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# Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking: Countering Gentrification in Contemporary American Literature and Fieldwork Narratives

Gierczyk , Marta

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

FICTIONS OF IMMIGRANT PLACEMAKING:  
COUNTERING GENTRIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE AND FIELDWORK NARRATIVES

By

Marta Gierczyk

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Marta Gierczyk

Approved:

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Tim Watson, P.h.D.  
Professor of English

---

Donette Francis, P.h.D.  
Associate Professor of English

---

Brenna Munro, P.h.D.  
Associate Professor of English

---

Guillermo Prado, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

---

Nadia Ellis P.h.D.  
Associate Professor of English  
University of California, Berkeley

GIERCZYK, MARTA

(Ph.D., English)

Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking: Countering Gentrification  
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This dissertation is a literary fieldwork study of gentrification and immigration in the post 1980s Washington, D.C., Miami, and New York City. Recognizing gentrification as a political and economic project driven by a narrative engine, *Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* demonstrates that storytelling is crucial to how urban spaces are made, valued, claimed, and defended. I examine the ways in which literary analysis reveals power and narrative as entwined in driving cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment into our cities. I comparatively analyze Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), Edwidge Danticat's *Untwine* (2015), and Ernesto Quiñonez' *Chango's Fire* (2004) in relation to fieldwork narratives I collected through participant observation and interviews with local housing organizers, artists, and community leaders. Reading together imaginative and embodied narratives, this study advances scholarship on the place of field research in literary critical practice. The project also situates the narrative expertise of literary studies as an important if barely tapped resource for gentrification research. I analyze counternarratives to gentrification in immigrant city novels to ultimately argue that literary fiction forms a part of a larger revisionist discourse on redevelopment in the American city.

## Dedication

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Gentrification and the Narratives of Literary Fieldwork**

Each year, the City Lab Summit features creative writers—alongside city mayors, planners, innovators, and other urban experts—to explore solutions to the most pressing issues facing today’s global cities.<sup>1</sup> During the 2017 Paris edition, the novelists Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ta Nehisi Coates discussed “Identity and Belonging: The Souls of a City.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the session quickly turned toward critical analysis of some of the most seductive urban narratives of our times. Coates challenged the “creative city” label so often hailed in discussions of contemporary urban revitalization, arguing that the notion of urban creative classes excludes from its definition low-income residents of color who have long contributed to the cities’ social, creative, and cultural capital.<sup>2</sup> Adichie on her end warned against the tendency to romanticize cities as bastions of progressiveness and inclusion, troubling the ethos of felicitous Parisian multiculturalism from the point of view of a Nigerian passport holder. Foregrounding their respective points of view as an African American man and a Nigerian woman, Coates and Adichie defamiliarized, as good storytellers do, the feel-good stories about identity and urban belonging in a way that turned on its head the very title of the session.

In times when we are continuously told that no one is reading and that the world has little use for literature—and least of all for literary fiction—why look to professional storytellers for insights? What can we learn about gentrification from writers and their

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<sup>1</sup> City Lab is the urban-focused site of The Atlantic Magazine <https://www.citylab.com>

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Florida’s categorization in *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

characters? Do narratives bear real-life consequences on urban realities? How can literary scholars—with our expertise in close reading and narrative theory—contribute to the efforts toward more equitable and sustainable cities? And reciprocally, how can engaging with people on the frontline of urban justice struggle transform our discipline? The questions that arise from situating novelists as authority figures on global cities align with the questions I pose and seek to answer in this dissertation.

*Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* is a literary fieldwork study of gentrification and immigration in the post 1980s Washington, D.C., Miami, and New York City. Recognizing gentrification as a political and economic project driven by a narrative engine, *Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* demonstrates that storytelling is crucial to how urban spaces are made, valued, claimed, and defended. I examine how literary analysis facilitates a productive scrutiny of the ways in which power and narrative entwine, driving cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment into our cities. I comparatively analyze Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), Edwidge Danticat’s *Untwine* (2015), and Ernesto Quiñonez *Chango’s Fire* (2004) in relation to fieldwork narratives I collected through participant observation and interviews with local housing organizers, artists, and community leaders. Reading imaginative and embodied narratives in tandem, this study advances scholarship on the place of field research in literary critical practice. The project also situates literary studies’ narrative expertise as a critical if barely tapped resource for gentrification research. While valuable work across disciplines has been done to amplify issues of gentrification in immigrant communities, insufficient attention has yet been given to how contemporary literature speaks to such problems. Addressing this gap, I analyze counternarratives to gentrification in immigrant

city novels to argue that literary fiction forms a part of a larger revisionist discourse on redevelopment in the American City.

In my analysis of the interplay between narrative and gentrification throughout this project, I refer to two meanings of narrative. I invoke the way in which cultural studies and the popular discourse understand narrative as a mode of knowing, a story told repeatedly to organize and make sense of reality. But I also rely on how the term operates in literary theory—as a storytelling practice, a process of making formal decisions about voice, time, space, genre, and characters.

It is not without hesitation that I rely on the term “gentrification” as much as I do in this dissertation. Popular debates on gentrification invoke the concept in ways that can be as vague as they are contentious. While some view gentrification as synonymous with urban progress, others denounce it as ethnic cleansing. Scholars of urban studies themselves have debated over the exact definition of gentrification for decades without reaching a consensus. And as I later explain, many housing organizers refrain from defining their work as “anti-gentrification” and prefer “anti-displacement” to avoid confusion and to prevent dismissal of their advocacy as adverse to change and development at large. At the same time, it is precisely the ambivalence of the term, which allows a productive scrutiny of the tension and violence of urban change under neoliberal capitalism. While this study builds on Jason Hackworth’s widely accepted view of gentrification as “the production of space for progressively more affluent users,” my analysis also pays close attention to the issues of race and citizenship status that define the realities of place and space in the United States (815). To put it briefly, I understand gentrification as a process of capital reinvestment into and privatization of previously

systemically neglected black and immigrant working class communities.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I delineate ways in which narratives about the neighborhood, its people, and change itself drive such class and racial reshuffling in urban America.

This project situates literary and nonliterary narratives within the context of post-1980s urban governance, development, and planning. Defined by neoliberal urban policies and New Urbanist design, the last few decades have brought rapid privatization of urban space via deep deregulations, large-scale redevelopment projects, and rollback of government interventions and institutions (including dismantling of public housing).<sup>4</sup> The framework of neoliberal capitalism prioritizes economic success in a way that turns urban planning into competition with other cities for investments, innovations, and the creative classes. Within this context, the development and urban tourism industries invoke the narratives of a global city, creative city, and sustainable city to promote gentrification as a lifeline for the systemically neglected ethnic neighborhoods. The key objective in this process is to train the audience to accept displacement as the inevitable cost of “progress.” Through an emphasis on the potential of immigrant narratives to speak back to and defamiliarize such dominant knowledges, my project advocates for the vital role of fiction in contemporary American politics and culture. The narratives of the

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<sup>3</sup>As I demonstrate throughout the study, this take on gentrification coincides with scholarship on race and urban development across U.S. cities. See, for example, Brendi Thompson Summers’ definition of gentrification in *Black in Place* (16-22).

<sup>4</sup> There is a vast body of academic literature on neoliberalism in urban policy and planning. For example, Jason Hackworth’s 2007 book *Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism*. Tore Sager also provides a comprehensive review of global scholarship on neoliberalism in urban studies in “Neo-liberal urban planning policies: A literature survey 1990–2010”. Scholars in the interdisciplinary field of urban studies have also theorized different frameworks and coined different terms to capture this phase in the life of the American city. Both Derek Hyra and Nathan Connolly speak of the “new urban renewal” and “Richard Florida of “new urban crisis.” While Gentrification has been a controversial and visible urban phenomenon at least since the mid-century, the neoliberal policies of the last few decades have increased the scope and speed of this issue.

global, creative, and sustainable city are so rhetorically salient because they appeal to the widely shared values of diversity, creativity, and conservation. However, scholars across disciplines have argued that despite these positive connotations, the politics of globalization, creative capital, and suitability have reinforced rather than mitigated urban inequalities.

The global city concept emerged in the 1990s in geography and urban studies, popularized largely by the sociologist Saskia Sassen. Much of the early geographical and sociological literature on global cities theorized the denationalized urban environments as spaces that facilitate unimaginable elsewhere radical political opportunities for immigrants, women, and communities of color.<sup>5</sup> The global cities scholarship has from the beginning considered the ways in which transnational circulation of people, information, cultures, and capital unravels and reproduces uneven geographies of power (Massey 2004, Sassen 1999). It is particularly the more recent work of Sassen, David Harvey that outlines how the corporate takeover of urban space, especially in the aftermath often great recession, threatens global city's radical potential. Beyond academic scholarship, the global city discourse captivated the imagination of urban planners, marketers, and city officials as well as the broader public as both an aspiration

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in their pioneering collection of essays “Cities and Citizenship” (1999), Holston and Appadurai situate the global city as a remarkable site for a reimagining of traditional forms of citizenship, and for efforts to shift the boundaries between formal and substantive forms of belonging. Not only do they identify something “irreducible and non-transferable, necessary but not quite sufficient, about the city’s public street and square for the realization of a meaningfully democratic citizenship,” but they also link the politics of cities with the politics of immigration (15). Under their pen, the figure of the urban immigrant challenges with their very presence and contribution to city life, the conventional notions of formal citizenship as determined by belonging to the nation state. Saskia Sassen’s analysis of global cities, in a similar way links immigration, urban space, and politics in its articulation of “the new geography of centrality and marginality” (“Whose City is It?” 71). Sassen theorizes an opportunity for new radical politics in the cultural split between what she identifies as the leading sector of global capital and “traditionally disadvantaged actors.”

to economic and political power and as a popular fantasy of felicitous multiculturalism and transnational mobility. Today, as cities market themselves and compete for private investments, their perceived wellbeing has become inseparable from their status as world class tourist destinations and their position as hubs for transnational industries.

Developers appeal to this global city ambition, pitching their projects as opportunities to transform distressed neighborhoods into cosmopolitan world-class destinations.<sup>6</sup>

There is much overlap between the theories and practices of the global and the creative city. While the former foregrounds political and economic power, the latter highlights creative capital as a key driving force of urban economic development. As explained by George Yúdice in *The Expediency of Culture*, Manuel Castells defined creative cities as those that attract innovators by enhancing the quality of life through “the social fabric of bars, restaurants, chance encounters on the street, etc. that give life to a place” (19). My project draws on the work of culture-facing urban scholarship, particularly when I describe how the seemingly neutral, colorblind concepts of the new creative economy reproduce racial and class inequalities. For example, Tyler Denmead in *The Creative Underclass* critiques Richard Florida’s “creative class” framework for presuming that “the desirable forms of urban creativity are located in and on the bodies of young white people” (16). And even as city marketing leverages the cultural cache of communities of color, these communities rarely get to reap the benefits of such marketing efforts. Theories of the relationship between culture and gentrification that have been invaluable to this project include Arlene Davila’s “marketable ethnicity”, Michelle

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<sup>6</sup> In the Miami chapter, I illustrate how playing to the tune of world cities, the developers rhetorically construct close-knit immigrant neighborhoods as insular; even as places like Little Haiti have been transnationally connected long before the recent corporate interests in the neighborhood.

Boyd's "racial heritage tourism", Derek Hyra's "Black branding", and George Yúdice's "expediency of culture" (2003).<sup>7</sup>

Woven into the discourses of creativity and innovation, sustainability has become the most recent buzzword in city marketing materials and development proposals. It is particularly in the environmentally vulnerable coastal cities that the development industry turns to green rhetoric. In *Extreme Cities*, Ashley Dawson evaluates the use of sustainability discourse by the development industry in New York and Miami as "urban greenwashing" promoting "environmental gentrification" (58). In his estimate, green branding under capitalism is wildly used to propel speculative development, attract affluent residents and drive up property values. In this way, green branding hinders rather than promotes true sustainability understood as environmental justice. What my project contributes to this existing scholarship on urban placemaking is an explicit focus on the function and usage of narrative in the culture-driven redevelopment practices of immigrant neighborhoods in the post-1980s U.S. global city. I posit that narratives do not merely help us make sense of the changes that occur in our cities, but they actually propel these very changes.

*Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* turns to multiple disciplinary spaces of knowledge about the representation and production of city space. Studying the interplay between the real and the imagined city worlds, I draw on, extend, and diverge from the academic crossover field of spatial literary studies. This interdisciplinary emerged from the spatial turn in the humanities, reinvigorating literary scholarship's investment in the

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<sup>7</sup> Yúdice offers a capacious definition of culture that encompasses institutions, community cultures, and creative industries.

matters of space, place, and mapping.<sup>1</sup> There is a vast body of work within spatial literary studies on the relationship between the city and the novel form. Some of the early research includes Richard Lehan's overview of the western literary city in *The City in Literature* and James Donald's view of cities as "imagined environments" (Donald 422). This scholarship assigns literary fiction a critical role in both representing and constituting urban realities. Recent publications expand this research on the literary city via Global South and multiethnic perspectives. Some of the noteworthy book-length projects include: Sarah Harrison's *Waste Matters*: (2016), Melanie U. Pooch *DiverCity* (2015), and Catalina Neculai's *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature* (2014). Far too little attention within the scholarship on literature and the city has yet been dedicated to exploring what insights narrative fiction has to offer to the study of gentrification.<sup>2</sup> While literary critics like James Peacock and Elizabeth Gumpert have led the way in recognizing the gentrification novel as a category of writing in American literature, much of their scholarship focuses on white American and Jewish American authors and the space of Brooklyn. The originality of my project in the context of this literature is twofold: the focus on diasporic themes and aesthetics and the literary fieldwork methodology. Drawing on theories in diaspora and critical race and ethnic studies, I propose that immigration belongs at the center of the American gentrification story. We must take seriously the unique position of immigrants as at once relative cultural outsiders and uprooted peoples who know the pain of displacement. Reading

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<sup>1</sup> See: "The Rutledge Handbook of Literature and Space" edited by Robert Tally.

<sup>2</sup> For a social sciences discussion on how immigrant communities and their business and cultural activity promotes urban growth and development, see Domenic Vitiell's and Thomas J. Sugrue's *Immigration and Metropolitan Revitalization in the United States*.

imaginative and embodied immigrant narratives in relation, this project additionally employs the mixed methods of urban cultural studies to advance scholarship on the importance of fieldwork in literary critical practice.<sup>10</sup>

### **Narrative and Social Justice**

In its commitment to literary scholarship that is embedded in and accountable to the broader community audiences, my project contributes to the debates about the power of narrative fiction to imagine and enact social change. For example, Marta Caminero-Santangelo in *Documenting the Undocumented* (2016) argues that narratives of and by undocumented immigrants challenge the dominant discourse on immigration in a way that promises to alter habits of thought and action. While exploring the power of literature to imprint itself on readers, Caminero-Santangelo remains ambivalent about the extent to which telling of stories can change behavior and propel readers toward new forms of civic engagement she terms the “ethics of action” (30). Methodologically and thematically similar, Kimberly Nance's *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio* (2006) assess the possibilities and limitations of empathetic identification at work in the testimonio genre to drive sociopolitical change.<sup>11</sup> Furthering this critical engagement, Namwali Serpell in a 2019 NYRB article “The Banality of Empathy” brilliantly deconstructs our contemporary faith in the power of fictional empathy to make readers act more compassionately in the real world. The empathy model champions narrative fiction for inviting readers to leave at the

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<sup>10</sup> See The Journal of Urban Cultural <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-urban-cultural-studies>

<sup>11</sup> Other important studies of the interplay between representation, narrative, and social justice, include Lee Beabout's *Whiteness on the Border: Mapping the U.S. Racial Imagination in Brown and White* (2016), and Mario García's *Literature as History: Autobiography, Testimonio and the Novel in the Chicano and Latino Experience* (2016).

door parts of their own identity and perspective in exchange for someone else's experience. But Serpell sees danger rather than a powerful social justice opportunity in this imagining yourself into others—especially into disenfranchised others. In her argument, consuming literature as a “vehicle for empathy” can actually prevent rather than promote critical self-assessment and civic engagement by commodifying pain; suffering tourism through fiction might, according to this argument, inadvertently promote indifference to real-life injustice: “It’s an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities, on the page and on screen, to say nothing of our actual lives” (Serpell).<sup>12</sup>

When considering the role and place of immigrant literature and literary studies at large in promoting urban equality, I share in these critics’ concerns about the limits of empathetic identification. As a teacher discussing immigrant literature with college students, I often witness in real time just how flawed the expectation of readerly empathy can be. My involvement in Miami’s housing advocacy has also rid me of any illusion that fictional images of displacement-related suffering could move those in power to stop prioritizing profits over the human right to decent and stable housing; this is particularly so considering how direct pleads of real people often leave them unmoved. But as a literary scholar, trained to analyze the efficacy of how writers order and shape their tales, I also know the power of a compelling story to not merely reflect but actually engender urban realities. Gentrification relies on narratives. The development and tourism industries carefully select starting points, character types, and plots as they configure and

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<sup>12</sup> In place of empathetic identification, Serpell proposes Hannah Arendt’s theory of “representative thinking”, which is different from engendering empathy in that it keeps distance between the reader’s and the characters’ identity :“Rather than virtually *becoming* another, she asks you to imagine using your own mind but from their position (...) to inhabit the position, not the person.”

disseminate stories of progress and paternalism, as they insist on the false binary choice between economic growth and economic stagnation or on the inevitability of top-down development to ‘save’ economically struggling communities.<sup>13</sup> The novels discussed in this dissertation offer more nuanced representations that shake up these dominant narratives about gentrifying immigrant places. Equally important is the way in which literature foregrounds the political intents and consequences of narratives by training our senses to read and listen for how sequencing, perspective, and language hold weight. Literary analysis, I argue, can help to expose gentrification narratives that masquerade as truth for what they are—deliberately and strategically arranged stories. Narrative fictions of gentrification reveal then the political fictions of gentrification narratives.

The idea that urban planners use stories is not new. At least since the New Urbanist turn in the 1980s, urban planners and scholars of planning have examined the use and importance of stories to planning theories and practices. In the 1996 book *Urban*

<sup>13</sup>A vivid recent example of how developers construct the narrative of progress and paternalism to defend and propel gentrification can be found in an opinion piece published in the Miami Herald by Neisen Kasdin—a land use lawyer and lobbyist representing many of Miami’s large developers and investors (including the Magic City Innovation District discussed in the Miami chapter). From the opening sentences, Kasdin’s defense of gentrification as a promise of social mobility hinges on the binary choice between economic growth driven by private development or perpetual poverty and deterioration: “Gentrification is good. The opposite of gentrification is stagnation and decline.” The rest of the article centers a narrative of fall and rebirth as it pertains specifically to Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood: the urban decline of the 1970-80s can and the opportunity for cities to ascend again with the saving grace of private capital. While Kasdin insists on the importance of historicizing gentrification, he can only find suitable meaning in the history of American urban evolution by eclipsing the long history of state-sponsored disenfranchisement. Among other omissions, he makes no mention of redlining when referencing declining property values. Instead, Kasdin, invokes the tropes of urban blight and stories of individual failure or attainment. This ascending narrative of gentrification casts a number of characters. These include: the housing activists who become antagonists to progress, the keepers of blight stuck in a “willful denial” of facts and history, “the hardworking immigrant” who by the means of self-advancement and perseverance moves out to the suburbs along the white folks, and finally “the unemployed or those too poor to move” configured as a homogenous mass with no little potential to uplift themselves. Kasdin depicts places like Little Haiti, and their communities as dysfunctional and in need of saving by gentrification. Magic City lawyer is not alone in these assessments. Most development proposals, developers’ web pages and social media sites, speeches and tweets by the elected officials hinge on a similar trickle down narrative framing revitalization of distressed neighborhoods. In the anti-gentrification narratives gathered in this dissertation, the plot of urban evolution ultimately falls rather than rises.

*Planning as Persuasive Storytelling*, James Throgmorton examines urban planning as a form of storytelling about the future to obtain a buy-in from diverse urban stakeholders.<sup>14</sup> Other scholars focus on how incorporating community storytelling into urban planning could result in a more democratic, public-driven planning process. For instance, urban planner Leonie Sandercock situates the work of urban planners as a “performed story” and argues that a deeper understanding of the role of stories can make better planners and result in more equitable planning practices (12). Co-Edited by a literary critic Barbara Eckstein, a 2003 interdisciplinary collection *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities* also explores the influences of narrative theory on planning practice. Many essays in the collection champion the power of storytelling to establish a common ground between planners and residents and to balance the desire for economic growth with social justice concerns. Eckstein’s own essay, however, warns not to sentimentalize stories as straightforwardly transformative agents of social change, describing how planners will often eclipse or misinterpret local stories in order to further their own planning agenda. Drawing on narrative theory, Eckstein proposes that urban planners would benefit from asking the questions literary critics ask about the power dynamic between authors (planners), texts (plans), and the audience (the constituents) (“Making Space: Stories in the Practice of Planning”). My own study of how power shapes the ways in which stories about American immigrant neighborhoods are told and heard emphasizes community organizers, rather than urban planners, as key interlocutors.

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<sup>14</sup> See also: Forester Mandelbaum; Marris, 1997; Throgmorton, and Ameel. As a literary historian, Lieven Ameel applies literary theory—specifically the concept of genre and metaphor—to analyze how the narrative structure of planning documents works to connect new with old and to foster a sense of identity and community in contemporary urban development in Finland. He specifically focuses on the case of Helsinki City Planning Department commissioning a novel, *Hyvä Jätkä* (Good Bloke), from novelist Hannu Mäkelä. The novel is given to all the inhabitants of the new area as a welcoming gift.

Practicing the methodology of literary fieldwork, I examine the reciprocal relationship between narrative inquiries and organizing practices. What can literary scholars learn from the embodied work and insights of community advocates and what can they contribute to the cause of those fighting on the ground for more equitable, community driven development? How do we make fieldwork more legible in literary studies and how can fieldwork, in turn, make the work of a literary critic more legible to broader community audiences?

### **Literary Fieldwork Methodology**

*Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* advocates for the urgency of studying gentrification through a series of textual, embodied, and emplaced encounters. In these encounters, immigrants' personal narratives salvage the intimate ways of seeing as a route to a more textured knowledge of the politics of development and multiculturalism in the American city. My movement between the close reading of literary fiction and engagement with material realties of everyday urban life through interviews, observations, and other forms of immersion in place is an exercise in a methodology that Shalini Puri terms "literary fieldwork" (40).<sup>15</sup> Drawing on the work of Puri and other humanities scholars invested in field research, I refer to the practice as fieldwork to differentiate it from anthropology's social science-centered practice of ethnography, which requires long-term involvement in participant-observation ("Finding the Field"). This dissertation as a project of literary fieldwork centers subjective narratives and contextualized knowledge to examine what Lara Putnam in "Daily Life and Digital

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<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities*, Puri and Castillo trace the term "literary fieldwork" to the work of Joan (Colin) Dayan on Haitian literature, in which she is "questioning of generic divisions between fact and fiction" (10)

Reach” theorizes as “the value of unsystematic, context-specific learning that does not seek the generalizable but instead the place-specific, the particular, the ungeneralizable” (178). Important thinking about the role of race and ethnicity in urban planning comes out of social science projects that analyze representative, comparable data. But I argue that plenty is lost—discarded as peculiar and hence unimportant—in such methodological commitment to objectivity and generalizable data. This dissertation examines how literary and fieldwork narratives share a poetics of intimacy that distills the detailed, particular, and localized knowledges about gentrifying immigrant neighborhoods eclipsed in social science research and mainstream discussions.

The individual chapters read novels in relation to fieldwork narratives emerging in interviews, stories told and held back during commission hearings and public meetings, but also unfolding from the urban landscape of murals, storefronts, neon signs, and street performances. The empirical research in Shaw/Logan Circle in D.C., Miami’s Little Haiti, and East Harlem in New York City varied in length—from one month of concentrated fieldwork in New York to a sporadic participant-observation over the period of two years in Miami. While the fieldwork data does not always make it onto the page, the experience of immersion has infused and transformed the argument of each chapter (Puri, “Finding the Field”). Coming from my home discipline of literature, I arrived at the project with a set of questions about the genre of the immigrant city novel: why does the contemporary immigrant novel jump in time and space between the American city and the urban homespaces in the Global South? How is it meaningful that these translocal settings narrate the immigrant experience of displacement alongside the issue of urban

redevelopment and housing insecurity in the American city? Why do so many of these current narratives offer an inversion of the progressive immigrant story, beginning where the most classic American Dream plots end, with home ownership? Where is the ethnic enclave? How else does this new set of immigrant narratives differ from the earlier tradition? And why even look to these novels for answers regarding large historical and sociological questions about contemporary urban spaces? But I was also curious about that which was missing from literature. Why are gentrification novels a relative rarity in some city contexts but not others? What is it about the novel form, which makes it not suitable for an explicit critique of development-driven displacement for Miami authors who are otherwise outspoken about the cultural losses of gentrification in their community? And how come there are no immigrant anti-gentrification activists among the characters? It is these and other absences—what Puri calls “literary silences”—which compelled me toward fieldwork. Striving to answer the two-tiered question—how are literary insights crucial and yet why do I find narrative fiction insufficient to this deep study of immigrant places—this dissertation contributes to and supplements a rich body of literary scholarship that upholds interdisciplinarity as an invaluable asset.<sup>16</sup> The experience of fieldwork further solidified for me the need to give equal weight to the cultural imaginings of immigrant neighborhoods and their material and embodied

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the work of Shalini Puri, Debra Castillo, and other fieldwork scholars, my thinking about literature and emplacement is indebted to scholarship across diaspora studies, American studies, area studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Research that has been crucial to this project’s methodology include: Katherine McKittrick’s work on Black geographies, Donette Francis’ research on the Black Miami aesthetic, Nadia Ellis’ comparative analysis of diasporic cities, Carol Boyce Davies’ theory of Caribbean spaces grounded in personal and family histories, Tim Watson’s study of the long-lived relationship between literature and anthropology in the transatlantic context in *Culture Writing*, Benjamin Fraser’s call for a blending of urban studies and cultural studies through the work of philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Gayatri Spivak’s work on the transformational influence of fieldwork and activism on the study of comparative literature in the *Death of a Discipline* and Brenna Munro’s dialogic queer readings across wide range of texts and spaces informed by field research in *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*.

specificities. It is through fieldwork that I came to realize the extent to which the specificity of experience that we literary scholars cherish, urban development proceedings trivialize as a soft, localized, unquantifiable, and hence inferior form of knowledge. It was also in the experience of following approval proceedings for new development projects in Little Haiti and East Harlem that I came to understand the feminization of organizing for housing justice only alluded to in *Beautiful Things* and *Chango's Fire*. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I reflect in detail on the unique forms of accountability and self-assessment that the embodied nature of fieldwork facilitates for a literary scholar.

But fieldwork narratives too have their silences. These silences are often intentional, strategic, and not infrequently coerced by those in power. Because defenders of gentrification tend to dismiss anti-gentrification activists as antidevelopment, uninformed, and unreasonable in their expectations, community organizers often find themselves having to tread lightly during commission hearings, town hall meetings, and other public events. The novel's freedom from the expectations and consequences of truth telling claims, allows it to fill with creative fiction the pauses of fieldwork narratives. To use Mohsin Hamid's formulation, fiction provides a platform to "say publicly what might otherwise appear unsayable, to imagine that which is missing, to articulate daring alternatives ("Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?"). Bringing together embodied and imagined knowledges about urban realities, the practice of literary fieldwork allowed me to see the unique insights of creative fiction more clearly while also enabling me to view literature as a part of a larger effort to change public discourse on gentrification.

## The Immigrant City Novel

In addition to grounding my literary analysis of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things*, Edwidge Danticat's *Untwine*, and Ernesto Quiñonez' *Chango's Fire* within a wider interdisciplinary discussion of global cities and immigration, I also situate these narratives in the ongoing tradition of American immigrant literature of the city.<sup>17</sup> I distinguish here between novels set in cities, which constitutes the greater part of American immigrant fiction, and the more restrictive category of the city novel as a genre where, to use Wendy Griswold's phrasing, "the city itself is paramount" (144). In city novels, immigrant authors articulate the relationship between American urban realities and the immigrant condition as mutually constitutive. The city is then not merely a preferred setting for the immigrant plots but an immigrant plot in its own right. The double play on the word "plot" (as a piece of land and a storyline) is key here. In the genre of immigrant city novels, the American city figures as a land innately immigrant. It is a space of cultural convergence built on and defined by migratory movements and a spatial-symbol of opportunity for various newcomers.

The twentieth century American literature of immigration privileges the city as a contested and by no means felicitous yet an exceptional and often indispensable forum for immigrant negotiations of social, political, cultural, and affective belonging. In much of this literary tradition, the city figures as a force propelling the narrative forward and an

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<sup>17</sup> While Ernesto Quiñonez's has been mostly discussed within the framework of Puerto Rican literature, Nuyorican literary tradition, or the non-migrant Latino canon, the author is of mixed Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican heritage (his family immigrated to New York City from Ecuador when he was two). I read his second book *Chango's Fire* within the literary tradition of immigrant city writing. Quiñonez' novel situates the Puerto Rican experience in East Harlem in the long history of the neighborhood as a springboard from immigrant communities. My analysis of the novel in the third chapter focuses specifically on the plot of Mexican immigration.

antagonist in the characters' immigrant struggles. The shared elements of this literature include: expressions of urban discontents (varying from imagery of overcrowded squalid housing, to exposure to corruption and crime, to racialized exclusions), images of close-knit ethnic enclaves with their informal economies and cultural production, themes of community organizing and neighborhood activism (neighborhood association, unions, church groups, or informal political gatherings etc), and storylines of self-reinvention as an American urban subject (successful or failed). In the Jewish-American and other early Euro-American narratives of Ellis Island immigration, like those of Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth or Pietro di Donato, the streets of the New York's Lower East Side become classrooms of assimilation for the newcomers marked at arrival as not quite white. As literary scholars note, these assimilation novels articulate the process of Americanization as progress through spatial and racial mobility: a sequence of struggle with the harsh urban realities, perseverance, and successful acculturation into white America. A move uptown or to the suburbs often concludes this assimilation process.<sup>18</sup> The twentieth century Asian-American novels, including Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family*, Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*, represent the landscapes of New York or San Francisco as fragmented by sharp racial exclusions. Yet, as Xiaojing Zhou argues in *Cities of Others: Reimagining Urban Spaces in Asian American Literature*, such novels also counter the stereotypical imaginings of the ethnic enclave as a static, passive, and self-contained community. Instead, the texts depict the ways in which the immigrant places

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<sup>18</sup>See David Fine's The City, *The Immigrant and American Fiction* and Carren Irr's *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*; Francis, "New Accents on Immigrant America"

influence the city and its other ethnic communities. Building networks within but also beyond the segregated neighborhoods, Asian Americans in these novels claim city spaces as salient grounds to the struggle for equal citizenship and participation. City writers within the Latinx and African diaspora canons similarly explore how American racism creates uneven urban geographies. One of the major thematic concerns within this literature is the racialized exclusions embedded in the built environment through segregation, redlining, the imminent domain, and public housing projects. While exposing the hypocrisy of the American Dream through urban inequities, these texts simultaneously complicate the dire representations of the inner city ethnic ghetto via imaginings of vibrant cultural production and grassroots organizing for socio-political change. Writers of the civil rights Latino/a canon, including Jesus Colon, Piri Thomas, Pedro Pietri, and Abraham Rodriguez protest the Nuyorican conditions in New York's Spanish Harlem. Simultaneously, they position the neighborhood as a necessary ground for cultural and political struggle for social justice and equality. Commenting on this literature, critic Juan Flores in the "Life Off the Hyphen" insists on urban spaces as the "original and authentic sites of Latino/a culture and resistance" (74). The Latinx feminist texts of the 1990s by Esmeralda Santiago, Cristina Garcia, or Judith Ortiz Cofer reconfigure the masculinist spaces of the city as sites of freedoms and possibilities for Caribbean women migrants. Some scholars criticized the authors for their seemingly apolitical disposition while others defended the works for renewing the canon with a political agenda of the everyday. Afro-Caribbean women writers also chart New York City with the history of women-led migration from the Caribbean, approaching with much more ambivalence the notion of the American metropolis as space of liberation for

postcolonial female immigrants. Paule Marshall's seminal 1959 coming of age novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* about the Barbadian community in Brooklyn offers the most notable example. Privileging black women's perspectives, Marshall examines how the protagonist Selina Boyce and her mother Silla negotiate the city-space to varying degrees of contentment. Silla, whose desire and determination propelled the family to leave Barbados for New York City, finds a sense of place and community in brownstone Brooklyn where she strives to claim and assign meaning to her piece of New York through homeownership. Selina rejects her mother's placemaking practices in a classic framework of intergenerational mother-daughter conflict. While she finds the close-knit Bajan community suffocating, New York's racial hierarchies outside the Brooklyn community also deny Selina a secure sense of place.<sup>19</sup>

*The Beautiful Things, Untwine, and Chango's Fire* extend the ambiguous treatment of urban environments that frames much of this earlier literary tradition. But all the novels in this repository also develop a distinct lexicon of gentrification-related urban maladies. City neighborhoods in these texts are fragmented into gated communities, immigrant homes are being sold, demolished, burnt, foreclosed, and small businesses threatened with eviction.<sup>20</sup> Through these thematic occupations, the contemporary immigrant city novels reveal a contradiction in the way today's American cities tailor themselves as immigrant friendly while becoming increasingly inaccessible to a large portion of its foreign-born communities. Haunted by a sense of loss and spatial

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<sup>19</sup> See Tim Watson's "African and Caribbean Modernist Fictions" (328).

<sup>20</sup> Other examples include Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, Naima Coster's *Halsey Street*, Patricia Engels' *The Veins of The Ocean*, Elizabeth Nunez' *Boundaries* etc.

instability, this fiction conceives of the American city as a force exacerbating rather than mitigating the trauma of displacement with the looming threat of its repetition.

But the novels are not defeatist. As I argue throughout the chapters, Mengestu, Danticat, and Quiñonez offer counter-narratives to gentrification by the means of plots (thematic occupations) and aesthetics (narrative moves and conventions). While all three novels privilege the conventions of realist fiction, they also experiment with chronology, disrupt the unity of space, play with narrative voice, and defy narrative progression. The ways in which these novels alter the ascending American Dream narrative makes many of my undergraduate students uneasy. They read the lack of resolution at the end of each narrative as deeply unsatisfying, and Mengestu's traumatized refugee protagonist in particular strikes them as off-putting — passive, self-sabotaging, and just impossible to connect with or root for. But it is precisely this readerly dissatisfaction that reveals the power of literature to defamiliarize. These immigrant novels of the city effectively resist the desire for a narrative of progress wired into the popular imaginings of both gentrification and immigration. *The Beautiful Things, Untwine, and Chango's Fire* all use the first person central point of view to relate the experience of immigrant life in a gentrifying neighborhood, and to rewrite the dominant knowledges about such experience. The first person perspective grants the reader a sense familiarity with the storyteller, emphasizing the individual and embodied dimension of gentrification processes. This point of view is as much about intimacy between the storyteller and the reader as it is about limitations of knowledge and unhidden bias. In all three novels, the protagonist-narrator offers a perspective that is underrepresented— because unrepresentative— in the official urban planning considerations. These points of view

also oscillate on the margins of narrative unreliability: a war refugee still coping with the ghost of his displacement trauma in *The Beautiful Things*, a teenager mourning after the loss of her twin sister who speaks through the a child's world view through much *Untwine*, and a young arsonist whose ethics are repeatedly questioned in *Chango's Fire*. Highlighting specificity of experience, these gentrification novels make no pretense to telling the entire story of their neighborhood community, or to relating a single, linear, or comprehensive history of the place. Instead, the narrative voice that gives weight to the subjective, often eclipsed, and always limited perspective prompts the readers to carefully consider the ways in which the storyteller's perspective skews this particular narrative, and arguably all gentrification narratives. We can learn from fiction, Spivak tells us, about the limitation of human knowledge: "let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be altogether salutary that it is so" (26).

Mengestu, Danticat, and Quiñonez challenge the certainties of social science gentrification knowledge also by manipulating narrative time and space in ways that facilitate unexpected comparative urban perspectives. All three authors situate contemporary local redevelopment processes in U.S. cities in the context of a global-scale web of relationships. In the novels' translocal settings Addis Ababa childhood meets Washington D.C. adulthood, Haitian middle class girlhood spans Miami's Little Haiti, New York's Brooklyn and Haiti's Port au Prince, and the displacements of neoliberal capitalism affect communities from Puebla to El Barrio to the U.S. capital city. This geography of scattered immigrant intimacies challenges the images of immigrant neighborhoods as insular, backwards, and needing gentrification to turn them

cosmopolitan or global. I locate the political possibility of these novels in their interruption of the established gentrification storylines that are as enticing as they are dangerous. My focus on African and Caribbean migrants responds to the general readings of *urban* as code for Black and Latinx communities and pushes against homogenization of these groups and their interests in inner city settings. In the individual chapters, I outline how immigrant narratives stage both inner-community conflicts and unexpected solidarities.

### **Chapters Overview**

*Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* consists of three chapters that each centers a different East Coast city where struggles over space and urban development interlock in important ways with placemaking practices of African and Caribbean immigrants. The sections move from Washington, D.C.—the most recent immigrant destination among the three cities—to Miami as the gateway to the Americas, concluding with the pinnacle immigrant city of New York. This spatial organization facilities a comparative urban approach while permitting attention not only to the distinct contexts of immigration and histories of urban change, but also to differing literary traditions. The approach also foregrounds the unique urban profiles of each metropolitan area: city of finance, government city, and city of tourism/entertainment. Such organization allows each chapter to zoom in on specific, local articulations of urbanism and gentrification.<sup>21</sup> It is

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<sup>21</sup> Although all three urban centers currently hold the position of a global city where foreign-born communities play an important role, they differ significantly in their respective histories of immigrant settlement patterns. According to the classification of U.S immigrant metro areas by the Brookings Institute, each city represents a separate category: NYC being exemplary of an established and continuous gateway (alongside San Francisco, Chicago, Boston), Miami standing for a post WWII gateway (receiving steady currents of foreign-born populations since the mid of the twentieth century), and D.C., if by now surpassing its initial category of “emerging destination”, represents the most recent of the three destinations, diversifying on a large scale only since the 1980s.

the global economic changes of the 1980s that bring the distinct neighborhoods of Logan Circle, Little Haiti, and East Harlem closer together in this dissertation. In all three neighborhoods, the neoliberal turn in urban planning overlapped with a new wave of immigration from Ethiopia, Haiti, and Mexico respectively. The subsequent cultural and business activity of each immigrant community redefined these neighborhoods for years to come. Texts analyzed in the individual chapters push back against distinct sets of cultural narratives, like the non-immigrant black city or the polyglot hemispheric city. Despite clear differences, all three novels in comparable ways defy the appropriative frameworks of cultural branding to reclaim immigrant culture for the purposes of making place and community.

Chapter one comparatively analyzes Dinaw Mengestu's 2007 novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Tsedaye Makonnen's 2016 performance *Common Ground* in relation to Washington, D.C.'s transformation from an African American Chocolate City to a gentrified global city. I argue that the study of immigrant arts helps to reformulate how we might imagine community belonging, the right to place, and the capital city itself. Both Mengestu and Makonnen foreground the Ethiopian refugee perspective, configuring the dispossessions of gentrification as an experience of repeated displacement. African immigrants in the performance and in the novel drift as distinct from both the longtime African-American residents and the mostly white and monied newcomers. From this space in-between, Makonnen and Mengestu reimagine placemaking outside of the double-bind of territorial exclusion—beyond the registers of property and ownership but also without recourse to the often-counterproductive discourse of authenticity and seniority. Their immigrant sense of place begs a new

rhetoric and practice of community protection against the pressures of gentrification; one which makes space for mobile identities and grants validity to place attachment without reverting to essentialism, stigmatization of outsiders, and calls for neighborhood impermeability. The Ethiopian-American artists who appear in this chapter make use of their imaginative prowess to extract from these challenges of urban negotiation a vision of commitment and being together in the city that could work across difference.

Chapter two draws on scholarship from urban and gender studies as well as on critical conversations about Miami's multiculturalism and blackness.<sup>22</sup> I argue that narratives by and about Miami Girls contest the tropes of poverty and consumable difference indexing the city's Caribbean spaces and challenge the city of Miami's history of ignoring or repressing its Black roots. The chapter analyzes how Edwidge Danticat's representation of Miami's Haitian-American good life in *Untwine* reflects larger, lived and imagined, gendered geographies I term Magic City girlscapes. My concept of girlscapes relates the geographical and metaphorical spaces of Miami girlhood and womanhood, which women transform from sites of exclusion into sites of kinship and possibility. This section combines close-reading of literature with fieldwork research on women-led advocacy for community justice in Little Haiti. Ultimately, I propose that the framework of girlscapes allows us to evaluate the social landscape of Little Haiti as neither politically nor economically hermetic, neither an issue to be fixed nor a culture to be consumed. Instead, my literary fieldwork of Little Haiti reveals the neighborhood community as

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<sup>22</sup> My study of Little Haiti hopes to contribute to the rich and multidisciplinary research on Black Miami. Most recently, the special issue of the Anthurium journal "Looking for Black Miami" sheds light on "the hemispheric, multilingual, multiethnic Blackness that rarely figures in depictions of Miami's celebrated diversity" (Francis and Harris, "Announcing Looking for Black Miami").

entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan, politically engaged, and economically, culturally, and generationally diverse.

The final chapter scrutinizes the tropes of quarrels over space within the archival materials, public debates, and social science studies on the expansion of East Harlem's Latinidad. I argue that the narrative moments of intimacy in difference between Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in *Chango's Fire* along with the rhetoric and practice of womanist solidarity across physical and metaphorical borders in the work of immigrant women-led organization, Movement for Justice in El Barrio (MJB), challenge the official narratives of tension and resentment between Mexican placemaking and Puerto Rican placekeeping in East Harlem. Building on Sara Ahmed's work, I adapt the concept of "complaint collectives." Throughout the chapter I will conceptualize complaint collectives as groups of solidarity in difference, united in a common grievance against systemic urban injustice and a shared drive to dismantle its abusive structures. I rely on Ahmed's recent work on complaint to explore the ways in which the established channels of civic participation and public intervention into the urban planning process—by their very design and intention —exacerbate preexisting divisions, fracture grassroots interest, and blind to the possibilities of collaboration across difference. The novel and the movement imagine and enact unexpected complaint collectives against the hostility of the complaint process. They contest the self-perpetuating narratives of conflict, suggesting there is nothing inevitable or finite about El Barrio's intra-Latinx divisions.

## Chapter 2

### The Arts of Ethiopian Placemaking in the Black Mosaic of Washington, D.C.



Tsedaye Makonnen performing Common Ground. October 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

During the 2016 “Crossing the Street” creative placemaking initiative, interdisciplinary artist Tsedaye Makonnen transformed the gentrifying streets of Washington, D.C.’s Shaw neighborhood into a public site of an Ethiopian coffee ceremony. Her performance, *Common Ground*, enacted the ritual of meticulous coffee preparation integral to the community life of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and their immigrant outposts. The artists aimed to launch a conversation about urban development, displacement, and the role of Black diasporic communities in the socio-cultural history and future of the capital city. Makonnen performed in two locations: outside the new hip chain Compass Coffee and the doorsteps of a soon closing family owned Ethiopian

eatery Zenebech Restaurant. The choice of location was not arbitrary. However distinct in their local business profiles, Compass and Zenebech are both contested spaces; each represents a different moment of change for this historically African American neighborhood. While the coffee shop marks the area's recently revamped and whitened image, the Ethiopian restaurant stands for the earlier ethnic diversification of D.C.'s Black community. When Zenebech first opened its doors on T Street in the 1990s, the restaurant was one of many Ethiopian-owned businesses revitalizing the area still submerged in the period of disinvestment following the 1968 civil unrest. By the early 2000s, the influence was significant enough for a group of Ethiopian entrepreneurs to attempt to formalize their mark on the neighborhood with an official "Little Ethiopia" designation for a part of the U Street Corridor near Columbia Heights. The proposal collapsed under the weight of contentious press-coverage and protests from the local African American community who felt the immigrants' assertions on Shaw forced new meanings on a place that held special cultural significance to Black Washingtonians. The "Little Ethiopia" controversy had soon faded away, overshadowed by the surge of top-down redevelopment of the area. In those early years of neighborhood gentrification, Zenebech became a magnet for new residents and tourists savoring in the authentic Ethiopian cuisine on a budget, and so the owners initially welcomed Shaw's makeover as uplifting for their business. But despite the restaurant's sweeping popularity, the pressures of rising taxes pushed the family into selling their property. Regardless if one reads the owners' decision as an instance of being forced out or enticed out, leaving the block after so many years triggered the familiar feelings of dislocation. Explaining their decision in an interview for the Washington Post, the owners spoke to the sense of place

loss: “I’m not happy, but I decided I had to sell it”, Dessu said, “With the three of us Ethiopian owners just on this street, it felt like Ethiopia here” (Stein).



Redevelopment of the block at T. Photo by the author.

I offer this story as an entry point into the first chapter for two reasons. First, the role of Ethiopians in Washington, D.C.’s evolution brings to light the paradoxical position of immigrant communities as at once new city actors who prompt urban revitalization and dwellers particularly vulnerable to its dispossessions. The arc of Zenebech’s opening, success, and closure captures how immigrant cultural and business activity can inadvertently prime the ground for the later stages of gentrification, and in many instances for the immigrants’ own displacement. There ultimately are few winners in the type of urban revival that relies solely on the logic of profitability and property value. To borrow Peter Moskowitz’s metaphor, “if the city is a ladder, gentrification pushes everyone down one rung” (56). Second, the attention *Common Ground* brings to the Ethiopian placemaking practices in Shaw situates the desire for spatial belonging at the

center of the immigrant experience. For transnational migrants, community is an archipelago – a constellation of places and attachments. This life of translocal affinities roots itself in a distinct sense of place that can reconcile the seemingly contradicting desires for place openness and place protection. From the immigrant perspective then, freedom of movement and place attachment are not binary opposites, despite what the flattened image of cosmopolitanism advanced by gentrification would have us think.

This chapter comparatively analyzes Dinaw Mengestu’s 2007 novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Tsedaye Makonnen’s 2016 performance *Common Ground* in relation to Washington, D.C.’s transformation from an African American Chocolate City to a gentrified global city. I argue that the study of immigrant arts helps to reformulate how we might imagine place and community belonging, the right to place, and the capital city itself. Intervening into gentrification debates of two adjacent neighborhoods of D.C.’s Northwest quadrant – Shaw and Logan Circle – Makonnen and Mengestu theorize a triad model of a community in transition. Both foreground the Ethiopian refugee perspective, configuring dispossessions of gentrification as an experience of repeated displacement. African immigrants in the performance and in the novel drift as distinct from both the longtime African-American residents and the mostly white and monied newcomers. From this space in-between, Makonnen and Mengestu reimagine placemaking outside of the double-bind of territorial exclusion—beyond the registers of property and ownership but also without recourse to the often-counterproductive discourse of authenticity and seniority. At the center of both texts is the question of how we can insist on the fundamental meaningfulness of places in the human experience without drawing lines around places and growing suspicious of

outsiders. How, in other words, is placemaking possible without the exclusions of territoriality?

I propose that the power of *The Beautiful Things* and *Common Ground* rests in a diasporic poetic that imagines a migrant sense of place—through temporal and geographic manipulations—as a challenge to urban capitalism and other forms of territoriality. Their artistic bending of the logics of time and space helps to imagine what Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds* describes as a “more humanly workable geographies” (156). The immigrant experience of place in these texts is never cozy or stable, but rather from the beginning fractured, and often wrapped in trauma. Yet, this urban art extracts from the challenges of immigrant placemaking a vision of commitment and being together in the city that could work across difference. These attempts to imagine placemaking without territoriality can be understood alongside Doreen Massey’s analysis of place as a constellation of trajectories: “What is special about place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or the eternity of the hills. Rather, what is special about place is precisely that throwtogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here and-now” (*For Space*, 140). For Massey and the artists alike, in the spatial negotiation of multiplicity that the city forces upon its dwellers, a truly democratic “throwtogetherness” is always spectral – a horizon that may never be reached; and yet it is crucial that this phantom is constantly worked towards, that it organizes and drives collective efforts.

Lynda Schneekloth’s and Robert Shibley’s *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* initiated scholarly enthusiasm for placemaking later advanced by scholars including David Harvey and Arjun Appadurai in their theories of place

production and reproduction. Drawing on this research, I focus on two aspects of placemaking: the connection to collective identity and a sense of community belonging and the ethical slippages between place shaping and replacement. The latter hinges on a devaluing of existing places and their histories in the name of progress and development.<sup>23</sup> While both placemaking and territoriality refer to the practices of assigning shared meaning to physical spaces, and both signal persistent attachment of people to their environments, throughout this chapter I situate placemaking as a broader umbrella term encompassing territoriality. In other words, I understand territoriality to be a particular exercise of placemaking – one but not the only way of making places meaningful. In the words of Geographer Robert Sack “territoriality is an attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control phenomena, or relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area. This area will be called territory” (19). Already this well-worn definition emphasizes control and border drawing as fundamental features of territoriality. Such assertions of control over places rely on regulation of social interactions and resources; they also delineate group identity through “us” vs. “them” frameworks. Territoriality as a placemaking strategy then is all about restriction and exclusion. David Delaney links this centrality of boundaries in territorial claims on place to the uneven power dynamics of race, class, and gender – from Jim Crow segregation to the policing of female bodies in urban public spaces. To his mind, “territoriality can be thought of as the assignment of a particular sort of meaning to lines and spaces in order to control, at first glance, determinable segments of the physical world. Upon further reflection, however, it is clear that the object of control are social

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of placemaking theories, see: Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*.

relationships and the actions and experiences of people” (6). This leads me to the diaspora theorists for whom the concept of territoriality is tainted by the legacies of colonialism and other violent forms of spatial domination. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, for instance, reject territoriality as a dominant approach to demarcating belonging rooted in the histories and practices of conquest and discourses of ownership. In *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, they articulate the potential of Black geographic narratives and lived experiences to move our collective understandings of place outside of territoriality: “Inserting Black geographies into our worldview and understanding of spatial liberation and other emancipatory strategies can perhaps move us away from territoriality, *the normative practice of staking a claim to a place*” (16). Intervening in the longstanding scholarship on geographical aspects of Blackness, their interdisciplinary methodology challenges the pathologizing approaches to Black peoples’ experience of place. McKittrick and Woods do foreground that Black sense of belonging has been necessarily constructed through centuries of displacements, erasures, neglect, and amnesia. But their investment in uncovering overlooked, often joyous, spatial practices insists that Black geographies are “networks and relations of power, resistance, histories, and the everyday, rather than locations that are simply subjugated, perpetually ghettoized, or ungeographic” (7). I root my notion of immigrant placemaking in their understanding of Black diasporic struggles as contests to territorial understanding of belonging. The editors rely on the comprehensive definition of African Diaspora borrowed from Carol Boyce Davies – understood to encompass the dispersal of African populations through voluntary, forced, and induced migrations. Yet the collection routes Black geographies largely through the African American/Canadian experience. I expand

the framework of Black Geographies by centering *immigrant* Black geographies as a modality for American city research. A combination of Black identity, non U.S. birth, and the intimate knowledge of place loss informs how migrants negotiate their placemaking practices and sense of belonging in African American spaces undergoing class and racial resegregation.

That is not to say immigrant placemaking is free from the logics of spatial domination. In fact, American immigrant literature well registers the appropriation of social space as a common strategy for immigrant empowerment, with Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as the most notable example. The narrative of socio-economic uplift that immigrants are pressured to pursue is itself entrenched in "social systems that reward us for consuming, claiming, and owning things – and in terms of geography this means that we are rewarded for wanting and demarcating 'our place' in the same ways that those in power do (often through displacement of others)" (McKittrick and Woods 12). The recent emphasis on creative placemaking in urban planning practices that appropriates the consumable and marketable elements of ethnic culture—what I theorize as cultural branding in the Miami chapter—means that immigrant communities often become unwitting foils to gentrification and its displacements.<sup>24</sup> Immigrant placemaking too can become captive to territoriality. But I argue that the immigrant perspective might also offer a crucial framework to rethink placemaking outside of the double-bind of territorial exclusions. Territorial claims can manifest as a treatment of land as a commodity that McKittrick and Woods have in mind

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<sup>24</sup> Because of the recent use of the "creative placemaking" concept by developers to attract the monied creative classes to urban centers, placemaking as a theoretical framework has fallen out of the graces of many anti-gentrification activists, scholars and artists. Many of them urge to focus instead on placekeeping or placeguarding. See the work of Stephen Pritchard.

but also as its most common counterargument – seniority in place as grounds for belonging. When communities face the type of urban revitalization that assumes economic power as the only legitimate practice of claiming place, they often turn toward their history and longevity in place as a strategy of protection. This strategy materializes in calls for the closure and fortification of the neighborhood from outsiders. But such a line of defense has less value for immigrant groups economically vulnerable to urban displacement. Themselves cultural outsiders, immigrants cannot stake legitimacy by invoking place seniority in any straightforward way. In fact, when appropriation of social space by immigrant groups takes place on the grounds of key historical memories for the receiving communities, immigrant placemaking too becomes perceived as intrusive. Pushback against the Ethiopian assertions on Shaw outlined in my opening section—and the assertions themselves—serve as one example of tensions bred by territorial placemaking.

Scholarship of the Global South includes voices that reclaim the concept of “territoriality” as a radical and liberating counterforce to the commodification and exploitation of land by global capitalism. For instance, Arturo Escobar’s theory of ontological defense of territories examines territorial struggle of African communities in Colombia and their use of what he terms “ancestral mandate” against “the neoliberal globalizing project of constructing ONE world.” (20) While Escobar positions his theory as transferable to urban contexts in the Global North, territoriality becomes a problematic framework when we consider the question of the right to place from the *American immigrant* perspective. In the context of U.S. immigration politics, defense of territories through the evocations of ancestry/seniority and anti-globalization sentiments too

often translates to xenophobia, racism, and anti-immigrant hostility to be perceived as the right shield against urban capitalism. The immigrant framework begs then a new rhetoric and practice of community protection against the pressures of gentrification; one that makes space for mobile identities and grants validity to place attachment without reverting to essentialism, stigmatization of outsiders, and calls for neighborhood impermeability. I want to argue that *Common Ground* and *The Beautiful Things* articulate this migrant sense of place and community belonging by defying the territorial structures of time and geography. The ritual format of Makonnen's public performance and Mengestu's formal innovations both use sustained deferral (an interruption to the logics of capitalist temporality that cycles between production and consumption) and uncanny spatial parallels (challenge to geographical reason) imaginative retelling.

### **Toward a Global City**

I view the cluster of Ethiopian urban art discussed in this essay also as a revision of the conventional narratives that chronicle the capital city. Makonnen and Mengestu extend the work of earlier cultural initiatives that aimed at altering the accounts of Washington, D.C. as a non-immigrant Black city. Such efforts include the 1994 Anacostia Museum exhibition *Black Mosaic*. Featuring groups from Central and South America and the Caribbean, the exhibit looked at how immigration of people of African descent into the Washington Metropolitan area has broadened the network of D.C.'s Black community, and how their placemaking connected the nation's capital to other places in the western hemisphere. Much has been written about the place and prospects

of the multinational Latinx community in the region.<sup>25</sup> However, insufficient critical attention has been paid to the role of groups from African countries in the transformation of Washington, D.C.. Even as black immigrant have played a critical role in the capital's transition from a place resembling a Southern town in the first half of the twentieth century, to the "Chocolate City" of the postwar period, to today's position as a premiere global city.<sup>26</sup> Black immigrant perspective remains understudied in the scholarship of D.C.'s redevelopment even when the focus lands on the capital's shrinking Black population. Derek Hyra's well-received *Race, Class and Politics in the Cappuccino City* offers the most recent example of critical approaches that equate the city's Black culture with African American culture. The book's important analysis of D.C.'s demographic, political, and cultural shift between the 1970s and 2010 leaves out the question of ethnic differences within the city's Black diaspora. I, in turn, argue that it is crucial to consider the aggressive class and racial resegregation of Washington, D.C. in the context of shifting patterns of immigrant settlement.

D.C. began to attract foreign-born populations in the postwar period when the metro area grew through the expansion of the federal government, international organizations, and universities. These numbers increased rapidly from the 1970s when the U.S. government has resettled thousands of refugees in the region, bringing Washington's currently largest immigrant group from El Salvador (Modan). As East Africans,

<sup>25</sup> There is much to be said about the literary representation of the Latinx-D.C. connection in the work of Mario Bencastro. Specifically, his 1998 novel *Odyssey to the North* narrates a Mount Pleasant and Adams Morgan of the 1980s as barrio Latino through the story of a Salvadoran immigrant named Calixto. Important analysis of the Latinx presence in Washington D.C. can be found in the work of Terry Repak, Olivia Cadaval, and Gabriella Modan.

<sup>26</sup> Due to the "white flight" from urban core into suburbs in the postwar period, Washington D.C. became the first major U.S. city that was predominately Black. In that period it has become known as "Chocolate City."

Caribbean Islanders, and South and Central Americans settled in the African American neighborhoods of Northwest D.C. by the 1980s, the immigrants' efforts to assert their presence in the quarter caused tensions with the existing community. The "Little Ethiopia" controversy is only one example of such quarrels over space. Eventually, many of the initial immigrants dispersed to the suburban areas in Maryland and Virginia. And while some moved to the suburbs as an expression of their middle-class success, a great many were simply priced out of the increasingly desirable urban core. Ethiopian settlement in the city followed a similar timeline and pattern. The first instances of Ethiopian migration into D.C can be traced to the 1960s, but it was not until the 1980s that groups of political refugees fleeing the Ethiopian Red Terror began to concentrate in Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights, and subsequently in Shaw/U Street. Scholars outline three phases in the Ethiopian diaspora formation (Getahun). The first instances of Ethiopian migration into D.C occurred under the rule of Haile Selassie I in the 1960s and 1970s when many students from Ethiopian elite families came to seek education at local universities —most notably at Howard University. The second and much larger in numbers group consisted of political refugees escaping the bloodshed of the Ethiopian revolution and its aftermath. As a part of the strategic containment of communism in the 1980s, the U.S. began resettling Ethiopian refugees in response to the Soviet-backed rule of The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) —known as the Derg. Brutal political and military confrontations between the Derg and its counteroffensives, but also within and among various anti-government forces brought a humanitarian crisis further exacerbated by the Ethiopian-Somali war and the Eritrean secessionist movement. All this resulted in a displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from Ethiopian

territory; in the early 1980s, about 3 million Ethiopian refugees fled to the neighboring countries, some of whom were later lifted by the American refugee resettlement programs (Getahun, 61). In the third wave of Ethiopian migration, those coming to the USA after Mengistu's overthrow in 1991 have been primarily Diversity Visa winners and family reunification cases, as well as asylum seekers, fleeing the repression of the current regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea (Chacko 2003). While the numbers of Ethiopian immigrants in the city have been contested, by the early 2000s the community had created a commercial nexus of restaurants, cultural organizations, and other small businesses, marking the metro-area in those decades as a home to the largest community of Ethiopians outside of the African continent. Comparably to the gentrification-induced displacement of Latinos from Mt. Pleasant/Adams Morgan neighborhood previously knowns as El Barrio/Barrio Latino, the clusters of Ethiopian communities in Northwest D.C. have dispersed under the economic pressures of revitalization throughout the suburban areas of Silver Springs and Alexandria. As suggested by scholars in social sciences, the current pattern of Ethiopian placemaking in the region is defined by suburban scattering (Chacko). And yet, parts of the city still feel positively Ethiopian; Amharic signs continue to punctuate the landscape of new trendy restaurants on U Street or in Adams Morgan. And even as the family owned businesses begin to crumble under the weight of the neighborhood's popularity, the "Little Ethiopia Food Tour" remain a part of D.C.'s cultural tourism campaigns, promoting the "authentic Ethiopian cuisine" as a part of the city's cosmopolitan image.<sup>27</sup> As expressed during my conversations with local organizers and artists, the community members see these few symbolic shops and

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<sup>27</sup> For more information about Cultural Tourism DC and their heritage trails, see <http://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/neighborhood-heritage-trails>

eateries as a marketable residue of the actual cultural imprint that once was. During my field research on immigrant involvement in housing activism in Northwest D.C., I interviewed Tsedaye Makonnen to discuss her role as an Ethiopian-American artist/activist embedded in the Shaw community. We discussed how her educational outreach and creative commentary on the effects of gentrification in the area serve local place preservation efforts. Her reflection on the issues of the cultural erasure and systematic disappearance from the D.C. canvas of the Ethiopian community of her childhood also included a commentary on the relationship between gentrification and immigrant cultural and entrepreneurial efforts: “The Ethiopian restaurants are a part of planting that seed, unfortunately (...) not that that’s the intention (...) but you know an Ethiopian spot here and an Asian restaurant there makes the area more cosmopolitan, cooler, and this hipster culture loves this exotic unique thing (personal interview). Urban planners, politicians and developers appropriate the marketable elements of immigrant culture—food and music in particular—tend to be appropriated by “revitalizing” previously disinvested neighborhoods to suit the more affluent, and often whiter, tastes of new and prospective city dwellers. In a perverse way immigrant cuisine feeds gentrification. Makonnen’s performances retrieve from these contentious sites of commerce and economic success, potential for community-building and community-maintaining. The artist reclaims them as meaningful places of social interaction and sites of thrown-togetherness.

### **Finding *Common Ground***

In *Common Ground* in particular, the artist carried out the coffee ritual from immigrant homespaces to the gentrifying pavements of D.C.’s historic Black Broadway

to critique the scope and speed of recent changes in this N.W. neighborhood. But the tellingly named performance also aimed at staging a coming together of three estranged micro-cultures of Shaw: the natives, the immigrants, and the newcomers. *Common Ground* emerged in collaboration with children from the Shaw Community Ministry – a longstanding institution serving the area's African American community. Children participated in the performance by inviting the area's newest residents into a conversation about the neighborhood and its meanings. Configured this way, the immigrant cultural practice emerged as a facilitator of dialogue, if not yet a coming together, between representatives of the area's oldest and its most recent community.

In the warmth of early Washingtonian fall, Makonnen immersed the neighborhood in a two-hour-ritual, silently guiding the audience through the stages of roasting and grinding the beans, then steeping and sharing the coffee. She was clothed in white flowing cotton, and her jebane pot sat on a blanket of fresh-cut flowers and grass. Emahoy Tsegue-Maryam Guebrou's instrumental hymn of displacement "The Homeless Wanderer" and "Homesickness" played softly in the background, mingling with the sounds of 8th street and with the rhythmic tap of the Compass Coffee entrance door. Makonnen did not perform alone. Other black women and children conducted a series of ritual-based and community-building gestures to complement the uniting power of the ceremony. As one of the performers filled the air with burning incense, and another sprinkled ground cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom, the Ethiopian goods penetrated the air, buildings, and the ground they walked on. Alongside the women, a group of children handed out free cups of coffee inviting passersby into a discussion of their relationship with Shaw. Children attempted to spark the conversation with questions that included:

“What do you love about the neighborhood?”, “how are the changes in this neighborhood affecting you?”, “did you know I too live in the neighborhood?”

Makonnen’s reenactment of the coffee ritual as a political street performance constructs an anti-capitalist temporality of social life that refuses to keep up with the rhythms of gentrification. In its original context, the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony (Buna) offers a pause—it slows down the pace of daily life to create time for conversation and community. This daily ritual consists of serving three rounds of coffee (awel, kalay and bereka); each cup takes about thirty minutes to drink, and accepting the invitations requires that guests stay for the entire duration of the ceremony (Mjaaland). When transplanted to the context of a gentrifying American neighborhood, the prolonged lag between the coffee order, the serving, and the drinking disrupts the capitalist commodification of time into ongoing cycles of consumption and production. In urban contexts, this capitalist temporality takes a form of city life that keeps its buzzing tempo even as it shifts from work to what George Yudice calls the “life-giving activities” of leisure (“Miami: Images of a Latinopolis” 36 ).<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Makonen’s performance demands of its audience to take time together in a difficult conversation. This process of waiting and observing in the middle of a week day is deliberately out of step with the pace of the lonesome grab and go coffee culture, and the gentrification processes this culture represents. While some scholars studying temporality and gentrification—including Rob Nixon and Christine Rickner—view development-driven displacement as

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<sup>28</sup> In the context of American urbanism, the temporality of the performed coffee ceremony carries a liberating anticapitalist potential. But the slow pace of the ceremony becomes more problematic when we consider the patriarchal implication of the ritual in its original context. Buna is exclusively the domain of women in Ethiopia. Because the ceremony consumes a lot of women’s daily time (two hours up to three times a day), it reflects and reinforces the traditional gender roles in the Ethiopian society (Mjaaland 89).

a process of slow violence, the metaphor of “rapid change” is perhaps a more fitting description of the type of redevelopment occurring in Shaw. The deferral in Makonnen’s ceremony offers an imaginative retelling of the logics of fast urban transformation. I return to this topic of temporal interruption later in the chapter when I discuss how Mengestu uses narrative deferral in *The Beautiful Things* to challenge the ethos of individual ownership.

The decision to enact the ceremony publicly was also about taking up space. *Common Ground* centered black performers and invoked Shaw’s multiethnic Black history and its reputation as a springboard neighborhood for immigrant communities to interrupt the usual terms of order in the area now reimagined as whiter and wealthier by the recent developments. Makonnen’s use of Ethiopian exports and the choice of music emerging out of exile invoke the dispersal of African people, resources, and cultures, drawing connections between the coerced migrations of African diaspora and the experience of displacement wrought by contemporary urban revival. *Common Ground* is only one of many Makonnen’s performances that draws on rituals and stories crossing generations and borders to connect distinct experiences of forced mobility—from urban dispossession, to the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary African migrations.

Angela N. Carroll calls Makonnen’s black migration series an “anti-colonial archives and profound testimonies to the possibilities of radical imagination” (9). Describing the *Lost and Loss* performance, Carroll writes: “The ritual she conducts intones walking meditation, a circular trancelike march around class ships and maps that echoes the cyclical export, exploitation, and displacement histories of African nations”(10). In *Common Ground*, the backdrop of D.C.’s revamped streets, the bodies of black and

brown performers – including both Black immigrants and African Americans – become a proxy for the people and cultural histories of the city buried or commodified under the weight of mixed-use developments like The Shay. Through its creative affirmation of the right to Shaw for the communities systematically removed from this new image, *Common Ground* posed a challenge to the capitalist registers of property and ownership, which grant a place to only those who can afford to pay the increased rent prices or patronize the new establishments. But since the story of the haves and the have-nots in the U.S. context is always already wrapped up in the politics of race, the performance also challenged racial resegregation at the heart of contemporary tactics of urban revival.

As a glistening symbol of D.C.'s gentrification, Compass Coffee provided a powerful backdrop to Makonnen's artistic commentary. The coffee shop is embedded in The Shay – a luxury apartment building and retail hub stretching through Florida and 8th street. Since The Shay was erected on an empty lot, the development did not physically displace any existing businesses or buildings. It did, however, take over a public space previously utilized for a local flea market. Its pricing and marketing tactics are also representative of the kind of urban "progress," which leaves long-term residents feeling like they no longer belong. The market-rate apartments above the retailers are priced as high as \$5,000 per month for a one-bedroom apartment. As many other developments, The Shay managed to claim a "mixed-income" status for offering a handful of Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) units. This proposal currently translates to a scant offer of seven units at 80% of Area Median Income (AMI) – six studios and one two-bedroom apartment. ("IZ – Public Dashboard") The unit-sizes themselves target a very specific demographic. But even if one sets aside the issue of livable space, the price tag on these

“affordable” units is still out of the financial reach of most families in the area. The AMI metric used to calculate affordability of housing and to determine tax cuts for developers considers metro area’s all-encompassing Median Income (which in the case of D.C. includes some of the wealthiest districts in the country – Fairfax and Montgomery counties). Since lower income neighborhoods like Shaw earn only a fraction of the Washington, D.C.’s metro area’s income, such calculation system provides a grossly skewed definition of affordability.<sup>29</sup> Alongside monetary barriers, The Shay’s self-representation has been equally excluding. The property marketing team has been strikingly blunt about the class and racial profile of the community they envision as the future of Shaw. They advertised The Shay’s “modern mindset” and “evolved style of life” with a poster that alienated most of the neighborhood’s original community. The infamous “She Has Arrived” banner towering over the streets featured a woman styled a’la Marie Antoinette with a white-powdered face and a peruke, gazing over the area with crystal blue eyes.

When I met with Makonnen to talk about her performances, D.C.’s Ethiopian community, and the role both arts and immigration play in the city’s gentrification, we walked by the sites where she performed *Common Ground* nearly a year earlier. The artist talked about the “invisible border” that separates the block of The Shay from the southern parts of the neighborhood. Many of the local Black children with whom she works at the Shaw Community Center had never before crossed over to where the Shay is located. By centering their presence, *Common Ground* created an opportunity to span this invisible border and offered the children a platform to declare “Shaw is my home

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<sup>29</sup> Save McMillan Park campaign serves as one example <http://www.savemcmillan.org/legal/>

too.” The ceremony became a site of joy and place keeping for the young African American residents who otherwise battle feelings of community loss and environmental alienation, what Derek Hyra in *Cappuccino City* terms “cultural displacement” (128). Not only did *Common Ground* allow the children freedom of movement through a space they feel as increasingly out of reach, but it also empowered them to assert a voice in the discussion of Shaw’s future. The responsibility to approach bystanders and spark a conversation encouraged the children to not merely enter but actually create discussions about their neighborhood community – to imagine the more inclusive futures they want to see. Beyond this single performance, Makonnen’s work with the children centers placemaking pieces and activities. Some of the art projects aim to affirm the children’s right to the neighborhood and empower their expression of this right. Various Shaw establishment throughout the city display one example of these collaborations: doormats like the one featured in the photograph were created by the kids for public display as everyday objects of place affirmation. Other projects forge connection between different manifestation of environmental injustice. The Clay Boats series, for instance, links the forced movements of African diaspora (be it the Atlantic slave trade or the more recent refugee crisis in Europe) with the violence of gentrification-driven displacements in the neighborhood. The clay boat series give visual artistic representation to the translocal approaches to anti-gentrification activism displacement that I discuss in the third chapter.

I locate the power *Common Ground* in a performance format that manipulates temporality and geography to enact a placemaking as a coming together. The traditional Ethiopian coffee brewing is a community-keeping ritual, and a symbol of sociability and hospitality (Mjaaland 91); it gathers neighbors to discuss everything from gossip to

politics: “the atmosphere created by the ceremony encourages the group to share thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It helps members of the group disclose issues that otherwise may be too difficult to discuss” (Loewy, et al. 182). The unspoken rules and proceedings of serving and accepting the drink rely on mutual respect between the host and the guests. Public reenactment of this communal ritual invited members of Shaw’s micro-cultures to similarly pause, consider, and discuss what it means to live together, and what it would take to make this “throwntogetherness” work across distinct commitments and desires toward the neighborhood. The performance draws upon the traditions of Tsedaye’s upbringing as the child of Ethiopian refugees who have remade their lives in D.C; a community that is familiar with both the pain of displacement, anti-black racism, and the position of cultural outsiders in local African American spaces. This Black immigrant perspective allows Makonnen to advocate for the neighborhood’s weaving together of cultures. Her defense of the neighborhood’s Black history routes this past through the lens of cultural crossroads and global mobilities. In this framework, Shaw’s cultural significance is also about the neighborhood’s openness – its track record as a space of opportunity for refugees and other displaced communities seeking to restore their sense of place and belonging. But her performance embraces the porousness of the neighborhood with cultural sensitivity that recognizes the importance of dwelling—understood as “personal memories and experiences in developing a sense of home over time” (Pinkster and Boterman). The power of *Common Ground* rests also in an understanding that immigrant claims to Shaw should remain mindful of the city’s African American history. Collaborating with the Shaw Community Center and including the children as performers and dialogue leaders was crucial in that respect.

It is through this participatory format that the performance at once creates a community and refuses its fixity, resisting what Bruce Robbins calls “romantic localism” – the use of essentialist notions of place to ground claims for local belonging (3). The ceremony was inclusive also of the patrons of Compass Coffee and the neighboring shops, inviting them to partake in the ritual and the discussion. This blurring of lines between the performers and the audience opened up the space also to the newer residents to join in the collective envisioning of a more equitable future for Shaw. This approach attempted to channel Shaw’s eclectic community away from reinforcing preexisting class and racial antagonisms – divisions, which deem communities weak and hence vulnerable to the type of urban redevelopment that leaves most everyone worse off. Insistent on the role of place not as a commodity but an intrinsic part of our humanity, *Common Ground* pulled all three groups toward a productive negotiation of their commitments to Shaw as a site of life, not profit.

The artistic goal of creating moments of meaningful interaction across established social divides did not come without challenges. *Common Ground* forced each group into the productive discomfort of facing individual and collective barriers that range from civic disengagement to feelings of resentment or defensiveness. Many of the Compass Coffee patrons, for instance, refused the conversation even though it came from a child and with free coffee. For the children, overcoming a sense of unbelonging bred by these refusals served as a crucial exercise in the performance. The newer residents who did partake in the ceremony, on the other hand, had to move past the feelings of indifference driven by an erroneous notion that the changes do not concern them and a sense of being attacked and implicated as the wrongdoers. The intended coming together of distinct

cultures in an engaged conversation about the changing neighborhood occurred more seamlessly at the Zenebech location. But this site also opened up some older wounds of immigrant assertions on African American spaces at the end of the last century. The Little Ethiopia controversy serves as an example of tensions over right to the city that precede gentrification conflicts and complicate the black-white binary that often frames gentrification debates

Through these challenges, *Common Ground* made perceptible how despite the promises of contemporary urban revitalization, income and racial diversification of an area in itself does not guarantee productive interactions across difference. Instead, as Dreek Hyra and Laura Tach suggest, rapid transformation of neighborhoods into mixed-income and mixed-race areas often exacerbate preexisting divisions, leading to micro-level segregations (11). Much will, work, and imagination is needed to move closer to a true neighborhood integration. I propose that arts play a crucial role in such a placemaking project. Tsedaye Makonnen's performance harnesses the immigrant sense of place to facilitate this aspirational being in togetherness. Driven by a similar imaginative impulse, Dinaw Mengestu's debut novel further nuances the barriers of division that gentrification both breeds and feeds off in search of an approach to place that could work across difference.

### **The Things They Carry into Diaspora**

*The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* writes the Ethiopian refugee perspective into the transformation story of Northwest Washington, D.C. The novel centers the experience of Sepha Stephanos who flees Red Terror violence of the 1970s Addis Ababa. Sepha's immigration path in the U.S. takes him from the initial settlement among the

Ethiopian community in Silver Springs suburbs to the ownership of a run-down grocery store in Logan Circle, at the time a disinvested African American neighborhood in downtown Washington D.C. When the area gentrifies some decades later, Sepha faces eviction and the likelihood of being displaced back to the suburban fringes that the novel recasts as a scrappy edge rather than a manicured symbol of middle-class aspirations. From the opening pages, the protagonist's sense of place fluctuates not only between Ethiopia and the U.S., but also among the different communities that converge and clash in Logan Circle at the cusp of gentrification. Sepha shields himself from the potential pain of loss by remaining on the sidelines of communal, social, and civic practices. But his withdrawal from affiliation is never complete. In fact, "we" rather than "I" is the dominant pronoun of the narrative and the privileged form of self-identification as Sepha forms attachments and slides between the often conflicting allegiances. As noted by Bénédicte Ledent, this collective designation refers interchangeably to the African refugees in Washington, D.C., the community of immigrant shopkeepers, the Logan Circle black low-income residents, and the area's newcomers (107–118). The shifting referents of the first person plural pronouns "we" and "our" convey the very predicament of Sepha's incomplete belonging to any single community. His placemaking has to negotiate distinct and often clashing migrant positions: Ethiopian refugee, immigrant shopkeeper, and a cultural outsider of the new African diaspora in historically African American spaces. In what follows, I outline how each one of these immigrant perspectives can help to imagine a right to place outside the property-seniority binary. In my analysis of the text's challenge to this double-bind dynamic of territoriality, I read

The *Beautiful Things* for its hopeful and imaginative undertones rather than dystopian sensibilities that dominate in the critical approaches to the novel.

Since its publication in 2007, critics have read Mengestu's novel as an insightful commentary on Black identity, the immigrant condition, and conspicuous consumption. Carren Irr classifies *The Beautiful Things* alongside the works of Junot Diaz, Chris Abani, Edwidge Danticat, and Teju Cole as a "digital migrant novel." Invested in media technologies that allow for transnational exchange, these texts—Irr claims—move away from the conventional immigrant motif of trauma (*Toward the Geopolitical Novel*). For Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Beautiful Things* is a novel of the New African Diaspora. He describes it as a part of the body of twenty-first century African immigrant writing that reconfigures the dominant paradigms of African diaspora studies, including the Atlanticist and Pan-Africanist frameworks of solidarity in blackness ("Newly Black Americans"). Far less attention has been granted to the textured urbanity of the text. With the notable exception of Sarah K. Harrison's chapter in *Waste Matters*, scholars have largely relegated the issue of gentrification in Mengestu's novel to a mere context, "a first layer of reading" (Ledent 110). But it is crucial to engage *The Beautiful Things* also as a Washington, D.C. novel and a novel of gentrification; in other words, to consider Mengestu's debut as part of the tradition of immigrant city writing. Ultimately, I argue that it is the combination of textured realism in the depiction of D.C.'s and Addis' urban realities with narrative fragmentation that allows the novel to defamiliarize territorial narratives and imagine a third space of possibility.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In "How Did I End up Here?" Nicole Cesare compares the novel's "geographical realism" and "modernist narrative style" to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Karen Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*.

At the forefront of the protagonist's immigrant experience is the issue of repeated displacement caused by the rise of Washington D.C.'s downtown and redevelopment of the neighboring minority areas in the 1990s. *The Beautiful Things* narrates the aggressive revival of Logan Circle and the subsequent dispossession of the neighborhood residents from the perspective of transnational dislocation. The encroaching eviction sends Sepha back to the original trauma of fleeing the country after the murder of his father by the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Thinking about gentrification alongside the displacements of war, Mengestu's novel exposes both the danger and the fragility of placemaking that relies on territorial claims. The circumstance of Sepha's exile reveal that under violent political conditions, property ownership and other conventional means of staking a right to place become irrelevant to personal and familial safety. Ripped away from his home in the aftermath of the Ethiopian revolution, the protagonist embodies the scattering of thousands of people from the Ethiopian territory after the Derg deposed Haile Selassie and grabbed power in 1974. Leading a government-sanctioned campaign of political repression, Mariam has become most notorious for the declaration of *nasa emit*, or "kill freely," in February 1977 against anyone suspected of anti-revolutionary tendencies and/or opposition to the regime. These indiscriminate mass killings conducted mostly in the urban centers became known as Qey Shibir – Ethiopian Red Terror. Student organizations – alongside landowners – formed one of the main arms of opposition to the Derg (Getahun 16-45). In the months before his coerced departure from Ethiopia, Sepha witnessed Addis Ababa punctuated with bodies of young people killed and scattered through the city streets for their real or assumed association with student groups. What sets in motion the protagonist's own exile at the age of sixteen is his

political involvement with Students for Democracy. When Mengistu's soldiers invade Sepha's family home in Addis Ababa, they find a stack of flyers for the student meeting, which Sepha volunteered to hand out and brought into the house. The flyers then become an excuse for the militia to batter and take away his father. And even though presumably Sepha's father would have been killed – and Sepha's life in danger – regardless of the flyers, such trauma of brutal repercussions for teenage political involvement stifles Sepha's engagement in anti-gentrification movements during his later D.C. days. Mass displacements, humanitarian crisis, and personal tragedy are the consequences Sepha comes to associate with divisive urban politics, conflict over land, and his own political involvement.

It is also the central role of land and property conflict in the Ethiopian Revolution, as well as Sepha's privileged urban upbringing in an elite intelligentsia family, that drives his later attitude towards the politics of place. Recalling his young reaction to the changed realities of Addis Ababa in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Sepha reflects: "I remember thinking that I couldn't understand how a city that had demanded so much intimacy could turn on itself. It was the thought of a childish, privileged young man, but that didn't make the disappointment hurt any less" (Mengestu 167). A number of similar childhood recollections of the capital city hinge on a contrast between the vibrant and moving with communal life pre-revolutionary Addis Ababa and its desolate, bloody, and tragically silent "Red Terror" counterpart. These polarized depictions draw the reader's attention to the unreliable point of view of a privileged boy that allows for such a perspective. The naive, romanticizing memory of a shielded child who yearns after the togetherness of city crowds actually reveals the dark side of Addis during Haile

Selassie's rule. What young Sepha envies as intimacy appears to the reader in the dire images of urban overcrowding. The city he admires is in fact a place of stark inequality where the selected few – including Sepha's' family – live in homes with servants and guards while the rest of Addis crowds in "tin-roof shantytowns" (165). The novelistic depictions of this unjust distribution of land invoke the peculiar history of inequality in Ethiopian urban property relations. Pretty much from the incorporation of Addis Ababa in 1886, urban land in the country was held in private ownership of a limited number of elite families. According to Daniel Weldegebriel Ambaye, the first reliable surveys of the city in the 1960s showed a progressive increase in this disparity and the failure of the Haile Selassie government to introduce effective reforms. While in 1961, about seven percent of the population held fifty-eight percent of the surveyed land, five years later only five percent of the population in Addis Ababa owned ninety-five percent of the land in the city (64-67). Almost all elite families at the time constructed rental houses for the city's poorest residents as means of investment; due to lack of proper regulations, this housing arrangement led to deplorable living conditions and the exploitation of tenants by their landlords. Similar disparities of the Haile Selassie period caused property relations to become a crucial motivation for the February 1974 revolution. In the years leading up to the overthrow of the government, a student organization propagated the slogan "Land back to the tiller of the soil" to protest the status quo. The Derg later appropriated this motto to lead the final turn against the emperor. Soon after the revolution, nationalization of rural and urban land became the Derg's priority. (UN-HABITAT, Situation analysis of informal settlements in Addis Ababa 10) Despite some promising changes brought by the property redistribution acts of 1974 and 1975 –

including significant rent cutbacks – the move towards state ownership of land resulted in the further deterioration of urban housing conditions in Addis (Prunier and Ficquet).<sup>26</sup> More so than the urban decline, it was of course the ongoing violence of the Red Terror period that has overshadowed any positive changes the Derg might have implemented.

As an adult, Sepha holds critical views of pre-revolutionary Ethiopia and identifies Haile Selassie as “a tyrant not a god” (118). As a witness of the bleak consequences produced by the decades of injustice regarding people’s right to place in Ethiopia, the protagonist is critical of the inequitable approaches to city planning in contemporary D.C. However, his first-hand experience of how the Derg’s regime perverted the promises of struggle for equity into years of brutal conflict, abuse, and division causes Sepha to reject as dangerous any totalizing political activism that vilifies entire groups of people as the enemy. Even if that activism is of a completely different scale and kind, as in the case of the neighborhood anti-gentrification movement. This refugee trauma could of course be read as a blind spot in the immigrant perspective, a cause of inaction, a hindrance to political engagement. I, however read Sepha’s reservations as productive. There is in his anti-territorial ethos an unassuming yet unceasing search for a more sustainable approach to placemaking.

In the D.C. part of the novel Sepha occupies the position of an immigrant shopkeeper. After a short-lived career as a student and an employee at the Capitol hotel, the protagonist opens up “Logan’s Market. A New *Community Store*” in pursuit of “the grand narrative of [his] life” (147). This turn toward business ownership invokes and deconstructs the popular literary trope of immigrant shopkeeper. There is a significant body of immigrant literature novelizing the long history of the inner-city neighborhood

as a springboard to immigrant mobility, where self-employment (often store keeping) serves as a crucial means of remaking a life for immigrants in the new society (Gold). To name just a few examples: Cristina Garcia's New York section of *Dreaming In Cuban* (1992) depicts Lourdes Puente's proud ownership of the Yankee doodle Bakery in Brooklyn; Julia Alvarez' *How Tia Lola Came to (Visit) Stay* depicts The Guzmans' bodega; Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957) centers a grocery store owned by a Jewish refugee from Russia; most of Myron Brining's novels feature Romanian-immigrant storeowners; and a few of Chang Rae Lee's texts, including the *Native Speaker*, highlight moments of conflict between Korean shopkeepers and the African American community. Unlike many of the novels in this tradition—and like some of them—Mengestu's portrayal of immigrant entrepreneurship in *The Beautiful Thing* challenges rather than reinforces the logics of territoriality—of asserting right to place through ownership, exclusion, and domination. As Harris argues, Sepha is a "reluctant shopkeeper"(84). He prioritizes reading sessions over customer service, does not uphold regular hours, neglects maintenance, and even abandons his store for the pleasure of city strolls ( 84). In her analysis of Mengestu's novel as a critique of conspicuous consumption, Dayo Olopade reads Sepha's progressive descent into bankruptcy as a narrative of initial investment in and later disillusionment with the promises of immigrant uplift understood as capitalist accumulation; Olopade recognizes anti-capitalist resistance in Sepha's business self-sabotage. Expanding on this analysis, I propose that the novel rewrites the value of place outside the capitalist rubrics of ownership. Mengestu's anticapitalist reimaging of the criteria that determine place and community belonging in the novel parallels with Makonnen's experiential ceremony and

the ways in which *Common Ground* reclaimed, however temporarily, the city sites of capital accumulation into spaces of community making.

The protagonist's attitude toward his store begs an analysis of the inner-city grocer not merely as a place of economic transactions but a node of citiness and a crossroads of communities – a site of placemaking and place-maintaining rather than claiming, owning, and consuming. The label “community store” in the very name of Sepha’s shop is of importance here. I propose that the protagonist’s investment in shopkeeping has from the beginning been more about the narrative of emplacement than accumulation – about establishing belonging in place and community rather than establishing oneself economically. From its inception, the idea of store ownership carried a collective meaning for Sepha and his friends and fellow African refugees – Joseph and Kenneth – who referred to the business as “our store” (28). As the meaning of “our” and “we” fluctuates throughout the novel, the physical location of Logan Market roots all of Sepha’s relationships; it becomes his buoy of belonging, a site of the fulfilled and failed intimacies of his immigrant life in the city. The store is where he gathers with Joseph and Kenneth and where he bonds with Naomi – the eleven-year-old daughter of Sepha’s white neighbor and a romantic interest Judith. It is also the junction of his relationship with the African American community, particularly the elder longtime resident Mrs. Davis. The store becomes a site where he tries to puzzle himself back together through affinity with different groups rather than via fixed belonging to any single one of them.

This affective and psychological investment in the store as a place and not merely a business, culminates in the concluding paragraph of the novel:

I’m convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway

cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own. (228)

While the “I” and “” entirely my own” seemingly pose a stark contrast to the previous communal approaches to the shop, this final reflection only borrows the markers of personal ownership to shatter the territorial conventions of claiming a place as one’s own. Sepha comes to the hopeful sense of individual ownership at the end of a day when he receives the eviction notice for his store, abandons its premises for several hours, and fails to find a source of capital to save the business; a day, which – if understood in line with capitalist logic-essentially strips the protagonist of possession over the store. But the meandering and disorienting temporality of the narrative stretches the twenty-four-hour period over several chapters and punctuates it with flashbacks to a myriad of meaningful community moments in the store. It is in these shared experiences of place that Sepha locates the importance of his store. Logan’s Market becomes a site of potential thrown-togetherness as the distinct groups cross paths or even clash in the store and in Sepha’s life. This narrative deferral opens the reader toward the more communal possibility of Sepha’s seemingly individual place-claiming. I read the protagonist’s unwarranted optimism and refusal to accept the existing conditions of his looming eviction as an act of imaginative audacity rather than descent into delusion. To reinterpret the notion of ownership through collective belonging – “regardless of everything” – is to challenge the treatment of place as a commodity.

The use of the shifting “we” in Mengestu’s portrayal of the shop throughout the novel is punctuated with other such subtle exercises of conceiving the meanings of place beyond territoriality. Logan Market figures as node of the neighborhood life, a site of the

city's placemaking rituals; it is where people gather, talk, meet, exchange gossip. In one of the many evocative descriptions of citiness in the text, Sepha inserts the role of city stores and shopkeepers into the sidewalk ballet that Jane Jacobs described some decades earlier in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. He reflects: "I lift the lock from its latch, grab hold of the lowest rung on the grate, and with three quick, solid jerks hurl it over my head and send it crashing, That same sound is echoing from stores all across the city; it is *we* the small storekeepers and newspaper vendors, who are drawing it back to life" (66). Attempting to stabilize a shaken sense of self and place with a collective pronoun "we," Sepha connects himself in this scene not only to the imagined community of "small storekeepers" but also to the very physicality of the store—the beating heart of city days. It is the heavy, secure materiality of the shop's latch and grate that rings for Sepha with the prospects of stability, significance, and urban belonging. The shifting referents of the "we" in descriptions of the relationship between the store-space and his identity indicate that Sepha's sense of place is not bounded by belonging to any single community. It is true that these groups remain separate or even clash as they cross paths in the store and in Sepha's life. However being a site of such social negotiations, the shop redefines not only the idea of place as a commodity, but also confront the notion of place as fixed, bounded, and having a single essence.

The immigrant shopkeeper is also a contentious figure in the history of urban community relations. Along with the commercial presence that various immigrant groups have developed across American inner cities throughout the twentieth century from New York City to Los Angeles came tensions with the existing communities over the scarce resources and opportunities. In Northwest D.C. itself, many of the German and Jewish-

owned businesses were left in ruin after the 1968 race riots; the destruction was fueled not only by the grief over Martin Luther King's assassination, but also by African American resentment of some white immigrant business owners who treated black patrons as second-class citizens. (Luria) Negotiating the baggage of this fraught history of urban relations between (Black) immigrant shopkeepers and the African American community, *The Beautiful Things* resists the unrealistic and ahistorical expectation of solidarity imposed on Black communities. As argued by Louis Chude Sokei, the novel reconfigures the dominant paradigms of African diaspora studies that assume straightforward affinity in blackness—what he identifies as “forced kinship” (67).

In the view of a series of evictions sweeping through the area, a group of local residents takes to the streets; Mrs. Davis attempts to channel the energy of these impromptu protests into a structured community organizing against displacement. To obtain formal legitimacy for their cause, she assembles the first official meeting of The Logan Circle Community Association. However distinct in tactics, the protest and the community gathering align in their antagonism toward newcomers. The formal meeting hinges on a us/them division no less than the spontaneous shouts of the protesters. Both assume the white and monied new residents as the acting force of displacement, the cause of gentrification rather than one of its manifestations. United in the feeling of being wronged, the community speakers at the fictitious meeting contrast their self-identification as “we, long term residents” with the vilified “them”—a buzzword that “seemed to trail onto the end of nearly every sentence” (200). In the stronghold of this binary, it becomes the type of meeting where Sepha has to pledge his allegiance by physically choosing a side of the room, where the misspelled flyer advertises the event’s

effort to “PROTECT THE NEIGHBORHOOD,” and where Judith as the only white person present in the meeting becomes the target of verbal attacks. It is important to note here that the historic Logan Circle Community Association exercised the exact opposite political agenda toward urban development. Formed in 1972, the organization consisted of newer monied homeowners who led a beautification and crime-fighting campaign that in effect alienated and eventually displaced many older low-income residents; their activity centered fierce anti-prostitution efforts, and later expansion of the historic district by purchasing and restoration of Logan Circle’s famed mansions.<sup>31</sup> Today, it gathers mainly white residents and organizes to advance the economic viability of the neighborhood (Hyra 10). By the means of this counter-factual, Mengestu exposes the ease with which anti-gentrification movements can replicate the very patterns of exclusion they critique in the type of urban renewal that drives racial and class resegregation. This narrative moment also exaggerates how the use of divisive rhetoric potentially exposes anti-gentrification activists and their causes to dismissal and accusations of unreasonable and incompetent opposition to change and integration. Aware of such risks, one of Northwest D.C.’s most active and effective grassroots organizations for equitable development, Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE D.C.), prioritizes radically liberatory approach to housing as a human right through participatory democracy and inclusion. In the opening remarks to their walking-tours about the physical side of gentrification in Shaw, the organization foreground the importance of both specific objectives for direct action and policy changes and linguistic precision in organizing efforts. Leading the tour, Claire Cook explained that ONE D.C. members deliberately

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<sup>31</sup> For more information about the association: <http://www.logancircle.org>

avoid the label “activists” and prioritize “organizers” in turn. This is to shun the connotations of the loaded term, often mobilized in press coverage and political discourse to overstate divisiveness and diminish the community’s knowledge and ability to organize methodically and with deep understanding of the complex systemic processes behind urban planning. The group is also reluctant to use the term gentrification because of its contested reception. They instead describe their efforts as organizing against displacement.<sup>32</sup> Since language and narrative are critical in the efforts of groups both condoning and condemning gentrification, the study of literature can offer important contributions to the research into these contentious dynamics.

An outsider himself, Sepha struggles to place himself within such framework of neighborhood defense. His is not the experience of straightforward categories of belonging. The language of closure and fear of outsiders propagated by the Logan Circle anti-displacement movement alienates Sepha’s immigrant identity. Mrs. Davis’ interpolates Sepha as one of the locals. Stephanos himself, however, holds on to the sidelines of the conflict, reflecting during the last of such encounters about his unbelonging to Logan Circle and his ambiguous role in its recent changes:

I was in no position, though, to say what was right or wrong. I was not one of “these people”, as Mrs. Davis has just made clear to me. I hadn’t forced anyone out, but I had never really been a part of Logan Circle either, at least not in the same way Mrs. Davis and most of my customers were. I had snuck into the neighborhood as well. I had used it for its cheap rent, and if others were now doing the same, then what right did I have to deny them? (189)

As the protagonist’s run-down store does not comport well with the neighborhood’s revamped image, his future too grows precarious amidst the impeding changes. Being

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<sup>32</sup> For more in depth description of ONE DC please see Moulden, D. T. and Squires, G. D. 2012. Equitable development in D.C. Social Policy, 42(3) (Fall), 37–39 <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2013/squires.htm>

black and economically vulnerable connects his fate in Logan Circle closer to the concerns of his African American neighbors and customers than the white affluent newcomers. Having the protagonist join in the community plea against the most recent residents, as Mrs. Davis would have him do, hardly appears like a surprising position. However, the language of closure and fear of outsiders propagated by the Logan Circle anti-displacement movement alienates Sepha's immigrant identity. Their insistence on seniority in place as the only legitimate claim to belonging in the neighborhood excludes the city's new African Diaspora – the “we” that aligns Sepha with Joseph and Kenneth and his family in Silver Springs. Sepha refuses to proclaim wrongness of the new migrant's presence in the neighborhood. The idea of policing borders and denying others the right to remake their lives wherever they find fit, sits uneasily with an immigrant business owner who himself had sought refuge and opportunity in this already existing community. As an immigrant, Sepha does not feel authorized to regulate movement and dictate the terms of mobility into and through the city. To support the logic of right to place promoted in the meetings and protests would deem also his being in Logan Circle illegitimate. While without the buying potential of “these people,” he also drifts outside the neighborhood's African American cultural history and collective memories. In his being in the place but not of the place, Sepha is not “a part of” and “in no position to”; these metaphors of rottenness and steadiness authorizing Mrs. Davis's plea are not available to him. Sepha remains outside of the established practices and discourses of place claiming that gentrification debates often figure as the only option; neither property ownership nor asserting a history in place through the discourse of seniority appear as viable options to the immigrant protagonist living at the brink of poverty.

But the novel is not defeatist. And despite the condescending tone of Sepha's account, the meeting scene should not be mistaken for a ridicule of the residents' plea to remain in their homes or a dismissal of the legitimacy of the community grievances. The narrative does privilege the immigrant perspective, and hence the portrayal of African Americans at times appear as flat or even problematic; after all, the only truly three-dimensional African-American character in the novel, Sepha's older neighbor Mrs. Davis, harbors and articulates the most ignorant beliefs about the African continent and its peoples. But it is crucial to consider that all characters in Mengestu's text, not least the narrator protagonist himself, are flawed—many fostering attitudes that deem a true coming together a distant future. These imperfections include the prejudice and insularity of the Silver Springs Ethiopian diaspora, Judith's white savior's impulse, her daughter's sense of entitlement, Kenneth's buy-in to the American bootstraps narrative, and of course Sepha's own withdrawal (trauma often received by the American audience as bothersome passivity). The reader then is not automatically inclined to sympathize with the protagonist and his perspectives. *The Beautiful Things* exposes the barriers of divisive politics of place to ask: how can those who feel wronged build bridges with those they perceive as wrongdoers for the future of more equitable and inclusive cities? With all those emotions at play, how can we defend a community's right to preservation of place, its cultures and histories, without falling back on exclusion and compromising the right to movement and border-crossing?

Thinking gentrification alongside immigrant displacement and placemaking, *The Beautiful Things* expands the notions of the right to the city beyond commodity value while also making place for mobile identities. The novel pushes against the assumption

that deems the defense of community and place attachment irreconcilable with celebration of migrant mobility and openness. For a refugee defending his adopted neighborhood against the pressures of gentrification, sense of place security is about freedom of movement that encompasses both the right to mobility and the right to remain in place. This perspective challenges the perceived binary between arguments for place permeability and place protection. Doreen Massey understands this totalizing impulse as “the romance of bounded place and the romance of free flow” (81). While the specific circumstances of Sepha’s exile make him anxious about the essentialist approaches to place and highly polarized language advanced by both the fictionalized and actual Logan Circle Association, his Ethiopian experience also opens up unique insights and allows for alternative approaches. As a refugee who learns to recreate his life in a city that now can no longer bear his company, Sepha ponders the connection between two different types of displacement—his exile experience and urban dispossession. During a night walk around the sites of the recent evictions, he reflects on the lifetimes left behind by families rushed to leave: “It didn’t matter where you lived, or where you came from, or how far you had traveled, somewhere near you someone was on the run. I pitied and resented those people, whoever they may have been, for being chased out of their homes, perhaps in part because I felt even then a similar fate waiting for me once more” (194). This is the first time the protagonist allows himself to confront the fate of the evicted neighbors. Through a bond of shared experience, Sepha empathizes with their pain. But there are limits to this affinity; he resents the parallel that this display of place loss imposes. To face their forced movement is to face the violence of both his past—the circumstances of exile from Ethiopia—and his future—the encroaching eviction. The ugly truth emerging

from underneath the remains is that the American city that was supposed to provide a haven, instead repeats his displacement.

Like Makonnen's performances, the novel prompts its readers to think comparatively and transnationally about the seemingly distinct experiences of displacement. This correlation between exile and urban dispossession helps redefine D.C.'s gentrification as systemic rather than individual problem. Sepha's experience of repeated displacement repositions the discontent of contemporary urban renewal beyond the issue of some people moving into a neighborhood and others moving out. Instead, this transnational perspective highlights the systemic nature of changes in Logan Circle that involves developers backed by corporate capital and the complicity of the local government, which extends to decades of racist real estate policies and politics. Focus on the systemic problems with contemporary urban development that in the end makes most all city dwellers worse off can help move away from the perils of division. Mengestu achieves this comparative effect by the means of spatial analogies, which shape shifting D.C. into Addis. While Sepha notes Washington D.C.'s "resemblance to Addis" (173) in the size, layout, and landmarks, and recognizes his family members in the faces of strangers on the street, the connections extend far beyond the comforting similarities that a mind tormented by trauma or nostalgia resorts to in order to soothe the longing. There is also something unsettling about the results of this hunt for familiarity; the "glimpses of home" are seen in the bodies of beggars on the streets, shabby buildings, evictions, monuments that evoke "fearful awe" (46), and a government official's motorcade that "reminds people what they are up against" (92). The uncanny connections between the two cities account for how the intimate knowledge of displacement and violence around

the issues of property and place politics in one geopolitical context can provide insights into navigating the pressures of urban transformations in another. Even if the two places and moments are as distinct as the post-revolutionary Addis Ababa life and gentrifying Washington, D.C. This focus on the systemic problems with contemporary urban development offers a step away from the perils of division. Another such parallel occurs toward the plot's end, when someone plants a brick in Judith's car. The brick is meant to implicate Judith in the recent evictions and prompt her to leave Logan Circle. The neighborhood gossip immediately imagines young African American men as responsible for the property damage. On the evening of this incident, Sepha observes the ritual of corner mingling in front of his store and reflects on the possibility of investment in place as a shared and potentially uniting rather than divisive aspiration:

I couldn't imagine any of them marching down the middle of the street armed with bricks. We all essentially wanted the same thing, which was to feel that we had a stake in shaping and defining what little part of the world we could claim as our own. Boys even younger than the ones standing outside had fought and killed one another all over Addis for that exact reason and they were at it again now throughout more of Africa than even Joseph, Kenneth, and I cared to acknowledge. At least here, in America, they had this corner to live their lives as they pleased, and if a few of them took to throwing bricks through windows, then we could not judge them. (211)

The aphoristic quality of the second sentence about the importance of place security in human experience seduces the reader to open up to the claims that follow. What follows, however, is not to be taken at face value. By the paragraph's end, the elegant poetic voice asks to excuse violence in the name of the right to place. The unapologetic and beautifully articulated need to feel invested in place and included in shaping its fate clashes against the appeal to accept force, cruelty, and division as the natural means of obtaining and preserving that right. Throwing bricks in protests is of course unlike the ongoing brutality and indiscriminate mass killings that came to define Ethiopia's post-

revolutionary era. The passage identifies the principle of territoriality driving both conflicts as shared and dangerous. The way in which Mengestu explores the dissonance between the meaningfulness of place and the instances of violence that place-attachment can breed, prompts the reader to ponder the shortcoming of territoriality. The novel prompts to question the violent logic of claiming place through siege, ownership, or barring and to reflect what it would take to conceive of a claim on place that does not revert to violence or exclusion.

### **Art and the Right to the City**

The divided infrastructure of housing activism in Northwest D.C. embodies the challenge of forging allegiances that could reconcile multiple, often clashing, needs and preferences. The previously mentioned Logan Circle Community Association represents mostly white affluent residents and their efforts to increase property value in the area. In contrast, the Shaw-based Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE D.C.) consists mainly of low-income African American members organizing for true affordability and equitable development (Hyra 10). Due to linguistic differences, the local Latinx communities form their own associations with similar housing justice agendas. Even with shared interest then, unity and collaboration are not a given. As alluded to in the introductory story concerning the Little Ethiopia petition, the in-betweenness of immigrant communities along with the appropriation of ethnic culture by developers further complicates the racial and class binary in the debates over urban space. Mengestu and Makonnen offer a clear engagement with barriers that deem a truly democratic thrown-togetherness in cities to still appear as an unattainable futurity. But they also reach beyond such critical engagement and gesture toward the importance of imagining

that which is not yet. When faced with contentious issues like gentrification, such exercises in critical, but hopeful, thinking are indispensable to model a new discourse of solidarity. Unbounded by the restrictions of realism, art has the freedom to push beyond the limits of perceived possibilities. The Ethiopian-American artists who appear in this chapter make use of their imaginative prowess to envision the immigrant perspective as a step toward, not away from, more equitable, united urban futures. Through performative and literary creations they formulate a migrant sense of place; this approach to urban communities is defined by the productive paradox of a desire for permeability of borders on the one hand and protection of the neighborhood from displacement on the other. This migrant sense of place must be taken seriously in the discussions of urban revitalization because its imaginative audacity eschews place-claiming fundamentalisms of both ownership and seniority that foreclose possibilities of cross-group integration. The central question occupying this essay is about the unique insights immigrant cultural production brings to bear on the discussion of America's urban affordability crisis.

*Common Ground* and *The Beautiful Things* are rooted in the specificities of Washington, D.C. – the exceptional position of D.C. as a district, the city's government profile, its African American history, and its recent transition into a global city. It is an important part of Mengestu's and Makonnen's projects to revise the established narratives of the nation's capital as a non-immigrant Black city. But the counter narrative framework of the migrant sense of place is applicable also to other urban contexts. The insights afforded by the unique position of Ethiopians in Shaw/U Street could be read alongside the role of Mexican immigrants in the latest expansion of East Harlem's Latinidad, or the efforts of Miami's Haitian community to preserve their presence and cultural impact in

the hyper-gentrifying Little Haiti/ Lemon City. This openness toward a comparative trans-urban framework situates the here locally rooted question of immigrant placemaking in lieu of gentrification as a broader issue for American city research.

## Chapter 3

### Magic City Girlscapes

“Miami is culture, an amalgamation of the Caribbean and Latin America” announces the promotional reel for the Magic City Innovation District Special Area Plan (Magic City SAP) in Little Haiti.<sup>33</sup> Intercutting scenes of fine dining and luxury-condo living with images of Haitian flags and folk dress, neighborhood murals, and Mache Ayisyen, the video inserts Haitian culture into the fantasy of Miami’s affluent multiculturalism.<sup>34</sup> Magic City Innovation District (Magic City) invokes Haitian heritage to promote a massive luxury development so out of scale and character of the existing neighborhood that it threatens to displace the very community the promotional teaser claims to celebrate.<sup>35</sup> The use of Black culture as a draw for tourists and a catalyst for neighborhood redevelopment represents a significant change in gentrification strategies in Miami. Marketers have long deployed the city’s Caribbean networks to sell real estate and vacation dreams, in the past relying primarily on images of and connections to a white multinational Latino identity (Yúdice, *Miami: Images of a Latinopolis*). However,

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<sup>33</sup> Special Area Plan (SAP) is a provision named after a section of the Miami 21 zoning code which allows developers who assemble nine consecutive acres of land to apply for a land-use change. Throughout this chapter, I will use the abbreviation Magic City SAP to refer to the project itself and Magic City to refer to the developer.

<sup>34</sup> Little Haiti's Mache Ayisyen, also known as The Caribbean Marketplace, is the largest venue space within the Little Haiti Cultural Complex. The Marketplace offers a space for vendors selling Caribbean and African goods and products. The building that would become the marketplace was constructed in 1936. In 1984 architect, Charles Harrison Pawley, won the design competition to repurpose the building. Pawley's design of the Marketplace was inspired by “*Marchè en Fer*” the Iron Market in Port-au-Prince, and the gingerbread house architecture in Haiti. The Marketplace opened in 1990 and closed just nine years later due to structural and financial problems. Community protest saved the structure from demolition in 2005. Remodeled since then, the Marketplace obtained “Florida Heritage Site” designation in 2018.

<sup>35</sup> According to the environmental impact study by Earth Economics—a Tacoma, Washington-based nonprofit research organization—the Magic City Innovation District could displace more than 3,000 households in Little Haiti. Two groups opposing the Magic City commissioned the study: Community Justice Project and FANM. While Magic City challenges the study, they did not seek to provide an alternative displacement study (despite community requests).

in the last decade Miami's development and tourism industries, such as the Greater Miami Conventions and Visitors Bureau, have seized Haitian culture as the new darling of the city's cultural branding with initiatives like the 2011 Biscayne Boulevard "hidden gems" tours and the 2014 "It's so Miami: People and Places" campaign.<sup>36</sup> This celebration of Haitian heritage can only masquerade as progress when compared to decades of crude devaluation of Afro-Caribbean contributions to Miami's multicultural landscape.

Between Little Haiti's newly-appreciated (or frankly, appropriated) symbolic cultural capital, the neighborhood's centralized location, and its precious high-ground topography, the area has been gentrifying with a scope and speed dizzying even by the standards of Miami's development history, which brought about the town's famous Magic City nickname. The use of ethnic culture as a tool of neighborhood redevelopment—what I refer to as cultural branding—has become the favored medium for urban planners and marketers.<sup>37</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will insist that there is a fine line between cultural branding as a shield against gentrification and cultural branding as a tool of gentrification. Making a culture more accessible and more recognizable, even at a grassroots level, often requires a certain level of simplification and highlighting of the consumable elements of culture and history. The strategy of cultural branding often

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<sup>36</sup> In 2011, the Urban Environmental League hosted a visitors' tour showcasing the "developing neighborhoods around Biscayne Boulevard" ([rfc.museum/images/stories/archive/20110210-miamiherald.pdf](http://rfc.museum/images/stories/archive/20110210-miamiherald.pdf)). The Little Haiti farm was one of the stops on the tour. A couple of years later the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB) announced the launch of the "It's So Miami (ISM): People and Places" (2013-2015) campaign, offering an "in-depth and authentic look at the rich cultural capital of "Miami's heritage neighborhoods" from the local insiders. The initial series featured short promotional clips for neighborhoods: Little Havana, Coconut Grove/Village West, Overtown, Little Haiti.

<sup>37</sup> Cultural branding is a process of formalizing and amplifying versions of ethnic identity for purposes varying from cultural preservation to profit-oriented marketing. This might include beautification of an area through heritage-oriented art, festivals, cultural institutions and heritage museums, historic designations for landmarks, and the like.

emerges from within the community to promote inclusion, prevent cultural erasures, and redress the tired tropes of crime-ridden spaces in need of restoration or empty spaces in need of cultivation. But the outward-facing approach that prioritizes tourists and broader city audiences over the interests of local residents often ends up exacerbating the very issue of dispossession that grassroots cultural branding seeks to resolve. The case of cultural branding in Little Haiti reflects how easily developers exploit for profit the images a “heritage neighborhood;” Magic City’s seemingly celebratory framework presents Little Haiti’s cultural richness as a mismanaged asset needing outsider money, expertise, and vision to thrive. The developer’s cultural branding tactics promote top-down development as a lifeline for the culture-rich but resource-poor immigrant neighborhood, monopolizing on the narrative of a hapless and homogenous community that is inept at commanding its own cultural capital and incapable of producing its own transformation.

In contrast, Little Haiti’s de facto poet laureate and long-time inhabitant Edwidge Danticat waxes poetically on the same tropes of murals and music. Her recitations of the “soul of Little Haiti” — the *konpa* and gospel, the smells of delectable foods, the storefront churches and the botanicas — foreground the perseverance of Haitian residents whose roots run deep in the high grounds of the neighborhood located on what once was the wrong side of the train tracks but what today registers as valuable land on the right side of the city’s inundation maps.<sup>38</sup> Under Danticat’s pen, it is the people marching the streets in “spirited processions and protests” who embody the soul of Little Haiti. Her literary mapping articulates a nuanced engagement with the neighborhood as a space “of

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<sup>38</sup> *konpa* (also spelled *compas*) is a musical genre that originated in Haiti in the 1950s. It is sometimes referred to as a Haitian merengue.

both mourning and joy” expressed in an ethos of care that recognizes the long history of diasporic cultural production and politically-active citizenship (Danticat, “The Soul of Little Haiti”). Writing on the survival and survivance of a people continually displaced, her work reflects larger, lived and imagined, gendered geographies of Caribbean Miami I term Magic City girlscapes. I draw on Arjun Appadurai’s seminal theory of locally situated global cultural flows articulated through the common suffix –scapes. My concept of girlscapes relates the geographical and metaphorical spaces of Miami girlhood and womanhood through a close-reading of Edwidge Danticat’s 2015 young adult novel *Untwine* and via fieldwork on women-led advocacy for community justice in Little Haiti.<sup>39</sup> Girlscapes refer to a set of locations central to gentrification debates—both public spaces and institutions—that girls and women use and reappropriate through what Appadurai calls the “hard and regular work” of producing locality (205). They are spaces from which those typically sidelined in urban planning assert themselves into the making of Miami’s future by influencing the city’s policies and rerouting its narratives. I articulate girlscapes as multigenerational. Despite what the prefix might suggest, the concept is not limited to the landscapes of female childhood and /or adolescence but instead registers female experiences and voices across age groups. I refer to this collective—after a popularized hashtag—as Miami Girls.<sup>40</sup> Girlscapes figure then as a

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<sup>39</sup> In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai identifies five interconnected aspects of global cultural flows to capture the uneven, personal, disjointed and locally situated forces behind globalization. Appadurai distinguishes five such scapes: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes and finanscapes, which articulate respectively the flows of people, cultural meanings, ideologies, technologies and capital. Scholars across disciplines have adapted Appadurai’s language of the scapes as a fruitful metaphor. The theoretical thinking about -scapes in this chapter is most influenced by the numerous takes on cityscapes understood as sites that make processes of globalization available for analysis in localized contexts, Maira’s and Soep’s “youthscapes” theorized as “places local youth practices within the context of ongoing shifts in national and global forces”, and Sumi Krishna’s genderscapes.

<sup>40</sup> #MiamiGirls has been a part of a wider media campaign by the Miami Girls Foundation — a non-profit organization framing itself as “a megaphone for the voices of Miami women.” Their mission is to empower

womanist reclaiming of the city's Caribbean landscape commodified by the development industry for the consumption of tourist and more affluent space users. Throughout the chapter, I foreground *translocal* and *embodied* placemaking practices as key features of girlscapes. The fieldwork section seeks to articulate how multigenerational Little Haiti women organizers—with varied and periodically opposed perspectives—occupy spaces of contention to the masculinist politics of development and placemaking in the city. I focus on the ways their bodies can be interpreted as unruly or disruptive while also being ghosted from official narratives. The way Haitian women impose themselves in the public arena of development debate flies in the face of cultural branding tactics that capitalize on the disembodied elements of Haitian culture while driving displacement of Haitian people. Comparably, Danticat's reclaiming of the key sites of Little Haiti's gentrification debates as spaces of middle class Haitian girlhood tied to Haiti and other diasporic outposts counters the narratives of Little Haiti's exoticism and insularity wired into Magic City's cultural branding attempts. Ultimately, I argue that the framework of girlscapes allows us to evaluate the social landscape of Little Haiti as neither politically nor economically hermetic, neither an issue to be fixed nor a culture to be consumed. Instead, my literary fieldwork of Little Haiti reveals the neighborhood community as entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan, politically-engaged, and economically, culturally, and generationally diverse; this image stands in direct opposition to the two-dimensional representations of Haitian and Haitian Americans in the developer-driven cultural branding and to the city of Miami's history of ignoring or repressing its Black roots.

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and celebrate the work and leadership of Miami's females of all ages against the grain of the damaging "Miami Girls" stereotypes.

## A Woman's Work

I emphasize a focus on Miami Girls because the role of women in the city's development remains understudied in popular accounts and scholarship alike.<sup>41</sup> My focus on the feminization of grassroots organizing in the fieldwork section reveals the persistent and self-perpetuating gender imbalance in Miami's development politics.<sup>42</sup> Women have long led the way in grassroots organizing around the issues of housing, equitable development, and resiliency, yet continue to be underrepresented among architects, urban planners, and city commissioners, and excluded from the traditional urban planning processes.<sup>43</sup> The robust local media reporting on climate-change gentrification in Little Haiti or Liberty City acknowledges the leadership of women advocates and community movers, but this coverage does so without an analysis of how gender dynamics matter in Miami's development politics and in grassroots organizing at large. While female organizers and leaders in Little Haiti are then not absent from these discussions, it is as if their identity as women was inconsequential, as if the visible gender imbalance between Miami's grassroots and official development politics held no weight.

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<sup>41</sup> Age also still occupies a peripheral position in studies of urban change. Addressing this gap, a recent essay by Hochstenbach and Boterman "Age, life course and generations in Gentrification" centers age as crucial modality for gentrification research. But as the authors discuss the "young people" category, they focus on creative millennial gentrifiers who "flock into inner cities" for school and jobs, and then push further the gentrification frontier in search of affordable rent. The "Engage Miami" organization invites a different focus; their members prioritize the perspective of young people growing up in Miami's gentrifying neighborhoods or trying to reclaim their right to the city upon returning from college: "Millennials and Gen Z increasingly see housing as a top issue hampering their ability to thrive"(Gilbert Placeres, Engage Miami website).

<sup>42</sup> In *All You That Labor*, Melissa Snarr uses the term "feminization of organizing" when analyzing the role of women in the Living Wage Movement.

<sup>43</sup> See "Women Will Rebuild Miami" in *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* by Elaine Enarson and Betty Marrow for a study of Miami's women organizing after Hurricane Andrew.

But gentrification is a gendered issue. Matters of public space and housing insecurity issues affect women in distinctive ways because of the central role that women still play in social reproduction and care work, and due to domestic violence and the persisting wage gap that particularly affects women of color. From the 1990s, scholarship has focused on women as agents of gentrification, highlighting the ways in which women moving into cities to participate in paid labor have restructured the city for different gender relations or expedited gentrification processes. The more recent studies also elucidate how images of women and families are used to promote the gentrification narratives of a safe city (Bondi, 1991; Lees, 2008; Kem 2010; Berg 2012). Much of this literature on gender and gentrification focuses on white women gentrifiers, foregoing discussion of women of color who have long lived and organized in the cities.

Sociological works on gentrification as well popular discussions and the rhetoric of development proposals tend to also frame Black and Latinx women as either sources or victims of urban decay. This chapter proposes that the framework of girlscapes challenge such facile representations by amplifying the ways in which women in Little Haiti spearhead movements for neighborhood justice and intervene in urban policy-making. I join here the still limited scholarship on women-led housing and land advocacy, including Keisha-Khan Y. Perry's *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* discussing women-driven resistance against land expulsion in the neighborhood of Gamboa de Baixo in Salvador, as well as Roberta Feldman and Susan Stall's *The Dignity of Resistance* documenting the decades-long activism of African American women to counter disinvestment in public housing in Chicago. Caitlin Cahill's participatory research with young women in New York City's Lower East Side has also

influenced this study; Cahill argues that the stereotypes of low-income women of color as promiscuous, lazy, uneducated, and burden to society play an important role in promoting gentrification by moralizing displacement (337). In Miami, the challenges of navigating the city's housing affordability crisis are the more pronounced for women of color who have to additionally contend with the hyper-sexualized image of "Miami Girls" and the gendered and raced stereotypes of sex workers, teen moms, and welfare queens, which have been used to justify displacement of low income communities as urban problem-solving. A quick look at Miami marketing campaigns, from the 1978 "Miami: See It Like a Native" to the 2014 "pop-up pool event," illustrates how the development and tourism industries exploit the beach-and-beauty images of young women.<sup>44</sup> The infamous 1978 poster centered the naked back of a female snorkeler wearing only a bikini bottoms with the "See it like a native" headline running under her buttocks. It uses the female body as an adornment to rebrand Miami as young and alluring. Following a wave of protests, the poster was eventually banned by the very tourism board who first commissioned the campaign. Over thirty years later when the image of Miami as a sexy city has been well-solidified, the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau's "It's So Miami" campaign included an experiential component—a pop-up pool party in the middle of Union Square where models clad in "It's So Miami" bikinis danced, swam, and handed out drinks to passersby. Both campaigns sell the sun-kissed female flesh as a Miami asset in their "cultural insider" approach, reducing Miami women to a sexualized tourist attraction. On

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<sup>44</sup> The "Miami: See It Like a Native" poster was designed and circulated by the Beber Silverstein agency hired by the Dade County Commission and our county tourism board. The agency explained that featuring the model Gail Kelly posing with bare bikini back was meant to help Miami break out of the retirement community image. The ad prompted feminist protests and was eventually banned. [communitynewspapers.com/cutler-bay/miami-see-it-like-a-native/](http://communitynewspapers.com/cutler-bay/miami-see-it-like-a-native/).

the flip side of things, developers invoke and disparage female sex workers to advance the narrative of gentrification as progress in Miami's economically struggling neighborhoods. An interview with Miami-based developer David Lombardi in the documentary *The Right to Wynwood* provides one appalling illustration of how development aims to remove sex workers and other low-income women from gentrifying spaces.<sup>45</sup> Boasting on camera about his contribution to the transformation of Miami's Wynwood neighborhood into a world-class arts and entertainment district—"I like to say that I took chicken shit and made chicken salad"—he invokes prostitutes as the representative figures of a "crime-ridden neighborhood." These popularized urban figures make Miami women at once hyper-visible and underrepresented in the city's official urban planning. It is against the grain of these realities that Miami girls build communities and political capacities by occupying spaces that were not designed to include them. And in this process, they find themselves having to carve out space for their input out of the persistent gendered and racialized restrictions in the Miami's formal development politics.

"Magic City Girlscapes" studies gentrification and the politics of multiculturalism in Miami through a series of imagined and embodied encounters. The literary and nonliterary girlscapes I analyze salvage intimate, subjective details that social science research and the industry-driven discourse of development evade to expand and challenge the popularized knowledges of culture-driven redevelopment of Miami. This chapter arose from literary questions about the recent body of multiethnic immigrant literature of

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<sup>45</sup> *The Right to Wynwood* is an investigative-documentary about gentrification of Miami's Wynwood neighborhood directed by Camila Álvarez and Natalie Edgar. The film premiered at the Student Film Festival held at the Wolfsonian-FIU museum in 2014; it can be viewed on Vimeo and Youtube.

the city. Why do so many of the contemporary Caribbean narratives of Miami center the young female experience? Why is the short story the favored genre of addressing the issues of gentrification and cultural appropriation in Miami's Caribbean spaces? How is it meaningful that these texts consistently write the girls' relationship with Miami through a desire to leave the city? Can literary arts help us imagine a more equitable future for Miami development? I was also curious about the "literary silences" (Puri, "Finding the Field"). Why are gentrification novels a rarity? What is it about the novel form, which does not make it suitable for an explicit critique of development-driven displacement for Edwidge Danticat—author otherwise outspoken about the cultural loses of gentrification in her community? And how come there are no female community activists among the characters if there is a long history of women organizing around the issues of housing and neighborhood preservation? It is these and other absences, which compelled me toward fieldwork. Analyzing in relation the distinct projects of political organizing and imaginative writing redefined the scope and argument of this chapter, but it also allowed me to see the unique insights of literary fiction more clearly. In "Who Gets to be 'Brooklyn Born'" the novelist Naima Coster writes "Let's be clear—gentrification is about displacement. But it is also a fight over dignity and identity" ("Who Gets to be 'Brooklyn Born?'"). Danticat offers a wide range of Haitian American stories that defamiliarize the space of Little Haiti, explore its contradictions, distill nuances of human life and limitations of human knowledge, supplementing the struggle over dignity and identity of the neighborhood with the hidden truths of fiction. I later delineate how the freedoms of literary fiction's from having to maintain a pretense to truth telling, allows

Danticat a unique opportunity to reconcile narratives that appear incompatible or undefendable in town hall meetings and other public discourse platforms.

In the chapter, I rely on data collected during and in the aftermath of the contentious approval process for the Magic City SAP. Throughout this time, I have attended women-led community meetings and housing advocacy sessions, as well as City of Miami commission hearings and Planning and Zoning Advisory Board meetings. In the course of my fieldwork, I conducted a dozen formal interviews that could be categorized as unstructured and semi-structured by the scientific models. For each of the sit-down, prescheduled interviews, I used an interview guide, which grouped and outlined questions and topics to cover and included a similar set of questions for all interviews, tailored to the context. I also planned for plenty of flexibility in how my questions were formed and at what point they occurred, allowing my respondents to express themselves at their own pace and using their own terms. Some interviews were held in offices while others happened over lunch or coffee in public spaces.

Over the span of two years as a participant-observer, I have also informally interviewed many others, gathering data through conversations with community members during commission hearings, town halls, community meetings, and cultural events, with the full transparency of being a researcher. I have sought to speak to a diverse group of stakeholders in Little Haiti—leaders, advocates, business owners, and artists—who organized around the approval process for the Magic City SAP. This included long-term resident organizers who either still live and work in Little Haiti or who had lived in the neighborhood for years before moving to North Miami or Miami Shores but continue to have organizational or business ties in the community; current residents who have moved

to Little Haiti in recent years and started businesses or work for local social justice organizations; and young people who grew up in Little Haiti, moved away, and have come back.



Little Haiti women organizers meeting with senator Jason Pizzo at the 2020 Legislative Week in Tallahassee January 2020. From the left: Alana Greer, CJP; Trenise Bryant, Miami Workers Center; Sagine Taluy, FANM, Jessica Saint-Fleur, Engage Miami, Denise Ghartey, CJP, and Francesca Menes, CommUnity Strategies, LLC. Photo courtesy of FANM.

This chapter highlights the voices that most vividly represent the multigenerational and culturally and politically diverse perspectives within the women-led organizing for community justice in Little Haiti. Most of the organizers who appear on the pages of this essay are Haitian American, but there are also women of Jamaican, South Asian American, and Latin American origin. Some of the main players in the debates surrounding the Magic City SAP approval have included: Marleine Bastien, executive

director at Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami/ Haitian Women of Miami, known today as Family Action Network Movement (FANM); Sagine Taluy, a community organizer at FANM; Gepsie Metellus, the executive director at the Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center; Leonie Hermantin, director of development at Sant La; Rosslyn Wuchinich, president of Unite Here Local 355; Meena Jagannath and Alana Greer, human rights lawyers at the Community Justice Project (CJP); Sandy Dorsainvil, director of the Little Haiti Cultural Center (LHCC) and former community liaison for Magic City; and Jessica Saint-Fleur, a community organizer at Engage Miami.<sup>46</sup> The chapter centers two longterm, established community leaders in Little Haiti who found themselves on the opposite sides of the Magic City SAP debate—Dorsainvil and Bastien—as well as younger antigentrification advocates of Haitian decent—Taluy and Saint-Fleur—and relative cultural outsiders like Meena Jagannath who advocate for their adopted neighborhood community. Despite multiple attempts to contact the chief female members of the Concerned Leaders group who spoke in favor of the Magic City proposal, I was unable to obtain interviews with them.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the majority of my interview responders represent opposition to the project. As I seek to air out the arguments on both sides, I supplement the data from interviews with quotes recorded during commission hearings. In other places, I bring to the forefront Sandy’s voice as representative of

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<sup>46</sup> The Family Action Network Movement assists new immigrants into South Florida by providing services especially to women and children, Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center is a non-profit organization serving South Florida’s Haitian community; Unite Here Local 355 is South Florida’s hospitality workers’ union; Community Justice Project is a Miami-based group of human rights attorneys; Engage Miami is a group powered by young Miamians organizing).

<sup>47</sup> Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti/Ti Ayiti Inc is a coalition of Haitian American stakeholders in Little Haiti formed in 2018 to provide the community a united front in negotiations with the Magic City developer.

proponents in favor of the project. The embodied practices of this diverse, multigenerational, and at times quarrelsome group of women who participate in the remaking and defending of their community defy the gentrification narratives that hinge on an artificial binary between the developer and a monolithic community. As women organizers forge girlscapes within and outside the formal platforms, they contend with a reality of political heterogeneity and friction within the neighborhood community. Defending a community-led development process, not only challenges developers or calls out elected officials but also pushes against one another's views and visions—which gets in the way of the presumed, and imposed, uniformity. Examining organizing in Little Haiti from a multiplicity of viewpoints allows for a voicing of the elided women's narratives in the contentious battle for Miami's future through the recognition of its past.

### **Miami, the Magic City**

Though envisioned and organized by the “Mother of Miami” Julia Tuttle, Miami was designed and is still run by men. Speculative and socially-irresponsible development has defined the city’s expansion since Tuttle persuaded magnate Henry Flagler to expand his railroad to Biscayne Bay in exchange for land. In *A World More Concrete*, Nathan Connolly traces the origins of Miami’s Magic City nickname to this arrival of big money from the North in the early 1900s. These early investments transformed the area, “as if by magic,” from a sprawling wilderness to a fully developed city in just a few years: “Publicists and business people agreed to call Miami the Magic City as a way of capturing the almost supernatural speed with which the developers built a city out of what seemed like thin air” (Connolly 20). What seemed like thin air was of course the tireless labor of Black migrants from the Bahamas, other Caribbean Islands, and the southern

United States, an immense ecological sacrifice, and the eviction of the remaining Seminoles who still lived and traded in South Florida. In Connolly's assessment, contemporary gentrification makes for the latest chapter in the same urban story, manifesting the most durable elements of systems invested in racial and class segregation of urban spaces.

As a minority-majority county (over 65% Hispanic/Latino but overwhelmingly white identifying and over 50% foreign-born) with an extraordinary ethnolinguistic diversity, Miami figures in the popular imagination as a hyper-diverse, immigrant-friendly city at the crossroads of the Americas. Despite this seeming exceptionalism of institutionalized linguistic and cultural diversity, the city has been plagued by the same disparities of class, race, gender, and citizenship that stratify communities across urban America. The politics of Miami's felicitous multiculturalism imply openness and receptiveness to otherness. This framework has worked to downplay the issues of inequality, fragility, and racial/class fragmentation of Miami's civic society; problems, which have manifested most vividly in: a) clashes between Miami's long-standing African-American community and incoming immigrant groups over scarce resources; b) the built environment and real estate relations that still reflect the city's Jim Crow segregation and the New Deal's bulldozing of Black neighborhoods; and c) the complexity of overlapping migrations representing very different immigrant experiences, as the white Cuban immigrant experience has been distinctly different not only from the Haitian or Puerto Rican experience, but also from Black Cuban immigrant experience.

The carefully crafted ethos of Miami's multiculturalism, generated specifically in relation to the Cuban migrations, has long worked to uphold systems of inequality

favoring Cubans. George Yúdice argues that the entertainment, tourism, and development industries have all relied on the image of middle-class multinational white Latinness to promote and profit from visions of urban restructuring that result in material displacement and cultural erasure in Miami's historically Black spaces of Overtown, Liberty City, and Little Haiti (37). At the 2018 "Mapping Creole Miami" symposium, convener Donette Francis framed the conversations about Black Miami as juxtaposed to the ways in which white Latinness has become the operative logic of whiteness in Miami. She notes, "Miami has acculturated into a Spanish-dominant, bicultural city in which the upper and middle-class white Hispanic population normalized the idea and practice of a *cosmopolitan hemispheric creole whiteness* rather than assimilating successive generations of immigrants into a U.S.-national Anglo model of 'becoming American.'" Connolly, Francis, Marvin Dunn, and other scholars of Black Miami center and amplify the long-standing and diverse Black experience in multicultural Miami, which has seemingly outgrown the Caribbean City status and yet continues to rely on its, as Francis described, "Caribbeanness as value-adding amenity." The development and tourism industries have leveraged the commercial advantages of Miami's felicitous multiculturalism, essentializing and simplifying the complex cultural and ethnic fabric of Miami. As the potency of Cuban cultural branding reached its inevitable end once Miami transformed into a Cuban majority, developers have now turned to different Caribbean ethnicities for their marketing schemes, taking up Haitian culture as the new Miami "other."

Building on these conversations about Miami's multiculturalism and blackness, I outline how the development industry, now spent on the novelty of the Cuban narrative,

manipulates Haitian culture to promote gentrification of the Little Haiti neighborhood. When covering the recent redevelopment debates, news outlets invoke both the unique cultural richness and the forty-six percent poverty rate in Little Haiti—the highest in South Florida.<sup>48</sup> These figures appear both from those supporting private investment in Little Haiti and in reports wary of gentrification-led displacement. It is critical to acknowledge and understand the decades of systemic disinvestment driving poverty and marginalization in Little Haiti. No responsible development can happen without a grasp of these numbers and the history behind them. But consuming poverty as the single story of Little Haiti, and dispossession as the very thing that defines its community, reinforces some of the most denigrating stereotypes about Haitian American spaces and people. These portrayals make use of the Caribbeanness of Haitian culture as new social capital in Miami while also employing that same Caribbeanness as symbolic of economic instability.

### **Making and Remaking Little Haiti**

Haitian refugees first began to settle in South Florida in large numbers after Francois Duvalier came to power in 1957. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, roughly 60,000 Haitians arrived to the Miami area fleeing political persecution and seeking economic opportunity. They concentrated in the area to the northeast of downtown Miami known as Lemon City—later dubbed Little Haiti. The narrative of Little Haiti’s origins repeated to me over the span of interviews with community leaders, organizers, and residents was one of resilience and determination. Upon release from Krome and other detention

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<sup>48</sup> See for example: “Some 40 percent of residents live below the federal poverty level” (Vigluccit); “the time is ripe for the aging and more run-down parts of Little Haiti, one of the poorest areas of Miami” (Luscombe); “in a (Little Haiti) neighborhood with a high poverty rate and a large minority population” (Bandell).

centers following President Jimmy Carter's creation of the Cuban/Haitian entrant category of classification, Haitian refugees, unlike their Cuban counterparts, were left with little to no government assistance, faced anti-Black racism combined with anti-Haitian prejudice, and clashes with African Americans over scarce resources.<sup>49</sup> Despite these challenges, Haitians in Miami developed their neighborhood into a vibrant, if still economically struggling, enclave economy with a strong small business ecosystem and institutional infrastructure.

Since the earliest migrations, newcomers from Haiti relied on organizing from within the nascent community to deliver services not authorized by the local and federal governments. The Haitian Refugee Center (HRC) provided legal services for incoming refugees.<sup>50</sup> Local churches—most notably Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church—additionally supported the newly-forming diaspora by facilitating community building, advocacy, and welfare work.<sup>51</sup> While faith-based organizations and initiatives were led by men like Father Gérard Jean-Juste and archbishop Thomas Wenski, women have spearheaded the majority of the long-standing secular grassroots organizations in Little Haiti. The deep investment of the Catholic church in upholding patriarchy as well as the role Black churches played in advancing the politics of respectability that constrained women's social roles might explain why female advocacy focused on secular operations. The many cultural and social justice institutions in the neighborhood reflect girlscapes. Women-led groups have been instrumental in advocacy for Little Haiti's economic

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<sup>49</sup> Krome Service Processing Center is an immigration detention center, an ICE facility located in west Miami-Dade County.

<sup>50</sup> The Haitian Refugee Center was founded in the mid-1970s and offered legal assistance to Haitian refugees (Rey and Stepick).

<sup>51</sup> Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church opened in the 1980s after moving from St. Mary's Cathedral to better serve the influx of new Haitian immigrants.

development, cultural preservations, and anti-displacement activism among the neighborhood's transformational community organizing practices. Women's leadership in the neighborhood seems natural to many community members, as Sandy Dorsainvil notes, "we are a matriarchal community; women sort of run the household, and most of our leaders in our community are female" (personal interview, 20 November 2019).

While published scholarship on Miami development has rarely foregrounded gender, a handful of studies highlight important moments throughout Miami's history when women asserted their political force in the male-dominated civic culture and electoral politics of the city—making girlscapes out of restrictive masculinist spaces. Melanie Shell-Weiss's book *Coming to Miami: A Social History* documents the contribution of "ordinary" women in the making of Miami. She highlights the "womanist strategies" that early Miami women, who were excluded from voting and other forms of civic participation, asserted to participate in the shaping of civil, political, and social life in the city (17). For example, Weiss delineates a landscape of inter-racial affinities in the early days of Coconut Grove when white and black women worked together to establish the first churches. They helped to care for each other's children, shared cooking responsibilities, and exchanged household advice. Black and white pioneer women cooperated and shared within the early Grove community. Nathan Connolly's account of the influential Black female property owner Florence Gaskins as an early organizer of black women's activism during Miami's incorporation in the 1890s also provides crucial historical context for my discussion of narratives about real estate in Miami. Gaskins's approaches to community uplift through private property as a shield against racism help

to situate one branch of current community advocacy that roots itself in a belief that “broader economic growth could improve living conditions for everyone” (Connolly 27).

There is an observable blurring of lines between public and domestic spheres in the way women reinvent forms of civic participation—an insistence that in matters of gentrification the personal and the political are intimately linked. The strategies of the earliest women in Miami illustrate a legacy of women-led grassroots organizing as today’s organizers enter into in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Their activism is marked by the womanist approaches of “outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior [and] wanting to know more and in greater depth than is good for one,” as described by Alice Walker (14). Some of the most active cultural and social organizations in the neighborhood founded and run by Little Haiti’s women activists employ these womanist strategies. Co-founded by Gepsie Metellus, who also worked with HRC, Sant La focuses on education, advocacy, and documentation. Founded by Marleine Bastien in 1991, FANM has worked to economically, socially, and politically empower Haitian women and their communities across Miami. Presided over now by Michelle Cilien, the Little Haiti Housing Association—today the Haitian American Community Development Corporation—was formed in 1987 to create affordable housing opportunities for residents in the Little Haiti neighborhood. The organization currently provides various housing services, including homebuyer counseling and tenant education. In one striking difference between the city-organized and the women-organized platforms for civic engagement in the Magic City SAP debates, the latter consistently offers childcare, interpretation, and food to foster inclusion. All of these organizations share a focus on community building and community uplift by addressing the basic needs critical for daily life such as housing,

education, food, transportation, and work. Women focus on the sites and processes of social reproduction because the role of a primary caregiver (to both children and elders) still disproportionately falls on women regardless of their professional career status.<sup>52</sup>

Though Haitian refugees faced many disadvantages in establishing themselves in Miami, local initiatives by tireless community members built Little Haiti into a dynamic and supportable network. However, the outpacing of wealth growth for other immigrant groups in Miami and the influence of continued narratives of disrepute, often tied to international perceptions of Haiti itself, have positioned Little Haiti as a site in need of revitalization and top-down reinvestment into the neighborhood. In the official channels, Miami's former African American commissioner, Art Teele, initiated the first city-led revitalization project for downtown Little Haiti: the Little Haiti Cultural Complex, approved in 2001 and comprised of the Soccer Park, the Cultural Center, and the Caribbean Marketplace. Projects like the Little Haiti Cultural Complex provide spaces in the neighborhood for community organizing and socializing—an undeniable resource and neighborhood improvement if the existing community could stick around to enjoy it. But in the reality of capitalist approaches to urban redevelopment and the Miami-specific climate-change gentrification, the construction of the Cultural Complex was just a drop in the rapid stream of changes rushing through Little Haiti. In hindsight, many community residents recall these years as the beginnings of the neighborhood's gentrification. Marleine Bastien recollects increased harassment and fining of residents that began during the revitalization efforts (personal interview, 29 January 2019). The Complex opened in 2008 after several years of construction delays, and the 2008 housing market

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<sup>52</sup> Cidi Katz in *Growing up Global* defines social reproduction as “the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis” (10).

crash and subsequent recession paused the area's restructuring only briefly.

Gentrification returned to Little Haiti with increased force a few years later. In the recent years, new developments and private investments sprouted in the neighborhood, encouraged by the relatively inexpensive land prices and real estate speculations driven by the threat of rising sea levels.

Responding to this onslaught of change brought in from the outside, the community sought to formalize their cultural mark on the neighborhood with an official "Little Haiti" designation in 2016. This campaign centered a struggle about the cultural identity of the neighborhood. In this round of the fight against gentrification in Little Haiti, the community's efforts aimed to ensure that—at the very least—the city officially recognized the important contributions of Haitian Americans in the making of Miami. Following years of contentious debates and lobbying led by Bastien, Metellus, and Joann Milord among others, the City of Miami voted in support of the designation in May of 2016. For many community members this decision represents a tangible win that the community could hold onto amidst imposed transformations. But some view it as an empty gesture intended to appease the Little Haiti community.<sup>53</sup> Yet others highlight how the deal required a territorial compromise, which affects current negotiations with

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<sup>53</sup>For many stakeholders in Little Haiti the name change is only a matter of time. Martin Nandy, known in the neighborhood as "Captain Haiti" and the director of "Keep it Haitian" Vendors Association, feels the symbolic wins are indicative of the accelerated gentrification of the neighborhood: "Very often those in power will give us symbolism instead of real benefits to appease us, to silence us, to prevent us from rocking the boat. It's an old power tactic. Who cares if it's called Little Haiti if you don't own it? It's about ownership. A collective ownership. People who are moving here now with gentrification have their own culture that they will want to impregnate into the neighborhood. They won the place, so they will change the name when their time comes" (personal interview, 7 January 2019). Jan Mapou echoes Martin's concerns about the lifespan of the Little Haiti name. As an owner of several parcels of land in the neighborhood, Mapou has access to investors' meetings. During one such meeting—Mapou told me—a developer leading the meeting shut down a debate about the urgency of renaming Little Haiti to Little River or Lemon City by stating, "let's change the place first; we can take care of the name once we are done" (personal interview, 2 February 2019).

developers. The official outline of Little Haiti between 54th Street to 79th Street and Northwest 6th Avenue to Northeast 2nd Avenue reflects a loss of territory to the encroaching Design District. This trimming of Little Haiti boundaries opened up a loophole for developers to exploit when negotiating with the city. Representatives for the Eastside Ridge SAP, for instance, attempted to dismiss any challenges raised by Little Haiti-based organizers as irrelevant, arguing that their project is planned for the outskirts of the official Little Haiti outline.<sup>54</sup> The commissioners' decision has also not prevented a smaller development—The Citadel Miami Food Hall—from simply replacing the name Little Haiti with the obsolete Little River throughout all their marketing materials.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the Little Haiti official designation campaign illustrates one of many community-driven efforts to institutionalize versions of Haitian identity in Little Haiti's social and built environments. Two women-led organizations, Northeast 2nd Avenue Partnership (NE2P) with Joann Milord as Executive Director and the Little Haiti Cultural Complex (LHCC) under the leadership of Sandy Dorsainvil have been at the forefront of promoting Haitian culture to drive neighborhood revitalization. But beyond the community-centered initiatives and the public-private partnerships lies the top-down exploitation of Little Haiti's culture as a means to capitalist gains; a process exacerbated by the recent concentration of Special Area Plans (SAPs) in the neighborhood.

The consistent and strategic organizing by Little Haiti women has begun to shift the discourse around SAPs among city officials and the broader narratives around housing in

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<sup>54</sup> Eastside Ridge SAP seeks to build a 22-acre mixed-use complex of 14 buildings and a total of 5.4 million square feet. Like the Magic City SAP, the developers propose to put \$10 million into a community trust. Developers have been seeking approval from the City commission concurrently with the Magic City SAP, but the Eastside Ridge proposal has been delayed five times (Rodriguez).

<sup>55</sup> The Citadel is 62,000 square feet with restaurant vendors, bars, retail space, makerspace, and a rooftop lounge. The space opened in February 2019 (Valys).

local media. SAP is a provision named after a section of the Miami 21 zoning code which allows developers who assemble nine consecutive acres of land to apply for a land-use change. This change typically amounts to massive upzoning (building higher and at increased density). The city offers this zoning flexibility in exchange for undefined public benefits usually negotiated between the developer and the city planning staff. What is astounding is that developers can meet the public benefit requirement by simply providing green or open spaces. In other words, as currently written, the SAP provision does not require developers to provide affordable housing or an analysis of displacement impacts. According to Miami-based attorney David Winker, this framework leads to concentration of new large-scale luxury developments in minority neighborhoods “where land is still cheaper and can be aggregated more easily.” As reported by Winker, a recent article in the *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law* concludes that “Miami 21 [SAP provision] has resulted in “displacement [of the poor] to outer fringes,” “increased gentrification,” and greater “social/economic segregation” because when people are forced to move they tend to move to areas that are more segregated.” Magic City Innovation District is only one of three developers who have asked for approval of a Special Area Plan in Little Haiti in the last two years.<sup>56</sup> Concerned about the impact of this concentration, women organizers with FANM, lawyers with the Community Justice Project, as well as other community attorneys, have called for an SAP reform or even repeal over the span of multiple commission hearings. Their consistent showing up and speaking up at city commission hearings and board meetings best illustrates a reclaiming of masculinist spaces into girlscapes. And the organizer’s efforts

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<sup>56</sup> Magic City, Eastside Ridge, and Citadel.

have not gone unnoticed. The Planning, Zoning & Appeals Board (PZAB) that advises the city commission voted during the December 4, 2019 meeting to recommend a repeal of the special area plan category from the Miami 21 zoning code. The PZAB-advised changes, now considered at the city commission level, build upon the recommendations submitted in writing and repeatedly voiced by Little Haiti women advocates. At the preliminary discussion meeting, board member Anthony Parrish said that multiple SAPs, “hold Miami neighborhoods under siege” (PZAB meeting, 20 November 2019). The language of violence, pressure, and forced surrender strikes one as fitting to describe the takeover of Miami’s low-income neighborhoods by large-scale luxury development, especially considering that the city commission has also approved the mega-project Miami Jewish Health Systems SAP in December 2017.

The recent controversies surrounding SAP approvals in Little Haiti reveal procedural flaws that are socially irresponsible, fuel Miami’s already rampant affordability crisis, and favor the developer’s interest over the community’s needs. The Magic City SAP was approved at 3:00 am with only four of the five commissioners present. Commissioner Keon Hardemon negotiated the community benefits package behind closed doors. In exchange for generous upzoning, Magic City would provide \$31 million, paid over 15 years, to the Little Haiti Revitalization Trust. This trust agreement was approved by the Commission *in place of, not in addition to*, the previous community benefits package that required affordable and workforce housing on site. The trust is to be governed by a five-person board: the Miami City Manager will appoint one member, and the other four will be named by the city commissioner for District 5, at this time Keon Hardemon, the same commissioner who negotiated the deal (Commission hearing, 28 February 2019, 28

March 2019, 27 June 2019). Those Little Haiti women leaders who voiced support for the Magic City project advanced arguments about social benefits that could trickle down to the community from private investment and economic development of the neighborhood. Other women organizers, as I outline below, take this position to task. Many activists challenge the developer's and commissioner's reassurances that the trust offers a better deal than the initial offer. Regardless of this polarization, the women's voiced and visible presence at the meetings nuanced Magic City's marketing of the disembodied elements of Haitian culture.

Magic City SAP distinguishes itself from some of the other developments in part via cultural branding. Both Eastside Ridge and The Citadel Miami Food Hall insist on location names that disassociate their projects from the space of Little Haiti. Unbothered by community backlash, Urban Atlantic Group continues to market Citadel Miami, which lies within Little Haiti proper, as located in Little River. There is tragically unrealized irony in the way Citadel takes its name from the revered symbol of black resistance—Citadelle Laferrière fortress, proclaims itself a “fortified stronghold for culture and community,” and featured Haitian folk dancers during the opening block party while casting off association with Haiti and actively participating in cultural erasures in Little Haiti (Francois).<sup>57</sup> In this simultaneous appropriation of Haitian heritage and strategic

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<sup>57</sup> Citadelle Laferrière, also known as Citadelle Henri Christophe after the leader of the Haitian slave rebellion, was constructed by him after Dessalines declared Haitian independence and meant to protect the new nation from attack by the French. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.  
<http://citadellelaferriere.com/>

distancing from Little Haiti, Citadel offers perhaps the clearest local example of cultural branding that has gone terribly wrong.



Rally against displacement in Little Haiti prior to the final Magic City vote in June 2019: Jessica Saint-Fleur, Engage Miami (far right) and Sagine Taluy, FANM (center), June 2019. Photo courtesy of FANM.

Magic City has committed no such blatant cultural erasures. Their marketing materials consistently highlight Haitian culture as a valuable resource. In fact, on its face Magic City's cultural branding efforts appear robust, attractive, informed, well-intended even. The developer announces that "celebration and preservation of the thriving Caribbean culture in Little Haiti is the foremost priority of the project" (Magic City website). Tellingly, this claim mimics the language of "presentation" and "preservation" at the heart of the initiatives within the community, such as the Little Haiti Cultural Center's mission statement. To distinguish themselves from other developers and gain community buy-in, Magic City has coordinated their outreach initiatives with local artists

and arts promoters. Among their cultural events, the “Route 1804: Little Haiti, Heartbeat of the Caribbean” exhibition at Art Basel 2017 was conceptualized by Sandy Dorsainvil, then working as a consultant for Magic City. The developer’s “open houses” in particular were promoted and defended as the developer’s effort to reach the community and solicit their input. Yet many argued these events took a form of upscale, show-like exhibits tailored only for the more affluent residents in the area. Because Magic City has clearly consulted with cultural insiders such as Dorsainvil, the ways in which their materials and initiatives manipulate Haitian culture to appeal to potential buyers comes across as much more subtle, less appropriative, more forgivable, and even laudable—to some. Other community organizers describe Magic City’s outreach initiatives as “very tone deaf.”(Taluy, personal interview 4 November 2019). Marleine Bastien emphasizes how the open houses excluded most of the working-class people who live in Little Haiti. This is not only because the community members work long hours, but simply because the upscale format was alienating to lower income people (personal interview, 3 March 2019). Another organizer with FANM, Sagine Taluy, adds: “they provide these events and amenities as a benefit, but most people here, especially the new immigrants, might not even know how to make use of them” (personal interview, 4 November 2019). At the center of FANM’s critique here is that the developer uses Haitian culture as a “selling ticket” while excluding a large portion of the community who created this culture in the first place. Taluy sees parts of cultural branding as “really kind of disgusting” when considered in the context of Haiti’s colonial history of stolen resources (personal interview, 4 November 2019).

I argue that the images Magic City produces flatten unique cultural details into broad stereotypes, perpetuating the same damaging narratives that have fueled the irresponsible redevelopment of systemically disinvested neighborhoods for decades. For example, in its shout out to Notre Dame, Magic City's website features the recently renovated church as a tourist attraction in the “points of interests” section. Magic City highlights the Catholic church alongside other edgy yet palatable to middle-class taste “cultural sites” in Little Haiti, including Yo Space arts studio, Churchill’s Pub, Panther Coffee, and several multiethnic restaurants. Little Haiti’s botanicas and the neighborhood’s many storefront churches are tellingly absent from the developer’s mapping. Exclusion of these diverse places of worship whitewashes the unique landscape of Haitian spirituality. To allow the recently renovated and beautifully landscaped Catholic church to singularly represent the religious life in Little Haiti erases the spiritual dimension of Haitian culture in similar ways that fusion restaurants in gentrifying neighborhoods subdue the flavor of ethnic cuisines to make them more palatable to broader audiences. This beautiful architectural site can be easily enjoyed by local and foreign tourist audiences hungry for authenticity of experience but unaware of any broader context, history, or geography of the community.

While Magic City uses the unique elements of Haitian culture to create cultural experiences, their landscapes are both exclusive of the working-class, and paradoxically contingent on the narrative of a homogenous working-class community in need. Representatives of the Magic City project appreciate Little Haiti’s cultural significance mainly for providing the neighborhood with “incredible growth potential.” Their depictions interlace celebration of Haitian culture with representations of a closed-off

neighborhood whose residents are assumed to lack the necessary expertise and competence to manage their cultural resources and transform their own environment. Positioning cultural richness as a mismanaged resource, developers take it upon themselves to provide the vision and capital to attract “artists, creatives, entrepreneurs, and makers to our community” who can help Little Haiti “become a more desirable and recognizable neighborhood” (Magic City website). To promote their vision of community uplift, Magic City provides unspecified “support” to local initiatives and institutions, including the Sounds of Little Haiti monthly festival, Little Haiti Football Club, Notre Dame, and the famed Little Haiti muralist Serge Toussain. The actual and perceived benefits of these initiatives have won over significant community support for Magic City. But the framework of condescending benevolence described above reinforces a dangerous notion that vertical (top-down) development is necessary to the progress and well-being of Little Haiti. Promising the trickle-down uplift for Little Haiti as a culturally rich but disinvested community, Magic City trains their audiences to accept displacement as the inevitable cost of “progress.”

Cultural branding in Little Haiti is a catch-22 situation. Because the government has failed to provide proper services and infrastructure in the neighborhood, and due to Miami’s tourism-oriented economy, the community needs tourists and outside investment to survive. At the same time, the growing outside interest and recognition of the neighborhood’s cultural assets forecloses the possibility of survival by making the area increasingly unaffordable and culturally alienating to the economically vulnerable segments of the Little Haiti community. Branding Little Haiti relies on the twofold undertaking of cultural preservation and presentation, which many hope will result in

Little Haiti's economic uplift. But these branding opportunities also expose tensions within the group of women who all advocate for Little Haiti's autonomy and economic prosperity. Everyone I talked to agrees that the neighborhood needs investment, that people deserve to live in a safe space with suitable roads, clean parks, and decent housing and business opportunities. But there is no consensus about how to reconcile these desires with the need to protect Little Haiti's status as a springboard neighborhood for newly-arriving immigrants, or whether this legacy can or even should be maintained in the push for the area's economic uplift. On the business-oriented, entrepreneurial side of the argument, there are discussions of an "unstoppable process" that inevitably produces winners and losers, and of cultural preservation as the best way to mitigate these impacts. On the other side, there are voices demanding a systemic change to ensure an equitable and inclusive development that does not leave behind the most economically vulnerable groups (City of Miami Commission Hearing—Planning & Zoning, 15 November 2018). Women on both sides of the Magic City debate assert their positions as rightful participants in the politics of the city. As they speak up in front of the all-male city commission and the nearly all-male planning and zoning department to expose issues with current redevelopment trends in Miami, they transform into girlscapes the masculinist public arena of the official development process. Despite the differences in outlooks on this particular project, their active involvement in the SAP approval process challenges the presumed incompetence of community members on the issues of urban restructuring. These women strategize and consistently show up, requesting that the developer and the commission include residents of Little Haiti in the planning process to

better demonstrate how the zoning codes and dollars translate to the actual livelihoods of people, to the well-being of families, and prosperity of businesses.

Within Miami's tourism-oriented economy and the city's politics of multiculturalism, a level of outsourcing of the neighborhood's symbolic resources seems necessary when competing for grants and other forms of economic support beyond the city budget. The Big Night in Little Haiti, later dubbed Sounds of Little Haiti, a key event in the Little Haiti Cultural Center's programming, perhaps best illustrates this challenge of appealing to general audiences to attract investment to a neighborhood that needs it without a mainstreaming of culture that developers can easily exploit for profit. As a staple of LHCC cultural branding programming, the Sounds of Little Haiti has been envisioned and marketed as a draw for visitors from the city and beyond. But LHCC, like other city-owned cultural institutions, faces constraints and pressures when seeking funding for local programming that benefits the immediate local community. In 2011, Laura and Jim Quinlan of the Rhythm Foundation secured a \$125,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Knight Arts Challenge Program and partnered with the Little Haiti Cultural Center to host a monthly free outdoor event entitled Big Night in Little Haiti that could "bring new attention and activity and broaden the interaction between Little Haiti and the broader South Florida communities" (Martin).<sup>58</sup> When the Rhythm Foundation funds ran out in 2016, the monthly cultural celebration discontinued. Following her wrongful termination from LHCC in the same year, Sandy Dorsainvil continued to promote Haitian culture through private ventures with her firm Maximillian

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<sup>58</sup> The Rhythm Foundation is a non-profit cultural organization founded in Miami Beach in 1988 focusing on international music [www.rhythmfoundation.com/about/](http://www.rhythmfoundation.com/about/). The Knight Foundation is a national foundation investing in the arts in cities "where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers" <https://knightfoundation.org/about/>.

Consultants Inc. and as a community liaison for Magic City.<sup>59</sup> In this role, she was in charge of community outreach, connecting the developer to people in the neighborhood and facilitating cultural events to get the community members involved in the project. Thus, Dorsainvil brought the annual event back under the name Sounds of Little Haiti and co-produced the event with the Center using private sponsorships. Among other sources, Sounds of Little Haiti received financial support from Magic City. Magic City has leveraged this sponsorship to both promote their project and prove their charitable and preservation work in Little Haiti (Magic City website). My intention is not to vilify cultural branding initiatives like the Big Night/Sounds concert programs, but to reflect critically on whether they provide the right shield against cultural erasure and inequitable neighborhood redevelopment in Little Haiti. Outward facing projects that prioritize attracting visitors and new residents are risky in the reality of ever-shrinking and costly Miami real estate and the still limited political influence of Haitian Americans in the city. However well-intended and well-received, such cultural branding initiatives frequently wind up feeding the monster they aimed to defeat.

Magic City's support for cultural initiatives provided them with talking points about "community benefits" for commission hearings, clouding a discussion of the type of benefits that the community actually needs. Such initiatives allowed the developer to reconcile in the public eye two goals that in reality are mutually exclusive: to protect the thriving Haitian culture and maintain community presence in the neighborhood and to expedite the approval process for the massive luxury Magic City SAP, which—as even

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<sup>59</sup> Dorsainvil was reinstated as the LHCC director in the fall of 2019. For more information about her wrongful termination and clearing of her name, visit: [www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article230256139.html](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article230256139.html).

those supporting this SAP admit—will inevitably change the culture and demographic composition of Little Haiti (Commission Hearing, 27 June 2019). As an arts promoter, Sandy Dorsainvil has prioritized preservation of Little Haiti’s cultural footprint, especially in the face of encroaching gentrification. For Dorsainvil, the brightest possible future for Little Haiti is filled with Haitian arts: “I would want for Little Haiti to become a mecca for Afro-Caribbean culture” (personal interview, 20 November 2019). In their ambitions for Little Haiti, the City of Miami and Magic City seem to share in at least a portion of this goal. However, while their cultural branding of the area relies on the marketable but disembodied cultural elements manicured for the enjoyment of tourists and potential, more affluent, new residents, Dorsainvil’s vision centers the people of the Haitian diaspora. As homeowners and business owners, Haitian Americans become beneficiaries and consumers of the culture-driven improvements and not just producers of the consumable content. In Dorsainvil’s capacity as director of LHCC, she helped to develop diverse and culturally significant branding initiatives such as African dance classes, the Little Haiti Book Festival, or the Little Haiti tours.<sup>60</sup> Dorsainvil also stands by her work for Magic City and describes the developers’ cultural branding efforts as positive and potentially uplifting for the neighborhood’s image and stability. She states, “I was proud to be a part of that. I could go to bed at night and my conscious was clear … I might be wrong … Later on, I might look back and say: what the heck? But today, yesterday, a week ago, I feel good about it” (personal interview, 20 November 2019).

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<sup>60</sup> The Little Haiti Book festival is an annual event that takes place in May to promote writers, booksellers, and performers from Haiti and the diaspora. The event has been held for seven years as of May 2019 and it is co-sponsored by the Miami-Dade College’s Miami Book Fair, Sosyete Koukouy of Miami, Inc. and Mapou Cultural Center.

The Magic City SAP has proven particularly contentious in exacerbating pre-existing divisions within the Little Haiti community. Those who fought side-by-side on issues of immigration, racism, and Little Haiti's official designation, have found themselves standing on the opposite sides of the City Commission chamber weighing the Magic City proposal. These divisions unfolded in particularly vivid ways during three commission hearings in 2018-2019 and two city-mandated community meetings with Magic City in the spring of 2019, particularly in the evolution of the Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti—a group of community and faith-based organizations and leaders founded to unite community representatives in negotiations with the developers. Organized by FANM with the legal counseling of the Community Justice Project, Concerned Leaders demanded a community benefits package that would prioritize on-site affordable housing, job training and job priority for Haitian residents, community trust funds, and community involvement in the development process. These discussions resulted in an internal rift before the November 2018 hearing. A majority of the organizations and leaders within the group decided to extend their support for the Magic City SAP at the incoming commission hearing even though the developer refused to meet the Concerned Leaders' initial demands. During the final commission hearing in June 2019, Sandy Dorsainvil spoke in support of the project. Aware of "the good, the bad, and the ugly of this deal," she insisted that the community benefit package represents "more than anyone has ever done for us" (City of Miami Commission hearing, 23 June 2019). Rosslyn Wuchinich, Gepsie Metellus, and Leonie Hermantin share her sentiment. Their organizations propose that to support Magic City and capitalize on the Magic City Community Trust fund offer presents the only opportunity for Little Haiti to thrive

through the inevitable gentrification (City of Miami Commission Hearing—Planning & Zoning, 28 March 2019). This support was not extended without hesitation or discomfort. Many of the project's community supporters do acknowledge how the grand scale of the Magic City SAP is sure to alter the landscape of Little Haiti and exacerbate the issues of cultural and material displacement in the neighborhood. Even Dorsainvil is reluctant to proclaim the commission's decision as a straightforward win for the community: “it's to be seen,” she says, adding “on the surface it's a huge win. No community has ever received that kind of money up front. Now it's just a matter of who's going to be included in the process” (personal interview, 20 November 2019). Moreover, this position in support of the Magic City SAP has created deep tensions. During the February commission hearing, Leonie Hermann pointed out that speaking out against the grain of anti-gentrification social activism risks accusation of selling out to the developer: “It's clear that all the supporters of Social Justice have been extremely intolerant about people with whom they disagree, and those of us who've taken the courage to speak on behalf of the project have been labeled as people who've taken bribes, who've taken money under the table” (City of Miami Commission Hearing—Planning & Zoning, 28 February 2019).

What Dorsainvil sees as a hopeful unknown, to Community Justice Project, FANM, Engage Miami and other anti-gentrification organizers is a clear deal breaker. Women on the opposite side of the Magic City debate passionately disagree with accepting the deal just because something is better than nothing—a premise they perceive as a “beggars can't be choosers” mentality. This prompted FANM, Community Justice Project, United We Dream, Poetry Collective, and Engage Miami to leave the Concerned Leaders group. Marleine Bastien recalled this evening to me with visible sorrow: “We organized civil

meetings, provided food for the group, and at the last minute we had to recede from it...It was really painful, but it was either that or stand with them and say we agree for the process to move forward even though Magic City did not give us what we wanted” (personal interview, 29 January 2019). Taluy views the argument of the Magic City supporters as starting from the position of compromise:

I find the argument that you need to compromise to get a seat at the table irresponsible because you shouldn't allow anyone to come into your community and even create a table, you should always be at the table. When they come, they are coming to your table not the other way around. I think that FANM's position is that “This is our table and so if you come to take a seat at OUR table come responsibly, come respectfully, and then we can have a discussion. (Personal interview, 13 November, 2019)

While agreeing that development and movement of people cannot be stopped, Taluy argues that the uneven dynamic of who is most sponsored and most excluded by the development can and should be challenged. Throughout our conversation, Taluy described as “irresponsible” and “defeatist” those arguments that accept displacement of the most vulnerable communities as a natural, if regrettable, side effect of progress.

To a certain extent, the split in the community organizing tactics reflects generational differences. Young people overwhelmingly spoke against the Magic City project, presenting arguments that were as passionate as they were well researched and articulate. It was mostly during the city-ordered community meetings (which, notably, no city representative attended) that FANM, Community Justice Project, and Engage Miami challenged the discrepancies between Magic City's self-presentation as the culturally sensitive good guys of private development and the inadequacy of their benefits package and their dismissal of community input. Women organizers within these organizations pointed out the hypocrisy in the way Magic City proclaims preservation of Haitian

culture a top priority while developing eighteen acres of land, previously housing the Magic City trailer park, into a luxury mixed-use development with no on-site affordable housing. They also confronted the developer's benevolence as patronizing, as well as exposed the ignorance of Magic City's cultural branding approaches. During the first city-mandated community forums at Notre Dame, Magic City opened up with a presentation of their project. The virtual rendering of the Magic City SAP design showcased French street names as an example of the developer's preservation efforts and of tribute to the neighborhood's thriving Haitian culture. In response to this demonstration, Engage Miami organizer Jessica Saint-Fleur remarked to the loud applause of the gathered audience: "The names that you are proposing for this project, these French names ... yeah that is a gross depiction of Haitian culture ... that is in fact not Haitian culture; you're talking about French culture. The French, you know, who were our colonizers" (Magic City Community Meeting, 23 April 2019). Saint-Fleur challenges the developer's cultural branding as lacking proper understanding of the linguistic complexities at work in Haitian history—of how language bears on the socio-political and economic dynamic and divisions on the island and in the diaspora. It was lost on Magic City that French has been the language of choice and distinction of the Haitian elite and that the Haitian people long fought for appreciation and official recognition of Kreyol. The gaffe of this proposal was the more pronounced as it was uttered at Notre Dame, which to this day holds masses only in Kreyol and English.<sup>61</sup>

Jessica Saint-Fleur is a part of the larger wave of young people's activism for housing justice in Miami that made itself visible during the Magic City negotiations. Saint-Fleur

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<sup>61</sup> Years back, Monsignor Thomas Wenski, one of the church's founders, expressed his solidarity with his early Haitian parishioners "by not learning French" (Rey and Stepick 34).

grew up in Little Haiti, moved away for college and, unlike many in her cohort of the second-generation Haitian Americans, returned to Little Haiti to “give back to the community” (informal interview, Magic City Community Meeting, 23 April 2019). During our brief conversation, she shared her initial reluctance to return to Miami—a city, which she felt had limited opportunities for her ambition and little living space for her pockets. Yet here she is, canvassing in the community and standing side-by-side with women who have long organized around the issues of housing in Little Haiti to be the voice of the younger generation of women in the struggle against inequitable development. Girlscapes emerge also from within such cross-generational womanist collaborations.

The differences in approach among the organizers reflect two schools of resistance: one that seeks a seat at the table and emphasizes the importance of representation within the existing power structure, and one that seeks to upend that very table (personal interview with Meena Jagannath, 16 May 2019). There is a long history of systemic neglect that has brought us to a moment when the Little Haiti community finds itself at a shaky table with little negotiating power. Understanding that decades of systemic neglect has put Little Haiti in a dire need of investment, Magic City has issued threats of pulling the offer because of the community pushback. Such tactics often intimidate city officials who care about the dollar amounts flowing into their districts. For these reasons, city commissioners are inclined to side with the developer even if it is not in the best interest of their constituents. When women organizers push the commissioners on this logic, when they continue to challenge the developers and city officials, they are interrupted, talked over, dismissed, or even threatened. A particularly heated exchange occurred

between Marleine Bastien and Keon Hardemon during the February 28, 2019 City of Miami Commission Hearing when FANM attempted to obtain an intervener status.<sup>62</sup> During that meeting, FANM strongly opposed the deal commissioner Hardemon negotiated with Magic City and revealed to the public and other commissioners at that meeting without previous notice. In response to FANM's opposition Hardemon, on a few separate occasions, confrontationally brought up funding FANM receives from the city for poverty relief efforts (implying the organization might be misusing the funds). He also threatened to remove FANM members from the room (City of Miami Commission Hearing—Planning & Zoning, 28 February 2019). Hardemon also issued intimating statements directed at the CJP attorneys representing FANM, specifically Meena Jagannath, suggesting that their bar licenses might be at risk. Members of the public on both sides of the conflict found Hardemon's comments addressed at Marleine Bastien concerning, so much so that the public comments that followed the exchange each began with either a short tribute to Bastien's long-time work in the community or a calling out of the commissioner's behavior as "shameful," "disgusting," and "ridiculous." Among many others, Laura Munoz with the Florida Immigrant Coalition said: "I would like to also talk about my concern about the way that Marleine was treated today by this Commission. It was ridiculous, and all of those men should be ashamed" (City of Miami Commission Hearing—Planning & Zoning, 28 February 2019). These exchanges reveal the willful work it takes to create girlscapes and intervene in the order of masculinist politics and spaces of urban planning in the city. While the women organizers differ in views and visions for what is best for Little Haiti, they all have skin in the game and

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<sup>62</sup> Intervenor status is provided to organizations or individuals who can demonstrate they are adversely affected by the development in a manner greater than the general public.

sandals on the ground, and they all impose themselves on a system that was not designed to include them. In the article version of this chapter, I analyze their advocacy as a killjoy practice through the lens of Sara Ahmed's feminist theory on happiness.<sup>63</sup> Bastien failed to be happy about the newly negotiated deal. She and the other women got in the way of the commissioner's happiness. By pointing out the shortcomings of the community benefit agreement, by asking uncomfortable questions about the process, by uncovering the ugly underbelly concealed under the neatness of dense legal jargon, they refused what Ahmed calls the "happiness script" (265). And for that refusal they were attacked as ungrateful (for the city support to their causes) and damaging (to the civility of the process), and difficult for the sake of being difficult. During public comment, community members are required to address the city commission "in a respectful manner"; no such official protections are extended to the women advocates. As mentioned earlier, the women helped to change the discourse about housing in Miami. But willfulness and insistency in organizing comes at a mental and emotional cost of having your reputation questioned and motives challenged in the public arena, often by men in power. Despite the tensions and many difficult exchanges, all the women I've talked to are hopeful that the community will find common ground, and come together to organize for larger systemic changes, like the overhaul of the broken SAP process.

### **Literary Insights**

In the times when cultural branding has become one of the most conspicuous tools of urban development, artists too find themselves divided on the issue. While Little Haiti's famed muralist Serge Toussaint supported Magic City during commission hearings,

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<sup>63</sup>See: "Magic City Killjoys: Women Organizers, Gentrification, and the Politics of Multiculturalism in Little Haiti". *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2020, p. 10. <http://doi.org/10.33596/anth.409>

Miami-based Cuban-Jamaican poet activist Aja Monet has curated a poetry and visual art showcase “Where the Land is Free” where writers and artists challenged the new developments in Little Haiti to free art from its serviceability to developers.<sup>64</sup> The event was organized in collaboration with O Miami Poetry Festival, Smoke Signals Studio, and the Community Justice Project. Inspired by local grassroots community organizing, “Where the land is free” used literary and visual arts to unite and empower Miami communities around the common struggle against development-led displacement and the city-wide housing affordability crisis. The social-justice oriented art provided a textured backdrop for a poetry reading by local writers — including an incarcerated poet who recited their work via speaker phone.

Edwidge Danticat was present at the showcase; she also supported her adopted neighborhood in discussion with the developers at the city-mandated meetings between the community and Magic City. The writer has advocated for Little Haiti and its literary scene through cultural initiatives and in her writing since she had moved to Miami from Brooklyn in the early 2000s. As illustrated in the chapter’s opening remarks, Danticat’s essays highlight the importance of Little Haiti in the formation of U.S. Haitian diaspora. Specifically, the piece plays a tribute to the neighborhood’s unique visual recreation of the island culture, and applauding the community’s perseverance: “I have been living in Little Haiti for over ten years now, yet it still manages to amaze me with its warmth and its ardent determination to survive against all odds” (“The Changing Scenes of Little Haiti”). In creative non-fiction and interviews, Danticat directly attends to the

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<sup>64</sup> Magic City paid Toussaint \$17,000 to paint “whatever I want” on a wall near Little Haiti Park.(Bojnansky [http://biscaynetimes.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3090:an-existential-question-but-no-master-plan&catid=50:community-news&Itemid=258](http://biscaynetimes.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3090:an-existential-question-but-no-master-plan&catid=50:community-news&Itemid=258)

gentrification-related anxieties about embodied and cultural losses the residents feel “because the city [has been] shrinking what is considered Little Haiti” (*Conversations with Edwidge Danticat*, 67). “The Changing Scenes of Little Haiti” published in the Departures magazine depicts a “raucous celebration, known as Big Night in Little Haiti... that transports you across the sea to Port-au-Prince” among other sites and sounds of Haiti rushing through the veins of the neighborhood. In describing the Big Night, the essay relies on parallel imagery and language to the fictionalized concert scene in *Untwine* that I analyze below. While the novel stops short from directly engaging the issue of gentrification, the thick description of the festival in Danticat’s essay serves as a springboard to an explicit commentary about the threat of gentrification-related cultural displacement: “The effects of gentrification are being strongly felt, even in a place where streets are named after revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture and other Haitian notables (...) Many in Little Haiti, myself included, hope the cultural richness can be preserved” (“The Changing Scenes of Little Haiti”).

It is also in fiction that Danticat joins the women whose stories and contributions I outline above. *Untwine* expands the girlscapes of their advocacy by articulating the value of Little Haiti outside the reductive frameworks of dispossession and exotic appeal. Beyond the novel I discuss in the subsequent section, Danticat’s 2019 collection *Everything Inside* gathers eight stories that narrate the entwined landscapes of Miami, New York, and Port au Prince through difficult intergenerational intimacies. On the pages of the collection a new mother comes to love via postpartum depression, another woman recovers from divorce, while a grandmother holds onto her family through the haze of

dementia.<sup>65</sup> The spaces of these women's narratives move beyond Little Haiti, scattering the girlscapes of Haitian Miami through the far corners of North Miami, Miami Shores, and Miami Beach. In the collection's concluding story, "Without Inspection," a Haitian woman Darline saves the protagonist Arnold from detention by the coastguard when he first arrives in Miami. The two become a couple soon after. "Without Inspection" begins where the love story of Darline and Arnold ends—on the morning of Arnold's fall to his death from a high rise construction site into a quick-dry cement. The background histories of their lives unfold through flashback recollections compressed into the six and a half seconds narrative-time of falling. Danticat's narrative emerged from occasional news stories about Miami construction workers falling from high-rise scaffoldings. The author emphasizes how the workers could never afford to live or stay in the establishments they help to built.<sup>66</sup> The story stretches the plausibility of the falling time to allow ample space for exploration of Arnold's humanity. This tempering with narrative time allows Danticat to move his story beyond the reductive frameworks of a shocking anecdote, a statistic, or a regretful oversight that dominate in company press statements and other media coverage and of these tragic incidents. The ability to bend temporality in order to freeze meaningful moments for deeper consideration is one of fiction's greatest political strengths. *Untwine* also makes an extensive use of flashbacks, similarly pushing the boundaries of narrative time. Formal experimentations with temporal structures in

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<sup>65</sup> During a book reading at Books and Books in September 2019, Danticat linked the origins of the book's title—*Everything Inside*—to gentrifying Little Haiti. She explained that some of the area's gentrifiers, place "safety signs" on the doors/windows of their homes and businesses. One such sign featured a human target with the caption: "Nothing Inside Is Worth Dying For," threatening to shoot/kill any potential trespassers.

<sup>66</sup> See the interview with Danticat here:

[networks.hnet.org/node/116721/discussions/1809495/edwidge-danticat-her-caribbean-immigrant-experience-debora](http://networks.hnet.org/node/116721/discussions/1809495/edwidge-danticat-her-caribbean-immigrant-experience-debora).

Danticat's fiction create room for the nuances and complexities of Haitian American spaces and people in ways unavailable during public gentrification debates. During the public comment at commission hearings, for instance, the organizers whose efforts I described earlier are given only two minutes each to tell their Little Haiti story; the intervenor status—which allows extra speaking time—is unavailable to tenants like Arnold and Darline. It is also worth noting that The Community Justice Project uses literary storytelling for some of their capacity building initiatives to empower those whom the legal language and practice of development excludes. Beyond the already mentioned “Where the Land is free” showcase, and their Salon Juste series inspired by the salons of the Harlem Renaissance, CJP has partnered up with Aja Monet in 2016 to facilitate a series of workshops called “Voices: Poetry for the People,” for the residents of the gentrifying Little Farm Mobile Home community CJP represented at the time. Recalling the origins of this project during our interview, Jagannath explained that it felt necessary to provide a platform for the fullness of her clients' stories. The workshop allowed for all the details and nuances that had to be redirected during legal counseling meetings because they digress from the bare facts needed for legal proceedings but that are crucial to the accurate understanding of Miami's affordability crisis. Literary arts bolsters other forms of advocacy by being a source of community and by allowing space for perspectives and experiences misunderstood, misrepresented, or evaded in the public political discourse on gentrification.

This takes us back to “Without Inspection.” When Arnold’s life flashes before his eyes during the fall, the reader learns that years before meeting Arnold, Darline too survived the sea landing with her son Paris; others who traveled with her on the leaky boat,

including her husband, drowned. Darline has been returning to the beach, the site of her trauma, since the arrival to help other immigrants escape detention and deportation and find communities in Miami. In Arnold's eyes this practice makes Darline "a volunteer chauffeur of boat people" who provides the rare luxury service of kindness to the undocumented immigrants (202). Darline guides the newly arriving Haitians through Miami's foreign landscape of shelters, churches, and free immigration clinics—the only American institutions willing to take in and aid those who enter the country via Miami's ocean-border "without inspection." Arnold's experience as an undocumented construction worker captures Miami's economic and racial inequalities by placing immigration at the center of the city's socially irresponsible development: "Before coming to the city Arnold had "felt [an] urgent longing for Miami (...) but what he had not foreseen about Miami, though, was the plethora of stories like his. He had also not realized that there would be homeless families sleeping under a bridge a few feet from the luxury hotel that he was helping to erect" (208). But it is the urgency of Darline's storyline that contests the tourist bliss of Miami Beach by rewriting the space as a site of migrant arrival where trauma and possibility coexist—where bodies of immigrants, propelled toward the impossible journey by a dream of freedom or an inexplicable longing, wash up both dead and alive. Darline keeps returning to the beach "because it was her husband's burial place, and her own" (210). By helping other immigrants, she transforms the site of personal and collective trauma into one of her girlscapes, a space of autonomy and advocacy.

Darline rescues Arnold from being detained at the Krome Processing Center, which she explain is "a prison for people like us" incarcerating migrants for the "crime" of

illegal entry. Krome figures prominently also in Danticat's memoir, *Brother I'm Dying* through the story of her uncle, Joseph, who died at the Miami detention center. This recent body of work solidifies Edwidge Danticat's crucial position not only as a prominent Haitian-American author but also as an important Miami writer. Yet some of the recent literary scholarship on the city overlooks Danticat's critical contributions. For example, the Miami chapter in John Lowe's highly praised 2016 book *Calypso Magnolia*, centers only contemporary white Cuban American writers—even as the project's intervention to expand our definition of the South and Southern studies via the Circum-Caribbean is “concerned with the African Diaspora” (6). Lowe's reassessment of the “difficult-to-situate state of Florida” situates Miami's literature within the southern studies canon via the work of Virgil Suarez, Roberto Fernández, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Christina García. He mentions Danticat only in passing as a part of Miami's “Circum Caribbean” author who “has recently moved to Miami and has begun setting her narratives there” (14). I propose it unfathomable to account for the city's Caribbean literary landscape without highlighting Danticat's contributions to what Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Saez identify as the new “Miami Imaginary”—a move away from the politically conservative, white, and securely middle class politics of the Miami Cuban establishment literary tradition.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Danticat's absence from Dalleo and Saez' framing is unsurprising as the book focuses on the Latino/Latina imaginary. But their analysis of the millennial generation of Miami Latino/a writers (including Capo Crucet) in the chapter “New Directions: The post-sixties Miami Imaginary” still privileges Cuban voices, while sidelining non-Cuban, and especially Afro-Latina perspectives like that of Jaquira Diaz. This reflects a larger inclination of cultural analysis of Miami: as the Cuban community gained political and economic influence in Miami, the narrative of Cuban success has become the default of Miami immigrant experience in the popular imagination. This focus on Cuban Miami overshadowed the much earlier migrant stories, which add to the city's multicultural profile: The Bahamians, the white Northerners and Southerners, African Americans, Puerto Ricans.

The 2015 young adult novel *Untwine*—Danticat’s only novel set primarily in Miami—re-narrates the contested geographies of Little Haiti as a site of cared-for and protected Haitian-American girlhood. Danticat writes multicultural Miami not only from the perspective of teen girls but also with young readers in mind. The young adult genre allows the novel to center and take seriously the voices and experiences of teenagers of color growing up in Miami too often trivialized, as the fieldwork section shows, in public debates on development in the city. *Untwine* tells a story of twin sisters Giselle and Isabelle Boyer, a visual artist and an aspiring musician. The novel begins in medias res; Danticat plunges the reader in the middle of a car crash that shatters the normalcy of life for the Boyer family, killing Isabelle and leaving Giselle and her parents seriously injured. The rest of the story unravels from Giselle’s narrative point of view through a mix of flashbacks and post-accident moments. Giselle reaches for memories of past routines and places of everyday teenage life of school, dating, friendships, and family time from before Isabelle’s death to cope with her loss and restore some degree of balance. *Untwine* reflects on death, family, and memory. It is also a novel about being a Haitian-American girl in Miami, which explores the complexities of diaspora life for a young reader.

Giselle and Isabelle are second-generation immigrants whose parents came to the U.S. on a plane equipped with passports and school visas. Their circumstances varied vastly from refugees arriving by boats whose struggle became popularized as the single narrative of Haitian-American immigrant experience, particularly in Miami. The girlscapes in *Untwine* offer images of financial stability, entrepreneurial spirit, homeownership, and an altogether wholesome environment in Little Haiti against the

grain of popular images of a crime ridden impoverished area to best be avoided and its community as a monolith of marginalized people in need. Under Danticat's pen, the twins' diasporic landscape emerges as an archipelago of Black middle and upper class excellence where conversations unfold in a fluent mixture of English, Haitian-Creole, Spanish, and occasional French spoken by the grandparents. The girls' father is an immigration lawyer, their mom a makeup artist for TV broadcasters who enjoys yoga and taking her daughters around town to museums. Their mom's sister, aunt Leslie is a doctor from Orlando, and their dad's younger brother, Patrick, a music producer who lives in twelfth -floor loft in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood. The girls grow up in a house with a "cleaning lady," a backyard pool, and a lap cat named Dessalines after the Haitian revolutionary. The garden of their Little Haiti home—with a banana, papaya, mango, and avocado trees—emulates the "boundless-looking garden" at their grandparents' "impossibly large house" in Haiti where as Giselle observes "few other people have houses like this...on top of a broken city , in a country that is still beautiful though it isn't supposed to be" (288). This short passage, and many like it in the novel, captures Haiti/Little Haiti in the nuance of a place that is at once beautiful and broken. This contradiction cannot be easily reconciled within a non-fictional discourse. Those who try at town hall meetings and commission hearings are often accused of lack of realism or unhinged nostalgia. Making the child protagonist marvel over Haiti's mountains, water, and trees, its homes and churches permits Danticat to recognize the beauty of Haiti without romanticizing the homeland or excusing its shortcomings of inequality, corruption, and environmental vulnerability that have pushed Haitian people into diaspora for decades.

The way in which Danticat's narrative of prosperous Haitian immigration contests the ontology of dispossession and abjection assigned to Haiti and Haitians in the diaspora invites a comparison with the stories of immigrant good life within the Miami Cuban-American canon. However, this shared literary refusal to meet the reader's desire for tales of hardscrabble immigration carries very different meanings in the light of opposite images circulating in the popular imagination about these two communities, and considering the uneven access of Haitians and Cubans to institutional and political power, particularly in Miami. While representation of prosperity in Danticat's work offers a corrective to the stereotypes of Haitian poverty, Cuban-American literature has both shaped and critically responded to the trope of Cuban-American success story mythologized in the national media from the first waves of immigration in the 1960s.<sup>68</sup> In "The Success of the Cuban Success Story" Sheila Croucher argues that the U.S. government was particularly invested in this narrative of Cuban exiles fleeing oppressions of communism only to find incredible economic success in America. Within the Cold War context, stories and images of accomplished—and white-presenting, middle-class, and politically conservative—Cuban American immigrants were used as weapons in the battle against communism. Literature by the first generation Cuban writers pushed out of Havana by the revolution bolstered this ethos through the plots of exile and a "nostalgia discourse"—a longing after the lost paradise of pre-revolutionary Cuba (Rivero 169). In the works by authors who continued to write mostly in Spanish—like Lino Novás Calvo, Eugenio Florit, or Lydia Cabrera—the suffering of Cuban

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<sup>68</sup> While the Mariel Boatlift migration of the 1980s shook up the stereotype of the Cuban immigrant as a white, middle class, and politically conservative exile, the success story myth has proven extremely persistent in the national imagination.

educated upper and middle classes losing their lives' work in Castro's rise to power was a wrong to be righted by the affordances of the American Dream and Cuban perseverance ("Cuban-American" 81). This literature insisted on framing Cuban-American immigration as political exile rather than economic migration in search of a better life. Critics have analyzed this explanation as a Cuban-American attempt to distance themselves from other Latino immigrant groups or ethnic minorities in the U.S. The one and a half generation including Cristina Garcia, Ache Obejas, or Nilo Cruz responded more critically to this trope of the Golden Cuban Exile, and Susan Thananopavarn reads Obejas' *Memory Mambo* as a counternarrative to the Cuban success story.<sup>69</sup>

Filtered through the perspective of a securely middle class family and grief-filled restorative recollections, Little Haiti of Giselle's memory unfolds as a safe and happy place of opportunities and unproblematic mobility. It is not lost on Giselle how her family's privileged economic position shapes the way they experience geography—the ease with which they move through and enjoy the spaces of Big and Little Haiti. That the perceptible inequalities occupy her only briefly speaks to the potential blind spot of the elite perspective. With a child as the novel's narrative voice—the classic unreliable narrator—*Untwine* makes no claims to chronicle the wholeness of Little Haiti experience. Instead, Danticat amplifies the typically and strategically muted perspectives of self-sufficiency, political presence, and mobility to contribute to a more nuanced image of the heterogeneous neighborhood. The framework of girlscapes reveals the ways in which the point of view of Black middle class girlhood resists the readers' expectations

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<sup>69</sup> The rich body of works by authors of the second generation, further rejects the model minority, resisting "the stereotype of Cuban-American community in the United states as fleeing the 1959 revolution, predominately white, politically conservative, and solidly middle class" (Dalleo and Saez 160).

to convey Miami's Haitian spaces central to the recent gentrification debates through either a bleak story of poverty and boat people or via representations of a fetishized ethnic difference.

As Giselle examines family and community relationships and memories, she also maps Little Haiti as a Caribbean space linked to the islands and other diasporic outposts in the U.S. The Boyer girlscapes extend beyond Little Haiti boundaries via travels to New York City and Orlando for family visits, and frequent movements between Miami and Haiti. These mobilities define a sense of place and community belonging for Giselle and Isabelle as a constellation of places and attachments. While Magic City offers to place the insular Little Haiti on the map of cosmopolitan, world class neighborhoods, *Untwine* depicts Little Haiti as an already connected place participating in the global flows of people, goods, and resources.

Within these complex geographies of girlhood in *Untwine*, the way in which Danticat narrates the girls' experience at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex, an unnamed local church, and a fictional Haitian restaurant Chez Moy most vividly disassociates from gentrification narratives. The cultural center, Little Haiti churches, and Haitian-owned small business are all key landmarks of the Little Haiti landscape and important community gathering spaces. As such, all three sites play a crucial role as battlegrounds or stakeholders in the previously outlined controversies over cultural identity and displacement in Little Haiti. In the world of the novel, these key sites of gentrification debates transpire as memory places where the protagonist's girlhood gets made and remade. Danticat reclaims the neighborhood public spaces and homegrown institutions as an anchor of the protagonist's young life—rather than a tourist destination—delineating

how Little Haiti matters to Giselle's healing process. Giselle recalls each place through flashbacks as crucial contexts for her bond with Isabelle and for the girls' progressive untwining. The way in which place matters to her healing process articulates the value of Little Haiti's recreation of the island culture beyond its market value and desirability to outside audiences.

*The Little Haiti Cultural Center*

*Untwine* fictionalizes The Big Night in Little Haiti concert in the chapter narrating Giselle's recovery not only from the accident but the news of Isabelle's death. As a staple of LHCC cultural branding programming, the concert has been envisioned and marketed as a draw for visitors from the city and beyond. The novel, in turn, divorces Big Night from its consumer value as a tourist attraction to reclaim the joy of the concert for the Haitian diaspora and to galvanize the importance of the Complex for its community building potential. Danticat centers the intimate experience of a family outing and the neighborliness of the community unfolding in the Center's sprawling courtyard:

The muraled plaza in front of the Little Haiti Cultural Center was packed with hundreds of people dancing and singing along with Emeline, the queen of Haitian music (...) Emeline was looking her most beautiful that night. Her piercing eyes and alluring smile were in full effect. She wore her hair bare and closely cropped for some songs, and exquisite head scarves for others. Her earnings were like miniature sculptures, and her head wraps and dresses were so intricately draped, layered, and embroidered that they could be hanging at the Smithsonian next to the gowns of first ladies and, well, other queens. (...) Jean Michel, Tina, and I stood under a canopy near the stage. We were mesmerized by Emeline's sultry yet mournful voice, as people slow danced or squashed their bodies together around us (...) the evening closed with a spirited procession, like a "Second line" parade. The three of us joined the procession line bouncing behind Emeline, until we were too sweaty and tried to continue" (119).

The scene offers a fictional account of Emeline Michel's appearance at the Big Night in Little Haiti festival in April 2013. This internationally acclaimed Haitian-Canadian

musician is known for her fusion of traditional Haitian rhythms (kompa, rasyn, and twoubadou) with pop, jazz, and blues. While Giselle's description of Emeline's performance through the details of "exquisite head scarves", "intricately draped, layered, and embroiled dresses," "alluring smile," and "piercing eyes" uses some of the same language found in tourist brochures, the scene disassociates the Big Night from cultural branding approaches. For one, Danticat's description of the concert's closing "spirited processions like a second line parade" situates the Haitian performance in a broader network of Afro-diasporic cultural practices and locations. The drummers, maraca shakers and bamboo trumpeters transport the audience to Port-au-Prince. Associated with New Orleans jazz, the tradition of second lining where spectators join in the performance by following in a coordinated dance behind the musicians is "an essential component of many of the city's Black expressive traditions (...) rooted in the Sunday slave dances of Congo Square" (Doleac). Beyond New Orleans, Emeline's performance also links Miami to Toronto and to New York where uncle Patrick signs up the singer to his new record label. Situating Little Haiti in a constellation of other creole cities in the U.S. Danticat complicates the static and exoticizing imaginings of Little Haiti as a unique center of Caribbean Black life tourism.

In contrast to the outward-facing focus of cultural branding, the novel rendering of the concert centers the pleasure and enjoyment of the neighborhood community. The Haitian community appears here as concertgoers. They are beneficiaries and consumers of culture and not just producers of consumable content. In the scene, Emeline performs for an audience of "hundreds of people" who are familiar enough with her music to dance and sing along. As Isabelle, Giselle, and Tina attend the concert along with their parents, the

Center's muraled plaza becomes a space of community bonding, old friends' reunion, and intergenerational camaraderie not only for the Boyers and Marshalls, but presumably also other members of the Haitian diaspora. Rather than entertaining a popular crowd or being surveyed by a tourist gaze, the artist performs for an insider audience that shares in her cultural understanding. The pleasure and entertainment of the performance means differently when enjoyed by a crowd possessing the intimate knowledge of the "mournful" behind the "sultry" of Emeline's voice. Whether expressed through losing oneself in the happiness of getting together with old friends, the proximity of other bodies in the slow-dancing crowd, or the glee of twirling to the music with your new love, the night is about recreation of home communities, relating to your kin, and being in togetherness.

The passage focuses specifically on the experience of second-generation Haitian-American teenagers. Narrated from Giselle's point of view, the novel highlights how the sisters, their best friend Tina, and Giselle's love interest Jean Michel navigate their momentary freedom from parental supervision, move through the semi-public space of the plaza, experience the event, and benefit from its cultural offerings. For Isabel—herself an aspiring musician and an acute socio-cultural critic of racial inequalities—the concert provides an opportunity to see a live performance of a successful Haitian female artist she admires. Isabel sneaks backstage and steals one of Emeline's "sculpture-like earrings", then keeps it in the flute case as a lucky charm. This detail emphasizes the potential of initiatives like the Big Night to facilitate mentoring possibilities by offering young girls access to aspirational female role models from their culture. For Giselle, in turn, the public space of a concert along with her parents catching up with old friends and

so “not watching closely” offers an opportunity for the unfolding of the young romance between her and Jean Michel (118). Through these harmless transgressions, the Center’s courtyard becomes a site of pleasure and possibility where the girls negotiate their experiences of belonging and relating with others, weigh their ambitions, and try out their emerging womanhood. Giselle revisits the joy of this experience to puzzle herself back together after Isabelle’s death. The Complex among other Little Haiti places centers Giselle with memories of stability and togetherness in ways that prove central to her healing process.

### *Little Haiti Churches*

Heritage festivals like the Big Night create strong and easily consumable markers of cultural identity in place. But it is also the more mundane and less easily marketable topography of “mechanics’ shops, storefront churches, and record shops that blasted music from giant loudspeakers on the sidewalk” that constitute Giselle’s and Isabelle’s girlscapes (115). This landscape of diverse places of worship creates a prominent visual recreation of Haitian spirituality, of which only certain institutions appear in cultural branding. In its shout out to Notre Dame, Magic City website features the recently renovated church as a tourist attraction in the “points of interests” section. Little Haiti’s botanicas and the neighborhood’s many storefront churches are tellingly absent from the developer’s mapping. Magic City highlights the Catholic Church alongside other edgy yet palatable to middle class “cultural sites” in Little Haiti, including Yo Space arts studio, Churchill’s pub, Panther coffee, and several multiethnic restaurants. The developer brands Notre Dame as a part of the manicured Little Haiti tourist package —a beautiful architectural site, which can be easily enjoyed by audiences hungry for

authenticity of experience but unaware of any broader context, history, or geography of the community.

The church in *Untwine* is neither a tourist attraction nor political player of the outlined above negotiations with Magic City. The focus instead lands on the everyday lives of families. Danticat also highlights how the institution—situated in the complex landscape of the neighborhood’s religious expression—centers community life. Giselle articulates the value of the church as a space of socializing and identity work for her and Isabelle rather than a site of religious experience:

Our parents have always been religious, but Isabelle and I have often stood, as Isabelle like to say, on the margins between belief and disbelief. Our faith is a mishmash of many things. We believe in family, in music and art, but we mostly believe in each other. We love our minister though, Pastor Ben. He was the one who christened us. We also like the church youth choir. Isabelle plays step flute for them and I sing alto with my best friend, Tina. We like the church building’s high, gabled ceilings. We like the dark burgundy cushioned pews. We love Mom’s cloche hats and Dad’s Sunday morning black and navy suits. We love how we all sit together in our favorite mid-row pew.” (10-11)

By emphasizing the discord between the institutional religiousness of her parents and their freer, non-institutional spirituality as a “mishmash of different things”, the narrator voices a generational difference between Haitian immigrants and their second-generation children. But the passage also highlights the way in which the church binds the community. The list of reasons why and how the church matters to her and Isabelle shifts between the “we love” and “we like” feelings about items, which have nothing to do with religious observance. The sisters’ affection for the institution is all about relationships in their lives. It is also about the ways, in which the very material spaces of the pews and hallways as well as activities, rituals, and celebrations facilitate space for creative expression and provide opportunities for their interactions with each other, their family,

and peers. The weekly trip to Sunday mass serves as a ritual of family bonding. Such intimate moments of togetherness become particularly important during difficult times in the marriage between Giselle's mom and dad right before the accident. The church spaces and events also provide contexts where the teenagers learn to navigate a variety of interpersonal relationships and create also a sense of belonging that is separate from the community provided by their parents. It is where the girls form friendships, fall in love for the first time, and learn to deal with first disappointments of these early attractions. The Easter foot washing ritual becomes an opportunity for Giselle to make up with Tina; and the youth choir practice an opportunity to „punish a boy” from Guadalupe who asks both Giselle and Isabelle out, they “curse him out in stereo “in the church hallways (77). After the crash, the memory of attending mass provides a source of solace and a sense of stability to Giselle.

Filtered through Giselle's grief-filled restorative recollections, the church is preserved as an untainted joyous space of childhood where the girls' expressions of willfulness are never policed or trained as „unruly” behaviors in an attempt to bring them back to respectability. Danticat never names the church. She also leaves the denomination unspecified. Inferring from the Easter foot washing ceremony and the fact that Pastor Ben has a family, the church is likely to be Protestant rather than Catholic. Giselle enjoys the high gabled ceilings, burgundy cushioned pews, and the parishioners dressed in their Sunday best. But the novel omits any further characteristics of the material condition of the church, its specific location, or language of the mass. This scarcity of details forecloses readings of the church space through the prism of exclusions or as a terrain of socioeconomic or gender divisions. *Untwine* writes the girls relationship with the

institution outside the deep investment of the Christian church in upholding patriarchy and heteronormativity. Danticat also tones down the prominent role Black churches played in upholding the politics of respectability that constrained women's social roles and disciplined their expressions of sexuality. The girls' distancing from those religious aspects of church traditionally used to justify gender hierarchy and gender oppression allows the novel to focus on the institution's crucial role in community building, healing, and cultural preservation without romanticizing or exonerating its patriarchal and heteronormative theology.

### *Chez Moy*

While the family frequents several small local businesses, it is the Haitian restaurant *Chez Moy* that becomes representative of Little Haiti's flourishing small business ecosystem. Giselle remembers Moy as a center of the neighborhood life and a site of important community gatherings where the political, cultural, and intimate realm meet and interweave. The restaurant owner Moy is an old family friend, and a fellow Iraq war veteran, who offers support to the Boyers after Isabelle's death. Over the span of the novel Moy wins the commissioner seat in District 3, which includes Little Haiti among other gentrifying Miami neighborhoods. The novel articulates through this victory an expanding political influence of the Haitian community in the local Miami politics where Haitian-Americans have been grossly underrepresented. Chairwoman Audrey M. Edmonson currently holds the commissioner seat for District 3 of the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners. Haitian-Americans are underrepresented on the county Board or the City of Miami commission where Keon Hardemon is the elected official for Little Haiti and other neighborhoods in District 5. For Marleine and other women organizers,

insufficient representation by cultural insiders in District 3/5 makes Little Haiti vulnerable to approvals of socially irresponsible development projects; it also perpetuates the image of Haitians in Miami as politically powerless.

After the election “ hundreds of people from the community” gather at Chez Moy to celebrate the owner’s victory and discuss important local matters. For Giselle the event becomes another opportunity for the stolen moments of intimacy with Jean Michel. She also chooses Chez Moy for their first official date because it is where she feels safe and grounded. Danticat writes the restaurant as a node of community life, articulating the value of immigrant-owned businesses beyond their role as places of business and their appeal as “a must try” feature in tourist brochures. If displaced these establishments cannot be simply replaced by another business offering similar services. Libreri Mapou bookstore, where I interviewed the owner, often transforms into a meeting space for community organizers: the 2nd Avenue Partnership in the past, and more recently the Concerned Leaders of Little Haiti. The FANM office similarly serves as meeting space for groups and individuals organizing around the issues of immigration, housing, and voting rights.

The Moy storyline writes the Little Haiti community as civically aware and politically engaged. This representation includes young second generation Haitian-Americans: Giselle and Jean Michelle volunteer alongside other local teenagers and young professionals at the Moy’s campaign office. Not unlike the voices of community organizers speaking up during commission hearings, *Untwine* takes seriously the perspectives, place rights, and political involvement of young people, resisting the negative stereotypes about youth-fueled political activism, which permeated the

commission hearings on Magic City. Older Little Haiti residents supporting the project, the developer's lawyer, and the commissioners themselves disparaged the well researched, informed, and articulate arguments of young community organizers as an overly-emotional noise making. These attacks rarely engaged the activists' arguments, but rather pointed out the young age, overly zealous tone, and the determined refusal to let go. Other community members invoke the opposite offense of the young people's disinvestment and lack of attachment to place. When asked about the role of second generation Haitian-Americans in efforts to sustain Little Haiti, Jan Mapou said: "as for the ambitious, educated, and talented young people of Little Haiti, they don't feel the same attachment. With few exceptions, they don't want to come back to the overpriced Little Haiti" (personal interview). Mentioned earlier Engage Miami organizer Jessica Saint-Fleur is that exception. Throughout the novel, many young characters also toy with the idea of leaving Miami. During the first date Giselle and Jean Michelle bond over a mutual desire to become visual artists, and to leave Miami for art school or the adventures of New York's art scene. Both Tina and Jean Michele decide to stay for local opportunities, and Giselle hopes to come back once she heals in Haiti. As the girls in *Untwine* move through the neighborhood, the novel imagines a complex city worth staying in or coming back to.

Giselle's favorite art works are Pentimento paintings—canvases which reveal traces of repainted brush strokes as the top layers of paint fade away. Her fondness of pentimenti is not about the simple uncovering of that which is original but was changed by the artist, but rather in a layering of images, which bears a more textured and fuller representation. We can think of Danticat's middle class girlscapes as pentimenti of Little

Haiti. The real and fictionalized Miami girls who appear on the pages of this chapter peel off the top layers of gentrification narratives that index Little Haiti via the entwined tropes of poverty or consumable difference. In the frameworks of cultural branding, Little Haiti charms with the bright colors of second avenue's gingerbread architecture, the smell and tastes of Haitian goods at the Caribbean marketplace, and the sounds of Kompa reverberating through the LHCC's sprawling courtyard every third Friday of the month. The development industry manipulates these marketable elements of Haitian culture to advance gentrification as a lifeline for Little Haiti, patronizing the neighborhood community as hermetic, insular and inept of managing its own cultural capital. For Danticat, it is the perspective of black, immigrant, middle class girlhood that is best suited to imagine Little Haiti otherwise. Giselle's girlscapes map the Little Haiti community as entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan, politically empowered, and economically, culturally, and generationally diversifying to battle what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, after John Berger, identifies as "the danger of a single story." As articulated in *Untwine*, Little Haiti's special role as the cultural heart of the Haitian diaspora is not only about economic struggle of refugees and not simply about the consumable recreations of island culture. It is also about the neighborhood's strong ties to Haiti and other diasporic sites, and about the neighborliness of the community, which brings half the neighborhood to the Pax Villa Funeral home on the day of Isabelle's burial and fills the Boyer's home with trays of comfort food when they return from the hospital.

This chapter offers a retelling of the story of Miami's Caribbean Space through the framework of girlscapes. While I here focus on Edwidge Danticat's diasporic landscape of Little Haiti, other Miami Caribbean women authors such as Jessica Fievre, Jaquira

Diaz, (Afro-Puerto-Rican) Patricia Engels (Colombian), and Jennine Capo Crucet (Cuban) all narrate their versions of Magic City girlscapes. Jaquira Diaz, for instance, narrates Afro-Boricua girlscapes to return the dispersed and now made invisible spaces of Miami's Puerto Rican experience into the city's literary imaginary. Her essays, short stories and the 2019 memoir *Ordinary Girls* populate the streets of Miami Beach from before the art deco revival with queer teenage girls who "came from broken home, broken English, and broke-ass parents" (*Ordinary Girls* 107). While there is a lot of pain packed into these coming of age stories, Diaz refuses to reduce the girls' experiences to misery. Set in the 1990s, the Beach of Diaz' writing is a difficult place of addiction, violence and abuse. But the local parks, corner bodegas, and the motel-style two story buildings are also places of music, dance, and laughter where the girl protagonist express their desires, carve out enjoyments and freedoms out of restrictions and imposed immobilities. Diaz' girlscapes offer a story of queer Miami Beach that is different not only from today's tourist brochures but also from the classed, raced, and gendered narratives of gayborhood bliss symbolized by Versace and his storied murder by a jealous lover. Future evolutions of this project would consider how Danticat, Diaz, and other women writers articulate Miami's Caribbean spaces through the girlscapes sensibility in a way that defines a broader literary imaginary of Miami.

As a tourist destination Miami is often framed as a getaway city. While many vacationers escape their everyday lives for Miami's beaches, glam, and culture, those who grow here often yearn or are forced to depart their hometown; many describe these outward migrations as the Caribbean problem of Miami: all the young local talent leaves—partially because the city demands so much and offers so little in return. But also

because those who constitute Miami's multiculturalism do not recognize themselves in the stories told about their city. Despite its seeming exceptionalism of linguistic and cultural diversity, Miami has been ailed by the same disparities of class, race, gender, and citizenship that stratify communities across urban America. The city's constant ranking as one of the world's most unaffordable places to live reveals a contradiction in the way Miami tailors itself as a city of immigrants while becoming increasingly inaccessible to a large portion of its foreign-born population. Organizers with Engage Miami, Community Justice Project, FANM, and others empower those traditionally sidelined in urban planning—young people and women of color—to participate in the making and remaking of Miami. Initiatives like “Where the Land is free” provide a public platform for the artistic expression of the joys and traumas of the city's diverse communities; and Miami's Caribbean fiction—freed from the constraints of truth-telling claims—nuances the city's Caribbean image beyond the sensational and the sellable. This repository of fictional and nonfictional girlscapes gathered here represent efforts to change the narratives, and the realities of just who and how gets to enjoy the multicultural magic of Miami.

## Chapter 4

### Complaint Collectives and the Politics of East Harlem's Latinidad

Midway through Ernesto Quiñonez' 2004 gentrification novel *Chango's Fire*, the protagonist narrator Julio spends an afternoon with the novel's storyteller, Santeria priest Papelito, at the Modesto "Tin" Flores Community Garden in East Harlem:

'Que pasa, Padrino,' I say looking around the garden. Many years ago this place was a vacant lot, filled with carcasses of dead dogs, cats and rats. An ex-junkie named Modesto, along with Hope Community, a church-based organization, had turned this desert of rubble into a little oasis in El Barrio. They couldn't afford top soil, plants, flowers and rocks, it was just too expensive. So they borrowed some from Central Park.' (107)

In 1981, a community gardener Modesto "Tin" Flores converted what was essentially a dumping ground on an empty lot into an ornamental garden that Julio describes here as a "little oasis in El Barrio."<sup>70</sup> Today, a slow stream of water that runs through the plants-filled courtyard and the trees that hug their brick surroundings promise a respite from the bustle of East 104th and 105th streets on either side of the metal bar fence. At the garden's center is Lina Muerta's *Seed of Growth*. This mosaic sculpture fountain of a woman's womb celebrates the diversity and contributions of women in the East Harlem community. From the fountain, a narrow brick pathway leads towards the reading garden where, presumably, Julio and Papelito sit and discuss the power of Yoruba stories. Yasmín Hernández' mural *Soldaderas* adorns a brick wall at the back of the garden. The piece was inspired by Frida Kahlo's famous *Las dos Fridas* and the imagery of the Mexican women soldiers. In Hernández' rendering, the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and

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<sup>70</sup> East Harlem is a neighborhood in Manhattan, known previously as Spanish Harlem, and referred to by the Latino residents as El Barrio.

the Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos hold hands against the backdrop of their respective national flags. As the flags unite in the shared red stripe, the mural pays tribute to the two women's shared revolutionary feminist outlooks and to "the common struggles that informed the art of the Mexican Revolution and later that of Puerto Rico and the political solidarity between these two communities" (Hernández).

The way in which Julio's narrative traces the origins of this garden to a collaborative effort of "an ex Junkie" and a "church-based organization" to turn a rubble desert into a green public space, situates the place in the anti-commercial, grassroots ethos of urban gardening. In food desert neighborhoods, often also deprived of access to parks, urban gardens have served as sites of resistance and resilience—community collectives curtailing urban inequity. But in the context of gentrification, the urban gardening aesthetic has also been co-opted to rebrand low-income areas for more affluent users. Modesto Flores is currently one of four community gardens ran by Hope Community Incorporated—a low-income housing developer at the forefront of East Harlem's cultural branding efforts. Counter to the garden's grassroots origins the novel recalls, the ornamental garden under Hope's management is not open to the public year-round. Instead, it operates as a special events venue: a place for school groups, museum tours, performances, and the annual "Poetas con Café" series.<sup>71</sup> Having to contemplate Yasmin Hernández' homage to solidarity and inclusion through the metal gates drives home the paradox of cultural branding I described in the previous chapter—the ease with which

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<sup>71</sup> Hope Community Incorporated is a non-for-profit affordable housing organization co-founded in 1968 by Rev. George E. Calvert—pastor of the independent Church of the Living Hope. Today, Hope Community Inc. is not a faith-based institution, but a non-for profit development organization that "works tirelessly to transform East Harlem community and surrounding neighborhoods through economic development, social service partnerships, and cultural arts programming at Galeria del Barrio." (Hope Community Inc.)

gentrification turns a complaint against urban inequality into a compliance with its exclusions.<sup>72</sup>

Hernández painted her mural against the grain of the prevailing stories of conflict between El Barrio’s Latinx communities: “I began working on “*Soldaderas*” (...) to dispel the stereotype that the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in East Harlem, only battle each other for space.” (Hernández) This chapter analyzes how literature and social movements nuance the tropes of territorial quarrels that are constructed within the archival materials, public debates, and social science studies on the expansion of East Harlem’s Latinidad. I argue that narrative moments of intimacy between the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in Quiñonez’ novel *Chango’s Fire* in tandem with the rhetoric and practice of womanist solidarity across physical and metaphorical borders in the work of the immigrant women-led organization, Movement for Justice in El Barrio (MJB/Movimiento), contest the official narratives of tension and resentment between Mexican placemaking and Puerto Rican placekeeping in East Harlem. Building on Sara Ahmed’s work, I adapt the concept of “complaint collectives.” I will understand the concept as groups of solidarity in difference, united in a common grievance against systemic urban injustice and a shared drive to dismantle its abusive structures. I rely on Ahmed’s recent work on complaint to explore the ways in which the established channels of civic participation and public intervention into the urban planning process—by their very design and intention —exacerbate preexisting divisions, fracture grassroots interest, and are blind to the possibilities of collaboration across difference. The novel and the

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<sup>72</sup> When conducting my field research in East Harlem in the summer of 2017, I tried to access the garden on multiple days, during different times, with no success. On her website, Hernandez herself also records frustration with the multiple complaints she received from people who wanted to view her mural but couldn’t.

movement imagine and enact unexpected complaint collectives against the hostility of such a complaint process. The texts contest the self-perpetuating narratives of conflict, suggesting there is nothing inevitable or finite about El Barrio's intra-Latinx divisions. Neither Quiñonez' novel nor MJB's materials are naively felicitous in their anti-capitalist and womanist search for solidarity. They contend with difference and acknowledge multiplicity in a way that flies in the face of the idea of a fabricated, unproblematic sense of unity. True solidarity is never easy. It requires tireless work, risk, and negotiation. The effort of forming alliances without eliding crucial differences is the more challenging in the context of an issue as contested as gentrification where tensions are fueled by misinformation, by competing narratives about what gentrification even is, let alone how the most vulnerable communities can best respond to its threats.

### **And the (Im)migrants Kept Coming<sup>73</sup>**

East Harlem—also known as Spanish Harlem or simply El Barrio (the neighborhood)—has been a springboard neighborhood for various immigrant groups settling in Manhattan throughout the twentieth century. At various times different ethnic groups—like Jewish and Italian immigrants—called the neighborhood their home. At least since the midcentury, East Harlem has become the center of political and cultural life of Puerto Ricans in the mainland U.S.—a birthplace of salsa and the Nuyorican poetics, and the center of New York's Young Lords movement. As early as in the early 1980s, the development industry began to incorporate Latinx culture into the areas' renewal projects. For example, the 1980-1981 East Harlem Development Plan (a

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<sup>73</sup> This subheading is a reference to a panel in Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series.

part of the Empowerment Zones grant) framed the proposal for East Harlem Commercial District as “Urban Design with a Latin Theme” (Olga Mendez’ Papers, Centro Archives).<sup>74</sup> The combined forces of reinvestment projects, like the EZ and a new wave of migration from Central America have shifted East Harlem’s demographics during those last two decades of the twentieth century. While the Puerto Rican population of East Harlem began rapidly declining, Mexican and Dominican communities increased considerably. Mexican immigration to New York peaked in the 1980s; the new immigrants arrived mostly from the region of Puebla and settled in New York’s neighborhoods that already had an established Latino population, with the largest concentration of businesses, organization, and public cultural expressions in El Barrio (Davila). As Russell Sharman notes in *The Tenants of East Harlem*, by the early 2000s the neighborhood’s Latino community was seventeen percent Mexican.<sup>75</sup> This Central American immigration transformed the traditional Caribbeanness of East Harlem’s Latinidad and New York’s Latinx community at large (Kraly and Miyares).<sup>76</sup> Many of the Mexican businesses that opened up in EL Barrio in the 1990s turned a portion of the neighborhood’s main street—the Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard—into a vibrant hub of Mexican culture. However, not too long after settling in, the Mexican residents have started to feel the economic pressures of escalating gentrification. High concentration of

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<sup>74</sup> Cultural branding initiatives have also been driving the more recent initiatives. In *Latinx*, Ed Morales refers culture-driven redevelopment as “Disneyfication of the neighborhood”, referring particularly to the early 2000s “river to river” development initiative for upper Manhattan that was to include a “Latino themed mini-city featuring performance spaces, recording studios, entertainments spaces and... housing for artists” (256)

<sup>75</sup> Similarly to census data on Haitian immigrants in Miami and Ethiopian immigrants in D.C. the numbers are likely underreported (not accounting for undocumented and temporary workers)

<sup>76</sup> Analyzing these demographic shifts caused by gentrification and new immigration, William Burgos describes a shifting pattern of Puerto Rican presence in the mainland U.S.—from the traditional concentration in New York—what he calls a “hegemony of that New York-based culture”—to a dispersal throughout different states, including central Florida ( Burgos 126).

public housing in the area (second only to Brooklyn's Brownsville) delayed East Harlem's redevelopment, especially as compared to other areas in Manhattan, like the Lower East Side or even Central Harlem. But in 2016, the New York Times named East Harlem one of the city's "hottest neighborhoods"—a sure sign of rapid change and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Through thick descriptions of East Harlem's streets, Quiñonez' novel captures how all this change creates a confusing landscape for the Puerto-Rican protagonist who grew up in the East Harlem of the 1970s. In one of the many walking scenes, Julio reflects on belonging and right to place as he rushes through Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard on his way to a gallery opening: "I walk (...) passing by a Blockbuster Video, a couple of Duane Reades, a couple of Rite Aids, a couple of McDonald's, a KFC, a Starbucks, a Gap, and an Old Navy. I ask myself, 'Whose streets are these?' There are a lot of Mexican taquerias, but they are offset by these chain stores that form an inner-city minimall" (246). The part of the NE 116th street Julio describes is to East Harlem what 125th Street is to central Harlem—center of social and business activity often simply called "the strip." Nearly two decades after the novel's publication in 2004, this cultural shift is even more pronounced. Much of the strip looks like a perplexing cultural collage of a neighborhood in transition—a material testament to the overlapping migrations and rapid capital encroachment plastered over decades of systemic disinvestment. Businesses like Don Panchito Deli Grocery, La Bomba Taqueria, Exquisita Comida Mexicana still dominate between Second and Third Avenues, and vendors still sell fresh tamales from push-carts alongside the sidewalk. Yet, establishments around 5th avenue now bear also West African and Asian names—new immigrant histories that continue to imprint

themselves on the physical landscape of East Harlem. Sprinkled in between these histories are the staples of gentrification—big box stores and hip bars; among the latter is the “Lion Lion” described on yelp as an establishment that finally fills the gap “in the middle of a cocktail bar desert” (Tessie V.) Back in 2014, a group of artists named Harlem Art Collective (HART) turned a wall at a stalled construction site on 116th and 3rd avenue into a Guerrilla Gallery—an open-ended project that invites East Harlem residents to post their work and comment on the neighborhood change.



Photo by the author



Photo by the author

Like much all else on the strip, the gallery murals are in constant flux as passersby layer the wall with their contributions and artists repaint their murals. I took the pictures above in August 2017, in the middle of the contentious debates on the East Harlem Rezoning Plan, which I described later in the chapter. This particular exhibit comments on the theme “No Rezoning, No Displacement, No Gentrification.” The middle panel featured in the photographs offers a nostalgic depiction of life on 116th street that the gentrification initiative threatens to destroy. Looming on each side of the street scene is a visual critique of the proposed rezoning plan: a Trojan Horse and the Wall-street bull. The image of the Trojan horse with suited men and women posting “sold” postcards on El Barrio’s building comments on the rezoning plan as subterfuge—a de facto displacement plan in disguise as a peace offering. The bull piercing through a color-coded subway map of El Barrio critiques capitalist approaches to housing as business endeavor rather than a basic human right. The map’s legend compares neighborhood median incomes with the market-level and “affordable” real estate prices to reveal the

skewed notions of affordability, which derail debates on affordable housing. Too often housing categorized and marketed as “affordable” in the rezoning negotiations is still far out of reach of the largely immigrant, working-class community.

As in Northwest D.C. and Little Haiti/Lemon City, the textured history of overlapping migrations in East Harlem have caused conflicts between different ethnic groups competing for scarce resources and recognition. Because Mexican immigrants came to El Barrio at a time of growing reinvestment into the systematically devalued part of Manhattan, they became a part of contentious debates about the neighborhood’s shifting cultural landscape. Materials I discovered at Centro Archives among the Olga Mendez, Richie Perez and the Community Board 11 papers suggest that as early as the 1980s, demographic shifts were causing anxiety about cultural loss and displacement in the area, registering the relationship between the established Puerto Rican community and the incoming Mexican immigrants largely through the lens of territorial quarrels. These included conflicts about the expansion of El Museo del Barrio’s profile from a sanctuary for Puerto Rican artists to a more expansive space for Latinx art broadly understood, as well as tensions regarding funding sources for Mexican heritage festivals. But perhaps most prominent was the controversy surrounding the efforts of Mexican civic leaders to rename the Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard. The main street was first named after Marin in 1982, following years-long lobbying efforts from the local Puerto Rican leadership and community. The event was significant and widely celebrated as it marked the very first time in New York’s history that a street had been named in honor of a Puerto Rican. A decade later, when the Mexican community and leadership was established in the in East Harlem more broadly, but on the main street specifically,

Mexican civic leaders began campaigning to rename the strip after a Mexican revolutionary. Puerto Rican senator Olga Mendez recalls this incident in a 1998 interview with “East Harlem Renaissance.” When asked about the newest immigrant group in East Harlem, Senator Mendez responds: “I like the Mexican people, they are very hard working and family oriented. But can you imagine, one of the Mexican leaders came to me for help in renaming Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard to, are you ready for this, to Pancho Villa Boulevard. After we [Puerto Ricans] struggled so long and hard for this street to be named after Marin Rivera” (Olga Mendez Papers, Centro Archives). Mendez’ invokes here the prominent trope of hard-working Mexican workers I discuss in more details below. Representing East Harlem and a portion of the Bronx from 1978 to 2004, Senator Mendez was the first female Puerto Rican ever elected to a State Legislature in mainland U.S. Throughout her career, Mendez emphasized her Puerto Rican identity, passionately rejecting the cross-national Latino/Hispanic categories of identification. She prioritized her Puerto Rican constituents, often foregrounding distinctions between Puerto Ricans, as U.S. citizens, and other Latino groups. For instance, she explained her decision to switch party affiliation from Democrat to Republican in 2002 by referencing immigration issues in East Harlem: “The mission of the Democratic Party has been to mainstream recent immigrants. But it has not done so for the Puerto Rican and African community. And both of these groups are citizens” (12).

Several scholars of East Harlem have focused on these territorial disputes.<sup>77</sup> In *Barrio Dreams*—a crucial 2004 ethnography on gentrification and cultural politics in East Harlem — Arlene Davila documents the relationship between Puerto Ricans and Mexican

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<sup>77</sup> See particularly: Ed Morales, *Latinx and Whose Barrio?* documentary co-directed by Morales and Laura Rivera

communities in El Barrio as living “together but not mixed” with physical separations between exclusively Mexican and exclusively Puerto Rican spaces (154). While both groups are invested in the preservation of El Barrio as a Latino neighborhood, Davila proposes, “their cultural politics sometimes directly confront one another” (155). She outlines how expressions of mutual prejudice—particularly evident among the civic leadership on both sides—have come into play within the territorial debates about El Barrio’s cultural identity. Struggling for resources, visibility, and political recognition, Mexican-American leaders and officials in New York City have often resorted to the trope of a hard working Mexican immigrant to distance themselves from the Puerto Rican community and the racialized stereotypes of Latino laziness. The Puerto Rican leadership would in turn often rehearse the tired tropes of Mexican immigrants as a homogenous community of vulnerable, undocumented workers; Herman Badillo—the borough president of The Bronx—infamously made racist remarks about Mexican immigrants as uneducated and unsophisticated country folks. But, as Davila points out, New York’s Mexican community is “far from homogenous, with a “variety of merchants, artists, student union leaders, and community members organizing around religion, Zapatismo, and Mexico’s culture and traditions” (156). Due to the growing prominence of Mexican business owners in El Barrio, many of the Puerto Rican residents in Davila’s interviews describe the immigrant newcomers as agents of gentrification.

Davila observes that during her research the Mexican community was practically absent in the public debates on East Harlem redevelopment. But since the publication of *Barrio Dreams*, a direct action housing justice group founded by immigrant women from Puebla—Movement for Justice in El Barrio (MJB or Movimiento)—has played an

increasingly prominent role in the complex infrastructure organizing against displacement in the neighborhood.<sup>78</sup> MJB's politics is unapologetically Zapatista—anti-capitalist, collectivist, and translocal. Their work was inspired by the 1994 indigenous peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. The movement follows horizontal structures of organizing and does not accept government funding. As a member of a transnational movement called “The Other Campaign”, MJB participates in cross-border collaborations to advance their local causes. Their work in East Harlem focuses on connecting tenants with pro-bono lawyers in a struggle against slumlords, protesting large-scale private developments, and forging housing justice allegiances by organizing large-scale cross-community gatherings called “Encuentros for Dignity and Against Displacement” (Maeckelbergh). These gathering are also a Zapatista-inspired practice and way of doing politics “from below and to the left” (“Invitation to First Encuentro”). Approaching MJB’s work in a rather dismissive manner, Ed Morales defines the movement as following “a radical working-class agenda” (257). But the crucial contribution of the Movement is not simply about their anti-capitalist politics. We cannot fully understand MJB without attending to their translocal approaches and their womanist principles of radical inclusion: “We have stood together as people of color, as women, as transgender people, gays and lesbians, as youth, as the elderly, as workers, as immigrants. We have made each other’s struggles our own” (“Invitation to First Encuentro”).

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<sup>78</sup> Other grassroots group for housing justice in East Harlem include East Harlem Preservation and El Barrio Unite (predominantly Puerto Rican).

### **Complaint Collectives—a Theoretical Framework**

Building on Sara Ahmed's work, this chapter delineates what we learn about the urban development process—and the narratives that underpin the process—from considering housing advocacy as a work of forging complaint collectives. In *Feminist Life*, Ahmed argues that diversity work within the University tends to register as a complaint regardless of whether a complaint was actually made or intended. Complaint in this way becomes a killjoy genre. To register an effort towards diversity and inclusion as complaint, says Ahmed, means to dismiss it as negative, destructive, self-referential and unreasonable. Because the word complaint carries a negative value, to be heard as complaining often means to not be heard at all (*Feminist Life*). Tracing the word complain to its old French and Latin roots signifying lament, grief, and sorrow, she points out how a (feminist) complaint becomes received as a wail of ingratitude: “whatever we say, however we say it; hysterical, killjoys, overreacting, sensitive, easily hurt, angry” (“Complaint as Diversity Work”). The Miami chapter invokes the figure of the complainer, delineating how commissioners, developers, and even some community members dismiss and attack as noisemakers Little Haiti’s women of color organizers and young housing activists.<sup>79</sup> Here, I am focusing specifically on the complaint process—exploring the possibility of housing justice collectives emerging and breaking through the process of formal urban planning. In “Complaint as a Feminist Pedagogy” Ahmed takes to task the laborious and hostile process of filing an official grievance through institutional channels. What masquerades or is presented as a straightforward following of policies and procedures—Ahmed argues—unfolds instead as an interminable journey

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<sup>79</sup> In *Magic City Killjoys* I write about the work of women organizers for neighborhood justice in Miami’s Little Haiti as a killjoy practice.

intended to “tire the complainer out”. Exhaustion, in this way “becomes the point of the complaint process” (“Why Complain?”). Ahmed proposes that despite the institution’s often successful attempts to exhaust and isolate the complainer, going forward with the grievance can also become a way of building a collective. She considers the ways in which pushing against the official channels might unite people in dismantling abusive structures. Iben Nilsson captures the essence of Ahmed’s argument best: “one person speaking up (complaining) creates a lead for others to hold on to and reach out for, making it possible to create collectives from which people can work together and chip away at the brick walls of institutions, one complaint at the time” (“Notes on Complaint”).

In the context of urban development, the formal complaint process involves speaking up at city-commission hearings and board meetings or participating in community engagement initiatives led by city officials. Ahmed’s collectives emerge from individual complaints through and against the complaint proceedings. Social movements for neighborhood justice already enter the official complaint channels as collectives, and the process frequently breaks down their unity. City officials frame their public participation initiatives as a democratic crowdsourcing of recommendations for an inclusive planning practice. However, when grassroots organizations follow the established channels for community input and intervention, they encounter “the gap between what is supposed to happen and what does happen” (Ahmed, “Complaint as Diversity Work”). I analyze the public participation initiatives for the DCP East Harlem Rezoning 2016-2017 to outline how the very structure and intention of the community planning process leads to exhaustion, isolation and increased fragmentation of grassroots interests. First, there is

the issue of inclusion and accessibility. Inconvenient times, remote locations, lack of childcare or interpretation services all sponsor certain voices while excluding others, making engagement difficult for many constituents. City planning commission meetings for the East Harlem Rezoning were held in the Lower East Side's Equitable Life Building in the early afternoon. Many organizers in attendance repeatedly complained about how convening the meetings on the other side of Manhattan in the middle of the day shuts out participation of the working and working-class members of the community. Only some bodies are then even in the position to partake in the process—to show up and articulate their discontent. Second, elected officials use community engagement process to create the optics of public participation without any real implementation.<sup>80</sup> Silverman and Yin in "Are we Still Going Through the Empty Ritual of Participation?" conclude that public participation in urban development too often becomes "a pro forma exercise where grassroots stakeholders are worn down in routinized meetings (...) that culminate in unfulfilled promises from public officials" (3). In the case of the East Harlem rezoning plan, City Council speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito led a community engagement initiative by organizing conversations between the city council and a steering committee comprised of twenty-one members (community organizations and neighborhood representatives) The timing of this initiative is crucial. The committee was appointed by the councilwomen to gather recommendations for revision of an already existing DCP East Harlem Rezoning Proposal rather than to help craft the first draft. After two years of meetings, the committee presented the "East Harlem Neighborhood Plan (EHPN)" as a

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<sup>80</sup> In her seminal article, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", Sherry Arnstein argues that "Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit."(216)"

“community-based vision and strategy for the future of East Harlem” (EHN). The EHN championed a more modest rezoning alongside comprehensive cultural initiatives. But the final draft of the DCP East Harlem Rezoning proposal implemented only a fraction of the EHN recommendations, causing a widespread frustration among the residents and business owners who participated in the drawn out community planning process. Despite a mounting public opposition to this final rezoning proposal, the city commission approved the plan in November 2017.

Grassroots organizations, including East Harlem Preservation, El Barrio Unite, and MJB have criticized this community engagement process as not only ineffective but also exclusionary and intentionally polarizing. As evident also in Little Haiti’s redevelopment debates, public participation in urban planning often turns into a game of divide and conquer as city representatives uphold one or two community groups (in the case of Magic City—the Concerned Leaders, in the case of East Harlem Rezoning—the Hope Community Incorporated mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.) Meanwhile, organizations and individuals that raise serious concerns are deemed unreasonable and unnecessary. For example, when responding to a series of complaints about the EHN’s insufficient affordability and anti-displacement measures, councilwoman Viverito resounds one of the most prevailing, and the most erroneous, narratives about housing activists as anti-development and anti-progress: “there are people in the community who don’t want anything to happen... to me, that’s not a realistic proposition.” (Plitt and Warerkar. Her argument dismisses the anti-rezoning critics as too extreme to even be considered a part of a constructive process.

Distrustful of these official channels, many grassroots organizations in East Harlem seek alternative routes to influence the planning process. They engage in protests, attract media presence, work with community lawyers, and canvas to increased residents' awareness about the upcoming changes. Evaluating the landscape of housing advocacy in El Barrio, Ed Morales identifies "two forms of confronting gentrification that seem to fall along ethnic lines — the first was adopted by Puerto Rican and African Americans, who worked though connections with local politicians and community boards. The other was exemplified by the efforts of a group called Movement for Justice in El Barrio" (257). Morales identifies the most vivid example of these distinct approaches in the ongoing conflict between the immigrant movement and the Puerto-Rican councilwoman Mark-Viverito. Responding to MJB's unyielding protests (including one in front of the councilwoman's house), Mark-Viverito accused MJB of being "outside agitators who refuse to work within the established channels set up through her work with Hope Community and their tenant advocacy" (Morales 257). What underpins Mark-Viverito's evaluation of the Mexican women as outsiders and their actions as illegitimate is a notion of seniority of one Latino group over the other as a measuring stick for who has the right to shape the future of El Barrio.

In her recent series of lectures, Ahmed tells us that "we learn from complaint a lot about power" because of the imbalance in whose grievances are acknowledged, addressed, and taken seriously and whose grievances are "audible as a tantrum" or heard "as a grudge" and hence dismissed as unreasonable ("On Complaint"). Debates about urban redevelopment too hinge on the assumption that some complaints are more legitimate than others and that only some complainers have enough stake in place to

influence how and where things are going. While this particular conflict foregrounds the nationality of the women organizers with MJB, it is also their status as tenants that is at play. Developers, investors, city officials, and other main players in the formal urban planning process prioritize voices of owners over those of renters. Grievances about construction noise, historic preservation, or the character of the neighborhood are taken much more seriously in the official channels by the decision makers when coming from individual home owners or home owner associations than tenants or tenant rights groups. This privileging is built into the very process of development approval proceedings and falsely registers ownership, or a lack of thereof, as a measure of investment in place.

But this polarization of organizing along national and ethnic lines during East Harlem's rezoning debates was not as straightforward as Ed Morales suggests. The Puerto Rican-led El Barrio Unite and East Harlem Preservation have joined the immigrant-powered MJB in fierce criticism of the Council's proceedings during the hearings. All three groups condemned the structure and sequence of the formal community engagement process. They pointed out how by the time the city representatives invited public participation, institutional stakeholders had already agreed on rezoning as the recipe for East Harlem redevelopment, and presented a united vision to the community for buy in rather than actual consultation and negotiation. For the organizations, a truly community driven process would have to involve community input from the very brainstorming stages. A prominent Puerto Rican organizer with East Harlem Preservation, Marina Ortiz, denounced the EHNP as not representative of the community's needs: "it is outrageous that rezoning is being sold as something that the neighborhood wants" (Chediac). MJB on their end foregrounded how the current

structure and timing of the community planning process fragmented grassroots interests by encouraging side-dealing for the elusive community benefits: “Local politicians use their power, influence and money to try to buy off resistance in our communities and pacify dissent under the guise of ‘community engagement’ to make their racist rezoning plans more palatable and ‘acceptable’, and there are those that choose to accept the money of the powerful and ride on the currents of their power” (“Invitation to the Encuentro for Humanity and against Displacement”). In this public invitation to their 2016 Encuentro, MJB combines a confrontational language directed at the powers of state and capital with a call to unity: “We must resist division. We must seek to come together” (“Invitation to the Encuentro for Humanity and against Displacement”). Movement for Justice in El Barrio has been unapologetic in challenging elected officials who uphold the for profit housing industry. However, everything from the format of MJB’s Encuentros to the language of solidarity and inclusion that permeate their texts illustrates an effort to organize and sustain complaint collectives across difference. These shifts in tone and slippages between charged and unifying language are a defining feature of the movement’s discourse. I see these seeming inconsistencies as an attempt to pierce through the pervasive neoliberal ideology that has normalized the idea of housing for capital gain.

In the following section, I analyze MJB’s efforts toward a more equitable and unified El Barrio alongside narratives of complaint collectives in Ernesto Quiñonez’ 2004 novel *Chango’s Fire*. The book shares in MJB’s fierce anti-capitalist critique. But the novel’s dialogic form—what James Peacock calls the “novel’s abiding interest in multiple

subjectivities”—allows Quiñonez a space to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable nuances of solidarity in difference (132).

### **The Book of Complaints**

Ernesto Quiñonez is a Puerto Rican-Ecuadorian author whose body of work contributed to and helped redefine the post 1960s Nuyorican literary tradition.<sup>81</sup> Scholars have analyzed his highly acclaimed debut novel *Bodega Dreams* (2000) as a critical engagement with the conventions and discourses of post-Civil Rights classics like Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* and Pedro Pietri's “Puerto Rican Obituary.”<sup>82</sup> *Bodega Dreams* depicts Spanish Harlem as a decidedly Nuyorican space threatened by gentrification. Engaging similar issues of property ownership, displacement, identity politics, and the relationship between activism and aesthetics, the 2004 *Chango’s Fire* also explores the shifting patterns of Latino immigration and the changing national landscape within El Barrio’s Latinidad. While removed from print in 2010, the novel is well known among Latinx scholars and has been a subject of fruitful literary criticism. Susan Mendez, Sean Moiles, Bridget Kevane, Dalia Kandiyoti, and June Dwyer have all discussed the messy politics of gentrification in Quiñonez’ second novel. Sean Moiles reads *Chango’s Fire* as a critique of both pro and anti-gentrification movements, arguing that “the uncovering of various kinds of hypocrisy is central to Quiñonez’s politics”

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<sup>81</sup> Quiñonez was born in 1969 in Ecuador to an Ecuadorian father and a Puerto Rican mother. His parents migrated to the U.S. when he was only eighteen months old.

<sup>82</sup> See Ylce Irizarry’s analysis of the novel as a memorial to East Harlem as puertorriqueñidad in “Because Place Still Matters” and Dalle’s and Machado’s discussion of how Quiñonez’ both deploys and deconstructs what they call “a ghetto aesthetic” of the Civil Right era Nuyorican literature (45) June Dwyer offers yet another analysis of intertextuality in *Bodega Dreams*, analyzing the novel as a postmodernist appropriation F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

(125). Dwyer explores the concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism”—a position that at once accepts the inevitability of urban change and insists on community participation in how this change takes place. Several articles and book chapters also focus on the intersections of religion and gentrification in the novel (Mendez, Kevane). Rather than expanding in details on the well-covered themes of Santeria, Spanglish, cosmopolitanism, or neoliberalism, I further this research by exploring the largely unexamined subplot of Mexican immigration in the novel’s gentrification commentary. My focus on the novel’s preoccupation with El Barrio’s overlapping (im)migrations allows me to place Quiñonez’ work in the wider tradition of Latino immigrant writing of the city, beyond the Nuyorican aesthetics and politics.

Quiñonez titles the first part of the novel, Book I “a Filing of Complaints”<sup>83</sup> Chapters numbered from “Complaint 1” to “Complaint 11” offer a lexicon of urban maladies about the gentrifying “mean streets” of East Harlem—grievances Julio and other characters in the novel bring up against the neighborhood’s inequities past and present. The novel’s complaints contest and revise the mainstream national narratives about achieving urban justice. These include the romance of individual ownership or trust in institutionalized forms of civic engagement. In what follows, I argue that it is in the unexpected moments of kinship between Mexican and Puerto Rican characters that the novel imagines alternative possibilities of coming together to affect change in the city.

In brief, *Chango’s Fire* tells the story of East Harlem’s gentrification from the point of view of Julio Santana, a college student and construction worker by day and an

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<sup>83</sup> Bridget A. Kevanein’s *Profane & Sacred* reads the filing of complaints in *Chango’s Fire* as a modern Book of Job.

arsonist by night.<sup>84</sup> Julio works for Eddie—an Italian holdover in Spanish Harlem—setting properties on fire in and around New York City for investors and house owners who can then claim insurance. The protagonist uses all the income from the insurance scam to buy an apartment floor in a dilapidated building. The walkup burns down at the novel’s end, set on fire by Eduardo-- Julio’s developmentally challenged childhood friend, who is also Eddie’s son, nicknamed Trompo Loco. The building that houses Julio’s apartment is the novel’s central setting; it grounds all major relationships, the neighborhood’s history and its changing landscape, conflicts, and community resistance.<sup>85</sup> Julio and his family live upstairs. Helen, a gallery owner, recent transplant from Wisconsin, and Julio’s romantic interest, owns an apartment on the second floor. And the novel’s most ardent social activist, a pseudo-preacher, and Julio’s childhood friend, Maritza organizes a church-turned advocacy group for the neighborhood’s immigrant parishioners on the building’s ground level. At his construction job Julio works with recent undocumented male migrants from Central America, renovating burnt buildings for the more affluent residents moving into the neighborhood. Rebuilding Spanish Harlem from its ashes, the novel’s new immigrants quite literally prepare the neighborhood for their own replacement. *Chango’s Fire* narrates, then, the shifting demographics of East Harlem and the neighborhood’s growing inequalities through two overlapping migrations: “Undocumented workers and yuppies are the range. Both group live in boxes, apartments that a had been cut up to make more units, charge more rent.

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<sup>84</sup> While we assume that Julio Santana is Puerto Rican, the novel does not explicitly reveal his ethnic/national heritage. The protagonist of Quiñonez’ other two novels—both also named Julio—are, like the author, Puerto Rican-Ecuadorian. In *Bodega Dreams*, Julio’s nickname is Chino, and at one point he confess: “I’m only half Rican, my father is from Ecuador,” I felt compelled to tell *Bodega*”.

<sup>85</sup> In *The City As a Trap* Andrew Hoffmann calls Julio’s building “a microcosm of gentrification” (167)

Only yuppies don't have to worry about the INS knocking at any minute and kicking them out" (28). Julio's narrative gives undocumented Mexican workers similarly ambivalent status in El Barrio's gentrification debates as Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things* articulates for the African refugees in the context of D.C.'s African American spaces. The new migrants in the novel occupy the dual position of cultural outsiders whose business and cultural presence in the neighborhood's 116 street corridor redefines East Harlem's Latinidad. At the same time, they are a group who shares in the displacement vulnerability of the long term lower-to moderate income Puerto Rican residents.

*Complaint #1: Ownership Won't Save us*

*Chango's Fire* begins with the ethos of property, but the novel's descending plot line deconstructs the romance of individual ownership as a shield against gentrification.<sup>86</sup> In a reversal of the all-American rags to riches story, Quiñonez places the protagonist back in one of East Harlem's housing projects at the end of the book, exposing the security of homeownership as an elusive promise for immigrant and minority communities. The reader first meets Julio as proud owner of an apartment floor in the "old, battered, three-story walk-up (...) a real space, with walls, doors, and locks" (13). Julio's description of the building's materiality—walls, doors, and locks—accents the anti-communal ethos that defines approaches to housing as a commodity. Both the joy and the cost of owning space lies in separating yourself from others. At a closer look then, ownership is a sticky

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<sup>86</sup>*Bodega Dreams* similarly deconstructs Willie Bodega's idea that the only way to save El Barrio from gentrification is to "own the neighborhood. Legally" Commenting on this ambitious project, Arlene Davila argues: "*Bodega Dreams* represents the ultimate neoliberal novel. The context it speaks to is one where the purchase of place is presented as the only alternative for lasting power, even when the feasibility of such a dream is quickly fading" ("Dreams of Place, Housing, Gentrification, and the Marketing of Space in El Barrio"114)

business from the novel's beginning. Julio's buyer's joy continues to chip away as he plans renovation for the newly acquired property.<sup>87</sup> In a seemingly felicitous scene, which resembles a moment in *The Beautiful Things* when Sepha stares at his store, Julio reflects:

At times, and for no reason, I go outside and cross the street and stare at my building. I smile. See the third floor? I own it I tell myself. I see the windows a little crooked, not exactly fitting their frames. Got to fix that. I smile. I see the paint chipping on all sides. Got to fix that. I like the gray shadow my building casts when the sun hit it from the west of 103rd street and Lexington avenue. I've come a long way from the clubhouse I built as a little kid. (5-6)

The contrasting imagery of Julio's smiling face and the building's decayed condition makes readers suspicious of his expressed enthusiasm. The crooked windows and chipping paint fail to meet the owner's elated face as they capture the story of neglect and systemic disinvestment in El Barrio. This romance of homeownership covers with gratitude that which should cause outrage. The ambivalence in this passage rests also in fact that Julio's claim to the property is not legally accurate. Fronting for Julio at the bank, it is Papelito who technically owns the apartment. This is because despite the long hours at his legal construction job, the only way Julio can afford to mortgage an apartment is through the unaccounted income from Eddie's insurance scheme.

The last sentence of the passage roots Julio's adult aspiration in a childhood play in ownership. The "clubhouse" refers to a structure Julio and Trompo Loco built as kids out of refrigerator boxes on one of East Harlem's many vacant lots: "the Brown House, home of the president of Spanish Harlem"(6). Soon after, a couple of white real-estate investors threw the young boys out setting the boxes on fire and replacing Julio's first "house" with

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Gumpert identifies the metaphor of renovation and a pattern of obsession with the aesthetic/appearance of old restored brownstones as prominent tropes of early Brooklyn gentrification novels like L. J. Davis's *A Meaningful Life* Paula Fox's classic *Desperate Characters*.

a “FOR SALE” sign, which would remain on the empty lot for many years. Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, when the Bronx and East Harlem were in flames, Julio has experienced and normalized displacement and other forms of housing precarity as a part of life for New York Latinos: “Being dispossessed by fire never scared me. As a child in Spanish Harlem, I’d go to sleep with the lullabies of fire engines. (...) At school firemen would visit to give demonstrations of what to do if your house was on fire” (155). The novel comes a full circle from these early reflections on dispossession by fire when Julio’s brownstone walkup burns down at the novel’s end. After the fire, Helen buys a new apartment in a different part of town, Julio and his family end up back in the projects, and Maritza takes off to save the world from somewhere else. The lot itself is promptly redeveloped into a mixed-use condo building with shops and a Starbucks on the ground floor. Despite this downward sweep of the homeownership plot, Quiñonez ends on an optimistic note. Julio, who now works at a pizzeria and is undergoing initiation to become a Santero, reflects on the novel’s last page: “So what? I got knocked back down a few notches. I’ve been in the projects before and I got out. And I’ll get out again. This time, I’ll do it right. This time, I’ll do it for good” (273). Andrew Hoffmann argues that the novel does not provide a viable alternative to neoliberal capitalism, and hence Julio’s unwarranted optimism in this final scene can only be understood as a decision to relinquish himself to the capitalist striving for upward mobility: “He must participate [in neoliberal capitalism](...), he has no real choice in the matter”(194). I disagree with this reading of the novel as a defeatist resignation to the idea of inescapable capitalism<sup>88</sup>. Julio’s resolution to “do it right” cannot refer to future aspirations to own property

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<sup>88</sup> Hoffmann’s argument appears to draw inspiration from Slavoj Žižek’s claims that there is no outside to capitalism

(legally, by the book) if we consider how *Chango's Fire* deconstructs the progressive narrative about American ownership. It is also the protagonist's turn toward Santeria and his more favorable perception of Maritza's socialist activism at the novel's end that discourages a cynical interpretation of the ambiguous, yet "full of hope and light" ending (Quiñonez, 273).

At the beginning of the novel Julio reflects on immigrant homeownership aspirations as inherent to the American Dream narrative. The book's opening pages introduce the protagonist during a job in Upstate New York, setting on fire a house with "Large windows and spacious bedrooms, an American house new immigrants dream of. The type of house America promises can be yours if you work hard, save your pennies, and salute the flag" (3). The widely accepted correlation between homeownership and the American Dream relies on a belief that you only need to follow the procedures of working hard (saving pennies) and upholding American values (the flag) to succeed in the land of the free. But as Julio's story illustrates there is nothing straightforward or secure about the process of coming to ownership, especially for immigrants and communities of color. And in the context of gentrifying El Barrio, the protagonist feels increasingly unsure in his claim to the changing neighborhood. When Julio first meets Helen, she—the newcomer—bars him from entering his own property. Returning home from work in the late hours of the evening, Julio stumbles upon Helen who is making her way home from a night out. Helen refuses to let him inside the building unless he proves he lives there by calling his apartment through the intercom. Helen gives Julio "a polite expression laced with a bit of suspicion. The kind of look I've seen white people give to office janitors and delivery boys"(14). Her confidence in the owner's rights contrasts the way in which Julio

carefully weighs out his options and responses, showcasing just how differently each of them experiences their position as home owners. Their distinct identities impact how safe and entitled they feel in the protections ownership seemingly provides across the board. Helen's willfulness reveals her white and class privilege, even as—or perhaps especially as—the gender dynamics situate her confronting a man she doesn't know in the middle of the night as risky or even reckless. Although reluctantly, Julio complies with Helen's request; he understands the politics of respectability, dictating who gets to demand and who is forced to temper even the most legitimate anger. Throughout the novel, similar instances cause Julio to question the freedoms and securities of individual ownership, even while it lasts.

Quiñonez explores the interplay between Julio's persistent desire for and belief in property possession as a guarantee of ontological security and his ongoing disappointment with the promises of legal ownership. Through these juxtapositions within the protagonist's individual perspective, the novel adds nuance to the strain of housing activism and gentrification scholarship that takes to task the American ethos of ownership. Groups advocating for tenants' rights—including MJB in New York or SMASH and Take Back the Land in Miami—rethink the ways we conceptualize claims to space and advocate for collective forms of ownership, like Community Land Trusts (CLT). Some scholars too have been increasingly looking into the displacing effects of gentrification on long-term property owners, paying attention to factors like increases in property taxes and owner harassment (Brown-Saracino, Immergluck, Zukin). This research contrasts with gentrification scholarship that argues for the key role of ownership in resisting development-led displacement (Martin and Beck 2017, Brown-Saracino

2009, Immergluck 2009, Williams 2014). These studies emphasize how material displacement occurs at a higher scope and speed in neighborhoods with high rates of renting than areas with an established homeowners base. Insufficient tenant protection laws offer one reason. These differences stem also from the privileging of owners' voices in urban planning proceedings I outlined earlier. Even for legal owners who are able to physically stay in the gentrified neighborhood, the shift in what the urban sociologist Sharon Zukin calls "cultural power" over space leads to a sense of dislocation, disorientation, and decreased attachment (4). Derek Hyra too analyzes how rapid changes in the racial and economic make-up of a place—different people, different establishments and amenities, and different stories—can alienate long-time residents and result in "political and cultural displacement"(19-22). Many of Julio's anti-gentrification grievances revolve around the shifting cultural identity of El Barrio. When Julio comments on the galleries, bars, and chain stores sprouting around the neighborhood, his anxiety is less driven by a fear of material dispossession than about the fading sense of cultural belonging. Walking around the neighborhood one night Julio reflects:

I stare across the street and see no one sitting in front of the buildings. It wasn't always like that. Before people like Helen arrived, those buildings didn't have spikes on the side of the stoops. People would sit on the stoops and talk all night as they watch their kids play; The spikes are offensive... it's saying: 'We don't want you sitting here. We don't care if you sat here for decades. bringing those *tropical customs* from our old countries, this is a new neighborhood now. (52)

While the protagonist understands that "all neighborhoods must change," he mourns the loss of Spanish Harlem as a Caribbean space just the same.<sup>89</sup> The "tropical custom"

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<sup>89</sup> See Carol Boyce Davies' discussion of global north cities as Caribbean spaces in Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones. She defines Caribbean spaces as "those locations, in which there are distinctly identified recreations of Caribbean communities following migrations" (*Caribbean Spaces*, 2-3). Davis pays attention to how Caribbean being in the world manifests itself in space, and examines how the material conditions and spatial realties affects how people experience migration. What constitutes

of sitting on a stoop in Julio's nostalgic reflection stands for a larger public or street culture (with intergenerational camaraderie and public socializing) that has rendered many New York's neighborhoods an extension of the Caribbean.<sup>90</sup>

*Complaint #2: Why Play by the Rules When the Game is Rigged?*

Throughout the novel, Helen voices many grievances of her own. In addition to the hostility she reports experiencing from the long-time residents, Helen complains about the lack of police presence in the neighborhood and the community's weak civic engagement. After attending a community board meeting, she tells Julio: “(....) there were about twelve people there. Just twelve, Julio. I'm saying to myself, they talk all this stuff about gentrification and they don't really give a hoot. Look at these empty seats. Not only that but (...) they were discussing the next block party!” (173). Quiñonez presents Helen's complaints seriously. To her, community boards represent a legitimate space for community empowerment, representation of public interests, and a possibility for influence in the development process. Within this logic, lack of participation translates to a missed opportunity and a clear sign that the community is not invested in the neighborhood's future. As a newcomer, however, Helen underestimates the

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Caribbeanness of a place for Davis is not limited to the presence of people, their businesses and entertainment, their language or even artistic production. It is also about the more subtle, more mundane and affective recreations, which give the community a distinct identity vis a vis the receiving environments and offer support in exile. These efforts include: public or street-oriented culture, intergenerational camaraderie, family socializing and celebrations, kin interactions defined by movement in both directions between the islands and its diasporic outposts (particularly when it comes to caring for children or elderlies), long terms neighborhood friendships, and other fictive relationships, ideas and desires about property ownership transferred from the home contexts, and planting of a familiar vegetation. (Davis, 2-5). Boyce Davis' deployment of Caribbean space is also informed by her concept of "twilight zones," understood to be "that gap between different realities, that zone of instability between darkness and light, that time when transformation happens" (19). Caribbean spaces operating as twilight zones are then both unstable and potentially transgressive— in-between sites of possibility (14).

<sup>90</sup> A chapter in Rebecca Solnit's *Nonstop Metropolis* atlas of New York City includes a map named "Archipelago: The Caribbean Far North" that reimagines the city boroughs as an extension of the Caribbean archipelago. Gaiutra Bahadur's essay accompanies the map.

community's valid distrust in the official public participation channels like community boards. First, is it perfectly possible—as Dwyer observes—that a block party could be a form of anti-gentrification resistance (132). Additionally, the immigrant and Puerto Rican residents in the novel are suspicious of the governmental entities and channel their anti-gentrification and other community-justice efforts through grassroots initiatives like squatting, protests, and church functions. For example, Julio's father composes a “complaint” performed in his church—what Julio terms a Latino Gospel or Latino spiritual—which best captures the novel’s grievances against the official channels for public intervention into urban issues. The lyrics read: “The super won’t fix the tub and my rent just went up, no heat for the winter, got roaches in my soup (...) I’m taking my complaints, I’m taking my complaints Oh, I’m taking my complaints to the Housing Agency of the Lord” (135). The tragicomical lyrics complain about slumlords and undignified living conditions many residents in Spanish Harlem are forced to endure. But the song also evaluates the established formal processes and institutional channels for tenant rights advocacy as so ineffective that one might just be better off praying for change or reward in the afterlife.

Quiñonez continually reveals the limitation of Julio’s point of view by clashing the protagonist’s perspective against other—often oppositional—voices.<sup>91</sup> The interactions between Julio and Helen through much of the novel resemble a match of complaints

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<sup>91</sup> Quiñonez constructs the protagonist’s limited perspective also by making him an arsonist—a flawed, yet good-hearted character pushed toward morally questionable deeds by the circumstances. Explaining these complexities, the author says about Julio Santana: "he never judges, you know, his mother is a racist and his father was a junkie, and yet he never brings that up, and Helen has problems with the bottle and yet he never brings that up, 'cause he knows that, you know, 'I can't throw stones. I myself am a criminal'" (Kerr 2004). An anonymous article by the Hunter College, Center for Puerto Rican Studies reads *Chango's Fire* as a picaresque protagonist. Consult: Ernesto Quiñonez's fiction seen as a picaresque narrative.." The Free Library. 2008 Hunter College, Center for Puerto Rican Studies 21 Apr. 2020.

about the neighborhood. Helen is a champion of institutions; in her dismissal of Julio's concerns about change in El Barrio, she echoes the anti-progress tropes that I outlined in Melissa Mark-Viverito's disputes with the opponents of her community engagement process. During one of their exchanges at Helen's apartment, Julio tells Helen about a gutter poet who survived arson and other forms of disinvestment only to be displaced by gentrification. The poet was kicked out from the apartment Helen now owns after the building went co-op. When Helen gets defensive, Julio replies:

"Well, all this history, Helen," I say, "is alien to you and those like you."

"The people at the church tonight," she says, her eyes becoming slants of anger, "the new immigrants, don't have a history here either, Julio. You are just afraid."

"Of what?"

Helen quickly answers, "*Afraid of change.*"

"Please."

"This is New York City, Julio. The city changes by nature. The world does."

"Well, Fifth Avenue never changes, Helen. It always stays rich and white. It hasn't changed. Fifth Avenue will only change when they want it to change. But neighborhoods like mine, though (...) "they change all the fucking time." (204)

Julio complains here about the uneven access to self-determination between residents of historically low-income neighborhoods, like El Barrio, and affluent areas, like Fifth Avenue. He complains, in other words about the uneven distribution of power to determine if and how change happens in your part of the city. But Helen misconstrues Julio's grievance as—to use Sara Ahmed's revealing phrase—"calling for more than is being called for" ("Diversity Work as Complaint"). Criticism of exclusion from influencing neighborhood change becomes in her eyes an unreasonable opposition to change altogether—a negative turn against the natural process of urban evolution. Helen distorts Julio's complaint also by shifting the emphasis from the point of his complaint to him: the problem is no longer about how urban change disenfranchises poor communities of color, but about Julio "being afraid". Helen's condescending assertion "you're just

afraid (...) of change” rehearses the ways in which defenders of gentrification question the values of anti-gentrification advocates; within the narratives of gentrification as inevitable evolution and growth, anti-gentrification become synonymous with anti-progress, anti-change, anti-diversity (bitter and petty). During the exchange, Helen also points out the new immigrants’ status as relative cultural outsiders. By implying that Julio’s plea to seniority (having a history in the neighborhood) shuts out the undocumented Mexican families from claiming a right to East Harlem, Helen exposes the protagonist’s nostalgia as territorial and exclusive.

The novel imagines the cross-national Latinx complaint collectives beyond Julio’s immediate experience and often in contrast to his point of view. Papelito’s botanica serves as one space of contact, especially for both Puerto Rican and Mexican women in the neighborhood. It is also in Maritza’s First People’s Church of God that the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities come together against injustice by forging unofficial, grassroots channels of affecting change in the neighborhood. Mari’s congregation is made up of ex-addicts, prostitutes, and “undocumented people—new immigrants from Mexico or Central America who need a kind community that will take them in” (191). In his limited perspective, Julio dismisses Maritza’s enterprise as a “socialist racket” and a “the greatest collection of misfits, sinners, and freaks” through much of the novel (189). But the novel itself gives the woman activist and her enterprise much credit. What Julio fails to understand until the book’s end, is that radical inclusivity is the very point of Maritza’s politics of solidarity across difference. Gathering and helping the most vulnerable residents in El Barrio, Maritza is unyielding in her efforts to establish

unexpected complaint collectives that challenge the intersecting oppression of American imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

Maritza's womanist approaches to social activism and her inclination to view issues of housing, immigration, domestic violence, and AIDS as necessarily linked resemble the work of Movement for Justice in El Barrio. The novel's scrutiny of Mari's enterprise through favorable (Antonio, Helen), condemning/skeptical (Julio), and ambivalent (Papelito) perspectives allows a nuanced lens through which to approach the work of MJB. Both groups forge translocal coalitions toward urban justice by challenging the divisive strategies of the formal complaint process. MJB connects their fight for dignified housing in East Harlem to the struggles of the "Zapatista compañeras in Chiapas" ("Invitation to the Encuentro for Humanity and against Displacement"). In their transnational commitment to anti-capitalism, reliance on participatory democracy, and horizontal decision making, MJB proudly labels their philosophy and practice "urban Zapatismo" (Maeckelbergh). The movement's emphasis on community building, and compassion as key modes of resistance blends the overlapping principles of Zapatismo and womanism. The movement's commitment to promoting a radically-inclusive solidarity across physical and metaphorical borders can be linked just as clearly to Alice Walker's reformulations of feminism. In *Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983), Walker coined the term to distinguish her ideology from white feminism. She defines a womanist as someone who "committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people" (11). Derived from folk culture of African American women, womanist strategies rely on intersectionality of identity position of race, sex, gender, citizenship status, and religion in women's life. MJB similarly defines its mission to forge bridges

“across the barriers of race, gender, language and geography” to “build a world where many worlds fit.”/“Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos” (Movement for Justice in El Barrio). In their emphasis on “many worlds” and intersecting identities, the movement proposes a vision of unity that is hyperaware of difference and its challenges. In their attempts to fulfill the ideals of unity across borders, MJB continuously reaches out to individuals and organizations from all ethnic groups, spearheading the efforts organize and sustain anti-gentrification collectives in East Harlem and beyond. They regularly organize citywide meetings about gentrification that include representation from Chinatown and Brooklyn to facilitate cross-borough conversations and learn from each other’s best practices. In the larger periodically convened international Encuentros, MJB aims to widen this comparative lens to bring together many geographically dispersed organizations and networks. MJB calls the gatherings “a place where we can share the many different struggles that make us one” (“Invitation to the Encuentro for Humanity and against Displacement”). Their publicly shared invitations to each Encuentro consistently use the collective pronoun “we” and “ours”. This is to emphasize that the gatherings are intended as spaces of womanist learning that hold at their center the fundamental importance of listening: listening to learn from one another’s experience and become inspired but also of listening to support, to join in the other’s experience..

MJB’s translocal approaches situate gentrification in el Barrio as a local expression of a much larger issue of commodification of land under global capitalism. Historians and urban scholars have long emphasized the importance of historicizing gentrification—situating the phenomenon in the long history of fraught race relations in urban America (Connolly, Dunn, Hyra). The work of MJB prompts us to also consider housing rights

and gentrification-related displacement in New York City comparatively across space/place. This translocalism is representative of a new model of grassroots organizing that has emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse; various groups in the Occupy Movement across the U.S. and globally have been translating large global issues in locally meaningful ways, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the local and the global.<sup>92</sup> For MJB these affinities across borders are not simply symbolic or digital. As Marianne Maeckelbergh emphasizes in her ethnographic study of the movement, MJB's translocalism is also "a practice of concrete exchanges and physical mobility" (664). And although "geography remains an obstacle, when movement actors say they fight back across borders, they mean it literally. It is not pure poetry" (Maeckelbergh 664). The experience of displacement from their homelands shared by the majority of the women informs their actively translocal approach. While many of the immigrant organizers cannot travel internationally because of limited financial resources and/or their immigration status, the physical border-crossings of members aims to challenge the neoliberal system that facilitates mobility of goods and resources while limiting mobility of bodies. MJB frames neoliberalism as the root cause of both the housing affordability crisis in New York and the economic crisis in Mexico that has driven the immigrants out of their homeland in the first place. In this way, the anti-gentrification and immigrant rights struggles are intimately connected in the work of the movement.

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<sup>92</sup> MJB has collaborated with Occupy Harlem, and Women Occupy Wall St. Caucus (WOW) (the various groups attended each other's meetings and events), the movement's literature also references the Occupy movement "Here we stand in resistance in our corner of the world and we welcome the rest of the 99%." ("Invitation to the Encuentro for Humanity and against Displacement").

Maritza's translocal activism too makes connections between local and global struggles. The most ambitious of all her efforts to challenge the power of American capitalism and imperialism is her attempt, to borrow Julio's' wording, at "making Americans" (185). Midway through the novel we find out that Maritza came into possession of blank N-50s forms—American citizenship certificates—which she gives away to the undocumented new immigrants from her church. Maritza is forced to flee East Harlem in order to escape the undercover agent chasing after the missing certificates. However, before she leaves together with her lover Antonio—an undocumented Mexican immigrant and Julio's fellow construction worker—Maritza gifts the remaining forms to El Barrio's newest immigrant community in a grand gesture of farewell:

Not long after the fire, Maritza and Antonio had climbed to the roof of a tenement on 116th Street and Second Avenue. The boulevard is named after a Puerto Rican governor, Luis Munoz Marin, responsible for the depopulation of the island; but now so many Mexicans live on that avenue, there are so many taquerias, that it's being labeled Little Puebla. It was during a Mexican festival, I don't know which one, when everyone is out in the street, when the Mexican flag fluttered, its green, white, and red taking over the avenue, when those documents that Mario was after began raining on the people like confetti. Most knew what they were and quickly snatched them up from midair, like they were wishes, and swiftly left for their homes. Others stepped on them and continued partying, enjoying their newfound neighborhood." (262)

This scene brings us back to the Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard — a former stronghold of Boricua culture, now commonly labeled Little Puebla. The image of a large Mexican flag "taking over the avenue," the festival goers who are "enjoying their newfound neighborhood," and the fact that Julio cannot quite remember which of the many Mexican festivals it was itself emphasizes the shifting cultural meaning of El Barrio's Latinidad. Quiñonez' references the boulevard's official and unofficial designations,

implying a discrepancy between the street's Puerto-Rican name and its dominant cultural and business presence. But the novel does so without mentioning the contentious debates surrounding the strip's name I outlined earlier in the chapter. Instead of focusing on tensions that dominate in the official archives and media coverage, the novel reimagines the boulevard as a space of solidarity between the two communities. This narrative moment when a Puerto Rican-Mexican couple makes it rain blank citizenship forms is meaningful for at least two reasons. First, it is a form of immigrant rights protest against the exploitation of undocumented workers under American capitalism. Second, the offering of citizenship forms serves as a symbolic gesture of eliminating the point of contention between the two largest Latino groups in mainland U.S.—legal status. Arlene Davila traces the tensions between Puerto Ricans and Mexican immigrants in *El Barrio* back to their “different histories, citizenship status, and/or self-conceptions as residents, racialized minorities, or temporary immigrants”(21). As she notes after De Genova and Ramos Zayas’ work on Chicago, “ it is Mexicans’ ‘illegality’ that provides the defining element for their racialization, just as Puerto Ricans’ “legality” renders them closer to African Americans (Davila 238). The politics of citizenship has always been a point of intra-Latinx frictions and clashes, keeping different Latino groups from combining their forces and focusing on common goals. Naturally, Maritza’s making of Americans works only as a symbolic solution. Eliminating the issue of citizenship in one illegal sweep does not amount to equality or seamless cross-Latinx solidarities. Rather, Mari’s work offers an opening—an attempt to reach beyond what the current systems of capitalism and imperialism have to offer. If both idealistic and reckless, Maritza’s determined pursuit of a more equitable world rejects as inherently bankrupt the idea of working from within the

system to uplift communities that the system and its institutions are designed to keep down.

Maritza's and Antonio's intimacy aside, this episode of blank N-50s is a one-sided rather than reciprocal expression of Mari's politics of solidarity in difference. The very spatial dynamic where the couple stands above the festival crowd sets up a hierarchy where Mari figures as the political activist-savior and the undocumented immigrants in the crowd remain both anonymous and passive. An earlier scene in the novel, called by Dalia Kandiyot the "episode of the broom," offers a fuller illustration of the two communities coming together as complaint collective (37). This collaboration takes a form of extrajudicial community punishment of a local rapist. A crowd of "angry women, many from Maritza's church, newly arrived immigrants" gathers to publicly shame and punish a man for repeatedly raping his stepdaughter (167). The victim is a young Mexican girl who earlier in the novel drives with Julio and Maritza to a clinic in Queens to have a procedure to restore her hymen before her wedding. When the stepfather sexually abuses the girl again, her mother and the other women from Mari's church come together to banish the man from El Barrio: "the women begin to swat him with their brooms. Instead of fighting back, the man drops his beer and runs. The women chase him, swatting him with their brooms and mops (...) several men who have witnessed this public display of humiliation have started to ridicule him as well" (167-168). Helen, who also partakes in the public shaming, leaves the scene appalled by the crime itself but also by the lack of response from the law enforcement to the public shouting and physical altercation. After the incident, she tells Julio: "All that time, not a single cop car came by. What's wrong with this place, Julio?" In response, Julio outlines how the fraught history

between the neighborhood and local authorities, including police and the statutory criminal justice system resulted in the community pursuing alternative methods to execute justice. Quiñonez does not suggest that East Harlem can take care of itself without any external help, but rather that over the years the community has been left to its own devices.

The episode of the broom is the first moment in the novel that depicts Mexican women as active leaders. The scene breaks with the narrative of the Mexican community in East Harlem as an unassuming and passive group of undocumented workers in need of saving. When Mari first hears the news about the women gathering to punish the stepfather, she refuses Julio's offer to help, saying: "it has to be handled by us" (166). She refers here to a womanist collective that gathers Latinx women against the violence of patriarchal abuse. Mari's "us" also acknowledges equality rather than her control.



The leadership of Mexican—mostly indigenous—immigrant women in the Movement similarly rewrites what Mexicanness means in the context of El Barrio. The featured above MJB’s poster for the annual March 8th celebration: “‘Women’s Struggles Transform the World’: An International Women’s Day Celebration” places an indigenous-presenting woman at the center, surrounded by a Muslim, Latina, and White women all shouting in unity.<sup>93</sup> Celebrating cross-racial solidarities and connection

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<sup>93</sup> Walker’s womanism is as much about the kind of killjoy willfulness Ahmed describes, as it is about celebration of women’s strength and courage. While the spirit of womanism permeates all of MJB’s work and effort, the March 8th celebration is particularly designed as an act of self-care for the fierce women organizers around the world. The male members of MJB prepare and serve dinner to allow women to fully celebrate and enjoy the evening. Upon arrival, all women traditionally receive a red rose.

between urban struggles against gentrification and indigenous struggles for land rights, the arrangement of women in the poster visually counters the tired tropes of the Mexican community as the most unassuming, docile and politically passive Latino group in New York. The only color in the otherwise black and white print is the bright red of the rose—an emblem of the Movement's cause and a symbol of women's struggle to equality. The red rose figures prominently in the history of democratic socialism and the labor movement as a sign of camaraderie among workers. In the Mexican, and the broader Latinx context, the flower becomes a symbol of sisterhood in the common struggle for justice. Yasmin Hernandez' mural that opens up this chapter includes a red rose in the scenery of tropical landscape as both an allusion to Julia Borges' poetry and a symbol of the soldaderas—Mexican women soldiers—and their womanist political organizing.

### *Complaint #3: Difficult Solidarities*

The way in which Quiñonez narrates a handful of grassroots efforts to execute neighborhood justice outside the established institutional channels, articulates the work of complaint collectives as an ongoing sequence of gains and failures. With the immigrant women at its center, the public shaming offers the clearest moment of the community coming together to informally confront the social and political problems of El Barrio. In the scene that immediately precedes the episode of the broom, Julio and Maritza fight about the exclusionary practices of local squatters. The commotion outside interrupts their exchange. Through this narrative sequence, Quiñonez contrasts two complaint collectives acting through unofficial means: squatting—using a dwelling without the owner's consent with intention of long term stay—and extrajudicial punishment—punishment for an alleged crime or offense carried out without legal process or

supervision from a court or tribunal through a legal proceeding. Both initiatives represent radical practices of complaint that challenge the established and widely accepted channels of seeking justice. While the community unanimously comes together across gender, racial, ethnic, and religious difference in punishing the rapist, the militant group of housing activist falls back on exclusionary tactics. Specifically, the squatters remove Trompo Loco from the occupied building because they see his disability as hazardous to their efforts to sustain their residency. The activists explain to Julio and Mari that Trompo puts himself and others at risk of arrest by insisting to stay in the building; as a radical and militant form of housing activism, squatting often becomes criminalized and so carries with it a serious risk of legal consequences.<sup>94</sup> Julio justifies the squatters' decision and is receptive of their explanations: "Those people are just doing what they know is right. They aren't hurting anybody, they just want a home, like everybody else" (163). Maritza rejects this reasoning: "Like Trompo wants a home too (...) Those people did to him what they hope the person who owns the building doesn't do to them" (163). The squatters' takeover of empty building or land pushes against the injustice of denying people a basic human right to housing. But Mari insists that by excluding Trompo, the squatters repeat the very violence of dispossession their group claims to challenge. By the means of contrasting these two attempts at collectivism, Quiñonez points out that challenging those established systems that uphold urban inequity and division with grassroots enterprises is only half of the job. In the words of Sara Ahmed, "it is the premature claim of solidarity, as if it is something we already have, that can block the recognition that there is much." ("The Politics of Bad Feeling" 81). Even the most radical

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<sup>94</sup> See Alexander Vasudevan's discussion of squatting in *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting*.

attempt at forging complaint collectives against systemic injustice does not guarantee lasting unity; solidarity requires hard, ongoing work in order for the actions to meet, and continue to meet, the ideals of inclusion and equity.

### **The Point of View**

Despite all his earlier skepticism, Julio eventually recognizes the value of Maritza's advocacy for complaint collectives: “[she] challenged American imperialism in a way in which no Puerto Rican or anyone could ever have imagined. That she failed is not surprising. That she even tried, that’s the true miracle. The impact she created was enough to keep people dreaming. So, immigrants keep coming to Spanish Harlem” (263). For all that the reader knows, Mari never got to finish her mission of uniting those left at the margins of El Barrio, let alone overturning the American immigration system. The odds are stacked against the kinds of collectives of radical inclusivity she and the Movement members imagine. When the narrative of division is wired into every aspect of community life, from the legal status, to the political infrastructure, to the built environment of street names, the very attempt at building and sustaining a “world that encompasses many worlds” becomes a “miracle.” Through this emphasis on possibility—regardless of outcome—Julio accents that the work of complaint collectives is also about bending the narratives about what is possible, acceptable, and natural just enough to “keep people dreaming.” The moments of unexpected kinship between Mexican and Puerto-Rican communities in El Barrio encourages inquiry into the sidelined stories of collaboration and the underestimated role of Mexican women in anti-displacement organizing in East Harlem. It is equally important to consider that which is missing from *Chango's Fire* in this context, particularly because of the novel’s emphasis on Julio’s

masculine and presumably Puerto Rican perspective. Would Maritza agree that she has failed? Or that this failure was not a surprise? Would the abused Mexican girl—who remains silent throughout the novel—articulate the public shaming of her perpetrator as an effective response to injustice? How very different would the story of El Barrio’s complaint collectives against gentrification look from these perspectives rather than Julio Santana’s first person point of view of nostalgia and deep ambivalence about the newcomers?

In his status as a home owner, his claims to authenticity, and attachment to the past, Julio seemingly invokes the typical narrator of the “Brooklyn gentrification novel genre” that Elizabeth Gumpert describes in “Gentrified Fiction: Brooklyn’s Recent Crop of Nostalgic Novelists.” But throughout all three generations of the gentrification writing Gumpert delineates, the novel form has been a forte of the white writer, white protagonist, and the gentrifier’s perspective that evades economic and racial realties. In this collection of novels, even the protagonists lamenting the crimes of gentrification focus on aesthetics rather than issues of displacement. While Julio is a homeowner, he is also a young and poor Latino who tackles heads on how race, class, and immigration status matter in gentrification. His point of view is a far departure from this novelistic tradition. But on his own, Julio is not enough to do justice to the sidelined yet urgent stories of gentrification in East Harlem. Quiñonez’ extensive use of dialogue continually invites the reader to notice the limitations of Julio’s point of view and question his convictions. Through the polemics between the protagonist and different stakeholders in East Harlem (from his mother to Papelito, to Eddie, Helen, and Maritza), the novel includes and seriously considers viewpoints that Julio deems disagreeable. This attention

to a range of responses across the community allows Quiñonez to more fully capture the complexities of gentrification. The anti-capitalist critique meets disapproval for forms of exclusion also in anti gentrification positions: nostalgia, felicitous multiculturalism, s narrow-minded tribalism, exclusionary radicalism. *Chango's Fire* intervenes then in the tradition of New York's gentrification novels by bringing in a variety of sidelined voices to the messy politics of gentrification. And Quiñonez is in great company. Women of color authors have in recent years published fiction that replaces the nostalgia of the Brooklyn gentrification novel with the aesthetics of Afro-Latina New York. These newer narratives breath fresh air into the genre by addressing evictions, criminalization of black and brown residents, and other embodied consequences of gentrification from the point of view of Black women protagonists. Among the most widely recognized in this new wave is Naima Coster's 2018 novel *Halsey Street* and Lulu Garcia-Navaro's young adult novel *The Education of Margot Sanchez*. The former rewrites the tune of longing after the old Brooklyn from the point of view of an immigrant woman from the Dominican Republic and her second-generation daughter, the latter frames gentrification of the Bronx as a coming of age story of a Nuyorican teenage girl.

In fiction, point of view is everything. Novels like *Chango's Fire* prompt us to carefully consider how perspective matters in debates on urban redevelopment and its consequences: who are the protagonists of the stories we hear, accept, and tell about gentrification? And who do we need to reduce to the role of peripheral characters, or erase from the page altogether, in order for our gentrification narrative to hold?

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have underscored the importance of the immigrant city novel not only as a genre within American literature but also as a part of a larger counter-discourse on gentrification. It may seem odd to seek in literary fiction answers to large socio-political and economic urban quandaries that have traditionally been a forte of social sciences. But bringing narrative and urban redevelopment practices closer together can help to reformulate the habits of mind—Informed by neoliberal ideology—which prioritize quantifiable knowledge about our cities. Throughout the study I have located the unique literary insights into gentrification in fiction’s concrete particularities, intimate sensibility, and imaginative freedoms, foregrounding the nuanced knowledges too often eclipsed by urban studies’ commitments to objective and generalizable scholarship.<sup>95</sup>

Learning from bell hooks’ argument that “art is necessarily a terrain of defamiliarization,” I have shown how novels like those written by Mengestu, Danticat, and Quiñonez stand on their heads the popularized gentrification narratives about immigrant places in the American city (4). I furthermore indicated that using literary studies methods as the primary mode of analysis facilitates a productive scrutiny of the role and place of narrative in reflecting and shaping urban realties. It is then also by arguing that narratives matter because they condition our understanding of cities that my research advocates for the vital contributions of literary studies to gentrification research.

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<sup>95</sup> While advocating for the unique contribution of humanistic approaches to knowledge production, I do not mean to devalue scientific generalizations or “trivialize the social sciences into their rational expectation straitjackets” (Spivak 19). Social Studies scholarship on the issues of race and class in urban development has been invaluable to this project, particularly the research by sociologists and anthropologists like Arlene Davila, Derek Hyra, Brandi Summers, and Marcos Feldman and geographers including Doreen Massey, Cindi Katz, and David Harvey, among others. Their work has been influential for me also from a methodological standpoint; I think scholars in humanities disciplines who are interested in the study of place/space have a lot to learn from sociology’s, psychology’s, or education’s experience with fieldwork.

Comparatively analyzing representations of Logan Circle in *The Beautiful Things*, Little Haiti in *Untwine*, and East Harlem in *Chango's Fire*, I have outlined parallels between geographically and ethnically distinct experiences of gentrification. This focus on multiple sites allowed me to acknowledge both the localized differences in how development-driven cultural and embodied displacement takes place and shared patterns that indicate the national scale of the problem. The novels' diasporic aesthetic further expands this translocal lens. By making unexpected connections between U.S. cities and places in the Global South, Mengestu, Danticat, and Quiñonez situate gentrification-driven displacement within the broader capitalist approaches to land that drive housing precarity across the globe.

*Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* argued that the trope of neighborhood in contemporary immigrant literature does not just hold the potential to rethink gentrification narratives but literary studies methods as well. This dissertation arose from literary questions about representation of cities in post 1980s multiethnic American literature. From the early stages, the project aimed to reconcile the textual focus and interpretive methods of literary studies with urban studies theories and the field methods of anthropology in the service of producing a critical deep study of place. The time of crafting the initial proposal overlapped with my work as a teaching fellow in the American Studies program at University of Miami. As I facilitated my students' analysis of American cities through literature and other art forms, historical documents, legal acts, and sociological studies, as well as via engagement with local social movements and the city around them, I was growing increasingly dissatisfied with simply pairing up close-readings of literary texts with urban theory and sociological findings in my own research.

I decided to undertake empirical fieldwork as a part of this dissertation study because it felt necessary. To my mind, the rich textured depictions of immigrant places within the narratives I read demanded an embodied immersion. For instance, Mengestu's intense "geographical realism" in writing Washington, D.C. invites to use the book as a guide through the city. (Cesare) I retraced with the novel in hand the "approximately 883 steps" across Logan Circle between Sepha's apartment and his corner store to gaze at the establishment as he so often does "through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of a circle" (Mengestu 228). While I knew from reading the novel, and from my visits as a tourist, that Washington D.C. is small for a capital city, I could not have truly understood the "commitment to intimacy" in Mengestu's affective mapping without engaging in what Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust* describes as "reading with one's feet" (70). Alongside the deep textual engagement with place, it was also literature's absences and curious counterfactualities that necessitated my reading of literary narratives in relation to other artistic forms and everyday practices, including community advocacy. The ways in which the 2008 housing market crash permeates realities of immigrant life in Miami and New York in novels like Patricia Engels' *The Veins of the Oceans* and Imbloo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, sent me back—in an act of "retrospective fieldwork"—to the life-stories of ESL students I taught when I first moved to Miami from Poland during the 2008 economic collapse.<sup>96</sup> Between the learned words and phrases in our daily sessions, my students shared stories about translating lives from their home professional and linguistic contexts into the recession-ridden US reality. I could not reconcile my students' involvement in organizing for tenant rights with the

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<sup>96</sup> "Retrospective fieldwork" is a term formulated by Judith Okely's and means a revisiting of autobiographical experiences.

stubborn absences of immigrant activists in the novels I read. Foreclosures, gentrification, evictions, and other forms of urban economic crisis were haunting these city novels. And yet their immigrant protagonists remained uninvolved in the forms of housing advocacy the narratives imagined. It was then also the desire to understand how and why novels corroborate or contest realities that propelled me towards fieldwork.

Outside of anthropology, fieldwork has been important to humanities scholarship in art history, architecture, and ethnomusicology. Shalini Puri and Debra Castillo trace the genealogy of literary fieldwork specifically to the emergence of cultural studies as an interdiscipline in the 1960s. This early interest of cultural critics in the ethnographic methods of anthropology and sociology faded with time (*Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities 3*). The work of Puri, Catsillo, Joan (Colin) Dayan, Bécquer Seguín, and other fieldwork practitioners in literary studies of the global south reinvigorate this branch of cultural studies with “the gains of emplaced and embodied cultural encounter” (1). Equally important for my project is the work of scholars, like Benjamin Fraser, in the emerging subfield of urban cultural studies who advocate for the blending of humanities and social science methods in the study of global city cultures.<sup>97</sup> My project builds on this long tradition of daring methodological interventions in literary studies. But in my decision to follow through with the literary fieldwork practice for my dissertation, I am indebted specifically to Puri's and Castillo's robust meta-reflections on methods in *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities*. This collection is first of its kind volume

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<sup>97</sup> See *The Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* that in its description aims to give equal weight to (1) one or more aspects of urban studies (everyday life, built environment, architecture, city planning, identity formation, transportation ...) and (2) one or more specific forms of cultural (textual) production (literature, film, graphic novels, music, art, graffiti, video-games, online or virtual spaces ...) in relation to a specific urban space or spaces. <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-urban-cultural-studies>

providing insights about methods, legibility, value, and ethical dilemmas of field research. Their scholarship has given me a roadmap for how to move between the aesthetic and the material and how to negotiate the tension between politics and poetics; it has also provided me with a language to articulate the rationale for this “undisciplined project.” Their volume’s framing as “an emerging community of scholars with whom to think” has also inspired me to found the Humanities Fieldwork Interdisciplinary Research Group at UM. This collective of graduate students and professors from across humanities disciplines provides a space to share and refine interdisciplinary practices, educate ourselves in methods foreign to our respective fields, and make visible the valuable work of humanities scholars who engage in fieldwork methodologies (Puri and Castillo 2).

I want to conclude *Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* by revisiting a fieldwork moment that marks a turning point in my project. During the early stages of field research in Miami, I attended a city-mandated town hall meeting between the Magic City representatives and the Little Haiti community. Throughout the session, the developers, investors, and their lawyers dismissed any questions and comments about displacement as irrelevant. They insisted in a united voice that their project has not evicted any residents or businesses and that in general there is no quantitative evidence that big development forces outward mobility. I became increasingly troubled by the ease with which the developer formulated fictive narratives out of scientific data on the interplay between gentrification and displacement. At the session’s end, I brought myself to comment on the reality of displacement beyond evictions. I also asked a question about the Magic City trailer park that was shut down in 2014 (displacing all its residents) when

the land was purchased by one of the development's main investors Robert Zangrillo.<sup>98</sup> Magic City representatives offered no productive answers or reactions. Later that evening, one of the lawyers from the Community Justice Project approached me to discuss potential collaborations. CJP was looking for a researcher to conduct a quantitative environmental impact study, which would measure the displacement rates that could result from the Magic City innovation district development. As a literary scholar I was, of course, in no position to do that. But their inquiry stayed with me as a calling to answer a related question: what can literary critical practice contribute to the struggle for more equitable urban realties and more responsible development? While the potential value of social science appears to be obvious to organizers for urban justice, how can literary scholars of cities make their contributions more influential and more legible to communities outside academic settings? My argument about how narratives condition our understanding of cities and drive urban development offers one attempt to answer these questions. My emphasis on the value of literary fieldwork suggests another.

The engaged nature of fieldwork practices carries a possibility of important public humanities work. In "Public Humanities as/and Comparatist Practice," Ricardo Ortiz argues that the model of public humanities grounded in social justice commitments moves beyond crossover writing and other efforts to reach a wider audience for humanities scholarship (however important such work is in resisting the continuous devaluation of humanities disciplines). The value of public humanities rests also in making use of our discipline-specific strengths and expertise to engage in public work for public good—to bolster the causes we believe in and advance the advocacy on issues we

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<sup>98</sup> During this QA, I introduced myself as a graduate student at UM researching gentrification in Miami.

care about and address in our research. I highlight the importance of fieldwork for American literary studies because the practice opens up channels for mutually beneficial community collaborations. Many conversations and relationships originated on the night of that town hall meeting, and the chapter informants became crucial interlocutors in my research. The engagement that followed instigated an ongoing working relationship with the housing organizers in Miami that continues beyond the scope of this dissertation with service learning partnerships and collaborative writing, research and digital mapping projects.

Fieldwork in and of itself does not guarantee engaged and responsible public scholarship. But the embodied and emplaced nature of field research does facilitate forms of accountability, mindfulness, and critical self-assessment that are not readily available from within the conventional practices of literary criticism. Engaging in regular dialogue about your research with a wide range of people outside the academic community and university spaces prompts one to articulate personal and political, not only intellectual, investments in the project—to answer *in person* why you do the work that you do. Unlike textual analysis, fieldwork is a reciprocal reading practice: while you analyze you are also being analyzed. As Puri frames it in “Finding the Field”: “When a researcher reads in a library, nobody is reading her back. When one reads in the field, one is constantly being scripted, being made the object of a countergaze, and is thereby forced to confront not only one’s geographical but also one’s historical location” (70). In the field, you negotiate identity positions physically and in real time, which makes immediate the questions of how class and racial privilege or institutional affiliations affect how you stand in and move through the places you research. And how these positionalities bear on

your work. In the case of my own fieldwork, the practice Puri conceptualizes as “exchange with non-experts” took a form of exchanges with groups and individuals I see as community experts or non-academic experts. I discussed issues of gentrification with young activists, long-term community organizers and leaders, community lawyers, business owners, vendors, and poets. While wide-ranging, all these groups and individuals shared a deep investment in my research subject and knowledge about local development practices that often surpassed my own expertise (*Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities* 9). Their insights helped redefine the argument of the Miami chapter and the scope of my project at large. Our ongoing exchanges also posed a complicated question about responsibility to the people and places my study was supposed to analyze. Throughout my research in Little Haiti, I continually evaluated the interplay between identity, scholarship, and advocacy. How do I engage with care, integrity, and responsibility, considering my position as a fellow immigrant, tenant, and a Miami resident alarmed by the city’s affordability crisis, but also a white woman and a graduate student researching Black, economically vulnerable spaces in the city?

This dissertation is just a beginning. Young adult novels about gentrification have abounded in many U.S. urban contexts over the last decade: from urban fantasies like Daniel Jose Older’s *Shadowshaper* (2015) about Brooklyn or Constantine Singer’s *Strange Days* (2018) set in LA’s Echo Park to realist representations of gentrifying Portland in Renee Watson’s, *The Side of Home* (2015). Literary fiction of gentrification by authors of color, featuring young protagonist of color to make sense of gentrification for the young reader deserves its own full-length project. The immediate future evolution

of my dissertation would involve a further and more focused dwelling in place, here in Miami, to expand the city's literary and non-literary girlscapes.

This study of literary fiction in relation to other arts, activism, and the politics of development sought to help reformulate how we imagine and enact the future of our cities. In the words of Shallini Puri, "this interdisciplinarity is by no means an abandoning of one's discipline" (68). By keeping literature at the center of analysis, *Fictions of Immigrant Placemaking* aimed to situate narrative inquiry as a critical praxis for urban studies research.

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