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Abstract
For decades, the San Francisco Bay Area has been a focal point for social justice initiatives and social change in the United States. Activists for racial justice, peace, sexual liberation, and access to healthcare have pervaded the region, using the media as well as their bodies and voices to reshape politics and the landscape. This visible and widespread social critique and activism in the region has transformed conceptualizations of justice. Alternative justice models – informal frameworks for conflict resolution ideally envisioned as outside purview of formal law and the legal system – have become increasingly common mechanisms to combat the deleterious effects of state justice systems in the region. In this article, I use 14 months of ethnographic research and applied anthropological work in the Bay Area to analyze the role of the presence and absence of images and direct action efforts in social justice work. This piece uses insights and findings from this fieldwork to ask: what is the role of images in social justice endeavors? What role does the absence of images in social justice endeavors play for alternative justice organizations and practitioners?
Figure 1: "No More Prisons" etched into the sidewalk in the city of San Francisco. A permanent reminder of ongoing

For decades, the San Francisco Bay Area has been a focal point for social justice initiatives and social change in the United States. Activists for racial justice, peace, sexual liberation, and access to healthcare have pervaded the region, using the media as well as their bodies and voices to reshape politics and the landscape (Bae 2017; Carlsson 2014; Howard 2014). As illustrated in the photo above, activists invade public space in both authorized (legitimate) and unauthorized (illegitimate) ways. They marshal audiovisual media to reveal social injustices and illuminate activist work. For example, photography has been used since the late 1800s to reveal urban inequalities, promote public awareness about social issues, and connect individuals across socioeconomic, geographic, political, and racial barriers (Bogre 2012; Carrasco-Polaino et al 2018; Farrell Racette 2018; Ferdous 2014; Memou 2013). Photography still plays an important role among activists: images are a call to action. Activist groups post on social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, to raise awareness about social issues, stay in touch with the interested public, and publicize their actions. These public calls to action and demonstrations make inequalities and street politics hyper-visible. But as some places, actions, and peoples become visible, others are rendered invisible.

Since initial implementation of alternative justice in the Bay during the 1970s, conceptualizations of justice have transformed alongside political, economic, and population changes. Simultaneously, social movements advocating the advancement of racial, economic, and environmental justice, such as Black Lives Matter (to acknowledge, uplift, and affirm the lives of all Black people), Right to Rest (fight against criminalization of the homeless), and Priced Out (raising consciousness of housing crises, advocating for tenant rights), sustain the region’s history of progressive politics and social activism. The existence of these movements alongside
alternative justice programs seeking to advance social justice provides an opportunity to critically examine the role of allyship in social justice efforts and the relationship of justice practice to social movements working towards similar goals.

This piece uses 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area to analyze the role of the presence and absence of images in social justice work. From 2014-2015 I conducted semi-structured interviews with conflict resolution practitioners, activists, and long-time residents, participant observation of direct action, and non-participant observation of activist and practitioner meetings and tenant conflicts cases throughout the Bay Area. During this time, I also observed alternative justice cases related to social justice, such as tenant rights cases, mediated cases, and facilitated casework. This piece uses insights and findings from this fieldwork to ask: what is the role of images in social justice endeavors? What role does the absence of images in social justice endeavors play for alternative justice organizations and practitioners?

**Modes of Justice in the Bay Area**

The San Francisco Bay Area has been the center for justice initiatives and programs since the 1970s, when the nation’s first community mediation center was developed and implemented in the City of San Francisco. Initially developed as a non-criminalizing justice program, the mediation center had satellite offices throughout the city that were staffed by members of those communities to provide locally-accessible conflict resolution processes (Merry and Milner 1995). The Bay Area has remained a generative space for innovation and the implementation of creative justice models that seek to augment, undermine, or otherwise subvert the legal system (Reinke, 2016a; Schwartz and Levitas 2011). These diverse models are collectively termed “alternative justice” – conflict resolution practices and frameworks that traditionally exist outside purview of the formal legal system – and seek to transform understandings and practices of justice from retribution to restoration.

Alternative justice advocates emphasize the legal system’s overly destructive nature, particularly its disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, focus on punitive rather than rehabilitative or restorative approach, and the inability of law to adequately disrupt and combat structural inequity (Merry and Milner 1995; Mulcahy 2000; Sullivan 2017; Swanson 2009). To address these limitations and harmful practices, myriad alternative justice models have been created and applied in numerous political, economic, and sociocultural contexts throughout the United States and abroad. Alternative justice in its many forms is implemented in diverse contexts, including community-based and neighborhood justice in the US (Merry and Milner 1995; Schwartz and Levitas 2011; Swanson 2009), justice for Indigenous populations and juveniles in Australia (Blagg 1998; Suzuki and Wood 2017), and transitional justice processes throughout the world (Evans 2016; von Au 2017).

The San Francisco Bay Area is a site of rapid urban transformation deriving from technology (“tech”) and start-up booms. These pervasive issues and tensions provide a unique opportunity to examine the current place and space of alternative
justice in a rapidly transforming environment that is beset by rapid and uneven political, economic, and social change. While the alternative justice practitioners I interviewed in the Bay attempt to carve out their place on the landscape in business offices and their place in politics with the state, they largely ignore the impact of visual and active direct action, such as protests and public works of art, that seek to reach shared social justice goals (e.g., combating gentrification, supporting marginalized communities) (Reinke 2016a). Instead, they choose to try and transform political and legal structures from within – achieving social justice goals by working closely with the state itself. As a result, alternative justice nonprofits align themselves with politicians and seek financial and political support from the state as means to support their social justice efforts. However, activists associated with social movements seeking similar goals (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Priced Out) use direct action, taking to the streets to voice dissent and advocate for social change. Those social movements became hyper-visible on the urban landscape and social media as they sought to disturb residents’ ordinary life in order to illuminate social inequalities (Maharawal 2017). As they became hyper-visible via direct action and associated media coverage, alternative justice practitioners and programs rendered themselves invisible.

Using 14 months of fieldwork in the Bay Area during the height of various and overlapping social justice movements, I discuss the relationships between justice, social activism, the contemporary political economic landscape of the Bay. In this piece it is the presence as much as the absence of images that matters. Although the presence of images in activist work is crucial, the absence of visual images from alternative justice practitioners and organizations themselves becomes a theme to provoke thought and discussion.

**Tech Boom, Housing Bust**

The rise of social movements in the Bay Area has occurred alongside the rise of the technology and start-up boom, colloquially referred to as the “tech boom” by the region’s residents. The Bay’s close proximity to Silicon Valley, a focal point for technological innovation and wealth, and the available economic incentives for companies in the region have led to the proliferation of tech and start-up companies in the city of San Francisco and nearby areas.

A major result of the tech boom is skyrocketing cost of living. Residents, businesses, and non-profits are routinely “priced out” as rents increase as high as 40% from one lease term to the next (Murphy 2015). Rent for a single-bed apartment costs an average of over $3,500 per month; by comparison, rent in San Jose averages $2,500 (Gonzalez 2018). Those that are priced out of San Francisco often relocate across the Bay to Oakland. This caused rapid growth into downtown Oakland, now a space of increasing costs and displacement of residents (LaGrone 2016). Gentrification continues to proliferate. Minority racial and economic communities are hardest hit by displacement and subsequent movement (LaGrone 2016; Werth and Marienthal 2016). Similar processes are happening in San Francisco as incoming residents disrupt socially-bound
neighborhoods. For example, the Mission District, a historically low-income Hispanic neighborhood in San Francisco, has been a major site of gentrification in recent years; skyrocketing rent prices and rapid development associated with incoming tech and start-up worker residents have pushed and priced many long-time Mission residents out (Mirabal 2009).

Incoming tech and start-up workers are characterized by disenfranchised long-term Bay residents as unwelcome and a nuisance at best, and incursion or invasion at worst (see Reinke 2016b). Conflict between incoming and marginalized residents has led to protests that target transit buses for tech employees, evictions of Bay residents, and City Hall. Protests target incoming residents and the companies they work for (e.g., Twitter) as a mechanism to demonstrate against gentrification. Gentrification is generally understood as a tool for changing property relations, creating consumption spaces yielding higher ground rent (Smith 1979), and is often done through streetscaping, reevaluations of property value, and requires consideration of productive and unproductive consumption (Lees 2016; Saunders 2018; Stehlin 2016).

Although tenant rights and homelessness activists identify Bay Area politicians as serving tech interests, their direct action tends to focus on physical markers of gentrification, such as high rise developments and tech transit buses. For example, they target the shadow transit system of buses that shuttle tech workers in and out of San Francisco. They blockade buses from picking up tech workers who live in the city and dropping them off at work in the south Bay. These direct action efforts are publicized
on social media and are freely available for sharing. Activist members of Priced Out, a tenant rights social movement, use images to document their direct action efforts and raise public awareness about issues in the urban landscape. In Figure 2, activists use their bodies to blocking buses while wearing reflective vests and holding signs with slogans that read “ILLEGAL USE OF PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE” and “Public $$$$$ Private Gains.” Other similar protests feature signs saying: “Eviction Free San Francisco,” “Love the Bay, Block the Bus” and “TECHSPLOITATION IS TOXIC.” Activists use their bodies as well as their voices and signs to protest the shadow transit system and to create a rich audiovisual account of their efforts that can then be shared widely.

Recently deceased former San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee is a particularly vilified figure among social justice activists. His generous tax breaks to Twitter in 2011 were provided in exchange for their headquarters move into the mid-Market neighborhood city (see Figure 3). The deal resulted in the “revitalization” of an area long considered the city’s skid row. Revitalization arrived in the form of expensive coffee shops, overpriced avocado toast, high rise apartments, and expensive markets. Anti-gentrification activists have renamed the neighborhood ‘Twitterloin,’ a combination of Twitter and Tenderloin, the adjacent low-income neighborhood. Catholic Charities and other nonprofits serving the homeless and low-income communities are still located only a couple blocks away from Twitter headquarters and the bright modern glass buildings nearby. Alternative justice organizations continue to host training events in Twitterloin in an attempt to keep their work situated in high conflict and underserved areas. However, during one training event in which I was a participant observer, a participant remarked that she felt “uncomfortable in this neighborhood.” When I probed further, she reflected on how “dirty” the neighborhood and people felt to her.

While the city is rebranding mid-Market as an arts and business district for bustling young and wealthy workers, activists created Streetopia, a utopic festival and subsequent book of writings that reflect on gentrification and the way art can simultaneously aid and resist gentrification (Clarke 2015). Activists continue to marshal visuals in their efforts against displacement of mid-Market residents, despite their general failures to preserve affordable housing or to mitigate the increased policing associated with gentrification.

Alternative Justice and Rapid Urban Transformation

Social justice activists, but especially tenant rights and homelessness activists, focus on the role of the tech boom in perpetuating and deepening economic, racial, and environmental inequity. Tech innovators, start-up employees, and other contributors to the Tech Boom 2.0 and resultant urban transformation reside in and around San Francisco taking up housing space, driving up the costs of living, and reshaping the look and feel of neighborhoods (Reinke 2016b). The result for long-term and low-income residents I had the privilege of speaking with during my fieldwork is feelings of panic, fear, and of living in an unrecognizable landscape. Activists working for tenant rights and alternative justice practitioners working on eviction and property conflicts reflect these concerns through their work. Activists are pushing back via writings, protests
and demonstrations, art installations, and mapping projects. The image below features Theresa Flandrich, longtime activist using her body and voice to protest her no-fault eviction. The banner spans the length of her building and reads “EVICATION=DEATH." In front of her stands a small table that serves as an altar for spiritual items such as sage for smudging and a photo display commemorating individuals who died after the stress of an eviction. Theresa uses her physical presence as well as her voice to marshal support for the anti-eviction and pro-tenant rights movements in the region. Tenants Rights and Eviction Free San Francisco, two social justice activist organizations specializing in tenant rights, attended Theresa’s eviction, but alternative justice practitioners that provide conflict resolution recourse for no-fault evictions were nowhere to be found. The absence of their voices, expertise, and physical presence were palpable for me.

Figure 3: Twitter Headquarters and NEMA Apartments, Mid-Market Neighborhood, San Francisco, CA. NEMA’s marketing slogan: “NEMA has the San Francisco lifestyle in its DNA – it is an authentic product of its time and place.”

Figure 4: Theresa Flandrich stands before a sign reading EVICATION = DEATH and an altar that commemorates elderly individuals who passed away after an eviction. Theresa and her neighbor Silvio were evicted from their building in North Beach.
Housing insecurity and displacement are pervasive concerns in the Bay. Living costs increases have driven many disenfranchised long-term residents out of the region. This phenomenon is referred to as being Priced Out. For example, neighborhoods like North Beach (home to Italian and Chinese residents; see Figure 4), the Tenderloin (home to African American and Vietnamese communities) and the Mission District (Hispanic; see Figure 5), and have been disproportionately impacted by rising costs and incoming residents. By contrast, historically wealthy, White, and traditionally desirable neighborhoods, such as Nob Hill and Pacific Heights, have been generally less impacted by this trend. Their ability to lobby against incoming residents is rooted in their historical landownership and the associated power within the political and economic spheres. The disproportionate impact of urban development and influx of new residents falls along economic, racial, and political lines and continues to replicate structural inequalities (Maharawal 2017; Mirabal 2009; Murphy 2015; Saunders 2018; Stehlin 2016).

Figure 5: Brogrammers Off the Block, San Francisco, CA.

Flyers requesting that all “brogrammers” leave the Mission District began appearing throughout the area in fall 2015.

Figure 6: Gentrification = Police Brutality.

In zones of gentrification, increased policing criminalizes the homeless, low-income peoples, and racial minorities; many have examined the critical link between ongoing gentrification and increased police brutality.
Despite the industry boom and the capital associated with it, poverty rates are still high and wealth is not spread evenly across the landscape (O’Connor 2015). This in conjunction with criminalizing homelessness led to Right to Rest protests which increased significantly during the 2016 Super Bowl. Activists teamed up during the Super Bowl to depict former Mayor Ed Lee as a football player kicking the homeless across the Bay out of San Francisco in Figure 6. Activists particularly resent the rising number of sweeps striving to “clean up” the streets of the city; the sweeps displace the homeless from their makeshift shelters to other areas of the city.

Activists use visible direct action techniques to display the disproportionate treatment and policing of marginalized racial communities and the homeless throughout the Bay Area (see Figures 6 and 7). Bearing signs that connect police brutality with gentrification, activists focus on this phenomenon as it occurs in gentrification zones, where police are “cleaning up the streets” (Hudson 2015; Rosenfeld 2015). As San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors apologized for police shootings (Waxmann 2016), the police continue to disproportionately patrol and police areas of gentrification.

Launched in 2007, 311 in San Francisco provides a nonemergency service infrastructure, alleviating nonemergency calls to police (AEMP 2015). The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project demonstrates that spikes in the number and frequency of 311 calls occur in areas of gentrification, such as the Mission District, South of Market, and the areas between the Tenderloin and Nob Hill (AEMP 2015). The disproportionate policing and removal of communities of color in zones of gentrification continue to be central components of activist struggles in the Bay Area (see Figure 7; Finamore 2016; Har 2016). Direct action bridged Priced Out and Black Lives Matter movements and cultivated collaborations. However, despite their shared goals and work...
Alternative justice practitioners maintain distance from these social movements and their direct action efforts. Although the majority of cases I observed or mediated during my research were tenant rights issues (e.g., no-fault eviction, primary and sub-tenant conflicts) related to gentrification and involved marginalized communities, such as people of color or LGBTQ+ community members, alternative justice practitioners failed to connect their micro-level work to these macro-level processes.

**Placing Allyship in Alternative Justice**

The forces pushing marginalized groups out of the region also affect alternative justice practitioners. The practitioners I had the pleasure of conducting research with are often well-educated, holding degrees in conflict resolution or peace studies. They adhere to the belief that conflict is a generative space for examining difference and building commonality; they consider having tough conversations essential to building a better society. Practitioners facilitate meetings, mediate disputes between neighbors or relatives, and restore relationships between victims, offenders, and the community. Their interests in building a better society based on relationships, community, and healing position practitioners to substantively contribute to social movements and actions clamoring to address regional inequality and displacement.

However, the political, economic, and social transformations occurring throughout the Bay are also dramatically impacting the lives of practitioners and their work. Underpaid, unable to meet basic living expenses in areas where they work, my research participants working in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Berkeley, and Oakland often commute up to and over an hour to and from work. Volunteers also spend up to an hour commuting to a single event. Commute times, staff shortages, and competition for few jobs are a result of shifting economic and political landscapes – the same processes relegating marginalized groups to city limits. As a researcher who worked within a conflict resolution nonprofit during my time in the Bay, I also felt the pressures of paying rent, sharing space with multiple roommates to make ends meet, and the intense time and emotional energies required for alternative justice work.

Alternative justice organizations are typically nonprofits. They struggle to meet the overhead costs associated with holding office space in locations accessible to mass transit and the marginalized communities they serve. Many organizations receive up to half of their income from government funding and grants (see SFCB 2015). The economic uncertainty that attends fluctuating grants has pushed organizations to streamline and economize. San Francisco Community Boards (SFCB) – the longest running community mediation center in the US – once held several offices throughout the City, one for each community they served. This model allowed office staff to mirror residents in that community, ensuring that staff spoke the language and understood local concerns. However, budget cuts and an inability to meet multiple rents pushed SFCB to consolidate into a single office now located in the Tenderloin.

Despite high numbers of trained practitioners, organizations have difficulty maintaining an active pool of practitioners who reflect the diversity of the Bay. The juncture of or-
ganizational and individual pressures affecting alternative justice practice and urban transformations is illustrated in the community meetings between the city of San Francisco and Mission District community leaders during my research.

Mission residents requested the community meetings in the wake of rapid development and subsequent displacement of residents. Development projects sparked widespread protests, such as Figure 8, where activists took over City Hall to demonstrate against the “Monster in the Mission.” Activists successfully stalled “Beast on Bryant” (274 luxury apartments on the 2000 block of Bryant Street in the Mission) and “Monster in the Mission” (345 units at 16th and Mission Streets) developments until November 2015 elections failed to halt market-driven development in the area.

Community meetings between city and community leaders were not going well: language barriers, high intensity emotions, and inability to find common ground stymied the talks. An alternative justice facilitator was requested with the purpose of keeping meetings on task and facilitating effective communication. When an experienced facilitator was introduced, their identity as a White non-community member – despite their desire to serve as an ally and intermediary – incited the community further. The center contracted to find a facilitator went back to the drawing board and, after much searching and several weeks, was unable to locate a resident that was qualified to serve as a facilitator. Instead, an affluent Hispanic woman, though not a Mission resident, was contracted.

This case demonstrates the complex interrelationships of gentrification, alternative justice, social justice, and the political and economic challenges facing the city and its residents. Alternative justice practitioners are increasingly drawn into ongoing social movements pushing back against the rapid gentrification saturating the region. Alternative justice practitioners, themselves emphasizing their framework’s ability to posi-

Figure 8: No Monster in the Mission. In response to proposed development, termed the “Monster in the Mission,” protesters take over City Hall. Courtesy of Kyle Smeallie.
tively impact social relations and communities, are theoretically positioned to address pervasive issues, such as tensions between Mission residents and the city. However, practitioners fail to reflect community identity or to meet the meaning of true allyship – the ongoing process of supporting and uplifting marginalized groups. It is precisely because of rapid urban transformation, with its political, economic, and social effects, that alternative justice practitioners in the Bay Area have consistently failed to embody allyship and substantively contribute to social justice in the region. Their absence in activism except in contexts where they are on contract, such as in the Mission, means they are also absent in wider social movement efforts, such as Priced Out and Black Lives Matter.

Conclusion
Alternative justice practitioners in the Bay Area must navigate between the daily pressures that living in the region poses and their commitment to social justice goals. Negotiating the need for political and economic support from the state – a major driver of the proliferation of alternative justice in California and the US more generally – and the fact that the state continues to perpetrate violence in marginalized communities is an underlying issue pervading much of the justice work in the region. Practitioners are thus occupying the informal-formal justice nexus, a space between formal law and state and activist work on social justice.

Practitioners caught in this nexus often fail to join direct action efforts, such as protesting and public art initiatives. They seek to define their work as anti-state through its focus on healing, communication, and active participation, attempting to reshape the meaning of justice itself from antagonism to cooperation, from retribution to restoration. When situated in the Bay Area however, these meanings are often lost. Facilitations between the city and Mission District community leaders appear to have failed; alternative justice could not incorporate the needs of both the city (to have a highly trained facilitator) and the community (to have a facilitator who reflected their identity and could represent their culture and interests). On its most basic level, this is a failure of the framework to provide adequate justice that is universally serving and holistic, two principles held by advocates as its strength.

By locating alternative justice practices and practitioners within the complex and shifting landscape of the Bay Area, this article has sought to illuminate how these individuals and organizations do and do not mirror the social justice activities that surround them. These individuals and organizations must navigate social justice movements, activists, and the political economics of allyship between these movements and the state. The tensions between being an ally to social movements that seek similar goals and meeting the everyday needs of living and working in the Bay Area continue to affect the daily life and decision-making of alternative justice practitioners in the region.
Notes
[1] In keeping with participant’s preferences, the term “Hispanic” is used here.

References


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