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On Colorfastness and Soil Remediation

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
UTC Art Department

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And I'm going to tell you the story too. When I lived in East Lake Courts, down here, I made a vow that I will have my children out of the project by the time my oldest son get 13 years old. And unbeknownst to me, I started having these dreams about trees. I would have these dreams about trees, trees, green trees all over the place. And I think it was a year later, after I moved in this house — it was a year later, I remember my oldest son was 13 years old. Two days before he turned 13 years old, we moved in this house. And all those trees that I saw, I'm in the midst of them. All over the place.

— Linda Richards

Secretary of the East Lake Neighborhood Association in Chattanooga, Tennessee

“Trust me enough to follow my thoughts, but mistrust me enough to question them,”

— Ashley Hunt

This site, this neighborhood, this fragmented census tract: like a stained-glass window shattered and then fused together again, light diffuses differently depending on where you stand. East Lake bears the marks of the toxic sublime,¹ a palette complicated by interactions between cadmium punches of Southern racism and verdant bursts of community activism. This story is about colorfastness — the physical resistance of a color to the loss of its original quality. This

¹1. Jennifer Peeples, *Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes* (Environmental Communication 2011), 5:4, 373-392, DOI: [10.1080/17524032.2011.616516](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2011.616516)

story is about a place where nostalgia meets optimism, but this place that is not my home. This is an essay of simultaneous contrasts,² a naming of things changing hues amid systematic shifts.

~

Few records of the East Lake neighborhood exist in the Chattanooga public archives. A small number of photographs documenting industrial pollution and legal briefs concerning desegregation pertaining to the neighborhood are filed in archival collections. According to the census, most of the houses in the neighborhood were built before the year 1960.³ There are no registered historical markers in East Lake, but the neighborhood's public park was Chattanooga's first.

I find a peculiar silence among the records. Did a hush fall over East Lake when the factory jobs disappeared? Where are the deeds, diaries, documents, photographs, and blueprints that can help tell the story of East Lake? They are not in the public library's archive. I know that there are documents collecting dust in private homes. The disparate stories that define East Lake's placeness are tangled among the memories of residents, the flow of creeks, and the state of the soil. Over the course of seven months, I gathered oral histories from residents of East Lake — a small testament to the colors, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of East Lake in 2019.

²2. According to color theory, this is the phenomena where one color affects the hue or tone of another when two colors are in close proximity to each other.

³3. U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, accessed October 27, 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_5YR_S2502&prodType=table.

~

The East Lake Neighborhood Association considers themselves guardians of the neighborhood. These individuals keep track of bicycle thieves and litter bugs. Ms. Linda, a modest, fashionable woman in her late 60s with satiny brown skin softened by years of wear, clutches a clipboard, bows her head, and calls the association to prayer. After the approval of last meeting's minutes, Curtis, one of the members, brings up the topic of slumlords. Jazmine jumps in. "Isn't there any way to fine them for leaving trash out after they evict people?" She adjusts her denim vest covered in a spectrum of buttons, essentially her uniform for getting things done. She's the youngest member of the association, in her mid-thirties. The conversation moves on to programming. Cecilie smacks her thigh and glares over the rims of her glasses. "Hey. Now, wait a *minute!*"

Cecilie is a fiercely vocal White woman who stretches her vowels with an "East-Coast" bitter-sweetness. She moved to East Lake from Florida in 2001 and has interjected herself in every discussion pertaining to neighborhood upkeep. "You can't let them [the city] walk all over you!" Cecilie references the last party that rented out the meeting house and left it trashed. Lisa, the neighborhood association president, rolls her eyes. "Cecilie, you know we can't charge them a deposit. We rent through the city." Cecilie is not pleased. She protests. She interrupts. She smacks the table.

In our interview, I ask Danny, the treasurer, a White man, the tired listener of the group, why younger people don't come to the meetings. He shrugs. He doesn't think that the neighborhood association will outlive the renovations to the park. He doesn't think they can do

anything without young people, but most young people are not homeowners. The park in East Lake is under construction for long overdue city-sponsored renovations. The Youth and Family Development Center is next. Then, a public art installation will be installed at one of these two sites. I am left with the realization that the neighborhood association is not the representative body that it claims to be. No one in the association represents the Latinx and immigrant community that comprises about one-third of East Lake's population. The group of self-appointed guardians want a clean, safe, sustainable neighborhood. But their priorities, mainly, the aesthetics of homeownership, do not reflect those whom they represent. I see that their relevance, and therefore, influence, is waning.

At the corner of 29th and Dodds, two wooden posts, support an ovular maroon sign. It reads: *Welcome to East Lake Est. 1887* in white letters and features pictograms of a steepled church, house, multi-story office building, and a line suggesting Lookout Mountain. But the color of the sign is wrong, according to Cecelie. She claims that the original color of the neighborhood was purple, and the sign should be purple today too. I ask why. "Because of the *history*," she retorts without further explanation of what the history is.

~

Daniel

I'm Dan, Daniel, or Dan or whatever. I've lived in East Lake most of my life. All of my almost 67 years, except for about five and a half or six. Now, of course, the school colors were purple and white and green. It's, it's ... the yards, trees, and stuff out here.

Well, okay. It was segregated, you know? I don't think I ever went to school with any Black kids until I went to high school in '67.

~

While Chattanooga can boast that it was one of the first Southern cities to comply with the Brown v. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court ruling, the process of policy implementation remained inequitable and unacceptable, especially in the eyes of activists.⁴ The schools were partially desegregated in 1962.⁵ However, the ratio was this: forty Black students transferred to all-White schools and one White student transferred to an all-Black school.⁶ Impatiently, James Mapp, named as a leader of the Black community in the city by the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, filed a lawsuit against Hamilton County Schools. He argued that the system's neglect to immediately desegregate the schools was unlawful. The school system argued that it was complying "in good faith." One paragraph from the transcript of a brief from the defendant, strikes me: "Almost four thousand teenagers will be involved. Approximately 180 teachers will be involved. As was testified to by Dr. Carmichael, the dimensions of the administrative problems is directly related to the number of students and teachers who are having a new and strange experience."⁷

⁴ 4. Springer Gibson, "School Board Reaffirms Intention to Integrate; Plans Hearings Soon." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, October 13, 1955.

⁵ 5. Gibson, "School Board Reaffirms Intention to Integrate; Plans Hearings Soon."

⁶ 6. Gibson.

⁷ 7. Ibid.

The defendant argues that White students will have too hard of a time with the racial integration to focus on their studies. Not a thought for the Black students who probably faced death threats from classmates. Although Hamilton County desegregated public schools in 1963, integration was not actualized. In 1986, Mapp's lawsuit was dismissed, and the benchmarks in Chattanooga's desegregation plans have yet to be realized. Today, an ironic monument to this sustained injustice looms over MLK boulevard, casting its shadow over a rapidly gentrifying street below.

Three years ago, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga renamed a building on campus after James Mapp. I have hustled past this building on my way to class countless times. It looks like any other state office building. His name now adorns the facade, yet there is no architectural indication that this building stands in honor of a man who fought for the civil rights of African American citizens in Chattanooga. Follow that shadow where it lands, and not far from the site, recently constructed university housing encroaches on the few remaining Black-owned business of East MLK Boulevard (aka Ninth Street).

On this street, the trees are shorter than the towering oaks in East Lake. A block of fresh ginkgo saplings lines the new sidewalks that border the breweries built within the last five years. Bessie Smith once called Ninth Street home. A Jazz community emerged here that would rival Beale Street in Memphis. Ninth Street was settled by formally enslaved persons after the Civil War because the real estate was cheap. The real estate was cheap because White people found the downtown swampland undesirable.⁸ On this same street, thirty-nine years ago, five elderly

⁸ 8. Michelle R. Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga : Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 82.

Black women were murdered by gunshots from the Klu Klux Klan.⁹ In response to the city's silence, activists from the Black community hurried ladders to the streets to cover Ninth Street signs with green bumper stickers reading, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd."¹⁰ Eventually, the city government conceded to renaming the street, that is, after permission from one of Chattanooga's wealthiest White developers, T.A. Lupton (who had recently invested in two office buildings on Ninth Street).¹¹

Desegregation did not promise equality in real estate deals. The street, once an electric strip that defined a self-sufficient community of Black business owners, artists, and activists, now defines income inequality. Today, an overwhelmingly White crowd of students, including myself, and urban elites hop the White owned bars. Among these urbanites, folks without permanent housing plead for a cigarette. Or bus fare. At the end of the street, the Bessie Smith Cultural Center is shaded by the tallest trees on the block. As I walk the street, I think of bell hooks who writes, "Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history."¹² East Lake is only a five-minute drive from here. For now, deciduous trees twist high above the neighborhood's YFD center, casting dappled noonday summer sun across the green basketball court. Black and Latinx family-owned small businesses thrive in the

⁹ . Joan Garrett McClane and Joy Lukachick Smith, "Chattanooga Times Free Press." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, Chattanooga Times Free Press, <https://projects.timesfreepress.com/2017/08/thelostway/about.html>.

¹⁰ . McClane and Smith

¹¹ . McClane and Smith

¹² 12. bell hooks, *Black Looks : Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 31.

neighborhood. Like MLK Boulevard, East Lake's autonomy is shrinking under the gaze of developers. It is transforming from an undesirable location to a promising real estate investment.

~

Across the street from East Lake Elementary, bulldozers unearth grassroots once fertilized by the migrant Canadian geese, now missing from the construction site. Last year, I watched as gaggles of students flew across the street to ride bikes, play soccer, and dart among falling leaves in the park. Now, without a park to meet after school, the caravan of parents idling on 13th Ave stretches longer as their children's names echo over a walkie talkie. The neighborhood is in a state of transition, a new and strange experience.

In our interview, Daniel explained that the park was the hub of the neighborhood. It was a tool to get people involved with community service. He said all you had to do to get people to volunteer was go to the park and serve food. Now, the green hues of the park are obscured by a black fabric wrapped around the perimeter. Fluorescent orange cones direct traffic away from men in neon vests pouring concrete. Yellow backhoes, white dump trucks, the red upturned clay dirt — a palette of anticipation.

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As I pore through the digital archives of the Chattanooga Public Library, jarring photographs of a creek near Rossville Boulevard surface. On June 1, 1970, an anonymous

documentarian from the Tennessee Division of Water Pollution Control took photographs of a purple creek flowing past East Lake and other neighborhoods in South Chattanooga.¹³ The color is almost beautiful. Liquid amethyst lapping against a quasi-shore of brown bubbling sludge. Drainage pipes leaking a byzantium ooze. And then, seepage slopping in violet and deep indigo hues, clotting at the base of a ditch. Toxic sublime. This purple phenomenon was caused by an expulsion of dye waste from a factory in Chattanooga. However, there are no newspaper clippings of the incident recorded in the files of public archives. On one hand, I am perplexed. How could there *not* be any reporting on this bizarre phenomenon? On the other hand, this event took place in 1970 when a rainbow of polluted water washed through the industrial South. This silence is evidence of the institutional environmental injustice inflicted upon East Lake.

The next day, I drive to the Salvation Army in the neighborhood. From what I gather on Google maps, the creek from the archived photographs must be this one behind the playground — Chattanooga Creek. I walk along the bank, concrete and algae carpeted. A 2x4 plank and an empty liter of orange Fanta lay partially submerged in the stagnant water. Gnats and water spiders disrupt the reflection of a basketball goal in the water below. I follow the creek behind the Salvation Army. It runs alongside dilapidated wooden picnic tables and informative plaques about benevolent services. I find a white metal sign sunken beneath the water. Green algae obscure the purple lettering, and I can't make out the warning. I follow the creek to an industrial park where it runs under a loading area. I photograph it from behind a chain link fence. I

¹³ 13. Tennessee Division of Water Pollution Control, "Purple Dye Waste." Chattanooga History Collections, Chattanooga Public Library, 3 May 2011. <https://chattanooga.pastperfectonline.com/media/F0235FFE-A7F0-444D-8C93-094583490217>.

continue following the creek to another school in the neighborhood, Clifton Hills Elementary. Rather, I follow the creek and find a dry bed where it is supposed to be.

~

Ms. Linda

I've lived in East Lake 36 years. It was March 31st, 1983 when my kids and I moved in. Okay. All the colors... You really want to know right now? Right now? Dreary. Dark colors. They're all dark, black, browns, and black-browns. And just a hint-- I want to say a hint of a neutral color.

I see these colors in the homes, on the streets. That's where I see them. And I'm trying to see the sun. But I don't see it right now. Too much junk. But when I walked that block [12th Ave], I kept the trash picked up. I always kept a bag. I can't stand trash. It just does something to me on the inside. But if everyone took ownership in your block or the neighborhood, where you see trash, you pick it up. And if you've got somebody come into your house, pick it up. I always say, "Don't drop trash."

Ten years ago, the colors were brilliant. All I know is that-- all I know is I wanted that area to be close-knit, close-knit. And that was 36 years ago. I still do have the feeling, but not as strong as I did because things have changed down that street. But I wanted to do the whole street. That's a straight street. It's a straight street. And I wanted to go through there one day and talk to the neighbors and get everybody to know each other. And everybody'd be close. And

it was just something in me that wanted to do that on that street. I wanted a model. I guess, I wanted what communities ought to. I wanted a model, and I wanted 12th Avenue to be that model. I wanted to build a street up. Build those houses up. Build the people up. I wanted to make things happen on that street.

Now, I'd like to see yellow. Bright. I'd like to see bright colors. I don't want to see pure white. It'd get dirty fast. But I want to see bright colors. I want to see those reds and greens and vibrant colors. In the houses, down 12th Avenue. I want to see life. I want to see some life, some active, vibrant life. That's what I want to see.

~

When I think of East Lake, there's music in porch windchimes and the thump of soccer ball punts. Elephant tracks trod by children dashing back and forth among front porch gatherings disrupt the asphalt grid, connecting weather-worn yellow, pink, blue, and green houses. Before working with East Lake Language & Arts, the words "East Lake" summoned hues haloed with golden hour light. White houses glowing in orange rays against purple sky, barking dogs chasing circles around trees, and toddlers feeding ducks hunks of honey buns by the lake in the park.

ELLA, East Lake Language & Art, germinated through the nurturing of a shared frustration. Jazmine and her co-founder, Audrey, grew impatient with the lack of art classes in East Lake elementary and middle schools. Other parents shared the same concern and formed an in-home reading group. Today, they work constantly on a limited budget to provide safe,

creative spaces for the neighborhood youth in and outside of the classroom. They also organize and execute altruistic DIY urbanism projects to improve the safety and wellness of the neighborhood alongside, and more often ahead of, the East Lake Neighborhood Association. These projects include crocheting rainbow colored yarn nets for neglected basketball hoops, organizing trash clean-ups near the elementary school, and hosting personal book binding workshops. Their mission is to help neighbors communicate and form bonds across language barriers by engaging in cultural exchange via literature and art projects. When Jazmine heard that Public Art was planning to invest in East Lake, she wanted the community to have a say in how it was going to be done. Now, I can see the evidence of a palpable ache for something to hold on to here. Chain link fences fold in on themselves from sustained trespasses. Churches on almost every corner with hand-painted signs and unshuffled kiosks urge the community toward holy tables. Broken glass bottle shards gleaming among the weeds of vacant lots.

~

If you have worked in the Chattanooga's tourism industry, even as a low wage cashier for a museum, you know who Walter Cronkite is -- the news anchor who announced that Chattanooga was the dirtiest city in the country.¹⁴ I am exhausted by the mythical narrative of the

¹⁴ . Andrews, Travis M, "Sorry Cronkite, Chattanooga Might Be the Cleanest City In America." Southern Living. Meredith Home Group. Accessed November 14, 2019. <https://www.southernliving.com/travel/tennessee/sorry-cronkite-chattanooga-might-be-the-cleanest-city-in-america>.

city's revitalization. Once a dump, now deemed "Best Town Ever" by Outside magazine.¹⁵ This city's "progress" from an industrial national embarrassment to a *livable* city is attributed to its ability to commodify this myth. The tourism sector wants to paint the town green. *Look how far we've come! Look how clean!* During my archival research, I stumbled across a book on urban planning that applauds Chattanooga for a spectacular job well done. "But probably the single most important factor that contributed to Chattanooga's success and continued growth is that Chattanooga capitalized on what made their city unique and created *a sense of place*."¹⁶

This phrase is vague, but I know that is an allusion to Chattanooga's specific *placemaking* in its urban sector through the River City Company developments.¹⁷ The tourism projects, new branding of historic neighborhoods, and riverfront apartment construction that they fund increase property taxes for downtown real estate. The funds come from the "old money" of Chattanooga, those families made wealthy by investments in Coca-Cola bottling and, probably, slave ownership at some point. I also find this phrase in one of Lucy Lippard's essays. "Much has been written in the last twenty years or so about 'the sense of place,' which is symbolically related to a sense of displacement."¹⁸

¹⁵ . "Video: Chattanooga Is the Best Town Ever," Outside Online, April 3, 2018. <https://www.outsideonline.com/2008956/why-chattanooga-best-town-ever>.

¹⁶ 16. Eric (Eric W.) Allison, and Lauren Peters, *Historic Preservation and the Livable City* Hoboken,(N.J: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 120.

¹⁷ . "About," River City Company, River City Company, Accessed November 14, 2019. <https://www.rivercitycompany.com/about>.

¹⁸ 18. Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local : Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997) 33.

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When Jazmine LaBlanc stands in front of a square vinyl banner patterned, quilt-like with bright, saturated images of public art, she is asking her community to define its own sense of place. She is one of the two women who run the non-profit East Lake Language & Arts, aka ELLA. She eats, sleeps (if she can), and breathes her work. The navy blue uniformed fifth graders of East Lake Elementary huddle before her as she gestures to the images. She asks them to explain what public art is. She asks them if they think it is important for their community. They wave raised hands, some grabbing the shoulders of peers to push their potential responses higher in the air. I am the only White adult person on the lawn, and I am content to work behind the scenes supplying stickers and taking photos of these students listening to their neighbor. One girl, standing back with her arm over her friend's braids, starts jumping up and down in place until Jazmine points to her. She leaps up, tagging an image of a bench held up by bronze hands sprouting from the concrete. She says, "I like it because it's like someone is holding up a chair for you!"

Jazmine tells me that every year, purple flowers push up through the soil in East Lake. The neighborhood is speckled with pops of yellow, white, and purple petals.

~

Jazmine

We have the oldest and most awesome park in the city. Everyone in Chattanooga who knows about East Lake knows that's the thing. We have people who have chosen to live here for lots of different reasons. And that's the cool part. It's not just because there's a factory close and we all work at the same factory. And it's not just because, you know, we're from here or there. It's because we all found something that we liked about the neighborhood. Part of it will be the price point, but the biggest underlying reason isn't the price point. That's not why people live here. People live here because they like something about it. And most of the time, it is something that is connected to other people.

We have a mulberry tree in the yard. And my kids like eating the honeysuckles here. A neighbor made dandelion wine a couple of years ago with the dandelions from the yard. I wouldn't recommend that because of our lead counts... but it's still one of those things that I associate. We have enough space in our yards to do cool things. And grow cool things. And know that we can smell neighbors grilling food.

We're in a neighborhood where you can listen close with your ears and find the lady that's pushing the cart with, not a baby, but a tamale pot. There's a strong sense of an entrepreneurial spirit here, and I think that's what makes East Lake fun. If you wait long enough, you are going to get passed by six ice cream trucks. And Howard the Icy Guy. Especially in the summer. Even though the sidewalks get blocked by cars, it's still a very accessible gridded street. We still have people who sit on porches and have that connectivity, even if people aren't actively communicating with each other. We have the base layer for things to grow — to regrow a strong community.

I'm really civic engagement heavy. So like, I care about the conditions of the neighborhood itself. I care about the built environment. I think about sidewalks, and where cars are parked and what trees need to get cut down and little tiny details like that...

I have a quilt from the early 1900s that was made by some ladies that lived here in East Lake who lived in a boarding house on 12th. I've been thinking about what the quilt could mean to our neighborhood now, 100 years later. I even jump to thinking, 100 years from now, if we restored the first one, and we have these two things that tell two different stories at two different points in time of the neighborhood, what does that mean? Having a sensorial map gives you that depth. It gives you this extra, little, something into this moment. It's like a cool time capsule.

Yeah, no one talks about that 30-40 year period when the factory jobs left. I've only heard a handful of people really talk about when the foundries stopped. That's a huge, important time in Chattanooga and the neighborhood history. Just like that. Livelihoods and jobs were gone.

Now, it's the transition, you know. The sounds are no longer gunshots or things like that associated with the neighborhood. You associate cool things, like fireworks, no matter how obnoxious it is at 2 in the morning. It's better that someone is shooting off some firecrackers than shooting off a gun.

~

Jazmine asks the students to pick one example of public art that speaks to them, to think about why they like it. Then, she asks them to place a sticker on a corresponding board to mark their vote. April, my fellow intern, gives male identifying students who live in East Lake a dark blue sticker. Female students are given a lighter shade of blue to mark their answers. This binary categorization is necessitated by the Chattanooga Public Art Commission. The city of Chattanooga is investing in public art in East Lake as part of an ongoing initiative to increase public art installations in the city.¹⁹

When considering an artist to commission for this installation, Chattanooga Public Art will reference the data that we collect in vibrant blue, orange, purple, and yellow stickers. I was paid ten dollars an hour to distribute stickers, photograph the educational events, and assist Jazmine and April in any way that I was physically able. This often included loading a box truck with hundreds of books or filling up holes in vacant lots with rocks and dirt so that kids could play soccer. My payment came from the same grant used to print the 9 x 9-foot display and corresponding response board. It is the same grant that East Lake Language & Arts uses to pay me to interview neighborhood residents, to collect oral histories for their library.

“The city is already planning to put art here. We have to tell them how to do it,” says Jazmine. We set up the public art banners in churches, schools, and the recreational center to allow the community a chance to vote on a design concept. “Que te gusta mas?” we ask participants. And then, “Why do you like it?” We recorded what elements participants marked

¹⁹ 19. “East Lake Public Art Project with ELLA Chattanooga,” Public Art Chattanooga. Public Art Chattanooga, 2019, <https://publicartchattanooga.com/eastlake/>.

as essential for the art installation. We made a list of non-negotiables. Jazmine tells participants that we are taking this to the city, that they will be heard.

The power of East Lake's community could swell in ELLA's translation of words to action. But even while ELLA's endeavors are subversive, they still operate as an extension of Public Art, of city government. Therefore, they censor more radical ideas. If art creation is a human right, as socialist art critic Ben Davis argues,²⁰ then it is unjust to restrict access to creation. One of the undeniable effects of Public Art investment is a corresponding increase of property taxes. With this, affordable housing disappears. When housing costs increase, quality of life suffers for renters. ELLA's placemaking efforts make the neighborhood safer and aesthetically palatable, but at the cost of complicity in its gentrification.

Even more, some of the members of the neighborhood association whom I interviewed are skeptical of the investment from the city. I am too. Why now? After years of closed ears in city council meetings, meetings in which East Lake residents argued for municipal management of potholes and improvements to the YFD center, the city suddenly announces that it will invest in public art. With Chattanooga's population growing each year, some residents of East Lake sense that gentrification is on the horizon. The promotion of public art and entertainment in municipally neglected areas is a common development trend that leads to the displacement of lower income households and communities of color.²¹

²⁰ 20. Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2013), 27-37.

²¹ 21. Kalima Rose, "Combating Gentrification Through Equitable Development," *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 9, no. 1 (July 1, 2002): 5.

The call to artists will be national, meaning, the commissioned artist is not guaranteed to be a resident of East Lake or even Chattanooga. The money spent on the public art installation is not designed to *directly* benefit local artists or community organizations. Though ELLA is redirecting some of the grant money to fund community art projects, their involvement with Public Art does more to promote a better reputation for the city among East Lake residents than it does for East Lake's agency as a neighborhood. Public Art does not recycle money back into the community. Investments like this from Chattanooga Public Art usually direct the money *out* of a neighborhood to pay outsourced artists, assistants, handlers, fabricators, transporters, insurance, etc. Considering this economic reality, it is not accurate to describe the Chattanooga Public Art initiative as an investment *in* the community.

~

Curtis

My name is Edward Curtis. I'm a resident of East Lake. I've been a resident for over 30 years.

Now, the city has changed. The neighborhood has changed. We've gone from industrial to tourism. So that means a lot of guys who had jobs in industry are gone, and a lot of them are dead and gone in 2019... and that's been back in 1979. A lot of things have changed

~

According to 2017 census data, the greatest increase in disparity between the number of property owners living in their housing units and property owners not living in their units in East Lake falls between the years 1990 and 2009. For reference, of the housing units occupied in 1979 or earlier, when the neighborhood sign was purple, 128 of the 142 units were occupied by the owners. In 2015, the ratio was 361 to 55 (occupied to not occupied by owner).²² This shift is an indicator of gentrification.²³ East Lake is described as “one-third Black, one-third White, and one-third Guatemalan,” by most residents. According to Census data, it is 41.7% Black, 37.4% White, 17.5% Hispanic, 2.0% Asian, and 1.4% Mixed Race. The median household income is \$31,000. And 16.9% of residents have a degree beyond a high school diploma. The majority of residents in East Lake do not own the homes in which they live.

Anecdotally, I’ve learned that East Lakers vacated en masse when a majority of the foundries closed, and, according to census data, this is the point when the neighborhood’s ratio of homeowners to renters shifted. Those privileged enough to move elsewhere probably followed the factory jobs when they left Chattanooga. Meanwhile, racially discriminatory loan refusal kept many Black blue-collar workers of East Lake trapped in stagnant economic and environmental conditions. “Because the initial abandonment and disinvestment was spurred by segregationist practices such as ‘white flight,’ mortgage preferences and redlining by banks and insurance companies, the new influx of people and capital has a direct racial impact when displacement begins to occur.”²⁴ A stagnant creek is left behind, built over by industrial

²² 22. U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, accessed October 27, 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_5YR_S2502&prodType=table (2017).

²³ 23. Rose, 6.

²⁴ 24. Rose, 5.

complexes and, in other places, exposed beneath oak trees. Chattanooga Creek meanders among the neighborhood grid complicating the boundaries between neighbors.

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Chattanooga Organized for Action, a local grassroots social justice organization, conducted a report on discriminatory lending practices of Chattanooga banks in 2016. The report's major findings include this statement: "There is a significant disparity in home loan origination between African-American and white residents of Chattanooga. The disparity ratio of approved loans to relative percentage of population was 36% for African-Americans and 107% of whites."²⁵

Like the pace of desegregation in public schools, equal housing policies were slow to pass nationally. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 failed to provide a reality of fair housing. In response, Congress passed the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977 in an effort to combat the effects of redlining.²⁶ Again, like the process of public-school desegregation in Chattanooga, the process of achieving equal and affordable housing remains unfinished, as the disparity ratio above indicates. Moreover, federal investment in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has declined at least 60% in the last 30 years which further threatens the

²⁵ 25. Chattanooga Organized for Action, *Whose Reinvestment? The Failures of Equitable Home Lending in Chattanooga*. Chattanooga, Tennessee: Chattanooga Organized for Action, 2016. <https://www.chattaction.org/whose-reinvestment-2016.html>.

²⁶ 26. Chattanooga Organized for Action, *Whose Reinvestment? The Failures of Equitable Home Lending in Chattanooga*.

affordability of private housing units.²⁷ In 2019, the economic power of the city pulses through fiber optics and rapid construction of million-dollar, multi-story houses amidst dilapidating bungalows.

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“What is an up-and-coming neighborhood? And where is it coming from?” Andrew Savage screams, one of the lead singers of my favorite band, Parquet Courts. I play this song, *Violence*, as I drive to work in East Lake. Good question. Where does the money a resident of East Lake spends on rent go? Do their dollars stay in the community? Where does their landlord live? How many properties do they own?

~

Cameron “Cgrimey” Williams

I've only been at East Lake for about four months. If I close my eyes and think about where I walk every day, it's like an oval. So I'm on the Tenth Avenue side, so I'll go either down towards the store and bust a left and a left and come back. Or I have a-- behind my house in my backyard is a little alleyway, so I can cut through there and go to the store. Or I'll go to the right and into the left and go down Dodds Avenue. So it's kind of like a big oval. But I also will

²⁷ 27. Rose, 5.

venture down all the way to the opposite side of Dodds Avenue going towards Rossville. You know what I'm saying? I'm a free spirit.

Colors? Green, blue, yellow. It's a lot of greenery around to the left and right. It's real flush with vegetation. Blue skies. Look up, you can see the clarity of the sky. Yellow from the brightness of the sun. I love the way the sun hits my porch in the morning. Burnt orange early in the morning. From the front window, you can see the sunrise, and it's beautiful. Walking down Dodds, green and white you see the youngsters in their uniform shirts going to East Lake Middle with their green and their white shirts on. And brown. You see a lot of brown people in my neighborhood. A huge influx of Latino people. Oh, the yellow. The school bus that stops on Dodds and 38th, I love, if I'm out early, headed on my commute to work-- you see the youngsters running to the bus, and it takes me back to high school when I was trying to be cool, catch the bus and look fly, holler at some girls before you get on the bus. So yeah, those are the colors I see.

Favorite sounds? It's the birds chirping in the front yard and in the tree. Favorite sounds... is that AC unit pumping so I know I got cool air waiting on me when I get in the house. What else? When the kids are walking to school, you hear them talking to each other. It takes me back to when I was a youngster because they start-- I believe they start school at 9:00 at East Lake Middle so they go around 8:00-ish. They'll start walking to the store, grabbing snacks, and walking back to school. So yeah, you get to hear the kids talking, and it's funny. I actually broke up a fight one morning. They were on the corner, and they were going-- and I was like, "Look, man, first of all, it's too early for this. And second of all, we all Black. We got to take care of each other." It was a group of Black young men. I was like, "We got to look out for

each other. We are an endangered species in America. So can't be fighting each other." And it was a good teachable moment. They broke it up. They shook hands, and, hopefully, it concluded like that the rest of the day and they didn't get into any more beef.

If East Lake was a mosaic, man, and I'm somewhere in my little corner and busting out a dope lil show and as people are walking by checking out all the dope pieces in the mosaic, they'll stop by, hear me rap a couple funky rap tunes, saying give me some props and keep it moving. That's what I see: an example of what young, Black men should be in the mosaic, looking fly and doing the right thing.

~

As a daily visitor in East Lake, I was constantly assessing and attempting to define its place-ness — the colors, sounds, shapes, and patterns of the streets, buildings, and nature. While it was my job to record these things, I was also trying to make sense of where I was. I interviewed multiple strangers. Between us, the interviewees and myself, lay differences in age, race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, political ideology, mood, and, sometimes, temper. I recorded only through an audio device so as to lessen the awkwardness. I imagine that residents in East Lake might be skeptical of a young person asking questions about the shapes of their days.

I have a small, athletic, feminine frame covered with fair, peachy skin prone to burn in the sun. The top of my shaved head marks a height of five feet and four inches from the ground.

On Rossville Avenue, one of three roads demarcating the borders of the East Lake neighborhood in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a Trump 2020 flag thrashes in the early summer breeze above a family-owned auto shop. There are moments when its shadow gently shades Tacos el Cuñao. Here, my Whiteness is palpable.

One day while spray painting the street for an ELLA activity, a disheveled White woman accompanied by five small dogs meets me at her fence line. She offers me a Mountain Dew, asking what I'm doing. I tell her it's a project for the elementary school students. She smiles. Then, she lowers her voice motioning to the house across the street where a man with dark brown skin and a bald head walks out to his garage. "Did he give you any trouble? Was he mean to you?" She asks in the whisper that White people use when they know that what they are saying is racist to another White person. "No. You mean Kenny? He let me park in his driveway while I paint the sidewalk. He was really nice to me, actually. He didn't have to let me park there," I respond, a little louder. "Oh. Well, if he's ever rude to you, just know that it's the Kenyan in him. He just doesn't get the language here." She walks back inside, wishing me a good day. I walk away bewildered and toss the Mountain Dew in my car. Kenny walks past, and I thank him again for letting me park in his driveway. "In U.S. society in general, however, the invisibility of whiteness serves to secure its unquestioned link to status and power."²⁸ In East Lake, I cannot hide in the skin that usually allows me to slip in and out of sight with ease among the gazes of my day-to-day. As artist and activist Ashley Hunt points out,²⁹ "When you're White, it's easy to forget that being in a room of all White people is something specific."

²⁸ 28. Amelia Jones, Whiteness: A Wayward Construction, *The Obscenity of Whiteness (Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Fairest One of All?)*, Laguna Beach Museum of Art, 2003), 93.

²⁹ 29. Ashley Hunt, *Notes on Emptying a City*, performed by Ashely Hunt. (2010), Video.

If East Lake is a mosaic, where am I in the composition? My outsider-looking-in perspective creates the boundaries of a frame. This perspective allows me freedom from the financial stakes that influence how non-profits like ELLA self-censor. My position, in this picture, is that of the framer. This frame is flexible. It should be pushed and pulled, stretched by what is inside. My body is an instrument of research marked with privilege and limitations. I have only twenty-two years of experience on Earth. I have only two eyes. This is one project. This is a record. This is a reparative critique.

While the process of gentrification materializes differently in each city, it tends to become apparent in recognizable stages.³⁰ Considering this, one can recognize the process of gentrification as the displacing effect that begins with landlords taking advantage of increasing market rates. They evict current residents in place of the more affluent.³¹ Couch cushions slouched over broken-up sidewalk, refrigerator doors swung open against a mailbox, a bag of clothes busted open over the overgrown lawn. The debris of urgency.

Investors in Chattanooga scout historically Black, redlined areas to invest because the real estate is cheap. Developers advertise their work with the following language.

Revitalize – brand a neighborhood like a product to make it more appealing to young, White professional homeowners or affluent renters. A new bar. A yoga studio. Cool blue and grey tones of the creative class. *Redevelop* – rezone, remediate, rebuild houses taller, thinner, and with more clerestories. Pour new cement for sidewalks. Paint bike lanes. *Progress* – lighten the color palette of racial demographics by refusing applications from African American applicants.

³⁰ 30. Rose, 6.

³¹ 31. Ibid.

Clean up – price out previous owners through increases in property taxes. Hire private security.

Startup – buyout historically Black owned businesses and open White owned businesses in their places. *Activate* – plant signifiers of safety and progress through investments in public art and design.

Like short-term missionaries, investors claim that this vocabulary put into action will civilize the neighborhood. A promise of *crime reduction* and *walkability* is impetus for breaking ground on expensive condos in historic neighborhoods. The difference between gentrification and neighborhood improvement is whom the development is designed to serve — current residents or future wealthier residents? What does one do in response to the *market rate*? Is there a difference between imperialism and gentrification when the common denominator is violence — erasing a home, a community, a culture? Developers come in. New aesthetics (housing construction, the addition of sidewalks, trees planted or removed, the Helvetica markers of contemporary urbanism) follow. Landlords increase rent to pay for the buildings that they own, leaving many of their renters unable to afford their leases. Landlords evict folks when the market rates go up. Right now, there are essentially no laws protecting renters in Tennessee.³² Development decisions are approved based on tax revenue, not the needs of a community.³³

So, where do renters go next? The city does not need an answer to invest in new development. While residents of East Lake can't seem to agree on the color of the neighborhood sign, those whom I interviewed know that East Lake is green when they close their eyes.

Everyone mentions the trees.

³² 32. “What Are My Rights as a Renter?” Healthy Homes - Renters. TN.gov. Accessed November 2, 2019.

<https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/health/cedep/environmental/healthy-homes/hh/renters.html#rights>.

³³ 33. Rose, 6.

In concise summary, Public Art's investment threatens the livelihoods of residents in East Lake. City-sanctioned art makes a previously municipally neglected area more palatable. When an area is perceived as more palatable, demand increases from wealthier residents. This demand results in a demand for more police presence. When a perception of public safety is established, property taxes rise. An area appears *safer* when crime rates drop. In many leases, arrests equal evictions for tenants. The more arrests made; the more units available for new, wealthier residents to take over. The wealthier the residents, the more agency the neighborhood has. The more agency a neighborhood has, the more chances the community has to invest in education or have lead removed from the soil.

In effect, the city government of Chattanooga presents their investment in public art as an investment in community development. In the city's opinion, community development is advantageous because the city can reap higher property taxes to fund more developments. But a new public artwork cannot be celebrated until environmental justice is achieved in the same place. Environmental justice cannot be achieved until access to quality housing is equitable. Housing inequality cannot be solved without repairing the effects of redlining. The effects of redlining cannot be overcome without a radical shift in land ownership practices.

Gentrification is rooted in a feudal model of land ownership where it's debt versus wealth all the way down, from developer to renter. Those who own the land still hold the most power in the United States. When land equals power, combating gentrification within the parameters of a capitalist economy requires reparations be made to those presently and historically disenfranchised. Unless reparations are made in turn, the long-term effect of public art is further disenfranchisement through loss of property and basic security. Public art not a viable means of

social or economic change for East Lake residents. Art alone is not political. Art will not bring justice.

~

When I visit Ms. Linda again, she presents me with a cactus.

“I mowed the other day and whacked off a hunk of my cactus in the back! You’re the first person I thought of. Now, it grows fast, so you better get a new pot soon.”

“Ms. Linda, this is so kind. Thank you. This is special,” I say. (Because my paternal grandmother is hard-of-hearing, I tend to speak like a Hallmark card around women her age).

“Just water it once ... oh... once a month. I think you can handle that,” Ms. Linda assures me. We walk out to her backyard. Fresh October chill shuffles the drying oak leaves above us. Under the trees, a prickly pear sprawls out over her lawn. “That’s where he came from,” Ms. Linda says, giggling. The way that Ms. Linda tells me to water it is another way of telling me that she expects me to keep it alive. More than likely, she will ask me about it the next time I see her. And she expects to see me. I don’t have the best track record with succulents, but I am determined not to disappoint her. I buckle the cactus propagation in my passenger seat as I say goodbye.

~

I drive home, heading northeast from East Lake, back to my apartment a block away from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s campus, two streets up from MLK

Boulevard. I think about how Ms. Linda's soil probably contains toxic levels of lead, how the EPA is starting to test in the neighborhood, though the testing is at least 30 years overdue.³⁴ In order to remediate the soil, the EPA must remove two feet of the contaminated dirt that tests positive for toxic levels of lead. Then, it must be replaced. The process takes about two weeks per lot. But the entire process of testing, removal, and remediation of the neighborhood takes years.³⁵

I don't know where the non-toxic soil and new grass sod comes from. I do not know where the toxic soil ends up. Perhaps it will be trucked and dumped in a community with less agency than East Lake. All I know is that the contour of life in East Lake is changing. Amidst the toxicity of the past, there are efforts of remediation. Amidst the celebrations of art, anxiety. East Lake: A garden of disparate lives, slowly intertwining along a grid, transplanting and propagating new and strange experiences that are shifting the topography of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

³⁴ 34. "Southside Chattanooga Lead Site Profile," *EPA*, Environmental Protection Agency, 20 Oct. 2017, <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.cleanup&id=0410686>.

³⁵ 35. "Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Soils Treatment Technologies," *EPA*, Environmental Protection Agency, April 17, 2017, <https://www.epa.gov/hw/best-management-practices-bmps-soils-treatment-technologies>.

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23. Rose, 6.

24. Rose, 5.

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