Belonging While Black at Lake Merritt: The Black Spatial Imaginary and Place-Making in Oakland, CA

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BELONGING WHILE BLACK AT LAKE MERRITT: THE BLACK SPATIAL IMAGINARY AND PLACE-MAKING IN OAKLAND, CA

Betel Solomon Tesfamariam

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History at Pomona College

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Readers:
Professor Guillermo Douglass-Jaimes
Professor Zayn Kassam
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

On April 29th, 2018, Kenzie Smith and Onsayo Abram were barbecuing on the east side of Lake Merritt when Jennifer Schulte decided to call the police on them for using a charcoal grill (Chang, 2018). Both Smith and Abram are African American residents of Oakland, California and Jennifer Schulte is a white resident of the city. Kenzie Smith explains how he had stepped away briefly to change his clothes and returned to find Onsayo Abram, who goes by “Deacon”, talking to Jennifer Schulte. When Smith asked Deacon what was going on, Deacon responded “We about to go to jail...for charcoal”. Although both Smith and Deacon did not take Schulte seriously at first, the encounter escalated when Schulte decided to call the police, placing her first 911 call at 11:22 am. Michelle Snider, Kenzie Smith’s wife, who is also a white resident of Oakland, soon arrived and recorded a video of the encounter, sharing it on social media so people were aware of what was happening. A little over a week later, Urban Peace Movement--a youth group focused on leadership--organized “510 Day” at Lake Merritt on May 10th. The event was organized in response to increased gentrification in Oakland, which is disproportionately affecting Black residents.

Although the “510 Day” event was planned months in advance, it became the community’s response to the “BBQ Becky” incident. Long-time African American residents of Oakland like Onsayo Abram and Kenzie Smith are experiencing increasing policing by new white residents who come from predominantly white suburban areas like San Francisco (Ramirez, 2017) and likely are not accustomed to sharing space with Black people in public recreational spaces. Lee, who attended the “510 Day” event, explained that it turned into a dance party, similar in spirit to a large family reunion, “an
act of resistance and reclaiming space in the face of someone’s racist actions. But it happened in the most celebratory way possible. It was a sort of poetic justice” (Chang, 2018). I will continuously return to this notion of “poetic justice” in this paper, more specifically the role and power of poetry, and art more generally, in resisting policing, erasure, and displacement, as well as envisioning new spatial imaginaries for Black liberation—articulated in *The Combahee River Collective Statement*, which was primarily written by Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith in 1977:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy (p. 19).

Logan Cortez organized a “BBQ’N While Black” event for her friends that turned into a large cookout. Over 2,000 people, including Angela Davis, showed up. This event was also planned with the intention of creating space and time to reckon with what happened to Onsayo Abram and Kenzie Smith at Lake Merritt. Jhamel Robinson, founder of the clothing line “The Real Oakland” and the graphic designer who created the flyer for the event that went viral, explained the importance of hosting an event that expressed gratitude that Abram and Deacon were alive, and that it “didn’t go another way” (Chang, 2018). That they did not get killed, that they survived. I recently had a conversation with a Black graduate student at UCI whose work engages with Black nihilism and Black suicidality—Afro Pessimism through artwork and death, without any futile attempts to appeal to life in a hopeful or escapist manner. I commented on his nonchalance and he responded by saying something along the lines of “it’s not
nonchalance, I just take the fact that I could die at any moment very seriously and I am often in awe that I am still alive”.

In June, 2018, Henry William Sintay, a white resident of Oakland dubbed “Jogger Joe” on social media, stopped during a jog to throw away the belongings of Drew (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2018), an unsheltered African American man at Lake Merritt who resides under the pergola at Lake Merritt (Stone, 2018). JJ Harris, an African American Oakland resident, filmed the video of the incident, and released it on social media. The decision made by witnesses of these racist encounters to disseminate these videos on social media demonstrates their acknowledgement of the urgency to elicit a response from the community, in calling for accountability and in decentering the state as a legitimate arbiter of justice. Kenzie Smith, who helped to start a GoFundMe page for Drew with the aim of raising $3,000, received over $12,000 in support of Drew, who is a longtime resident of Oakland (Eliahou, 2018).

These racist encounters are not isolated; Black residents of Oakland and other urban cities in the U.S. regularly experience policing, discrimination, and violence at the hands of white residents and police officers who perceive their presence as “out of place”, threatening, or both. These incidents are symptomatic of interlocking systems of domination, which include heterosexism, racism and capitalism, and can only be dismantled through structural change—or to be more explicit, anarchism. I turn to Black radical feminist work to articulate why and how the exploited position and lived experiences of working-class Black womxn in the U.S. and globally present legitimate sites from which to defy and destabilize these -sims, which stem from capitalism. The historical ties of these incidents to slavery, the Black Codes during the post-
emancipation era, and Jim Crow, demonstrate how the past is not past. White supremacist thought, which constitutes ‘knowledge production’, a project of colonialism, began during the Enlightenment Era (18th century) and emboldened European philosophers, psychologists, and authors (among others) to construct the myth of race through differentiation based on phenotypical attributes that fixed Black Africans in an inferior position relative to white Europeans. In other words, race is a social construct and a direct engagement with how this construct is upheld through anti-blackness is crucial.

This paper aims to demonstrate how the processes of gentrification and displacement are interrelated processes that invent new ways of perpetuating anti-blackness in the U.S. I demonstrate this through an engagement with Christina Sharpe’s analysis of the imagery of the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather as axis points that position Black life in the afterlife of slavery—how the conditions of slavery are ongoing today—presenting the racist encounters at Lake Merritt as illustrative examples. In her most recent book, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, Sharpe (2016) deploys an interdisciplinary approach to critically theorize Black subjection and grief through a Black feminist framework, offering care, or what she terms “wake work” as an anecdote to state-sanctioned anti-black violence. She turns to poetry, film, historical archives, and intimate personal experiences to thoroughly articulate how the past is not passed; I reveal how capitalist logic simultaneously structures media representations of Black people in ways that distort what we signify—monstrosity, threat, and criminal are three examples of this distortion—and fix abstract space in hegemonic spatial imaginaries through privatization and commodification. Most
importantly, I turn to art and expression—a prominent example being “BBQ’N While Black” as a community response to BBQ Becky—as resistance and examples of place-making practices that Black people have been engaged in historically to articulate their self-hood, belonging, and beauty through Black love. I strive to undertake this work with intentionality and care, which necessitates an undisciplined approach as academic disciplines have historically deployed methodologies that construct narratives on Blackness that reproduce colonial and anti-black violence. What language is available to describe the historical relationship between Blackness and the U.S. settler colonial state when the brutal imagination (Sharpe, 2016, p.82)—racist misrepresentations of Black people in the media and the law regardless of what we’re doing—relies on the distortive function of language? How can this language continue to be developed through a reckoning with how state terror collapses temporal and spatial scales?

**Chapter Sections**

In Chapter 1, I explicitly engage with the metaphors that Christina Sharpe (2016) offers in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* to convey how anti-blackness is an ongoing system of domination that manifests itself in state-sanctioned violence. My historical analysis of de jure racial segregation in the U.S. is heavily informed by the context provided by Rothstein (2017) in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* and is coupled with Stuart Hall’s (1977) critiques of how culture and media produce ideological effects that have capitalist logic at their base. I put the metaphors of the ship and the hold that Sharpe offers in conversation with metaphors used in urban planning processes in the post-WWII era, like the
“industrial garden”, as well as during the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s, like “Babylon”, to demonstrate why it is fundamental to attend to rhetoric that conceals, names, and subverts anti-blackness within the state.

Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party envisioned different spatial conceptions of urban politics and social justice (Tyner, 2007, p. 219), grounded in the claims made by Henri Lefebvre’s book titled The Production of Space (1991). Tyner showed how Henri Lefebvre’s divisions of space into two categories: representations of space (the “abstract spaces” or dominant spaces of any society, that are conceived by planners and are tied to relations of production) and representational spaces (spaces of resistance and protest). Similar to Tyner, in Chapter 2, I ground this project in Black radical social movements in the mid-20th century in order to reveal how spatial struggles offer legitimate pathways to liberation through self-determination. Social movements enable us to imagine alternative possibilities to the present conditions of our existence (Kelley, 2002, in Tyner, 2007, pp. 219-220). Kelley (2002) describes this imagination as “poetic knowledge” and explains how truly radical art is when it transports us from our current reality and articulates a different way to see, feel, and exist. In this chapter, I further explore the tensions and possibilities of the “geopolitics of freedom” (McKittrick, 2007, p. 104) by demonstrating the significance of the experiences of Black people in urban green spaces within the U.S, more specifically Lake Merritt in Oakland, California, as revelatory of the historical practices of racial segregation, policing, and state-sanctioned violence that are ongoing today. The analyses offered by Tyner (2007) and Kelley (2002) bolster ongoing efforts to re-envision urban green
spaces like Lake Merritt, in which historically marginalized people in the U.S. are unceasingly engaging.

In Chapter 3, I examine place-making practices and how Black residents of urban cities in the U.S. are engaged in them through artistic and grassroots organizing work that resists violence and displacement. These creative, intentional, and strategic practices are the material outcomes of Black radical praxis that strive to dismantle interlocking systems of domination in structural ways. I show how the implications of racist encounters at Lake Merritt in Oakland, California are a microcosm of the innumerable ways anti-blackness manifests itself within this empire—also known as the U.S. I turn to *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* by McKittrick (2006) to reckon with the limits of dominant constructions of geography, which displace humans from nature. McKittrick (2006) argues that land is speakable through poetry for example, and has historically borne witness to anti-black violence in the U.S., as well as being a legitimate site from which to spatialize Black liberation for Black women more specifically, and Black people in general.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of my thesis is composed of work by Christina Sharpe (2016) in her most recent book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. In this book, she intricately explains how we, as Black people in the African continent and the African Diaspora, are bearing witness to and experiencing the wake of the slave ship. This is to say that although the terminology, literally and metaphorically, that is used to describe the violent conditions in which we exist have changed over time, the characteristics of
those conditions have only evolved in increments. *In the Wake* makes up the theoretical framework of my thesis, by offering Afro-pessimism and Black Vitalism as pathways to wake work, which encompasses what it means to “to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death?” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 10). She situates her analysis in the context of different definitions of the wake; these definitions include the path behind the ship, funerals and processes, sitting with the dead and celebrations, “being woke” as in being aware of how you are situated in relation to interlocking systems of domination—the path behind a gun (p. 81) or a body moved in water. The book is comprised of four chapters; the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather. Sharpe explains that these are the coordinates that position Black life, from the past to the present.

**Methodology**

Through a content analysis of online news articles that cover recent racist encounters at Lake Merritt, I examine the brutality that Black people experience, which Sharpe characterizes as not constant but always present, historically and geographically situated, perpetually reinvigorated, and strategically erased by the state. I focus on incidents that have taken place from 2015 to 2018, as these appear to have received most media coverage, namely “BBQ Becky” and “Jogger Joe”. The news articles I will be referencing include those that appear in *The New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *East Bay Express*. The central questions that guide this work include: In what ways do place-making practices of historically marginalized communities reveal the possibilities of actualizing the Black Spatial Imaginary? What
does healing look like in the wake? How does the logic of racial/racialized capitalism produce “abstract space” that is discriminatory and puts Black lives at threat in urban green spaces like Lake Merritt in Oakland, California? The interdisciplinary and anti-disciplinary nature of the methodologies I deploy in this work enable me to reckon with the multi-scalar components of state-sanctioned, anti-black violence and consequently problematize conventional understandings of geography, urban green space, gentrification, and environmental racism.

**Why Lake Merritt?**

I am choosing to focus on Lake Merritt, which is located in the center of Oakland, California, because I am interested in what racist encounters like “BBQ Becky” reveal about how formations of urban green space, policing, and gentrification are interconnected in the U.S. In addition, I want to shed light on how place-making practices that historically marginalized people in the U.S. are engaged in illustrate how Black people are simultaneously reclaiming space and resisting displacement. Oakland is a historically brown city, made up of African Americans and multiple generations of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Oakland is also a city neighboring San Francisco, which has been an important site from which to understand the pervasive processes and significant consequences of gentrification. A hot spot for growing tech companies since the 1990s, San Francisco has seen an influx of young, predominantly white, recent college graduates who are employed at these companies and earn high incomes. Their high incomes enable them to rent expensive apartments around the Silicon Valley, consequently pushing out longtime residents of San Francisco over time.
Similarly, Self (2003) explains how capitalism “drives the creation of fixed space” (p. 18) but simultaneously creates conditions that result in pressures to abandon or remake that space. To what extent does an analysis of recent racist encounters at Lake Merritt reveal how processes involved in the construction of “abstract space” parallel processes that produce distorted media representations that weaponize Blackness and Black people? The metaphor of “the hold” offered by Sharpe (2016) helps us understand how the policing of Black people takes place in housing, green urban spaces, and media representations. This policing is pervasive and contested by various radical groups that have historically wielded political power in ways that establish a counterpublic by subverting the dominant ideology that characterizes these environments.
Chapter 1: Housing & Political Power

Hold—a large space in the lower part of a ship or aircraft in which cargo is stowed. (of a ship or an aircraft); continue to follow (a particular course); keep or detain (someone); a fortress. —OED Online (Sharpe, 2016, p. 68)

Sharpe draws connections between the transatlantic slave trade and present Trans-American and African migrations, the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children and slavery, in order to demonstrate how the imminence of death for Black people is a predictable and constitutive aspect of U.S. democracy. Sharpe explains how terror has historically undergirded everyday Black existence. It is this terror that Kenzie Smith and Deacon felt when Jennifer Schulte called the police on them. Sharpe describes the hold as the innumerable and ongoing ways in which state-sanctioned, anti-black violence is enacted on Black people. Onsayo Abram and Deacon are in the hold of the phone call to 911 that Jennifer Shulte makes. They are in the hold because police have historically murdered Black people, escalating an encounter instead of de escalating it, using unnecessary force and not being held accountable for their actions by judiciary bodies or the state, which supposedly protect everyone equally in the U.S.

On June 8th, 2019, I attended the unveiling of a mural at the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Station in Oakland, California commemorating the life of Oscar Grant. He was murdered by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle on New Year’s Day in 2009. Along with this mural, one of the streets crossing the station was renamed after him. His mother, uncle, daughter and close friends spoke at the event, describing the
significance of his loss in their lives, expressing their immense love for him, and what his premature death has meant to them. Hartman (2006) offers a useful description of the wake, or how the past is not passed:

This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment (p. 6).

Oscar Grant’s mother explained that the mural demonstrates how her son did not die in vain. Her words bring me to the questions that Christina Sharpe (2016) poses in the chapter titled “The Hold” in her book *In the Wake*.

In the afterlives of *partus sequitur ventrem* what does, what can, mothering mean for Black women, for Black people? What kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one’s child? Is it mothering if one knows that one’s child might be killed at any time in the hold, in the wake by the state no matter who wields the gun? (p. 78).

Here, the gun represents the state-sanctioned gratuitous violence that pervades Black existence. Anti-blackness functions like the weather (Sharpe, 2016, p. 106), it surrounds us Black people and relegates us to a subhuman status, represents us as terror, monstrous, and therefore deserving of punishment, neglect, and abuse. I discuss
the role of representation further in this chapter to make the connections between media
distortions of Blackness and political rhetoric that conceals anti-blackness in urban
green spaces more explicit.

Oscar Grant’s memorial, John Burris, a civil rights attorney who was his lawyer,
explained that the community’s response to Oscar Grant’s murder—the shock, the
anger, and the sadness—was the start of the Black Lives Matter movement. Members of
the Muslim Brotherhood and Black Panther Party, like Elaine Brown, were also present
at the memorial and called for accountability, Black self-determination, and community
solidarity in their speeches. As someone who has admired the Black Panther Party for
their militant commitment to anti-capitalism, Black Liberation, and Black Power, I
decided I could not leave without expressing the honor I felt to be in Elaine Brown’s
presence to her. She seemed pleased when I told her I was from Ethiopia and had
chosen to be an Environmental Analysis major and an Africana Studies minor. She told
me to hold on a second. A lot of people were trying to get her attention so I lingered until
she found an opportunity to return to our conversation. When Elaine Brown returned,
she explained that the Black Panther Party was one of the first groups to raise concerns
about pollution, the environment, and how it impacted historically marginalized groups
the most. Their mere presence in DeFremery Park throughout the 1960s and 1970s,
mobilizing around Black Liberation through self-determination and anti-capitalism,
politicizes the geographic space and makes vivid what Katherine McKittrick means
when she talks of the “geopolitics of freedom” (2007, p. 104). The spaces that Black
people have historically lived in, migrated to, and convened at make-up Black
geographies and these spaces are expanded and expanding through an active engagement in imagining and fighting for liberatory futures.

**DeFremery Park**

In *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Self (2003) explains how the Black Power movement emerged in response to city and state neglect of Black and brown neighborhoods, low employment rates, and bad healthcare. DeFremery Park, also located in Oakland, was a prominent meeting and organizing space for the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. On April 6, 1968, police fired multiple shots at Bobby Sutton (who was 16 years old at the time) and Eldridge Cleaver, as they walked out of a meeting that was taking place in the cellar of the Black Panthers’ meeting house. They were both unarmed and Bobby Sutton was killed. It is no surprise then that Elaine Brown also told Chryl Corbin, the chair of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Council (PARC) at Lake Merritt, that DeFremery park needs to be renamed Bobby Sutton Park, in commemoration of his life. One year prior to Bobby Sutton’s murder, Huey Newton was imprisoned for allegedly murdering a police officer at a traffic stop (biography.com, 2019). The “Free Huey” slogan grew in popularity due to the efforts of the Black Panther Party in raising public awareness about the injustice that riddled his trial. Various “Free Huey” rallies were held at DeFremery Park, demonstrating the ways in which a public green urban spaces like Lake Merritt can foster community solidarity in response to state-sanctioned anti-black violence.
Benign Acts of Violence

If the police are an extension of the U.S. state, and racial/racialized capitalism constitutes the U.S. democracy, which Sharpe (2016) describes as a *planned disaster* (p. 26), then a white resident calling the police to report an insignificant and benign activity becomes an act of violence, a threat to the lives of the Black people having the police called on them. Policing trickles down from the anti-black, white supremacist state in ways that grant impunity and other privileges to white Americans, who are
“deputized in the face of Black people” (Wilderson, 2003, p.20). The analogy of the ship is fitting to Lake Merritt, a man-made damned lake that is the sacred land of indigenous people who have historically lived there. Located on the north side of Lake Merritt, on Bellevue Avenue lies a Sailing Institute at Lake Merritt where countless residents learn to sail every year. My own experience walking around Lake Merritt was peaceful, nobody paid me much attention and I simply observed how the dynamics of people, their movements, and activities changed. When I sat down at the pergola, I saw people coming to the lake to exercise, stroll and talk, pick up their belongings and move, bike in groups or alone, play music out loud on a speaker, also sit on a bench, stand, and walk their dogs. Many people who moved past me did not look my way, some did, and others greeted me. Two people walked past me, one seemed older, perhaps the mother, and the other was younger. They were both drinking boba and because I love boba I was curious to find out where they bought it. I called out “Excuse me…” when they walked past me, and asked “Where did you get that boba?”. I saw them look at me and move away, avoiding eye contact and speeding up their pace. They were walking a dog. They both appeared to be women of Asian descent and they both ignored me, skeptical and distrustful. Because I am not accustomed to this heightened level of suspicion, I am very attentive to the effect it has on me.

As a young Black woman in the U.S. I know that I signify threat, monster, nonsensical, promiscuous, and unpredictable. The fact that I am a stranger to the two people who walked past me makes me untrustworthy and only worthy of skepticism, regardless of centuries of scientific racism, racist media representations, and religiously motivated projects that have fixed me, and people who look like me, in an essentialist
definition of monstrous inferiority based on phenotypic differences in relation to an epitomized, Eurocentric and white standard. These are processes and projects that Sharpe (2016) explains are ongoing in her discussion of the wake; a trail left in the water due to displacement by a ship/body. The ship representing the transatlantic slave trade and the wake representing trauma, among other ongoing brutalities.

Environmental racism is one of the building blocks of racial capitalism and radical analyses of environmental justice demonstrate how and why, through an engagement with political economy and race (Pulido, 2000). The differentiation of value, based on variations in phenotypic attributes, to posit that Black people are inherently inferior and therefore cageable and killable without consequence, and white people are inherently superior, illustrates how racism is constitutive of capitalism (Pulido, 2017; Robinson, 2000). Through reckoning with how the political economy of the U.S. is founded upon “racial capitalism”, we are able to understand explicit and hidden forms of racism that take place today in ways that are informed by materialist, ideological, and historical analyses (Pulido, 2017, p. 527). The U.S is founded, first and foremost, on settler colonialism, which is an ongoing project of land theft (appropriation) and primitive accumulation (Hinson, 2013 in Pulido, 2017, p. 525) that uses genocide as its principle structuring logic, displacing and killing millions of the indigenous people to this land (Smith, 2012 in Pulido, 2017, p. 525). Oakland is a microcosm that demonstrates this ongoing process and its ramifications. I am choosing to focus on the implications of the changing demographics of Oakland, California at Lake Merritt due to the limits of scale and scope in an undergraduate thesis, but the racist encounters I am analyzing here are pervasive throughout the U.S. Therefore, I am offering my analyses as revelatory of
how racialized capitalist logic structures the rhetoric of meritocracy in America. I echo Brown’s (2018) analysis of the film Born In Flames (1983), directed by Lizzie Borden, in the work that my thesis strives to do:

The film demands that we wake up from neoliberal dreams of meritocracy and the idea that the government and its contracts will, or ever did, protect us. Our actions, it suggests, should not be based in recognition from a nation-state, or in amassed wealth, but in remaining joyfully ungovernable (p. 596).

**Oakland-Snapshot**

The demographic of Oakland, California has changed overtime due to settler colonialism, and once the U.S. settler state was established, *de jure* segregation. The capitalist political economy that undergirds this settler colonial state calls for an understanding of space and place-making practices as negotiations, from the perspective of historically marginalized people within the U.S., and how the state continues to privatize, commodify, and delineate space across racial, gender, and class nexus. Urban history invites us to reckon with politics as a series of negotiations of space and civil rights, in relational ways, as the example of postwar Oakland illustrates. Postwar metropolitanization in Oakland encompasses the process of suburbanization and the civil rights movement that emerged in response and parallel to this suburbanization (Self, 2013, p. 1). In the 1960s, the powerful metaphor “Babylon” was widely used by African Americans in the Black Power movement to describe the U.S. (p. 14), a term that refers to the biblical city that was destroyed due to its own corruption and imperialist projects. The term was inspired by African American religious traditions.
as well as Jamaican Rastafarians, for whom this term denoted Western capitalism and imperialism. Within the Black Panther Party, Babylon symbolized eventual destruction of imperialism, as well as its replacement with a more just socio-political arrangement.

Babylon reminds us that black power, and contests over its meaning and implications, is a fundamental part of the political history of urban America (Self, 2013, p. 14).

Babylon represents the U.S. empire (Ferreira da Silva, 2013) and in using this term the Black Power movement is making a claim that a seemingly undefeatable power can in fact be destroyed. The term “babylon” stands in stark contrast to “industrial garden”, another metaphor that was used in local planning and politics to describe the urban modernism that would constitute the urban development processes in Oakland in the 1940s (p. 14). This term emerged out of 19th century English urban social criticism and French Utopianism (p. 9). The blatant irreconcilability of the terms “Babylon” and “industrial garden”, which were circulating throughout the postwar period, expose the paradoxes between capitalist logic and the lived experiences of African Americans—often precarious due to displacement, disinvestment, or both—that subverts the dominant political rhetoric that guards this logic.

I often say that slavery has not ended because of the 13th Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, turning to the prison industrial complex, and carceral logics more generally, as examples of its afterlives. In 1866, the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, purportedly abolishing slavery and illegalizing processes it determined to be
continuing aspects of slavery (Rothstein, 2017, p. VIII)—in other words, any process that relegated African Americans to the status of second-class citizens, which included racial discrimination in housing.

During the postwar period (1940-45), large numbers of war workers migrated from the Midwest to the West Coast in search of employment (Rothstein, 2007, Self, 2013). This period was also characterized by New Deal liberalism, which was characterized by a modified welfare state, moderate market relations whereby the middle- and working-classes experienced continued economic growth, racial liberalism—racially equal opportunities in social and political life and state intervention, individualism, whereby reforms and government policies were organized around individual people (Self, 2013, pp. 13-14). The housing efforts were started as part of Public Works Administration (PWA) during the Roosevelt administration in 1933 to solve the national housing shortage and provide more jobs in construction (p. 20). New Deal agencies often had a vested interest in residential segregation (p. 19). Harold Ickes, previously the president of the Chicago branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was the Secretary of the Interior and one of the few liberal people in the administration when it came to issues pertaining to race (p. 21). He introduced the “neighborhood composition rule”, which proclaimed that federal housing projects should be representative of the racial composition of the neighborhoods. This rule was only partially upheld, as the PWA mapped out neighborhoods that would be allocated whites-only or blacks-only throughout the 1930s (pp. 21-23). An example of state-sanctioned, spatial erasure of Blackness is the construction of Rosewoods Courts, a project located in the East Side of Austin, Texas
for African Americans. Rosewoods Courts was constructed on land procured by dismissing Emancipation Park, where an annual festival was held to commemorate the abolition of slavery. The land had been privately owned by a neighborhood association called Travis County Emancipation Organization and the objections of the residents did not have any effect, even though other land was available (pp. 23-24). Sharpe (2016) explains how the “logics and the calculus of dehumaning started long ago and is still operative” (p. 73), and the image below illustrates how anti-blackness is characterized by state-sanctioned dehumaning practices in discriminatory housing procedures.

Figure 2 depicts a widely distributed leaflet in opposition to housing desegregation in St. Louis in 1916. The term “negro invasion” in the description, which is both othering and dehumaning, ascribes a non-human status to Black people, in describing them as pests or alien species that should be feared because they only cause destruction. Each house that is occupied by a Black person is marked with an “x”, a negation of their presence that refuses any possibility of their belonging and also fixes their presence in a no-space. Sharpe (2016) argues stop-and-frisk practices are examples of what marks “the space/race/place of no rights and no citizenship” (p. 83). More explicitly referring to the wake, she explains that “To be in the wake is to live in those no’s, to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship…” (p. 16). I extend her argument to apply it to housing policies. Not only does de jure segregation ensure that African Americans experience second-class citizenship, which is against the law, it is a state-sanctioned, anti-black process that denies them citizenship altogether.

The street address includes “Belle Place” and “belle” is a French word that translates to “beautiful” in English. There is something to be said about the conflation of whiteness, femininity, and purity in Eurocentric standards of beauty and serenity. This conflation further illustrates how the use of the term “invasion” signals impurity, disease, and danger. Danger is also evoked by the words “Save your home!” on the poster. What are white residents being called to protect their homes from? They are being warned to protect their homes from a weaponized Blackness that has been construed through media representation, colonial violence in the form of police brutality, and legalized discriminatory practices that are outgrowths of a plantation logic, which I further discuss
in Chapter 2. In this instance, white residents are being told to protect themselves from Black residents, their proximity in the same space as them, and their presence in homes that can only be owned by white residents.

**Samba Funk**

Towards the end of September, 2015, in anticipation of the red moon, the musical group Samba Funk formed a drum circle on the shores of Lake Merritt (Ramirez, 2017, p. 5). The majority of the members in this musical group are people of color. After 90 minutes of drumming, Sean McDonald, a white resident of Oakland, walked up to them to demand that they stop and inform them that they needed a permit to drum at the park. According to the musicians that were present during the encounter, McDonald had approached them aggressively and physically tried to pry the drumsticks out of Theo Williams’s hands, the artistic director of the group. McDonald warned the group that he would call the police if they didn’t stop and he eventually did. As expected, when the police arrived at Lake Merritt, the encounter escalated; the drummers explained how the police sided with McDonald and were hostile towards them (p. 6). McDonald told the police officers he wanted to press charges against some of the musicians for assault. Theo Williams expressed that he also wanted to file charges against McDonald for putting his hands on him and trying to take the drumsticks out of his hands forcefully. Although the resident did not end up filing charges against Theo Williams, he did file charges against other members of the group (pp. 6-7). More police officers arrived at the scene and it ended hours later at around 1:15 am, both the resident and drummers receiving citations.
A San Francisco Chronicle article written by Chip Johnson in 2015, titled “Complaint against Oakland cops misses beat”, demonstrates how even today racially coded language in media continues to erase the quotidian, state-sanctioned violence that Sharpe (2016) explains constitutes the weather—how anti-blackness has and continues to be manifested in interlocking systems of domination—for Black people in the U.S. In this article, Johnson is critical of the series of events that took place at Lake Merritt on Sunday, September 27th in 2015 when a white, male resident called the police to file a noise complaint regarding a group of drummers. The narrative he constructs places the blame on the drummers and minimizes the threat posed to their lives during and as a result of this encounter with Sean McDonald as well as the police.

Although there have been some pivotal changes in the law overtime, such as the civil rights law adopted by Congress from 1957 to 1968 that prohibited second-class citizenship for African Americans in public accommodations, voting, and employment, the process of undoing de jure segregation necessitates an undoing of past decisions that are so normalized that they seem irreversible (Rothstein, 2017, p. 177). Multiple factors make housing desegregation difficult; these reasons include the fact that a low economic status becomes a multigenerational trait that makes it hard for future generations to participate in the free labor market, wealth disparity between white people and Black people has widened overtime as the houses of white working- and middle-class families has appreciated, and residential segregation has always been coupled with a race-neutral politics that purported to offer nonracial provisions that were in fact discriminatory such as the federal tax code’s mortgage interest deduction, which favored white residents as homeowners and relegated African Americans to renters (pp.
Similar to Pulido (2017), I believe that these reasons do not draw away from the fact that unchanging policies and laws demonstrate “a lack of political will that must be attributed to racial capitalism” (p. 529). Although the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, which prohibited discrimination, unaffordability remained to be a factor that made it difficult for African Americans to purchase homes in most white suburbs (p. 183). The varying conditions that constitute the living standards of a neighborhood or community will determine whether and to what extent laws will be detrimental or beneficial to them and the term used to describe this discrepancy is “disparate impact” (p. 188). What disparate impacts demonstrate is that the decisions and actions of governments can never be neutral (p. 190), regardless of race-neutral language they will almost always have disproportionate consequences for white Americans and African Americans in the U.S.

Political rhetoric is often used to justify the disproportionate consequences, such as through media representations of Black people, similar to the example of the poster in Figure 1., that associate Blackness to criminality, monstrosity, poverty, and death. Stuart Hall (1977) is interested in how superstructural and ideological contemporary forms constitute the capitalist mode of production, through an engagement with Marxism and language (p. 300). Marx presents a critique of capitalism, which has as its premise the ways in which capitalism demands a constant advancement of stages that are corrective of pre-existing contradictions or antagonisms (p. 300). With each new development in the stages of capitalism, a prior glitch is rendered invisible. Hall breaks down the power of language to transmit and distort human culture (p. 303) and explains that Marx and Engels engage with the material and productive force that is “culture”
explicitly as a *force* (p. 302). A political economy cannot be understood fully without a serious reckoning with the ideology that both constitutes it and is constituted by it. Hall explains that “ideology” is essential to any capitalist social formation, more importantly the dominant ideology, made up of “ruling ideas”, which are the “ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (p. 305). A strong example of how this works within the U.S. is the prison industrial complex, which relies on punitive logic that is framed as necessary, redemptive, rehabilitative, and fair when it is in fact anti-black, racist, violent, and obsolete.

Hall explains that ideology is explicit, what is most obvious and pervasive, whereas its real foundations are concealed, and what is hidden is where the unconsciousness resides (p. 309). He explicates how language gives meaning to things (p. 306) and determines the “social practice of signification” (p. 314), through which “labor” of representation takes place. An engagement with dominant ideology also necessitates a reckoning with the relationship between dominant ideology and the “dominant” and “dominated” classes, and what role this ideology plays in perpetuating capitalist relations (p. 315). Hegemony, or dominance more generally, requires active work on the part of various “agencies of superstructures” (Gramsci, 1971, in Hall, 1977, p. 318) (i.e. family, education system, the Church, media), in order to be maintained. He explains how the primary ideological effect of capitalism is to conceal the antagonisms that make up its foundations (p. 323). Another effect is fragmentation, or separation (p. 323). The third effect involves the imposition of an imaginary unity or deploying “various ideological totalities” (p. 323). The principal driver of this masking-fragmenting-uniting process is the state and the different modern advanced capitalist conditions (p. 324).
Hall labels the process of turning “real” events into symbolic form “encoding” (p. 330); it involves the selection of codes that assign meanings to events or position events in a referential context in order to attribute meaning to them (p. 330). In direct reference to the work of media, he explains that it has the tendency to reproduce the ideological effect of the structuring logic, economy, or system of domination (p. 334) and in the case of the U.S., this structuring logic is capitalism. In what ways does capitalist logic work through masking racism and distorting what Black people signify in media, urban planning, and housing?

I return to the historical context of the postwar period of Oakland because the interactions of racial logic, housing, and urban planning are well-documented in this period, by the likes of Robert O. Self (2003), and they clearly demonstrate why antiblackness needs to be treated as a structuring logic that emerges from capitalism. Self (2003) explains how the federal state, local city builders, and white homeowners shaped the postwar decades of Oakland (p. 97). Postwar American suburbanization involved the translation of property into capital and its constitutive elements (i.e. value for homeowners, profit for boosters, taxes for public officials) (p. 99). Segregation was a naturalized aspect of “healthy property markets” (p. 130). To illustrate what Hall (1977) explains about the ideological effect of capitalism, housing between the 1930s and 1960s was depicted as being driven by “a classic free market” (p. 131), even though the federal government was providing large subsidies to white homeowners. This example demonstrates how the rationalization of segregation in Oakland, and surrounding regions, was and continues to be a structural and ideological project (p. 131). Within a capitalist political economy, space needs to be productive (p. 135). Space in Oakland
was made productive by political leaders in the 1950s and 1960s through the introduction of new technology, remodeling of neighborhoods, physical and social engineering, and management by large and specialized institutions (p. 135). What these financial investments demonstrate is that the U.S. prioritizes maintaining and restoring property values over protecting human communities (p. 136). In the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of residents in West Oakland, North Oakland, and South Berkeley were African American (pp. 155-156). The rationalization of racial segregation through capitalist logic demonstrates how anti-black racism was justified and reasoned as an economic endeavor (Self, 2003, p. 160; Rothstein, 2017). The African Americans who were being pushed out by urban renewal projects began to buy homes in East Oakland (Self, 2003, p. 160).

The $198,250,000 Oakland Trust for Clean Water and Safe Parks (Measure DD) was voted on by Oakland residents in 2002 to restore creeks in Oakland and the Estuary, maintain and acquire open space, renovate parks, ensure the provision of safe public spaces, and secure matching sums in federal and state funding intended for these projects. Although the majority of Oakland residents seemed to have voted in favor of the bond in 2002, the projects only began to be implemented recently. High levels of city investment in green urban spaces like Lake Merritt demonstrate their importance for recreation, environmental preservation, and overall community health purposes. On the other hand, high levels of investment also reveal how capitalist logic constructs abstract spaces as perpetually needing reconstruction and renovation.

I will provide historical context of environmental racism in Chapter 2, a critical framework that is being continually problematized by Black and feminist scholars in the
Americas. There are various artists and theorists in the U.S. who are engaging with Black geographies through disciplines such as Sociology, Art, English Literature, and Media Studies and I will be shedding light on the ways they represent Black love, trauma, and Black liberation simultaneously.
Chapter 2: Literature Review on Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

Environmental Racism

Parks in the U.S. only became desegregated by law after 1964, a little over fifty years ago. Although legally, Black people and people in color more generally were permitted access to these parks, their experiences in parks were and continue to be riddled with overt and covert forms of racial discrimination. Environmental Justice, as a concept and political movement, emerged in the 1980s, following the civil rights movement in the U.S. Although Environmental Justice has been traditionally defined as a movement that strives to address injustices related to disproportionate exposure to toxic substances, or air pollution in low-income communities within the U.S., terms such as “environmental racism” problematize the causes and implications of these injustices further. Feminist and Black geographers like Laura Pulido and Carolyn Finney, as well as critical race theorists like Katherine McKittrick and bell hooks have interrogated the absence of discourse on race and anti-black racism in environmentalism, place-making practices, and environmental in/justice.

Pulido (2017) examines the disproportionate ways that communities of color are negatively impacted by toxic hazards. She argues that this disparity is a result of environmental racism, which needs to be understood as a component of racial capitalism (p. 524). The environmental justice movement emerged in the 1980s (p. 524), and aimed to protect affected communities by combating the issue of differential exposure to hazardous substances (p. 525). Pulido is critical of how environmental justice initiatives tend to rely on the state for intervention or resolve (p. 525), pointing to
the state as an entity that needs to be interrogated and distrusted. The state regulates environmental racism and the absence of political will is a product of racial capitalism (p. 529). She turns to the work of David Pellow, and critical ethnic studies more generally, to make her argument, and applies Cedric J. Robinson’s (1983) discussion on racial capitalism to environmental racism (p. 526). Robinson (1983 in Pulido, 2017) asserts that racism organizes capitalism (p. 526) in how it provides both a method and rationale for exploitation. Pulido (2017) explains how the framework of racial capitalism demands that racial inequality is interrogated using a “materialist, ideological and historical framework” (p. 527). Stuart Hall (1977) does this interrogatory work by critiquing how ideology structures representation and culture, shedding light on the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology as an organizing logic that determines value by delineating difference for profit to perpetuate exploitation. Through historically contextualizing incidents of racial discrimination and violence in the U.S. today, the ways in which these processes of state-sanctioned violence are by-products of capitalist ideology can be better understood.

McKittrick (2011) is engaged in a project of historical contextualization in her work in theorizing slave and post-slave Black geographies in the Americas by presenting the plantation, urbicide, and prisons as important sites from which to understand how race, place, and racial violence are connected (p. 948). She explains how Black geographies have been imbricated in state-sanctioned anti-black racial violence that have sought to make a Black sense of place an impossibility (p. 947). McKittrick discusses the atrocity of transatlantic slavery in terms of “spatialized violence” (p. 948) to draw attention to how the historical context of anti-black violence is
constituted in space and is directly related to the existing geographic organization (p. 948). She cautions against the tendency for analyses, or the “dehumanizing elements of geographic thought” (p. 953), of Blackness or a Black sense of place to represent Black people as “other” and fix Blackness in narratives of “death” (pp. 953-955).

Environmental racism continues to take place because people of color have historically been devalued and there are no legal consequences to capital (Pulido, 2017, pp. 529-530). Pulido argues that due to this continued devaluation and legal impunity, environmental racism needs to be conceptualized as a form of state-sanctioned violence (pp. 529-530). Pulido (2017) demonstrates how the interconnected workings of racism and economic processes can be understood by paying attention to issues around the appropriation and access to land in the U.S. (p. 528). She explains how access is racialized, evidenced by laws that privilege white land ownership for example (p. 528). Self (2003) demonstrates how liberalism, more specifically New Deal liberalism in the 1960s and 1970s (pp. 13-14), laid the groundwork for the political culture of property and homeownership (p. 14). In the 1940s, homeownership in Oakland was facilitated by state subsidies which opened the market for white Americans in the Bay Area and caused racial segregation (p. 97). Legalized processes of housing discrimination further demonstrate the significance of park desegregation in the 1960s in terms of scale, as Black people have historically been denied access to spaces by the state in ways that reinforce their second-class citizenship status.

Wright (2018) is attentive to the violence and more specifically the anti-black acts of violence that constitute the relationship between land, the environment, and race in the U.S. (p. 1). He explains how Black geographies are disproportionately impacted by
segregation, surveillance, and policing (p. 2) and discusses the work of American artists such as Billie Holiday, Robert Hayden, and James Baldwin that documents the “racial codification of land” (p. 2). Environmental racism works on two levels, the “above” being state-sanctioned violence and the “below” being the disposal of toxic waste into the land and water bodies surrounding the communities of historically marginalized people (p. 2). He defines Black ecologies as natural landscapes and human-made structures that are used to criminalize, carry out, and mask anti-black violence (pp. 2-3). Although environmental racism has traditionally been understood as the result of “unequal distribution and disproportionate impact of waste and other toxins upon impoverished communities of color, chiefly Black communities” (p. 3), Wright argues that the violence perpetuated on Black people, or the “violent spatialities of Blackness” (p. 4), also constitute an environmental hazard (p. 4). In conversation with Pulido (2000 in Wright, 2018), who presents a powerful critique of white privilege and whiteness in America, Wright explains how the cause of environmental racism cannot be narrowed down to white privilege in a neoliberal era that masks racism in multiculturalism rhetoric (p. 5). Similar to Pulido, Wright (2018) argues that the anti-black state needs to be challenged within the environmental justice movement (p. 5). He centers Blackness as a powerful site from which to develop a new humanism and new human-environment relations (Fanon, 1963 in Wright, 2018, p. 6). He asks how spatial and ontological representations of Blackness can be the source from which we envision futures in which conceptions of humanity and value are made anew (p. 7).

In 2019, the Pomona Museum of Art, “Euclidean Gris Gris”, which was curated by Dr. Nana Adusei-Poku, displays the artwork of LA-based artist Todd Gray, which
delves into historical power relations in the African diaspora through juxta positioning images of imperial gardens in Europe with green landscapes and elegant portraits of Black people in Africa. Gray’s work interrogates colonialism and imperialism, situating the destructive consequences of these ongoing processes in natural sites, including the human body, to pose questions about the contradictions that exist between explanatory capitalist rhetoric or ideology, and the lived experience of colonial violence by historically marginalized people across the world. Similar to the artists referenced by Wright (2018), Todd Gray’s three-dimensional multimedia pieces demonstrate how race and racial violence, socially constructed and perpetuated by colonial powers, are codified into green landscapes. As a Black man who was raised in the U.S., Todd Gray is situated in his work. He explained how Black feminist theory, Marxist theory, and critical race theory informed his understanding of mental colonialism and how art can be deployed to deconstruct this ongoing process.

**Representation in Place**

Finney (2014) discusses how processes of representation and racialization have fixed environmentalism in the U.S. in a narrative that is constructed by whiteness. She explains that the dominant narrative on environmentalism is constructed by white voices and not only does this narrative affect how the environment is perceived, represented, and constructed, but how Americans identify as a nation (p. 3). Finney calls for an intervention, a discussion of African American perspectives on the environment that takes into consideration the specific historical processes that have informed the “black environmental identity” (p. 3) in the U.S. She argues that corporations, academia, and
environmental institutions legitimize the absence of African Americans in the Great Outdoors by leaving out the historical experiences of African Americans with the environment (p. 5). Finney explains the importance of turning to nontraditional sites of knowledge production in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Black experience (p. 6). These more creative forms of expression reveal the ways in which African Americans are actively shaping their experiences, relationships, and struggles whilst making a claim that these practices and spaces, which have historically been undermined by traditional understandings of legitimate knowledge production, are in fact legitimate (pp. 6-7). Art, as well as place-making practices, are two examples of how African Americans are constructing counter-narratives and cultivating a legitimate and shared sense of belonging. Finney (2014) explains how African Americans are forced to reconcile a complex environmental history with a present time in which this history is not recognized (Kahn, 2001 & Meeker, 1984 in Finney, 2014, p. 10). The links between representation, racialization, and wealth inequality are not always self-evident but once made explicit, these links reveal how capitalism, as an exploitative project, is upheld to the detriment of indigenous people, Black people, and people of color more broadly in the U.S.

A Black Spatial Imaginary

In a talk titled “This is a Black Spatial Imaginary” at USC Price, Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (2018) present the possibilities of deploying a Black Spatial Imaginary in addressing ongoing issues related to gentrification in Portland, Oregon. Their work is interdisciplinary; they turn to Black Geographies, Urban Planning, and Art Practice to
reveal the interconnectedness of Blackness, place, and space. The Black Spatial Imaginary is both a lens through which to interrogate the historical and contemporary relationship between Black people and the environment and an approach to reconceptualizing place-making practices as legitimate sites from which to actualize dreams of more equitable futures that center Black love. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne explain how the Black Spatial Imaginary is a different geographic imaginary that explores Black geographies in analytic and poetic ways. Clyde Woods (2002), a prominent Black geographer, is critical of how post-civil rights racism in the U.S. is studied, represented, and interrogated within the discipline of geography. He reflects on his experience growing up in Baltimore in the 1960s and 1970s, more specifically the horror and displacement that accompanies the destruction of a city and homes by fires and construction plans for a freeway (p. 62).

While conducting research on poverty in the South while at UCLA, with a specific focus on the Mississippi Delta, Woods (2002) found that social science scholarship on the communities who lived there was riddled with language that only predicted death and extinction, precluding life or hope (p. 62). He points to the destruction of African American communities in cities and regions such as Washington, DC, Chicago, South Carolina’s Sea Islands, Los Angeles and New York to expose the disparity between the reality of destruction and the language used to mask the cause, racism (pp. 62-63). The insight provided by Finney (2014), concerning how representation and racialization in academic discourse and mainstream media maintain a narrative of environmentalism that renders the Black experience invisible, sheds light on why environmental racism, or state-sanctioned racial violence in green spaces, is not understood as an environmental
injustice. Her critique also provides a partial explanation for state-sanctioned processes that continue to devalue the environments in which Black people live, which is why the analysis offered by Clyde Woods (2002) is so important: attempts to explain how racial violence is codified into the earth are important steps towards achieving racial justice and scholarship that strives to critique the state-sanctioned processes that maintain this codification. Such scholarship needs to deploy a new language that describes the presence and possibility of Black life while grappling with the reality of death and destruction.

Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (2018) are responding to Clyde Woods’s (2002) call to interrogate research methodology in social science literature that has historically been used to describe death instead of life. He asks whether social science research adequately represents the needs of people in “dying communities” (p. 63). Clyde Woods advocates for a human rights approach that is expanded to include low rates of investment in adequate, low-income housing, environmental racism, mass incarceration, land seizures, and community enclosures among many other violations (p. 64). In order to understand the geography of race and ethnicity, social science literature needs to place social justice at its center and pay close attention to the institutionalized practices that lead to these violations (p. 64).

Woods (2002) is also responding to criticism that he anticipates will be directed at the interventions he proposes, more specifically how he is not considering the particularity of various forms of restructuring in the different locations he discusses (p. 64). He explains how literature on economic restructuring often describes the state and capital as abstract and globalization as a narrow and passive process characterized by
“capitalist rationality” (p. 64). What is needed is a discussion of globalization that contends with the ways both the dominant and dominated “economic/ethnic blocs” (p. 64) respond to restructuring. In addition, Clyde Woods explains how the study of human rights violations and restructuring processes at a regional level exposes the workings of ethnic supremacy at the scale of the regional level, instead of reproducing literature that relies on a narrow theoretical framework (p. 64). He is promoting the use of a “historically grounded multidisciplinary approach to understanding the regional processes of domination” (p. 64) in order to fully grasp how race affects the restructuring process (p. 65). Woods asserts that there are “new regional social and spatial foundations of post-civil rights racism” (pp. 64-65) which include resegregation and large state investment in predominantly white neighborhoods that is paralleled by disinvestment in areas where the majority of the people who live there are people of color (p. 65).

The through line in his work is an evidence-based critique of social science literature, and more specifically geography, which he explains undermines the structural causes of ethnic poverty in the U.S., namely institutionalized racism and how it works to produce economic inequality. He calls for a systematic method to study power in geography so the various components of identity and race are revealed in ways that debunk the myth of colorblindness that emerged following the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and expose the role of racial representation in the maintenance of legitimacy and hegemony by dominant groups (p. 65). Woods explains how studying social movements helps to unmask the “active racial practices of the local state and of local capital” (p. 66) and draw attention to how historically marginalized communities are capable of
identifying and implementing solutions to problems that are disproportionately affecting them (p. 66). He is critical of traditional epistemological approaches to studying race in the social sciences and calls for a serious reckoning with indigenous knowledge systems in the U.S., which are imbued with “geographical thought” (p. 66).

The Black Spatial Imaginary provides a framework through which to simultaneously engage with the spatialization of racial violence, problematize racialization practices, and envision a different reality for the future. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018) deploy the Black Spatial Imaginary to leverage different approaches to representing the systematic erasure of the physical presence of Black communities and their contributions and efforts to reclaim space in Portland, Oregon due to, and in response to gentrification. They explain how their work involves the spatialization of reparations through an engagement with historical archives and the Black community in Portland at large. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne identify white supremacy and capitalism as “traps”— terminology used by Clyde Woods to describe the specificity of racial and poverty traps in a place, or regionally specific traps. Although Woods engages with these concepts in relation to the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne apply his framework to the historical processes that shaped the make-up of the Pacific Northwest and Portland, Oregon more specifically. These processes include redlining and serial displacement, which are embedded in the planning logics of the city. The Black Spatial Imaginary is not constricted or limited by systems of domination such as capitalism and white supremacy, for example. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne demonstrate how it can be deployed to reconcile place-making practices with displacement by acknowledging the
connections of a Black community to a place they were displaced from and the desires of that same community to make place where they currently are.

They center the experiences, demands, and dreams of the Black community in Portland, Oregon in the different components of their work, principal of which is The People’s Plan, which they produced in collaboration with the Portland African American Leadership Forum (PAALF) and the Black community in Portland at large, and is discussed further in the section below titled “Black Love and Environmental Justice”.

Although Portland and Oakland are not facing identical challenges—Portland is a heavily gentrified city and Oakland is currently being threatened by gentrification—these cities share a similar history of migration and metropolitanization. The Black Spatial Imaginary illustrates the assertion made by Clyde Woods (2011) that “the reports of the death of African Americans were premature” (p. 66) in how it positions Black life as a legitimate site from which to envision a utopia.

**Black Love and Environmental Justice**

Pellow (2018) cites the book he co-authored with Robert Brulle, titled *Power, Justice, and the Environment* in which they introduce the term “Critical Environmental Justice Studies” to bring urgency to the need for academic research that fills gaps in previous work on Environmental Justice through interdisciplinarity (p. 3). Pellow explains how the environmental justice movement in the U.S. grew in the 1970s, led by historically marginalized groups such as people of color, low-income communities, and indigenous folk (p. 4). The movement was focused on combating toxic hazards that disproportionately affected people of color (p. 4). He explains that scholars have
grappled with the idea of ‘justice’ for some time now. Academics such as Stella Capek have introduced frameworks such as the “environmental justice frame” (p. 11), which outlines six claims:

1. Access to accurate information from authorities regarding environmental risks.
2. Public hearings.
3. Democratic participation in decision-making processes concerning future of threatened communities.
4. Compensation for injured parties from those who inflict harm on them.
5. Expressions of solidarity with survivors of environmental injustices.
6. A call to abolish environmental racism/injustice.

Others, such as David Scholsberg, argue that there is a heavy emphasis on distributive results in environmental justice literature, instead of a reckoning with the structural causes of these inequalities (p. 11).

In the face of pervasive anti-black racism, a Black love approach to environmental justice research is liberatory. An approach that not only reveals the spaces defined by Black geographies but expands these spaces in pursuit of justice. Nieves (2007) posits that approaches to historic preservation do not adequately document state-sanctioned processes of removal, relocation, and segregation, and chooses to focus on the Americas. He focuses on Africville, a settlement in Canada formed after the War of 1812 by Americans who had been enslaved in the U.S. (p. 87). The founders of Africville, William Brown and William Arnold, had bought properties in Halifax City to establish this settlement in the 1840s (p. 88). Africville became a cite for
undesirable city projects that were rejected by Halifax neighborhoods such as prisons (1853), soil disposal pits (1858) and a railroad track constructed by the Nova Scotia Railway Company (p. 89). Nieves explains how the architectural history of the U.S. is concerned with aesthetic attributes of the built environment, instead of acknowledging the ways in which the built environment has been, and continues to be shaped by race—which is crucial to envisioning novel ways of preserving Black history (p. 86).

Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018) present their interdisciplinary work historicizing the presence, displacement, and relocation of Black residents in Portland, Oregon, in order to map a future that protects the health and longevity of Black neighborhoods. Nieves (2007) is interrogating the limitations of existing epistemologies within preservation efforts that render the collective identities of Black cultures, which are constituted by place-making practices that resist racialized oppression, invisible in the context of an American cultural landscape (p. 92). He explains that the American natural landscape is undergirded by a system of interlocking racial hierarchies (p. 83), which is evidenced in how historic preservation continues to privilege structures created by and for European Americans (p. 85). I saw a lot of unsheltered people during my visits to Lake Merritt, most of which were Black and people of color. These people have experienced displacement for various reasons and one of the prominent ones is gentrification. With an influx of out-migration from San Francisco due to rapidly increasing housing rental prices, house prices are increasing in Oakland. Black people in the U.S. have historically resisted displacement in active and strategic ways, informed by a deep knowledge of their surrounding natural environment, collective deliberation, and action. The Black Spatial Imaginary, which emerges from
and alongside Black geographies, offers an alternative reality that is based on emancipatory dreams.
Chapter 3: The Black Spatial Imaginary as Revolutionary

A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 54) in Tyner, 2007).

I am interested in how historically marginalized people in the U.S., who experience ongoing exclusion from and policing in urban green spaces like Lake Merritt, negotiate their presence and articulate their outrage. In a salon (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2017) dedicated to Christina Sharpe at Barnard College, Kaiama Glover responds to a series of questions that Sharpe (2016) poses in her book *In the Wake*, regarding the young Haitian girl with the word “ship” taped on her head, staring back at the camera: “What is the look in her eyes? What do I do with it?” (p. 44) “Is Ship a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death?” (p. 46). In response, Kaiama Glover explains how perhaps it is resilience we see in her eyes, or maybe defiance at the idea of expected resilience and an outrage at her participation in the archive, its carceral logics, and its violence. In an effort to collapse and expand dominant understandings of anti-blackness that are confined in narrow spatial and temporal scales, I turn to the resistance efforts of scholars, organizations, and activists in various U.S. urban cities that are engaged in place-making practices through policy advocacy work, urban planning, anarchism, and engaging with the imaginative power of dreaming.
Capitalism fixes abstract space in a hegemonic imaginary that is constituted by whiteness, commodification, and privatization. The political economy of capitalism, or capitalist logic, does this by reducing bodies of water, human bodies, and land—to name but a few—to objects from which value/profit/capital can be derived. The articulation and consequent disarticulation of nature, and Black people, as property constitutes privatization. These frameworks make up the dominant ideology that Stuart Hall (1977) critiques so astutely, and they are concealed by rhetoric that espouses universality, equality, and inclusivity. In other words, although Lake Merritt is a site of policing and anti-black violence in as much as it is meant to be a space for recreation, the language of bonds and the park council claims that the lake is an inclusive and safe space for everybody. Oakland residents are implicated in Measure DD, the $198 million bond that exists for park restoration and maintenance purposes, regardless of their experiences at Lake Merritt. Although the bond money comes from the public in the form of tax, the city has authority over what happens with the money. The various restoration projects at Lake Merritt will ensure the park is well-maintained, making the park more attractive to incomers who can afford rising rental housing prices in the city, and consequently pushing out long-time residents of color currently living in Oakland.

What is the significance of the reality that Black people have historically, and continue to have, experiences in nature—public urban green spaces, forests, or beaches—that are riddled by subjection to state-sanctioned, anti-black violence and death? Lake Merritt has existed, first as marshland and then as a man-made lake, since before the 1800s, which means many people of various ethnicities and races have frequented it. However, because settler colonialism is premised on a capitalist political economy, viz., a
racial/racialized capitalist economy, exclusionary abstract space became property in ways that make the public/private divide incongruent. With the influx of middle- and high-income white residents into the city of Oakland, which has historically been and continues to be a brown city, racist encounters between newcomers and old-time residents have been on the rise and they continue to place Black residents at high risk of being incarcerated, shot, and killed for simply being in a space.

Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018) are interested in Black movement, fixity, community, urban planning, Black geographies, and art practice under the broad themes of Blackness, place, and space. Portland is a city located in the Northwest region of the U.S., similar to Oakland, although it is much smaller and has had a larger proportion of white residents historically. The city is the whitest big city in America; there have never been more than 7% Black people, and over 95% of Black people who live in Portland live in Albina district, a small section of the city.

Portland, similar to Oakland, is a city located in the Pacific Northwest that has garnered little attention in discourse around postwar migration or Black migration more generally. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018) explicitly point to white supremacy and capitalism as traps that underlie the planning logics that work to remove and disperse people. The realities of removal and dispersal, driven by logics of white supremacy and capitalism, further the critique of capitalism offered by Self (2003) in American Babylon. He explains how capitalism simultaneously “drives the creation of fixed space” (2003, p. 18) and produces pressures to abandon or remake cities. Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018) use artwork both to reclaim gentrified space and historicize the “defiance of erasure” that African American people have
demonstrated over time and continue to demonstrate today. They describe The
People’s Plan as a *Black love planning process* that engages with Black geographies as
where people are. Portland has experienced intense gentrification that has been
coupled with the erasure of the Black community from where they have historically lived
and how they continue to experience serial displacement.

I compare Oakland to San Francisco and Portland because these three cities are
all located in the Northwest region of the U.S. and have either been or are currently
experiencing gentrification/displacement/disinvestment in areas that have been
historically Black and brown. The current state of San Francisco, which has changed
dramatically from what it looked like before the 1990s due to gentrification, has been used
to predict the future of Oakland. However, I am not engaging with the examples of San
Francisco and Portland to predict what will happen to Oakland, rather I turn to ongoing
grassroots resistance efforts that may guide Oakland in a different direction—one that is
defined by place-making, restoration, and city investment. Since the tech boom that
engulfed San Francisco in the mid-1990s, housing rental prices have increased rapidly
(Ramirez, 2017, p. 12). Long time residents of San Francisco that have not been able to
afford this upsurge of prices are moving to neighboring cities like Oakland (p. 14).

Deploying decolonial theorizations of settler colonialism and Black geographic
theories of racial capitalism, Ramirez (2017) argues that a study of gentrification
necessitates a deep engagement with racialized dispossession across place and
temporality (pp. 17-18). She explains how artists of color who are long-time residents of
Oakland expose intersecting types of dispossession, consequently creating decolonial
geographies (p. 18). Ramirez (2017) is interested in exposing the ways art-activists,
creatives in Oakland, “who are explicitly political in their work and their intentions” (p. 20), are continuing the tradition of resisting displacement, the criminalization and policing of Black and brown communities, and poor housing and educational opportunities. She reveals how artists of color have historically played a prominent role in the culture and politics of Oakland. Her research reveals how art-activists have led struggles in defense of historically marginalized communities of color being threatened by displacement and state-sanctioned violence (p. 10).

The collaborative creation of The People’s Plan in 2017, by Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne (USC Price, 2018), in collaboration with PAALF and the Black community at large in Portland, engaged in collective, generative thinking and creative, artistic tools. Bates and Towne asked Portlanders to imagine a city that loves Black people and recorded their dreams in ways that rejected the white box of the gallery and the white page of the planning document. Their work is grounded in a different geographic imaginary, a non-hegemonic geography; more specifically, their work engages with the Black Spatial Imaginary. This type of imaginary, like Black feminism, emerges from the specificity of the position in which Black people find themselves, how they experience their environments, and are able to critique the structural causes of the precarious conditions that make up their lives. The context of Portland is different from Oakland for various reasons, some of which are listed above, and a fundamental one is the extent of displacement that Black people have been forced to experience in Portland in comparison to Oakland. Therefore, Lisa Bates and Sharita Towne pose the question “how do you plan with people once they’ve been displaced in ways that recognize their
connection to a historical place and a collective desire to make place where they currently live?"

The questions I pose, which have been inspired by theirs, include: how do you resist displacement and engage in place-making practices simultaneously? To what extent does an analysis of resistance efforts by historically marginalized people in urban green spaces reveal how interlocking systems of domination manifest in the U.S.? How can a deep engagement with community responses to this state-sanctioned displacement, policing, and violence render the anti-black racism that constitutes the racial/racialized capitalist political economy of the U.S. legible? The People’s Plan (2017) asserts that Black geographies encompass all the spaces where Black people are located. The Black Spatial Imaginary invites the loosening up of the mind, getting out of the constraint and gravity of the white spatial imaginary that is narrow, colonial, racist, and hegemonic. Their work strives to bridge the gap between the current reality and a possible future. The People’s Plan is a Black love planning process and the report is divided into various chapters, including Environmental Justice is Racial Justice, Environmental and Just Sustainability, and Administration of Justice.

**Afro-Pessimism**

In order to understand why the Black Spatial Imaginary offers an important approach to envisioning more just and liberatory futures, we need to turn to a framework that reveals why the present conditions of Black existence necessitates a different imaginary. The framework that I turn to in this paper is Afro-pessimism. In a lecture titled “What is Afro-pessimism?”, Mubirumusoke (2019) explains how Afro-pessimism makes
a political intervention that rejects the basis of the liberal political conceptual space that is U.S. democracy. The rhetoric of political liberalism espouses that humans enter politics, or a political organization to secure certain rights and liberties and without the government these rights would have no meaning. These rights are mediated by the law, and purport that we are all equal under the law. This rhetoric also underpins participatory democracy in the U.S. and the language in the Bill of Rights is a useful example of this. Mubirumusoke explains how there are "negative rights," which include rights such as “free speech”, and “positive rights,” like “healthcare” and “education.” The constitutive elements of negative and positive rights are the same and political liberalism relies on a historical trajectory that claims that with time everyone will exercise these rights, everyone can or will attain the “American Dream.” The American Dream, or efforts to correct a quantitative distinction between who has access to the American Dream, a question of inclusivity that is invested in an arc trajectory that is more and more inclusive, is grounded in anti-blackness. In the present political climate, with the behavior of the 45th president making more apparent the racial/racialized capitalism that undergirds the U.S., these inconsistencies are even more obvious. It is not difficult to understand that there are stark differences in the quality of life and access to rights or protection by law, between Black people in the U.S., immigrants, indigenous people, and white American citizens.

Afro-pessimist thought, or an Afro-pessimist understanding of the present conditions of Black existence or non-existence, is based on a rejection of political liberalism and any kind of investment in correcting a quantitative distinction (Mubirumusoke, 2019). Wilderson (2003) extends analyses of Blackness and being
offered by Fanon (1952) in *Black Skin, White Masks* to explain how the Black person occupies the position of the slave, whereas white people occupy the position of human. In other words, white people can exercise their rights and have disposition, whereas Black people cannot. An important example of how Black people continue to occupy the position of slaves is the prison industrial complex, which continues to exploit the cheap labor of caged people, who are predominantly Black people and people of color. Spillers (1987) describes Black people as “the captive body” (p. 67), or the enslaved Black person to emphasize the conditions of captivity in which Black people live within the U.S. The prisoner is a more explicit example of the captive body, and the carceral logics of the state enables us to extend this argument to the social life of Black people and Black existence more generally. The Black Spatial Imaginary offers a route out of this captivity that privileges the power of collective and collaborative dreaming; a bold practice that envisions Black liberation through Black feminist praxis and Black love.

If we understand the conditions of Black existence as captivity, we can further our understanding of the hold as introduced by Christina Sharpe, and how it pertains to the 911 calls that white residents at Lake Merritt make to report on Black people barbecuing or drumming. The 911 calls make up the hold, the quotidian manifestations of anti-black violence enacted by white residents on Black residents. Hartman (2006) is known for her prolific work in articulating the ways we, as Black people, live in the afterlives of slavery; she explains “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it…” (p. 133). Would the white residents who called the police on the Black residents at Lake Merritt have dialed 911 if the Black people they called them on were white? Wilderson (2010) also articulates how Black suffering is
unmatched by any other kind of suffering, specifically because Black people have been relegated to a subhuman status. He explains “that the violence that continually repositions the Black as a void of historical movement is without analog in the suffering dynamics of the ontologically alive” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 38). This repositioning takes place as a function of white supremacy. Sexton and Martinot (2003) explain how “the structure of its banality [white supremacy] is the surface on which it operates” (p. 175). The particular observation of its banality relates to the contributions of Stuart Hall (1977) in relation to the politics of representation. White supremacy, whiteness, and race are all social constructs. What this paper demonstrates is how these social constructs play a role in how abstract space is constructed, through media, urban planning and political rhetoric, and is determined by a dominant ideology constituted by white supremacy. If white supremacy grants white Americans privileges that necessitate an economic and metaphysical investment in the dehumanization of Black people, then all white people are the police.

Policing trickles down from the anti-black, white supremacist state in ways that empower white Americans to act like Jennifer Schulte and Henry Sintay Williams without consequence. As a paradigm, policing grants white people access to violence that results in Black people’s existence being under constant and ongoing threat. The ways that the state has historically fixed Black people in conditions of captivity points to how this dehumanization or social death is a necessary component to civility of American society as we know it. The policing, dehumanization, and murder of Black people—without pause or consequence—is not an aberration but rather absolutely necessary and ritualistic in the U.S. in order for the nation, or more astutely called
“empire” by Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) to continue to exist as a white supremacist, racial/racialized capitalist economy. The questions that arise from an engagement with Afro-pessimism reveal the ways in which spatial justice is deeply connected to ongoing colonial violence in the U.S.

When McKittrick (2006) describes the poetry of Dionne Brand, who has written profusely on the cartography of Black life, she explains:

She not only refuses a comfortable belonging to nation, or country, or a local street, she alters them by demonstrating that geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing: rooms full of weeping, exhausted countries, a house that is only as safe as flesh (p. ix).

I want to emphasize the importance of Brand’s refusal and this alteration that distorts dominant constructions of nation, home, and geography to shed light on how Black people cannot feel at home or a sense of belonging in an empire—the U.S. carceral state—that denies our humanity, our flesh, which we are forced to make safe in a world that is literally burning. Despite the threat of death and dying, Black people leave their houses. Despite being in their houses, Black people get shot and killed by the police. On October 12th, 2019, Atatiana K. Jefferson was playing video games with her nephew at 2:30am when a Fort Worth police officer shot and killed her (Martinez et al., 2019). A neighbor had called the police because the front and side doors of the house she was in were ajar. Figure 3 shows a vigil that was held in Fort Worth in her memory on Sunday:
Ritchie (2017), a lawyer and activist, has compiled a detailed account of various cases of police violence against Black women and women of color in the U.S. in her book titled *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. There are no safe conditions for Black people in the U.S., despite despotic universalizing rhetoric that erases the terror of this carceral state. Our flesh also signifies threat to the white gaze, threat which we are all made to internalize, and it is this threat that simultaneously is weaponized by the state and weaponizes us. The police are purportedly meant to protect people from harm and enforce the law. The mere act of calling the police on Black people who are barbequing or people of color drumming, by the white people in the cases discussed in this essay for example, means that our bodies and our presence are being registered as a threat, as unlawful, and deserving of violent force.
Drew, the unsheltered African American man in the case of Jogger Joe, quite literally inhabits his flesh and his belongings are mere extensions of his flesh/home. Sintay felt emboldened and entitled to put his hands on Drew’s belongings, picking them up and throwing them into the trash, which demonstrates how we, as Black people, are denied our agency by the policing of the white carceral state, and by extension its constitutive bodies—white people in the U.S. who are invested in whiteness and white supremacy. The disposability of Drew’s belongings, of his flesh, and the impermanence of his presence at the lake, reveal the ways the state disposes of Black people in prisons, disinvests from low-income and majority Black neighborhoods, and sanctions serial displacement through gentrification. According to McKittrick (2006), Brand makes it clear how “humanness is always geographic” (p. ix) and therefore speakable, as well as able to speak for itself. The experiences of Black people at Lake Merritt cannot be separated from the space, its history, or the ways it is represented. However, the dominant ideology relies on this erasure in order to continue existing.

I reject the category of the human in my paper and in order to arrive at new understandings of geographic formations. We need to interrogate how geography is constructed under the dominant ideology as either separate from the human or co-constituted by the white human, the only human within the philosophy of political liberalism. In what ways are Black geographies important sites from which to understand anti-black violence on a metaphysical and material scale? And, how do these scales collapse in the construction of abstract space as hegemonic, white, and commodified? Imaginative configurations of space, as emergent from the Black Radical Tradition, demonstrate how maroonage necessitated a deep knowledge of the natural
environment as an extension of us humans, us Black people and more specifically Black liberation. McKittrick (2006) offers useful language to articulate how the conditions of slavery, and the “racist paradigms” (p. xii) that gave rise to them, continue in the form of “hierarchical patterns” (p. xii) today. In ways that are evidently in direct conversation with Hall’s (1977) critique of the distorting effects of dominant ideology, McKittrick deploys “traditional geographies” (p. xiv) to render legible the spatial project that is domination, which “organizes, names, and sees social differences...and determine where social order happens” (p. xiv). Brown (2018) offers an in-depth analysis of Born In Flames (1983), a film directed by Lizzie Borden, which depicts the lives of various radical, lesbian, and immigrant feminists in the U.S. who mobilize around different views of anarchism.

Revolution, it seems to say, requires a fierce love, made of sweat, blood, and struggle (Brown, 2018, p. 593).

Brown explains how a Black radical feminist stance motivates and frames the anarchist militarism in the film. The women in the film discuss and strategize a revolution, one they claim Black women are in the best position to lead because of the specificity of their compounded exploitation and domination—as they have “suffered at the nexus of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and economic oppression in the United States,” (p. 583). Lizzie Bolden is using film, a creative and public-facing media production, to present an alternative future whereby “revolutionary change is not a destination but a practice” (p. 584) that is characterized by continual questioning and
ambiguity, following the destruction of interlocking systems of domination. The debates in the film, on what a revolution entails, emerge “across affective registers” (p. 593) and because of “mutual care” (p. 593), which is a driver of the revolutionary practice of engaging with the Black Spatial Imaginary. The alternative realities that emerge from an engagement with the Black Spatial Imaginary subvert dominant constructions of abstract space that are premised on white supremacy and capitalism. The collectivism that undergirds engagements with, representations of, and the productions of the Black Spatial Imaginary incite revolutionary change through community solidarity and action.
Conclusion

This thesis is an example of critical Black Feminist scholarly work that explicitly engages with spatial and temporal analyses of anti-blackness in the U.S. in order to shed light on why the state is not a useful site of justice or redress. The racist encounters that have been presented as examples of state-sanctioned anti-black violence are a microcosm of the quotidian violence that constitutes Black subjection in the U.S. When we, as Black people, convene in urban green spaces to barbecue, drum, protest, or simply be, the way we are policed demonstrates how the rhetoric of equal access or safety that is espoused by state bodies naturalizes anti-blackness. What is particularly useful about a spatial analysis that deploys Black Feminist geographic thought is that it presents the lived experiences of Black people in space as a legitimate site from which to understand interlocking systems of domination in material and theoretical ways.

The anti-black, white supremacist project that undergirds the capitalist political economy of this empire necessitates the active erasure of Black place-making practices in green urban spaces as well as rendering anti-black violence unintelligible in the dominant spatial imaginary. I am not interested in entertaining or appealing to the politics of inclusion; the framing of state-sanctioned anti-black violence as a problem of exclusion or better yet, a problem that has at its root a cause that has been assuaged in a “post-racial” period. The pervasiveness of racist encounters today reveals how desegregation of green urban spaces like Lake Merritt did not change the fact that our presence in these spaces as Black people are and will be legible as “out of place” or criminal under the white gaze.
We need to reckon with how these racist encounters demonstrate examples of how Black residents are being silenced in public green urban spaces by white residents and police officers—which also means they are being prohibited from engaging in various forms of self-expression and place-making practices by the state in systematic ways. Visual representations of Black place-making practices and joy are important reminders that a project of Black love is possible, crucial, and beautiful—they are also reminders that Black love has proliferated Black existence, expression, and resistance for time immemorial. What I demonstrated in this thesis is that these racist encounters are not isolated, they are manifestations of anti-blackness that more often than not have real consequences for Black people, while simultaneously securing white impunity. The ongoing ways that Black people assert their belonging in public green spaces like Lake Merritt should be understood as a rational and sensible reaction to being systematically targeted, policed, and killed by the police. Figure 4 depicts a poster publicizing a BBQ’N While Black event at Lake Merritt on June 10, 2018:
Gentrification is a multi-faceted and violent process that reproduces conditions that re-enact the class privilege, policing, and displacement that existed during slavery and Jim Crow. A deliberative engagement with pathways out of a capitalist political economy requires us to consider various alternative futures. In what ways do the philosophies of radical self-love and Black love present starting points to Black Liberation? How do grassroots movements led by working-class Black womxn offer a model that pin-points the U.S. state as the enemy and the people as arbiters of a more just future? How have art and Black aesthetics more generally historically criticized interlocking systems of domination and problematized collective radical efforts to
liberate ourselves? How does a spatial and temporal analysis of anti-blackness reveal the political stakes in democratized power?

There are more questions than answers that have emerged from my thesis. Furthermore, there is a lot more work to be done in order to achieve Black liberation, as it relies on the destruction of the very interlocking systems of domination we need to be grappling with and resisting. I pose these questions, in place of conclusive statements, to urge us to continue to do the work of Black radical feminists like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Lizzie Borden, Julie Dash, Winnie Mandela and Wangari Maathai, who challenged the state and demanded for change. Through this work, I want to honor the liberatory work that earlier Black womxn and people of color, more generally, have started and is our collective responsibility to continue.
References


City of Oakland. City of Oakland Bond Measure DD. Oakland, CA.


