

Chapter Three

They Plan for Profits, We Plan for People: Local Politics and International Conversations in the Mission District

September 27, 2013. On this day, renowned Mission District artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña wrote an open letter to his colleague, René Yañez. After three decades of residency in the neighborhood, Yañez and his wife were being evicted.

It seems that we no longer have a citizenry but rather a virtual mob. I see them everyday, the hordes of iPad and iPhone texting zombies, oblivious to us and our lives, our inspirations and our tribulations. I see them in my building and on the street, invading the city with an attitude of unchecked entitlement, taking over every square inch and squeezing out the last drops of otherness. I see them outside of my studio on 24th and Bryant wondering “How much does the weird native guy pay for rent?”; getting ready to make their outrageous bid to our landlord. 300% increase?

No problem. City Hall has their back!

Our city has become a bohemian theme park for consumer fools with the latest gadgets in hand, but what happens when there are no more bohemians left? In the meantime we are all sadly witnessing, day by day, how funky, decades-old Mexican restaurants and immigrants bars full of memories and ghosts get replaced overnight by upscale eateries and theme bars for twenty-somethings; the old billiard halls, specialty stores, beauty parlors, and *carnicerias* become “smart cafes” and “gourmet bakeries” for a new clientele who might as well live in Dallas or San Diego. Thousands of artists have moved to Oakland or further away, sometimes back to their hometowns. I myself have lost at least 30 performance art colleagues in the last 5 years. I cannot stand the thought of losing you as well.

Gómez-Peña’s letter unpeeled the multiple ways that people experience a neighborhood in the spasms of displacement. As homes

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are lost, so too are the things that make cities valuable: sanctuary, memory, culture, and community. Yañez's impending eviction represented the destruction of all four. He was responsible for bringing the Dia de los Muertos celebration to the Mission, founding the Galería de la Raza and other Latino cultural institutions, while mentoring a generation of radical artists.¹

"In my block, what I see is people getting evicted, at the same time as a great deal of cultural tourism. There is going to be just enough left of Latino culture to provide the illusion of Latinism or Chingonismo," remarked Yañez.²

In 2013 the housing movement was reinvigorated and took to the streets once more. With evictions quickly cannibalizing the remains of the city's housing stock, the city's tech industry loomed large in activist crosshairs. Resurgent tech, whose bubble was thought to be burst in 2000 was back with a vengeance, with 1,700 firms employing 44,000 people.³ The vast majority of those people migrated from places far afield. Simple laws of competition pitted tech workers, whose median starting wage is \$123,000, against the rest of the city for housing already in scarce supply.⁴ According to the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, a volunteer effort that researches the impacts and causes of displacement, evictions were up 115 percent in 2013 over the previous year.⁵

The clear-cutting of San Francisco's affordable housing has resulted in an atmosphere that can best be described as "Tech versus Everyone Else." In September of 2013, activists associated with Eviction Free San Francisco began blockading the now-infamous "Google Buses," private corporate buses that transport techies from their neighborhoods in San Francisco to the corporate headquarters of Google, Facebook, MTV, and others in nearby Silicon Valley. The tactic was simple: surround the bus and don't let anyone get to work on time. The series of protests drew international media attention to San Francisco's displacement epidemic. But the meaning of protests was contested, even by the protesters themselves: some insisted that they wanted the techies to join the movement against displacement, viewing them as simply high-paid pawns in the game. And others made little distinction between a Facebook employee and Mark Zuckerberg, the company's boy-wonder founder whose personal net worth

hovers around \$27 billion—roughly equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product of Bolivia.⁶ It was a fascinating case of *indirect* action. The blockades put a face on displacement even if it would be impossible to know who on the bus, if anyone, had actually displaced someone. The actions tapped the politics of resentment. Who were these people who expected their own private transportation system when the rest of us had to take the city bus? Why were the buses allowed to park in public bus stops? A parent doing the same thing, dropping their kid off at an appointment, for example, would risk a \$271 ticket.

Yañez's eviction illustrates the mechanics of how property speculation works to displace long-term residents. Golden Properties Limited Liability Company (LLC) purchased the four-unit building he lived in. While represented by a single individual, Sergio Iantorno, the LLC typically gathers several investors in a legal entity, which shields their other investments from legal action and can be used to obscure ownership. Used in the private market, it is a tool to minimize oversight while maximizing profits.

Yañez and his family paid \$450 a month for rent, though rents in the same neighborhood now start at \$2,700. This is a monumental “rent gap” (the difference between what a property is earning for an owner and what it *could* earn). In most housing markets, buildings with multiple apartments in them fetch a much higher price if sold separately as tenancy-in-common schemes rather than as a single building. Say that Yañez's landlord bought the whole building for \$1.5 million dollars and went on to sell each unit for \$750,000 to individual investors.

The Mission District's plight, and that of the larger city, is reminiscent of another tech boom, in the 1990s. (Ironically, Yañez fought off an eviction then as well.) The previous boom died an unceremonious death and took with it a host of firms whose names are scarcely remembered today. However, the unresolved issues from the final decade of the twentieth century cast a long shadow today. How can housing affordable to lower- and middle-income people be preserved in a market economy? What types of goals should urban social movements adopt to prevent displacement? How can concerns of representation and authenticity in a city pockmarked by race and class inequalities be addressed?