

Cultural Dimensions of Trust and Grassroots Political Participation: Black and Latinx Creative Activism in Los Angeles and Atlanta

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List of abbreviations

A+P	Art + Practice
AAPI	Asian American and Pacific Islander
ARA	ATL Radical Art
BIPoC	Black, Indigenous, (and) people of color
CAAM	California African American Museum
CRM	Civil Rights Movement
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
DBH	Defend Boyle Heights
DC	Destination Crenshaw
FW	Forward Warrior
HBCU	Historically Black college and university
HOLC	Home Owners' Loan Corporation
LAX	Los Angeles International Airport
MLK	Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NEA	National Endowment for the Arts
OZ	Opportunity zone
PoC	People of color
RAO	Regional arts organization
RTN	Rockin' the Nation
S01 E01	Season 1, episode 1
SAA	State arts agency
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SFQP	Southern Fried Queer Pride
SHG	Self Help Graphics
SPARC	Social and Public Art Resource Center
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
USC	University of Southern California

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1. Introduction

On Slauson I straddle Black girl tango
between northern heights
and south hair salons
Home.
Here I am diamond
solitary treasure
on Western I am unclaimed Christian
scribbling homilies on spines
of wrinkled church fans
here I am veteran
clutching cement scar
I am bandage sticking to sidewalk
On Centinela I vibrate the highest
I am journal of streets
hymnal of homeless, homebound
impoverished and important
writing a city memory
[...]

– Amanda Gorman
“Daughter’s Metro Map to City Identity”¹

On January 20, 2021, first National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman performed the inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb” when President Biden officially assumed office. She followed in the steps of Maya Angelou who had read a poem in 1993 for Bill Clinton’s inauguration. “The Hill We Climb” touches on Gorman’s personal experience as a Black girl descended from slaves, and hints at pressing issues like the attack on the Capitol that had occurred two weeks before the inauguration. The poem expresses a hope for the future of democracy, stating that while it can periodically be under duress, it can never be defeated. Gorman’s performance became a success and catapulted her to the forefront of newspapers and magazines. In 2014, Amanda Gorman had been the first Youth Poet Laureate of Los Angeles where she grew up. In this position, she wrote the poem “Daughter’s Metro Map to

¹ This is an excerpt from Amanda Gorman’s poem “Daughter’s Metro Map to City Identity” as it was published in the online newspaper *The Los Angeles Beat* (Kane, January 10, 2021). As the city’s 2014 Youth Poet Laureate, Gorman performed this poem at the LA public library (LA Public Library 2015).

City Identity” that is cited above. She describes how certain streets in South Los Angeles influenced her identity formation when growing up. She associates the spatial triangle formed by Slauson Avenue, Western Avenue and Centinela Avenue with experiences that constitute home. This urban triangle reaffirms her existence as a Black girl in Los Angeles and in the USA. Amanda Gorman’s poem creates an image of how place and spatial experience matter to identity and a sense of belonging. Her later poems, such as “The Hill We Climb,” that address a wider audience, are more political in nature. In her inaugural poem, Gorman, on the one hand, performs her own identity as “a skinny Black girl descended from slaves” (Liu 2021), and on the other hand, she urges that

We will rise from the golden hills of the West.
We will rise from the windswept Northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution.
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.
We will rise from the sun-baked South.
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.²

She performs her belonging by emphasizing that she is descended from slaves; and yet she stresses that the U.S. founding fathers are her forefathers, too. She claims that rebuilding democracy demands everyone in every corner of the nation to be included and to participate.

There have been similar efforts at reappraising U.S. history from its beginnings, such as Nikole Hannah-Jones’s *The 1619 Project* (2021). This project began as a series of essays in *The New York Times* and illuminates the role of non-white people in the early years of what became the United States of America. Both the poem and the book reflect a general interest in the role of non-white people for the establishment and development of the U.S. Especially in light of recent political events – like Donald Trump’s allegations of voter fraud after President Joe Biden’s victory, or the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, or attempts at disenfranchising voters of color in several states – a critical engagement with the country’s unequal political past and present has become inevitable.

The concurrency of a broad interest in the US’ unequal history, on the one hand, and political events that mirror right-wing extremism, on the other, are symptomatic of a polarized society with low levels of trust. Indeed, many surveys show that Americans’ trust in government and each other has been declining since the 1960s. However, as legal scholar Jedediah Britton-Purdy puts it, “[t]rust is not like running, or drinking coffee, so that you

² Excerpt from Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” (Liu, January 20, 2021).

could say, ‘I am not trusting today.’ It is like breathing. The question is not whether you trust, but where” (Britton-Purdy 2024). In his essay “We’ve Been Thinking About America’s Trust Collapse All Wrong” that was published in *The Atlantic* in January 2024, Britton-Purdy claims that trust dynamics have been shifting, and

[t]o have any hope of rebuilding democratic trust, we will need two things that have been neglected for decades in American life. One is civic virtue – serious and respectful engagement in the hard work of living with disagreement and difference. The other is a radical commitment to building a social world where trust comes more readily. (Britton-Purdy 2024)

Civically aware cultural agents, like actors, singers, producers, and others, have been addressing these developments in their works in different ways. More often than not, they try to convince their fans and communities to engage in any capacity possible. To be successful, these artists in turn need to be trusted by their communities and fans. That their efforts are in fact fruitful can be gauged by reports like Elliott McLaughlin’s *CNN* article “How Atlanta rappers helped flipped the White House” (2020) that illustrates how hip hop musicians in Georgia’s state capital took various measures to mobilize people to vote – resulting in the swing state’s Democratic turnout in support of presidential candidate Joe Biden.

As is the case with surveys on trust, it would seem that what cannot be measured cannot be managed. Trust surveys often operate with numbers and scales, but they lack a non-numerical dimension that reveals the patterns and relationships behind people’s perceived lack of trust. It is even more difficult to measure the impact of cultural engagement on trust and politics because there is no form of assessment so far. There are some studies on the value of arts for civic engagement (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Kisida and LaPorte 2021), or on how individual creativity constitutes civic participation (Burgess, Foth, and Helen 2006; Gaztambide-Fernandez and Arráiz Matute 2020a), but the question of how artists engage in mobilizing communities to participate in civic life thus far remains unanswered. Three developments in the U.S. make this question relevant. First, census data suggests that the population will become minority white by 2045 (Frey 2018). For the first time in U.S. history, whites will cease to make up more than half of the population. Non-white groups, especially of Hispanic origin, but also Blacks, Asians, and others, have been growing for the past decades, and while the white population is getting older, the younger population consists of a growing number of non-white children and teenagers (Frey 2020). Second, the racially diversifying share of the population is concentrated in urban areas. This affects local,

regional and national politics because racial minorities tend to vote Democratic (Hartig et al. 2023). Voter turnout maps from the 2020 presidential election show how cities like Atlanta voted Democratic while rural areas in the same state voted Republican. Atlanta's vote was powerful enough to turn the state's vote Democratic, and thus significantly contributed to Joe Biden's election. However, many immigrants are not legal U.S. citizens and thus cannot vote. So, while non-white citizens in cities tend to vote Democratic, there is a growing number of city newcomers who cannot participate in official elections. They can participate in different ways, for example through the census that does not require citizenship, and thereby still influence civic life. And third, young people engage in civic activities differently than older generations. They tend to engage less in traditional associations (Zukin et al. 2006); but on the other hand they participate more through new media and other forms of non-formal engagement (H. Jenkins et al. 2016). Young people consume news and entertainment primarily through social media and streaming platforms like Netflix and Disney+ (Watson 2024), where the boundaries between political messaging and entertainment are blurry. Some politicians use this behavioral pattern to their benefit, like former Georgia State Representative Stacey Abrams who joined a virtual rap battle between Jeezy and Gucci Mane in 2020 to urge watchers to vote in the upcoming election – the event was viewed by more than nine million people (K. Rodriguez 2020).

These three developments demand a more thorough examination of the role of non-white cultural agents and their mobilizing strategies in cities. These strategies can serve as blueprints for similar future work that aims to create a culture of inclusive civic engagement, which in turn is a response to Jedediah Britton-Purdy's call to rebuild democratic trust. The present work provides insight into the mechanisms behind activist-driven cultural work by artists of color who aim to mobilize their urban communities to participate in civic life.

In two case studies that focus on Los Angeles and Atlanta respectively, I investigate the actions of artists and cultural organizers. Los Angeles, with its artistic legacy, is located on the Westcoast, and has always been the destination for new immigrants. Atlanta, in contrast, has been a hub for Black culture and is located in the South with its stricken Confederate history. While the cities' difference makes them interesting for this examination, they also share some qualities: Today, both are considered strongholds for the entertainment industry, and both are home to a large racially diverse population. Moreover, both cities are associated

with the evolution of rap music and have yielded some of the most famous artists in the hip hop scene. Black Americans and Latinx Americans are responsible for the largest accessible cultural output in the two cities, and therefore my focus lies on these two ethnic groups. The artists who mobilize diverse communities to participate are people of color themselves. I approach the role of race and ethnicity with the concept of social performance, that allows to view race as identity-establishing and yet constantly evolving. In this way, race is seen as an experience that people share, and which therefore informs their real-life attitudes and behaviors. The idea of performing race is closely tied to questions of truth and trust. Only when we trust someone, will we be convinced by their words and actions. And thus, only when we trust someone, will we be inclined to reflect and perhaps change our own behavior. Therefore, in the search for patterns mobilizing for civic participation, I consider how artists' performance of race is perceived as trustworthy.

The aim of this research is to unearth the precise mechanisms behind artists' mobilizing power that has so far been neglected. I explore how artists truthfully perform race in and for their urban communities, and how they convince their fans. Two theoretical parts provide a basis for the analysis. The first part introduces several overarching concepts and embeds the research in the U.S.-American context. I illustrate how artist mobilization and trust relate to each other via trustworthiness, how new models of citizenship support civic participation, and how U.S. democratic history can be understood through the ideas of race and philosophical pragmatism. This first theory section connects the pillars on which this study rests. The second theoretical part explains the concept of performance as both theory and methods. Rooted in theater studies, performance has developed into an interdisciplinary and multifaceted research field that needs narrowing down to be a practical tool. In that section, I illustrate how race can be performed, and how performance serves as a research methodology. I wish to point out that my use of the term "race" is grounded in a sociocultural understanding which views race as the sum of norms, traditions, values, and experiences. Race is thus formed by one's experiences and can be part of one's identity. This understanding sees race as real, thereby acknowledging racism, and yet defies the essentialist view that race is the result of genetics and biology. The analytical part of this work consists of the two case studies from Los Angeles and Atlanta.

To discover similarities and differences, I structure the study geographically. Los Angeles and Atlanta are viewed as entities with their distinct history, geography and traditions. This distinction informs the thematic blocks that make up each case study. For Los Angeles, the two thematic blocks are Black cultural output in Black L.A. and artistic activism in Latinx L.A. For Atlanta, they are public art in public space and Black Southern democratic visions. These thematic blocks are grounded in each city's unique geography and history. Each thematic block consists of two analyses of specific artists, works or organizations. In this way, I provide a detailed account of local creative phenomena that are in relationship with local communities.

Chapter 4.1.1. takes a look at the artistic and social practices of non-profit organization Art + Practice in the traditionally Black neighborhood of Leimert Park in Los Angeles. For Art + Practice, ownership of space and art plays a crucial role in Black social and political self-determination. Chapter 4.1.2. examines late rapper Nipsey Hussle's economic activism in Crenshaw, Los Angeles, a dilapidated area where he invested in real estate for the benefit of residents. Hussle managed to become rich and yet continue to be trusted by his community – an achievement that even former president Barack Obama acknowledged. Chapter 4.2.1. investigates the practices of Self Help Graphics, a well-established non-profit art organization in the Latinx neighborhood of Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. Self Help Graphics view themselves as a facilitator in protest work and political activism, as their name suggests. Chapter 4.2.2. exemplifies how Latinx self-fashioning in the U.S. operates in popular culture, specifically in the series *Gentefied* that is set in Boyle Heights. *Gentefied* negotiates what it means to be Latinx and how individuals can navigate political activism and individualism. Chapter 5.1.1. focuses on the work of a small Atlanta-based justice-oriented artist collective, ATL Radical Art. The collective consists of artists of color and engages in pop-up performances in public space to mobilize viewers to reflect and act. Chapter 5.1.2. considers the public mural scene in Atlanta and shows how artists of color and the politics of mural creation are one form of grassroots political participation. Chapter 5.2.1. delves into the surreal world of the series *Atlanta*. Created by Donald Glover, a.k.a. Childish Gambino, the series is a Black production that exemplifies how imagination and participation work together. Chapter 5.2.2. explores the practices of Atlanta rapper Killer Mike who publicly endorsed Democrat Bernie Sanders during his 2020 election campaign. The rapper fuses his distinctly Black

Southern identity that entails some controversial opinions with his ideal of political action that views conversation in a polarized society as key to democratic success.

The eight analyses can be read almost independently from each other, but they do refer to one another at times. Some chapters feature interviews with artists and organizers. I conducted these interviews either virtually or in person during my research trip in spring 2022. Some chapters also involve photographs that I took during the same trip; these images are indexed on the list of figures and can be found at the end of each case study in chapters 4.3. and 5.3. Finally, the conclusion brings the findings together, illuminates the overarching patterns that have been discovered, and offers suggestions for future research.

2. On trust, art, and citizenship

Since the election of former president Barack Obama, discussions of race have been front and center in public debates in the U.S. again. That the U.S. has always had a problem with racial discrimination is old news. However, political and social events in the early twenty-first century have rekindled the flame: Barack Obama's presidency and the subsequent victory of Donald Trump, increasing deaths of PoC at the hands of police, the Black Lives Matter movement, rising immigrant numbers from Mexico and other South American countries, voter suppression targeting communities of color and so on. These are paralleled by criticism of U.S. history-making that has for too long neglected and wrongly portrayed slavery and the role of African Americans in building the country (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021). Public debates and protests signal that the country is still in search of a solution to the old problem. And solving this issue becomes more crucial in the face of current prognoses predicting that whites will cease to be the majority by 2045 (Frey 2020, 2018; Passel and D. Cohn 2008). The country's ethnic and racial diversification opens questions about participation: Who is American and what does that even mean? Who is part of decision-making processes in politics? How can a diversifying population access resources for democratic practices? What does art have to do with any of this?

This chapter outlines theoretical aspects for the study of creative civic participation in urban U.S.-American communities characterized by a high population of minority residents, especially Black and Latinx. I start at the micro level by considering how artists mobilize urban communities and how trust figures in this process. I then move on to the meso level of citizenship and demonstrate how a rethinking of this concept in favor of a cultural and urban approach can open new paths to understanding participatory phenomena in light of a diversifying demographic. The third part of this chapter attends to the macro level that serves as a contextualizing of the afore discussed aspects in a broader U.S.-American philosophical and political tradition.

2.1. Local artist mobilization and trust-building

During the 2008 rally for the presidential election, Atlanta-based rapper Jeezy performed his song “My President” in endorsement of candidate Barack Obama. Engaging with politicians and governmental policies is inherent to rap as, for example, the lyrics of Killer Mike’s “Reagan” explicitly demonstrates, and songs such as Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” process more implicitly in their videos. While most of rap is about voicing abuses of political power and structural problems in the U.S., there regularly have been instances of public support for political agents among the most popular rap celebrities. One of these moments was Jeezy’s 2008 performance of the song “My President” where he honored the then-presidential candidate Barack Obama – with the lyrics “my president is black” – and shot the musical video on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, the historical Black street where Martin Luther King preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church (Reid 2008). While rap music “is more likely to sound weary of political institutions than to show trust in them”, according to rap music scholar Bonnette-Bailey (C. Lee 2018), this is exactly what Jeezy did. He even declared that the 2008 election was the first he ever participated in. Back in 2008, Obama and politicians in general would not publicly accept endorsement by rappers, as scholar Mark Anthony Neal notes (NPR 2008); but this has changed since: During Stacey Abrams campaign for Georgia governor in 2018, for example, or Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden’s election campaigns in 2020, as well as Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff’s Georgia senate runoff in 2020, Atlanta rappers have been critically involved in mobilizing voters (Mike Jordan 2020; McLaughlin 2020; Zaru 2021). This development towards more active and public participation in election and voting processes raises questions about the relationship between these musicians and their audiences. How do these cultural agents influence their fans and communities? Why do their audiences trust them to guide their political actions? To approach these questions theoretically, this chapter discusses the ideas of community, trust and trustworthiness, and creative civic engagement.

Community: Politics, place, and society

Before I discuss the role of art(ists) in processes of belonging and activation, let me illustrate the significance of *community* for this topic. Talja Blokland (2017) states that the term community is often seen as old-fashioned and conservative because it is associated with an

outdated definition of community – a closed entity in a fixed place – as, for instance, Georg Simmel, Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville conceived of it. Indeed, being alive at a time of rapid growth and industrialization, these men were apprehensive of the city: In *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903), for instance, Georg Simmel feared the loss of personal attachments in the city; he described residents of the city as indifferent and *blasé* with no sense of belonging to a community. This view clearly regards the city and urban life as the enemy of communal life and belonging and, on a larger scale, even of democracy. A similar apprehension of the city can be observed in early political thinking in the United States where for a long time the ideal of an agrarian society with small, rural autonomous villages prevailed. Thomas Jefferson (1954 [1787]) dreaded that morally corrupt “mobs” of the city would endanger the idea of the American republic, and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), was critical of the American cities he visited during his trip in 1831. According to urban scholar Witold Rybczynski,

[w]hat seems to have struck Tocqueville most about the largest cities like New York and Philadelphia was the presence of a turbulent urban lower class, which he described as consisting of freed black slaves [...], and poor immigrants, whom he considered to be motivated by self-interest rather than by citizenship. [...] [H]e foresaw (more or less correctly) that in a democracy, the large size of American cities and the volatile nature of the urban underclass (although he did not call it that) would eventually threaten republican institutions. (Rybczynski 1993)

For Tocqueville, the size and the population’s diversity, both in cultural as well as economic terms, posed a threat to communal life, citizenship and democracy. All three men were inclined to believe that the city eroded the sacred idea of community. Urban scholar Talja Blokland (2017) opposes this view by claiming that community is still relevant, only one must understand it as a “collective and cultural entity” (11) that is formed through a set of daily public practices or performances instead of a static and stable presence. Community thus relies on individuals’ recurring actions, their practices, such as visiting certain places and avoiding others (cf. Certeau 1984). In formations of community, even in transnational communities such as immigrant networks, a specific place to which all members can relate remains necessary. For diasporic transnational communities this shared place may consist of a “mythic homeland” (Fabre and Benesch 2004, 14) that members keep referring to in the process of building new ties with a new place. For second or third generation immigrants and even for African American descendants of slaves in the U.S., the idea of a shared ancestral

place can be part of belonging to a community.³ More important, however, is the present place that binds communities of color together. It is essential to the daily practices through which “we develop shared experiences and shared symbols” (Blokland 2017, 29) that form the collective and cultural entity named community. A community can therefore also be based on representations of shared experiences: Hip hop music is a voice for those who hear their own stories in the artists’ lyrics about police violence, racism, political neglect or poverty. Another example is the contemporary surge of movies with Black heroes, such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *The Woman King* (2022), that portray an imagined ancestral African land and culture. While hip hop music has rapidly developed into a transatlantic phenomenon since the 1990s, it is known for evoking specific urban places: In the late 1980s and early 1990s, 2Pac and N.W.A. rapped about life in L.A. and Goodie Mob called Atlanta the Dirty South. In 2013, Nipsey Hussle dedicated his album to Crenshaw, L.A., and in 2017 Lil Baby feat. Marlo laconically tell the story of the “real A-Town”, referring to Atlanta. Often the social issues thematized in the genre are located in Black and Brown urban communities and feel relatable to migrant and ethnic communities all over the world (Magana 2021b). Migrant or ethnic communities often inhabit urban areas, and their artistic output reflects this specific urban lifeworld.

There are multiple reasons for the development of urban ethnic neighborhoods in the United States, many of which overlap and go hand in hand with the evolution of racism. Each city’s history is unique in this regard, but they all have in common the existence of ethnic neighborhoods that people call their home and community. In Los Angeles, for instance, World War II spurred anti-Japanese sentiments and led to their internment, thus reducing the number of Japanese (American) residents in the city, as Scott Kurashige (2008) traces back. Meanwhile, the region became a critical site to produce defense material and, like elsewhere in the country, many African American laborers from the South moved to the city to find work in the factories. The living spaces vacated by the Japanese were some of the few available options to the masses of African Americans who were prevented from entering the

³ Many African Americans celebrate Kwanzaa (Swahili) between Christmas and New Year, a “new” tradition created in 1966 by activist and professor Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga. The festivities include rituals adhering to the seven principles of African heritage that are consciously selected from various harvest festival traditions in West and Southeast Africa. The African American Cultural Center in Los Angeles calls Kwanzaa a “product of creative cultural synthesis.”

private, white housing market. Thus, historic events not only change the make-up of cities, but they also shift the meanings of race and otherness in relation to each other (Kurashige 2008; cf. Molina, HoSang, and Gutiérrez 2019). Community is thus influenced by several factors that can best be summarized as an identity-forming narrative shared by its members, and it is contingent on common place, experience, identity and practices – factors reflected in the cultural output of these communities and cultural agents. The spaces of community and city are social products formed by our interactions and practices (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht 2010; Lefebvre 1991). As human beings we are likely to trust people of our own community because we assume to have a good deal in common with them, including our moral values and norms. Therefore, we assume the risk we take in trusting them to be minimal because, if they are like us, we can determine if they are trustworthy and, thus relying on our correct evaluation, we do not assume they would betray us. This excursion into the notion of community conveys how pivotal the implication of community membership is for socially engaged artists and creators. However, apart from the group identity Jeezy and other engaged artists conjure, there is something about their music and performance that draws people in and fascinates them. Fifteen years after “My President is Black,” listeners are still in awe of Jeezy’s music, as one YouTube user comments: “The amount of chills I got listening to unbelievable, he did what he was supposed to do on this album/mixtape. It feels so good to hear him on that Trap or Die flow. Jeezy always been the Voice of the streets” (Frankss 2022). This user trusts Jeezy to say the truth on behalf of the people in his community. This is not a single case, as some of the examples in this work show in the analysis section. To obtain a deeper understanding of the relationship between mobilizing cultural agents and their trusting followers, I now turn to the concepts of trust and trustworthiness.

Trust and trustworthiness

In most literature, the concept of trust is framed as something similar to and yet distinct from faith, belief, confidence and reliance. The first two are directed at something that extends the capacity of human trustworthiness – something holy or divine; whereas the latter two are directed at something that can be expected to act or function in a certain way without too much of a risk – machinery, automatic processes. Trust, in contrast, is something inherently human and expresses our *goodwill* towards one another (cf. Baier 1986; Karen Jones 1996). And as the term *goodwill* implies, trust can only be directed at something that has a will of

its own (Hartmann 2020).⁴ If I trust you, I expect your goodwill toward me because I am taking a risk with trusting you in the first place which you are aware of. While some propose that trust is a rational three-part relationship – A trusts B with regard to C (Baier 1986; Hardin 2004) –, Karen Jones (1996) argues that trust is also an attitude of optimism that can be cultivated and thus a “distinctive way of seeing someone” (13) that remains stable regardless of the occasion. The attitude approach seems reasonable as we often quickly determine whether someone seems trustworthy to us or not, whether we believe in a person’s goodwill or not. The three-place concept does not seem to work with the idea of general goodwill but rather with the concept of *entrusting*. Baier’s (1986) concept of entrusting is to an extent echoed in Russell Hardin’s (2004) understanding of trust as *encapsulated interest* where “[y]ou trust someone if you believe it will be in her interest to be trustworthy in the relevant way at the relevant time, and it will be in her interest because she wishes to maintain her relationship with you” (13). Trust as encapsulated interest assumes that the person I trust will fulfil my trust because somehow my own interest is encapsulated by their interest because our relationship is important to them. This conceptualization, as Hardin (2004) notes, accounts for ongoing relationships between individuals, not for our behavior when meeting strangers. Therefore, both approaches to trust – as an attitude and rational behavior – are justified. As a pragmatic response, Eric Uslaner (2002) divides trust into two categories: moralistic and strategic trust. Moralistic trust is a vague advance of goodwill towards strangers, assuming that most people can be trusted and having little expectations towards them other than that they are not hostile towards us. We thus believe that strangers share our moral values (Uslaner 2002, 18). Strategic trust, which is closer to Hardin’s (2004) encapsulated interest theory, is based on personal experience, involves risk, and is associated with specific expectations the truster has of the trusted. It thus draws more from our knowledge of the person we trust and from our evaluation of their trustworthiness. Strategic trust can only come into play with people we have known for a while and therefore it cannot be useful in situations of collective action and collective problem-solving on a larger societal scale where we cannot possibly know every individual – in these contexts it is moralistic trust that we place in strangers to solve broader issues (Uslaner 2002, 20). In his seminal essay “Bowling Alone:

⁴ According to Martin Hartmann (2020), there can be no trust towards institutions and governments as these have no will of their own. Trust can only be directed towards human beings.

America's Declining Social Capital" (1995), Robert Putnam argues that joining associations and clubs increases generalized trust – our belief that people can generally be trusted –, and therefore a decrease in associational life in the U.S. is one reason for the overall decline of trust. Putnam defines *social capital* as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995, 67). He elaborates that

networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'we,' or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) enhancing the participants' 'taste' for collective benefits. (Putnam 1995, 67)

Social capital is thus the sum of civic and other networks among members of a society. Putnam believes that more engagement leads to more trust, but Uslaner (2002) and Hardin (2004) put forward the idea that it is trust in the first place that motivates people to join associations and not the other way around. Moreover, Uslaner (2002) criticizes that clubs usually further particularized trust, that is, trust in people like yourself, because you only meet people with the same interest or background. Generalized trust, on the other hand, is learned from our parents and expresses a certain optimistic view of the world and of people unlike ourselves (Uslaner 2002). Indeed, Uslaner and Conley's (2003) study of Chinese Americans' participatory behavior shows that “social ties stemming from a group can build bridges [to American politics] either if the group's membership is heterogenous or if its members reach out to other homogenous groups” (355).⁵ Thus, homogenous groups do not build generalized trust per se, and participation in U.S.-American politics depends on whether the members join other groups or have wider heterogenous social networks. This evaluation is consistent with historian Charles Tilly's (2007) argument of trust as a vital element of democratization. Viewing trust as both an attitude and a relationship characteristic, Tilly (2007)

⁵ The matter of multiculturalism and trust is widely discussed, and while some studies show evidence that different cultural backgrounds lead to more skepticism and mistrust in society (Putnam 2007; Stolle, Soroka, and Johnston 2008), there is a clear trend visible in detailed analyses: It is not diversity as such that decreases trust, but much rather segregation and inequality (Lenard 2010; Rothwell 2012; Uslaner 2012; Uslaner and M. Brown 2005).

proposes that *trust networks* among citizens need to be partially integrated into public politics to ensure democracy.⁶ Trust networks are recognized by the following four factors:

1. People are connected directly or indirectly by similar ties (network).
2. Members have claims to the attention and aid of another (strong ties).
3. Members collectively carry out a long-term enterprise.
4. The members' ties set the enterprise at risk to the mistakes, failures and malfeasance of individual members.

Religious sects, artisanal groups, migration streams and labor unions are examples for trust networks. The integration of these groups into politics can occur either through the *dissolution* or *integration* of previously segregated trust networks (some of which have enabled exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, race, gender or religion, as history shows), or through the *creation* of new connected networks. There are three ways in which trust networks are connected politically: First, indirectly, through patrons, protectors and intermediaries that are either formal entities (trade unions, political parties, churches, associations, social movement activists) or members of the elite (managers, officeholders, operatives). Second, more directly, through actors publicly representing collective interests. And third, very directly, through “state-controlled arrangements” like fascism, theocracy and social security (Tilly 2007, 88). In the light of contemporary disenfranchisement laws that inhibit U.S.-American citizens from voting, the creation of new and the integration of previously segregated trust networks that are connected to public politics where they work against discriminatory structures is essential for the improvement of a state that strives to be democratic.

How does Jeezy's statement “my president is black” fit into this context? It demonstrates that in contrast to other candidates (before Obama), this is the one to trust – he is “my” president. Simultaneously, it claims a group identity that is based on race and therefore exclusive – your president might be white, but mine is black regardless of the actual voting outcome. Does it not seem as if race and trust are indeed related? Before discussing this question in the next section, there is one aspect to consider. Jeezy's song became very successful in 2008 and when he filmed the music video on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, a crowd of locals came out to cheer and participate. His message became a mobilizer in the voting

⁶ Tilly's (2007) definition of trust networks: “ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others” (chapter 4, “Trust and Distrust”, 81).

process. Why were local residents moved by Jeezy? Why did they believe his message? Why did they carry the posters reading “Barack Obama,” “Malcolm X,” “Change,” “Gandhi,” “Soulja Slim,” “My President is Black,” “Women for Obama” as well as U.S.-American state names? What about Jeezy and his art is captivating and trustworthy enough to mobilize communities? While there is abundant theoretical and practical research on trust, there is a gap in literature when it comes to trustworthiness. In *Trust & Trustworthiness* (2004), Russell Hardin offers one of the few systematic accounts of the concept, beginning with the assertion that “trustworthiness is a motivation or a set of motivations for acting” (31). These motivations can be internal, external or mixed. Internal motivations, or dispositions, are most often of moral nature, meaning that moral rules tell us to be trustworthy, but they may stand in conflict with other moral rules such as not lying. Some people have a genuine disposition to be trustworthy in that they reciprocate cooperative behavior even though there is little to gain by doing so. In contrast to trust, there is almost no risk in being trustworthy and thus society benefits from trustworthy behavior if we were to follow utilitarian guidelines. External motivations for trustworthiness are usually constraints on three levels: Small-scale (such as scolding by friends and family), social convention (constraints that support conventions), and constructed organizational incentives (controls of the law and institutions). Hardin (2004) conceptualizes mixed motivations in the form of norms that we essentially internalize because they are a shortcut to strategic thinking that takes effort if we were to do it for every occasion. Hardin’s reasoning for internal motivations misses the idea that I might want to be trustworthy so that I can motivate and mobilize other people to act in a certain way. Similarly, Karen Jones (2012) argues that much of our trustworthy behavior is part of our everyday routine and we only need to actively consider that others are counting on us when some “temptation threatens to disrupt habit” (71). For her, the motivation for trustworthy behavior arises from one’s recognition of and responsiveness to “interhuman dependencies” (65) and changes according to one’s particular role and the context. Jones (2012) thus distinguishes three-place trustworthiness (A is trustworthy with respect to B in domain of interaction D)⁷ and rich trustworthiness (A is trustworthy with respect to B if A is willing and able to signal

⁷ Jones’s full definition reads: “B is trustworthy with respect to A in domain of interaction D, if and only if she is *competent* with respect to that domain, and she *would* take the fact that A is counting on her, *were* A to do so in this domain, to be a *compelling* reason for acting as counted on.” (Jones 2012, 70; italics in original)

her domains of competency).⁸ Three-place trustworthiness, analogous to Baier's (1986) three-place approach to trust, involves a specific domain or context where A (the trustworthy) is competent. A thus only acts trustworthy in the specific domain because she knows she is competent with regard to that domain. Rich trustworthiness takes place on a more intimate level as it demands the trustworthy person's social ability to respond to another person's dependency by signaling the trustworthy's domains of competence (Jones 2012, 76).

How, then, can we account for people's trust in civically engaged cultural agents? More specifically, which practices make artists speaking to ethnic communities trustworthy? There are different domains that need consideration to answer these questions. First, artists' cultural productions have certain effects on us; we might perceive the work as "authentic," "real," "artificial," "over the top" – in any case, we are often moved in one way or other by what we see, and we cannot fully separate the art from its creator. Rita Felski's *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) delivers a perspective on what art does with us and what we do with art. She offers a concise analysis of attachment devices – attunement, identification and interpretation – that help us understand the relationship between us and art, and why we are drawn and influenced to certain works but not to others. Second, when it comes to artists and works that engage with social issues, inequality and mobilization, the question of trustworthiness is central as we must decide whether we believe the message and the intentions – whether we are convinced by the art(ist)'s truthfulness. Jones (2012) and Hardin's (2004) models of trustworthiness offer helpful devices in assessing how cultural agents and their socially engaged work perform trustworthiness. From this angle, when we judge a person's trustworthiness, we think about their motivations (internal, external and mixed), their past actions, their commitment and their competences. From the complementary perspective of trust theory, our judgment also depends on our disposition: If we tend to rather trust people similar to us (Uslaner's particularized trust) or if we tend to generally give an advance of goodwill to people (Uslaner's generalized trust and Jones's affective attitude). Moreover, there is the conceptual issue of trust as context-dependent, as Baier (1986) and Hardin (2004) argue, or as a general attitude (Jones 1996). However, when it comes to the topic of socially

⁸ "B is richly trustworthy with respect to A just in case (i) B is willing and able reliably to signal to A those domains in which B is competent and will take the fact that A is counting on her, were A to do so, to be a compelling reason for acting as counted on and (ii) there are at least some domains in which B will be responsive to the fact of A's dependency in the manner specified in i." (Jones 2012, 74)

engaged artists, the domain is inevitably already given, and we do generally not care if we trust them enough to watch our house while we are gone.

As discussed in detail in chapter 3, the performance of race plays a crucial role in perceived trustworthiness. Similarly, artists' evocation of place is vital in their work. This is true especially for Black and Brown artists with ties to ethnic urban communities; consider, for instance, hip hop music where the lyrics often center on a specific "hood," or local art galleries that often display work related to their place. At the same time – think of Jeezy's performance – it is these artists that serve as bridges between their communities and wider politics, as Uslaner and Conley (2003) might put. This does not mean that artists are the only link between community and politics, but they have the power to activate participation especially in disenfranchised or underserved urban communities that are otherwise suspicious of politics and governmental institutions. Given the contemporary social context and the history that led up to it, there is a need for solidarity among communities of color: The massive police shootings of black men, among them George Floyd in 2020, the murder of Asian women in Atlanta in 2021, the persisting racial inequalities in income, education and homeownership especially for Black and Latinx (Fry, J. Bennett, and Barroso 2021), and the continuous disenfranchisement of voters, again, especially in neighborhoods of color (C. Anderson 2018; Daniels 2020; Downs 2020). Decade-long inequality, injustice and discrimination is reflected in the ethnoracial trust gap: Blacks generally trust people less than whites, and they generally mistrust more than whites (Alesina and La Ferrara; Smith 2010; Uslaner 2002). As sociologist Sandra Smith (2010) points out, however, this gap does not only mirror discrimination but also results from ethnoracial socialization and community context, too.⁹ Presuming that trust and, hence, distrust can only be directed towards other humans, the terms suspicion, doubt and apprehension are fit to describe the sentiments of many PoC, especially African Americans, towards governmental institutions like the police (DeSilver, Lipka, and Fahmy 2020). To come to terms with experiences of discrimination, inequality and injustice, we inevitably turn to our community where we find identity,

⁹ Smith (2010) elaborates on community context and ethnoracial socialization in length and accounts for the significance of disadvantaged neighborhoods (higher concentration of poverty, thus disrupted families and social isolation, followed by crime and social disorder, and distrust) that are often Black, and bias socialization as children which leads to more mistrusting adults, and most of parents educating their children about racial bias are Black.

belonging and shared experiences. And indeed, studies show that we are more likely to trust people like us – particularized trust – than people who are different (Simpson, McGrimmon, and Irwin 2007; Smith 2010). Among different factors that influence particularized trust, such as class, education, ethnic origin and religion, Uslaner calls race the “most powerful determinant” (2002, 107).

Cultural agents, including musicians, producers, actors, multimedia artists and organizers, need to hook their audience before they can form a relationship and convince the public of their trustworthiness. Showing similarity and kinship in their work and acting accordingly as a public persona are an important path to creating trustworthiness. By referring to a common place (the neighborhood, for instance) and a common culture and experiences (race, for example) cultural agents take the first steps toward a (one-sided) trusting relationship – they have the capacity to create an imagined community. Yet, they also need to show their record of trustworthiness and their competence as a public figure: Have they acted according to the standards they claim in the past? Does their art match their social engagement? The audience assesses all of these factors based on their factual knowledge of the person and on what they believe to be true (newspaper articles etc.). The pressing question that audiences need to answer is: Does this agent really work towards communal well-being, or is their engagement just a façade to further their own interest (money, reputation etc.)? The news regularly reports on what one might interpret as breaches of trust where artists of color are accused of selling out because they cater to the interests of a white public, or where they allegedly embezzle funds that should be used for the community.¹⁰

Art’s value for civic engagement

How can we conceptually grasp the leap from community to citizens that are moved and mobilized by art to become active? One of the epistemological dead ends in searching for answers, as arts administrator John Tusa (2000) suggests, is the belief that what cannot be

¹⁰ Musician/actor/producer Donald Glover has been criticized for catering to white people only and responded: “being in Atlanta and walking around, or even like in L.A., I run into Black people all the time who tell me this is their favorite show and how they appreciate everything we do. They also say we’re making them want to do cooler and weirder stuff ... So for me, that’s the real kind of conversations that are happening out there. Internet stuff isn’t always real; it’s not how people really feel. I kind of get my feelings from the streets, to sum that up” (Lattanzio, August 03, 2022). Another example that reached national news is Patrisse Cullors, artist and co-founder of Black Lives Matter, being accused of misappropriating donations for her private real estate purchase (Vincent, April 10, 2021). These allegations could not be verified (Rouan, April 19, 2021) and Cullors defended herself against these claims in an interview on Black News Tonight (BNC/theGrio 2021).

measured cannot be valued. And indeed, there is hardly any empirical method to measure in numerical terms how the arts impact individual behavior and motivation. There are efforts at understanding the relationship of art and civic behavior both in academia and in the public sphere,¹¹ and there are philosophical attempts at grasping the way we affectively respond to art (Felski 2020). These efforts not lastly result from a persistent idea that art needs to be rooted in community instead of high institutions (Lampert 2013). During the Black Arts and the Chicano Art Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, art, be it banners, texts (Smethurst 2005), photographs (Gunckel 2015) or performance art (Noriega 2000), created by protesting people and their allies was born out of the necessity to express discontent and demand change. As such, art was both a vehicle to transport sentiments and a tool to demand change. It is easier to analyze the contribution of art in retrospect, as books such as James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005), Nicolas Lampert's *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (2013) and Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (2010) demonstrate. Investigating contemporary patterns and practices is more speculative: The future is unknown; whether we will at some point speak of a pattern as a movement is uncertain. While this poses challenges to academic research, it also enables detailed accounts of contemporary events and art that allow for unbiased detailed observations without the necessity of immediate categorization.

To understand the implications of art's incalculable nature for society, let me briefly explain how arts funding and operation in the U.S. work. First, more than fifty percent of arts organizations' revenue is attributed to earned income (ticket sales etc.) and interest from investments.¹² Arts organizations (including any type of art, from visual art to performance art to literature) are dependent on how well they sell; thus, they need to be attractive to the public

¹¹ pedagogy scholars Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez and Alexandra Arráiz Matute (2020a) shed light on how youths all around the globe use art to protest for their interests; Eva Youkhana (2014) illustrates how urban art is used as a strategy to collectively re-appropriate public space; Kelly Leroux and Anna Bernadaska (2014) analyze how individual art participation increases civic engagement; and Jennifer Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown (2011) report on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts on the various modes of arts participation in the U.S. that reach from attendance to art creation. Similarly, Brian Kisida and Angela LaPorte (2021) argue for arts education on behalf of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska (2016) report for the United Kingdom.

¹² These numbers are put together by Tyler Cowen (2012) for non-profit performing arts groups and museums and are based on an analysis of 2006-2010 data from the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics and the US Census Bureau's Economic Census.

in the first place. Second, there is public funding and private funding for the arts. Public funding comes from the federal, the state and the local level. On the federal level, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA, established in 1965) and other departments and agencies (e.g. the Smithsonian Institution, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Museum and Library Services) act as grantmaking agencies with different types of funding (Cowen 2012, 5). As the NEA is legally required to appropriate funds to any existing state agency, states benefit financially from maintaining such an organization. In addition to funds from the NEA, state agencies have their own funds for the arts, which exceed those allocated by the NEA to arts organizations. Far more important, however, are local agencies, such as the Department of Cultural Affairs in Los Angeles or the Office of Cultural Affairs in Atlanta, that allocate most of the direct public funds to arts organizations (*ibid.*, 7f.). Indeed, local arts agencies have become more important as they can quickly adapt to changes on the ground and support urban economic revitalization and beautification for local communities and tourism. Several city-centered programs by the NEA have contributed to this development: City Spirit in 1974, Locals in 1982, and Our Town since 2011. Our Town is an initiative aimed at creative placemaking in cities in order to support and strengthen local communities through economic, physical and social changes (National Endowment for the Arts). Apart from public funding, the lion's share of contributions comes from the private sector – foundations, corporations and individuals are incentivized by the U.S. tax system to donate money to charitable and not-for-profit organizations (Cowen 2012, 18f.). In contrast to nations with a centralized arts and culture management, such as Germany or Italy, the arts in the U.S. are to a considerable degree dependent on being profitable. When non-profit organizations apply for public funding, they usually undergo a complex reviewing process that verifies the organization's work and intentions. For specific programs, like Our Town, applying organizations need to disclose their strategies for strengthening communities that might include artist residencies, art festivals, community co-creating of art, performances and public art which elevate local history and voices of residents, inject new resources and activities into a place, or “connect communities, people, places, and economic opportunity via physical spaces” (National Endowment for the Arts).

In the U.S., arts and civic life are interwoven through public grantmaking, private donations and profitability (except, of course, non-profit organizations). This three-fold

funding structure results in eligibility advantages for contemporary, attractive, local and community-oriented art. To return to the question of art(ist)’s value: Artists and creators themselves are individuals that have been moved by art to become active. Rita Felski (2020) deliberately elaborates on how art affects us and why this is important: A certain painting can bore one person while it fascinates another; and this has nothing to do with the prestige or social status of that piece of art. This infatuation – attunement, as Felski calls it – is contingent on many factors, such as the social context, the location, our mood, our education and upbringing, and many other things. This deep affection by art points to the “irresolvable ambiguities of agency: we make works of art even as they make us” (Felski 2020, 65). There is a relationship between a piece of art and the spectator, and thus the art itself becomes an agent in shaping the world – we should perceive of “art objects as actors that sustain social relations” (ibid., 63).¹³ From this perspective, it is fair to claim that participation in art is one form of civic participation.

I have been using the terms civic participation and civic engagement interchangeably, and at this point it is necessary to provide some definition. Etymologically, “civic” pertains to citizenship or a city, and thus some scholars argue that civic action can only be produced by national citizens, and thus civic action is really political action (cf. Berger 2011). Therefore, as for instance political scientist Ben Berger (2011) claims, one should differentiate between moral, social and political engagement. However, as I argue in chapter 2.2., new conceptualizations of citizenship in the context of urban and cultural plurality broaden the meaning of citizen to include more forms of belonging to a country than only national-legal. As such, “civic” is not limited to what citizens do, but rather concerns the nature of said actions. A different approach is that of political scientist Cliff Zukin and colleagues who distinguish between political and civic engagement in their book *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (2006). According to them, civic engagement is “organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others” (Zukin et al. 2006, 7). They define political engagement along the lines of Sidney Verba et al. in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (1995) who claim that it is any “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by

¹³ Felski (2020) draws on Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* (1998).

influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 38). Zukin et al. (2006) observe that younger U.S. residents in particular are active in civic matters but not in political, thus refraining from voting in elections. When it comes to non-political civic engagement, young people participate as much as older generations. The authors call this division in engagement patterns the civic-political divide (2006, 5). For quantitative studies, differentiating between political and civic, or political, social and moral like Berger (2011), makes sense. In this way, measuring individuals’ activities and their impact becomes manageable. For a qualitative study, such as the present one, that investigates not the actions of private individuals but those of organizations and public persons, such a distinction is not fruitful. Therefore, I view civic engagement and civic participation as social and political activity focused on helping or benefiting others, sometimes by intending to influence government action. I often refer to the efforts analyzed in this work as grassroots engagement, by which I mean that often these efforts are just in the making and not necessarily organized, in contrast to Zukin et al.’s definition of civic engagement. Moreover, “grassroots” is used to refer to actions that are not official: No political or other public institution necessarily endorses the activity, but the idea and implementation stem from people who do not professionally work in politics.

As art in its various forms influences people’s attitudes, decisions and behaviors, it is used as a tool for civic participation. The web of art, local politics, and economic profit allows for those within it to form a network that reaches from the artworld into politics and institutions – a process that can integrate trust networks (artistic and ethnic communities) into public politics and thus benefits democracy. At this point, remember Uslaner & Conley’s (2003) findings on particularized trust among ethnic communities and think of the networks that people form in clubs and associations. Viewed through Robert Putnam’s (1995) social capital theory, these activities strengthen social cohesion and should be supported. While it may well be, as Uslaner & Conley (2003) fear, that these kinds of associations foster only particularized trust, bringing the arts into communities creates and enriches community networks stretching to political institutions and individual politicians, like local council members.¹⁴ Two extensive public sector reports, “Understanding the value of arts & culture” for the UK

¹⁴ See for instance the political ties of Los Angeles-based cultural organization Self Help Graphics in chapter 4.2.1.

(Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) and “Arts for Life’s Sake” for the U.S. (Kisida and LaPorte 2021) emphasize the role of arts and arts education in community building through various methods. The authors use discourse analysis, statements from artists, arts administrators and managers, and create a meta-analysis of relevant research. Kisida and LaPorte (2021) recommend future policy strategies for arts education, including better data collection about art access and availability, participation and educators. Furthermore, they recommend introducing arts indicators to hold states accountable for their school education strategies (24f.). This call for better data leads back to the issue of measurement in the arts and civic engagement domain and for this project.

How can these vastly different cultural agents be studied with one approach? Communities are affected by an array of distinct cultural actors, some members more than others, and there is a need to investigate the various cultural influences that concern a particular community in a particular place. Moreover, art and artists (explicitly or implicitly) speak to different forms of civic engagement through different practices. Civic engagement reaches from collectively picking up litter to offering free art courses, from being a member of your neighborhood watch to working at the polling station. The artistic element in civic engagement practices is just as diverse: Painting banners for protests, pop-up performances on the streets before elections, asking people to vote during a hip hop concert, creating and reciting political poems, processing political events in fictive TV series, and much more. One subcategory of civic engagement is activism. Activism, in contrast to civic engagement, intends to bring about societal change for a perceived greater good. Thus, its scope is larger and long-term. In this work, the term *artivism* plays a role, too. It stands for artistic activism and is any form of art that people create or use to further an activist cause. It is not entirely clear when and how the term was coined, but according to popular belief it originates from a meeting of Zapatistas and East Los Angeles artists in the 1990s. Today, organizations and artists, especially of Latinx origin like Self Help Graphics (see chapter 4.3.1), use the term to signal the social impact and intention of their work.

2.2. Rethinking citizenship: Cultural and urban dimensions of participation

In his criticism of civic engagement, Berger (2011) claims that political engagement by non-citizens, such as the 2006 Immigrant rights protests, cannot be subsumed under civic engagement because the participants were mostly non-citizens, and the term “civic” pertains to citizenship only. In a strictly etymological and legal sense of “civic” and “citizenship” Berger is right, as I have illustrated above. However, this line of thought ends in an impasse where we once again need to grapple with systematic exclusion. A more accessible and progressive way to tackle the issue is to rethink and broaden the idea of citizenship. Legal citizenship is just one of many forms of showing belonging and participatory rights and duties in a community. T. H. Marshall’s (1950) frequently quoted account of citizenship differentiates between civil, political, and social rights and views their development as an evolution from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. Developed in the eighteenth century, civil rights encompass freedom of speech, thought and faith, liberty of the person, the right to own property and conclude contracts as well as the right to justice. Political rights that came into being in the nineteenth century guarantee the right to participate in the exercise of political power; and social rights instituted in the twentieth century include welfare and social security. While Marshall discusses the evolution of these rights, he takes the legal status of citizenship for granted and omits potential conflicts in a pluralistic and diverse society. More recent scholarly works have focused on the addition of citizen duties that complement Marshall’s rights and have engaged in discussing the cultural and spatial dimensions of citizenship. According to a Pew Research Center survey (2018) among adult U.S. adults, these eleven actions define a good citizen:

- Always follow the law (96 %)
- Pay all the taxes you owe (92 %)
- Respect the opinions of those who disagree (92 %)
- *Vote in elections* (91 %)
- Volunteer to help others (90 %)
- Follow what happens in government and politics (90 %)
- *Serve jury duty if called* (89 %)

- Participate in the U.S. census every decade (88 %)
- Protest if you think government actions are wrong (82 %)
- Know the Pledge of Allegiance (75 %)
- Display the American flag (62 %)¹⁵

While many of these are examples of political, moral and social engagement (cf. Berger 2011), only the two in italics, voting in elections and serving jury duty, actually require legal U.S. citizenship. Thus, nine of the eleven widely shared “good citizen” markers are practices of cultural membership that anyone can engage in. This leads to the notion of cultural citizenship that I discuss below.

Cultural citizenship

In the last couple of decades three main strand of cultural citizenship have emerged: Multicultural citizenship, promoted by Renato Rosaldo and Will Kymlicka, that claims that rights for ethnic minorities need to be realized in relation to political institutions; cultural productions and mass media that influence the formation of citizenship, as exemplified by the works of Liesbet van Zoonen and Toby Miller; and communicative cultural citizenship that views everyday interactions as constitutive of citizenship, as stipulated by Nick Stevenson and Gerard Delanty (Pawley 2008). It thus seems as if cultural citizenship is blurry and does not offer guidance. If seen as an extension to social citizenship and in light of the above criteria of good citizen behavior, though, the two latter strands with their focus on cultural productions and communication are mirrored in almost all of them. Cultural productions are valuable in expressions of citizenship, such as the flag, the Pledge of Allegiance or protesting that can take place on the individual and on the mass level, for instance in songs performed before sports games or on July 4th or during protest marches. Multicultural citizenship with its political perspective does not seem to fit in with the other two’s social outlook. Indeed, Will Kymlicka (1995) is first and foremost concerned with integrating minority rights into a pre-existing form of citizenship, but contemporary work sees the need to reconsider the assumption that citizens of a nation have a shared culture with common norms, values and practices (Beaman 2016). Especially against the backdrop of a globalized and networked world, configurations of cosmopolitan, global and transnational citizenship are at the forefront. Jan

¹⁵ Aggregate percentages of those who strongly and moderately agree; my emphases.

Pakulski offers a vision of cultural citizenship that brings together the three strands under consideration of ethnically and sexually marginalized groups. He views cultural citizenship as “the right to symbolic presence and visibility (vs marginalisation); the right to dignifying representation (vs stigmatisation); and the right to propagation of identity and maintenance of lifestyles (vs assimilation)” (Pakulski 1997, 80). He elaborates:

Cultural citizenship involves the right to be 'different', to re-value stigmatised identities, to embrace openly and legitimately hitherto marginalised lifestyles and to propagate them without hindrance. The national community, in other words, is defined not only in formal-legal, political, and socioeconomic dimensions, but also increasingly in a sociocultural one. Full citizenship involves a right to full cultural participation and undistorted representation. (Pakulski 1997, 83)

One might wonder if the concepts of belonging or participation fit better than the idea of cultural citizenship – after all, it seems that the core tenet of citizenship, legal citizenship, is being left behind all together. Political scientists, especially in international relations, might logically argue that citizenship is the category that ensures mutual rights and duties between citizen and the nation-state determining the boundaries of each nation-state’s sovereignty; from this perspective, conflating citizenship with culture might be intolerable. However, there are two substantial reasons that position cultural citizenship as the more effective and, in fact, more precise term. First, belonging and participation are rooted in action and behavior, and are thus more volatile and do not need to be acknowledged by others. Citizenship, on the other hand, is a stable status and contingent on identity as it is practiced in cultural, symbolic and economic terms (Isin and Wood 1999). As identity-informing, citizenship can be acted out and performed through both everyday practices and extraordinary activities (Isin 2019). It also demands recognition of membership by others in the community and by the nation-state (E. N. Glenn 2011). The Immigrant Rights Protests that ensued in early 2006 are an example of cultural citizenship enacted: Through the protests, immigrants claimed their right to criticize government’s plan to issue a punitive immigration bill – most of the protesters were non-citizens who nonetheless participated in what most U.S.-Americans deem essential for good citizens. Moreover, the protesters consisted of non-citizens and citizens alike and thus they were recognized by their communities. The rising number of protests that took place in many cities speak to the mutual recognition, too. And finally, the outcome – the success in defeating the anti-immigration bill – shows the nation-state’s acknowledgement of this act of citizenship. Cultural citizenship is a status informed by identity and with a need

to be acknowledged; it can be performed through different sets of practices that pertain to social, ethnic, economic and other dimensions of life.

The second profound reason that speaks in favor of the term cultural citizenship is the US' historical and contemporary struggle with that concept and the creative strategies that aim to challenge and transform citizenship towards a more open and inclusive status. Those excluded from citizenship have traditionally been African Americans and non-white immigrants.¹⁶ Citizenship as membership of a nation-state arose with the formation of the latter in the modern era with a profound change in the way individuals knew and felt their belonging to a societal order (B. Anderson 2016 [1991]). Although nation-states are merely “imagined communities,” as Benedict Anderson argues, membership became an important question, especially with regard to those who did not, in the eyes of many, fit the image of a community member.

The question of citizenship proved to be especially difficult during and after the abolition of slavery in the US: Slaves could not be citizens, but what about free(d) Blacks? The situation was further complicated by the sovereignty of each state to make their own laws regarding that matter – the same Black person could be free in one state, but was regarded as property in another (Kennedy 1996). One of the most famous incidents in the evolution of U.S. citizenship is the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1856) where Chief Justice Taney denied (former) slave Dred Scott the right to freedom and, thus, to citizenship (Kennedy 1996, 109ff.).¹⁷ Originally born into slavery, Dred Scott was taken to and lived on free territory by his owner, and upon his owner's death tried to buy his and his family's freedom from his former owner's wife. After this attempt failed, Scott and his wife sued for freedom on the grounds of being freed through their time spent on territory where slavery was illegal (Kennedy 1996).¹⁸ The case reached the Supreme Court and Dred Scott was ruled erroneous, thereby set back to his status as slave and non-citizen. Chief

¹⁶ While the meaning of “non-white” changed through time – Italians and Irish were at some point regarded as non-white, too – this work focuses on the contemporary understanding that views Black, Indigenous, Central and Southern Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders as people of color and therefore as non-white.

¹⁷ Also see Hudson (1983) for a very short summary of the case and its implications for African American citizenship.

¹⁸ The Missouri Compromise (1820) was supposed to resolve the interest of the Northern states to prevent slavery and the interest of the Southern states to maintain it by determining that Missouri would be a slave state and the remaining Louisiana Purchase territory would be free (cf. Kennedy 1996, 104ff.). This compromise, however, was overruled by the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford*.

Justice Taney's argument followed the idea that an African person was excluded from citizenship in the Constitution. However, as legal scholar Randall Kennedy observes, the Constitution never explicates who can and who cannot be a citizen (1996, 103), and thus Taney's decision was based on his own interpretation thereof (*ibid.*, 111f.). Some justices disagreed with Taney's conceptualization of citizenship and its natural exclusion of Blacks. Justice Benjamin Curtis, himself a northern conservative and by no means an abolitionist, maintained that Blacks were acknowledged as citizens in five of the original thirteen states at the time of the Founding, and that qualified Blacks were furthermore eligible to vote in these states, and thus were among the people for whom the Constitution was established (Kennedy 1996, 112f.). For Curtis, however, citizenship did not necessarily include any civic or political rights, but as it was a universal truth not further specified by the Founding Fathers, nothing spoke against Blacks being citizens. While some Blacks saw their suspicions confirmed by the Court's decision that under U.S. government and law they were non-human, others, especially in white and Black abolitionist circles, agreed with Curtis that the Founding Fathers did not exclude any person based on color from "we the people" and that Taney misinterpreted the Constitution (Kennedy 1996, 115). Although the Constitutional Amendments passed by Congress in the aftermath of the Civil War abolished slavery, ensured citizenship and the right to vote to Black Americans,¹⁹ the decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* in 1857 foreshadowed the race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Instead of freedom and equality that the abolition of slavery and the Union's victory were supposed to bring, many practices continued to bar Blacks from full citizenship; some practices subsumed under the Jim Crow laws that came into place in the South after Reconstruction even worsened the lived experience of African Americans (Graves 2016, 8f.). The Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906 where at least twenty African Americans were killed mirrors the sentiments

¹⁹ Thirteenth Amendment (abolition of slavery), passed in 1865: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Fourteenth Amendment (citizenship rights), passed in 1866: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

Fifteenth Amendment (right to vote not denied by race), passed in 1869: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." (National Constitution Center, n.d.).

of the time, and had profound repercussions on the development of local, regional and national race relations, such as the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s that originated in Atlanta (Godshalk 2006). Thus, while characterized by segregation and disenfranchisement, the Progressive Era also saw Black efforts, among them W. E. B. Du Bois and his support for the NAACP, at claiming the rights guaranteed by the Constitution (Southern 2005; Ch. 5). Although mostly ignored by mainstream reformers of the era, “African Americans created their own Progressive movement and in so doing established a vital beachhead for the twentieth-century civil rights movement” (Southern 2005, 138). All these events and circumstances influenced Black artistic expressions of belonging, identity and citizenship during the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement.

African Americans’ fight for inclusion and membership relates to the struggle immigrants face in the U.S. Every immigrant group has their own particular stories, and the most dominant groups are Latinx migrants, most of whom have a Mexican heritage.²⁰ While African Americans have long belonged to the U.S. and have full formal citizenship, many immigrants are not U.S. citizens, and about a quarter reside in the country as undocumented (Budiman 2020). Adults migrating to the U.S. can apply for naturalization if certain requirements are fulfilled; children born in the U.S. are *per jus soli* citizens; and individuals who were brought to the U.S. as children illegally can be granted the right to live, work and study in the U.S. through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program installed under former president Barack Obama in 2012. These individuals, called Dreamers, are temporarily protected from deportation and can apply to extend their status. However, former president Donald Trump attempted to terminate the program, and the situation has been volatile since then. As of October 2022, the program has been suspended, and while permits can be renewed, no new requests will be processed (Homeland Security Department 2022). Overall, the legal status of adult and under-age immigrants is diverse, and some never become naturalized citizens albeit spending a majority of their lives in the U.S. Regardless of their formal citizenship status, immigrants and first- and second-generation Americans participate in all areas of life and claim their rights as members of the national community. In 2006, for

²⁰ According to the Pew Research Center, 25 percent of all immigrants to the U.S. in 2018 were born in Mexico, that accounts to 11.2 million individuals (Budiman, August 20, 2020).

instance, massive protests took place in most major cities where protesters of mostly Latinx origin staged a “day without immigrants” to show the effects of a missing immigrant workforce. The movement evolved in opposition to a proposed anti-immigration bill that would have raised penalties for illegal immigrants and those who help them. The bill was eventually altered. A profound effect of the protests was the visualization of the immense number of human bodies that work in mostly low-paid and essential jobs which are the bedrock of the U.S. economy. To imagine them gone from the U.S. labor market is to envision chaos and, possibly, economic collapse. Immigration to the U.S. from Central and South America, especially from Mexico, increased tremendously since 1965 when the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed (Pew Research Center 2015a). This law was the first since the late 1800s that loosened the grip on tight immigration laws, such as the national origin quota from the 1920s capping immigration at two percent of the respective origin group already residing in the U.S. based on the 1890 census, that ensured immigrants from Europe remained the largest group. The 1965 law essentially abolished the national origin quota and gave rise to a different wave of immigration, namely from South and East Asia and Latin America (Pew Research Center 2015a). While currently the largest group of immigrants are of Mexican origin, some projections estimate that Asian immigrants might become the dominant group by 2055 (Pew Research Center 2015b).

As one of the largest demographic groups in the U.S., the participation of Latinx people in any sphere of society matters and has consequences. Regardless of citizenship status, as some are undocumented, their actions play a role in civic life and in terms of being a good citizen, as the aforementioned list of traits shows. A look at the cultural and artistic landscape of the U.S. approximates the country’s actual demographic: More and more productions and artefacts, such as movies, music, festivals and events, galleries and cultural organizations are produced, owned and run by or created for Latinx people. Like African Americans, their presence in the cultural scene, which goes hand in hand with claims of membership and belonging, must be taken seriously. And like most ethnic and racial minority groups, most Latinx immigrants settle in a handful of large cities, including New York and Los Angeles, where they can use their family and friend networks to find accommodation, work and the necessary information to get started. The demographic shift since the 1970s has led to the scholarly reemergence of the citizenship debate as the influx of immigrants from Asia and

Latin America challenges the notion of citizenship based on a shared set of norms and values, in short, a shared culture (cf. Rocco 2006).

Extending beyond civil, political and social rights, cultural citizenship addresses this shifting dynamic in membership and participation in U.S. society. Renato Rosaldo (1994) views cultural citizenship as a “deliberate oxymoron” (402) as it comprises the right to be different and yet to belong in a participatory democratic sense, which implies the “ability to influence one’s destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions” (402). The transformation from a culturally homogenous majority white population to a pluralistic and polyglot citizenry challenges the understanding of citizenship in favor of a more inclusive and diverse mode of belonging to society and the nation-state. At the same time, however, the demographic shift provokes voices calling for a narrower definition of citizenship; take for instance former president Donald Trump’s call for a wall at the border to Mexico, or his anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant rhetoric that portrayed non-white individuals as criminals and therefore not as part of the law-abiding U.S.-American citizenry. The political use of racist rhetoric plays with majority-group citizens’ fears of being dominated by the Other, and this is supported by official data that shows the twenty-first century as pivotal for a radical shift in racial demographics: Non-white populations in the U.S., especially new minorities like Asians, Hispanics and multiracial individuals,²¹ are growing much faster than the white population, and scientists estimate that by 2050 whites will be a minority, implying that there will no longer be a racial majority population (Frey 2015). Again, this suggests rethinking the traditional U.S.-American conceptualization of citizenship where members share cultural values and norms, and newcomers are encouraged to assimilate (Bishop 2017). When one looks at the ethnoracial makeup of some major cities and their histories, the fear some may feel appears comprehensible along general lines. The images of white flight and a subsequent urban blight still float around, but the traditional story of white suburbanization and inner-city ghettoization is outdated. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the fastest-growing population in the inner city and in the suburbs were Hispanics, followed by Asians for the inner city and Black Americans for the suburbs (Frey 2015, 150). Moreover, as Latinx scholars Andrew Sandoval-Strausz (2019) and George Sanchez (2021) demonstrate, Latinx

²¹ Frey (2015) distinguishes old minorities – Blacks, and American Indians and Alaska Natives – from new minorities – Asians, Hispanics, and individuals identifying with two or more races.

immigrants saved the inner city from deterioration and built it up to be economically competitive and livable. Another fact that is often ignored in debates about fear of diversity is the age structure inherent to the country's ethnoracial diversification: It is not adult immigrants that dominate the increasing BIPoC population, but rather persons under the age of 16; and as of 2019, there is no more majority ethnicity/race within that age group (Frey 2020; cf. also Frey 2021).

Returning to the beginning of this section, I would like to point out that cultural citizenship is indeed complex and might seem blurry on the surface. Zooming in, however, we see that all three strands – multiculturalism, cultural production/texts and communication – intertwine and yield a holistic picture of cultural citizenship that helps to come to terms with membership, belonging and participation in pluralistic and ethnoracially diverse societies. While multiculturalism and cultural production are self-explanatory terms, communication as cultural citizenship might pose more questions. One of the key theorists in this field, Gerard Delanty, argues that “citizenship is something that must be learned and that rights must be accompanied by corresponding duties” (Delanty 2003, 598). This addresses both the issue of how children growing into adults learn citizenship and the question of how newcomers to the country adopt the new citizen behavioral patterns.²² At the same time, this approach focuses not on the fact of membership but on

common experiences, cognitive processes, forms of cultural translation and discourses of empowerment. The power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process. (Delanty 2003, 602)

Here, the communicative strand of cultural citizenship ties in with the multicultural and textual approaches. Immigrants and ethnic minority groups strive for greater visibility through participation, not last in creative forms on TV, the radio, the music industry and more, and by doing so claim their rights as citizens – not second-class but full members. In this sense, citizenship is

²² Delanty draws on Klaus Eder's (1999) three-level model of societal learning that entails the individual, the cultural/collective and the social/institutional levels. I do not elaborate further on the concept of democracy and citizenship as a learning process, and recommend Gerard Delanty's short article “Citizenship as a Learning Process: Disciplinary Citizenship Versus Cultural Citizenship” (2003) and John Dewey's essays in *America's Public Philosopher* (2020), edited by Eric Thomas Weber.

a matter of participation in the political community [...]. It concerns the learning of a capacity for action and for responsibility but, essentially, it is about the learning of the self and of the relationship of self and other. It is a learning process in that it is articulated in perceptions of the self as an active agency and a social actor shaped by relations with others. In this view, citizenship concerns identity and action; it entails both personal and cognitive dimensions that extend beyond the personal to the wider cultural level of society. (Delanty 2003, 602)

Citizenship as a learning process is thus a crucial part of democracy. This idea becomes especially apparent in John Dewey's thought when he theorizes on the relationship between democracy, education and knowledge. Dewey argues that in order to participate, we have to know how society works. This understanding "has to be in terms of how things work and how to do things. Understanding, by its very nature, is related to action" (Dewey [1937] 2020, 34). Only through our own actions can we learn and understand, and only through our actions can democracy progress. Indeed,

to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that *democracy is a moral ideal* and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact. It is to realize that *democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living*. (Dewey [1939] 2020, 64; my emphases)

Seeing democracy both as a moral ideal that we strive to and as embodied in our everyday lives can offer a guideline to how we envision citizenship as learned patterns of behavior that we put to use for improving democratic practices and thereby enhancing equality and justice for all.

Urban citizenship

One particularly visible level of this ongoing struggle is the city where the question of citizenship is carried out through very visceral practices. Segregation and the removal of undesired PoC and immigrants, for instance through official redlining maps created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in the 1940s,²³ as well as claiming space, through protest marches and the public display of art, for instance during the Civil Rights Movement, have always been strategies of negotiating who is a member and who is not – in short, practices in

²³ While the official purpose of the HOLC was to create maps that designated the risks of mortgage lending in different districts, this policy inevitably institutionalized racism and furthered residential segregation in U.S.-American cities because the lines between desirable and undesirable areas were drawn based on social and demographic characteristics, especially ethnicity (R. K. Nelson et al. 2023; Mitchell and Franco 2018).

the city and claiming the right to the city are expressions of citizenship (Isin 2002).²⁴ The city as a small-scale mirror of the nation-state lends itself to detailed observation and meaning making, and thus urban citizenship has established itself as a fruitful discourse. Cities belong to nation-states, and they share some properties, like imposing taxes and distributing jobs, and have their own authority, for instance through creating their own revenues and being effective on their own behalf (Bridges 2016). City governments have the power to distribute goods and services and, thus, to improve residents' lives. The elected city government is therefore crucial to residents' everyday lives, and hence city elections matter. A look at voter turnouts, however, suggests that especially Latinx and Asian Americans tend to vote less – a huge factor considering these groups make up large shares of city populations. Indeed, political scientists Zoltan Hajnal and Jessica Trounstein (2005) demonstrate that ethnically uneven turnout in city elections significantly changes the outcomes to the detriment of marginalized groups.²⁵ Moreover, the participation of non-formal citizens matters too, namely on the level of census surveys (that do not require formal citizenship to take part and) that serve as the basis for the allocation of resources to city neighborhoods. As the U.S. is growing more diverse and immigrants continue to settle in the country, racial and ethnic minorities can influence the outcomes of national elections even more in the future. However, as Hajnal (2010) points out, if current turnout patterns stay the same and non-white groups continue to vote less, election results on the national level will become skewed and minorities' impact will be considerably reduced on the national level too. If the urban demographic shift towards a more ethnically diverse population remains unrepresented in political participation, the questions we need to ask are: Who is the city for? Who claims and makes the city? Who belongs to the city?

As early as the 1960s, sociologist Henri Lefebvre discusses the *right to the city*, a discourse that became relevant again at the turn of the twenty-first century. According to Lefebvre, this signifies “the right of citizens and city dwellers, and of groups they (on the basis of social relations) constitute, to appear on all the networks and circuits of

²⁴ I discuss the performance of citizenship in chapter 3.

²⁵ While many studies have found that skewed turnout does not lead to biased outcomes, these studies have often focused on national electorates and a few presidential or congressional elections. On the city level where populations tend to be more ethnically diverse, however, as Hajnal again stresses in his book *America's Uneven Democracy* (2010), voter turnout matters immensely in urban environments and low turnout is to the detriment of vulnerable ethnic groups.

communication, information and exchange” (Lefebvre 1996, 194f.). This entails the right to not be removed from urban reality because of discriminatory and segregating structures, as well as the right to meetings, gatherings and social life (ibid.). The right to be represented in all communication is a terrain currently being fought for, not only in the urban sphere with protest marches and public art, but in every facet of society, from entertainment, through news and information to politics. Lefebvre mentions citizens and city dwellers in one breath without distinction. And indeed, the right to the city and urban citizenship views anybody residing in the city as equal, and thus as having equal claims to the city’s resources and to decision-making processes.

The idea of the right to the city is picked up again at the beginning of the twenty-first century by geographer David Harvey (2008), who contextualizes it anew against the backdrop of neoliberalism and the globalization of cities. According to him, the restructuring of U.S.-American cities in the twentieth century was a means to deal with capital and labor surplus, and has developed hand in hand with new forms of debt-financing. “Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy” (2008, 31), argues Harvey. And neoliberalism’s

results are indelibly etched on the spatial forms of our cities, which increasingly consist of fortified fragments, gated communities and privatized public spaces kept under constant surveillance.[...] Under these conditions, ideals of urban identity, citizenship and belonging – already threatened by the spreading malaise of a neoliberal ethic – become much harder to sustain. (Harvey 2008, 32)

Hence, the right to the city demands democratic management of its development and it is “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2008, 23). While there are, as Harvey states, global urban efforts and movements aiming for change and urban justice (including access to sanitation and water, the fights against food deserts and displacement, better public transport and so on), these are disconnected and thus not able to generate large transformation. Neoliberalism and the weakening of the state furthermore reinforce the city as a place of power, decision-making as well as identity and political negotiation. On the one hand, the rise of cities as power centers poses difficulties in light of the fragmentation of claims arising through identity politics and in light of incohesive and disconnected social movements (Blokland et al.

2015). On the other hand, the practice of urban citizenship, in contrast to national citizenship, can inspire hope and self-efficacy among those who are not formal members of the nation-state. Thus, “emancipated from imperatives of national sovereignty and homogeneity [urban citizenship] may become a home base for cosmopolitan democracy” (Bauböck 2003, 157). The increasing globalization of cities like New York, Los Angeles, London, Shanghai and Lagos contributes to the shifting notion of citizenship in that it adds to the rights the dimension of duties. As urban geographer Ulrike Gerhard notes,

the new understanding of citizenship also implies civic *duties*, like participation in political decision-making processes (e.g., elections) or commitment to public welfare-oriented goals (civic engagement). [...] The emphasis is thus more on discussions of participation, norms, practices, meanings, and identities than on enforcing legal regulations. (Gerhard 2007, 84; my translation)

The global city as location where citizenship is being negotiated emphasizes the role of place and locale for processes of membership formation. In his comprehensive overview of modern citizenship, urban scholar Mark Purcell (2003) distinguishes three aspects in the contemporary transformation of citizenship: Rescaling (from nation-level political community to communities at other levels), reterritorialization (questioning the tight link between nation-state’s territorial sovereignty and political loyalty), and reorientation (away from the primary political community of the nation). These three aspects emancipate citizenship from the nation-state and imagine “the right to the global city as a potential citizenship that can both be enabled by the destabilization of LDW [liberal-democratic/Westphalian] citizenship and contribute to that destabilization by helping to ‘unthink’ LDW assumptions” (Purcell 2003, 566).²⁶ The focus on practices, meanings and identities, and hence, on bodies, manifests itself vividly in urban space. In this sense, and much in the sense of Lefebvre, urban and cultural citizenship claim the right to be heard and seen, the right to participate and make political decisions, the right to be equal to any other member of the community within the U.S., regardless of formal citizenship status. Urban and cultural citizenship extend the civic, political and social

²⁶ Purcell’s liberal-democratic/Westphalian citizenship assumes that “individual political actors agree to a ‘social contract’ with the state in which they consent to be ruled in exchange for certain privileges and Protections” (Purcell 2003, 565) This involves some sort of electoral system, and imagines “one’s primary political community to be a nation-state that is embedded in an international system of nation-states, each of which is sovereign within its territory” (ibid.), and because “each state is sovereign, a citizen’s ultimate political loyalty must be to her nation-state. She might be a member of other sorts of political community, but they must all be subordinated to her membership in the nation-state” (ibid.).

dimensions once defined by T. H. Marshall to include the dimensions of place and human geography, communication (in the broadest sense) and cultural texts, such as movies and music. The rise of new citizenship approaches is certainly grounded in the context of a global neoliberal and capitalist world order that widens the gap between rich and poor, and makes collective action embedded in the “fragmentation phenomenon” all the more difficult and more important.²⁷

2.3. Race, art, and the pragmatic tradition in U.S. democracy

As I have indicated in the two previous sections, both Tocqueville’s observations on democratic life in the U.S. and race-based (non-)citizenship play fundamental roles in political discourses in the U.S. In this section, I take a closer look at the philosophical tradition in the U.S. – pragmatism – and its connection to race. This connection is interesting because pragmatism had its zenith during the political Progressive Era in the U.S. when significant advances in the African American struggle for freedom were made.

American democracy, Tocqueville, and race

Alexis de Tocqueville mused about the United States and its relationship towards race as early as 1835. Tocqueville praised associational life in the U.S. that signified strong, decentralized and non-governmental democracy. Although his primary aim was to influence the political debates occurring in his home country France, his writing nevertheless continues to have significance in the U.S., especially with regard to the often mentioned associational decline in the U.S. (cf. Skocpol 1997). Many Americans seem to position the golden age of civic engagement in the early twentieth century, either during the Progressive Era or the New Deal era, which was marked by a progressive presidential leadership by Franklin D. Roosevelt and strong labor unions (ibid.). Believing that the decline in associational engagement has been fueled by a government that has become too strong, conservatives envision a return

²⁷ I use the term ‘fragmentation phenomenon’ to describe a general disconnectedness of life in modernity, similar to what Anthony Giddens (*The Consequences of Modernity*, 1990) or Zygmunt Bauman (*Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, 1997) describe. Examples are incoherent social movements, political polarization, identity politics, labor division, capitalism and mass consumption, consumerism and materialism, and so on.

to a more decentralized state. Against this persistent myth, sociologist and political scientist Theda Skocpol (1997) illustrates that civic engagement in the U.S. was spurred well before Progressivism:

The American Revolution, political struggles over the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and deepening popular participation in elections for state and national as well as local offices all served to spur associational life as America became an independent nation. So did religious and cultural ideals about self-improvement, and growing awareness of extralocal commercial and public affairs through widespread newspaper reading. (Skocpol 1997, 459f.)

In fact, Skocpol argues, the postal system that ensured every small rural community was provided with newspapers played a major role in citizen education and participation. This widespread postal network was only made possible through Congress subsidies. Thus, contrary to the general notion of self-governing and independent agrarian communities, government was significantly involved in the formation of civic associations. The efficient subsidized postal system also ensured direct communication between Congress and its citizens, hence being the “lifeblood of American democracy” (Skocpol 1997, 463). Moreover, as Theda Skocpol and her team find, many associations modeled their form according to the three-tiered structure of U.S. federalism that comprises local groups, state branches, and national centers. Skocpol thus concludes that

[f]rom early on in America's national history, the structure and activities of the federal government, along with translocal and competitive forms of popular political mobilization, created an "opportunity structure" that nourished, encouraged, and rewarded voluntary association. (Skocpol 1997, 472)

It is therefore not that government has become too strong, but rather that it has changed, diminishing this “opportunity structure.” Skocpol contends that mass politics has become “electorally demobilized and increasingly money-driven” (Skocpol 1997, 476) with leaders needing to raise funds and hiring media consultants. This led citizens “to feel themselves to be merely the manipulated objects of such effort. They do not feel like participating citizens or grassroots leaders active in broad efforts” (ibid.).

While Theda Skocpol (1997) does not offer any recommendations for the future, I find two of her final thoughts valuable for this chapter’s continuation: First, countering Robert Putnam’s famous essay “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” (1995) with the words “perhaps family and friends are bowling together in new ways” (Skocpol 1997, 473), she offers an optimistic glimpse into the future. Second, drawing on Tocqueville, she

maintains that “vital democratic participation served as a kind of ‘school’ where Americans learned how to build social and civic associations of all sort” (Skocpol 1997, 476).

Thought one leads to creative forms of civic engagement: Arts and grassroots activities aim to mobilize citizens to participate in social and political life. Although the media can often be criticized for their biased portrayal of events, new channels can benefit citizen mobilization. Many artists and organizations use social media platforms to communicate with their constituents. Skocpol’s sentence also evokes a positive gaze towards the future, much in unison with what communication scholar Roderick Hart (2018) calls *civic hope*, the attitude and actions of ordinary citizens that keep democracy alive. Thought two leads to citizenship as a learning process, as discussed by Gerard Delanty (2003), and to John Dewey’s emphasis on education as a vital ingredient in the forging of democracy. I discuss this point further below.

Despite her intriguing examination of the postal system’s role for democracy, Skocpol’s discussion omits Tocqueville’s observation on racial relations in the U.S. Philosopher Lucius Outlaw Jr.’s (2009) analysis of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and other works illustrates that the Frenchman believed that whites in the U.S. were superior to Blacks and Indigenous peoples. He viewed each race to be a distinctive people with a distinctive *national character* that consists of a common language, religious traditions, customs and habits, opinions and sentiments, as well as their outward appearance. However, he did not attribute white superiority to biological facts, but rather to social conditions (Outlaw Jr. 2009). In the U.S., Tocqueville believed, there developed an equality of condition among Anglo-Americans, but this did not include Blacks and Indigenous peoples because the differences between the races were too vast. Outlaw Jr. concludes that Tocqueville was in fact aware of how race figured in U.S. democracy:

Indians and Negroes were part of the overall context of the developing democratic project; they were not, however, constitutive aspects of the project. The racial differences of Indians and Negroes were such that these peoples could not become part of the equality of conditions definitive of the democratic project. (Outlaw Jr. 2009, 132)

Democracy in America, for Tocqueville, would not be a multiracial affair. Nor could it be, for it was an affair of and for *Anglo-Americans*. (Outlaw Jr. 2009, 135, emphasis in original)

Outlaw Jr. (2009) points out that Alexis de Tocqueville’s knowledge of Negro life in the U.S. was limited to observations. He probably never talked to Blacks in the U.S. to get their view

on the matter. Nevertheless, or rather because of this limitation, Tocqueville's analysis and its continued influence in the U.S. are worthwhile for understanding the connection between race and American democracy. Those who were central to U.S. democracy-making in the early years were white, and BIPoC were excluded. But BIPoC have always attempted to participate and to achieve equality. In the history of the U.S., different traditions of Black struggle have negotiated what it means to be American and what democracy looks like. From Dred Scott who unsuccessfully sued for freedom in the mid-nineteenth century, over Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and, in the later twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and many others, Black activists, scholars, and writers have formed a tradition of struggle for freedom, equality and justice. Along these lines, there has also emerged a tradition of African American political thought that scholars have recently started to bring to light (Rogers and J. Turner 2021; Zamalin 2015). Within this discussion, philosopher Tommy Shelby in his essay on Black self-determination states that

[t]he black struggle for social equality has traditionally included the fight for each black individual to be viewed as an equal participant in the multicultural mix of America. This is a legacy of the black freedom struggle that should earnestly be kept alive, for it expresses a cosmopolitan ideal well worth striving for, though no doubt utopian at the moment. (Shelby 2009, 183)

Shelby (2009) outlines the characteristics of Black cultural nationalism, from which the Black Power movement, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam drew, and concludes that this line of thought does not help to achieve said cosmopolitan ideal. He suggests to pay less attention to a collective Black identity and rather work toward a multicultural society. Scholar Eddie Glaude Jr., on the other hand, holds the view that racial identity matters insofar as character and conduct are interdependent: "Who we take ourselves to be [...] often guides how we engage in politics, and the sorts of choices we make while engaging in politics fundamentally shape who we take ourselves to be" (Glaude Jr. 2007, 56). Both Glaude Jr. and Shelby contextualize Black political thought within a pragmatic tradition in the U.S. In fact, many scholars have turned their attention to the race aspect in pragmatism in the last decade in search for solutions to the continuing struggle in the U.S. Most locate the beginning of a Black pragmatic tradition at the turn of the twentieth century when W. E. B. Du Bois and others were active in the Black liberation fight amidst a progressive political climate that offered opportunities for such action.

W. E. B. Du Bois

At Atlanta University, a historically Black college, Du Bois was professor for economics and history, and published multiple works, among them *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that contains essays on race and Black life in the U.S. The work became significant both as one of the first sociological works ever written and as a milestone in African American studies. Spurred by the overarching progressive atmosphere in the country, not least because of president Theodore Roosevelt's progressive politics, Du Bois founded the Niagara Movement in 1905 whose supporters demanded equal access to higher education and all rights promised in the Constitution (Southern 2005). Although Booker T. Washington was the most influential African American at the time – and, in fact, the first Black to be invited to the White House –, Du Bois openly opposed Washington who acquiesced to racial segregation in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois demanded equal and full rights of citizenship for Blacks, and in 1910 he quit his position at Atlanta University and became Director of Publications and Research at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that was founded in 1909. Historian David Southern contends that “[t]hough largely ignored by mainstream reformers, African Americans created their own Progressive movement and in so doing established a vital beachhead for the twentieth-century civil rights movement” (Southern 2005, 138). In this progressive movement, Du Bois became the most famous intellectual. In *Souls*, he writes,

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song [...]; the gift of sweat and [...]; the third, a gift of the Spirit. [...] Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (Du Bois 1903, chapter 14)

While David Southern deems Du Bois a “romantic racialist” (2005, 151) confused about the meaning of race and culture, Cornel West, in his comprehensive history of U.S.-American pragmatism, asserts that

Du Bois' stress on black music is significant in that here he sees black agency at work. Like Emerson and other pragmatists, Du Bois posits culture making as the prime instance of history making. He does this not only because for Afro-Americans all other spaces were closed, but also because in every society, no matter how oppressive, human creativity can be discerned in culture making. In good Emersonian fashion, Du

Bois' democratic mores are ground in the detection of human creative powers at the level of everyday life.²⁸ (West 1989, 144)

Du Bois emphasized the role of creative culture making in the freedom struggle. As I point out below, this, too, is a pragmatic approach to lived democracy. Still, philosopher Paul Taylor (2004) asserts that whether Du Bois can be called a pragmatist or not remains questionable, but viewing Du Bois through the lens of pragmatism opens new ways of understanding not only his thought but possible visions for American democracy. One example Taylor (2004) illustrates is Du Bois's departing sentence to a friend before leaving for Ghana where he remained until his death: "Chin up and fight on, but realize that American Negroes can't win" (Horne 1986). Taylor notices that Du Bois says "American" Negroes cannot win, and he interprets this "as a final recognition that 'winning' for Negroes, and for the many others whose fates so deeply concerned him [Du Bois] throughout his struggles against imperialism and racism, has to mean rejecting the idea of America, at least as it stands" (Taylor 2004, 101). Interpreted through the lens of pragmatism, Du Bois was neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but believed in the possibility of "salvation," as pragmatist William James called it, and therefore was inclined to *meliorism*, the pragmatic tenet that views any action for improvement possible and valuable (James 1907, 125; cf. Hildebrand 2013).

John Dewey and pragmatism

Although Du Bois was convinced by William James's pragmatism, Cornel West (1989) notices parallels with another of his contemporary pragmatists, John Dewey. Both scholars were more interested in the applicable social sciences and history, and both supported the U.S. joining WW I – a decision both regretted later and that made them more radical. Like Du Bois, John Dewey was a founding member of the NAACP, and, like Du Bois, he spoke at the National Negro Conference in 1909. His address includes the following statement:

Each generation biologically commences over again very much on the level of the individuals of the past generation, or a few generations gone by. In other words, there is no "inferior race," and the members of a race so-called should each have the same opportunities of social environment and personality as those of a more favored race. [...] it is the business of society as a whole to-day, to see to it that the environment is provided which will utilize all of the individual capital that is being born into it. (Dewey [1909] 2020, 25f.)

²⁸ For reasons of scope, I do not discuss Emerson and how his ideas came to set the basis for American pragmatism. For a full account of pragmatism's beginnings, see Cornel West's *The American Evasion* (1989).

Clearly, Dewey advocated for equal opportunities and believed that each new generation could and must refashion its own path in these matters. However, as philosopher Shannon Sullivan (2017) stresses, John Dewey avoided the topic of race in most of his writing and public speeches. She finds that some of his texts are, as a matter of fact, “infused with an unspoken, ‘invisible’ commitment to white privilege and white superiority” (Sullivan 2017, 267). Dewey, too, was a product of his times, and his choice of words probably was mainstream back then. Pedagogy scholar Thomas Fallace (2017) observes a shift in Dewey’s thinking about race and culture around the year 1916 when Dewey published *Democracy and Education*. This opus magnum comprised earlier essays and new original material, and thus brought together two contradictory views of race and culture. Fallace argues that prior to 1916, Dewey believed, like most of his peers, in a linear development of societies evolving through different psycho-social stages, and that the white race happened to be the most civilized. In contrast to other contemporaries, though, Dewey rejected the idea of inherent biological potentials and believed that any society, and thus every individual, had the potential to achieve a high stage of culture depending on the “interaction with a mediating social environment” (Fallace 2017, 477). However, Dewey uses the savagery-barbarianism-civilization hierarchy to explain the evolutionary stages of white Americans, American Indigenous peoples and Blacks. The paradox arises when, in his writing after 1916, Dewey advocates more and more for racial and cultural pluralism as necessary for democratic life. By then, he thinks that the greatest pool of potential for progress manifests in a diverse population with equal access to opportunities and education. Dewey thus evolves from cultural imperialism, with his focus on genetic stage theory, to cultural preservation, with his emphasis on pluralism (Fallace 2017). For his eightieth birthday, Dewey wrote the speech “Creative democracy – the task before us” that contains the following sentence: “To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life” (Dewey [1939] 2020, 64). The contradiction in his life’s work still causes heated discussions, and rightly so. Nevertheless, Dewey’s philosophy offers useful tools for examining the role of art, experience and improvement for

today's strategies of creative political participation. In the following, I briefly define four of Dewey's pragmatic convictions that are helpful for the further course of this work.²⁹

Experience: In Dewey's eyes, experience is "processual, transactional, socially mediated" (Hildebrand 2023). It is also experimental in that it occurs through action, and relating these actions to their consequences constitutes learning (Dewey [1937] 2020, 33f.). The importance of experience for democracy becomes clear when he writes: "every individual becomes educated only as he has an opportunity to contribute something from his own experience, no matter how meagre or slender that background of experience may be at a given time; and finally that enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experiences and ideas" (Dewey [1938] 2020, 163f.).

Meliorism: Dewey believed that philosophy served the purpose of improving life, and thus any philosophical theory or inquiry should aim at solving real life problems and start from lived experience (Hildebrand 2013). Likewise, life is neither good nor bad, but always improvable. A melioristic attitude values the experiential process over the result because this contributes to learning and progress: "Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means" (Dewey [1939] 2020, 65).

Democracy: Dewey thought "[d]emocratic life consists not only in civic and economic conduct, but more crucially in habits of problem solving, compassionate imagination, creative expression, and civic self-governance" (Hildebrand 2023). Democracy is thus not only politics but "a way of personal life controlled [...] by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished," as Dewey famously states (Dewey [1939] 2020, 63).

Art: Dewey held the view that art was a natural extension of everyday life and that the experience of art, like any other experience, served the purpose of improving one's life. In *Experience and Nature*, he writes

[...] art – the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession – is the complete culmination of nature, and that "science" is a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue. Thus would disappear

²⁹ I refrain from an elaborate account at this point because the present work is not philosophical in nature. My illustration is far from complete and might lack depth and exact terminological distinctions at times. This brief account is supposed to offer an overview of Dewey, and to introduce American pragmatism for the analysis that follows in chapters 4 and 5.

the separations that trouble present thinking: divisions of everything into nature and experience, practice and theory, art and science, useful and fine art, menial and free (Dewey [1925] 1980, 269).

Dewey's high regard for the value of art for society shimmers through in his later works. In *Art as Experience* (1934), he expands on his idea of aesthetic experience. Art, for him, "is not nature, but is nature transformed by entering into new relationships where it evokes a new emotional response" (Dewey [1934] 1980, 79). Art is thus a continuation of natural tendencies and arises from lived experience (Leddy and Puolakka 2023). It is not an ideal but rather part of everyday life, as Dewey theorizes. Nevertheless, he concludes in his chapter "The act of expression," aesthetic emotion is distinct from other emotional experiences because aesthetic expression is mediated by the objective material and not merely an unordered discharge of emotion (Dewey [1934] 1980). Dewey criticizes the dyadic view of art vs. ordinary life in what he calls the museum conception of art that views art and aesthetic experience as something separated from the everyday (Dewey [1934] 1980). This holds especially true for the fine arts, and "[w]hen, because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people, esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar" (Dewey [1934] 1980, 6). The removal of fine arts from everyday life renders it inaccessible for the masses and thus robs ordinary people of the chance for aesthetic experience and, hence, of improved future life experiences. At the beginning of his work on aesthetic theory, Dewey calls on the naturalistic aspect of art:

The collective life that was manifested in war, worship, the forum, knew no division between what was characteristic of these places and operations, and the arts that brought color, grace, and dignity, into them. Painting and sculpture were organically one with architecture, as that was one with the social purpose that buildings served. Music and song were intimate parts of the rites and ceremonies in which the meaning of group life was consummated. Drama was a vital reenactment of the legends and history of group life. Not even in Athens can such arts be torn loose from this setting in direct experience and yet retain their significant character. Athletic sports, as well as drama, celebrated and enforced traditions of race and group, instructing the people, commemorating glories, and strengthening their civic pride.³⁰ (Dewey [1934] 1980, 7)

More than art as common experience, Dewey believed art to boost group identity and belonging and result in a strengthened "civic pride." Art is the "union of material and ideal"

³⁰ It is unclear in what sense exactly Dewey used the term "race." He might have distinguished between several white races and referred to whites only, at least in his earlier writing, or he might have meant all white and nonwhite races, which is likely in his later works (Fallace 2017).

(Dewey [1934] 1980, 27), that is, the union of what is real and what is possible, and thus enables imagining a better future. Scott Stroud in his monograph on *John Dewey and the Artful Life* (2011), posits that one of Dewey's main goals in his aesthetic theory is to reflect on experience in a way so as to improve future experience. This depends on the attitude each individual takes toward aesthetic experience. In Dewey's own more detailed terms,

[e]sthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization. For while it is produced and is enjoyed by individuals, those individuals are what they are in the content of their experience because of the cultures in which they participate. (Dewey [1934] 1980, 326)

Here, Dewey connects aesthetic experience to society and, yet broader, to civilization. Art and the experience thereof are not only testament to a civilization's "quality," but they lead to said group's progress because each individual is the result of her experience in that specific culture. To emphasize this point, in a 1940 address to the U.S. Public Buildings Administration, Dewey states,

[t]he more the arts flourish, the more they belong to all persons alike, without regard to wealth, birth, race, or creed. The more they flourish the less they are privately owned, and the more they are possessed and enjoyed by all. This is what is meant when we say that art is universal – more universal than is that other intangible, science, since the arts speak a language which is closer to the emotions and imaginations of every man. (Dewey [1940] 2020, 305)

To put it simply, art is essential to democratic life because it leads to individual and collective development, and thus culminates in society tapping its full potential. Moreover, art is more universal than science and connects people across barriers such as language. Art should therefore be accessible to all human beings and it is society's duty to ensure equal opportunities in creative participation.

Much more can be said about W. E. B. Du Bois and John Dewey's thoughts on race, art and democratic participation. The points I made thus far, however, suffice for the analysis in chapters 4 and 5. As both Du Bois and Dewey proclaim, democracy can practically be improved by equal opportunities for all citizens, and more importantly, by a diverse citizenry that offers the largest pool of individual capacities. That pragmatism is the prominent philosophy in the U.S. is grounded in the country's political history: The nation-state began as an experiment and its citizens had to find out how to govern and lead their country. Experimenting with creative practices of participation and governance is thus a tradition engrained in

U.S.-American visions of democracy. Artivism is one form of pragmatism's trial-and-error experimentation with democratic participation. Cultural organizations and artist activists bring together art and civic participation in an experimental form that creates space for participants to create, experience and grow personally. Nevertheless, Dewey's paradox concerning the role of race emphasizes one question: How can society deal with race in the quest for more diverse democratic practices? The next chapter seeks a theoretical answer by taking a look at race from the perspective of performance.

3. Researching performance

In the last few decades, influenced largely by the rise of visual and virtual media, the scholarly understanding of performance has shifted to become a vast interdisciplinary field. In this chapter, I discuss what performance means and how it is studied. This includes a brief genealogy of the field and terminological clarifications. After taking a look at the intersection of performance and the city, I explore the connection between performance and race which considers the notion of identity. In the final section, I explain how I use performance as methodology and which methods I apply in my analyses.

3.1. Performance theory

There seem to be two academic approaches to performance theory. One stems from a sociological tradition, heavily influenced by Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), which understands the presentation of ourselves in social interactions as performance. According to Goffman, face-to-face interactions with others require us to suppress our initial heartfelt action in favor of one that is more likely to convey the impression that we desire to make. Goffman borrows terms from theater studies – *dramaturgy* and *staging*, for instance – to describe how individuals express themselves to receive a certain reaction from others. The sum of the activities "of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman 1956, 8) constitutes a performance. The relationship between performance and reality is a gradual one: While some performers themselves believe their performance, thus take it to be true and convince others to believe in it, other performers know they are *putting on a show* and do not care for others' impressions. These two extremes, described as "sincere" and "cynical" respectively by Goffman (1956, 10), represent the two ends of a continuum that distinguishes real or truthful performances from false or fictional ones.

Another understanding views performance as a show, a theatrical practice or even merely as entertainment (Madison and Hamera 2006a, xii). This perspective is rooted in the

classic genealogy of performance: The elocutionary movement (public speaking), that has its roots in antiquity, rose to popularity as a form of information and entertainment in nineteenth-century Europe and the USA where it became a powerful tool to influence public opinion and political decisions (Madison and Hamera 2006a). This performance branch later saw the development of speech-act-theory, formulated by John L. Austin, that assumes language to be performative (Austin 1975). Performative utterances, such as a judge's verdict ("Guilty!") or a matrimonial ceremony ("I hereby declare you husband and wife"), are language entities that perform reality and will something into being. The idea of language as performance seeped into other fields, like anthropology: According to theater scholar Simon Shepherd (2016, 33), the ethnographer William H. Jansen (1957) was one of the first to employ the idea in his work on folklore, where he observed a performer stepping out of his everyday role and assuming another pose towards his audience with a certain purpose, for instance to educate. Jansen's attempt to ascribe a broader meaning to the term, encompassing not only the process of performance, but emphasizing its reception by the audience, anticipated future developments in the field. Later, Victor Turner (1982) conceived of performance as expressions based on experience, and developed three concepts, *cultural performance*, *social performance*, and *social drama*, that underline the omnipresence of human performance and blur the line between sociological and theatrical perceptions of the term (cf. Madison & Hamera 2006: xvii). This threefold differentiation opens a pathway to understand both views of performance – as social reality and as rooted in the arts – from a common perspective.

Richard Schechner describes the performance–reality continuum as reaching from staged events (theater in its narrow sense), over social situations to everyday life, claiming that the more self-conscious we are, the more we perform a role (2002, 143). Schechner emphasizes the role of the media and its powerful effect on our self-consciousness: The more public our role is – for instance as a public broadcast reporter, a politician, or a famous actor –, the more our lives are like theater. Thus, the more we are able to present and re-invent our role through the internet and the media, the more performance and being collapse (cf. Schechner 2002, 177). Reading Schechner, one could assume that such a collapse must be avoided. Constant performance reproduced through the media seems to be damaging both to our self-image and to the value of the performance, which is often constituted in its truthfulness. Implied in Schechner's idea is not only a dichotomy but a contradiction of performance and

identity, based on the belief that performances by the virtue of their nature cannot be truthful, or at least not as truthful as reality. This is a valid point when it comes to performance as show, but it proves problematic when speaking of everyday life and social interactions as performance. Quite on the contrary, social performance, especially in the fields of gender studies, can be affirmative of one's identity and deep-felt sense of self, as I discuss below.

One often ignored terminological distinction that is especially important for the discussion of identity, is that of performance and performativity (cf. Peterfy 2020). As illustrated, performance occurs on a reality–fiction continuum. Performativity, as conceptualized by philosopher Judith Butler (1988), leans closer to the reality side of the spectrum because it means that an act has effects that constitute reality. Butler claims that gender is a constructed identity “instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [...] a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (J. Butler 1988, 519, emphasis in original). Performativity thus brings into being or transforms, whereas performance does not necessarily have to do so. Performance, in contrast can be just putting on a show. It can also, however, convince or change the audience of something already in existence. This distinction is relevant for the interdisciplinary study of works of art and their effect on social reality. The present work is situated at precisely this intersection, and therefore performance is often performative, as becomes clearer in chapter 3.2 on race and performance.

Performance as transdisciplinary knowledge

Since the 1950s and 1960s, performance studies have gradually conflated both approaches and thus been able to position themselves as an interdisciplinary field. One of the hallmarks of the field is its opposition to text-based approaches that have been criticized for their top-down mode of knowledge generation by scholars such as Michel de Certeau (1984), Kenneth Burke (1969) and Raymond Williams ([1963] 1975). According to one of the leading theorists of the field, Dwight Conquergood (2002), written text, a method deeply intertwined with modernity's enlightenment project, is not able to map all the world from a neutral and fair viewpoint. Indeed, written scripture often cannot account for vast amounts of knowledge; Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993), for instance, shows how knowledge about the human passage between Africa and North America, especially during the transatlantic slave trade, needs to be accessed through music, dance, objects and other cultural artifacts – anything but

written text. Performance studies is located at this intersection and has established itself as a new way of knowledge pertaining to questions of how and who instead of questions of what (Conquergood 2002, 146) – questions more associated with a bottom-up than a top-down approach. The engagement of the social sciences with performance has contributed to its evolution into “ways of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world,” as performance scholars D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera put it (2006a, xii). Dwight Conquergood rethinks performance’s traditional triad of theory, method and event, and proposes two sets of alliterations instead: “the three a’s of performance studies: artistry, analysis, activism. Or to change the alliteration, [...] the three c’s of performance studies: creativity, critique, citizenship (civic struggles for social justice)” (Conquergood 2002, 152). Conquergood’s emphasis on phenomena like activism and citizenship clearly present the concept of performance as one fundamentally related to grassroots struggles and to bottom-up transformations of society. Indeed, performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson shows how one branch of performance, namely Black performance, is essentially a “site of resistance” (2006, 452). His examples reach from musical and social performances during slavery to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s where various kinds of Black cultural productions served as performances of protest and identity appropriation.³¹

Simon Shepherd’s assertion that performance only began to be taught after “a new sort of activist behaviour, somewhere between art and politics, [...] emerged from the streets outside” (Shepherd 2016, 53) during the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war movements of the 1960s, seconds Conquergood’s suggestion of a new triad for performance and aligns with Johnson’s emphasis on the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. From the 1960s onward, then, the performance turn affected all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences as a new way of understanding the world with new techniques (cf. Shepherd 2016). The rise of the internet contributed to the rise of alternative forms of communication, entertainment and information that nowadays not only compete with written text but often overshadow it – thus “[t]he world no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in” (Schechner 2002, 21). The world, in other words, was not a play to be watched but one that enabled everyone to become an actor. While this low-threshold media participation entails

³¹ Chapter 3.2. takes a closer look at the performance of race.

certain risks – it can easily be manipulated to spread fake news –, it can also be read, through the lens of John Dewey's naturalistic art approach, as enabling democratic participation for all citizens. Conquergood's and Schnechner's definitions of performance studies bring together the aspects of art and creativity, activism and citizenship, and participation and politics. Understanding how these relate to each other is central to the present work's contribution. Contemporary performance studies have evolved into a widely applicable approach and can be found in all disciplines that lean towards the humanities and the social sciences, from political science (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006), over gender studies (J. Butler 1999), literature and ethnography (Madison and Hamera 2006b), ethnic and racial studies (E. P. Johnson 2006) to urban geography (Hopkins, Orr, and Solga 2015) and citizenship studies (Hildebrandt et al. 2019).

This interdisciplinarity hints at a connection between theories of performance and pragmatism: Both John Dewey's pragmatic approach to aesthetic experience and Dwight Conquergood's threefold conception of performance as theory, method and practice emphasize the value of art as common everyday experience. Both thinkers view art, its creation and its transformative capacity as rooted in the lives of ordinary people. Similarly, performance scholar Judith Hamera states that

[a]esthetics is inherently social. The formal properties and presumptions intrinsic to the production and consumption of works of art are communicative currency circulating between producers and consumers, binding them together in material and highly situated interpretive communities, serving as bases for exchange in the public and private conversations that constitute art's relational, political, and affective lives. (Hamera 2006, 46f.)

The everyday character of aesthetic experience also links back to a democratic way of life in both Dewey and Conquergood's alliterations. Art thus becomes inseparable from every other aspect of our lives, and can, in fact, be a tool for improvement. As has become obvious at this point, performance studies are a vast area where reality and fiction as well as research and everyday life can at times be conflated. While this poses a challenge, it also offers opportunities for viewing research as an everyday practice that everybody engages in. With regard to artist activists who perform their racial identity to mobilize audiences, this approach offers fruitful insights, as I demonstrate below.

Performance and the city

Another recent development has occurred at the intersection of urban studies and performance. The urban, as a large space with a dense and heterogeneous population, is a stage for the theatricality of everyday life. This tradition of seeing a performative aspect in the social life of cities goes back to the classics of sociology. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel (1903) pondered about the effect cities have on their dwellers, and observed that, in contrast to country people, urban residents show a blasé attitude towards each other in order to cope with the multitude of impressions the city generates. This attitude, Simmel believed, creates a tension between the self and emotional lifeworld of the actor on the one hand and his social role on the other, which leads to alienation from and potentially mistrust towards other urban residents. A similar approach to studying the social dimension of the city can be found in the Chicago School of urban sociology that profoundly influenced North American geographical scholarship. Here, Louis Wirth (1938) was the first to formulate urbanism as a way of life that is marked by superficial, impersonal, segmented and temporal social contacts, but simultaneously supports cosmopolitanism, openness, social mobility and adaptability. Urbanism as a way of life is not exclusively bound to city limits but rather represents modern life and society – which city conditions are especially constitutive of.

In recent years, the cultural geographers Ilse Helbrecht and Peter Dirksmeier, for instance, have influenced urban research by moving away from the static concepts of texts and symbols, and designing the *situational places* approach to account for intercultural interaction in diverse urban space (cf. Dirksmeier and Helbrecht 2010; Dirksmeier, Helbrecht, and Mackrodt 2014). In their chapter on the city and performance, Helbrecht and Dirksmeier (2013) conclude that viewing city life as performative behavior is deeply rooted in Euro-American thought. Nevertheless, the two cultural geographers also reflect the hegemony of structure and process in urban research, observing that relational and performative approaches only found their way (back) into the discipline in the 1990s when the so-called performative turn was emerging in cultural studies. Since then, the voices demanding other forms of analyzing and understanding the city from a geographical perspective have become louder, and the body of research has grown considerably (ibid.: 292f.). The concept of *encounter*, for example, has inspired a new subfield that understands the formation of social positions, identities and group affiliations as rooted in situations of encounters. The quality

of encounters between strangers determines if and how urban life can be transformed, especially in light of contemporary phenomena like the super-diverse city and consequent questions of urban citizenship. The performance approach helps to differentiate between meaningful and insignificant encounters in public spaces. According to Helbrecht and Dirksmeier, places that are alterable in their use, atmosphere, audience and charisma allow for meaningful encounters, and thus have the quality of *performative urbanity* (2013, 295; cf. 2009).

Another concept that takes up the challenge of diverse and multi-ethnic cohabitation in urban places is Elijah Anderson's *cosmopolitan canopy* that he characterizes as "heterogeneous and densely populated bounded public spaces within cities that offer a respite from the wariness, settings where a diversity of people can feel comfortable enough to relax their guard" (E. Anderson 2004, 15). Within these canopies, people of different races experience "trusting attitudes" and "feelings of community across racial and ethnic lines" (16), and people are "encouraged to behave civilly" to each other (21). While the comfortable atmosphere of the canopy arises from certain behavior patterns, it is equally determined by the space "which no one group expressly owns but all are encouraged to share" (21). Both *encounters* and *cosmopolitan canopies* describe situations where strangers with different ethnic backgrounds come together in urban settings and experience each other's goodwill. An attempt to define these positive encounters hints at larger questions that big cities and their residents face: How can so many diverse people come together in a densely populated space and all experience community, justice, equality and belonging? Especially in light of discriminatory spatial practices like redlining, evictions, and redistricting, people of color still cannot participate as equals in designing their cities in terms of urban planning, mobility, elected officials, arts and culture and so on. Urban space is produced through social performance – it is a relational space that changes through the human (inter)actions that take place within it (Lefebvre 1991).

3.2. Performing race in the twenty-first century U.S.

In her article "Performance practice as a site of oppression," bell hooks (1995) writes that African American performance practice can only be alive in the moment it is performed

because any sort of reproduction would commodify the art, and commodification stands in stark contrast to the objective of performance art to mobilize and transform people and to form communities of resistance. hooks's reasoning stems from a review of the historical roots of African American performance practice: In slave narratives, learning how to read and write are described as crucial steps in the liberation processes of mind and body. hooks's own experience as a child in post-slavery segregation mirrors the importance of reciting and performing words, poems and monologues to engage the audience and form communities of resistance. Rap music is the extension of this evolution of performing words at moments when no material resources for artistic resistance were available to the oppressed. While African American performance art can be open to diverse audiences that include whites, it should not cater to consumer interests but focus on the "decolonization of black minds and imaginations" (hooks 1995: 219). When bell hooks wrote these words in 1995, the internet and social media were not as omnipresent as they are today. Performance studies was in its early stages of development. bell hooks's view of performance thus lies closer to theater studies than to Butler's performativity. Today, any kind of performance can be reproduced online, and transnational audiences can immediately react and start engaging with the art. This is not to imply that live in-the-moment performances and those spread through the web are one and the same; neither does this suggest that their impact is the same. But the possibility of reaching and building communities through the internet that are able to interact with one another did not present itself at the time of bell hooks's article. Movements for social change, such as Black Lives Matter, still go into the streets to protest – live acts are as important as ever – but they have more opportunities to organize themselves with international support via the internet. In hooks's understanding, performance refers rather to the concept derived from theater that denotes a live act on a stage, with a beginning and an end after which the performer (and the audience) returns to their life (albeit possibly transformed). However, performance and Blackness often stand in a relation to each other that implies an unconscious and ongoing performance of race that is associated with social identity. This branch of performance lies closer to Erving Goffman's (1956) face-work and Victor Turner's (1982) elaboration on societal rituals where performance is understood as everyday actions that individuals use to position themselves in social interactions and as a ritual process that transforms the individual and the community, respectively.

The boundaries between performance as an act and performance as social identity are fluid. The latter goes back to Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* where he postulates the idea of social face, a performance that individuals put up in interactions with each other. He draws from aspects of acting and theater to explain social interactions in everyday life. Performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson articulates a similar connection between race and performance when he states that Blackness "is a simulacrum until it is practiced – i.e., performed" (446). Moreover, "black performance provides a space for black culture to reveal itself to itself – to come to *know* itself, in the process of *doing* [sic.]" (2006, 449). Although hooks's definition of performance seems to be restricted to an event (limited in time and place), both her and Johnson's views of performance follow the tradition of Victor Turner's idea of ritual: An experience of getting to know and transforming oneself and the community in the process. Performing Blackness, in Johnson's view, is thus not limited to live events but encompasses any instance where a specific Black cultural identity is expressed. This stretches from reciting certain poems in a specific style – think about Maya Angelou's inaugural poem in 1993 or Amanda Gorman's in 2021 – to the music, text and lifestyle of rap, and to the distinct elements that constitute Black movie productions.

Against bell hooks's demand for communities of resistance and Black performance practice as opposition, not all of Black expressive culture fights for social justice and racial equality. Many productions and pieces of art do not explicitly convey the same message as the Black Lives Matter movement does. This in part depends on each individual's identification: Some people might be ascribed the label Black but might not identify as Black or might do so to a certain degree. However, many works by artists of color do indeed perform Black identity and culture from a "marginal space" (hooks 1989) in face of a dominant culture. Even if protest and opposition are not central themes, the cultural productions are created in a space of resistance to be read against or, at least, in relation to the dominant culture. This marginal space is the performer's or artist's space of grappling with collective memory, of coming to terms with who they are and what they have experienced. In this sense, it is almost impossible not to perform race in one way or another. Society's reception of those artefacts adds to the relevance of race even if the artist does not link her work to racial discourses. At this point, let me discuss the concepts of race and ethnicity for this work.

Defining “race”

In the past two decades, the Black population in the United States has been growing more diverse, as a report from the Pew Research Center shows (Tamir 2021). Since 2000, the overall number of people identifying as Black has been growing, with a significant increase of people identifying as multiracial or Hispanic. This racial diversification of the Black population is expressed in cultural forms where the visibility of multiracial and multilingual characters, like Hispanic Black actor Julissa Calderon in *Gentefied*, or German and African American Zazie Beetz in *Atlanta*, is not only celebrated among fans but becomes part of the fictive narrative. Other artists with a wide reach and influence on the Black cultural landscape start to represent a more diverse interpretation of Blackness: Actor, songwriter and producer Donald Glover, alias Childish Gambino, defies stereotypes of Black masculinity in his TV show *Atlanta* where he plays Earnest Marks, a lanky, intelligent but aimless Princeton dropout who is neither strong nor aggressive. Similarly, rapper Lil Nas X is one of the few in the hip hop scene who displays his homosexuality in his futuristic music videos. So, how can we define race and ethnicity in the context of artistic creation?

In the edited volume *Race Or Ethnicity? On Black and Latino Identity* (2007b), scholars debate the differences and the value of applying these concepts to Blacks and Latinx in the U.S. Jorge Gracia (2007a) observes that in the U.S. people tend to associate race with biology and ethnicity with culture, but that the terms cause confusion. Gracia argues that the terms are problematic both factually – because they are not real and exist only in our minds – and epistemically – because there are no effective criteria to establish membership in either of the categories. In the last two decades various solutions to the problem have been discussed. Some scholars argue for abandoning the concepts altogether, others favor race as the only encompassing concept, yet others plead for adopting the idea of racial identity, and some rethink both concepts anew (cf. Gracia 2007b). Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2007) systematically explains his concept of social identity that relies on ascription, identification and treatment for social labels to work.³² Particularly interesting in the context of the present work is his explication of identification:

being-an-X figures in a certain typical way in their thoughts, feelings, and acts. When a person thinks of herself as an X in the relevant way, she *identifies as an X*. What

³² Appiah first delivered his idea on race and identity in his essay “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections” (1998).

this means is that she sometimes *feels like an X* or *acts as an X*. An agent *acts as an X* when the thought “because I am an X” figures in her reasons for acting. (Kwame A. Appiah 2007, 27, emphasis in original)

Conscious feeling or acting as, for instance, a Black or Latinx person, constitutes identification. A social identity is only one if, additionally, others use the same ascriptions and if others’ treatment occurs in some way according to those ascriptions. These three conditions are relational: Depending on each other and on one’s own social identity, one ascribes an identity to others and treats them respectively. Appiah subsumes racial names and “ethnonyms,” sexes, professions, affiliations and “other more airy labels” (Kwame A. Appiah 2007, 30) under the concept of identity. Hence, a person can identify as Black, U.S.-American and female, and as a mother, a New Yorker, a lawyer, Protestant, and Democrat at the same time. This broad view of social identity does not need a distinction between race and ethnicity.

If the relational nature of race and ethnicity does not become clear in Appiah’s essay, it definitely does in *Relational Formations of Race* (2019) where the authors argue for the case that race is socially constructed through relational processes between individuals, groups and their respective notions of race. This approach views race as a “mutually constitutive process” (Molina 2019, 44) that broadens the category and allows for transformations. The inclusion and representation of non-stereotypical individuals, like Black Hispanic people, in the cultural landscape is an example of how Blackness is constructed in relation to *latinidad*.³³ Scholar Natalia Molina hints at the historical development of racial concepts that is contingent on several “organizing principles” (Molina 2019, 51). An analysis of racial and ethnic formations through other organizing principles can enrich our understanding, Molina argues. One such organizing principle is that of space, especially urban space, where the racial identities of immigrant groups have always been contested and transformed. The idea of race as relational plays an important role in human geography research, for example with regard to the social development of urban communities. Scott Kurashige (2008), for instance, writes about how the relationship between whites and Koreans/ Korean Americans shaped the relationship between whites and African Americans in the post-WWII Los Angeles neighborhood of Crenshaw; similarly, George Sánchez (2021) revisits the Jewish, Chicano and Black history of Boyle Heights, L.A. and spins a multiracial and multicultural web that

³³ I discuss the term *latinidad* in chapter 4.2.2.

accounts for, as Sanchez concludes, the neighborhood's contemporary model status in terms of democratic practices.

To sum up, race can be conceived of as a relational identity. Another growing research branch in social studies is exploring race as lived experience (cf. Garcia et al. 2015; Wade 2005). This approach focuses on the actual experience of individuals and how they believe race impacts their lives. Rather than working with theoretical concepts of race, this view aims at formulating solutions and policy suggestions based on how ordinary people feel affected by their own and others' ascriptions of race. Studying race as lived experience is a pragmatic approach that primarily wishes to improve life based on scientific evidence, and therefore is willing to abandon and reformulate theories of race. A pragmatic implication of this research is the proposition to change the race and ethnicity questions for the 2030 U.S. census (Fong, Percival, and Wolf 2023). For the past decades, the census has been offering two separate questions in that matter. First, respondents are asked about their ethnicity which the census equates with origin: In this sense, individuals can choose, for example, "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," and state their country of origin. Second, respondents can state their race by choosing from "White," "Black or African Am.," "American Indian or Alaska Native," several Asian and Southeast Asian nationalities, "Other Asian," "Other Pacific Islander" and "Some other race." As Fong, Percival, and Wolf (2023) from the Brennan Center for Justice report, these questions cause much confusion because people often do not distinguish their race and ethnicity. For example, over twenty-six million Hispanic and Latinx individuals stated they were of some other race (N. Jones et al. 2021) because the census did not view their origin as race-based, in contrast to Pacific Islander, for instance. A similar problem arises with people of Middle Eastern or North African descent who often do not identify as Black, nor as white (Fong, Percival, and Wolf 2023). Aware of these issues, federal government proposes changes to the 2030 census that combine the race and ethnicity questions to make it easier to answer. This is important, because the amount of financial and other resources for local and regional communities are based on these results. Moreover,

that data is used to enforce antidiscrimination laws and voting rights laws, allowing for better monitoring of discriminatory practices in hiring and racial disparities in education and health. Further, under the Voting Rights Act, racial and ethnic groups that are sufficiently big may qualify for electoral districts where they can elect candidates of their choice. (Navarro 2023)

Race, therefore, is not just a social identity, but its assertion can have tangible effects in real life.

With everything in mind, the present work sees race as a learned way of being in the world, which is, either willingly or not, more visible when belonging to a marginalized racial group that has to assert its identity constantly to be acknowledged. Black cultural expression, therefore, has its specific styles, traditions, inside knowledge and topics that have accumulated over the centuries in the lives and histories of the Black population. Similarly, Latinx cultural output has deep roots in the U.S. that have always had to do with claiming space and making visible the diversity within this heterogeneous group. Henceforth, I do not distinguish between race and ethnicity, and use the terms interchangeably. I also often refer to people of color (PoC), and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), as well as to Brown people. I mean any individual who is not stereotypically read as white, but primarily, in this context, I use these terms to designate African Americans (Black) and Latinx Americans (Brown). Whenever possible, I try to refer to artists and others in the same way they refer to themselves in order to project their own lived experience and identity.³⁴

Performing race and citizenship

If one assumes race to be a social construct and performance to be a practice of identity, it lies close at hand to see race as a part of identity that is performed. Performance can be both make-belief and make-believe (Schechner 2002); it can pretend something for someone else to believe, but it can also lead to real-world change through repetition. Thus, it can go the path of pretension, but it can also bring things into being. Race is a reality contingent on time, place and discourse, and constantly negotiated between performer and spectator. The social side of performance theory views performance as formative of reality. Extended to the experience of race, this means that performance forms racial reality. The performance of race and ethnicity pulls from culturally significant phenomena:

Dress, hairstyles, food, body language, jokes, choices of preferred music, accent and other ‘projected’ self-images are common ways in which an ethnic identity is

³⁴ I would like to share a personal anecdote to illustrate how subjective racial labels are: When I spoke to one of the interviewees for this work, we talked about being Black in the U.S., and she divulged that she identified as Brown. I was surprised because in Europe I had never heard anyone using that term to refer to themselves before. I had previously mentioned my own background with parents of western Turkish origin and some south European influence in my grandparents’ generation. When she sensed my confusion about the term “Brown,” she exclaimed that I was, of course, Brown too!

performed: it is a dynamic phenomenon constantly expressed through these and other cultural devices, even in circumstances where the individual or group is suffering oppression or prejudice. (Clammer 2015, 2159)

Sociologist John Clammer thus views performance as “the creation, presentation or affirmation of an identity (real or assumed) through action” (2015, 2160). These factors contribute not only to one’s own identity, but also to how individuals perform race for others in order to open their experience to others. As sociologist Jeffrey Alexander stated during a lecture at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, the goal of performance is to create trust and similarity, and to perform something into being by persuasion of the audience. Performance is thus also a way to view reality through somebody else’s eyes.³⁵ Art is an especially viable tool to bridge the gap between individuals because it requires nothing from the viewer but attention, as one of my interview partners so aptly put it (see chapter 5.1.1.). Furthermore, meaning making can occur through the aesthetic experience of material objects, too. Thus, in performances of race, objects, like sneakers or headwear, are invested with meaning. Through specific interactions with objects, performers can establish and transform knowledge. These objects and interactions can be both fictive and real. Cultural sociologist Jason Mast aptly states that “the existences of real objects and representations of real objects mutually constitute one another through a feedback loop dynamic” (Mast 2006, 124).

If, like Appiah (2007) claims, identifying as American or as a Southerner constitute social identities as well, then these, like race, can be performed. Building on the discussion of citizenship in chapter 2, I wish to point out the perks of viewing citizenship as performed. The emphasis on action in a democratic lifestyle is closely related to the notions of acting out or performing citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Hildebrandt et al. 2019). According to citizenship scholar Engin Isin, “to enact oneself as a citizen involves transforming oneself from a subject into a claimant, which inevitably involves a break from habitus” (Isin 2008, 18). An act of citizenship thus constitutes a cesura and a moment of radical change. Performing citizenship, on the other hand, can be an ongoing articulation of membership, not restricted by time and place. The difference between performance and acts, as conceptualized by Isin, is the temporality and singularity: Acts are short, one-time events that stay in our memory, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott; performance, as processes of identity formation, is a

³⁵ Jeffrey Alexander presented his essay “Performing Nature as a Sacred Icon” at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies’ GKAT lecture series on October 18, 2023.

constant pattern of behavior and action that eventually engrains this behavior as commonplace. In this understanding, acts of citizenship belong to a broader performance of citizenship. Performance can be everyday actions that, especially from a marginal point of view and read against a dominant mode, establish one's identity or way-of-being-in-the-world as normal. This theorization is supported by the fact that the significance of citizenship is unequally distributed: "[T]he lived experience of Latino/as and African Americans increasingly attests," observes Latino/a scholar Suzanne Oboler, that "citizenship is meaningful only in the lives of those who continue to be excluded from the rights and benefits it guarantees" (Oboler 2006, 8). Oboler draws on the humanitarian crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where government failed to aid its citizens, especially people of color, and contrasts this with the massive governmental support for the victims of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Formal citizenship did not guarantee help, and indeed, the catastrophic reaction to Katrina highlighted the rift between first- and second-class citizenship for all the world to see. Citizenship and belonging are not only experienced, they are also embodied, as the visceral desolation of Hurricane Katrina victims, who waded through the floods and desperately called for help from rooftops, showed impressively. Artists and researchers Paula Hildebrandt and Sibylle Peters discern three dimensions of performing citizenship:

- There is the successful civic performative, allowing citizens to constitute and change civic reality through their actions.
- There is the performance of citizenship outside of given structures that includes a dimension of 'fake it 'til you make it', that enacts and thereby claims citizenship in new ways.
- There is the most basic performance of citizenship, that often resides beneath the radar of our attention, in which citizenship as such is a performance of bodies – institutional and individual – which, through a daily reiteration of practices, contributes to the very constitution of the individual body.

(Hildebrandt and S. Peters 2019, 7)

Performing citizenship is hence a negotiation of bodies, rights and spaces, and how they relate to each other. The contemporary discussion of democratic citizenship as something that is experienced, learned and performed contextualizes citizenship as a contested relational phenomenon that is defined in opposition to non-citizens, to aliens, to those excluded (Isin and Wood 1999). And while in an ideal world this should be restricted to those outside of the national community, the exclusionary design of formal citizenship ensures that within the nation-state there remain insiders and outsiders who claim membership in creative ways.

Considering how race and citizenship relate to each other in the U.S., as I have illustrated in chapter 2, the performative nature of both is intertwined. The conscious and assertive performance of race that many artist activists use becomes a tool to claim and signal citizenship. As Isin rightly points out, bodies and breaks from habitus are essential to performing citizenship. Works of art can enact racial identity and citizenship, and thereby transform real-life experience, as my analyses in chapters 4 and 5 shows. The conscious creative performance of race and citizenship can be a participatory tool for artist engagement because artistic creativity is accessible across social barriers. Performance thus creates access to people's lived experience and bears the power of transformation through relatability to other lifeworlds.

3.3. Methodology and methods

The enormous scope of performance studies that I have described makes it difficult to grasp as a methodology. How can we do research with performance? One way is to practice performance as a way to reveal knowledge that is inaccessible through other practices. This is what some artists do, for instance in performance art or dance: The artist herself uncovers knowledge through her body, and she makes it accessible to others who either watch or participate. Performance scholar Judith Hamera points out the value of performance art for the survivors of the Khmer Rouge in 1970s Cambodia: "classical Khmer performing arts serve as templates organizing a new sociality among survivors, and an archive that links subjectivities and socialities to the glories of Khmer history. In this archival incarnation, performance actually becomes personal and collective memory" (Hamera 2006, 48). Classical performance art thus constitutes an archive of collective memories that is accessible to anyone who can, in some way, experience it. Like Dewey's ([1934] 1980) aesthetic theory, performance studies aim to transport the experience of art from an exclusive and hermeneutically closed realm into everyday life. While the field thus tries to enhance democratic practices, in the sense of Dwight Conquergood, it can pose something of a problem that theater scholar Wolf-Dieter Ernst and cultural geographer Jan Simon Hutta face in their interdisciplinary work on speculative research practices: Performance as research "oscillates between an unlimited expansion of its subject area, on the one hand, and its condition to consider each performance

as embodied and specifically localized, on the other” (Ernst and Hutta 2020, 178). The authors distinguish between firmative and affirmative speculation. The first takes uncertainty (for instance about the future) and makes it calculable and knowable. The second embraces uncertainty and uses it to envision alternative and new modes of thinking (cf. also Cortiel et al. 2020). Ernst and Hutta claim that “speculative ways of knowing – ‘knowing how’ instead of ‘knowing that’ – are best achieved when they are embodied” (Ernst and Hutta 2020, 173), and conclude that performance research is affirmative speculation because it brings knowledge into being that remains hidden with other forms of research. One example for this research practice occurred during the GKAT Conference at the University of Heidelberg in May 2022 when U.S.-American performance artist Kwabena Slaughter presented his work in progress *Tribal Luminescence*. The interactive, immersive experience focused on the social practice of handshakes and what happens with interpersonal trust in that context. Participants could put on electrically conductive gloves and walk around a space that contained frames with hands on them. One frame said “us,” and when participants put their hand on it, a light within the frame would switch on to reveal “us” transformed to “trust.” Additionally, participants were encouraged to shake hands with each other and found out that two among them had special gloves: One of them would cause lights to switch on and off around the room when touched, and the other would make an automated voice from the speakers say, “hello, glad to meet you, so nice to meet you.” In this way, participants experienced how their embodied actions are part of a chain of cause and effect that influences trust relationships between individuals.

Another way of engaging in performance research is to observe and analyze how performance is done. This is the approach used in the present work. The broad scope of performance studies allows any form of cultural product and human behavior to be considered as performative. This means that the field enables researchers to apply a vast array of analysis techniques from different disciplines, such as thick description of visuals like photographs, places, and films, as well as discourse and interview analysis, hermeneutic analysis of song texts and music, ethnographic methods like participant observation, and more. This variety of possible methods can pose problems. The ephemeral nature of performance art, for instance, can create obstacles for research, as performance scholar Baz Kershaw (2009) observes. Precisely because performance art is limited to time and place it is difficult to grasp

how exactly it contributes to lasting knowledge. Baz Kershaw distinguishes between performance as research live, similar to what participants experienced during Kwabena Slaughter's installation at the GKAT conference, and performance as research documented. In the first case, knowledge is produced during the live event, and in the second case, this knowledge is "resuscitated" through post-event documents (Kershaw 2009, 37). Performance as research documented is not limited to performance art, but can be applied to any kind of human performance that is made available through video, photo, written text, oral stories and so on.

In the present work, the focus lies on performing race, both in fiction and in reality. This kind of performance is often documented, either in the fictive work itself or in artists' interviews and media coverage. Audiences' reception of these performances can also be traced: Newspaper articles report on the turnout of fans for certain events, fans discuss an artist's actions in online forums, other famous persona react to an artist's speech or work, and so on. There are multiple ways to qualitatively analyze how artists are perceived in their respective communities. However, these interpretive techniques are speculative – there is no absolute answer to questions of perception and truth in these matters. Speculative research "runs on non-knowledge and uncertainty to produce new knowledge," as Jeanne Cortiel and her colleagues put it in their introduction to the volume *Practices of Speculation: Modeling, Embodiment, Figuration* (Cortiel et al. 2020, 8). In light of the Covid pandemic, for example, speculative practices helped to predict the course of its spread, and they also enabled envisioning a post-pandemic world where global supply chains operate under other demands than just accumulating capital. Likewise, Cortiel et al. argue, artistic activism speculatively conceives of a world where decolonization and decapitalization are real. Through a speculative lens, performance research becomes an optimistic approach to possible futures.

Interpreting performance means considering as many factors as possible to obtain a holistic research result that does justice to the multifaceted lived realities. Therefore, performance as methodology allows for a variety of methods that fit the purpose of the work. The eight examples I present, four in each case study, all focus on (time- and place-) specific cultural products and artists. Each example engages with a different form of artistic creation – cultural community organizations, public muralism, TV series, rap music – and thus demands different analysis methods. I apply thick description and hermeneutic analysis to the products in question, and incorporate context in the form of urban history, contemporary

newspaper articles and communication on social media channels to create a rich multi-dimensional picture of the research object. My descriptions of places and neighborhoods also draw from participant observation that I engaged in during my research trip. I chose each object of analysis based on the following principles:

- Local connection: The work is set in urban L.A. or Atlanta, and is invested in its people
- Black and Brown creation: The work is owned, created or heavily influenced by people of color, specifically by Black Americans and Latinx Americans
- Thematic focus: The work engages with social and political issues pertaining to racial experiences
- Contemporaneity: The work is topical and mirrors current events and developments
- Popularity: The cultural productions are widely discussed, for example in social media and online forums, or, in the case of organizations, they offer events and exhibitions that people frequent
- Accessibility: The work is available to a wider audience, either through no admissions and long opening hours including weekends (organizations), or through availability on streaming platforms like Netflix, Disney+ (for series), YouTube and Spotify (for music)

The first three principles are hard selection criteria that ensure that the works lie within the realm of the research question. The last three principles consider the works' social impact. Because measuring cultural productions' influence on human attitudes and behaviors is impossible, these three principles are guidelines that help to gauge the effect of the work in question. These six principles resulted in the present choice of works for Los Angeles and Atlanta. I wish to make clear that this choice is by no means exclusive: Different types of cultural product and different cultural agents can be added to the list, and such an extension would be highly welcome for a continuation of this work. For reasons of scope, this project is restricted to four analyses in each case study. And for reasons of comparability, the two case studies feature similar objects, that is a TV series, a rap musician, and a cultural organization each. The only difference is that the Los Angeles study contains two organizational analyses, whereas the Atlanta one encompasses one artist collective and public street art. This

is due to the distinct artistic landscape in each city. Los Angeles is home to many established art organizations and museums, from large institutions like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Getty, the Hammer Museum, the California African American Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art to small or artist-driven organizations such as St. Elmo Village, the Watts Towers Arts Center, Self Help Graphics & Art, 18th Street Arts Center and Art + Practice. An artistic hotspot for decades, Los Angeles features many creative organizations with their own physical space that exist in ethnic hubs, that is neighborhoods with a predominant ethnic residential group. Atlanta's artistic landscape, on the other hand, is to a degree characterized by public muralism. In every neighborhood, murals meet the eye on buildings, walls, utility boxes, bridges and so on. The growth of Atlanta's public mural scene in the past decade has been noticed by a wider audience as newspaper and art magazine articles, for instance by online magazine *Hyperallergic*, demonstrate. These distinct artistic landscapes are enhanced by the demographic shape of the cities. In Los Angeles, many neighborhoods are part of ethnic enclaves, around for instance Chinatown, Koreatown, Filipinotown, Little Armenia, Olvera Street, and Little Ethiopia. This means that lots of neighborhoods are characterized by their ethnic make-up, and this is reflected in the local art scene. In Atlanta, meanwhile, such a stark ethnic distinction between neighborhoods is not visible, and therefore the city's artistic organizations are less concerned with particular ethnic groups but rather with equality for all people of color. To enhance the reader's grasp of these urban geographical dimensions, I insert a map at the beginning of each case study. These maps are screenshots from Google Maps views that I have annotated to highlight the streets and areas investigated in this research.

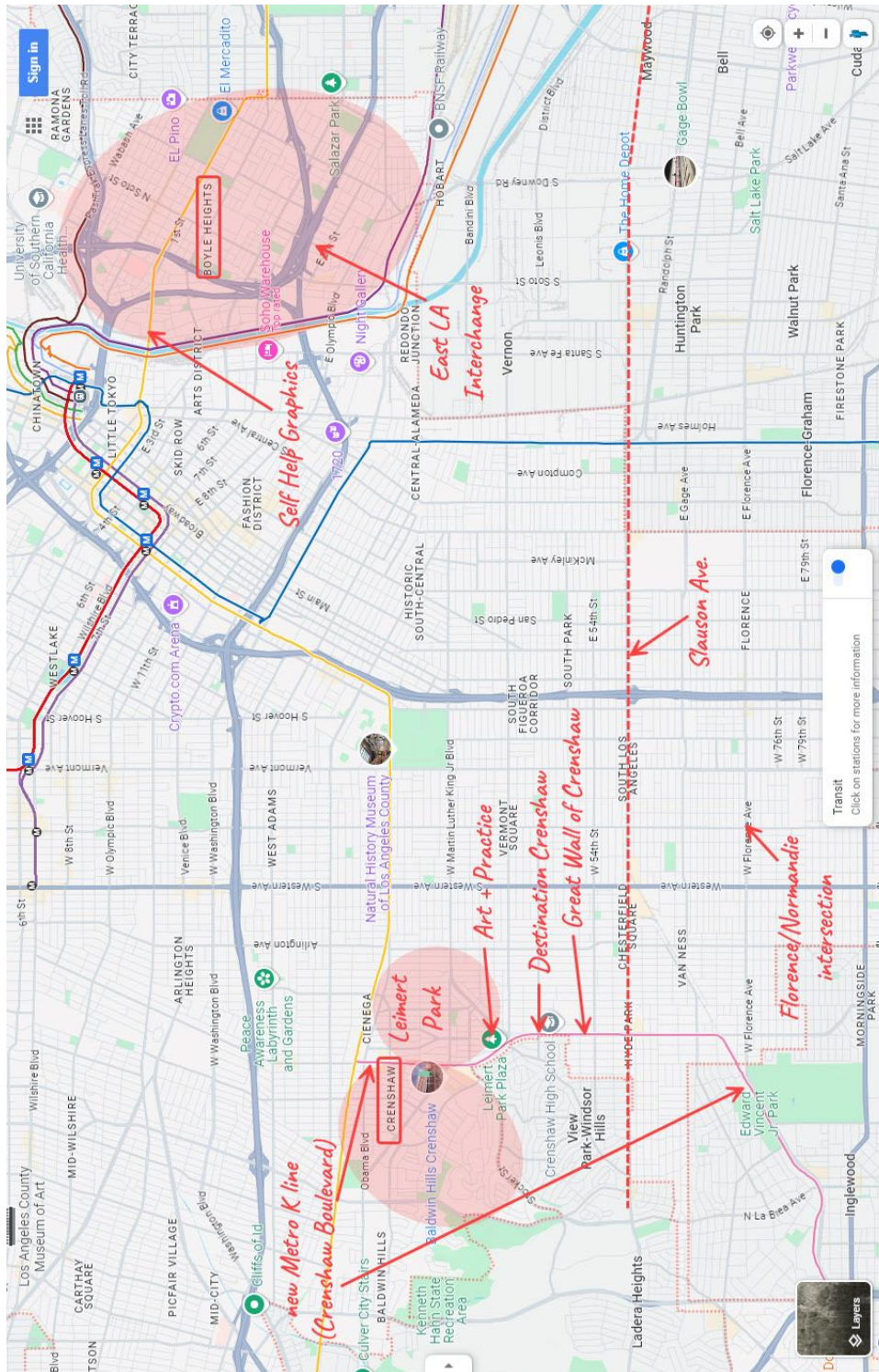
Furthermore, four of the analysis chapters feature interviews that I conducted with the cultural agents whose work I analyze. I initially reached out to nine organizations/artists in Los Angeles and Atlanta, out of which five responded, and four interviews ultimately materialized. All interviewees work in the arts and are public figures or representatives. I discovered their work through online research and approached all participants via email, introducing my work and stating the purpose of contacting them. Each of them agreed to be recorded during our interviews and received a transcript that they could edit if wished, but none of them did actually require changes to the original. The interviews last approximately half an hour each, with one exception that lasts about one hour. My questions follow the same

pattern in each interview: I start with introductions and have a loose question catalogue specific to each organization's or individual's work. I let the interviewees talk and associate freely, and sometimes change my questions impromptu if they mention an interesting aspect, or I sometimes try to reel them back in if I have a pressing topic to ask about.

I maintain an exclusively professional relationship to all interviewees except for one, Rozina Gilani, whose work I analyze in chapter 5.1.1. Throughout my research, the relationship to Rozina Gilani developed into a trustful friendship, and thus her interview is considerably longer than the others. A close relationship between researcher and subject might prove ethically problematic for certain types of work, for instance, where private and sensitive information about the subject is concerned or when the researcher chooses to reveal only part of their role and motive for their own safety and other reasons. A close relationship, some might argue, can also interfere with academic standards of neutral and objective research. Therefore, I wish to emphasize that the present research is explicitly concerned with the performance of racial and ethnic identities. The cultural agents investigated are public persona aware of, even utilizing, their racial identities for their activist agendas. I have disclosed my background and research objective to all interview participants. Moreover, this research is not about determining what is right or wrong – it is about uncovering *how* activists perform and *how* they engage people.

The mix of methods I use in this work generates a holistic view of how the idea of race influences people's engagement in social and political life in urban communities of color. I use the lens of performance to discover how cultural agents use their racial identity as a tool in the fight for democracy and justice. This research strategy is supported by pragmatic thought that, one, enables a time- and place-sensitive contextualization of said cultural agents in the present-day U.S., and two, leaves room for speculation because it emphasizes the process of things and not their result. This pragmatic backdrop is particularly helpful in researching contemporary patterns and movements where the long-term effects cannot be foreseen. And yet understanding the processes themselves is enriching for future challenges.

4. Los Angeles



Map 1. Google Maps, © 2024, “View of Los Angeles with Annotations.” The highlighted areas indicate the places that I visited and refer to in the following chapters.

Los Angeles's cultural output is immense. Along with cinematic output by the established Hollywood industry, there are several well-known private art foundations, such as the Getty Center or Hammer Museum, fueled by the philanthropy of individuals that accumulated their wealth with oil from the city's tar pits (Aenlle 2016). Moreover, the city offers a cultural infrastructure that attracts young artists: The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC) offer quality programs, not to mention private and specialty schools with good reputations. And while Los Angeles cannot compare to New York when it comes to curated and institutional art, there is a history of artistic activism that influences the contemporary cultural and community landscapes of the city.

In late April 2022, I visited an event organized by the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and the California African American Museum (CAAM). The event, called "South of Expo: Art, Artists and Cultural Spaces Since the 1960s," included roundtable discussions where artists, activists, curators and scholars debated the relevance of art spaces in the area that lies south of the fairly new Exposition metro line and is considered Southern Los Angeles. Deliberately chosen, the title of the event alludes to art historian Kellie Jones's widely acclaimed book *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017) that sheds light on Black artists' engagement with urban renewal, Black migration and Black mobility. These topics set the tone for the discussions that followed. Southern L.A. used to be predominantly African American with neighborhoods such as Crenshaw, Inglewood, South L.A. and Watts that are known either from 'hood movies of the 1990s (*Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993)) or through media portrayals in the aftermaths of the Watts Riots in 1965 and the L.A. riots in 1992. While the first roundtable traced back the evolution of art spaces and community-based practices in L.A., roundtables two and three focused on contemporary organizations and artists. Throughout the discussions, some themes came up regularly that reflect a certain mindset among the newer generation of artists and organizers in L.A.: All panelists expressed a desire to embed art in local communities where residents can access and experience it, and where art and social change are mutually constitutive.

The panelists in L.A. in late April expressed a sense of awakening and revitalization in terms of socially engaged art. Artist Lisa Diane Wedgeworth, for instance, works for the small community-based and non-profit art studio Arts @ Blue Roof in South Central L.A.

that offers artist residencies primarily to women. The art studio, one of many that opened in the last decade, purchased a vacated church in 2016 to offer space for free-of-charge community programs and underserved artists. During the panel, Wedgeworth advocated for accessibility measures on several levels that need to be prioritized, especially after Covid and lockdowns worsened many problems: First, art spaces need to be open to the public, so people can walk in when curious; second, art spaces need to provide means for artists in underserved communities, such as women in South L.A. where the unemployment and poverty rates are high; and third, art spaces need to actively engage with the community through programs and they need to be in contact with political leaders, such as the district's council member, in order to gain representation and funding.³⁶ Similarly, Bethany Montagano, director of the University of Southern California (USC) Museums, announced that art and artists in high institutions need to connect campus to community and leave the ivory towers they inhabit – in her words, art can no longer be simply for art's sake but must engage with the community and have a social stance. While socially engaged art organizations have been focused on community for a long time, it seems as if higher institutions are now realizing they need to transform in favor of accessibility and social impact.

Visual artists Ray Anthony Barrett and Felix Quintana, also part of the panels, talked about the importance of art that is rooted in communities: Barrett repeatedly mentioned that art needs to leave institutions and be brought into the field by artists – there need to be more “practitioners of theories than theoreticians.”³⁷ Quintana stressed his practice of walking, exposing himself to the street and documenting his movement through his home neighborhood in East L.A. as an artist. Seeing what the community sees and transforming these common experiences into art makes his work relatable. His exhibition *Cruising Below Sunset* that was on display at Residency Art Gallery in Inglewood in June 2022, for instance, follows his movements through places people call home via different visual and material art techniques such as photography, collage and sculptural installations that consist of everyday objects. With a focus on Black and Brown diasporas, Quintana maps different migrant communities in L.A. and their mobilities through areas like Watts, Inglewood, Boyle Heights, and more (Residency Art Gallery 2022). In this way, the artist uses an adapted version of Michel De

³⁶ These issues are contingent on how the arts operates and is funded in the U.S. See Chapter 2 for a brief account of the U.S. art funding system.

³⁷ This quote is taken from my personal notes.

Certeau's (1984) walking as an enunciative function: Quintana intuitively uses walking as a research praxis for his art and as the shared experience that guides the viewer. This form of art is deeply rooted in the community because it visually and materially mirrors their experience. Moreover, it makes problems such as poverty and fear of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) visible and tangible. Corresponding to Ernst and Hutta's (2020) conception of embodied learning,³⁸ Quintana's practice of walking as art research generates knowledge that answers questions of *how* (do marginalized people move, perceive their surroundings, engage with their neighborhoods?) instead of questions of *what*. In this way, his art is relatable and educative. Felix Quintana and mixed media artist Alicia Piller work in the open; they are approachable by passers-by, and they incorporate solid materials, things they often call "junk," and urban visuals like concrete and shop fronts – anything they find outside in their neighborhood – into their work. While the artwork is a key element to raise curiosity and engage people, the artists and their objects are not isolated from the politics of their creation and display.

Los Angeles has been extensively studied as a city with a long and deep tradition of artistic movements that go beyond the Hollywood movie industry.³⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, many Black and Latinx art and community organizations established themselves, – such as St. Elmo Village, the Watts Towers Arts Center, the William Grant Still Arts Center, SPARC, and Self Help Graphics & Art – aligning themselves with the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Movement. Pivotal incidents in L.A. at the time were the Watts riots in 1962, protesting police brutality and injustice, and the East L.A. walkouts in 1968 that protested against inequality in the school system. In light of these historical events where both Black and Latinx residents protested, and against the backdrop of longstanding Black and Latinx art organizing, this section takes a look at the practices of two contemporary art organizations,

³⁸ In their essay "Enacting Speculation: The Paradoxical Epistemology of Performance as Research," published in *Practices of Speculation: Modeling, Embodiment, Figuration* (2020, edited by Jeanne Cortiel et al.), Ernst & Hutta stipulate that (scientific) knowledge – especially knowing *how*, not *that* – is tested and created through embodied practices. They refer to this as "speculative ways of knowing" (p. 173) that are very much stimulated through the materiality and mediality of their production. See chapter 3 for a discussion on performance and practice as generating knowledge.

³⁹ See for instance Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (2010), Barron et al.'s *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (2000), and Kellie Jones's *South of Pico: African American Artists in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017). With a million monthly visitors, the online art magazine *Hyperallergic* frequently reports on the contemporary art scene in L.A., focusing on "the inner workings of art institutions and markets, shedding light on the movements and individuals fighting for greater inclusion and representation," as they state on their website (*Hyperallergic*, n.d.).

at activist rapper Nipsey Hussle and at the Netflix series *Gentefied*. While artists and art for social change receive considerable attention in research, the role of established organizations and visual entertainment often remains in the shadows.⁴⁰ Moreover, studies often focus on a single mode of creativity but rarely bring together organizations with rap musicians and series – here, performance is useful, as I have illustrated in chapter 3. To understand the mechanisms behind trust and trustworthiness in artistic community activism it is crucial to take a broader look at cultural work and identify the distinct strategies of trust-building with and through artistic practices.

Los Angeles's urban structure, its sprawl and ethnic hubs, also feature in this analysis.⁴¹ The vast landscape of what constitutes Los Angeles contains many neighborhoods that are demographically shaped by a homogenous ethnicity. From Chinatown, over Little Armenia, to Boyle Heights and Leimert Park/Crenshaw, these are historically ethnic communities that often formed out of redlining or immigration patterns. The city's sprawl ensures a great distance between neighborhoods, and its historic focus on the automobile led to prioritizing freeway construction in the 1950s and 1960s – especially cutting through ethnic neighborhoods once deemed undesirable, such as Boyle Heights and Leimert Park/Crenshaw. Many impactful cultural products have been created in these neighborhoods since the end of the twentieth century. Far from Hollywood and established art institutions, Black and Latinx artists, collectives and organizations in Boyle Heights and Crenshaw have been creating multi-purpose art that bears many names: Protest art, social art, artistic activism, political art. The contemporary landscape of meaningful and participatory art in Los Angeles is shaped by the city's, and, on a broader scale, the country's, urban history.

In this section, I carve out the creative practices of citizen engagement that cultural agents employ. I uncover a pattern of contemporary *artivism*, as explained in chapter 2, by illustrating how two art organizations' practices create and consolidate trust, as well as social

⁴⁰ See for example the studies from various disciplines by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Alexandra Matute (2020b), Seana Lowe (2000), Anna-Lisa Müller (2019), and Eva Youkhana (2014) on the impact of art on social justice. The gap concerning organizations is not without reason. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 3, measuring the impact of art and artists poses great difficulties – no survey or questionnaire can yield truthful answers on the change of attitude or behavior after the intake of art. Art organizations are such complex entities that searching for clear answers is problematic. Thus, an approach grounded in the theories of performance and speculation promises to be fruitful because it focuses on the practices and actions of said organizations and agents, which can be observed and interpreted.

⁴¹ In contrast to the Atlanta case study in chapter 5 that distinguishes between different artistic phenomena more than neighborhoods.

and civic engagement in their communities. Furthermore, the creation politics of activist rapper Nipsey Hussle and the Netflix series *Gentefied* exemplify different, if not uncontested, strategies of community empowerment and participation. Through the concepts of race and place, I uncover the connections between art, urban locale, identity and participation, and show how cultural agents matter in advancing civic engagement.

4.1. Art and ownership in Black L.A.

Leimert Park and Crenshaw, two distinct adjacent neighborhoods that I subsume as Leimert Park/Crenshaw, are located in South Los Angeles and are historically Black areas with a majority of African American residents. However, in the 1940s, the area was largely white and Leimert Park was considered “still desirable” by the HOLC, while the area of Crenshaw was “definitely declining” due to the influx of Polish, Russian and Armenian Jews at the time.⁴² Consequently, whites moved out or were ushered to other areas by real estate agents. People of color, in contrast, were often accepted as tenants in these exact districts only, which led to further segregation, social and cultural disenfranchisement and financial disinvestment. The effects of these policies reverberate today, and are discussed both in scientific studies (cf. Stermon and Lukinbeal 2021) and in the media, as Ta-Nehisi Coates’s insightful essay on “The Case for Reparations” (2014) demonstrates. Despite the information available on the redlining maps, neither Crenshaw nor Leimert Park get much academic attention in terms of their urban histories. But Crenshaw gained global popularity through its depiction as a neighborhood of crime and poverty in so-called ‘hood movies of the 1990s. Leimert Park, on the other hand, has had a steady presence as a cultural hotspot for African American art and creativity since the 1960s. Both areas are symbols for Black cultural output, and the following two examples illustrate how this output operates in a web of urban and cultural activism.

⁴² Los Angeles areas C117 for Crenshaw and B81 for Leimert Park (R. K. Nelson et al. 2023).

4.1.1. Participation through Black ownership: Art + Practice in Leimert Park

One of the discussants during the CAAM's roundtable on art spaces in southern L.A. represented Art + Practice, a non-profit organization located in Leimert Park. Leimert Park is a neighborhood located south of Pico Boulevard and the city's metro E line (Exposition line) that opened in 2012. The area is considered the heart of L.A.'s African American diaspora and culture with over seventy percent of the residents belonging to that group. In the east, Crenshaw Boulevard separates the area from the Crenshaw neighborhood, and in the west, 29-mile-long Western Avenue creates a perceived-as-natural border. In the southwest corner of the neighborhood, the cultural center of the area, Leimert Park Plaza, features cafés, Jamaican and Ethiopian restaurants, shops, theaters, galleries and art organizations. Most of the shops are Black-owned and proudly state so on their windows and websites, such as Hot & Cool Café that served as a polling station in 2020 and offers re-entry employment to people that have been subject to the criminal justice system. Throughout the year, there are several festivities around the Plaza, such as the Leimert Park Book Fair or the Juneteenth festival – that is, under normal conditions before and after the Covid pandemic. Socially engaged and community-based art organizations are located at the Plaza, too: The KAOS Network founded by arts educator and filmmaker Ben Caldwell – who was also part of the USC roundtable discussions – offers film screenings, art walks, performances, ethnic festivals and workshops to the community; the World Stage provides donation-based music and theater workshops and performance art shows; the Fernando Pullum Community Arts Center offers “performing arts instruction to underserved youth and help[s] them build self-esteem, develop civic responsibility, and achieve academic success” (Fernando Pullum Community Arts Center); and Art + Practice (A+P) hosts art exhibitions in collaboration with art institutions and organizes workshops for local foster youths in their spaces around Leimert Park. A+P is thus nestled in a place teeming with art and social organizations. This chapter demonstrates, on the example of Art + Practice, how Black ownership in the arts creates access to and participation in socially engaged creative work. It further uncovers a pragmatic tradition in African American culture that helps to navigate the intersection of Black political and artistic work.

Art + Practice: Living Black ownership

Founded in 2015 by local artist Mark Bradford, the organization “aspires to be a space where the social aspect of art – the practice of it – puts the art into a context of action” (Art + Practice). This echoes the conversations at the CAAM, and resonates with performance scholar Dwight Conquergood’s (2002) three C’s approach (creativity, critique, citizenship) that replaces more traditional scientific knowledge generation via object, theory and practice.⁴³ I had the chance to visit A+P and conduct an interview with two employees, Paul Mate and Eboné McCloud, in spring 2022. What is the organization’s purpose? First, A+P’s goal is to have contemporary curated art that is accessible to the community. This means that entrance needs to be free of charge and located in the community because, as Paul Mate, A+P’s Gallery Guide Supervisor describes, “when you want to go see artwork you have to kind of travel far and when you’re in the South L.A. or South Central area it might not be feasible to be able to go all the way to Westwood or Downtown LA, so he’s [Mark] trying to bring artwork to the community here.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the emphasis on the term ‘curated’ demonstrates A+P’s vision to participate in and open up the oftentimes exclusive economy of high art which is mostly restricted to prestigious galleries that are located in the Westwood and Downtown areas of L.A. Second, the organization focuses on taking action for the improvement of the community – as the second word in their name alludes to – through working with foster youths. The number of foster youths in the area is higher than the average for Los Angeles, and when A+P opened in 2014 with a focus on art, they realized that, as Paul puts it, “before any of the young adults could focus on artwork and stuff they needed housing [...], that’s just a big part of development [...], having a safe place to lay your head.” The organization brings together art and community not only through an open exhibition space but also through active engagement: Next to the art space there is a location for workshops across the street where the artists on display give lectures and discuss their art careers with the foster youths and the interested public. They open conversations about art and explain how to find resources that can help aspiring artists to create a path in the art world. Through conversations with successful artists who might share a similar background, new opportunities can evolve for the young adults. Moreover, A+P supports these youths with educational

⁴³ See Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ Any statements from Paul Mate and Eboné McCloud are from our interview conducted on May 3, 2022.

scholarships that cover supplies, technological tools, and fees for degree certifications. The organization thus engages on various levels of accessibility to promote the community's well-being and engagement in social life. They see access not simply as the right to resources, but as the *ability* to use and benefit from them. Knowing that foster youth in particular have a hard time to exercise their rights, A+P works to open the path to access, not last by setting an example of Black ownership themselves (cf. Ribot and Peluso 2003). The space's open-door policy, its location and its founder's origin in Leimert Park – an aspect that emphasizes belonging and identification – all contribute to the community's access to resources: Viewing and learning about curated art, financial aid, information on career planning, and role models that have a similar socio-economic and ethnic background.

The spatial factor

Ownership and racial performance are contingent on space and place.⁴⁵ Following Henri Lefebvre (1991), social space “‘incorporates’ social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act” (33). Space is thus the dynamic and relational setting for embodied enactments of citizenship, and through specifics such as time, context and history, space becomes a specific place that people can belong to. Situated in geographical and demographic context – traditionally Black Leimert Park, South Los Angeles –, the operating spaces of A+P become sites of belonging and home. The imaginary of Leimert Park is also shaped by what happened in the past and the contemporary discourses that surround the area. Strolling through Leimert Park Village, the core of the neighborhood, and on historic Crenshaw Boulevard, the area's African American heritage seems steeped into its fabric. However, founded in the 1920s, Leimert Park was one of the first planned communities and restricted to white Angelenos until the 1960s, according to Gil Robertson (1997) writing for *Black Enterprise* magazine. The redlining maps created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) between 1935 and 1940 automatically deemed areas dominated by PoC as “hazardous” and thus African Americans and other non-white people were rendered immobile. Simultaneously, whites would move out of diverse

⁴⁵ I discuss the performance of citizenship in chapters 2 and 3. Moving beyond citizenship as rights and responsibilities dictated by the nation state, a performance approach is rooted in practice. Performing citizenship is threefold: Acting the citizen and thereby creating civic realities; claiming a right that has yet to gain legal effectiveness (“fake it ‘til you make it”); embodiment of citizenship by the right to control one's own body (Hildebrandt and S. Peters 2019).

neighborhoods in fear of decreasing property values. Consequently, these maps reinforced racial and financial segregation. Leimert Park and the surrounding area were marked as “still desirable” and “[d]eed restrictions [...] protect from racial hazards,” meaning no Blacks were allowed to move in. World War II demanded factory workers and thousands of Blacks migrated to L.A. from Southern states, often occupying the homes of interned Japanese and shifting the spatial racial makeup of the city (Kurashige 2008). Moreover, in 1948 the Supreme Court prohibited the enforcement of racially restrictive housing covenants based on the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (*Shelley v. Kraemer*), and thereby rendered redlining, as practiced by the HOLC, a felony. However, only after the Watts riots in 1965 did Leimert Park begin its “black renaissance with the arrival of art impresario Alonzo Davis” (Robertson 1997). Davis and his brother opened the famed Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park because they felt a lack of Black art exposure. They operated the gallery from 1967 to 1990 and witnessed an influx of Black residents and art in the neighborhood (LeFalle-Collins 2012). While many shops and organizations changed throughout the years, and rising rent and real estate prices transformed the demographic, the neighborhood remains a hotbed for Black culture and art. Apart from the artistic scene, the West Coast’s largest and oldest African American newspaper, the Los Angeles Sentinel, is located on Crenshaw Boulevard (LA Sentinel). Indeed, the newspaper along with the Leimert park and Leimert Park Village are part of a historical walking tour of Crenshaw that starts just north of the Expo/Crenshaw metro station and leads south via Crenshaw Boulevard, passing several famed institutions – such as Holiday Bowl that became a “polycultural landmark” during the desegregation process of L.A. (Kurashige 2008), or Angelus Funeral Home, a long-term family-operated facility that serviced the funerals of *Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton and local rap-activist Nipsey Hussle in 2019 –, until it reaches Leimert Park. Turning back to art, further down the boulevard, the Crenshaw Wall presents African American history on a 240-meter stretch of concrete. Local artists began painting the wall without permission and at gusto in the 1970s; in 2002, a graffiti collective called Rocking the Nation began working on the Wall in earnest and produced the mural as it is today (Crenshaw Wall & Mural). After a period of neglect, the urban development and Black public art project Destination Crenshaw, that was born out of the construction of the new metro K line connecting Crenshaw to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), plans to restore the original mural (Nittle 2022). Destination Crenshaw

aims to become an open-air museum for Black art as well as a desirable shopping and leisure area, and tries to involve the local community and businesses in their work. In October 2023, for instance, they distributed a call for artists via their email newsletter, stating that

Destination Crenshaw is a reparative development project and will be the largest Black public art project in the U.S. and possibly the world. Ultimately, the project will commission more than 100 works by Black artists who have strong ties to Los Angeles, creating a pipeline of employment and career opportunities for emerging, seasoned, and internationally renowned artists. To do this, we need YOU and your talent to accomplish our goal. (Destination Crenshaw 2023c)

Much like A+P, Destination Crenshaw induces more Black ownership and participation in terms of business opportunities and the arts. Part of the metro connection opened in October 2022 and connects Leimert Park as well as Inglewood to the existing Exposition line that runs from Downtown to Santa Monica. The new K line makes Crenshaw and Leimert Park more accessible, and when finished, will link to LAX.

Organizations like Art + Practice are not isolated entities; they are part of a dynamic and relational urban space where small changes to everyday practices, induced maybe by a shop's closing, a mural's appearance, or a public event, reconstruct and redefine its quality as an enacted place. Located in walking distance from the Crenshaw Wall, the Los Angeles Sentinel, historical Holiday Bowl and other places that represent the history of African Americans (and Asian Americans) in the area, A+P steps into a cultural legacy of placemaking that comes with a responsibility to put the community first.⁴⁶ Gathering from art historian Kellie Jones's book *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017), art has been a driving force in the South Los Angeles communities since the Black Arts Movement when assemblage artists like Noah Purifoy (co-founder of the Watts Towers Arts Center) and John Outterbridge shaped the role of art in the Black communities of South L.A. (Stromberg 2020). Leimert Park is embedded in the placemaking history and legacy of South Los Angeles along with the neighborhoods of West Adams, Watts, Inglewood and Crenshaw – all of them forming a spatial web of activist engagement featuring institutions from the Black Arts Movement, such as Brockman Gallery, St. Elmo Village and the William

⁴⁶ I use Cara Courage's (2020) loose definition of placemaking: "placemaking is an approach and a set of tools that puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions. There is a community imperative in placemaking" (2). Placemaking is enacted by a community of practice that, according to Courage, consists of three dimensions: domain (topic of joint enterprise), community (how mutual engagement functions), and practice (the capability and value added).

Grants Still Arts Center, as well as new spaces like the Crenshaw Dairy Mart (founded by Black Lives Matter organizer Patrisse Cullors), Residency Art Gallery, community center Summaeverythang, and Art + Practice. Artist and activist Lauren Halsey, founder of Summaeverythang in Watts that supplies the community with fresh produce and art kits, stated in an interview with Matt Stromberg,

it means everything to be a true participant in the neighborhood. [...] Otherwise the end result is a caricature of what you think you're doing. Hiring folks from the neighborhood, who puts up work, who runs the gallery, the front desk, who sits in positions of leadership. All those actions matter. We know if a space is for us, or not for us, even if it's in the middle of Watts. (Stromberg 2020)

Halsey's ethics of truly participating goes hand in hand with making jobs and positions accessible to underserved communities. Ownership of gallery and workshop spaces signifies that organization like A+P are born out of the community and intend to sustainably support the area. It also means they can withstand the pressures of the real estate market, and are relatively immune to displacement due to gentrification and redevelopment, which have become growing issues in the neighborhood (H. Meares 2019). Of course, there is the risk of intrusion, as was the case with several art galleries that opened in Boyle Heights in 2016 and 2017: Residents and community groups organized to protest against newcoming galleries; they feared a wave of *artwashing* would cause rising rents and displacement (Delgadillo 2017).⁴⁷ While the galleries may have had good intentions, it was the structural and systemic gentrification often beginning with artist pioneers that protesters fought against (O'Brien, Vilchis, and Maritescu 2019). Precisely because of this looming threat, artist-activists and organizations stress being Black-owned and -operated – an aspect that often creates a sense of belonging and trust among local community members. Black ownership, many believe, can protect long-term residents and the neighborhood's culture from negative change, such as gentrification and displacement, that might come along with the new metro line and the neighborhood's beautification through Destination Crenshaw. But while similar racial experience induces more trust and understanding, it cannot in fact remedy gentrification as I show in chapter 4.2.2. by example of the series *Gentefied*.

⁴⁷ Similar to greenwashing, the accusation of *artwashing* criticizes using art as a pretense for financial interests and exploitation of communities. I write more about Boyle Heights and community efforts against artwashing and gentrification in the next section of this chapter.

Black art and community connection

While there is active support and engagement between artists, the organization, local foster youths and the general public, the artwork itself intentionally addresses realities that are familiar to the local community, as Eboné McCloud, the Ars Programs Liaison, makes clear:

The curators that we're working with currently – CAAM in general, in my opinion, is very much concerned with how it will affect the community, and so with the works that we're doing, like with Deborah Roberts' work, it's about vulnerability in childhood and how Black children are oftentimes not seen. So that's something that this community knows all too well. (Eboné McCloud)

During spring and summer of 2022, A+P hosted Deborah Roberts's *I'm* exhibition in cooperation with the California African American Museum (CAAM). Indeed, the organization had started a five-year collaboration period with the CAAM at the beginning of the year. Throughout the three exhibition rooms, Roberts's mixed-media collages portraying Black children and serigraphs on paper that feature Black female names are on display. Other collages from the same series are simultaneously on view at the CAAM that is also free of charge to the public. One of the collages is named "The duty of disobedience" (fig. 1) and portrays three Black girls:⁴⁸ One of the girls wears a tank top with three appliqué cartoon monkeys and red balloons – a "playful image that doubles as an allusion to anti-Black stereotypes," as the caption reads. The other girl's t-shirt features a weasel and a monkey and the words "Pop Goes the Weasel" – where "the word 'pop' forms a double-entendre on the 'Pow! Blam! Boom!' graphics of comic books and 1960s Pop Art while also referencing the sound of gun violence." A descriptive and interpretive text accompanies all of the art pieces and makes it easier for the viewer to understand the motivation and references behind the work.

Another collage, "Cock-a-doodle-doo" (fig. 2), features a boy flexing his muscles and wearing a shirt with an imprinted rooster which suggest the "perils of masculinity" (image caption). The boy's face is put together from different pictures, among them Bahamian-American actor Sidney Poitier's eye. The caption explains that this represents "layered, collective identities rather than individuals" and that Deborah Roberts was thinking about Tamir Rice, "who was shot within eight seconds of the police arriving, not realizing he was a little boy because he pumped himself up."

⁴⁸ All images are photographs taken by the author in 2022.

The collages all play with elements from popular culture that are familiar to a wider audience. Moreover, they allude to historical and contemporary incidents that are all too well known to the African American population of the U.S. The captions that accompany the works offer an interpretation, oftentimes with quotes by the author. These supportive elements ensure that every viewer can understand and relate to the work. Deborah Roberts thus creates a distinctly African American collective history, identity and imaginary that speak to the residents of Leimert Park and Southern L.A. The works displayed at A+P thus do not require higher education to make sense – on the contrary, the captions educate the interested viewer, and thus offer an easy introduction to art theory and interpretation.

The other part of Roberts's exhibition, serigraphs on paper, addresses the problematic positioning of and prejudices against African American female naming practices. One serigraph reads "La'Condrea is a noun." (fig. 3) and another "Angwenique is mild as milk." (fig. 4). In both cases the names are rendered as faulty: Written in Microsoft Word, the "red squiggly lines visualiz[e] its failure to recognize the name and demonstrate the anti-Black biases programmed into such systems," the caption reads, along "with maternal and paternal lineages used in both forename and surname practices, Black American naming is an act rooted in honoring and enforcing legacies of their own making."

Next to the frames, a small booth fitting one person is installed (fig. 5). This booth offers a bench to sit and headphones where the viewer can listen to prejudiced and racist statements that insult African American females and make fun of their names. All the while, the listener watches herself in the mirror that is installed in front and can touch the Black female names carved out of felt and covering the walls of the booth. The booth is topped by bars and the light installation on the ceiling creates shadows on the felt walls that resemble metal bars in a prison: The Black female names are entrapped (fig. 6). This booth enables the viewer to step out of a passive consummatory role and have a bodily multisensory experience that makes the audible attack (from the headphones) more real while it establishes black female names as non-negotiable traditions through their tangibility (felt carvings on the walls). At the same time, the booth's mirror invites the viewer to reflect on her own reaction to the verbal assault, and thus the now active viewer becomes part of the art object.

If the arts are to engage with citizens and vice versa, they need to be accessible on various levels, as both the "South of Expo" panelists and A+P's employees, Eboné and Paul,

discuss. Beside financial and geographical accessibility, racial representation is an important factor, as Eboné stresses:

I think that it's really important to see an institution that is Black-owned and minority-owned. Right. So, our founders are people of color. And I think that that's really important to have, especially in the neighborhood in which you reside, and the demographic is people that look like you, right? And I also think from a retail standpoint, that it's really important to have things that are stamped with Black-owned and or women-owned or, you know, minority-owned or anything like that, because it's a reflection, I think, that people are able to see themselves and the businesses that they are spending their hard-earned money on or going to frequent or something like that. So I think that that's kind of like a, for me I would say just kind of like a welcome like your home. You get to spend your money here, you get to participate in the activities and programing that we do or, you know, other things like that. So I would I think that that's extremely important. (Eboné McCloud)

Eboné mentions several factors that make A+P accessible to the community. Her description of feeling home extends the physical space of one's apartment or house and includes one's connection to the community. To be home involves a responsibility to maintain the characteristics of a home: well-being, communication, trust, support, and participation. These are maintained only through engagement with the other members of the home/community. Here, in the traditionally African American neighborhood of Leimert Park, home is created through performing a common cultural thread that is based on the experience of being Black. Thus Blackness, as cultural, equates home and the attributes attached to it. To feel home includes an environment of trust (cf. Gerhard and J. Keller 2023). This trust is created through the performance of Blackness that, in Roberts's art, involves drawing on common experience and history, and on materialized objects in her collages. The material and tangible aspect is especially significant in the booth where the experience of Blackness becomes haptic and multisensory. Furthermore, Eboné links home to financial investment: If you want to have a comfortable home, you need to put your money into making your home livable, such as buying furniture, fixing broken windows, paying electricity bills and so on. Eboné prompts the Black community of Leimert Park to spend their money locally to benefit the home economy. Moreover, seeing financially successful people that look like you offers a glimpse at one's own possible future: You can indeed make it and there are people who support your endeavors moneywise. Moreover, as A+P's founder Mark Bradford proves, the arts can be a fruitful career path regardless of one's individual privileges. Indeed, all three founding members – artist Mark Bradford, social activist Allan DiCastro and philanthropist Eileen Harris Norton

– grew up in underserved communities (Lloyd-Smith 2022). Performing Blackness in their ownership and staff signals that A+P’s programs primarily address and invite the local African American community. In addition, many regular visitors to CAAM now find their way to Leimert Park to view the exhibition and participate in the programs. In this way, the neighborhood and its shops attract residents from other parts of the city. To move their public towards more civic participation, artists and art organizations must be relatable and engaging, they must facilitate access both to their own work and to various levels of social and public life. In his address to the Association of Art Museum Directors in 2015, President of the Ford Foundation, one of the largest philanthropic foundations in the U.S., Darren Walker states,

we all have a responsibility to go back to the basics in our communities. To support art from the community, art about the community, art for the community. Because, ultimately, art museums are not only underwritten by communities, but are the underpinning of them. They are the fulcrum on which society’s balance hinges – the forum where inequality is neutralized. And for your institutions to be essential in the community, you must engage with the community. It’s not enough to say we’re open late on Thursdays, or that we’re free on Fridays. That’s not the openness or freedom the arts require – and, for that matter, inspire. Our communities deserve something greater. (Walker 2015)

Walker’s understanding of art ties in with the notions of *artivism* and, on a wider scale, with cultural citizenship: Art, and culture as its extension, can be the means to express and negotiate cultural belonging, i.e., cultural citizenship.⁴⁹

Black art and citizenship through a pragmatic lens

Ownership, art access and participation are all part of a broader understanding of citizenship that takes into account the cultural dimension of everyday life, that is creative cultural output, but also ethnic cultural traditions and values in the form of experience. Center-staging Blackness in these activities is a necessary performance that criticizes society and politics and claims full citizenship – think of Conquergood’s three C’s – for a marginalized yet fundamentally U.S.-American group. In her detailed analysis of Black youth in the U.S., political scientist Cathy Cohen (2010) finds that most African American young adults feel like second-

⁴⁹ Cultural citizenship goes beyond the notion of citizenship on paper and therefore having rights and responsibilities towards the nation-state. The concept I use here combines two strands of cultural citizenship theory: One, viewing culture rather as cultural production and therefore as a resource that can be manipulated to influence forms of belonging (van Zoonen 2004). The other sees culture as a collective learning process where citizenship equals “common experiences, cognitive processes, forms of cultural translation and discourses of empowerment” instead of mere membership in a polity (Delanty 2003). See chapter 2 for a discussion of the term *artivism*, and, for a more elaborate engagement with cultural citizenship, see chapter 3.

class citizens in a country that their families have been legally part of for generations. The notion of cultural citizenship accounts for the dimension of cultural non-belonging, and efforts for representation and participation in the arts and culture, such as Deborah Roberts's serigraphs, fight for inclusion within the idea of what it means to be American. While some rightly argue that formal citizenship does not redress racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva and Mayorga 2011), others, like Delanty (2003) and Isin (2019), conceive of citizenship as an ongoing learning process that, "[especially democratic citizenship,] depends on the creative and organizing capacities of citizens whose performance of citizenship is not only the driving force for change but also the guarantee of the vitality and resilience of the polity" (Isin 2019). These creative and organizing capacities are part of A+P's *raison d'être*: As a private operating 501(c)(3) foundation, A+P is a nonprofit institution funded few private donors, and, as such, must operate programs that directly benefit the public. The organization's ownership of their spaces, their nonprofit status, as well as their representation of Blackness, both with their employees and the exhibited art, contribute to their trustworthy image. Through their reflection of and engagement with the residents and foster youth, they teach and learn about the artistic dimension of civic participation.

As a learning process, citizenship is a relational and dynamic process where individuals position themselves toward each other and within society. Thus, our understanding of citizenship "needs to be tied more closely to discourses of recognition in order to empower people in their own self-understanding, sense of belonging and identity" (Delanty 2003, 604). Delanty's emphasis on learning what it means to act the citizen mirrors Dewey's pragmatic reasoning where knowledge can only be generated through action and experience, and where democracy can only exist if citizens live their lives according to the democratic principles of experience and education:

Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education (Dewey [1939] 2020, 64)

Delanty's and Dewey's approaches locate democracy in both the public and the private realm. Beyond politics, it is our personal experiences and the way we design our decisions that influence lived democracy. This approach resonates with Eboné's observations on home that extends to a larger community: We can act to meliorate our public lives (that is our

neighborhood community, our city, our region and our country), and strive to feeling at home in all of these dimensions of life by making decisions that benefit us and those around us. Linking back to the role of the arts, this sentiment is echoed in what scholar and author Ibram X. Kendi calls the contemporary Black Renaissance: “if the Harlem Renaissance stirred Black people to *see* themselves, if the Black Arts Movement stirred Black people to *love* themselves, then the Black Renaissance is stirring Black people to *be* themselves. Totally. Unapologetically. Freely” (Kendi 2021). Citizenship and democracy take place in everyday life and the pragmatic paradigm urges us to act in public the way we prefer to be in the privacy of our homes. The process of learning and of coming to know oneself through performance enriches our experience and thus can meliorate our decision-making abilities which concern private and public processes, such as political participation. The center-staging of Blackness in A+P’s practices, especially in their artist choices, is the Black Renaissance in action; more so, their practices are part of “structures [that] must be built to allow creativity to truly flourish. During the past six or so years, Black artists formed mechanisms to lift up their own work and that of their peers” (ibid.). These mechanisms, according to Kendi, include a variety of creative and artistic practices in a broader cultural sphere. Series such as *Genteified* or *Atlanta* are as notable for their politics of creation as cultural organizations like Art + Practice and Self Help Graphics: all of them include conscious decisions regarding who is in charge of and who is visible in the production. All of them are *owned* by people they claim to represent and care for.

Lived citizenship depends on the existing political system and how people in this system *learn* what it means to be citizens. John Dewey views art as valuable for citizen education and democracy because it enhances imagination and character formation, so individuals can make informed decisions in their lives (cf. Nakamura 2019). From a pragmatic standpoint, the experience of art depends on and influences one’s attitude (cf. Stroud 2011, chapter 2; Felski 2020). As education is only possible through experience, as Dewey ([1938] 2020) argues, and art speaks “a language which is closer to the emotions and imaginations of every man” (Dewey [1940] 2020, 305), the individual experience of art influences lived democratic citizenship. Ford Foundation President Darren Walker’s words resonate with this view when he claims that art museums are the places where “inequality is neutralized” because of art’s universality. Eboné’s words point out the significance of a sense of belonging – on the

local scale of Leimert Park and L.A., but also within the broader U.S.-American citizenry. A+P's practices situate African Americans and their cultural traditions, such as female naming that diverges from the white American norm, firmly within the U.S. imaginary of citizenship and societal participation. While John Dewey did not explicitly write on the dimension of race, scholar Eddie Glaude Jr. (2007) insightfully conveys how African American political engagement can be understood through pragmatism: Experimenting with different forms of participation to meliorate life, believing in the knowledge and ability of everyday people, and an optimistic commitment to democracy as lived experience are characteristics of Black civic engagement. A+P puts pragmatic elements to use, too, for example in their conviction that they can make a change and their belief, against all statistical odds, that foster youth can live a better life. Education through art is central to the organization's values, and this is rooted in the belief in the transformative power of individual action. Glaude Jr. states that "American pragmatism is the direct reflection of the unique character of America itself, which is inextricably connected to the presence of its darker citizens – America's blues people" (Glaude Jr. 2007, 5). Eddie Glaude Jr.'s pragmatic view of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* applies to Deborah Roberts's *I'm* exhibition analogously when he says,

the problems of race in the United States are best dealt with by confronting our past and the tragedy therein precisely in order to invade intelligently the future. Creative intelligence and an experimental approach enriched by the knowledge of our *racial* [sic.] experiences allows us to locate the serious conflicts that plague America and offer up ways to deal with them. (Glaude Jr. 2007, 20)

Deborah Roberts's works educate about a collective racial experience and simultaneously hold a mirror to the viewer's face. The wide-reaching problems in society thus become clear. At the same time, her artworks exemplify a positive empowering outlook when she claims that "La'Condrea is a noun" and "Angwenique is mild as milk."

The organization Art + Practice brings together education, art, and collective identity to enable their audience, especially the youth they work with, to not only envision better futures but to see pragmatic decision-making paths concerning their careers and other choices. Their philosophy and goals are rooted in the place and community which is exemplified by their focus on Black audiences and cooperation with the CAAM.

In stark contrast to A+P, the next chapter investigates the practices of one public figure, late rapper Nipsey Hussle. The artistic genre and the rapper's one-man operation could not be more different to A+P's enterprise. Nevertheless, both endeavors share a spatial tie,

with Nipsey Hussle's roots just around the corner in Crenshaw, and a desire to uplift the local community, as I show.

4.1.2. Rapper Nipsey Hussle's economic activism in Crenshaw

In April 2019, former president Barack Obama composed a condolence letter to the friends and family of Los Angeles rapper Nipsey Hussle in which he writes:

While most folks look at the Crenshaw neighborhood where he grew up and see only gangs, bullets, and despair, Nipsey saw potential. He saw hope. He saw a community that, even through its flaws, taught him to always keep going. His choice to invest in that community rather than ignore it – to build a skills training center and a coworking space in Crenshaw; to lift up the Eritrean-American community; to set an example for young people to follow – is a legacy worth of celebration. I hope his memory inspires more good work in Crenshaw and communities like it. (Trammell 2019)

Unlike rappers like Jay-Z, Kanye West or Lil Wayne, Nipsey Hussle was not that well-known. How come, then, a former president pays tribute to him? How did Hussle and Crenshaw gain socio-political attention?

Close to the neighborhood of Leimert Park where Art + Practice resides lies the area of Crenshaw that has become notorious with hood movies of the 1990s, such as John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* and the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society*. As early as 1992, John Singleton's movie drew attention to the gentrification in Crenshaw and proposed that Black property needs to stay within the Black community in order for it to heal and prosper. In popular culture, Crenshaw remains a symbol for African American gang culture and hip hop to this day. With his lyrics focused on local and Black issues, Crenshaw rapper Nipsey Hussle rose to fame in the 2010s and quickly became an underground hero for BIPoC hip hop fans throughout the country. With his murder in March 2019, murals all over Los Angeles and other cities in the U.S. appeared, honoring the late artist and activist (Magana 2021b). Many of the murals, like Danny Mateo's in Hyde Park, L.A., feature Hussle's motto "the Marathon continues" that alludes to both his clothing brand and his philosophy of uplifting Black and marginalized communities. The abundance of murals corresponds to the outpour of emotions and national attention to his death in March 2019 when he was murdered in front of his clothing store *Marathon Clothing* in Crenshaw (Del Real, Arango, and J. Medina 2019).

Family, friends, admirers and celebrities joined the artist's funeral, and Barack Obama praised Hussle's community work and inspiring attitude (Chokshi 2019). Nipsey Hussle was not only an acclaimed rapper but an entrepreneur and community activist who managed to be trusted and to inspire his community in Crenshaw, Los Angeles. After his death, multiple newspaper articles praised his endeavors for the local community, shedding light on his actions uplifting the Black community and against gentrification in South Los Angeles. In this chapter, I examine the performance behind Nipsey Hussle's trustworthiness and how they tie in with his artistic, entrepreneurial and activist endeavors. To exemplify his social and participatory impact, I take a closer look at his artistic career, his efforts to buy back the neighborhood and his involvement in the realization of Destination Crenshaw, an infrastructure project on Crenshaw Avenue that features public art and community spaces. I then contextualize Hussle's work in a broader vision of Black American activism that is related to the pragmatic approach to democracy.

The *real* hip hop activist of Crenshaw

While Nipsey Hussle is best known for his first and only album *Victory Lap* (2018) that was nominated for a Grammy Award, his song "Crenshaw & Slauson," released on the mixtape *Crenshaw* in 2013, is a crucial reflection of his roots and community standing. Commenting the album's release, Hussle remarked, "[t]his is my area. This is my home town. This is really like where I spent a lot of my time as a youth. [...] [Crenshaw] is a foundation to my personality and my story. It's where it took place at" (Coleman 2013). The relevance of Crenshaw is reflected in many songs where Hussle raps about growing up in the hood and hustling in the parking lot to make a living. With 2.7 million views, the extended music video accompanying the song of the same name "Crenshaw and Slauson (True Story)" (2017c) ranks average among his released tracks on YouTube. But this music video stands out for a different reason: Before the song begins, the video documents Crenshaw residents giving statements about Nipsey Hussle to the camera. The viewer assumes the role of the camera person who interviews the residents, and therefore the interviewees seem to be talking to the viewer directly. The accounts are a testament to Nipsey Hussle's perceived-as-truthful and trustworthy character: Some note "he ain't never change, you know, he still come right here, [...] he still pull up on the block" (02:13-02:18) and "he's here, he's really on the streets" (02:45). Others stress that he is not fake because "he lived it, this is his neighborhood, this is his home, we

know him, we see him, he's a real nigga" (03:15-03:20) and "he really 'hood [...] Nipsey is the truth" (00:55-01:09). Even with financial success, the rapper decided to open his clothing store at the strip mall where he used to spend time as a child and teenager. The strip mall at the intersection of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue suffered from disinvestment until Hussle and his brother decided to rent a shop there. In her detailed chronicle of Nipsey Hussle's urban community investments, journalist Sahra Sulaiman writes,

[t]he fight to claim place and space at Crenshaw and Slauson would become one of the defining struggles of his life. It was also one of the defining struggles in his community, rooted in the policies and practices implemented to uphold segregation and the city's historic efforts to deny South Central residents, and the Black community, in particular, ownership over their own streets. (Sulaiman 2019)

As depicted in the introduction to chapter 4, the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles has an ethnically diverse history that was heavily influenced by redlining practices in the 20th century. After white residents started moving out of the area with the influx of Black and Japanese residents during and after WWII, real estate prices dropped and efforts to create an integrated neighborhood in the 1950s and 60s failed (Kurashige 2008). Consequently, Crenshaw became known as an urban ghetto and, simultaneously, as the heartbeat of Black life. This is vividly depicted in influential movies of the 1990s such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). Nipsey Hussle's strong attachment to Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue must be viewed against the backdrop of their histories: The intersection is just 1.1 mile south of cultural hotspot Leimert Park and 2.7 miles northwest of the intersection Florence and Normandie where the unrest of 1992 peaked with the violent beating of truck driver Reginald Denny that was vividly portrayed to a world audience in a live broadcast from the helicopter (Leibowitz 2015). As far as the artistic significance of the area goes, the mural the *Great Wall of Crenshaw* is located on Crenshaw Boulevard approximately between 50th and 52nd streets that is a half mile distance to Crenshaw and Slauson. Moreover, National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, who delivered her poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of President Joe Biden in January 2021, dedicated one of her poems, "Daughter's Metro Map to City Identity," to the streets in South Los Angeles where she grew up. She recites,

On Slauson I straddle Black girl tango
Between northern heights
and south hair salons
Home.
(LA Public Library 2015)

Followed by personal descriptions of Western Avenue and Centinela Avenue, Gorman creates a spatial image of what home and belonging mean to her. The very same area Gorman dedicates her poem to is the place Nipsey Hussle's creative work and activism focused on. To visualize the area in question further, journalists of the Los Angeles Times recreated a map of Slauson Avenue that highlights places Nipsey Hussle interwove in his music (Simani, Roberts, and Krishnakumar 2019). Depictions like Gorman's poem, Hussle's songs and journalists' spatial chronicles are key to understanding the immense significance of place in artistic practices and to getting a sense of place from an outside perspective. Moreover, Hussle's frequent recourse to place names conveys both a sense of place and a social agenda that are intertwined. In "Hussle in the House", he raps

Look I'm comin straight out of Slauson, a crazy motherfucker name Nipsey!
I'm turfed up cause I grew up in the Sixties!
[...]
And I'm from where homicide boost the economy
Pay taxes to these corners and put in work it's a policy
(Hussle 2009)

Growing up in the Sixties testifies to Hussle's affiliation with the Rolling 60s, a clique of the notorious gang Crips that is probably one of the most infamous on the Westcoast. In this context, Slauson Avenue is painted as a dangerous place where gang rivalries lead to unnecessary deaths. Hussle's own murder in his neighborhood that is being associated with gang activity attests to the problematic trust and distrust relations that shape systematically neglected Black communities. Thus, while Hussle was trying to build trust and opportunities, there exist complex underlying distrust mechanisms that are hard to break down. As a former gang member, Hussle must have been aware of these structures and the risk that his engagement and public exposure involved. However, Hussle also hints at a larger pattern behind Black homicides that "boost the economy" – a critique of structures that uphold the status quo of poverty and crime in South L.A. and possibly "incentivize [...] the construction of more prisons," as journalist Sahra Sulaiman contests (2019). While Hussle acknowledges the crime in his neighborhood, he is aware of the racist structures engrained in judiciary and police institutions that create a vicious cycle. The main solution he sees is to personally invest in the place. Eight years after the release of "Hussle in the House", he buys a shop at the strip mall on Slauson and Crenshaw to sell his clothes under the brand name *Marathon* that mirrors his philosophy concerning the struggle for elevation and equality: It is a long and arduous

process that demands discipline and perseverance; solutions and progress cannot be achieved quickly. In another song, he reminisces about the past at “Fifty-Ninth and Fifth Ave, granny house with vanilla wafers” (Hussle 2018a) where his grandmother lived and he visited 59th St. Elementary School as a child. Years later, after having earned money from his mixtape sales, he renovated the school’s basketball court and created nearby Vector90, a co-working space that provides technical education and aims to “anchor cultural and intellectual hubs for entrepreneurs and creatives, and will heighten the economic and social fabric of the neighborhoods we enter” (Vector90). With fame and wealth, Hussle went back to his spatial roots and invested in them. This not only shows his care for the community, but also his integrity by acting according to his marathon philosophy. In “That’s How I Knew”, Hussle raps about the opportunities in digital technology,

You can look a gift horse in the face and not know what you looking at
And I feel like, you know, I'm looking at the gift horse
I'm just one of the ones that notice what I'm looking at
You know what I mean? It's actually an incredible time
It's like a gold rush, it's never been a time like this in our generation
It's our equivalent of the Gold Rush with everybody moving to California
This technology has empowered everybody
And it's giving people, you know, it's as big as you wanna make it and
You know, it's as far as you take it
And we can quote a gang of things going on in the world right now
Or just, you know, accept it as being true
But, you know, it's like, man, giants gon' crumble
Big-big companies gon' crumble
New companies gon' pop up outta nowhere and it's-it's gon' be dramatic
And I believe that
(Hussle 2018b)

He connects the financial opportunities that lie in digital technology and education to his social agenda, and accordingly created his vision of Silicon Valley with Vector90 that is “giving people” in Crenshaw possibilities for education and networking. Moreover, his vision about old companies crumbling and new companies popping up contains an optimism telling the listener that there will be change and prompting them to get active looking at a “gift horse” and to participate because it is “gon’ be dramatic”. The lyrics to “That’s How I Knew” partly stem from an interview he gave to the online hip hop magazine *Complex* in 2013 after independently releasing his mixtape *Crenshaw* without a record label contract. In

this interview, he criticizes the magazine itself and the music industry and argues for his stance on voice and ownership that guided his activism:

I felt like we're at a point where *our culture's getting exploited* and it's looking like they're [record labels] trying to do us like they did rock 'n' roll. *They're trying to do us like they did Africa, and they're trying to extract all of our natural resources* for their own exploited reasons. If [the magazine] Complex is going to take the stance to degrade the culture and point out every flaw that hip-hop artists have and every mistake they make, then I'ma take the stance to say: As hip-hop, we're gonna boycott Complex. We don't need that. *We can write about ourselves.* We could develop our own outlet and we can cover our own stories. [...]

So when I hear about an editor asking: What's up with my output? I'm like: What's up with you even commenting on my life? Niggas don't know my life.⁵⁰ That's the *bourgeoisie approach that I get offended by* because this ain't no bubble. This ain't no vacuum we doing this music out of. *That's why people connect to the pain in it. Because it's real.* That's the part they should respect. These radio hits, these charts, they don't validate the truth and the message. [...]

Because he [the rapper] *wants to retain ownership.* He wants to do what they refuse to let you do and that's *control his own destiny.* He don't wanna be exploited by the music industry that been traditionally exploitive to our creators. Then he end up on lists like the Top 25 Underachievers. A lot of these artists that you got on these lists, *they're living real life and come from real places.* The fact that they're not doing 25-to-life in jail, y'all niggas better salute that. The fact that niggas ain't running up on shit, robbing shit, stealing shit—niggas are being creative, having a positive output. (Diaz 2013; my emphases)

Nipsey Hussle felt strongly about owning his music and intellectual property because he perceived the music industry exploited artists like him who worked their way up. He aligns this sort of exploitation both with racial oppression, as his reference to Africa's colonization shows, and class oppression, as his use of the term “bourgeoisie” hints to. Hussle is highly aware of his reputation as a truthful and real rapper that he upholds as an independent and spatially rooted artist who practices community-serving placemaking in his Crenshaw neighborhood. This mindset aligns with A+P's as analyzed in the previous chapter. Moreover, Hussle believes and encourages others to tell their own stories by claiming and maintaining ownership of their creative work and assets. His statements showcase that his art and activism were consciously set against the backdrop of international class and race struggles, especially focusing on the U.S. and Los Angeles. Asked in an interview why he thinks he resonates with people so well, he answers,

⁵⁰ While I aim to avoid offensive language in my own text, I leave quotes in the original for the purpose of truthful reproduction.

Because I'm real my nigga. My story is real. There ain't no rap niggas in the game like me at all. Especially from my generation. [...] Didn't give up. Stayed down, stayed in the shit. Built for his community. Stayed local and inspired his area. Came from a treacherous area like the Rolling 60's. Went toe to toe and head up with killers. (Diaz 2013)

While his statement displays certain showmanship that is typical for the hip hop scene, there is truth to it because Nipsey Hussle did continue to invest in his community regardless of his success. What he asserts in public, such as the *Complex* interview, matches his musical lyrics, thus promoting a character that is true to his words. The Crenshaw residents appearing in his music video "Crenshaw and Slauson" experienced Hussle's development and can attest to his truthfulness. While his public language assumed a more formal style throughout the years, his ideals stayed the same as an interview from 2018 shows:

I'm conscious that there's a intentional push back from a loud – we could unpack each one of those – people that look like me are supposed to be in jail or dead. It's a whole prison complex, you know what I'm saying. Then you think about, as an artist, there's a business model that exists in the music industry to prevent you from having ownership, to prevent you from being a partner in the lion's share of the profit. (Mass Appeal 2018)

Referring to his lyrics from his song "Dedication" where he describes himself as the 2Pac of his generation, Hussle states, "2Pac was highly intelligent but in our culture, street culture, especially his generation, intelligence was viewed as a form of weakness. How do you get the people that's really affected by, you know, what we're trying to solve, involved? And I think Pac's intention was to do that" (Mass Appeal 2018). Comparing himself to 2Pac, Hussle's aim was to reach and involve the people affected by poverty, racism and disenfranchisement, and one of his strategies to do so was exceptional art:

I always respect when people [...] make such a concentrated art that is undeniable. We could be intentional and strategic as we want to be but at the end of the day, we all are moved by next level art. And even, you look at the albums that sold ten million, you look at *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, look at, like, Tracy Chapman, even Adele – you listen to Adele and you, like, you know, had to be a fan of no genre; this is just powerful words, incredible music, sincere delivery. And I think that was my goal with *Victory Lap*, is to just deliver on that level, not until the parameters of a genre, just to say, you know, this is really feeling, this is really some truth. I believe that's the most effective approach to be successful. (Mass Appeal 2018)

Nipsey Hussle created, in his view, real and true music that was independent of industry demands to touch and motivate people. His success, both with his Grammy-nominated album *Victory Lap* as well as with his mixtapes *Crenshaw* and *Mailbox Money* that he sold for 100

USD and 1.000 USD per item respectively, attests to the effectiveness of his strategy: People trust his music to tell real stories, thus they spend a lot of money on it. This is a real-life example of Rita Felski's speculation about the affection and impact that art can create. It also resonates with W. E. B. Du Bois's thoughts on the value of truthful Black art for the uplift of the Black people, on which I elaborate in chapter 5.3.2. by example of another rapper, Atlanta native Killer Mike. First, Hussle created intentional art that was supposed to motivate people to become involved and claim agency over their lives. Second, he was aware of the politics of music and employed them to his advantage to feed his truthful public persona and his financial success: He became an independent artist and retained ownership of his creativity, rendering him immune to outside demands and thus furthering his reputation as an artist-activist that stays true to himself and to his community. Lyrics like

See most niggas in this life get locked up
Lost inside the system pull a white man's stock up
Only difference is, I picked up hip-hop
And this is why they still can't stop us
(Hussle 2017a)

It's amazing to niggas how I get down
But it's crazy to me that I exist still
Cause the maze in my city leave you crazy and dizzy
Cause you either doing life or get chipped now
Lot of ghosts in my pics now
It ain't souls occupy the abyss now
(Hussle 2017b)

How long should I stay dedicated?
How long 'til opportunity meet preparation?
I need some real nigga reparations
'Fore I run up in your bank just for recreation
Dedication, hard work, plus patience
[...]
This ain't entertainment, it's for niggas on the slave ship
These songs just the spirituals I swam against them waves wit
Ended up on shore to their amazement
I hope the example I set's not contagious
Lock us behind gated but can't tame us
Used to be stay safe, now it's stay dangerous
'Cause ain't no point in playing defense nigga
[...]
Royalties, publishing, plus I own masters
I'll be damned if I slave for some white crackers

I was mapping this out, I hit the heights backwards
(Hussle et al. 2018)

paint a vivid picture of Nipsey Hussle's experiences and his commitment to the Black community in face of structural racism. In the first example ("Ain't Hard Enough"), he acknowledges that the prison industrial complex financially benefits white agents, and in the last example ("Victory Lap"), he refuses to work for a white person, instead hoping to inspire others to follow his steps by staying dedicated, working hard and having patience. Detailing his success and progress, he evokes the image of the slave ship sailing through the Middle Passage from Africa to America: Like others from his community, he used to be on the slave ship, but he swam against the waves and hit the heights backwards and finally arrived on shore – metaphors for his path to artistic independence and ownership. In his songs, Nipsey Hussle performs Blackness through language and content, and aligns himself with and motivates those who are from underserved communities of color. Watching interview videos available on YouTube, it is evident that Nipsey Hussle also performed his character through his physical appearance: With his long beard and the four stitch cornrows he positioned himself within Black grooming traditions and as part of a counterculture that resists stereotypes (like equating long dark beards with possible danger and criminality). After his death, his hairstyle became known as the Nipsey Hussle braids that fans adopted to honor his legacy, and they went viral on YouTube and TikTok.⁵¹ Additionally, the rapper usually wore several gold chains around his neck – again, staying true to his successful rapper role. Although Hussle became an entrepreneur and investor, he continued the gangster rapper look that signaled consistency in character to his friends and fans.

In the following sections, I take a closer look at how Nipsey Hussle put his fans' trust to work in creating urban participation as well as transnational and transracial solidarities among communities of color. I exemplify how the rapper's actions tie in with claims for citizenship that are rooted in an U.S.-American cultural tradition and in the context of urban rights against the backdrop of the global city.

⁵¹ YouTube offers countless results for "Nipsey Hussle braids" and in November 2023, people continue to upload new videos of their Hussle hairstyles. See for instance 1nito_ (2022) or MiA (2021).

The community in urban transformation: Participation in Destination Crenshaw

Nipsey Hussle's urban investment endeavors mentioned so far are mostly small-scale projects compared to his involvement in the infrastructure project *Destination Crenshaw*. Situated on a strip of Crenshaw Boulevard that starts at the intersection with Slauson Avenue, the project planners claim to create

a transformative infrastructure project that will boost our community through economic development, job creation, and environmental healing, while elevating Black art and culture. [...] A 1.3-mile stretch of Crenshaw Boulevard will be transformed from an area that has long deserved economic investment and strategic urban planning, into a thriving commercial corridor linked by architecturally stunning community spaces and pocket parks, hundreds of newly planted trees, and over 100 commissioned works of art. (Destination Crenshaw)

The project is a public/private endeavor and receives public funding from the City of Los Angeles, the State of California, Los Angeles County, and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, as well as funds from private donors and foundations (Hickman 2020). While infrastructure projects often claim to create new opportunities and benefit the community, they regularly fail to deliver on these promises, instead furthering gentrification and the displacement of long-time residents. The Atlanta BeltLine, for instance, aims to connect multiple urban and peripheral areas via a walkable trail to enable residents access to the city.⁵² However, as urban scholars Dan Immergluck and Tharunya Balan (2018) find, real estate prices and rent within a half-mile of the BeltLine rose considerably. And while the project increases the City's property tax base and ensures more people enter the city for recreation, it puts lower income residents at risk regarding housing and economic opportunities (Immergluck and Balan 2018, 559). Destination Crenshaw differs from the Atlanta BeltLine because it is a creative response to a controversial public transport project, and thus tries to turn a possible damage to local business created by urban development into an opportunity. The project was initiated by local art and community leaders and Los Angeles Councilmember Harris-Dawson as a response to Los Angeles Metro's decision to build a new light railway line – the K line –, that connects the Expo/Crenshaw station with LAX Airport above ground. Originally, locals had protested this decision, preferring the new line to run underground in order to leave the business corridor on Crenshaw Boulevard intact (Destination Crenshaw). At the time of Destination Crenshaw's inception, which heralded a

⁵² See chapter 5.1. for more information on the Atlanta BeltLine and its impact on residents.

wave of change coming to Crenshaw, Nipsey Hussle and his partner David Gross were buying real estate in this neighborhood. And while some declared Hussle worked “to become a real estate mogul” (O'Malley Greenburg 2019), others, like councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson, believed: “He was investing in this part of town because he understood ... if we ever wanted it to be in the condition it deserved, and for our people to be treated the way they deserved to be treated, we have to own it” (Jennings and S. Kelley 2019).

As part of his larger Crenshaw vision, Nipsey Hussle was involved in the birth and development of Destination Crenshaw, and made use of the opportunity zones (OZ) policy (in Public Law No. 115-97) passed in 2017 that allows tax payers to invest in distressed areas in the U.S. (115th Congress 2017; cf. also Internal Revenue Service 2022). Investing in opportunity zones is beneficial to both investors and the local community: The longer the investment lasts the more the tax return; and long-term investments create more possibilities for change (McKinney 2020). Destination Crenshaw and the intersection Crenshaw and Slau-son lie within such an opportunity zone, and thus offer good investment opportunities. In fact, Hussle and his partner Gross were planning to use the OZ regulation on a larger scale to secure investments in Black neighborhoods by Black people, which eventually culminated in the founding of two investment organizations after Hussle's death. At a meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus inside the U.S. Capitol in May 2019, Councilmember Harris-Dawson was optimistic about their ideas, reaffirming Hussle's trustworthy character:

These folks have things that all of Wall Street's money put together can't buy, [...] and that is what's called street credibility. That is what's called skin in the game and that is what's called confidence [in] their community. That when they make an investment or get involved in a business venture it will [...] serve the community that they are in and leave the communities in a better place. (Jennings 2019b)

As with infrastructure projects in general, the opportunity zones policy is prone to exploitation because investors might finance luxurious projects that essentially drive out long-term residents, and there is no regulation to prevent these developments. Local residents trusted Nipsey Hussle as a local hip hop activist and entrepreneur to invest with the community's interest in mind – he had “street credibility” –, as Harris-Dawson and other residents attest in interviews (cf. Chody et al. 2020; Jennings and S. Kelley 2019). Hussle's unwavering interest and investment in Crenshaw throughout the years made him a trustworthy person in residents' eyes. As Hussle's partner David Gross stated in the *Los Angeles Times*, they

intended to build a residential and retail complex in Hyde Park/Crenshaw where tenants could co-invest and thus become co-owners (Jennings and S. Kelley 2019).

Destination Crenshaw (DC) follows the principle of hiring local employees and partners with organizations to help find, and even train, workers from South L.A., for instance (Vankin 2023). However, even such a large project that intends to protect a Black spatial legacy will not be able to prevent gentrification and displacement by itself. On the contrary, it remains to be seen if the project will speed up the rise of rent and property values. As president of Destination Crenshaw, Jason W. Foster states,

We won't determine whether housing costs go up or down — those are economic forces happening all over L.A. — but we intend to prevent cultural erasure of this important Black neighborhood, one of the largest black neighborhoods on the West Coast. [...] We want to do that by stamping the neighborhood with unapologetically Black art and an infrastructure project that will persuade Black people to stay in their homes, and not leave, or to move here. To create a cultural space that recognizes the value that we hold as Black people. (Vankin 2023)

Similar to DC, the Atlanta BeltLine is a public-private endeavor and set out to be a democratic, collaborative planning project, but Roy's (2015) analysis concludes that the project ultimately took advantage of the "problematic principles" of collaborative planning theory and thus sustains the "neoliberal order of existing power relations" (66). In fact,

in a predominantly neoliberal state context it [collaborative planning approach] is likely to be used by market-led agencies to protect the interests of those stakeholders, developers, and middle/upper income residents/visitors who can contribute towards the economic growth of the city. This silences the voices of the marginalized groups within so-called democratic collaborative processes. [...] the BeltLine process created a comprehensive and a compliant public sphere within which neighborhood residents, especially the less resourceful ones, were either fully excluded, or educated, disciplined, and managed, rather than empowered. [...] These ideals thus provide an effective veil to hide the true nature of the post-political space of citizen engagement fostered through present governance arrangements within the predominantly market-driven political-economic regime. (Roy 2015, 67)

Unfortunately, analogous studies do not exist for Destination Crenshaw yet, but there are similarities between the two projects, such as the public-private funding and the decision-making power of state and market-led agencies, that might foreshadow an eventual top-down decision-making process for DC. Rather than claiming collaborative planning, like the Belt-Line, Destination Crenshaw views itself as a "reparative development project" and "the largest Black public art project in the U.S. and quite possibly the world" that engages and serves the local community, for example with a 70 percent local hiring requirement in their

construction contract (Destination Crenshaw). DC's community advisory council consists of twenty-two members, among them well-known figures like filmmaker and activist Ben Caldwell, who owns KAOS Network at Leimert Park Plaza (see Ch. 4.2.1.), Ron Finley, also known as the Gangster Gardener of L.A. who engages in food justice for Crenshaw, and activist Judith Baca, creator of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* and director of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) (see Ch. 4.3.2.). Nipsey Hussle was involved as a "community partner" (Destination Crenshaw), but his exact role in the project remains unclear. However, the engagement of powerful community figures, like Nipsey Hussle, and DC's dedication to Black representation mirrors a level of acceptance, and maybe even trust towards the project, in the neighborhood. Because Nipsey Hussle was perceived as someone who stays true to his principles and follows through with his actions, residents were likely to believe that his participation in DC was part of his marathon vision towards equality and justice for BIPoC in the U.S.

While the infrastructure project focuses on business and economic opportunities for the local community, art plays a crucial role in its self-image and placemaking strategies. This might also be for marketing reasons, but it is undeniable that Destination Crenshaw offers access, payment and visibility to the more than one hundred Black artists who paint and sculpt for the open-air museum. The 1.3-mile stretch of DC also runs past the mural "Our Mighty Contribution" – dubbed the *Great Wall of Crenshaw* – that depicts Black history (see chapter 4.2.1.). The wall has been used for political parole and protest since the 1960s, but its present art was created by graffiti collective Rockin the Nation (RTN) in the early 2000s (Crenshaw Wall & Mural; Nittle 2022). As an incorporation into DC, "Our Mighty Contribution" will be restored and preserved by DC. Similar to Judy Baca's *Great Wall of L.A.* or the numerous smaller works in Atlanta, public muralism is a way to claim physical space and be seen. It is an act of cultural citizenship that positions the artist as part of the public and demands the viewing public to acknowledge, or at least confront, the artist's claim to citizenship. The Crenshaw Wall is thus an original epitome of a practice that today is understood as *creative placemaking* (Courage 2020; Zitcer 2018). According to Cara Courage (2020), placemaking is an "approach and a set of tools that puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions," and as soon as "you take the community out of placemaking as both spearheading and equal stakeholder in its process, the process is

no longer placemaking and the radical potential of this place-based process is completely lost” (2f.). For decades, the Crenshaw Wall bore this radical potential because it was created by community members who shared their Black identity, their political protest, and their history on the concrete. Destination Crenshaw’s incorporation should thus be viewed cautiously: On the one hand, the organization collaborates with RTN to replace the old mural with a new one called “The Struggle Continues” (Destination Crenshaw 2023a) and thus ensure its maintenance for future generations. On the other hand, the mural will thus be partially governed by an organization, albeit a non-profit. This institutionalization is likely to prevent people from creating spontaneous and protest art on the Crenshaw Wall. However, unlike the Atlanta BeltLine (see chapter 5.2.), Destination Crenshaw was born from the community’s concern about how the train line will impact them, and thus the organization has been a non-profit and community-driven issue from the start. When it was clear that Metro would significantly transform the area for their infrastructure project, residents and council members worried about the negative effects for the Crenshaw business and cultural center (Destination Crenshaw 2023b). DC is their plan to embrace the change in the most optimistic way possible.

Nipsey Hussle’s involvement in multiple urban redevelopment projects attests to his awareness of urban change and the opportunities for ownership this offered. He intended to make ownership and claims to urban space accessible for his community, thereby putting Edward Soja’s (2010) and David Harvey’s (2003) theories on the ‘just city’ and the ‘right to the city’ to practical use. For Hussle, ownership was one answer to the decadelong neglect of Black Los Angeles, and through his truthful performance of belonging to the hood and being part of the Black community in South L.A., his investment projects were admired and seen as beneficial to the Black community of Crenshaw. His actions are congruent with those of an urban citizen that claims the right to participate in civil society. This approach to citizenship (see chapter 2.3.) views it as “a social process where individuals and social groups engage to claim new legal rights [...]. The emphasis is rather on discussing participation, norms, practices, meanings and identities than on the assertion of legal regulations” (Gerhard 2007, 84; my translation).

From local to global transracial solidarities

In his artistic and public performances, Hussle also evoked the notion of a broader solidarity with global disadvantaged communities. What role do these solidarities play for civic engagement in Los Angeles? Solidarity is a concept akin to trust. Solidarity, from the French *solidarité*, means a unity that is based on a community of interests,⁵³ and in practice can reach from feeling empathy towards someone to peacefully or violently protesting on behalf of a shared interest. Racial, or transracial, solidarity describes when people of different yet equally discriminated racial minorities feel and act as a larger community, for example in face of racist threats. In the U.S., the question of racial solidarity has come and gone with political events and changing social atmospheres. As Scott Kurashige (2008) shows for the post-WWII generation where Japanese and Blacks lived as neighbors in Crenshaw, and Maurice Magana (2021a, 2021b) portrays contemporary pop cultural solidarities in L.A., there are moments when the mutual interest for equality and justice pivots. The same solidarity erupted during the Covid crisis when Asians and Asian Americans were threatened, and even killed during the Atlanta spa shooting. Then again, there are instances where minority communities seemingly turn against each other, as was the case during the 1992 riot when Korean grocery store owner Soon Ja Du shot African American Latasha Harlins because she believed the teenager wanted to steal. Scholars Jennifer Lee and Tiffany Huang call what followed in media coverage the weaponization of the trope of Black-Asian conflict (Jennifer Lee and Huang 2021). As more recent contextualization shows, the role of white racism is often neglected in those framings, and, additionally, such conflicts erupt extremely rarely and when they do, the media's focus seems exaggerated (Kang 2022; Jennifer Lee 2006). Interracial conflict and solidarity thus have a lot to do with interracial trust that in fact exists in urban communities of color as the scholars cited in this paragraph show.

A few days after his death, *The Atlantic* published “Nipsey Hussle’s Eritrean American Dream,” an homage to the rapper’s unifying force for the global Black community, calling him “a rare model of public acceptance to young people who trace their heritage back to the small East African country” (Giorgis 2019). Similarly, *The Los Angeles Times* states that Hussle’s “vision for South L.A. [...] started with a trip to Eritrea” (Jennings 2019a).

⁵³ As defined by Merriam Webster online dictionary (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

According to this article, Hussle's visits to his father's home country in 2004 and 2018 transformed him and inspired his community activism. Referring to his first visit, Hussle commented,

[i]f you don't know your full-throttle history, the whole story of how you came to where you are, it's kind of hard to put things together. [...] You saw that in key positions [in Eritrea]; president, government, police, everybody's the same. It's a country run by its people. No racial class, everybody feels a part of it. (Kondo 2010)

As Giorgis (2019) and Jennings (2019a) point out, the Eritrean American community in particular observed Nipsey Hussle's evolution and saw him as a model for vocational success apart from more traditional paths to becoming doctors and lawyers. "[F]or us, it's like the American dream is that much more attainable," says Messai Belayneh, one of the vigil organizers in Washington, D.C. after Hussle's death (Jennings 2019a). Hussle's community elevation went beyond the Black and Eritrean American communities. In the 2016 song "FDT," Hussle and YG rap

It wouldn't be the USA without Mexicans
And if it's time to team up, shit, let's begin
Black love, brown pride in the sets again
(YG 2016)

The song, its title an acronym of "Fuck Donald Trump," protests against the former president's political agenda and calls for transracial unity because

We the youth
We the people of this country
We got a voice too
We will be seen
And we will be heard
(YG 2016)

The artists name Mexicans, Black love and brown pride in the same breath with "We the people," the first words of the U.S. Constitution. Regardless of legal citizenship, Hussle and YG transform all Black and brown people into citizens with a voice in their text. They evoke the notion of cultural citizenship, as theorized by Engin Isin, Gerard Delanty and many others (see chapter 2), where all residents of the U.S. have a say in shaping social and political life. Nipsey Hussle's economic activism may have been locally rooted in Crenshaw, but his broader approach to national and global solidarity among all PoC speaks to activism's globalization as well as to the global city approach in geography: In a city that is open to the world (market) and where everything is connected, communities need to network globally,

too, to achieve their goals. Through Nipsey Hussle's work, Crenshaw's reputation changes, as Obama's letter proves. Investments in Crenshaw become known to a wider audience. This bears the risk of outsiders joining the opportunity wave, but it creates access to economic and cultural participation for the local community, too, as Destination Crenshaw tries to implement. Nipsey Hussle's Vector 90 coworking and business space has been closed since his death, and since the new rail line materialized, numerous new commercial and housing developments have sprouted, some of them replacing former rent-stabilized housing complexes (Barragan 2020). In face of the new developments, fears of gentrification become louder and it remains to be seen how the neighborhood and the community will develop in the future (cf. Bartholomew 2022).

Nipsey Hussle's marathon: Civic hope and democratic visions

Despite of looming threats to the community, the late rapper's philosophy revolved around hope, as Barack Obama contemplated in his letter. I wish to draw attention to Roderick Hart's concept of civic hope once more: One main component of civic hope is a set of democracy-oriented values. This entails imagining a future where enlightened leadership, productive citizenship through cultural plurality and wise governments are possible (Hart 2018, 58). Moreover, civic hope means to act accordingly and rationally – "optimism is an emotional state, whereas hope is an emotional state gone behavioral" (Hart 2018, 48). While optimists simply expect good things to happen, according to Hart, hopeful people calculate possible outcomes and search for evidence that justifies their hope. One interesting aspect in Hart's theory is this: "Trust comes slowly to such [hopeful] people because their memory banks are filled with broken promises and unfulfilled expectations" (2018, 48), yet in his analysis no individual thought of giving up because "they believed in the perfectibility of democratic institutions" (ibid., 59). Decadelong disenfranchisement, displacement and disappointment with politics are disproportionately present in urban communities of color. Yet the perseverance of politically well-informed artists and activists embodies hope despite facts that give enough reason for despair. Black activists carry with them a legacy of struggle that has always involved the question of what it means to be Black. Eddie Glaude Jr. convincingly interweaves the identity issue with the history of American democracy:

African Americans were forced to create themselves amid the absurdity of a nation committed, at once, to freedom and unfreedom. Theirs was a blue note, an unstable

chord that called attention to the unbridled chaos at the heart of American democracy. That African Americans have been, for the most part, successful in these attempts at self-creation is testimony to the enormous power of their creative energies. (Glaude Jr. 2007, 48)

Consequently, African American identity has always also been political. Enacting Black identity, protesting for racial equality and justice are at the heart of negotiating U.S.-American democracy. Although it seems a wide stretch at first, Hussle's visualization of progress as a participatory marathon can be viewed through the lens of Black pragmatism as conceptualized by Eddie Glaude Jr. (2007). How Nipsey Hussle and others fashion themselves and perform themselves matters because, as Glaude emphasizes,

when persons act in the name of a particular identity they often presume that there is a supreme end that defines and justifies their desires and purposes – that their actions and dispositions form the basis for widespread approbation and that they are obligatory and legitimate. How we think about black identity, then, affects how we as African Americans understand notions of virtue, right, and the good: who we take ourselves to be, how we conceive of our obligations to those we consider “one of us,” and how we orient ourselves to “others.” (Glaude Jr. 2007, 49)

Nipsey Hussle enacted civic hope in his music, in his speaking in public and in his consistent actions. These attributes rendered him a trustworthy creative activist in his community's and fans' eyes. He not only designed his own Black persona, but performed values his community regards highly, as the newspaper articles and interviews cited above show: Honesty, gratefulness, solidarity, humility, pride, perseverance. Practicing those values in attunement with Blackness opens the path to seeing the performance of race as a tool for participatory activism.

The marathon metaphor presumes that the path of progress is exhausting and slow, yet worth it. Hussle named his apparel store in Crenshaw *The Marathon Clothing* in line with his mixtape released in 2010 and his mindset for personal success. At least since his death, his fans have appropriated the marathon metaphor as a broader activist agenda, paying tribute to the rapper with murals carrying slogans like “the marathon continues” and “Hussle & Motivate,” a song from his most famous album *Victory Lap* released in 2018 (Pineda 2019; Recinos 2019). The marathon is thus an epitome of a pragmatic approach to meliorism and democracy: Every small step that orients life towards true democracy is valuable. More important, though, is the opportunity to rethink race, politics and activism through the pragmatic lens. John Dewey believed identity to be the consequence of our experiences, and thus subject

to change over the course of our lives. Racial identities, then, result from our experiences, too, and thus, to say it in Glaude Jr.'s words, "black identity is, in part, a consequence of the kinds of stories we tell about our beliefs, choices, and actions in the context of problem-solving activity" (Glaude Jr. 2007, 65). This pragmatic contextualization not only helps to understand the effects of small-scale hyperlocal actions, it also enables to localize such efforts in a broader pattern of U.S.-American activism. Similarly, Gerard Delanty's citizenship as a learning process views every individual as capable of incorporating civic values in their private and public life. Hussle enacted his citizenship through ownership of his art and of urban space, much like Art + Practice does. While there certainly were limits to his character and achievements, Nipsey Hussle was perceived as a trustworthy artist and community leader. This chapter exemplified how performance of race and creative activism take place on the local level and how they impact urban transformation. Through a pragmatic lens, the Americanness of such practices and their strive towards a better democracy can be understood.

As I have shown, artistic endeavors in Leimert Park and Crenshaw fight for the uplift and mobilization of the local Black community. The next section moves to another area in Los Angeles. Boyle Heights is the epitome of Latinx life in L.A. and provides a large pool of cultural and civic output. Analogous to the practices of Art + Practice, cultural organization Self Help Graphics engages in creative community work. In a different way, the series *Gentefied* participates in civic life, too, as I explore.

4.2. Artivism and spatial injustice in Latinx L.A.

There is a certain narrative of resistance about the neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles.⁵⁴ Located about two miles east of downtown and traversed by several freeways, Boyle Heights is shaped by a multicultural history and is home to many Chicanx residents. In the late 2010s, the neighborhood has become a favorite subject of local and regional

⁵⁴ For clarification: Boyle Heights is a neighborhood located east of downtown Los Angeles; I use Eastside Los Angeles to describe the eastern neighborhoods of L.A., namely Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, El Sereno, and the unincorporated area of East Los Angeles (not part of the city of L.A.). Chavez Ravine was an area in the Northeast of downtown L.A. where Elysian Park and the Dodger Stadium are today.

media's coverage of gentrification issues, as residents mobilize against artwashing and its impact on the community. While press coverage often portrays Boyle Heights as a unified Chicana community in its struggle for social justice, the nature and the background of these protests is more complex than meets the eye, as analyses in this chapter show. Boyle Heights's tradition of civic resistance is omnipresent in contemporary cultural and academic discourses: Most recently, George Sánchez published *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy* (2021) where he argues that this particular neighborhood draws from its history of protest and solidarity in fashioning a model for other neighborhoods throughout the U.S. – a model much needed today. Before I explore a selection of contemporary cultural artefacts and their influence on civic activity in Boyle Heights, I draw on the large body of literature on this neighborhood's urban history to illustrate how this tradition of local civic resistance can be understood in historical context. A central element in the following two analyses is art and creative expression which, I argue, is not merely supportive of protests or movements, as is often believed, but instead, is a force in its own right that can be a powerful agent of social change.

Historically, the neighborhood of Boyle Heights has been accustomed to major spatial disruptions on behalf of government institutions. After WWII, the then majority Jewish community witnessed an influx of immigrants from Mexico whose presence transformed the neighborhood to become a melting pot where “L.A.’s Jewish history and its Latino history and Japanese American history intersected” (Tobar 2011). The brief period of multiculturalism ended when non-white, working-class immigrants were met with racist policies during the New Deal era (Avila 2014): Redlining prevented people from buying homes, and the construction of massive highways through the center of Boyle Heights in the 1950s destroyed houses and displaced several thousand people (Avila 2014, 833) – reasons why many non-Hispanics left the area (Tobar 2011). In his article for the *Los Angeles Times*, author Hector Tobar's interviewee, a former resident of Boyle Heights, counters the stereotypical narrative of white flight, explaining they did not leave the area because of race-based mistrust, but instead because they were not allowed to buy their home and had to endure the noise and smell of highways – their flight was economically and not racially motivated. Moreover, external governmental actions, not neighborhood conflicts, were responsible for the family's move. I point this out to illustrate a misconception of the current white flight discourse: The

phenomenon is prone to be instrumentalized to highlight the causality between skin color and moving habit, thus ascribing a racially motivated, indeed racist, choice to individuals. While this may often be true, there can be other more important factors, as Tobar's interview shows; moving from A to B in the context of white flight is not always causally linked to (racial) othering. The 1950s and 1960s were a pivotal moment in the USA because "race displaced class as the primary discourse of social conflict" (Avila 2014, 831) – the Civil Rights Movement embodies the public resistance against this transformation. This shift went hand in hand with the post-WWII urban renewal agendas, setting "[n]ew directions for the physical form of the city [that] corresponded to the political transformation of the nation" (Cuff 2000, 211). The spatial image of the city adhered more and more to the race paradigm than to class; divisions between areas represented color lines where they had formerly separated the rich from the poor. Thus, the arrangement of urban space and political atmospheres influenced each other.⁵⁵

The future of Los Angeles's infrastructure was decided by a handful of old guard families, like the Otis family who owned the *Los Angeles Times*, in the post-WWII decades. This infrastructure plan was facilitated by transportation structures that had been engineered as early as the 1920s during the founding of East Los Angeles (Roth 2004). The beginning of public infrastructure in East Los Angeles was in itself an act infused with prejudice and inequality that – however unplanned – influenced the identity formation of generations to come, as Matthew Roth's analysis demonstrates:

The placement of a high-traffic artery through the center of Boyle Heights, the diminution of play areas, and the minimal pedestrian amenities helped to define that neighborhood as a place where the residency of "undesirables" would be tolerated. The creation of Whittier Boulevard⁵⁶ was part of a progression of actions that caused the identification of certain people with certain places in Los Angeles, a process that unfolded over decades and that reflected the accumulation of many decisions and their results. This embedded quality of sociospatial identification helps explain how

⁵⁵ In his book *City of Quartz* (2018), urban scholar Mike Davis uncovers the role of the *Los Angeles Times* and its owner Harrison Gray Otis and his family in manipulating city planning, real estate and public opinion in favor of his own agenda. Through campaigns against the southern California socialist town of Llano and articles against supposedly socialist public housing in the 1950s, the *Los Angeles Times* exercised power over the City's decisions.

⁵⁶ Whittier Boulevard is an arterial street running from the Los Angeles River, along the East L.A. Interchange, through south Boyle Heights and the center of East L.A., all the way into the city of Brea. The boulevard is roughly fourteen miles long and served as the main Latino commercial street in East L.A. (cf. Vega, September 06, 2020). For a detailed analysis of the importance of Whittier Boulevard and ethnic identity see Roth 2004.

prejudice can be literally built into the fabric of the city and suggests as well why it can be so difficult to overcome. (Roth 2004, 742)

While scholars like Matthew Roth (2004) and Gilbert Estrada (2005) point out the immediate effects of the 1920s to 1960s highway construction on Mexican American communities in Eastside Los Angeles, the repercussions of those choices are still visible today. The boom in infrastructure went hand in hand with a more general urban renewal plan that was, on the one hand, a reaction to the city's growing population and an opportunity for real estate, and on the other hand represented a national political shift. Indeed, some "of the last great battles in this urban political metamorphosis were fought in cities across America" (Cuff 2000, 212). Not only did city officials declare non-white, working-class areas the ideal place for highway construction, but they also displaced those communities on grounds of public well-being deeming the areas 'slums' and thus fit for public housing construction that would transform the neglected houses into orderly and densely populated living spaces (Estrada 2005). However, in the case of Chavez Ravine, a former community comprised of the neighborhoods Palo Verde, La Loma and Bishop located northeast of downtown, the rapidly growing public anti-socialist political sentiment of the 1950s, that resulted from the nation's economic recovery and effective real estate lobbying, prevented the construction of public housing (cf. Mechner 2003) which was by that time publicly viewed as an attack on the American dream (Cuff 2000, 212). After violently displacing the Mexican American residents, the city eventually sold the land to Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley who built his baseball team's home stadium on that soil (Estrada 2005; Masters 2012). Essentially, the land went from public to private ownership with no benefit for the people. The public memory of these violent experiences and the protest they sparked, portrayed for instance in Jordan Mechner's 2003 movie *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*, in *Lost L.A.*'s "Before the Dodgers" episode, and numerous newspaper articles (cf. Becerra 2012; Podair 2017; Shatkin 2018; Tobar 2011), resonates with contemporary issues of gentrification and displacement in Boyle Heights. The current resistance to spatial interventions by city authorities partly has its roots in the protest of the 1940s when a steadily growing Chicanx community demanded political power to address spatial injustice. Their united power resulted in the election of the first Mexican American councilmember, Edward Roybal, in 1949, who "finally gave some voice to the people of Boyle Heights in the politics of transportation" (Roth 2004, 742). Community and resistance are tightly linked to decades of undemocratic city planning practices, especially

regarding infrastructure. These continued acts of marginalizing Latinx immigrants and citizens are imbricated both in the spatial and cultural memory of Boyle Heights. The grey concrete, noise and smell of the six highways that traverse the neighborhood are constant reminders of the devaluation of Latinx, brown residents on behalf of state authorities; and the personal stories unearthed by authors, journalists and scholars like Hector Tobar, Caribbean Fragoza and Gilbert Estrada contribute to the public availability of the place's vibrant cultural memory. Memory in that sense implies there is a group of people that collectively engage in the act of remembering, and that have a shared understanding of certain symbols and practices. Common symbols and experiences constitute community, as defined by Talja Blokland (2017), and ensure a sense of belonging among members. To preserve and revisit those shared memories, various creative forms of storytelling are employed by artists, authors, filmmakers and residents as a brief search on the internet reveals.

In light of the current protests against gentrification and a growing interest in rethinking what it means to be American and re-evaluating the history of the United States, this chapter wishes to investigate how cultural productions in and about the neighborhood of Boyle Heights have the capacity to transform civic behaviors. For this purpose, I consider an established art organization and a contemporary series that are widely accessible, through digital media for instance, and that resonate with a local audience.

4.2.1. Facilitating activism through art: Self Help Graphics in Boyle Heights

One cultural organization, Self Help Graphics (SHG), has become a neighborhood landmark since its establishment in 1970 and has an active voice in the ongoing struggle for Latinx rights and urban space. Like Art + Practice in Leimert Park, SHG is a non-profit organization that engages in community activism through education programming, workshops, displays of local art and artist residencies. While SHG's main focus lies on enabling the community to participate, they, too, engage in protest and political decision-making, as this chapter shows. I investigate the organization's practices as an example for how art and socio-political participation in communities of color are mutually dependent. Unlike with A+P, a significant share of the Boyle Heights community does not have legal U.S.-American citizenship.

Indeed, many residents are undocumented. This changes the starting conditions for political activity because residents know they cannot vote in elections. They might even be hesitant to draw any attention to themselves in fear of deportation. Despite these inhibiting factors, however, Boyle Heights is teeming with social and political activity that clearly shows that residents imagine themselves as citizens (G. J. Sanchez 2021). After a brief history of Boyle Heights, I show how cultural organizations contribute to civic participation in the neighborhood by example of Self Help Graphics's practices.

A spatio-historical contextualization

The neighborhood of Boyle Heights is accustomed to major spatial disruptions on behalf of government institutions. The area was deemed a "hazardous" area by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation:

This is a 'melting pot' area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements, and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous in type of improvement and quality of maintenance.⁵⁷

After WWII, the then majority Jewish community witnessed an influx of immigrants from Mexico whose presence transformed the neighborhood to become a melting pot where "L.A.'s Jewish history and its Latino history and Japanese American history intersected" (Tobar 2011). The multiculturalism did not last long, as non-white, working-class immigrants were met with racist policies during the New Deal era (Avila 2014): Of little worth according to the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, the area was chosen for the construction of massive highways in the 1950s which destroyed homes and displaced several thousand people (Avila 2014, 833) – reasons why many non-Hispanics left the area (Tobar 2011). Indeed, the beginning of public infrastructure in East Los Angeles was in itself an act infused with prejudice and inequality, as urban historian Matthew Roth's analysis of the origins of transportation in East Los Angeles demonstrates:

The placement of a high-traffic artery through the center of Boyle Heights, the diminution of play areas, and the minimal pedestrian amenities helped to define that neighborhood as a place where the residency of 'undesirables' would be tolerated. The creation of Whittier Boulevard was part of a progression of actions that caused the *identification of certain people with certain places in Los Angeles*, a process that unfolded over decades and that reflected the accumulation of many decisions and their results.

⁵⁷ See "Mapping Inequality" by R. K. Nelson et al. 2023 Specifically see area code D53 for Boyle Heights.

This embedded quality of *sociospatial identification* helps explain how prejudice can be literally built into the fabric of the city and suggests as well why it can be so difficult to overcome. (Roth 2004, 742; my emphases)

In contrast to other cities, for example Atlanta, Los Angeles consists of highly sprawled ethnoburbs that speak to Roth's sociospatial identification. Thus, these ethnoburbs are often analyzed as hermeneutically closed entities, almost as if they were cities of their own. While scholars have pointed out the immediate effects of the 1940s to 1960s highway construction on Mexican American communities in Eastside Los Angeles (cf. Estrada 2005), the repercussions of those choices are still visible today. The boom in infrastructure went hand in hand with a more general urban renewal plan that was a reaction to the city's growing population and an opportunity for real estate. Essentially, the land went from public to private ownership with no benefit for the people. The public memory of these violent experiences and the protest they sparked, portrayed for instance in Jordan Mechner's (2003) movie *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*, on public broadcast series *Lost L.A.* (KCET)⁵⁸ and numerous newspaper articles,⁵⁹ resonates with contemporary issues of gentrification and displacement in Boyle Heights. The current resistance to spatial interventions by city authorities, as documented for instance by George G. J. Sanchez in his 2021 book *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, partly has its roots in the protest of the 1940s when a steadily growing Chicano community demanded political power to address spatial injustice. Their united power resulted in the election of the first Mexican American councilmember, Edward Roybal, in 1949, who "finally gave some voice to the people of Boyle Heights in the politics of transportation" (Roth 2004, 742). The relationship between the arts and protest in Boyle Heights was born out of the first humble protests against the 1950s highway constructions. As Chicano studies scholar Eric Avila's (2014) historical account of the resistance to city-planned automobile infrastructure demonstrates, the collective memory of the Boyle Heights community still reverberates with the experience of state-authorized discrimination – and a reasonable mistrust towards government institutions. The

⁵⁸ *Lost L.A.* is a historical documentary series that airs on the regional public broadcasting channel for Southern California, KCET. The series documents the forgotten history of greater Los Angeles and dissects the histories of neighborhoods, landscapes, and architecture.

⁵⁹ See for instance Hector Becerra's article about the memories of Chavez Ravine for the *Los Angeles Times* (April 05, 2012), Jerald Podair's writing on the Dodger Stadium's impact on L.A. for *The Guardian*, Elina Shatkin's text on the same matter for *LAist* (October 17, 2018), and author Hector Tobar's essay on Boyle Heights's urban history for the *Los Angeles Times* (December 09, 2011).

Chicano Movement of the 1960s and its artistic counterpart, the Chicano Art Movement, addressed undemocratic practices and ethnic discrimination that manifest in spatial terms, such as displacement, confinement and ghettoization, and consequentially render people powerless. The artistic movement is thus inextricably linked to the idea of urban space and injustice, as the work of the artist collective Asco shows.

Art and protest

Natives to East L.A. and active throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the four artists created several street performances to address the issue of systematic exclusion from arts institutions and to discuss their own identity by opposing Chicanx stereotypes and nationalism (Noriega 2000). After being rejected from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the group spray-painted their names on the outside walls of the museum building – in doing so they created the first Chicanx exhibition at LACMA, rendering the museum both an “art object and the product of Chicano gang activity” (Noriega 2000, 362). The rejection Asco experienced might seem trivial, but the institution’s decision essentially led the group “from the museum to the streets, from the art world to a community engaged in social protest” (ibid., 363). The systematic exclusion from spaces of high art redirected the artists to spaces of the barrio where working- and middle-class people with backgrounds rooted in Latinx culture were their audience, participants and critics. With a different set of audience, the streets as art venue fulfil other purposes than museums. In museums, art is foremost an exhibition and an object, something to be looked at that inspires emotions such as awe, discomfort, uncertainty, and ideally educates people. In contrast, any kind of art in the streets that is not contextualized by a formal institution, neither physically nor mentally, blurs the boundaries between object and subject, between exhibition and audience. While Asco’s intent was to criticize highbrow institutionalized art, they also set out to parody more traditional forms of Latinx activism, like street protest, graffiti and leaflets: The group believed these forms were inadequate strategies to reclaim public space because they often drew from Chicanx nationalism, mythology and iconography instead of addressing the real issues unfolding in the streets – in short, Asco believed these strategies were drawing from a monolithic, homogeneous and static cultural nationalism and thereby were performing Chicanx identity as it was reproduced in mass media and the corporate liberal state (Noriega 2000). Therefore, the group saw conceptual and performance art as the ideal form to undermine institutional art

(such as the LACMA) while simultaneously subverting the idea of Chicanx cultural nationalism. Apart from performance pieces, *Asco* would often photograph their installations, such as their *Spray Paint LACMA*, and call these stills *No-Movies* which refers to the exclusion of Chicanos from Hollywood. Photography was indeed a medium in the coming at the time: Colin Gunckel (2015) describes the photographic art of the Chicano Movement as a social practice which was essential to the formulation and articulation of both identity and politics. The art was not simply a commodity, but, in contrast to Hollywood movies, its production process and distribution were participatory and accessible in nature. Gunckel furthermore observes that the Chicano Art Movement challenged the divisions between cultural expression and political action. It is this moment in time where a political voice in the cultural production of and in Boyle Heights has its origin, and *Asco*'s performances prove how central space is to protest, both as its message (the fight for spatial justice) and its medium (take and occupy space).

This brief insight into the emergence of protest art in East L.A. serves as the springboard for this chapter. To understand contemporary issues in Boyle Heights, it is necessary to be aware that none of the phenomena can be explained without a look at cultural and urban history. Moreover, the example of *Asco* and the Chicano Art Movement in general, raises the question if the contemporary forms of civic participation enhanced by cultural production are indeed new or if they are just a continuation of older practices.

The strong relationship between the arts and protest in Boyle Heights was born out of the first humble protests against the 1950s highway constructions. As Eric Avila's (2014) historical account of the resistance to city-planned automobile infrastructure demonstrates, the collective memory of the Boyle Heights community still reverberates with the experience of state-authorized discrimination – and an ensuing mistrust towards government institutions. The Chicano Movement of the 1960s and its artistic counterpart, the Chicano Art Movement, addressed undemocratic practices and ethnic discrimination that manifest, for instance, in spatial terms, such as displacement, confinement and ghettoization. In his essay on the role of photography during the Chicano Movement, Colin Gunckel (2015) describes the photographic art of the period as a social practice which was “fundamental to the articulation and formation of politics along with conceptions of identity” (379). The art was not simply created to be consumed, but its production and distribution processes were participatory and had

the capacity to influence other forms of art. Gunckel observes that the movement's art challenged the divisions between cultural expression and political action (ibid.) – just like the Black Arts Movement that was seething in South L.A. at the time. SHG carries this legacy and follows in the path of participatory art and community politics.

Self Help Graphics: Local art with a socio-political stance

Founded in 1970, the community art organization Self Help Graphics & Art (SHG) was born out of this artistic protest era. A group of friends and printmakers established the non-profit organization in Boyle Heights, on Cesar Chavez Avenue,⁶⁰ where it operated until 2011 when the property was sold to a private investment firm that raised rents, and the organization had to move (Stromberg 2018). They rented a former seafood packing plant twenty walking minutes away and were able to buy the property in 2018 with financial support from the City of Los Angeles, foundations, and private donors – rendering them one of a few Latinx art organizations that own their buildings (ibid.). The new space is located at the metro L line's Pico/Aliso station, and close to several bus stops, but, as the artist duo Kalli Arte tells me, the community still needs to adjust to the organization's new location and fewer people are trickling in than before – although that might also be an effect of Covid.⁶¹ Similar to A+P, SHG provides a room for art exhibitions and a large hall for public workshops and events. In addition, they also have a space for artist residencies in the major factory-style hall where artists can bring or use equipment (fig. 7). The offered programs and workshops cover various topics and target groups: Youth programs, the Barrio Mobile Art Studio that travels to communities further away, printmaking workshops, wellbeing courses, the annual Día de los Muertos festivities, and many more. In spring 2022, during my visit, newcoming Cambodian American artist Phung Huynh displayed her *Donut (W)hole* exhibition, a series of silk screen prints on paper and donut boxes, that chronicles the life of 'donut kids', children of Cambodian immigrants who opened and ran a mom-and-pop donut store (fig. 8). Along with the prints, the artist involves her audience and asks people to participate in her storytelling. One wall panel reads:

⁶⁰ Cesar Chavez (1927-1993) was a Mexican American civil rights activist, a labor leader, and co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in the early 1960s.

⁶¹ I talked to Adriana Carranza and Alfonso Aceves of the artist duo Kalli Arte on April 28, 2022 while visiting the SHG space. Any citation of theirs stems from my recollection of that conversation.

Share a moment if you have felt pressured to assimilate. How do you maintain your cultural identity? Immigrants, 1st generations, and English language learners adopt social norms and adapt to new environments to assimilate --- Americanize. These actions and external expectations cause internal frictions about behaving and identifying.

In a nook, post-its and pens invite the onlooker to share their personal story on the prompt “how do you counter assimilation?” On the wall behind this is a string with pegs where many participants have already pinned their answers. (fig. 9). One participant wrote “learning & growing through your culture & identity. Share it. Normalize it.” Another’s note says “Being me,” and yet another reads “try the best you can in life and you know it’s a struggle but you can do it!” The prompt created by Phung Huynh invites the viewer to critically engage with the artwork and contribute her individual experience to that of the collective migration and belonging experience. Although the participants do not share a face-to-face conversation, each new contributor can read the notes already present and thereby feel part of a community. Through critical engagement with the pressure to assimilate, the participants forge their own kind of belonging that is a unique mixture of identifying both with the U.S. and with their respective ethnic or cultural heritage. Participatory artistic practices like this are one form of civic engagement because they influence the way participants position themselves in society and thus the way they act in social and political life.

SHG offers three months artist residencies to artists of color, Latinx, women, or otherwise underrepresented people. These residencies usually close with an exhibition where the artists present what they have been working on at SHG. The local printmaking collective Kalli Arte, Adriana Carranza and Alfonso Aceves, were the artists in residence in May 2022 and as part of the SHG program “Beyond the Press” they regularly offered open studio sessions where anybody interested could visit them during working hours to observe and chat. Now in their fifties, the couple have been longtime residents of Boyle Heights, which is reflected in their prints and their community art network that reaches from nearby Plaza de la Raza (since 1970), EastSide Café (since 2004) and Ave 50 Studio, over Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural in Sylmar north of L.A. (since 2001), to San Diego’s Chicano Park and its murals that played an immense role in the Chicano Movement. The land of what is Chicano Park today was claimed by Latinx residents of Barrio Logan in San Diego in the 1960s and 1970s. Residents defied the plans of city authorities and occupied the land until they were granted the land to create a park – a demand they had voiced for years. Today, there are about forty

historical murals at Chicano Park that tell the stories of Mexican ancestors, the land when it belonged to Mexico and the Chicano Movement (Rosen and Fisher 2001).

Alfonso Aceves speaks of a “Zapatista spirit” that unites their artist community both concerning their artwork and their political mindset. The term Zapatista goes back to Emiliano Zapata who was a central figure in the Mexican Revolution. He led the Liberation Army of the South which had rebellion and guerilla characteristics demanding land reform in favor of farmers. In memory of Zapata and aligning with some of his principles, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation is active in parts of Mexico today where it is at war against the Mexican state. Aceves’s use of the term thus aligns with concepts like guerilla, rebellion, resistance, socialist, anti-capitalist etc. Like many residents in Boyle Heights, the couple experienced the effects of gentrification when their apartment complex was about to fall prey to rising rents and evictions in 2014/2015. Residents successfully protested against this development and could continue to live in their homes. The network that Kalli Arte has established throughout the years is built on a shared political view, a shared place, and shared artistic work. In their residency’s closing exhibition called “Sueños Real” (“real dreams”), on display July through September 2022, the couple illustrated what it means to be family and community in Boyle Heights through colorful prints displayed under categories like “Family,” “Our People,” “Kalli: Our Home,” “Community: Boyle Heights,” and “Moments” (kalliarTE and sara.j.aceves 2022). With their work, Kalli Arte exemplifies many aspects that Self Help Graphics represents, as director Betty Avila reflects in our interview:⁶²

This way of working with and engaging in communities through art has always been part of the space that is created at Self Help Graphics. And so much of our work, too, has been about just opening the door for artists who come in to show their work, to create space to engage the community. I describe Self Help often as being a vehicle, and it’s the artists that come in and really leverage that, and they’ll use that platform however is best for them. (Betty Avila)

Betty goes on to stress the organization’s role as a facilitator that provides the space and means to create and participate:

in the instance of our youth committee, who are mostly high school students, they actually created work specifically around voting and civic engagement [before the 2020 presidential election], the importance of it, and the importance of it for young people, the people who are eighteen who could just barely vote. We created the space

⁶² If not otherwise indicated, any statements from Betty Avila are from our interview on December 1st, 2021.

for them to make that work and to create those messages, we weren't telling them what the messages should be. (Betty Avila)

Along with their public programs for adults, SHG engages in arts education for children and teens through a Youth Committee, visits to and from school classes, and through institutional work: As a member of the Invest in Youth Coalition, SHG demands public funds for the creation of a citywide youth development department – a city department that supports the needs of youth in terms of education, employment, and wellbeing; a department that most large cities in the U.S. already have (Invest in Youth Coalition L.A.). In addition, SHG is in touch with political representatives, such as California Senator Maria Elena Durazo and State Assembly member Miguel Santiago who helped the organization to secure four million dollars for renovating their building. But, as Betty Avila states,

we really had to help them understand the value of a place like Self Help Graphics in the community. Somebody like Maria Elena Durazo, who comes from the Labor movement, and was a Labor leader, understands how art plays a role in community organizing, she totally gets that. And Self Help Graphics historically has been very connected to some of these political movements, including Labor – so we didn't have to convince her, she already understood. And I think the Assembly member as well – there was this sense of the political importance of cultural representation in the community and seeing yourself reflected in the visual landscape around you. The relationship with some elected officials has been really positive and with others it's been more challenging. (Betty Avila)

While the political connections to elected Democratic officials follow in the footsteps of the Labor movement and support the interests of local residents, this did not protect the organization from being accused of selling out: In 2015 and 2016, during the height of art galleries moving into the neighborhood, two local alliances – Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD) and Defend Boyle Heights (DBH) – formed which viewed art galleries as complicit in gentrification and eviction processes. Although SHG is deeply rooted in the community and speaks out for tenant rights and against gentrification, some activists viewed SHG as a stimulator for rising rents. These sentiments culminated in a staged intervention by some members of DBH during a meeting that SHG was hosting in 2016 to put artists in dialogue about gentrification and their role in it (Salas 2017). Clearly, there was mistrust between some activists/residents and Self Help Graphics concerning the organization's purposes. But despite artists often being the pioneers of gentrification, the bigger drivers of gentrification are to be found among real estate developers and city officials. SHG director Betty Avila interpreted this intervention as a call for help by community

members who were unable to pay higher rents. As a consequence, the organization started publicly communicating their actions in various coalitions. They are, for instance, part of Eastside L.E.A.D.S. (Leadership for Equitable and Accountable Development Strategies), a cross-sector coalition that unites different neighborhoods in their struggle for fair development without displacement, and works towards a systemic change to sustainably improve housing and tenant rights (Barbosa 2019). SHG's transparency regarding their actions for the community is an effort to build trust by showing that they are what they claim to be: an organization by and for the community. SHG's self-image includes the term *artivism*,⁶³ as they state on their website:

Our mission is dedicated to the production, interpretation and distribution of prints and other art media by Chicana/o and Latinx artists, and we foster uplifting the narrative of the issues of our community by providing access to space, tools, training and capital to support advocacy through *artivism*, [sic] policy change and practicum. (Self Help Graphics)

Artistic activism uses art and creative endeavors as tools for social change. As I have pointed out in chapter 2, activism is more radical in its scope than civic engagement. Activism demands long-term change in society, and by emphasizing this concept, SHG positions itself as an organization that actively fights for change – in their case for inclusion, protection, and access for Latinx residents.

Fashioning Latinx identities and citizenships

While Betty Avila stresses Self Help Graphics's primary role as a facilitator, their identification as an activist space provides a social and activist agenda and guides the organization's artist selections. For SHG, activism necessarily includes facilitating access to resources for people of color, and specifically for Chicanx and Latinx artists. As is the case with A+P, performing and positively reproducing race plays a crucial role not only for the organization's aims but also for their right to exist as a non-profit – this type of organization must benefit the public and if the local public has suffered from discrimination based on race and ethnicity, then race can be the element with which to uplift and involve said local public.

In contrast to A+P, Self Help Graphics's cultural identification is more diffuse: While it is rooted in the Chicanx tradition of the 1960s and 1970s, it has grown more diverse throughout the decades, as Betty Avila describes:

⁶³ I briefly discuss the idea of *artivism* in chapter 2.

The organization's foundation was really rooted in serving the Chicano community and it was very specific to that context in the early 70s around the Chicano identity being relatively new as a political identity, as a cultural, aesthetic identity. And so, as L.A. has changed over the last fifty years – and I think there's obviously a lot of people who still identify as Chicano – the Latino identity in L.A. is now much more nuanced. You're not seeing just Mexican Americans who call themselves Chicano, it's much more layered now. So the way I like to see it is that the organization is rooted in these values related to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, to the Chicano identity and its different layers. As a space it welcomes all types of people of all backgrounds – but that is what brings people in: these values and practices of the organization is what makes Self Help Self Help; and how people come in and use the space is up to them. (Betty Avila)

Despite the community's diversification, the values and practices rooted in a shared cultural heritage constitute the organization's essence. The annual Día de los Muertos as it is celebrated in the U.S. is effectively a creation by Self Help Graphics that started in the early 1970s (L. Medina 2019; Riefe 2017). Performances like the Day of the Dead draw from a pool of signs, symbols (e.g. skulls, colorful flowers), visual patterns (e.g. *papel picado*/perforated paper garlands), and rituals, such as the *noche de ofrenda*. This *night of offering* is a ritual where photos, the favorite foods and other items connecting to a deceased person are placed on a decorated altar to invite their spirit into the home. Additionally, images that attest to both diasporic memories of home and a crucial U.S.-American belonging, are part of the celebrations. This belonging is for instance mirrored in the regional lowrider scene: There are many Chicanx Lowrider car clubs in Southern California that are still active today. The cultural practice of tuning old-timer cars and slowly cruising in the tweaking vehicle started in the post-WWII years and is closely linked to the Chicano Movement and to the development of a distinct Mexican and Latin American identity (Blanck 2021). Belonging is also visualized in Kalli Arte's prints of, for example, Cheetos chips and Virgin Marys with pop-sicles – an homage to Latinx kids who, according to the artists, love Cheetos, and a symbol for the protection of street vendors, respectively.

Artists, organizations and communities take an interest not only in civic engagement but in political representation and support, too. Both during the CAAM roundtable and my interview with Self Help Graphics, the participants referred to their political representatives, on the hyperlocal level of city councils or on the regional level of state senates, as vital contacts. Both artist Lisa Wedgeworth (from the CAAM roundtable) and SHG director Betty Avila stressed how wide-scale social and political support hinges on the mindset and agenda

of the respective political representative. While SHG has political connections as Betty Avila mentioned, there is little information available for A+P. This might attest to their comparably young age as an organization and hence a network that is still in the process of growing. They do, however, feature Brenda Shockley on the board of advisors who is Los Angeles Deputy Mayor for Economic Opportunity and first appointed Chief Equity Officer since 2016. Shockley founded and worked for non-profit organization Community Build in South Los Angeles for over two decades prior to entering city politics. Adding to this political foothold, a couple of yards away from A+P, there is Hot and Cool Café which served as a polling station in the 2020 election because there was no other opportunity to vote in the vicinity. Betty Avila of SHG explains that for her organization it was important to mobilize the community to take part in the 2020 census that gathers data about communities' resources, among other information, and allocates resources accordingly.

The biggest concern this year is being undercounted and not having the appropriate resources allocated because people were afraid to participate in the census. And particularly because of the Trump administration and their messaging around – including a question about citizenship status – and people's fear of participating. So, we wanted to ensure that we were leveraging our expertise in art making to move a message around participation in the census a little bit differently and doing it through art in such a way where it doesn't feel like 'you must do this' and more around 'here is this artist's interpretation of the world when the community is counted properly, and resources are allocated properly'. [...] The program director at the time said 'I don't want you to approach this with a deficit mindset. This needs to be approached from 'what happens when we are represented, and we do get counted? What are the resources that we see, what is the context of that world?' The artist did such an interesting job reflecting their understanding of the prompt, and we had many to then create these billboards and advertisements on the streets that were huge and visible in these different communities that were expected to be undercounted. (Betty Avila)

This refers back to my initial point on the possible political disenfranchisement of communities with a high share of non-citizens (in the legal sense). Census participation does not require formal citizenship and is thus particularly important for communities with many undocumented residents. These residents and their needs often fall under the radar of political decision-making, but census participation is a way for them to be seen. As Betty Avila points out, there is misinformation and fear concerning the census and, consequently, many undocumented residents avoid any form of institutional contact. It is estimated that between 2001 and 2012 about 17 percent of Boyle Heights residents were undocumented (Marcelli and Pastor 2015). The census does not ask for citizenship status, but Donald Trump tried to

include that question for every household member in the U.S., in order to then exclude these unauthorized immigrants from counting. This would have left out a great portion of residents in certain states and consequently would have led to fewer House seats and less political influence for the representatives of immigrant-heavy areas (S. Levine 2020; Wang 2021). Donald Trump's effort was nothing short of voter disenfranchisement on the census level. Through art, SHG intended to show the positive outcomes of participating in the census and thereby enticed those who were afraid with direct benefits.

Towards a pragmatic citizenship?

It is clear that SHG encourages the community to engage in civic matters to the extent possible to each individual. The diversity of backgrounds that opens discussions of *latinidades* (see chapter 4.2.2.) is mirrored in the neighborhood's diversity in formal citizenship. One part of SHG's programming is directed towards civic education and how citizenship can be enacted in other ways than governmental voting. The organization's aim is to facilitate accessible and participatory programs where each individual can forge their own experiences. As Betty Avila stresses, the youth committee came up with their own idea of mobilizing people through art. This is a pragmatic approach to democracy in action and ties in with Eddie Glaude Jr.'s observations on Black American political activity (see chapter 4.1.1.). After all, democracy, in the pragmatic view, also consists of habits of creative expression, compassionate imagination, civic self-governance and problem solving (Hildebrand 2023). Following pragmatic belief, personal growth benefits public life because individuals have the capacity to discuss and solve problems collectively. Eddie Glaude Jr. writes about a Black tradition of pragmatism in the U.S., and there is a similar phenomenon occurring in other long-established communities of color, too. Latinx life is steeped into L.A.'s landscape and the people's continued struggle for a voice materializes in concrete highways and buildings in East L.A. Established cultural centers have engaged in creative democracy and political life for decades; their work involves creating access to tools that people can use to make their lives better.

As has become clear, both A+P and SHG position themselves as Black and Latinx respectively, and yet as distinctly U.S.-American through their practices. Their performance of race and identity is crucial to their success as community art organizations: Demonstrating unity and a common horizon of experience solidifies their trustworthiness, even against the

occasional setback. In addition, their location and ownership of space connects several important aspects: The specific place is emblematic of histories of contradictions – discrimination vs. equity, difference vs. sameness, staying vs. leaving, belonging vs. exclusion – and thus speaks of a joint effort to create a lasting home against all odds. As mirrored in many of the artistic works on display and in the interviews, the organizations consciously share in that overarching narrative. By legally owning the building and the space, the organizations set positive examples of belonging and of claiming their rights. Considering the histories of racial and spatial injustice – such as the aforementioned redlining practices, highway construction and gentrification –, defying obstacles and staying rooted in the same place is the result of resistance, determination and self-sufficiency. More than that, ownership underlines belonging to a wider society of equals, namely that of U.S. citizens shaping the future of their country. In this way, the organizations engage in creative placemaking. While some ideas might be interpreted as rejecting the U.S. state and government, like Aceves’s Zapatista spirit, the embeddedness of artists and organizations within the U.S. funding system and their efforts in societal participation very clearly demonstrate a deep self-conception as U.S.-American. The rebellious actions are aimed against structures and individuals that wish to preserve exploitative and suppressive systems such as the prison industrial complex and voter oppression. The question is not if people identify as U.S.-American and if they want to be part of that society. Rather it is a negotiation of how they envision this country to work.⁶⁴ With Delanty’s notion of cultural citizenship as a learning process and van Zoonen’s emphasis on cultural production in shaping citizenship, activist output, both as civic participation in itself and as a catalyst for such, becomes a positive force in the social and political inclusion of marginalized groups.

Furthermore, A+P and SHG’s accessibility practices create an array of opportunities, and while it is difficult to measure the tangible civic and political effects of these, the number of visitors and participants and the organizations’ continuing existence speak to successful and much needed programming. Creative industry analyses, such as the annual Otis College Report of the Creative Economy,⁶⁵ put numbers on the economic value of art for cities and

⁶⁴ I discuss the moral relationship between art organizations and the U.S. state in more detail in chapter 5 where I analyze an Atlanta collective that focuses on liberation art.

⁶⁵ Published by the Otis College of Art and Design, n.d. since 2007, this report measures the economic impact of the creative industries in California. The report focuses on five industries: Architecture and related services,

regions. These reports have again and again shown the financial benefits of arts and culture for cities. Some scholars, like Richard Florida (2003), argue that cities have transformed from manufacturing centers to hotspots of entertainment and consumption, and now have to compete for people instead of merely firms. Of course, economic value does not equal civic value, but it does usually equal more governmental funds for the arts from which non-profit and community art organizations benefit, too. While cities might use art and cultural events to attract specific companies and professionals and while this is sometimes seen as commodifying ethnic cultures, a closer look at the agents behind these events and works reveals more about the programs' actual purposes. Art + Practice and Self Help Graphics are two of many organizations in Los Angeles that unite art and community work. Through their multilevel community-centered practices they enable access to resources and opportunities, build trust networks, and mobilize for social and political engagement.

4.2.2. Performing *latinidades* and citizenship in the series *Gentefied*

As we have come to understand the history of Boyle Heights in conjuncture with art as protest to spatial injustice, I now turn to a recent fictional representation of these topics: The series *Gentefied*. Created by Linda Yvette Chávez and Marvin Lemus, two Chicana first-generation writers, the series's first season with ten episodes was released in February 2020 on Netflix, followed by the second and final season in November 2021. The two creators were supported by executive producer America Ferrera who has been part of the movie industry for years and is known for her political activities, such as her engagement in Voto Latino, an organization that is dedicated to the mobilization of potential Latinx voters. The Netflix series is modeled on the previous web series *Gente-Fied* with five episodes produced by Ferrera in 2017. Like the series *Vida* that aired from 2018 to 2020, *Gentefied* is set in the real-life neighborhood of Boyle Heights, a predominantly Latin American area east of downtown Los Angeles. In this chapter, I first contextualize the series and illustrate why it is perceived as

creative goods and products, entertainment and digital media, fashion, and fine arts and performing arts. Organizations like SHG and A+P are subsumed under the last category. In our interview, Betty Avila referred to this report when asked about measuring the impact of Self Help Graphics and similar organizations in general.

truthful and relatable by many viewers. Then, I analyze the show's impact on civic participation through the lens of cultural citizenship. In doing so, I consider both the fictional narrative and the production politics of the series.

Gentefied centers on the lives of the Morales, a fictional Mexican American family who is deeply rooted in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. The narrative follows Casimiro Morales, called Pop, who owns a taco shop which is under duress because of rising rents. Casimiro's grandchildren frequently help him in the shop and must navigate their individual struggles while fighting for the existence of the family taqueria. His granddaughter Ana is a queer artist and in a relationship with Afro-Latina Yessika; grandson Erik dedicates his life to the taqueria and feels financial pressure because he is expecting a baby with his on and off girlfriend; grandson Chris returned to the neighborhood after completing a business degree and dreams of securing a spot at a prestigious Parisian cooking school. The plot stays close to contemporary issues in the real neighborhood, addressing topics like urban transformation, the American Dream, (ethnic) identity and community. As the title of the series suggests, gentrification is a key concern throughout the episodes, albeit with a twist to its original connotation: *Gentefication* means the gentrification of Chicane neighborhoods by Chicane people – *gente* is the Spanish word for people –, and reflects on the internal conflict of both the fictional characters and the creators themselves. In fact, the show is to a great extent modeled on personal experiences of belonging and exclusion.

Agency, power, and production politics

In an interview with *Vulture* magazine, Marvin Lemus describes the moment when he first realized that he contributed to the gentrification of the working-class immigrant East Hollywood neighborhood after moving there in 2014 (Fernandez 2020). Shortly after the release of *Gentefied*, Linda Yvette Chávez describes the production process as “trauma bonding” between her and co-creator Lemus, reflecting on their cultural and ethnic identity issues while growing up; Lemus compares his experiences with the character Chris who returns to his neighborhood with a university degree only to find himself challenged by colleagues for not really being Mexican – Lemus explains, “especially as first-gen, being Mexican American tends to mean never feeling American enough and never feeling Mexican enough” (Cornish and Shapiro 2020). For Chávez and Lemus, “the reason why it's important to put brown bodies behind brown shows in terms of creators or producers is because we're going to write

from a place of love versus fear” (ibid.). On a larger scale, representation in the media industry matters because fictional stories can influence real life. Literary scholar Andreas Huyssen, for example, observes that recorded and represented performances, especially visually, can create “imagined memories” (Huyssen 2000, 27) that blur the lines between real and unreal.⁶⁶ Sociologist Ron Eyeran takes the idea further claiming that these memories can in turn influence imagined communities that are vital for the formation of (ethnic) identity:

Until fairly recently, marginal groups and subcultures have had rather limited access to the means of representation through which to influence collective memory; their efforts at creating collective identity have depended on ‘real’ as opposed to ‘imagined’ communities. (Eyeran 2002, 449)

In a globalized world and with accessible media, building collective identities and communities becomes easier for minority groups because one does not necessarily need to be present at a specific place or event to join in the efforts.

In *Gentefied*’s process of community-building, the creators’ social identity and trustworthiness determine whether their audience relates to them or not. In the case of *Gentefied* there is an intention to mobilize the viewers and to gain the acceptance of the neighborhood: Linda Yvette Chávez stresses their involvement with the local community during production to demonstrate the truthfulness of the representation they created. In this way the creators establish themselves as trustworthy narrators with an inside perspective. Another argument for the creators’ reliable representation of Latinx life in Boyle Heights can be found in their choice of Netflix as the ideal platform “not just because of prestige or creative freedom, but because of *la gente* who had inspired the stories” (Fernandez 2020). Lemus explains, “[w]hen I think of a show that’s going to shift culture, it has to be accessible. [...] I think about where are my cousins watching? I want my little cousins back home in the hood of Bakersfield to watch this show” (ibid.). In September 2019, Netflix was the most popular streaming platform for movies, series and shows in the U.S., followed by Hulu and Amazon Prime.⁶⁷ As of

⁶⁶ Huyssen (2000) concedes that the term “imagined memories” is problematic in that all memories are imagined, but the idea “allows us to distinguish memories grounded in lived experience from memories pillaged from the archive and mass-marketed for fast consumption” (27). While Huyssen uses the term to critically engage with media consumption and public memory, Eyeran (2002) uses the concept to explain the role of cultural artefacts in social movement formation.

⁶⁷ According to Statista, YouTube was the most popular streaming platform in September 2019 with ca. 164 million monthly average users, followed by Netflix with ca. forty-seven million monthly average users. However, YouTube does not fall into the same category as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Hulu because it does not primarily provide movies, series and shows but rather music videos and short clips (Stoll 2022a).

May 2020, most of the U.S. subscribers were members of Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, with about 70 percent of the generation subscribing to the platform (Stoll 2022b). But while the series is available globally and can thus raise international awareness for community issues – a phenomenon that can also be found in the hip hop music discourse –, local community groups, such as Defend Boyle Heights that also protested Self Help Graphics (chapter 4.2.1.), criticize the production of the series. In a Facebook post from February 2020, the neighborhood association claimed that many residents were unhappy with filming in their community and that the series was trying to “latch onto the popularity” of the anti-gentrification movement, thereby commodifying and mocking the real struggle (Defend Boyle Heights 2020). In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, producer America Ferrea emphasizes the *Gentefied* crew’s efforts to inform the residents about their plans through community group meetings with a non-profit organization called Harness:

we were very aware of wanting to keep our footprints as low as possible. [...] [Filming at certain locations] would make me think twice because I’m like, ‘Am I helping or am I hurting?’ We always want to be an ally and an advocate. So, yeah, when we’re shooting somewhere, or even doing this interview here, there are thoughts about: Are we displacing another customer that could be a regular? We’re not just trying to take, take, take. We’re trying to give back. (Villarreal 2020)

America Ferrera has become famous as an actress with her lead role in the TV dramedy series *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010) that won her a Golden Globe Award among others. She has since become the producer of several movies including *Gentefied* and is currently producing a movie adaptation of Erika Sánchez’s novel *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) with screenwriter Linda Yvette Chávez. In 2020, Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson, professor of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at Loyola Marymount University, wrote in article for the ASAP Journal titled “I ♥ America (Ferrera)”:

I trust America, which is a funny sentence for me to write – because there’s no way I trust the nation that misappropriates not only her name but that of two continents. But back to America (F): I trust her because I ♥ her, but why? Partly it’s because of the politics of her work, and she says all the right things in public. And yes, her work offers intersectional critique (and that is simply not a thing on primetime TV), but that’s not why. I ♥ her because of the deeply felt pleasures of laughing with someone like me. She’s the child of Latina/o immigrants, a Latina feminist, and she works in the mainstream. If you’ve never seen anyone like you on TV, it’s thrilling. As we are threatened with another four years of the current genocidal presidential administration, it’s lifesaving. (Rodriguez y Gibson 2020, 558)

The emphasized segments are the reasons that make America Ferrera trustworthy in the eyes of Rodriguez y Gibson, who stresses that there is “a larger pattern of cultural activism and advocacy driven by intersectional critique and Latina feminist politics” (ibid.) in Ferrera’s work. In addition to identifying with Ferrera because of her economic, ethnic and immigrant background, she sees congruity in Ferrera’s performance as an actor, producer and activist. Moreover, Rodriguez y Gibson trusts Ferrera especially in light of mistrusting the U.S.-American nation and Donald Trump’s government, as her contrasting statement shows.

The creators’ efforts for truthful representation paid off, as media scholars Richard Mwakasege-Minaya and Juri Sanchez (2021) show in their analysis of the series’s impact on viewers: A collection of four hundred Twitter comments by Latinx users reveals that most of them view the show positively and claim to identify with the characters and the message. However, the researchers’ analysis only considers those viewers who are active on social media and who commented on the series on Twitter, and this does not represent the average viewer, nor is there any evidence these viewers are located in Boyle Heights. Ferrera’s comment on filming locations highlights another issue that *Gentefied* taps into and that viewers discuss on the platform Reddit: Corporate productions making money off filming at precarious locations. While most comments on Reddit’s *Gentefied* thread praise the show for its realistic representations, some viewers believe that the show was produced by whites because it does not reflect their attitudes as Mexican Americans, especially as working-class urban residents (u/Mr_Rivera). According to ethnic studies professor Curtis Marez, contemporary shows like *Vida* – another series set in Boyle Heights that aired between 2018 and 2020 on the TV network Starz – that shoot in poor and disenfranchised locations “detach settings from locations such as [...] Boyle Heights, making it more difficult to critically reflect on race and the politics of place” (Marez 2021, 24). In the case of *Vida*, the production evolved in a top-down process,⁶⁸ and thus “it’s clear that the East LA gentefication narrative was a corporate, algorithmic choice aimed at appealing to middle class and middle class aspirant Chicanx viewers” (Marez 2021, 21). For *Gentefied*, in contrast, writers Chávez and Lemus created the idea from personal experiences and worked on the script for four months from a café in Boyle Heights. Called “Hollywood outsiders”, they had never sold a script before and pitched the

⁶⁸ For *Vida*, a film production company commissioned a story set in Boyle Heights from a queer Latinx writer after they saw the media coverage of local anti-gentrification protests. They pitched the script to the streaming cable network Starz, who in turn pitched the idea to producer Tanya Saracho (Marez 2021).

idea to multiple production companies until deciding in favor of the streaming platform Netflix. The idea to center a story in Boyle Heights came almost naturally, as both Lemus and Chávez are familiar with the neighborhood. Lemus emphasizes his personal connection to the place: “I had never experienced a place that was Mexican *and* [sic.] American and they were doing both proudly. [...] This was all of me, all of my identity in one place” (Fernandez 2020). Not only was *Gentefied* produced in a bottom-up fashion, but the creators consciously chose Netflix as the platform to air it because they knew their target audience. *Gentefied* hooks the target group by creating familiarity and relatability on different levels. First, the series’s message to fight for one’s rights and for equality is a timely topic which picks up the viewers right where they are – in a time where BIPOC protests for equality in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing and mobilizing Latinx voters for the 2020 election ring in people’s ears and where the call for minority representation in media and culture cannot be ignored. Second, the featured music covers several genres and epochs that embrace the variety of Latin American roots and traditions, like mariachi music, while mixing in modern and young Latinx beats, Chicano punk, R&B, funk, and more. Third, the portrayed local narrative about urban injustice, following the American Dream, and identification as both U.S.-American and Latinx corresponds to the real narrative of Boyle Heights and of many second- or third-generation immigrants. And fourth, the recurring Mexican food not only emphasizes familiarity and ethnic identity but is a pattern of participation, as I discuss below.

Cultural citizenship and contested *latinidades*

In contrast to Self Help Graphics, *Gentefied* is a new and temporary phenomenon, and as such exemplifies the recent emergence of films produced by artists of color. Media scholars Denise Bielby and Lee Harrington (2005) find that around the turn of the century, U.S. television programming, until then an Anglo-Saxon centered enterprise, started a “courting of the Spanish-speaking audience” (386) with the aim of generating more revenues for the networks. Until the 1990s, the U.S. market was closed to culturally diverse and non-English programs, and thus faced competition by Spanish-speaking cable networks upon its opening. While in 2005 representing Latinx life in TV shows was fairly new and audience’s reception was anxiously anticipated, today many series feature Latinx characters, albeit in often stereotypic ways, like the straight, light brown middle-class protagonist in *Jane the Virgin* (2014–2019) or the equally fair middle-class Cuban American family in the sitcom *One Day at a*

Time (2017–2020) (Mwakasege-Minaya and J. Sanchez 2021). *Gentefied* breaks with those stereotypes because it portrays lower (middle)-class Mexican Americans truthfully by mirroring their working-class sociolects, both in English and Spanish, their political and social issues, and because it is produced by individuals belonging to that group. The series addresses specific U.S.-American urban issues and thus caters to an audience that conceives of itself as bilingual U.S. citizens with Latinx cultural traditions; an audience that consists of young, second- or third-generation Latin Americans, born and raised in the U.S. and perceptive of the political and social issues in their immediate environment. This relationship between plot, production and audience that is characterized by Latinx agency, power, and representation is indicative of cultural citizenship in terms of media participation as conceived by Elisabeth Klaus and Margreth Lünenborg (2021) and is also reflected in Nick Stevenson’s (2000) cultural sociology approach that Delanty (2002) summarizes under the title cosmopolitan citizenship as the “power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes [that] is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process” (Delanty 2002, 64). Delanty’s (2003) additional emphasis on citizenship as a learning process confirms the idea that cultural citizenship in a globalized media-drenched world entails learning how to be a citizen regardless of legal categorizations of the nation state. Similarly, for Klaus and Lünenborg, cultural citizenship

entails all those cultural practices that allow competent participation in society and includes the rights to be represented and to speak actively. Media as a particular form of cultural production is both an engine and an actor in the processes of self-making and being-made, in which people acquire their individual, group-specific and social identities. (Klaus and Lünenborg 2021, 204)

The focus on media production in their theory resonates with the bottom-up production politics prevalent in *Gentefied*. Additionally, the plot reflects the struggles to become visible and active in a society that is often ignorant of large ethnic communities.

Much like the diversity of Blackness that is portrayed in the series *Atlanta* (chapter 5.2.1.), *Gentefied* reflects the variety of Latinx people in the U.S. in terms of national origin, race, sexuality, education, degree of U.S.-American identification and the conflicts created by these differences. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be Latinx? As Mwakasege-Minaya and J. Sanchez (2021) observe, the series critically negotiates the

idea of *latinidad* and positions itself within the realm of *marginal latinidades*. Studying Afro-Latinas in U.S. film, Keara Goin (2016) identifies *generic latinidad*

as standard political and representational practice in the United States, Latina/os are consolidated under the label ‘Hispanic’ and their heterogeneity masked by a generic and flattened representation. Popularly imagined as a homogeneous ‘brown’ race with a mixed indigenous and Spanish ethnic heritage, the extreme diversity within the Latino population is systematically reduced, ignored, and erased. Pan-ethnic *Latinidad*, while it has been beneficial in terms of alliance politics and solidarity, privileges certain experiences, representations, and identifications over others. (Goin 2016, 349)

Generic *latinidad* favors a Mexican heritage and white aesthetics. Therefore, Afro-Latinas who possess marginal *latinidad* are “rarely included in what is popularly imagined as the Latino/Hispanic population within the United States” (Goin 2016, 345) that adheres to a specific “Latin look” (C. E. Rodriguez 1997). While Goin (2016) only considers the racial marginalization of Blackness in *latinidad*, Mwakasege-Minaya and Sanchez (2021) speak of a “racial, socioeconomic, and sexual complexity of Latinxs as a population” when they refer to marginal *latinidades*. *Latinidad* as a concept entered Latina/o studies in the early 2000s when scholars like Frances Aparicio (2017b) demanded a concept that encompassed the variety of Latina/o life that started diversifying due to shifting streams of migration from Central and South America. Indeed, she called to “deploy [*latinidad*] in ways that allow our communities and others to exert agency and more control over the public definitions of who we are” (Aparicio 2017a, 113). According to Mwakasege-Minaya and J. Sanchez (2021), viewers reacted to *Gentefied* in a way that expressed their *latinidad* as a complex, diverse and fluid identifier.

Protest muralism

The character Ana Morales exemplifies this aspiration for agency through her drive to create public murals that represent her identity (S01 E05):⁶⁹ As a queer artist she is hired to create a mural on a building owned by the white, gay, male gallery curator Tim and rented by an elderly Mexican American lady, *tía* Ofelia, who runs a corner store. Ana is an advocate for queer rights and paints two kissing Mexican wrestlers, *luchadores* (10:30). The *luchadores*’ torsos are naked, and they each wear a mask that is pulled up to their noses, so they can passionately kiss. As part of the young, liberal generation and thus supporting the U.S.-

⁶⁹ Throughout this work I use abbreviations to cite the precise episodes of series. In this case, it is season one, episode five.

American LGBTQ+ movements, she naïvely believes to positively influence her Latinx community. When *tía* Ofelia intends to have the mural painted over because local customers are abhorred by it and threaten to take their business elsewhere, Tim and Ana stop her, both with different interests in mind: Tim is buying up several buildings in the neighborhood and wants to increase the property values – with a Mercedes license plate “RU4SALE” he is depicted as a stereotypical white hipster who lumps all brown people together believing Ana and Ofelia to be Ecuadorian; moreover, he intends to create an “art market,” “an artist hub where people from all walks of life are coming together to share in our passions” (01:55-02:10). Upon Ofelia’s mural removal scheme, Tim threatens her with eviction, and leaves Ana aghast and apprehensive of her own role in this dilemma. When he perceives Ana’s resistance to his harsh behavior, Tim uses their shared queerness as a bonding argument: “Ana, listen, you have got to stop let people like Ofelia intimidate us, okay? As queer people, we have to stop asking permission to exist in this world” (17:24-17:40). Ana does not know how to do justice to her activist principles advocating both for queer rights and racial equality. To Ofelia’s dismay, Ana believes in uncensored self-expression as a catalyst for positive transformation in her community. Only when *tía* Ofelia tells her that the well-intended mural does nothing but harm by driving away her regular customers does Ana realize that she is part of the gentrification process. For Ana, artistic expression collides with community interests, a moral dilemma that Linda Chávez puts to words in an interview with *NPR*:

the American culture is very individualistic, and it's about chasing your dreams and - no matter what. [...] And those are the things that our parents sacrifice everything for. It's a constant reminder and a constant guilt trip of, like, you know – this is why we came here. [...] And then as we're accomplishing it, as we're coming into this dream of capitalism, really, how is that dream then displacing and disenfranchising the very people we love and hold dear? [...] How does it make it hard for the most vulnerable communities, the undocumented community? You know, both our parents came here undocumented, and so we know that experience very viscerally. (Cornish and Shapiro 2020)

The conversation that Ana, Yessika and their friend Connie have at the end of the episode portrays the colliding arguments for and against individualism versus community:

Connie: This vanilla extract fucker [Tim] didn't think an immigrant woman had a right to her own walls. [...] He would've asked a white tenants' permission for sure.

Yessika: Obviously. But if he would've asked, Ofelia would've shut it down real quick. [...] Those *luchadores* are iconic machismo murdering homos that arouse and –

Connie: If they strip away a brown woman's livelihood, bro, she can't have her key demographic running into the 7-Eleven. What's she gonna do without her *borrachos y chamacos* [drunks and teenagers], heh?

Chris: [shouting from the distance] Good art's divisive, cuz. Just follow your bliss and screw the haters. [...] The point is, a landlord doesn't have to ask for permission to paint in his own building.

Connie: So? It's about respect for those who've been holding it down in our community for years. Who the fuck asked you, coconut?

Yessika: I dunno. Ana's Idaho potato cousin kinda has a point. [...] You both have a point. Yes, it was commissioned by uh, uh a fucking colonizer but I'm all for fighting *comadre* homophobia with queer love bombs. (19:50-21:05)

In face of a shifting economy, as mirrored in *Gentefied*, people individually and as a community need to decide how to deal with changes affecting their neighborhoods. This verbal exchange shows opposing views on that matter, even among friends of the same demographic group, and emphasizes the complex ingroup-outgroup dialectic prevalent in all of the series's conversations: Ana's commissioner Tim is described as "vanilla extract" and "colonizer", and Chris as "Idaho potato" and "coconut". While Tim is the threatening antagonist, Chris's ascribed attributes paint the picture of a harmless, mildly amusing and passive character. The series thus not only visualizes the insider-outsider conflict but also gives insight into problems within the Latinx community – the narrative plays with these dichotomies in a way only members of this community can tell truthfully.

I wish to return to Ana's mural portraying two kissing *luchadores*. *Lucha libre* is a form of professional wrestling that was imported to Mexico in the early twentieth century. It has since developed into a national and institutionalized sport with its distinct fighting style and culture, and in 2018 received the status of intangible cultural heritage. The Mexico City based companies CMLL and AAA promote *lucha libre* and organize spectacular staged fights that draw thousands of viewers. *Lucha libre* has become a symbol for Mexican cultural identity and for visions of Mexican masculinity in particular (Pereda and Murrieta-Flores 2011; Levi 2008). While the sport is famous in Mexico, it has recently reached popularity in the U.S., too, with television broadcasting programs such as *Lucha Underground* and companies like WWE and WCW promoting the sport for a U.S. audience. As Cuban American *luchador* Konnan observes,

[w]hen lucha started, everyone was Mexican. Now fast-forward 25 years, and you have it in every nationality. It's in England, Japan, Germany, with different cultures and different races. Just like hip-hop started black and Latino, lucha libre started

Mexican, but they both exploded and became a phenomenon everyone could embrace.
(Barrasso 2019)

Comparing *lucha libre*'s development to that of hip hop suggests that both phenomena started out from the margins, in both ethnic and socioeconomic terms, and successfully brought these marginal practices to the mainstream. This, however, also entails a potential degree of appropriation and commodification.

Against the backdrop of *lucha libre*'s cultural value and association with masculinity, Ana's mural becomes especially risqué as it can be interpreted as subverting not only male identity but in extension also Mexican national and ethnic identity. Therefore, the mural is both an act of participation in U.S.-American society and an act of negotiating *latinidad*. The creators' choice to dedicate an entire episode to Ana's mural represents the significant tradition of Chicanx and Latinx muralism in the U.S.

In the 1930s, muralist David Siqueiros left Mexico as a political refugee and came to Los Angeles where he was commissioned to paint a ca. 24 x 5.5 meter large public mural on Olvera Street in the center of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, the site of the original Mexican city of Los Angeles (The Getty Conservation Institute 2019). Intended for the Plaza Art Center, the mural titled *América Tropical* was supposed to portray a happy landscape with palm trees and sunshine, but to the dismay of his commissioner Siqueiros instead painted a Mexican Indian crucified on a cross beneath an American eagle and two sharpshooters targeting the eagle from a nearby rooftop. Shortly after its completion, the mural was covered with white paint because it "evoked the imperial savagery at the origin of the Anglo occupation," as Mike Davis puts it (M. Davis 2018, 30). After decades of neglect the mural was nearly erased from public memory until the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s sparked renewed interest in Siqueiros's legacy and efforts to restore the original mural were brought into motion. Siqueiros's defiance against his commissioner's wishes and his vehement dedication to paint politically motivated art inspired the artists of the Chicano Art Movement that spread throughout the Southwest (Goldman 1974). Stimulated by the Civil Rights and the Chicano Movement, modern Chicano muralism

grew out of a desire for change and was typically centered in barrios and ghettos of inner cities. Muralism inspired efforts to reclaim a community's cultural heritage and was used as a means to develop individual and community self-pride. Murals were an expression of collective vision and tended to link the artists to the people to shape content in the genre of social realism. (Rosen and Fisher 2001, 100)

One example of Chicano muralism and its social effect is Chicano Park in San Diego. During the evolution of the Chicano Movement, residents of Logan Heights in San Diego protested against highway bridge developments that teared their neighborhood apart by demanding a public park and playground for their community (Rosen and Fisher 2001). As a successful consequence, Chicano Park has been used as a site for social and political events since 1970. Visually, it is distinguished by about forty murals that adorn the concrete pillars that carry the weight of the highway bridge. As archaeologist Martin Rosen and historian James Fisher (2001) note in their detailed chronicle of Chicano Park, the murals depict a variety of topics, such as

images of Mexican pre-Columbian gods, myths and legendary icons, botanical elements, animal imagery, the Mexican colonial experience, revolutionary struggles, cultural and spiritual reaffirmation through the arts, Chicano achievements, identity and bicultural duality as symbolized in the search for the 'indigenous self,' Mexican and Chicano cultural heroes and heroines such as La Adelita, Cesar Chavez, Father Miguel Hidalgo, Che Guevara, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and scenes based on contemporary Chicano civil rights history. (Rosen and Fisher 2001, 94)

The wide range of topics the murals engage with attributes a significant role to mural creation in Chicana and Latina culture in the U.S. Indeed, Los Angeles artist, activist and UCLA professor Judy Baca, founder of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), affirms that "Chicano murals have influenced international muralism greatly and contributed to the shift in emphasis from Mexico to the United States as the center of mural production in the world" (Sperling Cockcroft and Barnett-Sánchez 1990, 1). Judy Baca herself is the creator and director of the half-mile long *Great Wall of Los Angeles* located in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley. Created between 1974 and 1978, the *Great Wall* was and continues to be a participatory project that depicts the history of the U.S. and of Los Angeles from prehistoric times to the 1950s through the lens of inter-racial relations. Baca involved youth to design and paint the mural over the course of five summers. Since then, the mural has regularly been restored and continues to grow with a 1960s segment currently in conceptualization.⁷⁰ Chicano and Chicana muralism, especially in California, has been recognized as a practice of empowerment and of firmly positioning people of Chicana descent in the image of the U.S. (cf. Latorre 2008; Selz and Landauer 2006). Public muralism

⁷⁰ If not otherwise indicated, information about the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* is from the official website of the Social and Public Art Resource Center, n.d.

like Baca's *Great Wall* and Ana's *Lucha Love* is a performance of citizenship: first, the artist claims the public space as her own, and second, she paints a political statement that cements her rights as a cultural citizen of the U.S. In addition, Ana's mural criticizes heteronormativity by performing a marginal *latinidad*. *Gentefied*'s location in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, California and Ana's mural become meaningful in the contexts of the history of Chicano muralism in California and the urban discrimination against Latinx residents in Boyle Heights.

As a hotspot for Latinx art and political participation (G. J. Sanchez 2021), Boyle Heights features abundant public art that engages with social and intersectional issues, as the following two examples demonstrate. The prints on fig. 10 (artists unknown) are located on 1st Street close to Self Help Graphics. They all portray different communities of color that are subject to structural disadvantages. On the fourth print from the left in the upper row, Chicago rapper and activist Common claims to "reconnect" – in the upper two corners of his print a closer look reveals the title of his memoir *Let Love Have the Last Word* (2019) and the words "spark change – prison reform" that allude to his non-profit organization Imagine Justice that fights for a reform in the criminal justice and detention system. In a similar style, the fifth print from the left in the third row features lawyer, film maker and activist Valerie Kaur with "rebirth" and the title of her book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (2020). Kaur engages against hate crime, especially against religiously motivated crime targeting Muslim and Sikh people. The fourth print in the second row and the second print on the third row advocate for indigenous peoples with the statements "protect the sacred" and "together, we are power." Other prints read "women are perfect," "we the people – defend dignity" and "come for one, face us all." This wall of prints speaks for women's rights, for racial and ethnic equality, for a better criminal justice system, for religious plurality, for indigenous peoples, and for human dignity overall. It thereby shows the intersectionality of most movements for justice and equality that demand social change on many levels.

On the right-hand side of these printworks, a mural titled *Migrant Mamas* (2019) can be found (fig. 11). This piece was developed by a group of female teenagers under guidance and financial support from the Las Fotos Project that offers photography and mentoring to teenage girls from communities of color in South, Central and East Los Angeles (Las Fotos

Project; Vilcek Foundation 2019). The girls translated a quote from Padma Lakshmi's book *Love, Loss, and What We Ate: A Memoir* (2016) from English to Spanish and adorned it with photos of migrant mothers and aunts they admire: "She had sculpted the mist, the way those who have no choice do. She had willed a life for the two of us in a new land." Padma Lakshmi is an Indian-born American actress, producer and activist who experienced migration at an early age, and in her memoir reflects on her life journey that is closely tied to memories of food. As I suggest in the beginning of this chapter, food plays a decisive role in *Gentefied*'s practices of participation.

Food practices as identity-building and activism

In the series, it is saving Pop's taco shop that drives the overarching narrative, and Chris's culinary endeavors that cause positive and negative excitement. Traditional Mexican dishes and ingredients establish the characters' identities as they are often seen eating in the taco shop, cooking at home or preparing family meals. Food is a multifaceted and contested field: It is used to describe a person's ethnic and cultural belonging – "coconut," "vanilla extract," "potato" – and to mark a perceived authenticity that is at risk of commodification. Yessika and Ana claim that white people like spending money on things they believe to be authentic and thus love *tamales* and *nopales*, traditional Mexican and Central American foods. The sensory experiences of taste and smell are closely linked to human memory (Holtzman 2006), and thus "[i]ngredients, dishes, and practices have the potential to become cultural markers that identify and rally individuals and communities, who frequently display fierce attachment to their food traditions" (Parasecoli 2014, 423). As professor of food studies Fabio Parasecoli (2014) elaborates, these food practices extend to foodways and therefore encompass the movement of food, the people involved in this process and the economy of certain foods. This hidden dimension of ethnic foods in the U.S. sheds a new light on Chris's decision to change the ingredients used in the taco shop, and the outrage that ensues suddenly makes sense. Chris tries to walk the fine line between his family's Mexican ethnic identity and their U.S.-American identity. While it might seem plausible to assume that ethnic foods are symbols for the past and thus detached from the present location of migrant individuals, Fabio Parasecoli attributes a participatory value to migrant food practices:

the sense of belonging to a community may be generated by the reappropriation of lived-in places and specific localities in which preparation, distribution, and

consumption of familiar foods play a crucial role. This dimension may be especially sensitive for individuals and groups, like immigrants, who are excluded from the participation in other higher-status fields of cultural production. (Parasecoli 2014, 430)

Food practices are thus also spatial practices, and marginalized groups in particular claim space through these food systems. Chris's desire to transform the taqueria's menu constitutes a potential threat not only in economic terms but also in terms of the established spatial practices surrounding the taco shop: the routes of community members that usually visit the taco shop may change, the route of suppliers may alter, outsiders might frequent more often – in short, the whole network of movements in the community, motivated in part by the taco shop, that is an act of claiming space and participating in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights might alter permanently.

Spanglish sociolect as trustworthy

Another aspect that lets the series appear in a trustworthy light, and therefore stresses the importance of Latinx representation in decision-making positions, is the characters' Spanglish sociolect. They switch between Spanish, English and Spanglish and use words that are, according to Mwakasege-Minaya and J. Sanchez (2021), indicative of an urban Latinx working-class background. The Spanish conversations are not translated unless the viewer turns on the subtitles in the respective language, nor are the Spanglish parts explained in any way. These linguistic styles convey that the series is made by members of a community for that exact community – the characters' speech is thus affirming the viewers' identities. However, especially against the backdrop of the citizenship discourse, there are debates on the Americanness of movies produced with languages other than English, as the Golden Globes decision in 2020 to bar the movie *Minari* from competing in the best picture or best drama categories proves (J. W. Lee 2020). *Minari* follows a fictional Korean immigrant family living in Arkansas and was created by Korean American director Lee Isaac Chung. Despite its American production, the movie had to compete in the foreign language category because of the Golden Globes statute that only movies with at least fifty percent English language count as domestic. This decision was followed by backlash from actors, creators and artists, many claiming that nothing could be more American than *Minari* that is written by an American, features American actors, is produced by an American company and follows the lives of immigrants in America (cf. Lee 2020). While cultural citizenship according to Klaus and

Lünenborg (2021) and van Zoonen (2004) relies on media participation, and one might argue that by now there are many cultural artefacts produced by PoC, cultural citizenship also entails recognition of this status by others and, as several scholars emphasize, the right to full societal belonging (Beaman 2016; Pakulski 1997). The outcry over the Golden Globes decision puts the spotlight on the missing recognition of claimed citizenship. Thus, *Gentefied* positions itself exactly along the lines of *Minari* in terms of claiming American cultural belonging and, more than that, recognition of ethnic American people's agency that should be self-evident.

This chapter has illustrated how production politics in media creation matter to societal participation. Linda Yvette Chávez and Marvin Lemus, along with America Ferrera and the actors they employed, accessed the movie industry through doors that are fairly new – streaming services that target a younger demographic and are willing to experiment with content. This chapter has also uncovered the narrative dimension's potential to mobilize viewers: *Gentefied*'s truthfulness and relatability is created through various topics that address the young Latinx American target group: From spatial injustice to the tradition of Chicano muralism, to food practices and language – the show's performance of *latinidades* is an act of claiming cultural and urban citizenship in U.S.-American society.

Los Angeles's geographic and demographic make-up is mirrored in its social and political art scene, as has become clear. The four analyses in this chapter have shown the distinct mobilization and participation practices that artistic endeavors employ in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of Leimert Park and Crenshaw, and in the Latinx neighborhood of Boyle Heights. Each artistic form, be it organization, rap music, or series, has its own way of influencing social and political life. While Black practices often stress the need to own and to vote and engage politically, Latinx creatives are more concerned with protesting and other forms of engagement that are not contingent on legal citizenship status. Contemporary artistic activism in Los Angeles builds on the city's well-chronicled rich history of socially engaged art, as I have shown. Atlanta, in contrast, is not as much characterized by out-of-country migration and ethnic neighborhoods, but rather by its contradictory legacy that entails the Confederacy and the Civil War, Jim Crow laws and segregation, as well as the Civil Rights Movement and Black political power. This legacy left an imprint in the city's spatial landscape: While Georgia's state capital is dubbed the Black Mecca because of growing Black

political and economic power in the mid- to late twentieth century, the city still struggles with its history of racism and segregation in the U.S. South. The following casestudy on Atlanta, therefore, first investigates how artistic social and political engagement takes place in the physical space of the city (analyses in chapter 5.1.), and second, sheds light on how Black creatives envision their role in social and political mobilization in the context of Atlanta's Southern heritage.

4.3. Images from Los Angeles



Figure 1. Deborah Roberts's "The duty of disobedience" from her exhibition *I'm*. On view at Art + Practice in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. Photograph taken on May 3, 2022.

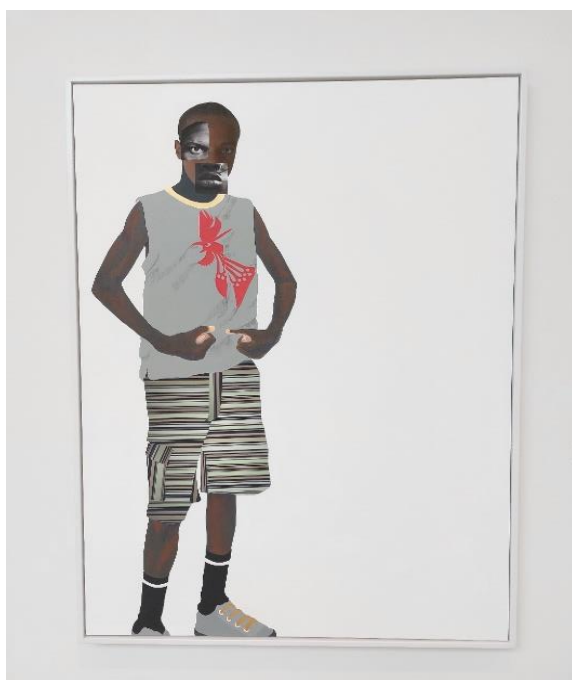


Figure 2. Deborah Roberts's "Cock-a-doodle-doo." Collage, *I'm* exhibition, Art + Practice, Leimert Park, Los Angeles. Photograph taken on May 3, 2022.

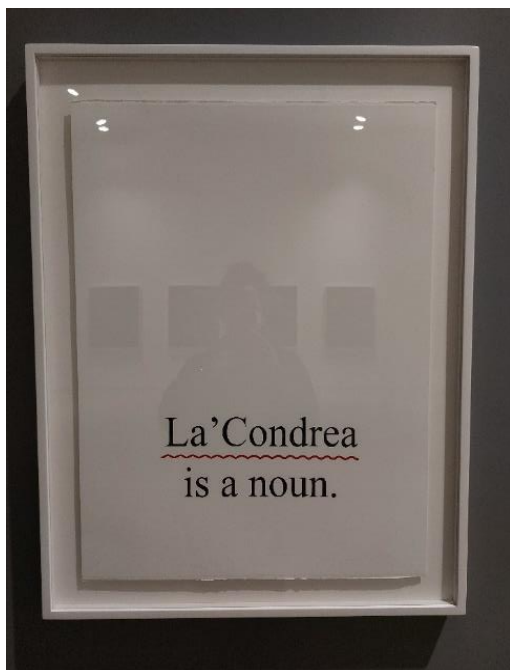


Figure 3. Deborah Roberts's "La'Con-drea is a noun." Serigraph on paper, *I'm* exhibition, Art + Practice, Leimert Park Los Angeles. Picture taken in May 2022.



Figure 4. Deborah Roberts's "Angwenique is mild as milk." Serigraph on paper, *I'm* exhibition, Art + Practice, Leimert Park Los Angeles. Picture taken in May 2022.



Figure 5. Deborah Roberts's multisensory booth with African American female names on the walls, a mirror in front, and headphones that let the viewer listen to a prejudiced and racist conversation about Black females and their names. *I'm* exhibition, Art + Practice, Leimert Park, L.A. May 2022.

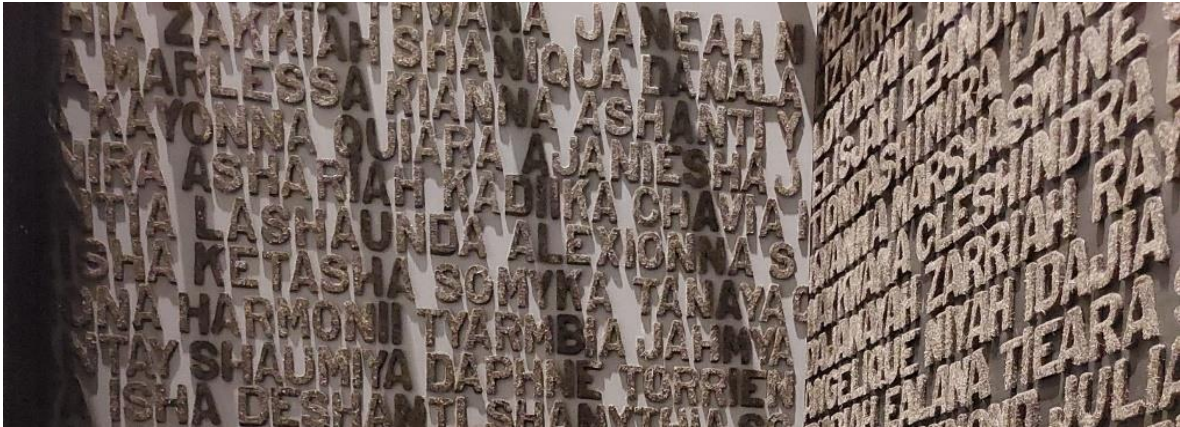


Figure 6. Close-up of Deborah Roberts's multisensory booth (fig. 5) that zooms in on the female names carved out in felt. May 2022.

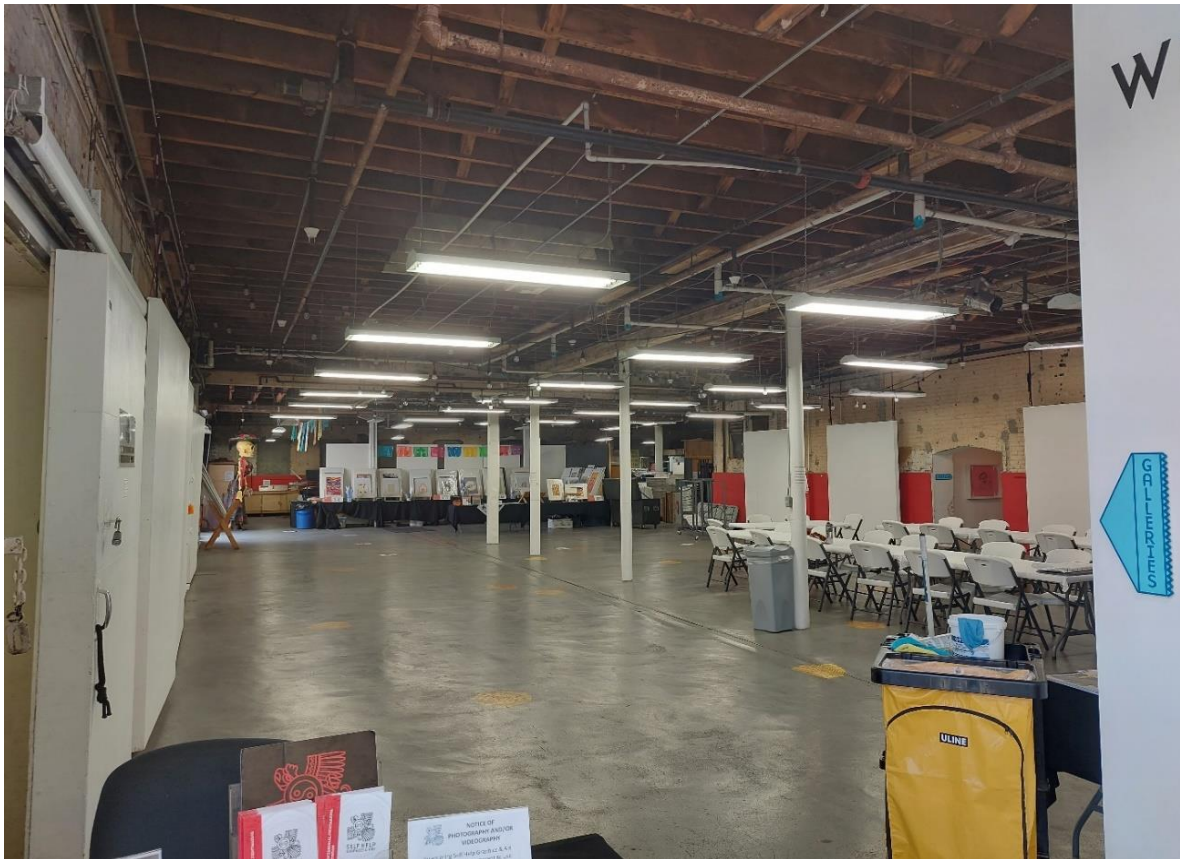


Figure 7. Self Help Graphics's work and exhibition space in Boyle Heights, L.A. The organization bought the former seafood packing plant in 2018. Picture taken in May 2022.

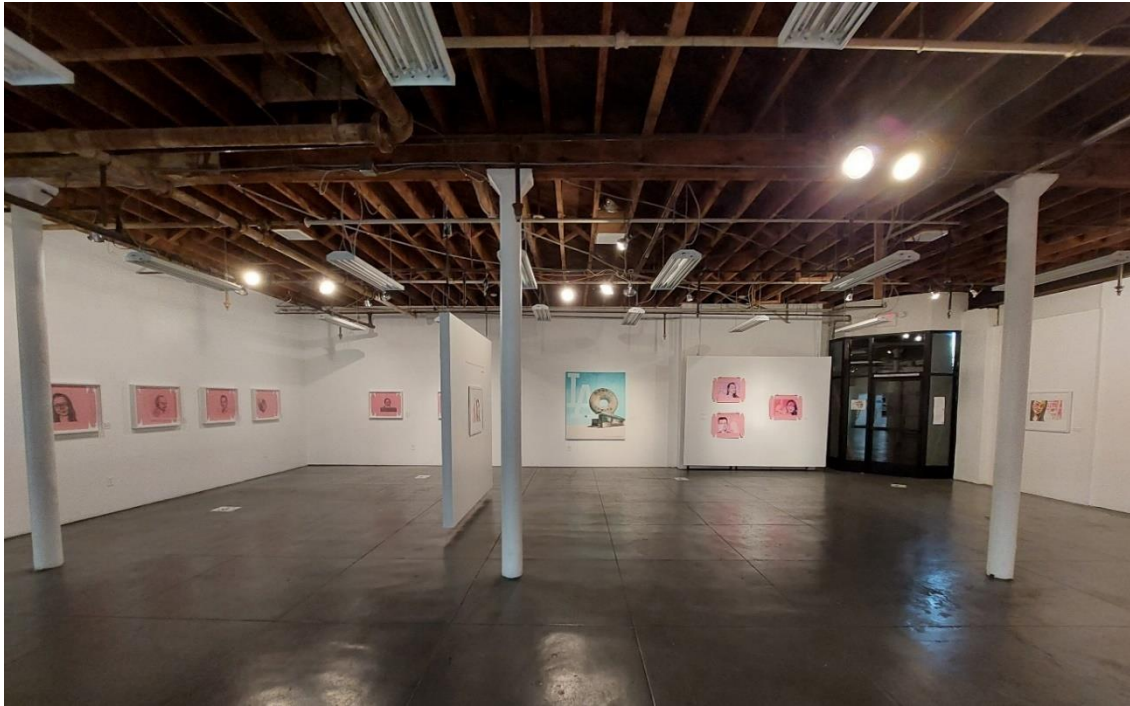


Figure 8. Cambodian American Phung Huynh's *Donut (W)hole* exhibition at Self Help Graphics, Boyle Heights, L.A. May 2022.



Figure 9. Part of Phung Huynh's exhibition *Donut (W)hole*. These are answers visitors gave to the question "How do you counter assimilation?" Self Help Graphics, Boyle Heights, L.A. May 2022.



Figure 10. Posters by unknow artists, located on 1st Street close to Self Help Graphics in Boyle Heights, L.A. Picture taken in May 2022.

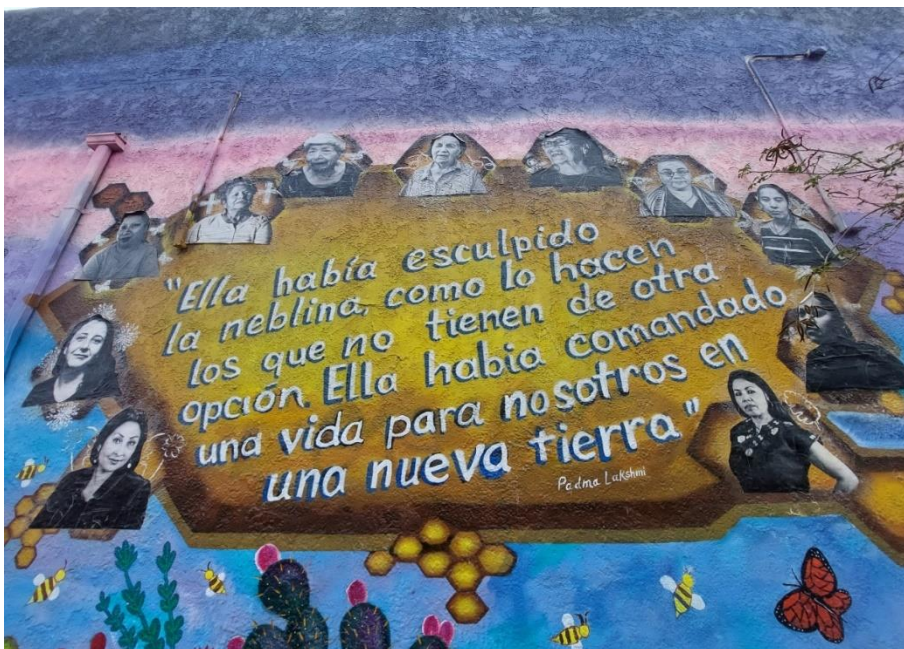
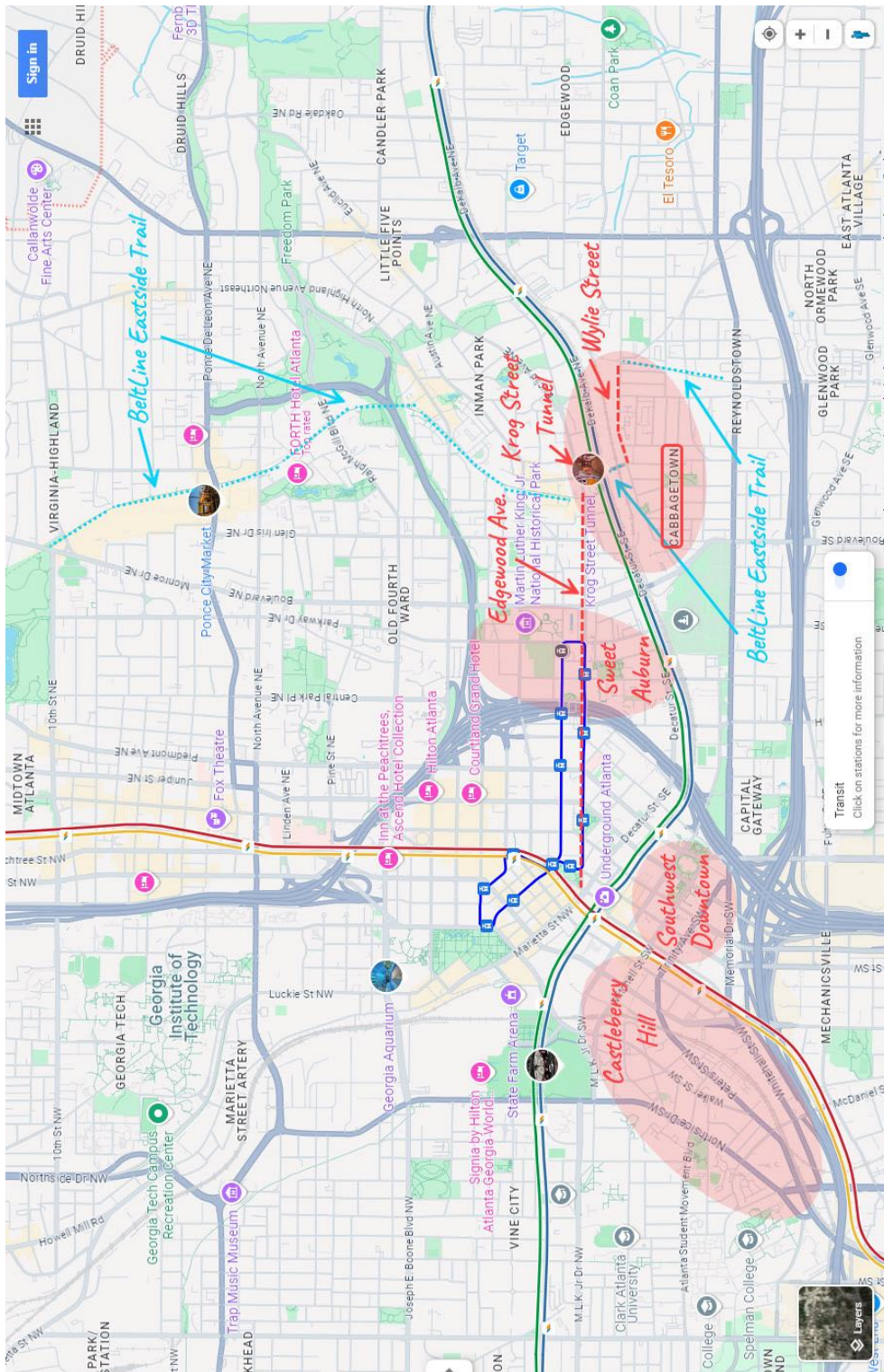


Figure 11. Mural titled “Migrant Mamas,” located next to the posters (fig. 10). Created by female teenagers in 2019 as part of the Las Fotos project. The quote is from Padma Lakshmi’s book *Love, Loss, and What We Ate: A Memoir* (2016), translated to Spanish. Picture taken in May 2022.

5. Atlanta



Map 2. Google Maps. © 2024, “View of Atlanta with Annotations.” The highlighted areas indicate the places that I visited and refer to in the following chapters.

In October 2018, *The Guardian* launched their “Atlanta week,” a series of online newspaper articles that focused on the state capital of Georgia. In the opening article, the editors of the *Cities* series wrote,

something about Atlanta has always fired our imagination. The great gateway city of the ‘new south’ is poised on the cusp of great change, from culture to demographics to urban planning. Indeed, it often feels as if Atlanta has all the ingredients to be to the 21st century what Chicago was to the 20th – a quintessential American city of its era. (Oliver and Michael 2018)

Among other things, they refer to the city’s booming hip hop scene, to its growing movie industry that is often nicknamed “Hollywood of the South,” to its multi-million-dollar infrastructure project called BeltLine, and its growing and diversifying population. The city’s cultural output has received considerable media attention during the past few years with Tyler Perry’s movie production studio, Donald Glover a.k.a. Childish Gambino’s multiple creative endeavors, rap music by Killer Mike, T.I. and others, and abundant muralism and public art.

In addition, the state of Georgia’s significant role as a swing state in the 2020 presidential election and Atlanta’s singular Democratic turnout catapulted the state and its capital to the forefront of political interest. The number of Asian, Latinx and Black registered voters in Georgia grew considerably between 2016 and 2020, the latter displaying the largest growth with 25 percent. The actual voter turnout, however, dropped among the Black electorate compared to 2016 and compared to 2012 when Barack Obama was on the ballot (N. Cohn 2020). Nevertheless, the electorate in Georgia is growing more ethnically diverse, and while Atlanta is losing white residents, the share of PoC is growing. Atlanta’s 2020 turnout map shows city and suburb residents to have voted Democratic (N. Cohn 2020); against the backdrop of the demographic shift, this suggests that ethnically diverse city residents have the power to significantly influence political outcomes. The growing number of PoC registered voters also suggests a willingness to actively engage in social and political debates. Before the presidential election in 2020, Atlanta rappers publicly endorsed their favored candidate and urged residents to participate in the ballot, and they got involved again in the mayoral race 2021 (McLaughlin 2020; Smith-Barrow 2022). In this vein, two Democratic candidates won the senate election in 2022, namely Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff. One important figure in Georgia’s growing voter turnout is Democrat Stacey Abrams who served in the Georgia House of Representatives and competed in the state’s gubernatorial election in 2018 and 2022. Abrams’s efforts to mobilize potential voters involve engaging with popular artists like

rappers Jeezy and Gucci Mane, and also consist in founding Fair Fight, a voting rights organization that educates constituents primarily in underserved areas.

While Atlanta's reputation as the "Black mecca" is contested, as I discuss below, its majority population remains Black according to 2020 census data (Frey 2021). In fact, there seems to be a reverse migration pattern for African Americans who now move from the north to the south, albeit more often to the suburbs and smaller cities than to big cities (Harshbarger and A. M. Perry 2019; Tamir 2021). In 2021, journalist Charles M. Blow published *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto*, a widely acclaimed book that calls Black Americans to move to the South for a sustainable transformation in racial power dynamics. Blow's book became an immediate success, a *New York Times* bestseller and *Kirkus* Best Nonfiction Book of the Year. Blow continues his idea through opinion articles like "Dear Black Americans, Please Move to the South" (2023) where he proposes that Blacks should become the majority in Southern states to leverage political power. He himself moved to Atlanta after living in New York for twenty-five years. Georgia indeed is one example for Black state power: because of the growing Black electorate the swing state eventually voted Democratic in 2020.

To study Atlanta inevitably means to study the South. U.S.-American history-making has long stumbled over the South and its complicated past: Economic success through plantations was built on the backs of slaves from Africa. But these slaves' descendants, too, came to call the South their home throughout the generations. The Confederacy's position during the Civil War, their defeat and the ensuing myth of the Lost Cause opened the path for the Ku Klux Klan and their atrocities. But still Black people belonged to the South. Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and his work in Atlanta shed some light on Black life in the U.S. South. However, segregation and discrimination continued to strip Blacks of their right to be at home, as the Atlanta race massacre of 1906 exemplifies (Godshalk 2006).⁷¹ Moreover, the recent debate over renaming the event from "riot" to "massacre" shows how central the memory still is (McCracken 2022). Fleeing Jim Crow laws, many African Americans moved to the North in search of a better life and for jobs provided by the U.S. joining of WWII. In the mid- to late twentieth century, the Civil Rights Movement with its center in Atlanta, Dr. Martin Luther King's birthplace, achieved some change, but structural discrimination still

⁷¹ In September 1906, as a result of growing racial tensions, thousands of white men attacked African Americans in downtown Atlanta. The riot lasted for a few days and expanded to several Black neighborhoods. In the end, at least twenty Blacks were dead and many more injured (Godshalk 2006).

exists. Today, racist systems prevail in many cities, for instance in the shape of gerrymandering, police killings, urban neglect and more. Thus, the following analysis frequently draws on the history and culture of the South to make sense of participatory efforts in Atlanta.⁷²

In her book *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South* (2012b), education scholar Bettina Love lists what she believes to be necessary components of a discussion of Atlanta:

racial inequality, Jim Crow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, soul and gospel music, Black megachurches, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Sweet Auburn Avenue, Jack the Rapper, Ryan Cameron, Frank Ski, Ted Turner, gay pride, the 1996 Olympic Games, Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, Coca-Cola, Black radio, Jazz Funk Kafe, LaFace Records, Freaknik, gratification, strip clubs, and Southern-flavored Hip Hop music and culture (this list is in no way exhaustive). (Love 2012a, 34)

Indeed, many of these points appear frequently in this case study. One aspect that Love neglects in her list, however, is the changing demographic of the South: Like anywhere else in the U.S., Southern cities attract immigrants, and thus the number of Brown residents, especially from South America, has been growing (Mohl 2008). Today, Atlanta's Buford Highway is known as an ethnic hub with South American shops and restaurants. Nevertheless, in contrast to L.A., Atlanta does not have strong ethnic enclaves, and its landscape is much more influenced by Black culture and a Southern legacy that originates from the Civil War and conservatism.

One aspect of the South that does not feature in this case study, yet needs to be mentioned, is Black Christian political influence. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for example, was born out of the Civil Rights Movement and first chaired by Martin Luther King Jr. Some influential Black political representatives in Georgia were members of the civil rights organization, such as Andrew Young who was a Congressman for Georgia and mayor of Atlanta from 1982 to 1990. Other political activists who did not hold any office include Ralph David Abernathy who worked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement and continued his engagement afterwards by speaking to the United Nations and founding a non-profit organization that supported underprivileged Blacks with managerial and technical training, job and trade opportunities and more. The influence of

⁷² What to make of the South? This question is still controversial, and scholars are searching for answers. Imani Perry, for instance, published *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* (2022) where she aims to uncover Americanness by visiting places in the South.

Black religious-political networks in Georgia is also visible today when one considers Reverend Raphael Warnock's election to state senate in 2022. Until his election, Warnock was pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, the megachurch where Martin Luther King preached until his death. King's funeral, as well as the funerals of police violence victim Rayshard Brooks and popular Atlanta politician and House of Representatives member John Lewis took place at Ebenezer Baptist Church in 2020. Black megachurches have long played a role in political mobilization, as studies such as sociologist Sandra Barnes's *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment* (2010) and political scientist Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs's *Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender and the Politics of Public Engagements* (2012) suggest.

In the wake of growing voter turnout and Democratic election results, new grassroots efforts representing a liberal left-leaning politics have sprung up in Atlanta. Small cultural and artistic endeavors like the annual mural festival *Forward Warrior*, the non-profit public mural organization *Living Walls*, the artist collective *ATL Radical Art*, and others spread progressive democratic ideas. Simultaneously, Black cultural agents bring their specific understanding of what it means to be Black in Atlanta, in the South and in the U.S. to the table. This self-conception is not only informed by a Southern history and geography but also by Black accomplishments native to Atlanta, such as W. E. B. Du Bois teaching at Atlanta University where he published an extensive sociological work on *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), or the hub of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) with Spelman College, Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University. What is significant to Atlanta's history is the presence of Union troops after the Civil War which protected the newly setup Freedmen's Bureau that helped former slave who had been freed. Consequently, as historian Maurice Hobson (2019) observes, many Blacks in the region moved to Atlanta. Additionally, the Reconstruction era witnessed the founding of Black colleges and universities in Atlanta, which ensured higher education for African Americans. In the long run, these developments helped to create well-educated Black middle and upper classes that gained the power to influence political decisions. Nevertheless, Hobson (2019) states, the few Black representatives were often elevated into positions of power by more influential whites who recognized that Black participation in politics and business was necessary to ensure their own peace and profit. The existence of a Black elite led to the formation affluent Black neighborhoods and

a bustling Black business district called Sweet Auburn close to downtown which eventually gave the city its nickname “Black Mecca.” However, a majority of Blacks remained, and to this day remain, poor.

While established Black presence in Atlanta resulted in political power, other non-white groups’ presence until the early twentieth century was more dispersed than, for instance, in northern cities (Dameron and Murphy 1997). This was due to the relatively small number of immigrants and their main reason for moving to Atlanta which was business. This changed when mayor Maynard Jackson introduced his “international city” campaign in the 1970s, which included the construction of the international Hartsfield Jackson Airport and was intended to boost Atlanta’s growth and economy (Dameron and Murphy 1997). Although the number of immigrants increased, the principle that guided their settlement was not their distinct ethnic groups but their otherness that did not fit with white nor with Black.

In this sense, the following two sections look at how creative engagement operates in the city’s public space, and at how Black artistic social and political participation works in Atlanta today, respectively. For the analyses, I consider a grassroots artist collective, public muralism, Donald Glover’s series *Atlanta* and rapper Killer Mike’s engagement.

5.1. Claiming the city with public art in public space

Like in any large city, Atlanta’s urban space is highly contested. Los Angeles is home to an abundance of art galleries and cultural organizations that can be physically visited. This is not least because of L.A.’s long-established art scene and the city’s comparatively high budget for arts funding. In Atlanta, the conditions for the arts, and hence art’s presence in public spaces, are different. A first look at the city landscape mirrors these circumstances: Fewer galleries and artistic spaces but countless murals on public walls. Moreover, a closer look at Atlanta’s public space beckons an examination of the city’s most prominent and largest infrastructure project, the BeltLine. Heralded as an urban redevelopment project supposed to connect Atlantans from various neighborhoods, the BeltLine is a 22-mile loop around downtown with ongoing construction. Intended for pedestrian and bicycle use, the loop features different trails, recreational parks and temporary art. Despite its intention to connect

residents and facilitate more sustainable forms of transport, the BeltLine is criticized by urban scholars as a project that drives gentrification and displacement.⁷³ Urban studies scholar Dan Immergluck (2023), for instance, observes that real estate prices in the BeltLine’s vicinity increased much faster than in the overall city. He further criticizes that the city neglected to buy spaces for affordable housing and instead focused on the development of urban parks which resulted in rising neighborhood values and drove low-income residents out – the term *green gentrification* is applied to such processes (Gould and Lewis 2017). As Atlanta’s most transformative urban project, the BeltLine’s “planning and policy decisions [...] have promoted a heavily racialized version of gentrification that has excluded lower-income, predominantly Black residents from sharing in the city’s growth” (Immergluck 2023).

Art organizations and public muralists negotiate their presence in city spaces. These negotiations take place in form of the art works’ visibility in specific places, and they can represent certain population groups’ fights for visibility and recognition. As a contested venture, the BeltLine changes Atlanta’s public space and demographics. Socially and politically conscious artists engage with the social repercussions of a transforming urban space by claiming it for themselves and their purposeful art. The following chapters take a look at how exactly artists use public space, including the BeltLine, to contribute to political information and mobilization. The first analysis focuses on a BIPOC collective that uses performance art in urban space to generate political activity, and the second analysis delves into the city’s mural scene to exemplify how and to which extent public murals participate in civic discourses.

5.1.1. Grassroots organizing exemplified by the artist collective ATL Radical Art

While Atlanta’s hip hop scene is primarily represented by Black artists, art organizing and performance art in the city offer more diverse groups of cultural agents. Along established

⁷³ See for instance the studies on the BeltLine’s green gentrification by Dan Immergluck (January 25, 2023), Dan Immergluck and Tharunya Balan (2018), Jessica Martínez (2023), and the analysis of the BeltLine’s collaborative planning by Parama Roy (2015).

organizations, such as Alternate Roots or Highlander Research and Education Center that cater to the South more broadly, there are grassroots organizers who are more difficult to spot. Small organizations like Sol Underground, La Choloteca, Southern Fried Queer Pride (SFQP), Art in the Paint, The Bakery and ATL Radical Art, to name a few, work at the intersections of racial equality, freedom for gender and sexual identity, and spatial justice. Some of these, like ATL Radical Art and La Choloteca, do not have an official online presence and are thus hard to locate from a distance. Because these groups are small and hyperlocal, they struggle to establish their own physical spaces – an issue heightened by the Covid pandemic. While The Bakery, for instance, was able to secure a space after years of uncertainty and became a registered non-profit organization in 2023 (The Bakery 2023a), others, like Southern Fried Queer Pride (SFQP 2023) and Sol Underground are trying to raise the necessary funds or experienced major setbacks during the pandemic (Sol Underground 2023; SFQP 2023).

So far, there is little scholarly information on small-scale grassroots organizing. Therefore, this chapter draws on social media as a research tool to grasp organizations' collaboration patterns. I reconstruct these organizations' networks based on their activity on Instagram, for instance. While some organizations focus more on activist work than artistic work, others do the opposite, and it is noteworthy that they organize common events where their strengths complement each other. One example is the support between Sol Underground, an organization that focuses on helping unhoused people in Atlanta and defines itself as an "abolitionist ecosystem [...] dedicated to Black and Indigenous resistance and liberation" (Sol Underground 2023), and The Bakery, a collective "dedicated to offering alternative models to local creatives and the general public" who "produce experiences that connect and inspire people through collaboration, experimentation, and play" (The Bakery 2023b). Once a month, The Bakery offers their space to Sol Underground for their community day (Sol Underground). In July 2023, for example, this was an event called *Mix n' Mingle*. It offered a cocktail mixing workshop and social gathering on a sliding scale entrance fee. Through such social events the organization stays in touch with their volunteers and the interested public and can generate funds for their primary work of providing free food and clothing to unhoused residents, creating warm shelters in winter and campaigning against city sweeps that target the unhoused. The Bakery itself does not engage in that type of activism but offers

their space showing support for the cause. Another collaboration example is SFQP and The Bakery's mutual *Spring Fling*, a queer social event that took place in February 2022 at the Atlanta Contemporary, a non-profit art center founded in 1973. Yet another example is ATL Radical Art's work with local radio station WRFG 89.3, where they have a segment to present the organization's work and upcoming events. Thus, while the collective primarily uses social media to communicate, they also engage with more traditional media, such as the radio. One other example is their cooperation with Sol Underground for organizing a May Day workers' festival in 2022 that featured live music and performances, film screenings, workshops around creating art, and a training organized by the Democratic Socialists of America. Zooming out of Atlanta and connecting to the issue of voter disenfranchisement, in June 2023 The Bakery's gallery featured an exhibition by the Center for Artistic Activism called *Making the Impossible Possible* and focusing on "artistic activism, community building, and dreaming of a better future through voting and beyond" (thebakeryatlanta 2023).

These examples from Atlanta show that, contrary to Putnam's suggestions (1995), civic engagement is still alive. Associational engagement, which Putnam (1995) views as essential to social capital, might have declined,⁷⁴ but there are numerous grassroots endeavors that try to transform social and political life with agendas reaching from neighborhood issues to national and even global problems. In fact, some scholars observe a trend towards using new forms of media as participatory tools.⁷⁵ As a bottom-up movement, grassroots engagement aims at convincing the public of its cause and mobilizing potential supporters and members. Depending on their cause, groups employ a variety of strategies to become visible, communicate their message, and gather public backing.

The diversity of purposes, members, and actions of different groups raises questions about their comparability and success. As indicated in chapter 2, it might not be the lack of efforts but rather their disconnectedness that makes change so difficult to come by (cf. Blokland et al. 2015; Harvey 2008). To approach these questions, this chapter focuses on the work of one Atlanta-based organization, ATL Radical Art (ARA), and explores how the artist

⁷⁴ See chapter 2.1 for a discussion of civic engagement and Robert Putnam's social capital theory.

⁷⁵ See Cliff Zukin et al. (2006) who speak of a changing American citizen and a new form of engagement that accompanies this shift. Similarly, Gaztambide-Fernandez and Arráiz Matute (2020b), Burgess, Foth, and Helen (2006) and Rheingold (2008) find that young people engage more in various forms of online and new media social and political participation.

collective uses creative techniques of mobilization and how their focus on BIPoC aims to create trust, community and cohesion. In addition, I show how the collective comprehends education and how this informs their practices that align with a pragmatic approach to democracy. In line with this idea, affirmative speculation, as theorized by Wolf-Dieter Ernst and Jan Simon Hutter (2020), plays a vital role in the organization's creative actions.⁷⁶

ATL Radical Art

ATL Radical Art was founded in 2018 by Atlanta native Rozina Shiraz Gilani, a first-generation American performance artist trained in Indian classical dance. Some of the collective's recurring performances entail *May Day*, as mentioned above, and *Break the 4th* that takes place on Independence Day and envisions to bring more awareness to the exclusionary U.S.-American founding myth by centering the role of BIPoC and the poor in the formation of the USA. This chapter's focus on ARA stems from the opportunity to meet its director Rozina Shiraz Gilani during a research trip to Atlanta in spring 2022. Since then, Rozina has granted me insight into different aspects of the collective, culminating in a workshop on community trust building that she organized for the graduate school *Authority and Trust's* (GKAT) conference "Practicing Trust and Authority" that took place at the University of Heidelberg in May 2023. The openness and goodwill toward my work as a researcher has served as a solid foundation in what developed into a trustful relationship between me and the founder of ARA.

Since its inception, ATL Radical Art has organized and produced a variety of events: Their participatory art show *Resist: A Simulation of Struggle* took place in a warehouse in 2018 and led the participants, who were assigned either Israeli or Palestinian identities that were diametrically opposed to their real life identities in terms of statistical stigmatization, through a simulated Palestine-Israel border;⁷⁷ the annual *Break the 4th* performance where the collective performs songs, poems and dance at four stops on Atlanta's public walkway BeltLine; and the annual *May Day* festival where workshops and film screenings are

⁷⁶ The concept of affirmative speculation is discussed in detail in chapter 3.3.

⁷⁷ In the show, a white middle-class person would be assigned a Palestinian identity, and an African American person would be Israeli – the show's premise is that border-crossing Palestinians are discriminated against by Israeli border patrols through long waiting periods and violence, and thus the audience can experience the reverse role. The powerful become powerless and the oppressed become oppressors, in the logic of ARA's show. Note: This chapter was written before the Hamas's attack on Israel and the ensuing escalation in Gaza in October 2023.

presented to educate the public about workers' rights. What all of these events have in common is the use of art, in one form or another, to convey, convince and mobilize.

As a grassroots organization, ARA does not employ any members but relies on their voluntary commitment. This applies to Rozina, too, who works as a freelancer in the field of cultural coordination and has had jobs with the Highlander Center and Alternate Roots where she evaluated the organization's partnerships with local artists regarding factors such as community benefit. All of ARA's members have main jobs in different fields, and thus the collective's composition varies in each performance and action.

Grassroots funding in Atlanta, Georgia and beyond

Before investigating ATL Radical Art's specific practices, I wish to provide some insight into the mechanisms of grassroots arts funding in Atlanta and Georgia. Like ARA, there are various other creative organizations in Atlanta and the state of Georgia that engage in social activism. A few Atlanta-based organizations have been mentioned above, and there are numerous other officially registered and unregistered operating on the local, state and regional levels. Many organizations, especially when they are not officially registered, derive their funding from private donations and grants.⁷⁸ Georgia government's appropriation for the arts has traditionally been low, ranking at number 49 with 0.14 USD per capita in the fiscal year 2023 – California, in contrast, appropriates 3.48 USD per capita in 2023 and ranks at number 11. The U.S. Southern states, encompassing Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas, Virginia and West Virginia, in general receive less funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and State Arts Agencies (SAA) than other states (Surkamer and Young 2021).

Grant-giving organizations, such as Alternate Roots, The Highlander or South Arts that operate in the Southern region, derive their funds from a combination of public and private budgets. Both the NEA and SAA funds are public, but the NEA funds derive from a federal pot allocated by Congress and the SAA budgets consist of state dollars. The NEA and SAAs have Partnership Agreements determining that the NEA allocates their funds to the SAAs that, in turn, must match the NEA dollars one to one, and invest them in local agencies, individual artists, arts education and rural communities. While the NEA is required to

⁷⁸ See chapter 2.3 for an overview of arts funding in the U.S.

distribute 40 percent of its Congress-allocated money to SAAs, the amount of individual state funding depends on several factors, including state population and public engagement in their planning (NASAA 2017). Most SAAs exceed the required one-to-one match. Thus, effectively, most public funding comes from state budgets rather than the federal level. Similar to SAAs, regional arts organizations (RAO) are allocated money from the NEA and the SAA. RAOs are groupings of states that facilitate multistate programming and amplification on the regional level (NASAA 2021). These federal-state partnerships ensure that even small and local organizations can benefit from federal NEA funds through the SAAs and RAOs. A 2019 map created by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies illustrates that the Southern region in particular benefited from SAA and RAO grants that did not include NEA money, while the metropolitan areas in California benefited most from direct NEA grants (NASAA 2021, 4).

This might indicate that more small, emerging or volunteer organizations, which are less likely to be granted funds from the NEA directly, are located in the South than, for instance, in California. However, it might also mean that there are more private funds available for non-registered organizations in other regions than in the South, especially in locations such as Los Angeles and New York where large private foundations, such as the Getty, Ford and Mellon foundations, are well-established. Organizations that are not registered as officially non-profit, like ARA, are not eligible for public funds and thus rely heavily on grants through private donations. The combination of public and private funds allows grant-giving organizations to elect both registered non-profit as well as non-registered organizations acting as non-profits as recipients. In this way, small, emerging or volunteer grassroots organizations are eligible for certain grants.

While per capita arts funding in the South is significantly lower than on the East and West coasts, the societal changes achieved during the Civil Rights Era that emanated from the South still reverberate. The NEA was established during former president Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program in the 1960s and went hand in hand with the aim to overcome segregation. Along with the NEA, the SAAs were founded to ensure distribution to the state and local agencies in the spirit of community enhancement. Paralleling the CRM,

Johnson's Great Society program built on the Progressive Era's advancements concerning the wellbeing of African Americans.⁷⁹

Following in the Progressive Era's footsteps, the racially integrated Highlander Folk School – which later became the Highlander Center for Research and Education – was founded in Tennessee in 1932 by Myles Horton. The Center was influenced by Horton's progressive ideology regarding education, which in turn was inspired by his reading about Dewey's pragmatic democracy at university (Thayer-Bacon 2004; Lake and Blunden 2017). This orientation is exemplified by the Highlander's involvement in Citizenship Schools in the 1950s and 1960s. These Schools were an education program initiated by civil rights activist Septima Clark, future mayor of Atlanta Andrew Young and Myles Horton, and consisted of teaching Blacks how to read so they would fulfil the literacy requirement to participate as voters in elections (D. P. Levine 2004). First facilitated by the Highlander Folk School, the program was later handed over to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. During the Civil Rights Era, activists like Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Martin Luther King and many others who would later become leaders in the movement visited the center's program (Lake and Blunden 2017). In the 1970s, another regional organization, Atlanta-based Alternate Roots, was born at the Highlander with the aim to support artists working for social justice (Alternate Roots). Originating in the progressive movements and the fight for racial equity that emanated from the South with Dr. Martin Luther King, these organizations stand in the Southern progressive tradition that enriches thought on social justice, equality, democracy and education. Shaped by Progressive thought and the Civil Rights spirit, today, the Highlander Center and Alternate Roots are grant-giving organizations that support Southern artists who work for social justice and racial equality. Most important in this context is that they support grassroots work, that is organizations and artists who are not necessarily registered as non-profit organizations. Grants as offered by the two institutions are essential to grassroots engagement because registering as a 501 (c)(3) comes with obstacles that small, emerging and volunteer organizations might be unable or reluctant to tackle.

ATL Radical Art and similar grassroots efforts benefit from grant-giving organizations that are committed to a specific geographical area. The Highlander and Alternate Roots,

⁷⁹ One of the transformative reforms representing this agenda was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. See chapter 2.2 for a brief overview of citizenship and nationality in the U.S.

as well as South Arts, the Southern Arts Fund and others, aim at enhancing arts access and participation in the Southern region. With this geographical focus, small groups are much more likely to be seen and considered for funding. In the case of Highlander, artists and organizations work with the center's resources on education, as the example of ARA shows. The popular education approach that works with the premise of "all the knowledge is in the room," as Rozina once put it, ties in with U.S.-American pragmatism as formulated by John Dewey: Knowledge comes from experience and can be revised when faulty, and it is ordinary people who enhance lived democracy. Highlander founder Myles Horton, while running an education program for the labor movement, realized that the workers had grown used to viewing their own experience as worthless, yet only an analysis of their own experience would offer a starting point to resolving their problems (Lake and Blunden 2017). Aligning with pragmatic principles, Horton believed that adults learn from experience and only knowledge arising from one's own experience is useful for meliorating life. This belief is entrenched in contemporary grassroots work in the U.S., especially in artistic approaches to social and political transformation, as the previous chapters have demonstrated: The arts as a medium is accessible and experiential for everybody, and thus offers good conditions for collective knowledge generation and collective action. In this way, activism and creative grassroots work stand in the pragmatic tradition of experience, meliorism and participatory democracy. In addition, the U.S.-American ideals of freedom and self-reliance parallel the pragmatic principle of democracy as a way of life where every individual's actions matter and shape collective community life. To put it simply, civic engagement is at the heart of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Another dimension that is central, as discussed in this chapter, is that of place. The pragmatic understanding of democracy relies on experience and actions; this in turn has its roots in American self-reliance and self-rule. Self-rule and American democracy are deeply intertwined with the historical development of townships in New England (McAllister 2014). While Tocqueville marveled about the nature of townships in the U.S. (*Democracy in America*), today, it seems, living liberated from the constraints of small towns and the obligations, responsibilities and intrusions they bring along is more desirable in an individualistic society. However, some share the view that it is these lost attachments to place and the integral civic engagement that would secure freedom

and self-rule (McAllister 2014). In this vein, they seem to mourn a lost past, but the American ideals they cherish exist in urban places around the U.S., as the present project shows.

Performance art as education

Many activist organizations engage in performance as an art form to bring their messages viscerally closer to their audiences. Beside messaging, embodied practices offer the possibility to generate knowledge, as Ernst and Hutta (2020) postulate, and thereby often times break free from traditional text-based knowledge.⁸⁰ Embodied practice, for Ernst and Hutta, means the visceral bodily experience that “reveals enactive ways of knowing, which are stimulated by the materiality and mediality of its very production and distribution or circulation” (Ernst and Hutta 2020, 173). Participatory performance is embodied practice, and as such, it is *artistry* and *activism*, or, *creativity* and *citizenship* to evoke Dwight Conquergood’s concept of performance once more (Conquergood 2002). At the same time, performers who wish to move their audiences need to be receptive to their reactions and emotions and adjust their techniques accordingly if they want to have an impact. This resonates with Dewey’s trial-and-error approach to generating knowledge that benefits lived democracy. Activist performers and organizers engage in performance research themselves and thus complement the aliterations with *analysis* and *critique*. Through their creative and imaginative performances activists speculate and imagine a different and better world. Participatory performances, such as ARA’s show *Resist*, guide the viewer but leave the outcome open. This kind of affirmative speculation in creative activism is closely related to John Dewey’s pragmatic approach of *meliorism*, or to what Roderick P. Hart calls *civic hope*: Cherishing democratic ideals, envisioning a better society, and acting upon this imagination (Hart 2018, 58).⁸¹

In the following, excerpts from my interview with Rozina Gilani that was conducted in summer 2023 exemplify how the artist collective comprehends and envisions their work. Rozina’s views are her own, but they help to understand how artists can make sense of their role and art’s value in social and political mobilization. It is necessary to offer some contextualization to make sense of the questions’ direction because in contrast to the interviews with Eboné, Mike, Betty, and Peter, the conversation with Rozina took place after having been in touch with ARA for over a year, after having spent time with Rozina in Atlanta, and after

⁸⁰ See chapter 3 for a discussion of embodiment in performance practices.

⁸¹ See chapter 2.3 for details.

having participated in her workshop at the GKAT Conference in May 2023. This interview, therefore, is longer (about one hour) and the questions are more attuned to ARA's and Rozina's work as well as to the dialogical style that has established itself between us. I refrain from paraphrasing Rozina's answers and leave them complete, because the details illustrate the line of reasoning behind specific actions and strategies. This way, her exact choice of words remains unaltered and benefits understanding the artistic practices.

Embodied claims to public space

With a few exceptions, like the *Resist* show that took place in a privately owned warehouse, ATL Radical Art's work happens in public space. These spaces are accessible to many people and are frequented by all kinds of groups; they are not owned by individuals; thus, they are open for activist action. Intrigued by Rozina's recurring mention of space in previous conversations, I ask why ARA chooses public space as their platform.

I think there's two [reasons] that come to mind. There's probably more, but one is to meet people where they're at, as an *interventionist approach*. We don't rely on the public to be invested in our experience. So, we are kind of forcing it into spaces where we may not be welcome, where we may not be even permitted to be. But we're trying to say this is our space too, you know. And if you are not creating spaces for us to be heard, we'll create it for ourselves. And I think it's also about *reclaiming actual physical space*, because as with every major city, it has been largely gentrified. Atlanta is historically Black, but folks have been pushed into the margins since the creation of the city. And it just gets worse by the year. So, a lot of folks can no longer afford to live in areas where their families have lived. And so, to go into those areas that are now like posh neighborhoods, but occupied by liberal, progressive folks in the upper echelon, [and] for us to say, 'okay, you wear your safety pins, and you say Black lives matter, but what about the space that you've taken away from the communities that you're in supposedly support of?' So, asking those questions and inviting people in to maybe make different choices [...]. So, I think it's important to go into *places where you are not invited* because that's the whole issue. *We haven't been invited into the arts. We haven't been invited into public discourse. We haven't been invited into history making. So, we have to invite ourselves. And that happens in public space.*⁸² (Rozina Gilani; my emphases)

The first reason is grounded in a pragmatic approach: to meet people in their mentally and physically comfortable everyday place and to interrupt their routine with creative activist performances, leaving it up to them to either stop and watch or move on. While these moments of intervention might seem banal, individuals make small decisions that determine

⁸² Rozina Gilani (director ATL Radical Art), interviewed by author, August 1, 2023. All following statements from Rozina Gilani are from the same interview.

whether they are open to be influenced by the performance, either learning about something they never heard of before or something they suspected all along, or, more extremely, allowing possibly uncomfortable messages to challenge their beliefs. The first reason therefore targets the collective's audience relationships and increasing their outreach. This *interventionist approach* is at the heart of and a lived example of performance art, as conceptualized by bell hooks (1995). The second reason, *reclaiming actual physical space*, speaks to the performance of cultural and urban citizenship. Feeling systematically excluded from the arts, public discourse and history making, they claim participation from a marginalized standpoint and in this way perform cultural citizenship in opposition (cf. Conquergood 2002; hooks 1995). Not being invited to these societal realms, as Rozina phrases it, means not having access. While people may have the right to something – as in the case of participation in the arts, public discourse and history making – it is their actual ability or inability to do so that determines whether they have access or not (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Environmental scientist Paul Ribot and sociologist Nancy Lee Peluso maintain that access to environmental and infrastructural resources depends not on the rights but on the ability of individuals to benefit from those resources. They distinguish between property and access which is “bundles and webs of powers that enable actors to gain, control, and maintain access” (Ribot and Peluso 2003, 154f.). These webs of powers derive from different structural and relational access mechanisms which are interdependent: Technology, capital, and markets belong to those mechanisms, but also knowledge, authority, social identities, and social relations. These and more factors influence how access occurs and shifts throughout time. According to Ribot and Peluso's theory, thus, belonging to a social group shapes one's access to resources.

This aligns with Rozina's understanding of access, that is subject to individuals' racial identity. The exclusions that Rozina mentions manifest in spatial terms, too, as I have exemplified in the previous chapters. Reclaiming, instead of claiming, physical space assumes that it did belong to and was taken away from someone before – here, Black Americans, but also extending to Indigenous peoples, specifically to the Muskogee Creek and Cherokee peoples. Rozina explicitly mentions gentrification and displacement as intersectional issues that the collective protests by reclaiming the lost space. The immigrant and indigenous experience translate to embodied knowledge that is expressed in relatable bodily performances, such as

dance and recitals. These visceral performances need a place to unfold, and urban public spaces are an ideal platform for activist action.

ATL Radical Art's annual *Break the 4th* event takes place on the BeltLine. This not only guarantees visibility, but also serves as a critique of this infrastructure project. The event takes place on a busy strip of the BeltLine's walkway close to shops and markets where performances, such as poetry reading, dance, rap and music, take place in three to four stops and each last for twenty to thirty minutes. In between the stops, the artists and their supporters march with their banners and signs that speak to different issues, depending on the annual theme ARA communicates before. The event is advertised on the collective's social media channels, especially Instagram and Facebook, where they post the planned route and stage locations. The precise location on the BeltLine depends on the weather and can be changed impromptu. Rozina claims that the infrastructure project

in its construction has torn through communities and pushed people out because people want to live on the Beltline, especially of a upper middle, upper class. And so, they've torn down and rebuilt these massive developments on the Beltline for basically completely unaffordable housing. And there are very few areas on the Beltline – I would say almost none – that a lower middle-class family could live. And so, it is in many people's opinion a huge failing of the city on its people. (Rozina Gilani)

While it is clear that city institutions failed in their responsibility towards their residents, this has disproportionately affected low-income BIPoC people. Once more, structural discrimination challenges the notion of equal urban citizenship where city institutions have the duty to treat residents/citizens equally. It is the city's obligation to protect and ensure the human, civil and social rights of its residents – after all, city government is elected by its citizens and must act in their interest.

ATL Radical Art also identifies and focuses on another agent that drives gentrification:

[T]he people that go to the Beltline, the people [who] live on the Beltline are proud liberals. They [...] would be all the people that went to the Women's March and are proud supporters of Democratic candidates. But when it comes to making conscious choices about how they participate in these systems through where they choose to live, through supporting projects like this, are part of the problem. [...] So, we've done pop up performances on the 4th of July, which is obviously American Independence Day, to catch the heavy foot traffic and to ask them – to challenge this autopilot celebration of independence when, as artists from communities who have not experienced that independence, we have nothing to celebrate, really. And so, the question is independence, but on the backs of whom? And so, we want to break this idea of all Americans experiencing freedom, all Americans experiencing access to all of these privileges, and to say, yes, you have those, but it's come at a cost. You may have the

privileges, you may live on the BeltLine, you may have access, but it has meant the lack of access to so many. And so, we've basically taken up space again, unpermitted. (Rozina Gilani)

ARA thus addresses Atlanta's progressive, liberal middle- and upper-class residents who can afford to move into the vicinity of the new green spaces constructed around the BeltLine, and appeals to their moral values and integrity. This target group tends to vote for the Democratic party and, especially the young, highly skilled share, lives in cities and suburbs (K. Parker et al. 2018). They are, therefore, inclined to pay attention to ARA's messages that overlap with their own mindset. The BeltLine is a place for other forms of art, too, such as muralism which is investigated in the next chapter. In this context and landscape, performance activism that tackles racial and spatial discrimination, like the work of ARA, becomes even more urgent and tangible.

Defining community: A race-aware continuum

As the collective's artists are BIPOC, their activism focuses on intersectional struggles of race, sexuality and gender, socio-economic realities, and political orientation. In an earlier conversation, Rozina mentions ARA's membership application process where interested candidates can indicate their racial and ethnic background. Along with other factors, this intentional question is considered when applicants are assigned tasks and roles in the collective. Because Rozina keeps mentioning ARA's community, I ask her how they define their community:

we have three communities in that we have [(1)] the group of artists, we've changed over the years. [...] living under capitalism, all of our artists are hustling and their level of investment and collaboration and, you know, their producing their own works kind of waxes and wanes. And we're a very grassroots based organization. [...] I would say that we have a lot of artist affiliates, but not always active members depending on the season. For example, if there's a protest, something that our city really needs to be addressing, we have a group of artists, a large group of artists that are in our network that would be very interested to join in on a campaign and bring their art into whatever we're creating together. So that is our members or artists. And then we have our sort of radical left community who are basically [(2)] our accomplices and our supporters. [...] our artists are all Black, Indigenous people of color, and our accomplices are sometimes also from BIPOC community who maybe don't participate in the arts, but they're very passionate about movement work, they appreciate the arts, etc. But we also have a lot of white accomplices that are really on the front lines with us whenever we are in public spaces. And they also support the arts, either through donations or helping us build when we do larger installation type work. So, we have like our core members, then we have our accomplices and people who show up to our programming to support our work. And then we have just the general community, and I

would say this doesn't necessarily mean anyone and everyone. We have some ticketed events, so people have to be somewhat interested to see what we have to say. But when we go into public spaces, I would say that our community is really [(3)] the progressive scene that needs to maybe go beyond voting, you know, like, the most progressive thing they do is they vote for Democrats. But what we want to do is really get to the root of issues through our work and to inspire people to think more radically outside of the box of just the electoral process. Because obviously we see that doesn't work alone. And so [...] we have our members, our accomplices, and then the general public, I guess you can say. We don't go into the more conservative areas. That's not really where we are invested. I think especially being a community of artists of color, you know, for purposes of safety, for purposes of like emotional labor, we are really relying on our accomplices and our white comrades to do the work of going into more right-wing areas. But our work is more to be in spaces that feel safe enough for us to be uncensored, but also still with the intention of creating massive, radical change. So, we're hoping for a ripple effect. If we can change progressive whites, then they can go and do the work to change or to at least challenge folks on the right. (Rozina Gilani)

Rozina's use of the word "accomplice" to describe their supporters aligns with the collective's self-image as a group that intervenes and disturbs the status quo from the margins. This threefold community model consisting of BIPOC artists, BIPOC and white supporters and a sympathizing left-leaning public develops based on individuals' amount of investment, their strength and abilities, as well as their ethnic identification. Accordingly, ARA's public performances are "in service of that [BIPOC] community, not necessarily to be heard by that community,"⁸³ but addressing a wider and whiter public. However, Rozina emphasizes their unwillingness to go into conservative areas where she fears for the collective's safety and emotional wellbeing. This attests to the growing polarization in the U.S. where members of opposing political ideologies are unable to or refuse to communicate. In this case, the aversion to address the other, namely white conservatives, stems from a fear of the emotional and physical consequences of being outnumbered when entering the physical space of the other. For ARA and their purpose of elevating marginalized voices, race and ethnicity is one marker on the ingroup-outgroup continuum⁸⁴ and is

absolutely central to the purpose of why we exist, because largely folks who have been marginalized or underestimated historically have had their narratives wiped from history, all the way from the education system to the systemic oppression that exists in the U.S. And while we are a sort of internationalist group of artists, we are living

⁸³ Interview with Rozina Gilani, August 1, 2023.

⁸⁴ I conceptualize ingroup and outgroup differentiation not as an impenetrable boundary but rather as a continuum where various attributes, such as language, complexion, traditions, values, wealth, personality traits, education and more, intertwine and define each other's position on the continuum.

in the U.S. on stolen land. We have a plethora, unlimited number of issues that we deal with and address in our work. And so, I would say that it's a mixture of the immigrant experience and the indigenous experience as being largely underrepresented or misrepresented. So, we often say we're reclaiming space, we're reclaiming our voices; we are not voiceless, but we have been spoken over, and so we're taking back that space. There is no shortage of platforms and representation for majority identities in the U.S., especially in the arts. So, this is our attempt at creating that for ourselves.⁸⁵ (Rozina Gilani)

Accordingly, race and ethnicity also serve as trustworthy attributes because this shared aspect is often, not always, paralleled by similar attitudes concerning equality, justice and politics. In pragmatic terms, race is an experience that people share. On the basis of these shared experiences people form their attitudes and behavior, and can relate better to others with similar experiences and attitudes. Similarly, the shared experience of race evokes shared visions of how to improve future experiences. All these factors contribute to the likelihood of trusting members of the same race, which in fact means individuals with the same experience of race. That race and ethnicity are important in assigning roles to members at ARA seems like an unequal process. Indeed, this would factually discriminate against non-PoC in other contexts, for example at work or entering restaurants and bars. However, in this case, fighting for marginalized and stigmatized communities within a dominant white setting is fighting for equality.⁸⁶ Eddie Glaude Jr. puts this notion of race in a nutshell with a pragmatic view of Black identity: He states that, first, “race-language and race identities are descriptions of certain schemes of interaction that help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience. They are tools used in our problem-solving activity” (Glaude Jr. 2001, 312). And second,

black identity is, in part, a consequence of the kinds of stories we tell about our beliefs, choices, and actions in the context of problem-solving activity. [...] This background of things that matter shapes our characters and informs our conduct; it amounts to a reservoir of experiences that is indispensable to any effort to successfully invade the future. (Glaude Jr. 2001, 312)

⁸⁵ Interview with Rozina Gilani, August 1, 2023.

⁸⁶ A related question is that of affirmative action. In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court banned affirmative action in college admissions (Montague, June 29, 2023) Two divided camps of protesters had previously called either for a ban or for the continuation of affirmative action. Contrary to common assumption, many Asian Americans supported the ban because they suspected that their large share in higher education institutions would result in them being disadvantaged by affirmative action programs.

Pragmatically conceptualizing race as shared experience allows one to see the meliorative purpose of groups like ARA: the common experience becomes the catalyst for improving future experiences.

Education and the role of performance and pragmatism

In artistic activism, performance and pragmatism as research practices are intertwined in that the artist pursues an educative goal through bodily practice and needs to inquire if and how to improve his or her work based on its practical effectiveness. ARA works with the popular education framework that approaches learning and action through the premise that, as Rozina describes,

all the knowledge we need, all of the solutions we are looking for actually exist within the lived experiences of everyone in the classroom. [...] when we look at our artists in the collective, each of us come from communities that have experienced either systemic or individual oppression. And we've learned through our embodied or our inherited trauma. And when we come together to find solutions, we have that knowledge. We have the ability to reimagine together. And so this way of collective learning sort of equalizes our experiences. There isn't a teacher and there isn't a student. We're all doing that for each other. We're all learning and instructing one another. So, it is a very horizontal structure and equitable structure which is not the traditional view of education. (Rozina Gilani)

This approach is grounded in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who in his influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000 [1970]) iterates how the oppressed can break the cycle of oppression and reclaim humanity through knowledge acquisition. The link between Freire and ARA stems from the collective's participation in workshops offered by the Highlander Research and Education Center whose founder Myles Horton was in close exchange with Paulo Freire (cf. Bell, Gaventa, and J. Peters 1990). Thus, the Center's popular education framework is influenced by Freire's theory. Freire criticizes the banking model of education that views the learner as an empty container that needs to be filled with knowledge – a hierarchical top-down approach closely linked to oppression. Freire posits another education approach: The problem-posing model is grounded in dialogue as equals where the teacher encourages the student to express their own experience and view of the world in order to achieve an understanding of the problem and search for solutions. Freire's bottom-up approach of education corresponds with John Dewey's conception thereof and aligns with his

emphasis on the value of experience for knowledge and, in the long term, democracy.⁸⁷ The critical moment of artistic mobilization, however, is assessing its impact. As elaborated earlier in this work, art's long-term value for individual and collective decision-making and action cannot easily be quantified. Although some research approaches the question (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Felski 2020; Mansour et al. 2016), measurement remains an obstacle (Stern and Seifert 2009). When asked 'how they know if something works,' Rozina replies:

there isn't one sort of set of information. It's 'was it successful, fulfilling, cathartic, powerful, I guess, for the artists who participate?' Because a big part of this [...] is for our community to find our voice and our space in the city, and to feel seen. So, when I go away from an event, a large part of what I look for is feedback from our community of artists. How is it for them? What was the experience performing, participating, being given that platform, being paid, when a lot of times our work is sort of taken for granted [...]? So, being able to get that feedback from them is a large part of how I determine 'did we do well?' And then in terms of audience, it is more about how generative our conversations are, because while you can assess how many people turned out and use that as a tool of measurement, I think for our purposes it is a lot about transformation. So, if we have conversations that we feel are transformative, where audience members are telling us, 'we never saw it this way. I read about this, but I never really understood it through the lens of someone who is experiencing it. How can I get involved?' People who want to join us on the Beltline. Every time we've done that performance, you know, people will ask us for our social media and they want to start following the work that we do: 'How do I get involved in your programming? How can I help? How can I help make this possible? Can I donate my technical equipment to help make the protests louder? For example, can I bring my drums next time?' Etc., it goes on and on. So, it's about how people want to either get involved or show us some sort of transformative experience that they've had, and they share that with us [...]. So, I feel like the tools for measurement are a little bit more – they can't be calculated as much as they can be, sort of, you know – it's an interpersonal sort of assessment. [...] I think even just having a few conversations [...] I remember a screening that we had right after the pandemic – we hadn't done any in-person programming for a while, and we had a film screening and turnout was low. Turnout was ten people when we normally would have fifty plus people show up, but those ten people stayed around and we talked for two hours after the film screening. So that to me is a huge success, maybe even more successful than having fifty people that watch a film and then go home right away, you know, and maybe don't have the space to unpack and process what they saw. (Rozina Gilani)

Instead of focusing on quantitative evaluations, ARA assesses their impact in qualitative terms through interpersonal analysis such as conversations with participants who share their solidarity, interest in donating and supporting, their learning and the transformative effect

⁸⁷ See chapter 2.3.

ARA's work had on them. In *Hooked* (2020), Rita Felski theorizes on the social dimension of art by drawing on the idea of attachment: Human beings regardless of their level of education can grow attached to art, and experience it as learning and even as transformative. While there is abundant literature on the role of art in activism,⁸⁸ contextualizing the value of art in ethnic and BIPoC-centered activism opens a new door to understanding art as,

a language that spans every identity. I'm a dancer and so I don't use my voice, my body is my voice in that sense. And I think that it requires nothing of my audience to connect to what I'm giving them. It doesn't require any level of education, it doesn't require entry into any class of society. It is a language that supersedes all of that, all of those social structures. And that's not to say that there isn't art that is inaccessible. I think that's a huge barrier that exists and that as a collective, we challenge through our art making. But I would say that art in its purest form and its most genuine and people centered approach is accessible and it's relatable and it's visceral and it's able to penetrate the human consciousness in a way that words cannot. [...] I would say that it's absolutely a vital part of creating change because, again, it requires nothing. It only gives, it doesn't take. And I think especially when talking about revolution, it's going to be front and center, if not leading the people. And I think that's why we can appreciate art from anywhere around the world. We can appreciate music in another language because it connects to a different sensibility that is universal. And so that's why I think it's the most powerful. But I mean, that's not to say it can exist in a vacuum. It needs to and it's more impactful when it can be interdisciplinary, and it can pull in the different ways of educating. (Rozina Gilani)

Regardless of formal education and literacy, art can “hook” people, to say it in Felski's words, and it can reach across linguistic and racial boundaries to an extent that people can relate to the art and the artist. In the vein of popular education, experiencing art in its most genuine form does not demand anything from its audience.⁸⁹

ATL Radical Art's work seems embedded in Dewey's strand of American pragmatism with its focus on democratic education and the role of the arts.⁹⁰ This is no surprise as his philosophy is steeped in many Southern social justice organizations like the Highlander Center to whom ARA is connected through visiting workshops. Thus, ARA's intention of

⁸⁸ Scholars from different fields investigate the relationship between art and activism. Here are some examples: In their edited volume, pedagogy scholars Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez and Alexandra Arráiz Matute (2020a) shed light on how youths all around the globe use art to protest for their interests; Eva Youkhana (2014) illustrates how urban art is used as a strategy to collectively re-appropriate public space; Kelly Leroux and Anna Bernadska (2014) analyze how individual art participation increases civic engagement; and Jennifer Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown (2011) report on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts on the various modes of arts participation in the U.S. that reach from attendance to art creation.

⁸⁹ This is the same approach as artist Deborah Roberts used in her exhibition for Art + Practice (see chapter 4.1.1.).

⁹⁰ Dewey's books *Art as Experience* ([1934] 1980) and *Democracy and Education* (1916) both discuss, in part, how art and creativity benefit societal co-habitation and democratic life.

breaking down racist and oppressive structures simultaneously follows in a pathway created by one of the most influential U.S.-American thinkers. The idea of self-reliant, democratic communities is at the heart of the U.S. historical narrative, and while it was conceptualized excluding Black and Brown people, today, BIPOC activists claim these U.S.-American traditions of community and democracy for their equality and justice driven work. Art's ability to stir emotions and the imagination, to connect people of various backgrounds, makes it a depository of tools for any kind of civic engagement and activism. When an audience member shares, "I read about this, but I never really understood it through the lens of someone who is experiencing it" (see #7) after watching ARA's performance, it is a clear indicator of a bridge built through art.

Another question that arises when considering performance and pragmatism as approaches to education is how the artists implement these in their work. How do the artists learn how to create activist art? How do they know which presentations are most impactful compared to others? Yes, art itself is the tool, but how does one learn how to put it into effect precisely?

[O]ur craft is largely informed by not only our identities, but our experience in community building. Most of us come from organizing backgrounds. I had my start in organizing through Palestine advocacy. So, I guess I could go back to what I learned in university through mobilizing students. And then later through [...] mass movement building through the End the Occupation work and Jewish Voice for Peace, but that's just my story. [...] all of us have been active in other organizations prior to this. So, we all come in with that lens. But in terms of our praxis, I think a lot of it's just been *trial and error*, to be honest. We have community partners who also have been doing the work. And we will come together and talk about what's worked in [...] their pasts, what's worked for us, what hasn't worked. And a lot of it is [...] between trial and error and maybe being inspired by things that have worked in the past, and shifting it to incorporate an artistic lens. So, for example, like marches – we didn't invent that, right? We didn't invent the march at all. So, the first thought you would think is, 'okay, July 4th, you go to a place where everyone is dressed up in their flags and getting drunk and just being super patriotic. That's going to be the BeltLine. Let's do a march. Let's intervene.' But as artists, we're like, 'okay, how do we create that – recreate that to incorporate the art?' So, it's really not a lot of new invention. Or, for example, a flash mob we did, that's in the history of American protests, or not even just American, but just internationally. Flash mob is popular everywhere, and it's effective in capturing people's attention. So, I wouldn't say that we have a particular theory that we work with. And maybe that is something we should be considering more in terms of how we move more intentionally. But I think it's also just that different campaigns require different approaches. And so being open to the versatility of and the diversity of tactics has been the organic way that we've moved. (Rozina Gilani; my emphasis)

Rozina describes how knowledge comes with the experience of doing things and through a trial-and-error approach. Again, this aligns with Dewey's pragmatism where he claims that knowledge and lived democracy can only be generated through action (Dewey 2020). Similarly, the acting out and evaluation of ideas is nothing short of performance as research (Ernst and Hutta 2020). Against this theoretical backdrop, ATL Radical Art's work is not only art on display but enacted research that is assessed through the audience's reaction and the artists' subjective perceptions.⁹¹ Similarly, the popular education approach, that builds on the foundation that all knowledge necessary for action is within the people present, finds its way into public space and opens up the traditional form of teaching to something that Dewey would consider successful education: Through doing and talking to each other the participants experience something new that possibly widens their horizons.

Through artistic networks of education and funding, progressive and pragmatic approaches to democracy as envisioned by John Dewey, Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, and many others continue to inform the practices of creative cultural organizing with a political vision. ATL Radical Art's methods mirror principles from popular education and meliorism through knowledge and experience – approaches that already informed the Civil Rights Movement's Citizenship Schools which began at the Highlander and continued through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Therefore, contemporary grassroots cultural activism in Atlanta and the South is embedded in a network of Southern social and political organizing that continues to draw from racial experience as a catalyst.

The organizations and artists examined in this work all engage in placemaking through transformative action. They are all attached to the places they live in, and work for democratizing them and making them more livable for the whole community. The scale of these places might extend that of the township or might just depend on different parameters; but grassroots activism pertains to local democratic action in the U.S.-American spirit. ATL Radical Art's work takes place in public space, as this chapter has shown. While the

⁹¹ ARA's, and particularly Rozina's, artistic approach to embodied learning became more tangible during her workshop on community trust-building and liberation art that she offered at the conference of the Graduate School Authority and Trust (GKAT) in May 2023 at Heidelberg University. One activity consisted of the participants, all of whom were interdisciplinary trust researchers, getting together in couples and staging a short scene for the others that represented a trust-related word which the audience had to guess. In this way, participants consciously embodied trust and observed how others practice trust in its manifold actions. Rozina's workshop thus put to use her artistic approach to performance as research that is often neglected in academic work (Ernst and Hutta 2020).

collective's work thus gets more attention, the first impression of Atlanta's city spaces prompts a different question: Why are there so many murals? This might be trivial, but in fact, the question is relevant for political mobilization in Atlanta, as the following analysis illustrates.

5.1.2. Beyond what meets the eye: The politics of public muralism

Anyone who strolls through Atlanta's neighborhoods – be it Downtown, Little Five Points, Pittsburgh or any other – quickly realizes: there are murals everywhere. Painted in vivid colors, in various styles and sizes, these vibrant art pieces make up an essential part of the city's landscape. An annual mural festival, *Forward Warrior*, and a successful public art organization, *Living Walls*, are only two efforts at creating public murals with strong social and political messaging. Encompassing commissioned art on private ground and independent art in public spaces, such as Krog Street Tunnel and Wylie Street, the public art scene of Atlanta has experienced an immense growth in the past years. When it comes to accessibility and grassroots activism, public art and muralism is front and center in this city. In this chapter, I demonstrate the mechanisms of public art in Atlanta through in-depth analyses of some works and their spatial and socio-political contexts. Social justice motivated public muralism offers a low threshold for access, and is a tool to create trust and social cohesion in the urban landscape. Atlanta's African American history further invites questions about the relationship between public art, race, and activism that are addressed. By unraveling the politics and practices behind public murals, I showcase both the extent and the limits of public art as urban citizenship.

One useful resource for Atlanta's public art is the "Atlanta Street Art Map", a hobby website operated by a retired engineer, that displays and archives art pieces that pop up in the city and even provides neighborhood maps with walking tours. For a non-native visitor these suggested walking tours prove valuable because they offer walkable routes in two senses: First, the routes are actually accessible for pedestrians, that is, there are no physical obstacles or closed roads, and, second, although occasionally sparsely frequented and empty, they have been walked by someone before which conveys a sense of safety for people who are not

accustomed to U.S. cities' infrastructure or norms of behavior in public. Some of the examples in this chapter stem from those suggested walking tours. Other murals were visited during a bicycle tour titled "Atlanta's Journey for Civil Rights" and offered by the company Bicycle Tours of Atlanta. And yet others were found on city strolls through various neighborhoods and the BeltLine.

Many murals that one can marvel at in Atlanta's outdoor gallery feature influential persona of the Civil Rights Movement and the ongoing fight for racial equality. In every neighborhood, portraits of national figures, like Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, or Colin Kaepernick, and regional and local figures, such as Selena Sloan Butler, John Lewis, Doris Derby or Stacey Abrams adorn the walls. The prominence of Black leaders and organizers illustrated on these artworks is not surprising given the city's history and its nickname, Black Mecca. A closer look reveals that Latinx artists' contribution to the scene is growing, with the organization Living Walls, the artist Yehimi Cambron and others having risen to fame in the last few years. Many, but not all, murals have a signature, and some include an Instagram account that links them to their artist. In addition, some murals feature an introductory note stating in which context the art was created, for example as part of a collective work or if they were commissioned.

While visitors might simply admire the abundance of public art, not every piece is in fact created on public walls. Many murals that are publicly visible are painted on private property with the owner's permission. This has caused conflicts between the City of Atlanta, artists and residents. In 2014, Atlanta Council member Joyce Sheperd spearheaded a legislation to ensure that public murals were approved by the City. Her argument involved the controversy around two murals created in 2012 by Living Walls artists that were criticized by the respective neighborhood communities for portraying offensive images (Blinder 2017; Jarvie 2014). Critics of the legislation, among them artist Peter Ferrari who organizes the annual mural painting event *Forward Warrior* and who I interviewed for this work, held the view that it impinged on the First Amendment; thus they filed and won a lawsuit against the legislation in 2017 (Erdozain 2023). This lasting debate on who pulls the strings in Atlanta's public art scene not only showcases fights for power, but it also opens questions about what is going on behind the scenes: Who are the artists and how do they choose their canvasses?

How do social justice inspired organizations or public art festivals operate? And how does all of this involve the local communities?

In chapter 4, I have described how the communities are involved in the creation and maintenance of two Los Angeles murals, the *Great Wall* led by artist Judy Baca and the *Crenshaw Wall* originally created by the collective Rocking the Nation. In contrast to Atlanta, Los Angeles has stricter rules for the creation of public art, thus L.A. does not offer as many diverse murals as Atlanta. In Atlanta, anyone can get property owners' permission to beautify their walls. This leads to an abundance of art pieces that are difficult to categorize in terms of the politics behind them: It is easy to compare two murals that are similar in messaging, but it gets complicated when they have been created under opposite conditions. Some serve as hidden advertisement for a company or restaurant where the artist was paid to create a specific image; others were created under artistic freedom where the owner simply provides the wall for free. This is a continuum, and the lines can get blurry when, for example, the owner provides the wall for free but with specific conditions regarding messaging or colors. The same is true in instances where the mural is commissioned but the artist is at liberty to paint whatever they wish. One difficulty about socially and politically motivated muralism on private property is the lack of community involvement – but then again, this can ensure more expressive freedom than City commissioned projects. The two sides of this coin are, one, that property owners have the right to do as they please on their own land, but, two, anything that is publicly visible should involve the public in decision-making. Most public murals addressing the civil rights legacy, portraying strong Black figures and messaging for equality and justice agree with Atlanta's majority Black residents (R. Burns 2012; Wolfe 2019). Other murals that, objectively viewed, are not directly connected to Atlanta or its residents and embrace artistic freedom more generously, are not necessarily accepted by residents, and community outcry can lead to their removal (R. Brown 2012). In the specific latter case, the two murals were created by a French and an Argentinian artist that Living Walls had invited to the city to paint. And while the murals required and obtained approval from the City, the residents were not asked their opinion on the intended work that they would have to

see every day.⁹² This controversy serves as an example of how complicated the social and political process behind an artwork can become.

The following examples in this chapter rather focus on public murals with an activist message created by artists with personal ties to Atlanta because they belong to the local community that governs, or should govern, their access to and participation in civic matters. There are countless public murals in Atlanta and each one of them has a story that remains hidden to the casual viewer. While this abundance ensures an unlimited pool of possible research objects, and a work solely focused on Atlanta's murals would indeed be a fascinating project, it also necessitates choices and restrictions for the present work. The murals were selected according to two pragmatic parameters: Are they accessible with public transport and on foot? Are several of them within walking distance / in the same neighborhood?

Parameter one ensures that many people, including me, can actually see the murals in their daily lives, for example when they commute. Parameter two, apart from making it easier to collect and contextualize the art for research,⁹³ hints at possible patterns that might help understand the value of public art: Why does an area have many murals and what do they convey? Taking the two parameters and the content limits of this chapter in consideration, the analyzed areas are:

- Castleberry Hill through Southwest Downtown
- Around Edgewood Avenue in Sweet Auburn
- The BeltLine Eastside Trail
- Krog Street Tunnel and Wylie Street in Cabbagetown

Public murals as materialized performance

Connecting public murals to the theoretical concept of performance might seem far-fetched. After all, the previous chapters have focused on the behavioral aspect of artists' and organizations' practices which could easily be tied to performance of ethnicity and race as well as to performances of citizenship. Regarding painted works in public space takes us one step further into the multifold dimensions of performance. Materialized objects play a significant

⁹² While the residents might have a right to be involved in such processes, Living Wall's former communications employee Alexandra Parrish likewise perceived the City's and the community's removal of the murals as a rushed and undemocratic endeavor (Parrish, November 06, 2014).

⁹³ All images are photographs taken by the author during a research trip in April 2022.

role in how someone performs and in what people perceive to be their identity and their objective. Muralism is deeply intertwined with the history of protest movements and of self-assertion against a dominant other, as the Latinx mural development discussed in chapter 4.2. exemplifies.⁹⁴ Atlanta has evolved into a complex multi-purposed canvas throughout the last decade with international and local artists, commissioned and independent murals, politically strong or diffused art. Thus, Atlanta's mural scene per se cannot be seen as symbolic – or can it? To the extent of their materiality, public murals shape places, regardless of their politics of creation. Visible murals always influence space because they are proof that somebody came to a particular place and took the effort and time to do something there – somebody cared about this place and infused it with meaning. This is especially significant in neglected urban areas where murals are even more prominent. To this extent, murals are in fact symbolic. It follows to wonder why an artist came to this place to paint this exact mural, and that is where one enters the politics behind the scenes. In a city abundant with diverse public murals, their shared symbolic meaning cannot extend to the dimension of protest. Nevertheless, precisely because murals always influence places, it is worthwhile to examine in which ways these works of art shape places and their spectators. How do public murals in Atlanta perform race and ethnicity? And what do they communicate in terms of social, political and civic participation? The materiality of public murals shapes the materiality of places. In contrast to pop up performances, series or rap music, murals stay at the same place for a longer period of time. Their full significance can only be experienced when standing in front of them and taking in the surrounding area. Public murals furthermore direct attention to and claim the places they exist in. If, as noted above, a mural comes to life in a neglected area, the blight becomes the more visible. Simultaneously, a mural is an enactment of belonging, and possibly of ownership if one is to use the Western concept of relating to a geographical space that one inhabits. These two observations logically lead to the question: Why is this place run-down if there are people who live here or care for it? In this way, public murals can assert criticism of City politics.

Next to the materiality of the mural itself, there is the materiality of the painted objects. Often, artists portray people in various situations. And often there are painted objects

⁹⁴ For further reference, Jürgen Streeck gives an account of how material objects become illocutionary symbols to 'do things' in the business context (Streeck 1996).

that the people either interact with or that, rather passively, accompany them. These objects are crucial to the mural's enactment of its message, as the analyses below show. Here, the performance of citizenship through visual representations of objects lies close at hand. Another dimension of performance is the act of mural creation where the artist performs their work and passersby can watch. The artist allows everybody to experience their work in progress and to comment or start a conversation. While this aspect is not part of this analysis because it requires onsite presence during artists' painting processes, I wish to point out that the creation of public murals invites residents and those walking by to join the process. This can be a valuable act of mutual learning for artist and spectator.

Castleberry Hill and Southwest Downtown

The neighborhood of Castleberry Hill is located southwest of Downtown and connects to downtown via the Peters Street bridge that crosses over Atlanta's cargo rail tracks. The area mostly consists of intact industrial buildings that date back to the 1800s, many of which are lofts, art galleries, businesses and restaurants today. According to the Black News Channel, Castleberry Hill is the "largest neighborhood of Black land owners and entrepreneurs" (theGrio Politics 2021), owing in part to the success and influence of Black constructor Hermann J. Russell who founded his plastering company in the vicinity in 1952 and invested in the surrounding area (E. Davis 2022). In the early nineteenth century, however, Castleberry Hill was called Snake Nation, a name deriving from the bootleggers and snake oil peddlers that resided in the renegade and rowdy enclave. This changed when Jonathan Norcross became mayor in 1851 and smashed Snake Nation and any shady activities in the area. Only after the Civil War was the neighborhood rebuilt with the efforts of merchant Daniel Castleberry – hence the name – and others (Bevington and E. Burns 2018). Due to its industrial nature until after World War II, the majority of residents were workers of color. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation's redlining map is blank where industrial districts are located, but the two adjoining districts are colored red, with D12 being composed of forty percent Black residents and ten percent Syrians, Greeks, Italians and Jews, and D18 of seventy percent Black residents.⁹⁵ Thus, when Herman J. Russell founded his company in the neighborhood in the early 1950s, the area was run-down and rather a blight than a flagship for the city.

⁹⁵ See Atlanta area codes D12 and D18 on the redlining map recreated through "Mapping Inequality" by R. K. Nelson et al. 2023.

Russell financially supported the Civil Rights Movement, and his legacy is well-remembered as a mural by Atlanta artist Sean Schwab, part of the artist collective The Loss Prevention, shows.

Sean Schwab's landscape mural in black, grey, white and red (fig. 12–16) was commissioned by the Russell family after Herman J. Russell passed away in 2014 and represents the history of Castleberry Hill and Atlanta (The Loss Prevention 2015). It portrays several things: Herman J. Russell and his construction company, the Snake Nation and railway industry, Atlanta baseball player Hank Aaron (with the “44” on his back) and the 755 Legacy Club, a 29c liberty torch stamp, a peach, the Olympic rings for the 1997s Olympic games, a Fox theater symbol for Atlanta's famous theater, a canon and (horseback) soldiers, a crowd with a banner reading “we the people,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Atlantan company Coca Cola, an Atlanta Falcons helmet, and an Indigenous person's head in profile with the traditional headdress. Most symbols serve as reminders for jubilant occasions and good causes, but a few, the canon and soldiers and the Indigenous person, remind the onlooker of wrongdoings and an ambiguous history, especially considering the position of the South during the Civil War. While the more prominent parts of the mural, especially MLK and Russell, highlight the city's admirable past, the smaller image of the canon and soldiers in particular hints at the wartime South without condemnation and without commemoration. As a mural commissioned by the family of a successful entrepreneur and social investor, this work is not a piece of protest but a piece of advertisement for the neighborhood. Nevertheless, it also serves an educative purpose because visitors can interpret the images and texts from afar, and maybe investigate their meaning further – as I have done here. The artist, Sean Schwab, is a local figure well-known for his large public portrait of Civil Rights activist John Lewis located on close to Edgewood Avenue in Sweet Auburn that he painted in 2012. The Loss Prevention create murals for communities, such as the one discussed, for small and big business and for real estate. Thus, the collective uses art for professional purposes, to live off the profits. This can include justice-oriented art but is not the goal of their creative work.

Another mural in the vicinity showcases a slightly different sort of production politics: The mural “Community Roots” created by artist Muhammad Yungai (fig. 17 and 18) in 2018 as part of a project called Off the Wall.⁹⁶ This project was created by the Super Bowl

⁹⁶ See www.offthewallatl.org for more information (last accessed October 11, 2023).

Host Committee and local art organization WonderRoot, which has since shut down, for the Super Bowl 2019 that took place at Atlanta's new Mercedes Benz Stadium. Off the Wall sponsored murals and community conversations about Atlanta's civil rights and social justice history, and aimed at making this accessible to Super Bowl visitors. Artist Yungai mainly creates murals in and around schools in Atlanta, inspired by civil rights leaders and the importance of education. His murals, like "Community Roots," portray Black school children and teenagers who stand in the legacy of civil rights activists like MLK, John Lewis, Coretta Scott King and others. The mural in question shows four Black college students, each wearing a hoodie from a local HBCU, and an elderly gardener. The four students' hoodies bear the names of Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse, Spelman and Morris Brown College. In addition, each student holds a floating vegetable in their hand: radishes, carrots, tomatoes and a cabbage. The artist stated that after talking to local residents, he wanted to connect their urban gardening and farming experience, with the area's Black education legacy (Off the Wall 2018). The mural hence claims urban space in two ways: First, by visually representing Black life, and second, by focusing on Black residents' urban gardening, an activity that often responds to food deserts or the unavailability of healthy foods which mostly hits BIPoC communities hardest (cf. Alkon and Agyeman 2011). In this mural's case, a non-profit organization teamed up with a commercial sponsor that sought to beautify the area for visitors to the Super Bowl in the newly built stadium. The artist primarily paints in Atlanta's schools and brings representations of Black activists and Black children into the learning environments of mostly Black classrooms. The motivations of the sponsor and the artist probably differed – the first intending to beautify for commercial success and the latter intending to bring representation and a positive outlook –, and while one can criticize the capitalist practice behind it, the mural was after all painted by a Black local artist who communicated with the residents about his plans for the wall and created something that people can connect to.

An art piece that carries, at least on second glance, more activist zest is one titled "We" (fig. 19) by Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, who goes by the artist name alonglastname. The mural is located in South Downtown and in walkable distance from Castleberry Hill via Peters Street bridge. Her mural not only differs in terms of style and color, but also in terms of the production politics and motivation behind it. Overlooking a parking lot, the wall features the bluish heads of two African American people – their kinky hair reveals their ethnicity

—, half visible from the top of their heads to their noses, as if swimming in a pink colored liquid. In between them the word “we” hovers in a pink asymmetrical shape and the background features various colorful objects, such as a basketball, a baseball, a shoe with wings and multiple geometrical shapes, set against a backdrop of clear-cut clouds in yellow, orange and blue. At the top left, the artist’s signature leads to her Instagram and at the top right the Instagram account of the sponsor is indicated. Atlanta-born Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya is the daughter of Thai and Indonesian immigrants and became known to a wider audience in the aftermath of the 2021 hate crime in Atlanta where six women of Asian origin were murdered. Amanda had been creating murals for AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) visibility before, and in the wake of rising anti-Asian hate her work catapulted her on the cover of TIME magazine’s March 29, 2021 issue (Di Liscia 2021). In 2023, the artist was selected to the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities that advises the President and the National Endowment for the Arts on cultural policies regarding topics such as civic engagement, community well-being, education, economic development, public health, and climate change. The Atlanta mural was created in 2018 through a collaboration with local non-profit organization ChopArt that provides homeless youth with funds and opportunities to express themselves through art. The artist therefore involved local youth who helped her in creating the mural. Today, Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya resides in New York and her artistic work includes murals, installations and public art campaigns that invite public participation. In the wake of rising anti-Asian hate during the Covid pandemic, the artist published a series of public works titled “I still believe in our city” throughout New York in collaboration with the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs that drew attention to Asian American residents’ essential work during the pandemic and called for solidarity both among the various AAPI communities and across broader ethnic and racial boundaries (Messman 2020; cf. also D’Souza 2021). Phingbodhipakkiya’s murals portray diverse Asian American people and Black Americans, mostly persons read as female, and through strategic visible placing, at Times Square for instance, they are likely to be viewed by thousands of people.

Not far, located under a bridge that crosses Piedmont Avenue SE and a five-minute walk from the Capitol, Yehimi Cambrón painted “We carry the dreams” (fig. 20) for the Off the Wall project in 2019. Cambrón’s parents are immigrants from Mexico who moved to the U.S. when their daughter was a child. Thus, Cambrón, like many child immigrants, is a

“Dreamer,” a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient who is granted certain citizenship rights, but nevertheless stays undocumented. Cambrón grew up on Buford Highway that parallels the I-85 heading out of Atlanta in the northeast direction. This area, spanning the two sides of Georgia State Route 13 and nicknamed the International Corridor, is home to an ethnically diverse population, most notably Mexican and Central American, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean. The Latin American Association Atlanta is located on this corridor, as well as numerous ethnic restaurants and shops. Yehimi Cambrón painted a mural here, too, of a monarch butterfly with one wing transformed into a book and the caption “here to stay” (fig. 21). The “We carry the dreams” mural in Downtown portrays four students of Freedom University, a local college for undocumented students and immigrants and others (Bagby 2019a). Around their portraits is written in capital letters,

We carry our parents’ & grandparents’ dream. It’s not just our voice, it’s the voice of their sacrifices. They will never have the privilege that we have to scream as loud as we can. When I share my story, I share generations behind us. We put ourselves in the frontlines, but we shouldn’t always have to fight. You can’t let your immigration status define you. You define you. (see SDT2)

The red and white stripes of the U.S.-American national flag are visible in the background along with five monarch butterflies. Cambrón often uses these butterflies as a symbol for human migration because the species migrates annually on a multi-generational long-distance route between North and South America that many of them do not survive. As envisioned by the Off the Wall project, the artist spoke to the portrayed students in preparation for her work, and the accompanying text is inspired by their experiences and stories (Bagby 2019a). In 2017, Cambrón painted the wall of a sandwich shop on Buford Highway as part of a collaboration between the non-profit organizations Living Walls and We Love BuHi in an effort to preserve the cultural identities on the corridor. Her mural showed, among other things, a monarch butterfly with one book wing and the caption “here to stay,” similar to the one on Buford Highway (fig. 21). However, after the mural was vandalized, the owner, herself Latin American, painted over the butterfly and the statement, explaining that she did not agree to any kind of political messaging on her wall (Bagby 2019b). As in the case of the two murals painted by a French and a Peruvian artist, a lack of communication paired, in this case, with an act of vandalism led to the mural’s erasure. It seems that Cambrón was granted artistic freedom on the private wall until the owner experienced backlash, and for the sake of

her (financial) security removed the mural. This is one example of how public opinions are discussed in the city's material dimension.

Sweet Auburn and the Old Fourth Ward: Art around Black Edgewood Avenue

From south Downtown it is only a short route to the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site that is located east of Downtown in Sweet Auburn and close to Edgewood Avenue with its abundance of murals. Sweet Auburn is named after Auburn Avenue that once used to be a bustling commercial street with shops and businesses owned by Black residents. The historic district includes a museum dedicated to MLK and the Civil Rights Movement, and Ebenezer Baptist Church where MLK preached. On the east, Sweet Auburn adjoins to the Old Fourth Ward, a historically Black residential area. MLK's birth home and other middle-class houses are accompanied by countless signposts, operated by the National Park Service, that tell the stories of African American residents who moved into the neighborhood in the late 1800s when it became majority Black. Today, the commercial district of Sweet Auburn is rundown and neglected, despite the gentrification that changed the nearby Old Fourth Ward and many other traditionally Black residential neighborhoods (Lartey 2018; Murry 2023). Nevertheless, countless public murals display efforts at revitalizing the neighborhood. More than anywhere else in the city, the artworks in this historically significant area are political and activist in nature, as the following examples, located around Edgewood Avenue that runs through Sweet Auburn and the Old Fourth Ward, show.

One of the most prominent artists in Atlanta's contemporary scene is Fabian Williams, a.k.a. Occasional Superstar, who paints "primarily just people of color in heroic circumstances in beautiful poses," as he states in an interview with art magazine *Burnaway* (Rojas 2018). In 2017, Williams created a 60 feet mural of Civil Rights icon Hosea Williams (fig. 22) that is part of his Civil Rights Superhero series where he portrays Black leaders as futuristic superheroes inspired by the X-men movies (Rojas 2018). The mural was commissioned by Columbia Ventures, a mixed-use urban development company that owns the Studioplex building featuring Williams' mural (Bainbridge 2017). Hosea Williams was active during the Civil Rights Movement along Dr. Martin Luther King, and led the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, Alabama in 1965 with John Lewis. The mural depicts Hosea Williams outlined in neon colors as if floating through the galaxy that surrounds him in black and dark blue colors. The halo around his head suggests both an astronaut's helmet and a saint-like

apparition that is added to by his posture: the right arm outstretched pointing at the viewer and the left arm stretched to the left pointing at large hieroglyphs. To his right, one can see his name written in large font and underneath it the Latin alphabet with corresponding hieroglyphs. This enables the viewer to decode the text on the left that reveals: Feed the people. This slogan alludes to Hosea Williams' non-profit foundation Hosea Feed the Hungry and Homeless, founded in the 1970s, that until this day provides warm meals and other essentials to the homeless and the poor. Not far from this work, another building is adorned by two of Williams' murals: The popular corner bar Sister Louisa's Church offers a portrait of Stacey Abrams, created for the 2018 gubernatorial election, and a painting of Colin Kaepernick (fig. 23), created during the 2019 public mural initiative #KaepernickBowl where three Atlanta restaurants honored former NFL player Kaepernick's protest knee fall in 2016 by commissioning public murals from local artists (McKibben 2019). On top of these murals are the words "Vote Ossoff Church Warnock Pray," which were created during the Senate runoff in 2022 and urge the viewer to vote for Democratic candidates John Ossoff and Raphael Warnock (fig. 23 and 24). On the opposite side of the street, another different kind of Williams's murals sits on the wall of an abandoned building. Created in 2016 in cooperation with the project Education Is Not a Crime that sheds light on Iran's governmental education discrimination against the Baha'i religious minority (Education Is Not a Crime), the mural's title is "The Paragraphalizer" (fig. 25). It satirically depicts the neglect of African American history education in U.S.-American schools. On a pink door in the center, it reads "Contraption," followed by a twelve-point instruction list:

1. Stack 400+ years of African American History into the Paragraphalizer ©
2. Compress history by 95 % in the Reducer
3. Condenser-printer prints compressed paragraphs on page from the Reducer
4. Page is passed down to the erase-o-matic arm-o-tron
5. Page falls out of public knowledge into books
6. Erase-o-matic arm-o-tron © grabs page and inserts it into U.S. History
7. U.S. history book springs up
8. The congressional arm-o-tron © inserts the edited U.S. history book into the Congressatron
9. Congress approves edited U.S. History book
10. U.S. History books are distributed around the country
11. Students receive edited books and learn about one portion of America
12. Some students notice that something is missing ... (fig. 25)

Surrounding these instructions, a machine, the Paragraphalizer, vividly illustrates each step of the process. The “stack of 400+ years of African American history” is represented by a tower of books that includes (auto)biographies, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), *Marcus Garvey: A Biography* (2019) by Stephen Johnson and *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright, nonfiction, like *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) by Frantz Fanon and *Up From Slavery* (1901) by Booker T. Washington, and novels, such as *Go Tell It to the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou and *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) by Sister Souljah. Step five in the process shows a single page with the title “African American history,” reading in capitalized letters,

Black people were slaves. Then Abraham Lincoln said free them. The Civil War happened. Blacks were finally free. George Washington Carver made a bunch of inventions from peanuts. Then the Civil Rights Movement happened. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, made some speeches and was killed. Now Black people can vote ... kinda. (fig. 25)

This, in the mural’s fiction, is the condensed version of African American history that eventually is approved by Congress and finds its way into schoolbooks. A smiling white schoolboy holds the history book in step 11, and in step 12, a black schoolboy holds the book in his hands with a very skeptical and confused look on his face. Much like Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya’s “We,” this mural, too, is the result of artistic collaboration with non-profit organization Education Is Not a Crime. The casual viewer cannot be aware of these differences in the fleeting seconds that she focuses on the artwork, passing by in a car or walking somewhere. Equally difficult to grasp in passing is the depth of the Paragraphalizer that demands the viewer to stop in order to be able to appreciate the artist’s full message: That public school education in the U.S. systematically neglects and fails to teach the wealth of African American history and knowledge.⁹⁷ Fabian Williams comments on this open criticism of government in *The Guardian*, and draws a connection to Atlanta’s legacy: “I don’t think me doing The Paragraphalizer, confronting education disparities, race and facts about black contributions, would have been OK in any other city” (Worthy 2018). This statement alludes to Atlanta’s growing public art scene and its pivotal role in a pattern that some identify as a Black art renaissance (ibid.). Originally from North Carolina, Fabian Williams moved to Atlanta

⁹⁷ See Fabian Williams’s interview with the Southerner for more information on the motivation behind this work (B. Brown, November 22, 2019).

after living in Los Angeles for a while – he attributes the reason for his move to OutKast and the city’s “vibe” (Bainbridge 2017). As is also exemplified in the analysis of Donald Glover’s series *Atlanta* and the urban rap scene with Killer Mike, it is the city’s Black history paired with its Black cultural output and its Southern Black heritage that inspires artists to stay and create. The performance of race, especially of Blackness, in terms of artistic production, seems to be perceived as more welcome in this city, gauging from Williams’s words. He, too, was among the group of artists who sued the City for its ordinance that would impose strict regulations for publicly visible art on private property (Blinder 2017).

Around the corner, Black artist Charmaine Minniefield, a.k.a. Black Angel ATL, created a mural titled “Watch me learn” (fig. 26) as part of the same collaboration with Education Is Not a Crime in 2016. The mural is inspired by a black and white photograph taken of Dr. Doris Derby in 1965 and depicts parts of the U.S. American national flag next to her. Dr. Derby, who died in 2022, was a photographer, chronicling the struggles of rural Black residents and the Civil Rights Movement, and taught African American studies at university (Collins 2022). Another mural by Charmaine Minniefield (fig. 27) is located nearby and portrays African American civil rights activist Ella Baker, again inspired by a black and white photograph, against a colorful background of navy, red and yellow shapes. In quotation marks, it says, “We who believe in FREEDOM [sic.] cannot rest until it comes” (fig. 27). This mural, like Yungai’s “Community Roots” in Castleberry Hill, was created for the Off the Wall project in 2019 and commissioned by a collaboration between the City’s Office of Cultural Affairs and non-profit organization WonderRoot (Minniefield 2019).

Temporal art on the BeltLine

The BeltLine is the largest urban development project that Atlanta has seen in a long time. As a public place, it is a location with great exposure to a diverse audience. Hence, art on the BeltLine reaches from graffiti and tagging (fig. 28), over protest art (fig. 29–33) and pop-up performances (see previous chapter) to commissioned murals (fig. 34–36) and complex art installations. The photographic examples are all located on the Eastside Trail that runs from the Botanical Garden in Midtown southwards crossing Edgewood Avenue and through Krog Street Tunnel to Reynoldstown. Most of the examples, regardless of whether they are commissioned or not, adorn the temporal fences of the construction sites. The protest art/tagging for Black Lives Matter on figures 29 and 30, for instance is located in front of a large site

where new office buildings are built. The large yellow lettering on the pavement, reading “Black lives matter” (fig. 31 and 32) sits just in front of that fence. One cannot miss this protest logo on a stroll on the Eastside Trail.

Figure 32 most curiously portrays the clash of protest art and urban development in terms of new construction and green spaces. In the foreground, parts of the large yellow “Black lives matter” writing on the pavement are visible, and in the center of the photograph, the construction wall bears the same writing in white on a black background. This writing is adorned with the names of African Americans who were killed by police, like Eric Garner, Bettie James, Medgar Evers, Breonna Taylor and more. Behind this construction wall, two tall and glossy unfinished buildings with glass fronts are visible. Further in the background, two cranes are set against the high-rises of Atlanta’s downtown. In front of the construction wall, people are strolling and walking their dogs on the BeltLine. Similarly, figures 33 through 35 are located on construction walls and therefore determined to be taken down once the construction is finished. The artwork on BL6 shows the slogan “Lift every voice” against a black background. The first word is in green, the second in yellow and the third in red. These are the pan-African colors that are often used in connection with Juneteenth, Kwanzaa and to indicate Black-owned businesses. The slogan is accompanied by drawings of African masks that are also present in figure 29 underneath “George Floyd,” and it is therefore likely the same artist created them. As there is no signature or other kind of identification, it is safe to assume these pieces are part of a larger Black Lives Matter protest and were not commissioned.

In contrast to these protest works, the murals in fig. 34 and 35 are part of a paid collaboration called “A reflection of change – artists of color mural activation” created in 2021 and to be found on the Instagram account @areflectionofchange. The participating artists are Erica Chisholm, Erin Nine, Jiggy Korean, Lord Yatta, Michelle Kee and Ruby Chavez, who have all been active in the city’s art scene before. The commercial real-estate company New City Properties commissioned the wall with the BeltLine Inc. and its curator-in-residence Courtney Brooks (Farshi 2021). The mural “Be the change” by Ruby Chavez (fig. 34) portrays the slogan set against a colorful background. On its right two Black children are sitting on a Confederate equestrian monument that, according to online magazine Arts ATL, is the one that once held Robert E. Lee (Farshi 2021). One of the children holds a poster

enscribed with the words “Together We Can.” The two paintings by Eric Nine (see BL8) bear the slogans “He can cry” (left) and “She can run the world” (right) respectively. The left mural shows a Black American dad holding his little son in his arms, set against a blue background with pink clouds. The right painting shows a little Black girl in a pink tutu confidently marching with closed eyes. Behind her, a blue and green globe is floating on a yellow surface.

On figure 36, one can see a Black woman with sunglasses, her hair tied into knots with red, yellow and green scrunchies. Her hand gestures an upside-down V, and in the background a crowd and camera flashes are visible in a blurred way. Triangular shapes float through the whole scene hinting at Doritos chips because the company, along with the advertising company Overall Murals, collaborated with artist Quake for this work of art. In the lower right corner, the artist put his Instagram account. On his Instagram account, Quake’s accompanying post reads “Being a Atlanta native, I wanted to show the upcoming new business and travelers to THIS city to never forget where WE came from 🌍. As long as I’m here, I’ll always pay homage 🇺🇸” (@quakesolo 2021). The politics behind this mural is commercial – Doritos paid for its creation –, but the first thing the Atlanta native viewer notices is a Black woman in a good mood whose hand gesture refers to “A-Town down,” a slogan made famous by rapper Usher who is from Atlanta. Coupled with the artist’s statement, it becomes clear that the mural displays pride to be from Atlanta. This is a subcultural and hyperlocal performance of race.

Krog Street Tunnel, Wylie Street and the *Forward Warrior* mural festival

Walking east on Edgewood Avenue one reaches the BeltLine Eastside Trail that crosses Edgewood Avenue. Following the trail southwards, Krog Street Tunnel with its chaotic abundance of graffiti leads out to Wylie Street in the neighborhood of Cabbagetown – the street with the highest public mural density in Atlanta. Since 2012, artist Peter Ferrari has been organizing the annual *Forward Warrior* mural event where artists come together and paint their own projects on a piece of wall. In our interview, he tells me that it started out as a small event for street artists to get together and display their work, and later evolved into a popular public mural festival: First, requested by an art gallery in Castleberry Hill and later by residents in Cabbagetown who at the time had an issue with tagging in their neighborhood. Peter tells me,

there's a lot of graffiti on the [Wylie Street] wall and they would go out and paint it and you know, the neighbors didn't like this sort of constant tagging that was going on. And you can imagine since you've seen the wall, it was just a big blank canvas for whoever wanted to go up there and paint whatever they wanted on it. So, the neighborhood was looking for some solutions to that, and they came up with the idea of what's called the Wall Keepers.⁹⁸ (Peter Ferrari)

In 2014, Peter became one of the Wall Keepers and organized the first *Forward Warrior* event there:

First of all, it was just sort of, you know, it got rid of the graffiti issues in the neighborhood, and I think that that was sort of their first priority. But then as the art started to grow and we started to have more and more artists and the number of artists for the event grew, you know, it really became kind of a mark of like, you've made it in Atlanta, the Atlanta public art scene. You know, when you get invited to that, it's sort of your foot in the door to all these other opportunities. And there's a lot of artists who painted their first wall with *Forward Warrior* and are now, you know, professional mural artists. And it sort of started their career. It was one of the first spots that they were able to paint. And then the more that that's happened and other people have seen it, you know, it's kind of like a notch in your belt of an Atlanta artist invited to do *Forward Warrior*. It's one of those things where there's no way I could have predicted what it's really become at this point where we have 40 plus artists every year come out and we paint over some of the old murals, we refresh stuff, and it's really taken on a life of its own, which is so cool. (Peter Ferrari)

The mural event evolved out of the community's need for controlling and beautifying one of the neighborhood's prominent walls, and the annual gathering organically grew with more artists joining to display their art. Eventually, according to Peter, participating and painting on Wylie Street became synonymous to artistic success and thus a door opener to more public presence and commissions. *Forward Warrior* thus enables access to a wider viewer range and to financial opportunities. The philosophy, meanwhile, is to stay away from corporate advertising as much as possible, as Peter states:

I try and I keep it very simple. I don't want any sort of corporate backing, you know, we don't want "Home Depot presents Forward Warrior" or anything like that. And we do get offers quite a bit from different companies that want to put branded content on the wall. And I really like the sort of purity of the event in that it's artist driven, artist focused. When people come out there, I don't ask for detailed sketches of what they're going to paint, I just make sure that it's something that's appropriate for public consumption. And I say, 'hey, is it something that you would be okay with your ten-year-old cousin seeing something like that?' and people get it, and that includes political messages and things that are relevant to what's going on in the city of Atlanta and the country as a whole and the world as a whole. (Peter Ferrari)

⁹⁸ All of Peter Ferrari's quotes stem from our interview conducted online on April 23, 2022.

This, however, also signals that who gets chosen to paint depends on Peter's decision. He elaborates that

it is a bit of a dictatorship currently. It's kind of what I say goes. [...] I get emails throughout the year, 'how do I get involved?' And I just tell people, 'hey, send me your portfolio and I'll let you know.' We have just recently got an advisory board, a *Forward Warrior* Advisory Board, so that we can sort of spread the responsibilities of any kind of things that need to be decided by a board. You know, because we do get grants from the city. And I think it's important for the city to see it as a communal effort. But [...] knowing that there is sort of one final decision maker just makes things move much more smoothly. And obviously, it can be quite a responsibility. I do have certain parameters that I always operate under. I want to make sure that we have an even split of men and women, a diverse crowd of folks. Because the early events – you know, I was just kind of pulling from who are the local street artists, and I learned pretty quickly that that is heavily weighted with men. It's mostly men who are running around in the streets at night, painting on things. So, I needed to sort of become more intentional over time. And it's just become more and more important to me over time to realize how many barriers to entry there are for certain groups of folks and how this opportunity, like I said, can really open a lot of other doors for them. So, I take that very seriously, and that's a really important part of my mission as a curator, to make sure that I'm getting a really good cross-section of all artists in the city. (Peter Ferrari)

Indeed, the aforementioned artist Fabian Williams painted Martin Luther King from his Civil Rights Superhero series for *Forward Warrior* around the time his career started to flourish. He modified and restored his mural which is still on Wylie Street during the following *Forward Warrior* events. Figure 37 from 2022 is similar in style to the Hosea Williams mural and shows Martin Luther King in neon colors floating through the galaxy with the words “wake up” written above. Here, too, his left hand points away into the distance and his right hand points at the viewer. The artist added to the original in the following years: Underneath, in a bed of orange color, lie two Black children sleeping, as if dreaming of Martin Luther King superhero. During the mural festival in 2023, Williams further added a portrait of Fulton County District Attorney Fani T. Willis who is responsible for the indictment of former president Donald Trump and others on grounds of attempting to overturn the 2020 election results in Georgia (CBS News 2023). Willis leads the case and was responsible for bringing in all defendants into the Fulton County jail for mugshots – Donald Trump's photo was afterwards released and went viral as the first mugshot ever taken of a former president. On September 20, 2023, Fabian Williams posted an update of his mural on his Instagram account:

Updating the dream with the only person this far to get a mugshot of a former president, this has been wildly out of control. Plenty of people still don't think he's going

to see any jail time, even with the RICO.⁹⁹ In the meantime, she got ‘em. It took Fulton County DA @faniforda to bring him in for the photo. I believe when MLK was talking about the dream, this was part of it. A black woman with the power to hold a former president responsible for trying to steal an election. Atlanta has been playing a major role in keeping the democracy, a democracy. Stay tuned as the dream progresses, we will see progress. (occasionalsuperstar 2023)

The artist connects the Civil Rights Movement legacy to contemporary efforts for racial justice and the fight for democracy in the U.S. Moreover, he incorporates current developments into his public art, thereby evolving his murals to tell contemporary stories. The temporality of street art is what makes it politically relevant, because works appear and vanish with socially relevant themes. However, this also makes the topic difficult to study. These works, as is also the case with many other *Forward Warrior* murals, are painted over sooner or later, so there is little chance to revisit a piece of art. Some of the murals that were photographed for this project no longer exist, having been overpainted during two more *Forward Warrior* festivals that have taken place since.

Other murals on the *Forward Warrior* wall feature similar political messaging, such as the artwork by Joe Dreher, a.k.a. JoeKingATL, that shows an African American man in black and white – who can be easily perceived as Malcolm X but is actually Atlantan video producer Brian Phillips – with a cappy emblazoned with the word “Atlanta” in capital letters, his hand pointing to his head like a gun (fig. 38). The artist first painted this in 2015 and modified it throughout the years, just like Williams. By spring 2022, the slogan “Black lives matter” had been written across the figure’s chest. During *FW* in September 2022, Joe Dreher overpainted the slogan and instead added a new version of Brian Phillips, this time with a cappy featuring a fist (joekingatl 2022). Like Fabian Williams’s mural, this too parallels events that concern society at large. Another mural with political interest was painted by artists Jessica Caldas, Angela Bortone and Krista Jones from the Living Melody Collective during *FW* 2018 and titled “Lo Que Hereda No Se Hurta” (“what is inherited cannot be stolen”) (fig. 39).¹⁰⁰ It shows three mother and child pairs in black and white against a purple background with tile shapes that evolve into a pink wire fence. At the bottom of the painting,

⁹⁹ The RICO statute (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) enables district attorneys to prosecute organized crime more effectively by allowing to tie together apparently unrelated crimes that have a common objective. It also enables severer penalties and permits the defendant to be convicted separately for the underlying crimes and the violation of RICO (U.S. Department of Justice 1970).

¹⁰⁰ I thank my colleague Valentina López Liendo for helping me with the translation.

“#keepfamieliestogether” and “#familiesbelongtogether” present the artists’ intention. In fading dark purple letters, the heading and the text of the UN resolution 44/25 can be seen. This resolution is the result of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that took place in 1989 and ensures children’s rights. This mural thus addresses the human rights and children’s rights violations that occurred at the U.S.-Mexican border in early 2018 where children were intentionally and forcefully separated from their families during the Trump presidency in order to discourage families from immigrating to the U.S. The repercussions of these actions reverberate today with many families still separated and children lost in the U.S. foster care system (Miriam Jordan 2023).

Apart from political messaging, some artists use the space on Wylie Street independent of *FW* as a memorial canvas that allows for public grieving. Portraits of deceased people whose achievements or death circumstances matter to society adorn the wall, and viewers commemorate them by putting down flowers and other paraphernalia. One such example is the portrait of 26-year old Colombian American Laura Calle, an arts advocate and member of Living Walls who died in 2015, painted by Lunar Nutre Yerbos (Terrell 2015; fig. 40). Another example is the mural dedicated to 27-year-old Mariam Abdulrab (fig. 41), an Atlanta resident who was abducted and killed in 2021 by a convicted sex offender. The mural was created by multiple unknown artists. These memorial murals are ad-hoc creations that respond to a public need for collective grieving, and as the fresh flowers underneath both portraits show, this need continues to exist even years after the incidents. In this way, public murals not only open access to art participation, but also to public grieving and protest that can potentially influence law making: Mariam Abdulrab’s brutal murder and the ensuing public outcry led to the passing of House Bill 188, also called Mariam’s Law, that mandates electronic monitoring and toughens requirements for sex offenders released from prison (*WSB-TV* 2023).

In a similar vein, on the part of Wylie Street leading the other direction from Krog Street Tunnel, a group of artists led by Sam Newby, created the “Solidarity” mural in honor of the victims killed during the Atlanta spa shootings in 2021 (fig. 42). The mural was sponsored by community organization *Bad Asian ATL* and the initiative *Civic Walls*. In the center of the mural, two multi-colored hands clasp against a white background. On the left, it says in bold black capital letters “Black lives matter” against a yellow background and on the right, in

bold yellow capital letters against a black background, “stop Asian hate.” Atlanta-based marketing strategist Toyin Adon-Abel created *Civic Walls* in 2020 as a temporal project that focused on the Black experience in reaction to the killing of George Floyd (Hauk 2020).¹⁰¹ The project realized six protest murals in southeast Atlanta, among them the “Solidarity” mural, a “History of good trouble” mural by artist Choze (fig. 43–45), honoring the life of congressman John Lewis, and a work by Peter Ferrari stating “Paintings ain’t policy! Criminal justice reform now,” located in Cabbagetown. This project has become inactive since after the “Solidarity” mural collaboration. Similarly, *Bad Asian ATL* came into existence in March 2021 after the Atlanta spa shootings to mobilize people for protests, and is still sporadically active in matters that concern the AAPI communities in the U.S. However, gauging from their online presence, their activity waned after having created the two murals in response to the Asian women’s killings in 2021.

The temporal nature of public mural initiatives is, on the one hand, crucial to its immediacy and reaction to contemporary events. On the other hand, this precise characteristic poses an obstacle to long-lasting and rooted action that could transform into movement. This resonates with Talja Blokland (2015) and David Harvey (2008) who believe that a *disconnectedness* of claims prevents urban change. The public mural scene in Atlanta with its variety of organizations and projects, such as Living Walls, Forward Warrior or Civic Walls, and its lack of city regulations enables easy access to creating art with limited funds. The creation processes often involve local residents and communities of purpose, for example collective grieving, and thus sustain networks of like-minded people, possibly with similar ethnic backgrounds or experiences. The artists, either individually or collectively, engage in socially and politically critical thinking when creating their activist murals. While not all public art is in fact politically motivated, there is an abundance of public murals in Atlanta that does at least bear a connection to the city’s African American and Civil Rights legacy. For the viewer, it can be impossible to interpret the motivation and funding behind a mural: Some are simply fun to look at and no political message might be evident even if their creation process was highly socially or politically motivated – as in the case of Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya’s “We” mural. Other murals’ message is intently political and created in partnership with

¹⁰¹ *Civic Wall*’s website no longer exists, but the murals can be viewed on their Instagram account (@civicwalls) and on the Atlanta Street Art Map.

international organizations, like Fabian Williams's "Paragraphalizer." Yet other artworks represent the Black local community but are commissioned by corporations for marketing purposes, such as Muhammad Yungai's "Community Roots." The murals' creation politics are opaque to the viewer and do not impinge on her first impression of their message, nor on their educative quality. Viewing Atlanta's murals, the visitor learns that she is in a traditionally Black, liberal and politically engaged city. The exact effects of these murals can hardly be measured, but a feeling of engagement and ethnic empowerment persists that invites residents of color and others to join. However, as these murals are temporal, this environment remains fragile and depends on the efforts of individual artists, like Fabian Williams, Charmaine Minniefield, Peter Ferrari, and on institutional support, such as the abolishment of the public art ordinance and the City's interest in public art, materializing for example through the annual *Elevate* art festival. In the neoliberal era, cities strive for global recognition, and each follows their own path to reach their place in the global order (Sassen 2000; Gerhard 2007). Beautifying city landscapes and attracting international visitors through investing in the arts is one strategy that Atlanta follows. This economically motivated plan must be criticized because many city policies do not primarily aim at justice and equality for its residents. Moreover, against this political context, investment in the arts renders the artistic product's intention doubtful, as the art is not created for art's sake or out of an urge to bring forth an important message. However, as the examples in this chapter exemplify, the relationship between art and creation politics is more complex and moves on a continuum. Albeit difficult to distinguish, there is socially and politically meaningful art that targets race-related urban issues and is funded by commercial actors.

The public art scene in Atlanta mirrors the city's civil rights legacy and Black history, as has become clear. While the casual viewer might be ignorant of public murals' hidden politics, the creators are aware and form their own networks of politically and socially engaged artists. They perform citizenship and identity in their murals through colors (green, yellow and red for a pan-African connection) and symbols (Egyptian hieroglyphs for African origin; a Monarch butterfly for migration; the U.S. flag for national belonging). What and who is visible in urban space also includes the material dimension of muralism. Public art in Atlanta negotiates belonging, informs about current debates in society, and mobilizes to take action in any possible way. It also facilitates communities of purpose, for example to mourn

lost ones, where artists and viewers can join to take collective action. While Latinx and Asian American public art is increasing, paralleling the shifting demographic, most murals in Atlanta continue to engage with city's Black legacy. The next section, therefore, focuses on Black cultural output and how it relates to civic participation in the Southern capital of Georgia.

5.2. A Black Southern legacy of civic visions

I have alluded to a distinct Southern history of activism in the previous chapters. Atlanta's growing Black cultural output in the past few decades taps into a specific tradition of African American art, organizing and introspection. In 2008, the state of Georgia has introduced tax incentives for the movie industry to lure more jobs to the region and thus boost the economy (W. Meares et al. 2020). Tyler Perry, one of few African Americans who own a major film studio, created his Tyler Perry Studios in Atlanta and opened a large production site southwest of Atlanta in 2015. The studios have since established themselves as a catalyst for both Black and non-Black films and are famous for productions like *Black Panther* (2018) or *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022). Perry's studios is responsible for a large share of Atlanta's growing creative industry, and is one reason why Atlanta has earned the nickname Hollywood of the South (Fennessy 2018). The job opportunities in the creative industry attract young and liberal-minded individuals. In traditionally Black Atlanta, this industry is led by people of color. Not only the film production economy but also the music industry exemplifies the Black cultural legacy that the city offers. Democrat Stacey Abrams, who ran for the Georgia state governor's office in 2018 and 2022 against Brian Kemp, teamed up with popular Atlanta rappers during her campaigns and during the 2020 presidential election where she mobilized constituents to vote (C. Lee 2018). Her strategy of mobilization through popular entertainment, especially with Black cultural agents, has been widely acclaimed as a contributive factor for the swing state's Democratic turnout in 2020 (McLaughlin 2020). In Atlanta, therefore, ties between the Black cultural industries and politics are used to influence decision-making. The following two analyses of the series *Atlanta* and rapper Killer Mike's

performance showcase how the spirit of civic engagement and political awareness features in creative work.

5.2.1. Afrosurreal possibilities: Transforming the city in the series *Atlanta*¹⁰²

Between 2016 and 2022, the series *Atlanta* aired on U.S.-American TV. Created and directed by Donald Glover, who is well-known for his musical hit “This Is America” from 2018, the four seasons follow the rise of fictional Atlantan rapper Alfred a.k.a. Paper Boi (Brian Tyree Henry) and the everyday lives of his friends: his cousin Earnest (Donald Glover), his best friend Darius (Lakeith Stanfield) and Earn’s on-and-off girlfriend Vanessa (Zazie Beetz). Many newspaper articles comment that *Atlanta* “depicts a truth of Black experience unseen on TV” (Hughes 2016) and praise what Glover “unapologetically shows us about our city” (Mike Jordan 2016). Journalist Michelle Ofiwe even states that the show “changed the way Black stories are told on television” by looking at “true-life experiences through a hyper-realistic and absurd lens” (Ofiwe 2016). A look at the social media platform Reddit shows how invested fans are in discussing the details of this series – from actual places they recognize in the episodes over Darius’s unique clothing style to metaphysical interpretations of objects and cameo appearances. Apart from fandom and newspaper reviews, *Atlanta* has had a more tangible impact, too: In one of the earliest episodes, Alfred and Darius enjoy chicken wings at an actual popular local franchise called J.R. Crickets (S. Glover 2016a). Because the barman admires Paper Boi’s music, he preps their lemon pepper wings – an actual Atlantan variation of the dish – with sauce and blue cheese. Alfred and Darius are exhilarated to be served “lemon pepper wet”, a variation that does not actually exist, and the surreal golden glow that radiates from the dish underlines its treasure status. The series became so popular that the real J.R. Crickets started offering “lemon pepper wet” on their menu (Weiss 2021).

¹⁰² A modified version of this chapter has been submitted for publication in a forthcoming volume edited by Sarah Earnshaw under the working title *Sense of Placing*. This project results from the conference “Here, There, and Somewhere in Between: Placing, Practicing, Configuring” that took place in Eichstätt, Germany in November 2022.

As fans and reviewers notice, the series successfully portrays and impacts reality. How did *Atlanta* become a force in the cultural landscape and why does it matter to civic participation? This chapter investigates the mechanisms that make the series truthful and result in real-life effects. I claim that both the production politics and the narrative truthfully represent Black life in the city of Atlanta by performing Blackness in a way that ties in with contemporary Afrosurrealism. This truthfulness is perceived by both viewers, who discuss the series in reviews and social media platforms like Reddit, and journalists. The strategies for *Atlanta*'s impact can be found in its truthful performance of Black identity and its Afrosurreal aesthetic that are set against the contemporary discourse of a Black Renaissance. After revisiting these concepts, I analyze selected scenes and episodes to illustrate the practices and instances that make *Atlanta* a trustworthy cultural product and an agent of social change. I interweave viewer comments and reviews in my analysis to exemplify the show's real-life impact.

Production politics, Black Renaissance, and Afrosurrealism

Against the backdrop of a rising number of cultural products created by and representing Black individuals, contemporary cultural and social observers speak of a Black Renaissance that has emerged in the mid-2010s. Ibram X. Kendi, for instance, states that “if the Harlem Renaissance stirred Black people to see themselves, if the Black Arts Movement stirred Black people to love themselves, then, the Black Renaissance is stirring Black people to be themselves. Totally. Unapologetically. Freely,” and this sentiment has “coincided with a moment when white executives, out of shame or guilt, goodwill or good (money) sense, began to seek out our stories and storytellers in greater numbers” (Kendi 2021). As examples, Kendi mentions writers, artists and producers like Ava DuVernay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Cardi B, Issa Rae, Lupita Nyong'o, Viola Davis, Raoul Peck, Patrisse Cullors, Beyoncé, Amanda Gorman and many more, who have firmly established themselves in the cultural sphere in the last few years. These artists' and creators' performance of race is an act of identity formation that serves as a truthful portrayal of cultural Blackness. However, a growing Black cultural output and the interest of white executives also raises questions about a commodification of Black culture and might raise suspicions about artists' truthfulness. Some works are being criticized for selling out or for catering to whites only, but it is crucial to be aware of the capitalist structures that no cultural product can escape if it wants to be seen. Nevertheless, to identify whether a cultural product is perceived as truthful in its representations and claims, there are

two levels to scrutinize: The production politics – who makes the decisions, who finances, who writes and directs, etc. – and the narrated world that is being fabricated in the product.

Atlanta is created by Donald Glover, with each episode written and directed by different people. While the direction mostly lies with Japanese-American filmmaker Hiro Murai (who created the music video for “This Is America”) and Donald Glover himself, the scripts are created by a variety of screenwriters such as Donald Glover’s brother Stephen Glover, Nigerian-American Ibra Ake (who was also involved in “This Is America” and in Beyoncé’s visual album *Black Is King*), Salvadorian-American Francesca Sloane, African-American Stefani Robinson, Nigerian-American Taofik Kolade, African-American Jordan Temple, and many more. Naming these artists’ ethnic origin is important because Donald Glover had full and conscious control over selecting the staff – and almost all of them are people of color (Friend 2018). The staff’s cultural and ethnic identity thus plays a crucial role in what Glover envisioned for his team and the series. Moreover, as reviewers observed, “most members of the all-black writer’s room are Atlanta natives” (Coscarelli 2016), and Donald Glover admitted that he “only cared about what people in Atlanta thought. Like, you can’t name a show Detroit and have Detroit people hate it. I really only cared if my parents, cousins, and everyone in Atlanta thought it was cool” (Lockett 2017). This geographical focus is a crucial part of truthfully portraying Black life throughout the episodes as the narrative frequently pulls from local knowledge both in terms of settings and in terms of cultural knowledge, as I show.

Another aspect that situates *Atlanta* within a Black cultural tradition and attributes an activist agenda to the show is its Afrosurreal style that did not go unnoticed (Bakare 2018; B. Butler 2022; Poniewozik 2018). The term was first used in the 1970s by writer Amiri Baraka to describe writer Henry Dumas’s

skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one. The stories are fables; a mythological presence pervades. They are morality tales, magical, resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, mystery, implied revelation. But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear. (Baraka 1988, 164)

Atlanta is both a magical tale of absurdity and a story about real life, and thereby aligns with Baraka’s vision of Afrosurreal creation. Baraka’s statement, “[t]he world of [Henry Dumas’s short story] *Ark of Bones* [...] shares a black mythological lyricism, strange yet *ethnically* familiar! Africa, the southern U.S., black life and custom are motif, mood and light, rhythm,

and implied history” (Baraka 1988, 164; emphasis in original) mirrors Donald Glover’s goal to please his family and friends in Atlanta with a story they can relate to – a story that is “ethnically familiar” to them. According to journalist D. Scott Miller’s “Afrosurreal Manifesto” (2013), Afrosurrealism strives to uncover an invisible world that stretches beyond the visible. It uses “excess as the only legitimate means of subversion, and hybridization as a form of disobedience,” “distort[s] reality for emotional impact,” and “strive[s] for rococo” (D. S. Miller 2013, 116).¹⁰³ Afrosurrealism

rejects the quiet servitude that characterizes existing roles for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, women and queer folk. Only through the mixing, melding, and cross-conversion of these supposed classifications can there be hope for liberation. Afrosurrealism is intersexed, Afro-Asiatic, Afro-Cuban, mystic, silly, and profound. (D. S. Miller 2013, 116)

However intriguing, none of these explorations provide a clear definition for Afrosurrealism, and scholar Terri Francis rightly notes that

[n]either surrealism nor Afrosurrealism is a style, a set of criteria, an ideology, a genre, or even a coherent exploration. It is not a movement. It is an imaginary, magnetizing loosely related sensibilities and it certainly is a modernism connected to other forms of modernism such as the Harlem Renaissance, negritude, magical realism, and [...] marvelous realism. (Francis 2013, 97)

While Francis’s elaboration on Afrosurrealism remains vague, she contests that this imaginary “re-center[s] blackness at the core of surrealism and modernism, not as a catalytic matter, but as the manifestations of black artists’ own modalities” (Francis 2013, 100), and that the Afrosurreal can serve as intervention to reveal facts that change our understanding.¹⁰⁴ While the Afrosurreal has often been attributed to the fine arts, the genre of Afrosurreal films has been growing in the past few years. As the pioneer in the contemporary rise of Afrosurrealism, *Atlanta* (2016–2022) was followed by *Get out* (2017), *Sorry to Bother You* (2019) and other movies, most of them a mixture of Afrosurreal horror and psychological thriller.

To give a concrete Afrosurreal example from *Atlanta*: In S01 E01, protagonist Earn encounters a Magical Negro character who drops some pseudo-wise advice and then aggressively demands Earn to take his Nutella sandwich. The Magical Negro is a trope, defining a

¹⁰³ Journalist and writer D. Scott Miller has been writing about Afrosurrealism for several years, and his “Afrosurreal Manifesto” can be considered a pioneer for the contemporary Afrosurreal movement.

¹⁰⁴ Francis names the documentary of *The Central Park Five* (Ken Burns and Sarah Burns, 2012) as an example for an Afrosurreal intervention that presents facts that shift our understanding of the republic (Francis 2013, 101).

black supporting character who usually guides a white protagonist with his mystic powers and supernatural insight. This stereotypical character has a long tradition in U.S.-American cinema (C. Glenn and Cunningham 2009), and *Atlanta* uses a subverted depiction to play with this trope. While the show ironically exaggerates this character on the one hand, character Darius, on the other hand, seems to possess an unearthly gift that often proves reliable throughout the series. This double play is a subversion of the common movie stereotype. Moreover, the absurd validity of Darius's sixth sense emphasizes the surrealism of the show and speaks to the Afrosurreal tradition that is being picked up across genres.¹⁰⁵ With the influence of recent works by historian Robin Kelley (*Freedom Dreams* (2002); *Black, Brown, and Beige* (2009)), Afrosurrealism has had a comeback into popular discourse where it is now being discussed as a cultural movement entering a new age (Bakare 2018). It is no coincidence that new debates on Afrosurrealism parallel discourses of an emerging Black Renaissance. In a sense, Afrosurrealism is a performance of Blackness that renegotiates the meaning and position of Black identity in society. Through recurring surrealist elements, *Atlanta* exemplifies the contemporary transformation of the idea of Blackness that is shaped by cultural production. Cultural phenomena subsumed under Afrosurrealism and the Black Renaissance are closely related to a Black cultural tradition in the U.S. where artists raise awareness for the ills of U.S.-American society, and yet are hopeful. They imagine a better future and show what could be real one day through various artistic devices. Scholar Eddie Glaude Jr. (2007) positions this Black legacy of imagination, hope for democracy and melioration as part of a Black U.S.-American tradition of pragmatism.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, *Atlanta* follows in the path of a distinctly Black tradition of using cultural creation to envision a more just and equal life.

Creator and director Donald Glover's *Atlanta* intended to make the audience *feel* what it is like to be Black in the U.S. (L. S. Miller 2016). The emphasis is crucial because it explains several techniques of the series that are consciously employed to create an almost tangible atmosphere that enables the audience to feel as if they live with and through the characters. As many critics and spectators have noted, the show is a successful mirror of everyday

¹⁰⁵ Contemporary music videos, from Beyoncé's "Apeshit" (2018) to Lil Nas X's "Montero" (2021), feature surrealist techniques such as subverting time and place, showing shockingly explicit images, or following an illogical and irrational storyline.

¹⁰⁶ I discuss pragmatism in more detail in chapter 2.3.

lived reality for Black people in Atlanta and elsewhere in the U.S. (Bramescio 2018; W. Morris 2016; Nguyen 2016). Following the Reddit threads on the show, one can see how fond fans are of *Atlanta*'s realistic depictions and truthful atmosphere and how *moved* they are. The performance of everyday life that Donald Glover and his crew create is experiential and social commentary at the same time. While the portrayed relationships and interactions are natural, and thus enables the viewer to empathize, the storytelling is infused with surreal elements that create an atmosphere of comicalness, bizarreness and irony. The show oscillates between comedy, drama and satire and thus encapsulates the variety of human emotions. *Atlanta*'s "lived-in sense of place," as NYT journalist Joe Coscarelli (2018) calls it, is necessary for the show to be perceived as real, as the above lemon pepper wet example shows: Full of magic and surrealist aspects, a real-life setting becomes the anchor to which the characters, the plot, and the audience can constantly return. This style bears the potential to mobilize viewers by, first, hooking them through absurdity and, second, tying this absurdity to the viewers' own lived experiences. Seeing the absurdity of reality mirrored in fiction leaves one to self-reflect.

Moreover, as most of the crew and staff are Atlanta natives, their inside knowledge becomes a fundus for cultural cross-references that underline the show's authenticity with regard to its locale. As the show's director of photography, Christian Sprenger, states, "[t]he access that we had to all these cool weird quirky things, places where we shot, most of that access came from our local crew and the fact that Donald grew up there. [...] [Th]ey became our shepherds, our guides to the city" (Hallett 2017). Many of the featured songs, for instance, are from both well-known and underground Atlanta rap artists, such as OutKast and Migos. While OutKast is an old icon of Southern rap, most popular in the 1990s, Migos is a rap trio that became famous only after they had a guest appearance where they starred with their real-life artist names and group name in S01 E03 (S. Glover 2016b). Whether their presence in *Atlanta* contributed to their rise is unclear, but at the time of the show's production the trio's music was rather underground, and only after the show's first season aired in spring 2016, did Migos release their most well-known single "Bad and Boujee" which counts over a billion clicks on YouTube as of January 2022. *Atlanta* interweaves real-life individuals, places and phenomena – such as J.R. Crickets, the Migos or the discussion about Reparations – into its fictional narrative and, through its popularity and success, affects reality. Thus, it is a

small step to claim that *Atlanta* manages to be perceived as truthful and trustworthy. This success largely stems from their use of irony, absurdity and magic, as I show in the following.

The growing diversity of Atlanta and the South

In S01 E05, Darius visits a shooting range where he puts up a dog poster to shoot on. Outraged by his unusual target, two middle-aged white men command him to take it down (S. Glover 2016c). While Darius tries to reason with them, claiming it is better to shoot a dog than a human, a young man with a Middle Eastern complexion and accent approaches and takes Darius's side: "He can shoot whatever he wants. You shoot at your racist targets with no problem. I saw you shoot at that one with a Mexican hat holding a knife. It's shameful. America has taken so much. No more. A revolution will rise from within. Blood will spill" (12:00-12:19). While Darius looks happy about the support at the beginning, his expression gradually changes into confusion and then rejection while his supporter's statements turn more radical. For one, this incident claims that white Americans value dogs more than human life regarding people of color – an assumption that has its place in popular media and culture (Harriot 2017). It also draws on the long tradition of utilizing dogs in the prosecution of Blacks, from bloodhounds against fugitive slaves organized by slave patrols to modern-day canine units within the police. Although protests against the police and their racist strategies have erupted after the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 and again after the death of George Floyd in 2020, this practice remains an "agent of racial repression" and is not really addressed in discourses about police violence, as reporter Larry Spruill (2016) points out. Apart from addressing a social issue, the contrastive portrayal of Darius and his supporter in this scene showcases both the diversity of appearance and the varying mindsets among people of color and immigrants.

Indeed, Darius often serves as a portal to other worlds: His frequent encounters with ethnic minority groups and subcultures, such as the Korean youth he meets in an abandoned industrial building to trade a Samurai sword for a pitbull in S01 E04 (D. Glover 2016), and his fondness for all kinds of headpieces, such as the "urban turban" in S01 E02 (S. Glover 2016a) and the "Art" cap in S01 E04 (D. Glover 2016), are never explained to the viewer. It seems as if Darius has a sixth sense of finding the Other, both in terms of niche subcultures and objects. In every episode of seasons one and two, Darius wears a different sort of headpiece, and many viewers ask about their origins on Reddit. The "urban turban," for instance,

is similar to the turban styles of Berber tribes in Northern Africa. While the African American women's headwrap has a long tradition that goes back to slavery where it served as a symbol of communal identity and resistance (Griebel 1995), Darius's style leans toward North African Berber traditions of turban-binding that is commonly associated with men. He thus combines the symbolic meaning of the African American women's headwrap with a Northern African cultural tradition, and presents a diverse, even transnational, community of people of color. In contrast to the urban turban, Darius's "Art" and bird caps stand for a local community: The "Art" cap, along with other clothing items from the show that have the same logo, is designed by a small, little-known fashion label called Baiser D'Amour which is owned by two African American men.¹⁰⁷ There seems to be a network connection between the brand and the crew of *Atlanta* which seems to result in a 'buy from your community' mentality. Similarly, Darius's navy-blue cap with birds on it is created by a small brand called MakerWear where people can submit their artistic ideas that might then be utilized to design clothes. The brand's motto is "Fashion powered by the People," and its LinkedIn profile features the founder Ebun Olaloye who is a self-made entrepreneur from Nigeria based in the U.S. (MakerWear). Both brands are owned by Black upcoming and self-made entrepreneurs whom the producers of *Atlanta* must have consciously chosen because of personal connections. While this information might seem trivial – how should the viewers even know all of this and why should they care? –, it is astounding that a group of fans is keenly interested in the clothes worn by the characters, especially with regard to Darius who is considered a secret fashion icon (u/opiester 2016). Furthermore, the fact that *Atlanta*'s production staff care – they could have chosen other apparel that is easier to purchase – and want to present these underground brands speaks of the series's moral intention to support the local community.

Another telling aspect lies within the Middle Eastern character's words: "America has taken so much. No more. A revolution will rise from within." Defying the stereotype of the Muslim Arab terrorist who wishes to see the U.S. in flames, this character wants to defend America. His first sentence implies that he sees himself as part of that country and even as protective of it. Moreover, his concerns do not involve relationships to other countries but are focused on society in the U.S. His "revolution" rising from within mirrors growing

¹⁰⁷ As there is no official information about this brand, the only resource I could find is the blog "Wear Do I Begin" (Wear Do I Begin 2015).

worries about polarization and discussions about whether another civil war is possible.¹⁰⁸ This character whose appearance stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical depiction of a U.S.-American citizen claims belonging by arguing against men whose self-image rules out any doubt of their Americanness. Darius is left in the middle, and the situation is dissolved by the shooting range manager who throws Darius out for causing trouble. The scene vividly portrays the multiple approaches to what it means to be U.S.-American independent of legal citizenship status, and thereby contributes to a changing perception of citizenship. It also implies and reflects that such a societal and cultural transformation does not go without conflict. While there is evidence for a growing diversity of the Black population in the U.S. (Tamir 2021), *Atlanta*'s contribution lies within its representation and making visible. *Atlanta* spreads the notion that Blackness does not only refer to the African American experience and to the descendants of slavery but encompasses various people of African origin in the U.S. who may or may not be citizens but have the right to be represented and to participate in society.

Identity, place, and the Southern legacy

One episode that draws heavily on the aspect of locale and critically comments on Black life in the U.S. is "Rich Wigga, Poor Wigga," S03 E09 (D. Glover 2022b). As is the norm for season three, the episode leaves the main cast aside and follows a different plot. Shot in black and white, the viewer meets senior year student Aaron who visits Stonewall Jackson High School, a fictional school somewhere in metropolitan Atlanta. While the viewer is introduced to Aaron's Black father and thus knows Aaron is mixed race, he passes as white in front of his exclusively white friends. Amid Aaron's worries about financing college education, a rich benefactor and alumni visits his school: Robert Shae Lee is a Black entrepreneur with an imperium of ethnic hair care products – ironically, in real life, the Bronner Brothers of Atlanta founded one of the largest African American hair and skin care companies in the U.S. in 1947 – who announces that he is "changing the name from that degenerate slave owner [Stonewall Jackson] to one of the richest Black men this side of the Mississippi. From now

¹⁰⁸ Journalists from different newspaper have been discussing whether another civil war is possible or not. While these are no scientific answers, they reflect a broader sentiment among the US population. See for example Bouie (February 15, 2022), Coaston, Bouie, and Alberta (2022), Pengelly (August 30, 2022); Walter, Marche, and C. S. Parker (November 06, 2022).

on this school is gonna be named the Robert S. Lee High School” (08:14-08:32). Moreover, “[slowly, with exact pronunciation] I am going to pay every single senior’s college tuition – [dramatic break while students erupt in cheers, then leaning forward into microphone:] who’s Black” (08:40-08:55).

These statements condense several social comments. First, Robert Shae Lee is introduced with irony: Although he is an influential businessman and seems to have good intentions, his renaming of the school does in fact not change anything. Both Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee were famed Confederate generals during the Civil War. Indeed, they held each other in high regard and their relationship has been described as a “great partnership” by historian Christian Keller (2019). Fictional Robert Shae Lee’s own name therefore perpetuates the South’s hero narratives. With the Black Lives Matter movement since 2015, many Confederate monuments and public names have been deinstalled, but many continue to be prominent. On the premises of the Atlanta State Capitol, for instance, a monument of slave owner and Confederate General Gordon adorns the front gate, while the backside of the Capitol features a sculpture titled *Expelled Because of Color* – a reminder for the Black elected state legislators who were expelled from the state house in 1868. This opposition mirrors Southern states’ conflicted histories and the ongoing debate about their identity. In S02 E09, for instance, Earn, Darius and Alfred end up at a white fraternity party on a college campus where Confederate flags adorn the mansion and the fraternity members walk around with guns and humiliate the newest members of their community (Olori 2018). Similarly, with Robert Shae Lee as a Black benefactor, *Atlanta* comments on the contemporary monument debates and insinuates their futility with regard to achieving equality. Moreover, Robert Shae Lee as an ironic character suggests that some efforts to cause transformation are motivated by vanity and ignorance – had he known that his name alludes to a Confederate hero, the benefactor could have instead chosen a name that aligns with his alleged activist motivation.

Second, announcing he will only be paying for Black students’ tuition not only taps into the socio-political debates about affirmative action,¹⁰⁹ but it also emphasizes one

¹⁰⁹ In June 2023, the Supreme Court banned affirmative action in institutions of higher education. This means that there will no longer be race-conscious admissions that enabled BIPOC students who are disadvantaged to enter colleges and universities. Protests ensued against this decision as it re-opens the door for racism in education (Bero, June 30, 2023).

question: Who is Black and who is not? To determine who is eligible, Robert Shae Lee holds auditions where he questions the contestants about Black culture and their identity. While doing so, he sits on an elevated podium with two friends, serving as the jury, and looks down on the candidate who stands in a light beam as if on a show. The scene's setting and Lee's character once again exaggerate the absurdity of the U.S.-American Black experience: Showing a specific behavior and knowledge to prove to someone else that you belong. This does not seem significant as everybody acts their identity in some way. But seen with bell hooks's (1995) words in mind, it becomes clear that there is no equivalent for whiteness: Blackness is read and performed from the margins *against* a dominant cultural standard that is white. As with the school's renaming, Lee reinforces the idea of Blackness as Other by expecting the students to perform for him and prove their Blackness. When Aaron wonders if the decision should not rather be based on one's parents' ethnicity, a fellow student tells him, Lee "doesn't believe that ADOS [American Descendants of Slavery] necessitates 'Blackness.' He's really talking about the culture of 'Black' in America. It's a nuanced discussion" (11:42). With this statement, the series critically and ironically comments on the discourses about Blackness and race in the US: There is no consensus on what being Black means, and while a nuanced discussion indeed seems necessary when it comes to such a term loaded with history, it does not lead to more equality and justice, as Aaron's failed audition shows. After countless wrong and weird answers to questions like "What mixes with Hennessy? What color are Wendy's napkins? Where do you take your cousin after he gets out of jail? Your mama or your mother? Mustard or mayonnaise?" – knowledge that Black people allegedly have –, Aaron complains, "This isn't fair! You're not giving me the scholarship because I'm light skin?!" (15:38). One of the judges bursts out in anger: "You are white! [...] You white! [...] How long you been coasting on your whiteness, son?" (15:45-16:25). While this outburst seems exaggerated, the viewer, knowing that Aaron is hiding his Black ancestry from his white friends, is tempted to agree with the judge. At the same time, however, the viewer also feels sympathy for Aaron because he cannot afford college and would benefit from the scholarship. This episode thus mirrors a double-edged sentiment towards the topic of affirmative action and inspires the viewer to critically reflect on her own moral standards.

Another instance in this episode brings the absurdity of the Blackness discussion, especially against the backdrop of Southern history, to the point: Attempting to burn down

the school in frustration, Aaron meets Felix, a Nigerian American who was refused the scholarship, too, because “[m]y parents are from Nigeria. I was born there, but I don’t even remember it. I’m from Lithonia” (20:53).¹¹⁰ Aaron’s response shows his own double standard: “You’re not really Black. You have an entire culture to pull from. You know where you’re from, you can trace your lineage and you have a country to go home to. That’s not really Black” (21:10). When Felix answers that he’s Blacker than Aaron, the two start to fight and eventually chase each other with their flame throwers. The scene is resolved when Felix is shot by a policeman and about to be transported to a hospital. In that moment, Robert Shae Lee arrives in his dressing gown and decides to give Felix the scholarship after all because “getting shot by the police is the Blackest thing anybody can do. [To the medics:] Make sure he survives, okay? Take him to White Grady” (24:35). Once more, Lee perpetuates racism: While getting shot as a Black man is indeed more likely than as a white man, Lee rewards this systemic racism with money instead of fighting against it. And again, he proves his old and conservative mindset when he tells the medics to take Felix to White Grady. This used to be an actual segregated hospital for white patients, and it was common knowledge that they received better care and treatment. Today, there is no White Grady anymore but only Grady and Emory hospitals, the former located in south Atlanta and serving more lower income patients and the latter located in the wealthier area – a fact that local viewers of the show acknowledge (u/BrotherCrow_ 2022). Robert Shae Lee seems to have missed desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement, and in his grandeur assumes it natural that Felix would be taken to the white hospital if he demanded.

Other scenes mirror the contemporary housing conditions in Atlanta. In the first season, for instance, the protagonists often meet in Alfred’s flat or close to his home on the rugged sofa that overlooks a small park. Fans have tried to figure out the real address of this apartment and have located it at Glenwood Apartments in unincorporated Northwest Atlanta, more specifically at the intersection between the neighborhoods Grove Park and Hunter Hills (u/BigDaddyDear 2022). The area is predominantly African American and low-income and saw a 20.4 percent decrease in home values between 2000 and 2018 – factors that put the area at risk of gentrification (Chapple, Thomas, and Zuk 2021). Reddit discussants have even

¹¹⁰ Lithonia is a city in the Atlanta metropolitan area with about 2.600 residents, located about 20 miles southeast from Atlanta.

debated the authenticity of Alfred's apartment: whether the show truthfully depicts that someone with Alfred's income could afford that apartment – most of the discussants agreed that he could since the apartment does not seem to be located in a very good neighborhood (u/nevalost20 2022). The creators of *Atlanta* are natives, many of whom grew up in the city and have experienced the spatial and demographic changes in the metropolitan area. Local viewers can empathize with the characters because they know the places; as one user comments on Reddit: "That's north of Morelli's Ice Cream! Love that place!" (u/Ultra_Maxwell 2021). Except for season 3, which is set in Europe where Paper Boi tours, the story takes place around Atlanta, and draws on hyperlocal phenomena to make it truthful for a local audience. This results in a specific attachment of viewer from Atlanta. Attachment, according to Rita Felski (2020), is the first step in being moved and inclined to change one's attitude or behavior.

Cameo appearances as extensions of reality

Robert Shae Lee is played by controversial internet star Kevin Samuels who became famous for his relationship advice shows on YouTube and Instagram. Samuels's work was criticized for being misogynistic, hypermasculine and following ultra-conservative gender roles, and more than 30.000 people petitioned to have his channels removed (Victor 2022). *Atlanta* frequently makes use of cameo appearances by celebrities, such as the aforementioned Migos group and actors Alexander Skarsgård and Liam Neeson. Along with Kevin Samuels's appearance, the real-life individuals portray exaggerated versions of themselves in the show: In the episode before "Rich Wigga, Poor Wigga," Paper Boi is led to a bar called Cancel Club where he finds Liam Neeson sitting at the counter and starts a conversation (D. Glover 2022a). Paper Boi recognizes Neeson as a famous actor, thus the viewer knows Neeson's fictional character draws on his real-life persona. In 2019, Liam Neeson publicly admitted that as a young man he had set out to kill any Black man because someone close to him had allegedly been raped by a Black man (Michallon 2019). While stating feeling ashamed of his actions today, he used racially offensive language in the interview, and was met with public backlash that resulted in the cancelation of his movie premiere (BBC 2019). In light of this, the following conversation between Neeson and Paper Boi in *Atlanta* reflects real life, serves as an ironic comment on society and whiteness, and offers a moment of truthful absurdity:

Neeson: “You might have heard or read about my transgression. You know, what I said about what I wanted to do to a Black guy – any Black guy – when I was a younger man in London. A friend of mine had been raped and I acted out of anger. I look back now, and it honestly frightens me. I thought people knowing who I once was would make clear who I am, who I’ve become. But, with all that being said, I am sorry. I apologize if I hurt people. [...]”

Paper Boi: “It’s good to know that you don’t hate Black people now.”

Neeson: “What? No, no, no, no. I can’t stand the lot of you. Well, now I feel that way. Because you tried to ruin my career. Didn’t succeed, mind you. However, I’m sure one day I will get over it. But until then, we are mortal enemies.”

Neeson gets up to leave, Paper Boi interjects, “But didn’t you learn that you shouldn’t say shit like that?”

Neeson: “Aye. But I also learned that the best and worst part of being white is we don’t have to learn anything if we don’t want to.” (D. Glover 2022a; 21:50-23:50)

After being canceled in real life, Liam Neeson apologizes for his actions on a metalevel created in the series. The border between his real-life persona and the one he portrays gets blurry when he adds to now hate Black people after the public backlash. And indeed, viewers as well as magazine articles debate the connection between fictional Neeson to actual Neeson (u/knicks92 2022; Juneau 2022). Similar to the portrayal of Liam Neeson, Kevin Samuels in his role of Robert Shae Lee exaggerates characteristics attributed to his real-life self: His traditional and conservative values with regard to relationships and gender roles in real life turn into perpetuating racial stereotypes in the show. The truthful cameo appearances in *Atlanta* render the show itself truthful and reflective of society at large. The exaggerated cameo characters serve as the link between reality and absurdity: The absurd becomes an extension of the truth and is thus an effective device for ironically commenting on social issues.

Both in the case of cameo appearances and other characters, the viewer’s allegiance and moral values are often challenged. Many questions the characters struggle with, and not all of them are related to race or politics, are contemporary issues that the viewers might be thinking about, too: Reparations for descendant of slaves, Southern and Confederate legacy, the influence of social media on privacy, poverty and homelessness, character weaknesses in relationships, such as double standards or hypocrisy, and trans rights. In many instances, *Atlanta* defies stereotypes that Blacks may have about certain whites. In S02 E09, for instance, Southern white fraternity boys prove to be less racist and more fun than the protagonists anticipated (Olori 2018). Yet in other moments, the series confirms stereotypes, such as in S01 E09 when a wealthy white man is too invested in a Juneteenth celebration that he seems to have the white savior syndrome. Regardless of stereotypes, though, the series

depicts most characters as complex and relatable, leaving the viewer to question her own prejudices.

Conquergood's alliterations in performance theory aid a critical engagement with cultural productions and their social impact: *Atlanta*'s artistic value not only renders the show entertaining and realistic; on a metalevel it also offers an analysis of and critical comments on society. By doing so, the show negotiates Blackness and firmly positions Black identity and culture as central to society – it claims full cultural citizenship for Black individuals. Through the exaggeration, irony and absurdity and by staying true to a specific place the series hooks its viewers and takes a moral stance on racism. As Rita Felski (2020) theorizes, only works that hook people have the potential to move them. The surrealism that winds through *Atlanta* leaves the viewer in awe, sometimes in shock, and in this susceptible moment the show presents new modes of seeing and thinking – for example, about the diversity of Black life in the U.S. and abroad, the relationship between white and non-white individuals through the eyes of PoC, the role of geographic place in understanding racial dynamics. The series offers its viewers access to societal discourses through artistic tools, but it also offers those who work in the cultural sphere access to the creative industry, as I have shown by discussing the politics behind the series's production. Furthermore, what is new about *Atlanta* is its Black ownership and relative independence from the production company that Donald Glover and his team negotiated. In this sense, the show is a truly Black creation that follows in the path of Robin Kelley's aptly titled book *Freedom Dreams* (2002). *Atlanta* envisions what is possible in the present and in the future. These visions are not all positive, but they show alternatives to the status quo, and thereby broaden the viewer's horizon with regard to Black life in Atlanta and beyond. In contrast to the series *Gentefied* analyzed in chapter 4.2.2., Donald Glover's creation does not carry any explicitly political statements or opinions. Rather, the character constructions, the many small interactions, the surreal elements, and the addressed topics contribute to an overall sense of social and political awareness of the show.

The next analysis returns to a more direct form of creative mobilization that has been discussed in a similar way in chapter 4.1.2. Like *Atlanta*, local rapper Killer Mike draws from his relationship to the South to emphasize his democratic imagination.

5.2.2. Hip hop and Killer Mike's Southern democratic imagination

Before I'm a Georgian, before I'm an Atlan-
tan, I'm a southerner . . . If we cotton pickers,
what better thing to be?

– Killer Mike¹¹¹

In 2019, the French-German TV channel *Arte* created a ten episode documentary series called *Lost In Traplanta* (2019). In ten short episodes, the series follows Larry, a Black French journalist, who tries to win back his girlfriend Destiny by reuniting the famous rap duo OutKast who were pioneers in Atlanta's rise to international capital of hip hop in the 1990s and early 2000s. Larry wanders around in Atlanta searching for the whereabouts of Big Boi and André 3000, the two members of OutKast. Following this fictitious storyline, Larry meets people that have been involved with Atlanta's hip hop scene in various ways. Their stories create a picture of what hip hop in Atlanta means and of the wide-reaching social effects of this cultural phenomenon. It becomes clear to Larry that since OutKast Atlanta developed its very own style of hip hop which reverberates with the city and its African American people's histories and everyday realities. It might come as a surprise that a French-German TV channel should be invested in a very specific urban cultural product of the United States, but indeed *Arte* dedicates a considerable part of their popular culture branch to hip hop and rap. Of North American origin these styles have had a considerable impact on youth cultures in Europe, too, and especially in France where many migrants from North African and Sub-Saharan countries can identify with African Americans and their struggles for recognition, upward mobility and equality. For people around the globe, Atlanta's rap music thematizes and challenges larger systemic problems based on racism and poverty. It is this very local urban distinction, connected to real people, real histories and real events, that allows rap and the people involved in it to send a social message. While the emergence of rap and hip hop music in general is deeply connected to protest, resistance and disruptive expression, Southern rap artists in particular evolved from being outsiders to representing a distinct brand and growing industry (Grem 2006).

¹¹¹ (Grem 2006, 69).

Precisely because of its history and its thematic focus on poverty, racism and injustice, rap music is prone to outside criticism about authenticity and pretentiousness. And it is for the same reasons that rap artists tend to stress their community attachments and frequently engage in efforts to support their communities. As Black studies scholar Courtney Terry and colleagues (2017b) put it, the genre's commercial success is grounded in supporting capitalism, excess and misogyny. However, in its early stages, it provided "a medium for a collective voice of disenchanted and dispossessed African American and Latino youth in New York and later the West Coast" (Terry, Bradley, and Evans 2017a, 3f.). While rap is an immense industry today, it "maneuvered between commodification and community service" (Terry, Bradley, and Evans 2017b, 4) and continues to do so today. Based on its history, rap music and artists' influence stretches into other social, political and economic networks, as chapter 4.2.2. illustrated by the example of Nipsey Hussle. These different networks and uses of rap show that there are certain strategies of creation, distribution and production politics hidden behind what meets the ear. While Hussle became known to a larger audience only after his death, and his community engagement thus took place more privately, hip hop activism in Atlanta often reaches newspapers, even national outlets like the *CNN* and the *New York Times* (McLaughlin 2020; G. Williams 2020). One prominent figure in Atlanta's contemporary music and political activism scene is rapper Michael Render, a.k.a. Killer Mike, who has made it into the headlines with publicly endorsing Democratic candidate and close friend Bernie Sanders in 2016 (Bromwich 2016). He has also made controversial moves, for example with speaking out against the violence that erupted during the George Floyd protests in 2020 on the Atlanta Police's press conference or with his support of the Second Amendment (the right to own guns) thematized in a 2018 interview on NRATV, the National Rifle Association's TV channel (11Alive 2020; NRATV 2018).

This chapter examines Killer Miller's performance as a Black rapper and activist who both mobilizes and divides viewers. With a closer look at his music and his public appearances as an activist, I uncover his practices to create trust, and, more importantly, the mechanisms behind his activist force that are quite different from Nipsey Hussle's strategies. I start with a brief account of the social and cultural impact of Atlanta's rap scene and of how Killer Mike emerged in the city. In contrast to Los Angeles and very similar to Donald Glover's *Atlanta*, the regional aspect plays a key role in the self-fashioning of Atlanta rap. It is thus

not only a performance of race but of a distinctly Southern mindset that pervades the work of artist-activist Killer Mike. I examine the artist's work in the context of what it means to be Black and Southern and scrutinize this synergy's impact on trust-building and community activism in Atlanta.

African Americans, rap, and the U.S. South

As revisited in the introduction to chapter 5, the history of African Americans in the Southern states is shaped by slavery, the myth of the Lost Cause and belief in the Confederacy, the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement. Prominent Black figures like W. E. B. Du Bois and Dr. Martin Luther King and their visions of equality can be seen as standing in stark contrast against white conservative persona like Confederate General Robert E. Lee and pseudo-nostalgic Southern imageries pushed by, for instance, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1939) that partially romanticizes the Old South before the Civil War. Southern rap engages with these clashing ideas and reckons with the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. The two most famous rap groups that helped position Southern Rap on the U.S.-American hip hop landscape in the 1990s and early 2000s are Goodie Mob and OutKast whose music differed from West Coast and East Coast hip hop: Influenced by Southern Black music, such as gospel, the blues and rock'n'roll, their rhetoric not only featured distinctly Southern terminology but typical Southern accents and drawl (Grem 2006). In their hit "Dirty South" Goodie Mob sing

See, life's a bitch, then you figure out
Why you really got dropped in the Dirty South
See in the 3rd grade this is what you taught
You was bought, you was sold
Now they sayin' Juice left some heads cracked
I betcha Jed Clampett want his money back
(Goodie Mob 1995)

The lyrics are accompanied by a video that alternates between scenes of the group rapping and a little white girl drawing on a sports ground with chalk. At the end of the video, the viewer sees the finished painting and realizes that the innocent-looking girl had been drawing the Confederate flag. The text's reference to "Jed Clampett" is a derogatory term for white men derived from the white male protagonist's name in the series *The Beverly Hillbillies*,¹¹²

¹¹² *The Beverly Hillbillies* was a popular comedy series that aired from 1962 to 1971. It follows the Clampett family, uneducated and naïve hillbillies, who become wealthy upon discovering oilfields on their land. They

and “Juice” refers to OJ Simpson who was at that time involved in trial accused of murdering his wife (Terry, Bradley, and Evans 2017b). The rap group criticizes the commodification of Black lives and the reductionist approach to their legacy that is being taught in school. Imagery and sound intertwine to portray the clashing stereotypes of the South: On the one hand, there is the Confederate myth in the hands of a white child that suggests innocence, tradition and honor; on the other hand, the viewer sees well-informed thug-style rappers talking about the erasure of their legacy and white trash. While the term “Dirty South” first emerged in the club scenes of Southern cities in the 1980s, the rap group uses it with an educational function, as Darren Grem notes in his analysis of the southernization of hip hop:

For Goodie Mob, the South, in general – and Atlanta, in particular – was “dirty” because of its troubling racial history, its continuing record of black on black violence, and its corrupt judicial system. To hammer this point home, Goodie Mob related stories from the “dirtier” of Atlanta – mothers struggling to raise good kids, teenagers reflecting on their uncertain future, young adults troubled by gang life. (Grem 2006, 61)

With their lyrics, Goodie Mob tap into a long history of politically engaged Black music. Since the dawn of slavery, music and song have been a means of communication for enslaved people. Traditional Black styles, such as call and response in gospel, blues and jazz music, emerged and influenced later genres like funk, R & B and hip hop. Black music is therefore inextricably tied to the African American struggle for freedom and equality. Scholarship on the relevance of music in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance by Reiland Rabaka (2016), or on the meaning of funk music in the counterculture that followed the CRM (Morant 2011), or on hip hop as political protest music (Dennis 2016) illustrates the importance of music in African American social and political movements. As early as 1995, when hip hop was still regarded rather critically and thus a niche for academic research, scholar Marvin Gladney (1995) traces back the progression from the Black Arts Movement to hip hop and contends that hip hop continues the ideological tradition of the Black Arts Movement.

A brief look at the development of Southern hip hop helps to understand contemporary rap music’s significance for Atlanta’s communities of color. In *Third Coast: Outkast, Timbaland, and How Hip-hop Became a Southern Thing* (2007), Roni Sarig meticulously revisits the emergence of hip hop and rap in the Southern states. His chapter on Atlanta

move to a mansion in Beverly Hills, California where they encounter misunderstandings and conflicts with the local upper class.

(chapter 5) identifies the 1980s as formative years for the city's hip hop scene: The two musicians Antonio "L.A." Reid and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds founded LaFace records, a label that would become one of the most successful labels of the 1990s and would boost the careers of artists such as Toni Braxton, TLC, Usher, Pink, OutKast and Goodie Mob (126). The establishment of a serious record label in the city meant that local rap artists had an opportunity right at their doorstep. In the late 1980s, some rap artists from the north started to focus on a more regional identity approach in their music. While the Southern style of rap was already distinct from its East Coast and West Coast counterparts, there was no such thing as "Southern Rap" yet. Thus the turn to regional and local identity proved popular and "Southern" became "a cultural identification and source of pride, something that had not yet been explored by bass artists or urban-pop acts" (Sarig 2007, 130). However, Southern artists were largely viewed as "un-urban, unsophisticated, and 'backwards'" (Grem 2006, 62) by bigger players from the east and west coasts. The duo OutKast's earlier works mirrored this reputation: With their name and their album *ATLiens* (1996), they position themselves as anti-establishment, opposing both the East Coast/ West Coast dichotomy in hip hop and the traditional white Southern image that is epitomized in *Gone With the Wind*. As Darren Grem states, while the music written by OutKast and Goodie Mob, who collaborated under the name Dungeon Family, embodied the influences that defined East and West Coast rap, they emphasize the peculiarities of Southern Black life and tap into Southern Black music (gospel, rock'n'roll, the blues and Stax soul) (2006, 58). This rogue image's reputation changed when the duo OutKast won a Grammy Award for their album *Stankonia* in 2002, and more awards in the following two years. And while the Dungeon Family and LaFace Records can be applauded for successfully putting Southern rap on the map, they "also had a great deal to say about racial identity, regional identity, and the selling of both in modern America" (Grem 2006, 71).

The hip hop genre has developed out of the need to creatively express the everyday realities of socially, politically and economically disenfranchised and disadvantaged communities that are often times racialized in mainstream media and popular culture – but the rap industry has evolved into an international billion-dollar business where profit generally overshadows the cause. Nevertheless, there are artists who try to do justice to their moral values and communities while simultaneously striving for financial wealth. In the hip hop scene it

can be difficult to differentiate between lip service and activism because, owing to the origin of the genre, rap lyrics traditionally tend to engage with topics such as racism, poverty or police violence. Therefore, it is especially important to look beyond the product and at the artist's public and private persona to gauge if there is something solid behind the creative work. Precisely because of hip hop's genealogy, artists are quick to be judged as sellouts. At the same time, artists who claim to have the interests of their communities at heart and walk a thin line of public goodwill as activism and financial success, are viewed suspiciously by many. For good reason, as chapter 4.1.2. has shown: Los Angeles rapper and activist Nipsey Hussle decided to establish his own record label to be independent of managers and industry demands. This decision secured both his creative freedom as an artist and his credibility as an activist. Atlanta rapper Killer Mike has different strategies of emanating trustworthiness and being an activist, as I show below.

How Du Bois matters

In 2017, the academic journal *Phylon*, that W. E. B. Du Bois himself established in 1940, dedicated a special volume to *Hip Hop Culture and Rap Music Aesthetics in the Post-Civil Rights South* which hints at the urgency of the topic and the need for more research (Clayton 2017). Du Bois moved to Atlanta in 1897. He experienced the city and the South during the Progressive Era – in fact, he became a progressive himself as his falling apart with Booker T. Washington shows. During his time in Atlanta, he wrote the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that includes the chapter “Of the Wings of Atalanta” where he ponders about the current state and future development of the city, putting into words his fears of the erosion of Southern culture due to materialistic greed. Scholars Seneca Vaught and Regina Bradley (2017) draw parallels between Du Bois's prophecies at the time and the evolution of hip hop as a Black expressive form. While Du Bois sees Black people's accumulation of wealth as a necessary step to end Black exploitation, he is also apprehensive of this strategy's corruptive influence on Southern life and culture that, in his eyes, should be protected. Similarly, Southern rap artists discuss the problematic relationship between consumption, wealth, and personal and community well-being – but in spite of Du Bois's high regard for Black art, Southern rappers were viewed as outsiders at the beginning (Vaught and Bradley 2017, 17f.). In 1926, Du Bois held a speech at the NAACP's annual conference titled “Criteria of Negro Art”. In 38 points,

he argues for the relevance of Black art in the fight for freedom and equality. He starts out asking,

What do we [as Black people] want? [...] We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? (Du Bois 1926, # 4)

Du Bois draws on the Marshallian idea of citizenship that includes civil, political and social rights and duties, but he also reaches further. Even if they (his audience and Blacks folks in general) became full-fledged Americans and had wealth and power, Du Bois posits that materialistic pursuit would not truthfully satisfy them because

you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a *beautiful* world; [...] if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that – but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America. (Du Bois 1926, # 7; my emphasis)

Du Bois was skeptical of a purely materialistic lifestyle as he believed this would not solve the problems that Blacks faced. Instead, taking citizenship to the level of participation, changing and creating to obtain a more beautiful world, was the right way in his eyes, and this includes the creation of art. Beautiful, in Du Bois's interpretation, comprises both an aesthetic and a certain quality of life: Beautiful is, for instance, the Cathedral of Cologne, a Vai village in West Africa, the Venus de Milo, and the music of the Southern U.S. (Du Bois 1926, # 8). The world is thus full of beauty, and everybody should have access to it, Du Bois contends, but “today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly. This is not only wrong, it is silly. Who shall right this well-nigh universal failing?” (Du Bois 1926, # 9). According to Du Bois, Black folk at that moment in time – this speech took place when the Harlem Renaissance was in full bloom – might be able to help because “we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be” (Du Bois 1926, # 10). This aesthetic sense of beauty is, for Du Bois, irrevocably tied to truth and goodness: As a “humble disciple of art,” he

tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable. (Du Bois 1926, # 11)

And while Du Bois observes and praises that Black artists are starting to be recognized by both Black and white audiences, he warns of whites who are too eager in embracing Black artists' dissolution of the color line and who might thus be blind to larger structural racism. In fact, Du Bois urges Black artists to join the NAACP's

great call to a new battle, a new fight and new things to fight before the old things are wholly won; and to say that the Beauty of Truth and Freedom which shall some day be our heritage and the heritage of all civilized men is not in our hands yet and that we ourselves must not fail to realize. (Du Bois 1926, # 20)

Beauty, truth, goodness and freedom go hand in hand in Du Bois's conception, and he believes "it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty" (# 27). Referring back to citizenship, Du Bois adds the aspect of duty to a full citizenship for Black Americans. The tools with which the artists can achieve beauty are truth – "not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding" (ibid.) – and goodness – "not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest" (ibid.). What Du Bois essentially describes is how artists become trustworthy agents of mobilization and change. He uses the words *truth* and *goodness* in the same sense contemporary scholars use *authenticity*, *reality* and *truthfulness*. His description of the Black artist conveys the image of a credible, goodwilled cultural agent who works for the betterment of his people.

In fact, all art

is propaganda and ever must be [...] writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (Du Bois 1926, # 29)

Here, Du Bois takes a radical stance on what art is and which purpose it serves. The reason for art, and thus for creating beautiful things, needs to be propaganda in the sense of information advancing a certain cause.¹¹³ Du Bois's art as propaganda can be compared to

¹¹³ The word *propaganda* was originally used to refer to material or information that advances a cause or an idea. Only at the beginning of the nineteenth century did it begin to be used denoting information that is questionable, inaccurate or misleading (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

contemporary practices of artistic activism, or artivism. To achieve truth and goodness in one's art, however, the art has to be judged by those who create it:

We [as Black people] must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment. And we are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men. (Du Bois 1926, # 35)

Hip hop music has, to a degree, achieved Du Bois's vision: The industry has been created and is dominated by Black artists and labels, such as LaFace in Atlanta. However, interpreted today, Du Bois's desire for truth and self-assessment mirror hip hop's standard to keep it real that has a limiting streak to it as it excludes any form of speculation, abstraction and experimentation, as sociologist Alondra Nelson observes (2000). Keeping it real translates to truthfully representing one's socio-economic background and addressing the issues that especially poor Black communities face in everyday life. Artists who keep it real are trustworthy mobilizers because they address these issues directly. However, the function of art that is less direct, as explained by Rita Felski in *Hooked* (2020), cannot be overlooked. And while hip hop tends to be direct, following a certain sound and style, there are successful rappers whose music defies standards of keeping it real. Literary scholar Howard Ramsby, for instance, finds that OutKast borrowed many musical elements from funk and fashioned themselves as futurist: Their name and album *ATLiens* suggests an "extraterrestrial" existence coupled with techno and sci-fi qualities (Ramsby II 2013, 209). OutKast's achievements concerning the redrawing of geographic lines of hip hop and their funk-related, visionary musical explorations address the issue of producing popular and simultaneously surreal music (Ramsby II 2013). The rap group's surreal style is carried on in Donald Glover's *Atlanta*, as explored in chapter 5.2.1. As both the series and OutKast produced socially engaging art, it is evident that Black activist art can indeed be less direct and diverse, and yet popular. Atlanta-based contemporary rapper Killer Mike is well-known for his socio-politically engaging lyrics and activities that involve a Netflix show, *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike*, where he portrays Black life, and his public engagement during elections and other societal events, such as the George Floyd protests in 2020.

Killer Mike's performance: Black, Southern, and controversial

In May 2023, the *New York Times* published a portrait of Atlanta-based rapper Killer Mike on occasion of his new solo album *Michael*. For the past couple of decades, the rapper has

been a prominent figure beyond the city's hip hop scene as he has frequently appeared in political debates, alongside Bernie Sanders, for instance, and publicly declared his opinions on gun ownership, police protests and his Southern identity. Despite his controversial ideas, Killer Mike is described as "an authoritative public brand of his own, a truth-telling talking head who came to represent an insular community on an international scale" (Coscarelli 2023). How does the rapper create that sort of authoritative and trustworthy public image that even *The New York Times* recognizes?

Killer Mike's career started with featuring in songs like OutKast's "The Whole World" (2001), followed by his debut album *Monster* in 2003. Since then, he released five more solo albums until he partnered up with rapper El-P to produce music as the duo *Run the Jewels*. His song "Pressure," released on his 2008 album *I Pledge Allegiance to the Grind II* and featuring Los Angeles rapper Ice Cube, starts and ends with passages from Malcolm X's speeches. At the song's beginning, Malcolm X's voice says:

Who are you?
You don't know?
Don't tell me negro
That's nothin
What were you before the white man named you a negro
What was your name?
[...]
Where is your history?
How did a man wipe out your history?
How did the man – what did the man do to make you as dumb,
as you are right now¹¹⁴

The song thus starts with Malcolm X's thought on Black heritage, history and legacy before plunging into Killer Mike's original content. The song reminds the listener of past racial discrimination and urges her to stand up for her rights and put pressure on politicians. The song ends with Malcolm X's words:

No negro leaders have fought for civil rights
They paid for civil rights
They have begged the white man for civil rights
They have begged the white man for freedom
And anytime you beg another man to set you free
You will never be free
Freedom is something you have to do for yourselves
And until the American negro lets the white man know

¹¹⁴ This is from Malcolm X's famous "Democracy is Hypocrisy" speech in 1960 (Malcolm X).

That we are really, really ready and willing to pay the price that is necessary for freedom
Our people will always be walking around here second class citizens or what you call twentieth century slaves
What price are you talking about sir?
The price of freedom is death¹¹⁵
(Killer Mike 2008)

Killer Mike's choice of these passages aligns with his skepticism of material wealth and his call for owning one's community and space. This tradition of thought goes back to Du Bois who feared the pursuit of wealth would interfere with higher moral values like freedom, truth and goodness, and thus with the advancement of Black Americans, especially in the South. Killer Mike could have chosen more moderate words by Dr. Martin Luther King, but he opted for the radical stance of Malcolm X who in his speeches mobilized people to fight for equality by any means necessary and who saw death as a necessary price in this fight. By choosing Malcolm X's criticism of civil rights leaders (see the song's concluding passage), Killer Mike reveals some of his own thoughts on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. This becomes more obvious in a 2014 interview where he states, "[e]verything we think we have? We have nothing. We've gained nothing but the ability to buy shit. And you being a customer is nothing. They're growing customers. Customers are born. Customers die. You're just a statistic. But we could own the communities we're in" (Reece 2014). While he respects the work of both Malcolm X and King, in "Pressure" he urges that contemporary

Black politicians stop bullshittin'
And you funky black preachers with your pulpittin'
Our kings had dreams and a big vision
All you give us is government and religion
Are you a freedom fighter or a school pigeon
Is you down for your people in the big mission
Or you a dirty nigga workin' for fuckin' Clinton
Or you a dirty nigga workin' for fuckin' Bush
Another message for the politicians
Better get the police off our ass quickly
(Killer Mike 2008)

In this song, the rapper criticizes both material wealth and capitalism as substitutes for actual equality and calls Black political figures to stay true to the interests of their constituents – if

¹¹⁵ This paragraph is from an interview that Malcolm X gave roughly in 1963 or 1964 to an unidentified news reporter. Unfortunately, there is no legitimate source for this paragraph, and I had to make assumptions based on several videos and articles (cf. Autodidact 17, February 21, 2020; Malcolms Disciples 2017).

necessary, in opposition to government and religion. The rapper's message is not only protest against the actions of white Americans but also a critique of Black politicians and Black religious leaders who lose sight of what really matters. This reflection on his own community offers a glimpse at the rapper's conscientious and multi-faceted opinions that, by frequently running against trending liberal attitudes, can be interpreted as genuine. Killer Mike's statements become even more credible in light of his own political engagement: He publicly supported Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders during the 2016 campaign and Georgia state senate candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff in the 2022 runoff. Thus, while Killer Mike states his weariness of politics in general, he distinguishes between individual politicians and supports or criticizes depending on their respective actions. In one of his most political songs, "Reagan," released on his 2012 studio album *R.A.P. Music*, the rapper invokes former president Ronald Reagan's famous speech concerning the Iran-Contra affair in 1987 where he promised not to have traded weapons for hostages in Iran, only to backpedal and admit his failure a few months later. Against this background, Killer Mike raps

Ronald Reagan was a actor, not at all a factor
 Just an employee of the country's real masters
 Just like the Bushes, Clinton and Obama
 Just another talking head telling lies on teleprompters
 If you don't believe the theory, then argue with this logic
 Why did Reagan and Obama both go after Gaddafi?
 We invaded sovereign soil, going after oil
 Taking countries is a hobby paid for by the oil lobby
 Same as in Iraq and Afghanistan
 And Ahmadinejad say they coming for Iran
 They only love the rich and how they loathe the poor
 If I say any more they might be at my door
 (Killer Mike 2012)

Calling then president Barack Obama "another talking head telling lies" who is led, just like the Bushes and Clinton, by the interests of powerful and wealthy elites aligns with hip hop artists' overall declining sympathy towards Obama during his presidency (Nielson 2012).

How does a rapper repeatedly criticize Black leaders and simultaneously succeed in fashioning himself as a truthful activist for the African American community? Killer Mike's particular performance of Blackness plays a crucial role in his image as a genuine artist-activist. This performance, as I argue in the following, rests on one essential pillar: His public identification with the U.S.-American South that is unusual in the hip hop scene where artists

tend to emphasize their ties to a city rather than a region. As this chapter's introductory quote shows, Killer Mike sees himself first and foremost as a Southerner, and while he does not explicitly mention race, his addition "if we cotton pickers, what better thing to be?" gives a clear vision of a Black Southerner. In an interview with Chuck Reece from *The Bitter Southerner*, an online magazine that aims to "uncover the American South in all its truth and complexity" (The Bitter Southerner)¹¹⁶, Killer Mike states

the people who are stereotypically *supposed* to hate me, or the people I'm *supposed* to mistrust, have always been my neighbors. And for most of my life, we've been really nice to each other. That's my honest experience with whites in the South, and I think a lot of times when people say 'Southerner' or make those crass jokes, I, as the black guy, am supposed to excuse myself from the joke. But we're all Southerners. We all talk with these drawls and twangs. We all go to the race track on Sunday. We all go fishing. I don't have a Dixie flag on the back of my pickup, but it still has mud flaps and big tires. So you're talking about me, too. I am that redneck guy you're talking about. I'm *not* him, racially. He's not me, racially. But culturally, in the geography of where we're from, our grandfathers did the same things. They did the same shit. I fiercely identify with being a Southerner because I value that culture. Everybody else thinks we're country as shit, anyway. So why not just be who I am? I am Southern. I rap. I wear cheesy jewelry. I bounce around on stage. But when I take that shit off and go home, I fish. And I'm your neighbor. I do the same things you do. (Reece 2014; emphases in original)

He distinguishes race and culture but emphasizes a shared Southernness that reaches across racial boundaries. The mutual activities, experiences and linguistic elements that shape his concept of a Southerner go beyond Black and white and defy what Killer Mike describes as stereotypically "supposed" attitudes. His broader mission of bringing together people of the South that he expresses with the above statement is mirrored in the rapper's weekly interview program "Love & Respect" that aired on PBS from 2021 to 2022. In this format, Killer Mike interviews personas from politics, entertainment, sports and more, some of which share controversial right-leaning ideas. Killer Mike's approach is grounded in the belief that people need to talk to and understand each other even if they have opposing opinions. In this vein, he interviews people like Atlanta-based film production mogul Tyler Perry, rapper-activist

¹¹⁶ *The Bitter Southerner* was established in 2013 by journalist Chuck Reece with the aim to catch the complexity of the South in stories and share them in order to break down stereotypes about the South. The magazine was launched with Reece's article "Why We Created The Bitter Southerner in the First Place" (Reece, August 06, 2013) and publishes online and print stories, essays and poems about Southern culture, art, food, educators, scientists and more.

T.I., preacher (and daughter of Martin Luther King) Bernice King, former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young, as well as controversial figures such as Republican politician Herschel Walker (who ran for the Georgia Senate in 2022 against Raphael Warnock) and Conservative radio host Erick Erickson. Killer Mike's skill as a communicator lies in his ability to treat opponents with curiosity and respect and simultaneously stand by his own beliefs, as these conversations show. While many of his opinions are reflected in the democratic and left-leaning population, he also shares views, such as his advocacy for the right to own guns, that strike some as questionable, even outrageous. However, it is precisely this provocative determination that enables the rapper to enter uncomfortable conversations and that makes him trustworthy in the eyes of those disagreeing with his political agenda. His opinions do not always align with a liberal and left-leaning demographic that is, in a polarized society as the U.S., exclusively associated with the Democratic party. In an interview with comedian Joe Rogan that was conducted in the aftermath of a controversial interview that the rapper gave the National Rifle Association, the rapper explains how his defense of the Second Amendment is rooted in his identity:

The First and Second Amendment rights matter to me as an African American and as an American. First and foremost, as an African American, I've only been free fifty-five years, my parents were born in apartheid; and as an American, we are a country that broke off from what we felt like was a tyranny and monarchy, and we did that because farmers and guns dared to wage guerilla warfare against at that time one of the largest armies [...]. So, I honor that by continuing to be in the spirit of those farmers, in the continuance of Crispus Attucks, the first person to die in the American Revolution was a Black man, you know, so for me, I would dishonor those patriots who started this country, and Crispus Attucks, I would dishonor the lineage as an African American who's only fifty-five years into freedom, by giving government my gun back. That's not something I believe in. (JRE Clips 2019; 1:35-2:25)

As mentioned before, Killer Mike's objective is to reconcile Southern culture with a Black American identity. The above quote exemplifies how he amalgamates being American and African American and how he ties these identities to the constitutional right of gun ownership. Through emphasizing a shared culture rather than a shared race, the rapper is able to position himself at the center of the image of U.S.-American citizenship with a deep tradition of American values that are rooted in one of the most sacred American symbols, the Constitution. This positioning allows him to be simultaneously patriotic and Black – it allows him to present himself as thoroughly American. Another symbolic element that Killer Mike uses to evoke the idea of citizenship and Black patriotism is the history of Crispus Attucks. In his

detailed account, historian Mitchell Kachun (2017) concludes that the true biography of Crispus Attucks who died in the Boston Massacre in 1770 will likely never be revealed for lack of evidence. In fact, Kachun claims, the myth of a heroic Attucks was created by American Revolutionaries who used him and the memory of the massacre to serve their political agenda. It is not clear if Attucks was a run-away slave or a free man, if he was Black or Native American, if he even identified primarily as an American (Kachun 2017, 9f.). Killer Mike, however, like many popular productions, uses the symbol of Crispus Attucks to emphasize the importance of Black Americans for the nation's formative narrative. During the same interview, the rapper discusses reparations and refers to Black figures Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad to back his response. Whether the facts he pulls are true or not seems insignificant; rather, he drops the names of famous Black people to emphasize his Black American traditions and lineage – a strategy that underpins the validity of his opinions and his trustworthiness.

“I am Harlem as a ghetto and its renaissance in one human being”

Killer Mike is an elaborate speaker and enjoys putting his qualities to action in interviews that he frequently gives the media. In May 2023, *New York Times* reporter Joe Coscarelli dedicated an article to “Atlanta’s Rap Journeyman, [who] Is at the Peak of His Powers” (2023) on behalf of his solo album release. I have illuminated the significance of place in Killer Mike’s music, but I wish to emphasize the point by taking a look at his performance in interviews. The caption to this paragraph is a quote from Killer Mike, and the complete reads: “I guess for people who still don’t have a proper understanding of Atlanta, I am Harlem as a ghetto and its renaissance in one human being” (Coscarelli 2023). The rapper sees Atlanta as both a physical space and a cultural phenomenon or movement. This becomes more evident when fellow rapper Charlamagne asks Killer Mike if growing up he was aware how special Atlanta was in terms of Black representation, and Killer Mike answers:

When you get shipped to the country in the summers, then you understand how lucky you are, how fortunate, but most of my friends didn’t have any idea. So I grew up really with us in power, I grew up in Wakanda, but growing up in Wakanda, I got a chance to see we do good and bad, we make good politicians and bad politicians. Our church is as corrupt as any other church, our institutions are as good as any other institution. And that’s not me down in Atlanta just as much saying I learned to keep an eye on all the power, so I started participating in the political process a lot younger. So, my grandmother was from Tuskegee, she participated in some of the marches with

King and stuff, she just thought being a part of the political process was absolutely what you were supposed to do as a citizen. My grandfather was a Black man but from a philosophical standpoint was probably more like a libertarian. He wanted government out of his life, you know, and he thought the worst thing that ever happened to Blacks was desegregation. (The Hollywood Reporter 2019; 01:20-02:15)

The rapper touches on three interesting aspects here. First, he equates Atlanta with Wakanda, the fictional country in the Marvel comic world and in the 2018 movie *Black Panther* where African peoples are in power. Second, he mentions the legacy of being part of the political process as citizenship. And third, he portrays the diversity of political opinion in the Black American community by drawing from his grandfather's attitude. The comparison of Atlanta to Wakanda speaks to the city's history of Black activism and power that became prominent during the Civil Rights Movement and with its first African American mayor Maynard Jackson in the 1970s. This also proves how important Black representation and cultural imagination are with regard to real life. *Black Panther* has certainly had real life effects as Killer Mike's nonchalant use of Wakanda implies. The vision of Wakanda as a country governed by Black peoples leads to the rapper's memory of his grandmother who viewed political participation as natural for any citizen. In their edited volume *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination* (2020), Henry Jenkins and colleagues' assembled essays show how popular culture can be appropriated, remixed and redeployed for social change at the grassroots level. Similarly, Robin Kelley (2002) muses about the socio-political opportunities that lie in Black surrealist imagination. If Atlanta is Wakanda, then Black people in this city have the capacity to govern themselves and their land. In *In a Shade of Blue* (2007), Eddie Glaude Jr. discusses African Americans' unwavering hope and fight for democracy from a pragmatic perspective. Killer Mike's lyrics and political mindset, that are inspired by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Marcus Garvey and others, share the same hopeful vision for the US' political future:

What I would like to do as a Black community is for us to start holding some Sunday meetings that are not online and let's start talking what we want and what we deserve because 54 percent of all African Americans live in the South. The South is still great in terms of land ownership, we could own that part of the country. Essentially, I want Black people to think of yourself as Mormon in the south of Utah. I want you to start thinking, what can we do from a power base perspective there (The Hollywood Reporter 2019; 22:58-23:25))

Killer Mike taps into an idea that Charles Blow most recently formulated in his book *The Devil You Know* (2021). In the early twentieth century, many African Americans moved from the south to the north, a pattern that became known as the *Great Migration*. Today, many

African Americans move back to the South, a pattern that has established itself in research as the *New Great Migration* (Frey 2004). Since the 1990s, metropolitan areas like Atlanta have been attracting young, well-educated Blacks. Of the four geographic regions in the U.S., the South is the only one to have increased its Black population (Frey 2022). In fact, Southern metro areas have become magnets for Black migration: Between 1995 and 2020, the Atlanta and Dallas metropolitan areas have gained the highest number of African American migrants, while New York, Chicago and Los Angeles had the highest losses. In 1970, Atlanta had the 13th-largest Black population, and by 2010, it had become second after New York – a trend that is bound to continue, as William Frey predicts:

whether it is because of family connections, cultural ties, or just the “comfort level” in a region that, for better or worse, is familiar and predictable, the South will continue to stand out from the rest of the country by maintaining a large and increasingly prosperous Black presence, even as it also attracts migrants from other racial minorities. (Frey 2022)

This aligns with what journalist Charles Blow urges Black Americans to do in his book *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto* (2021): Move to the South to form political power through large numbers participating in elections and other forms of civic life.

If Atlanta is, like Harlem, both a place and a cultural phenomenon, maybe even a movement, then Black cultural organizing is its engine. Artists like Killer Mike and Donald Glover amplify this phenomenon by mobilizing citizens in various ways to be part of politics and social life. Cultural organizers drive this hopeful prospect, even in face of backlashes like voter suppression, because they believe in a better democracy.

Killer Mike’s vision of Sunday meetings where Blacks congregate to find solutions together mirrors Eddie Glaude Jr.’s (2007) observation on the annual State of the Black Union conference that author and public speaker Tavis Smiley organized from 2000 to 2010. The State of the Black Union conference was open to the public and took place in different cities throughout the U.S. Famous public figures presented their ideas on topics that were deemed relevant to the broader Black American community. In 2006, Tavis Smiley published an edited volume, *The Covenant with Black America*, that was born out of the State of the Black Union conference. Glaude Jr. points out that Tavis Smiley composed his book by asking African Americans on the radio to list the most compelling problems they experienced; Smiley then put together expert groups to write on these issues. To Glaude Jr. this is a remarkable process because “[t]he book materializes, then, out of a communicative space mediated by

radio; its content reflects a broad-base consensus about *particular* problems faced and the need for conversation and debate about how *best* to respond to them” (Glaude Jr. 2007, 153; emphases in original). What Glaude Jr. observes through the pragmatic lens in his epilogue holds true with Killer Mike and many other activists:

The ideals of democracy inspired those who had been denied freedom and education to dream dreams, to imagine possibilities, and to hold on in the face of the withering storm – to will themselves into a new day. This tradition never believed the lie that this country was an example of democracy achieved but, rather, understood intimately its failures and shortcomings, its blindness and deformities. This tradition saw nevertheless not simply disease but possibility – understanding that the nation could have life if it would only learn to swing Duke Ellington style. It is a tradition that, at its best, cultivated democratic dispositions in the face of strange fruit dangling from popular trees, insisted on effective freedom as African Americans imagined a day that their children and children’s children would be able to actualize their capacities and potentialities, and struggled to ensure that every child would have access to the opportunity and skills to make good on the promise that is America. It is in these dark and trying times that we must turn to [...] the enduring purchase of traditions of struggle to muster the democratic hope and courage to challenge our nation and insist on a better future for our children – to educate them *and* [sic.] ourselves into the habits of democracy so that this nation can be saved. (Glaude Jr. 2007, 155f.)

The Covenant with Black America stands in this very tradition, Glaude Jr. believes. As do W. E. B. Du Bois, John Dewey and the artists analyzed in this work. They were and continue to be convinced that democracy is to be molded by its citizens, and that it is to be created again and again by every generation.

5.3. Images from Atlanta



Figure 12. Sean Schwab's landscape mural in Castleberry Hill, Atlanta, portraying the neighborhood and city's legacy. Commissioned by Herman J. Russell's family after his death in 2014. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 13. Part of Sean Schwab's mural.



Figure 14. Part of Sean Schwab's mural.



Figure 15. Part of Sean Schwab's mural.



Figure 16. Part of Sean Schwab's mural.



Figure 17. Muhammad Yungai's "Community Roots" in Castleberry Hill. Created as part of the Off the Walls project in 2018, commissioned by the Super Bowl Host Committee and art organization WonderRoot. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 18. Close-up of Muhammad Yungai's "Community Roots."



Figure 19. Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya's "We" mural in Southwest Downtown, Atlanta. Created in 2018 in collaboration with youth and local non-profit organization ChopArt. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 20. Yehimi Cambrón's "We carry the dreams," created in Downtown in 2019 for the Off the Wall project in context of the Super Bowl.



Figure 21. Yehimi Cambrón's mural of a Monarch butterfly at the Latin American Association on Buford Highway. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 22. Fabian Williams's mural of civil rights activist Hosea Williams. Created in 2017 close to Edgewood Avenue and the Martin Luther King National historical Park, commissioned by mixed-use urban development company. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 23. Stacey Abrams (left) and Colin Kaepernick (bottom right) by Fabian Williams. The first was created for Abrams’s gubernatorial runoff in 2018, and the latter as part of the initiative #KaepernickBowl in 2019 to honor the NFL player’s knee fall in 2016. The building is Sister Louisa’s Church Bar, located on Edgewood Avenue, Atlanta. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 24. The slogan “Vote Ossoff Warnock” was added to the building (fig. 23) during the 2022 senate runoff. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 25. Fabian Williams's "The Paragraphalizer," created in 2016 in cooperation with the project Education Is Not A Crime. Located on Edgewood Avenue, Atlanta. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 26. Charmaine Minniefield’s “Watch Me Learn,” portraying Dr. Doris Derby. Created in 2016 in cooperation with Education Is Not A Crime on Edgewood Avenue. April 2022.



Figure 27. Charmaine Minniefield’s portrait of civil right icon Ella Baker. Created in 2019 in collaboration with the Off the Wall project. Located on Auburn Avenue between the MLK historical site and Downtown Atlanta. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 28. Graffiti and tagging on the BeltLine Eastside trail. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 29. Tagging for Black Lives Matter in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. BeltLine Eastside trail. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 30. “Black Lives Matter” written on construction fences in front of new office spaces. BeltLine Eastside trail.



Figure 31. “Black Lives Matter” written in yellow paint on the pavement, BeltLine Eastside trail. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 32. The Black Lives Matter slogan on the pavement visible against new construction and people on a stroll. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 33. Temporary art on a construction fence. Artist unknown, BeltLine Eastside trail. Picture taken April 2022.



Figure 34. Ruby Chavez's temporary mural "Be the Change," part of a collaborative mural activation by artists of color in 2021. Commissioned by a real estate company through the BeltLine Inc.



Figure 35. Eric Nine's temporary murals, part of the same collaboration as fig. 34.



Figure 36. Artist Quake's 2021 mural, paying homage to "A-Town" and commissioned by Doritos Chips. BeltLine Eastside trail, picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 37. Fabian Williams's mural of Martin Luther King. Created for the annual Forward Warrior festival in 2022 on Wylie Street.



Figure 38. Joe Dreher's mural of a local video producer, located on Wylie Street. First created for *Forward Warrior* in 2015, the artist has been modifying the mural every year. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 39. “Lo Que Hereda No Se Huerta” – what is inherited cannot be stolen, by the Living Melody Collective. Created in 2018 during *Forward Warrior* in response to the family separations at the Mexican– American border. April 2022.



Figure 40. Memorial portrait of local activist Laura Calle with fresh flower in front. Created by Lunar Nutre Yerbass on Wylie Street in 2015. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 41. Memorial portrait of local resident Mariam Abdulrab who was killed in 2021. Artist unknown, on Wylie Street. Picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 42. “Solidarity” by Sam Newby and colleagues. Created in 2021 in response to the Atlanta spa shootings where six women of Asian origin were killed. Wylie Street, picture taken in April 2022.



Figure 43. “History of Good Trouble” by artist Choze. Honoring the Atlanta civil rights activist and politician John Lewis who died in 2020. On Wylie Street, picture taken in April 2022. 1 of 3.



Figure 44. “History of Good Trouble” by Choze. 2 of 3.



Figure 45. “History of Good Trouble” by Choze. 3 of 3.

6. Conclusion

[...]
the blood vessel sidewalks pumping my lungs
'till I mold:
existing
included
unforgettable

– Amanda Gorman,
“Daughter’s Metro Map to City Identity”¹¹⁷

In the first part of her poem that is cited in the introduction, Amanda Gorman states that her home streets make her “diamond,” “veteran,” “journal of streets,” “writing a city memory.” The second part, quoted here, is more explicit. The streets breathe life into her lungs, and shape her until she feels existing, included and unforgettable. In her description, the city is a living thing fueled by the people that call it home, from churchgoers to the homeless. While the city, in Gorman’s poem, shapes its residents, the same is true in reverse: Residents influence how their city looks and operates through various actions. They shape city spaces through everyday behaviors like walking and shopping, and through other activities like protesting, voting, public displays of art, and more. Metropolitan areas in the U.S. are becoming more ethnically diverse, and this transforms how cities look and operate. While Robert Putnam (1995) and others lament the decline of associational engagement, there are new forms of civic participation that speak to the needs of diverse urban communities and offer access to different ways of social and political participation, as I have shown. The chapters in this work have presented a variety of creative efforts that target urban communities of color, especially Black and Latinx Americans, and address their specific worries and hopes. Because of underlying racist structures, artist activists emphasize their own racial identity to prove their trustworthiness and convince their communities of their message. Each artist has their own performance of race, depending on ethnic origin, history, personality, and creative medium. These individual performances create a broader pattern of artistic mobilization: All

¹¹⁷ Second part of Amanda Gorman’s poem “Daughter’s Metro Map to City Identity” (Kane, January 10, 2021).

artists of color draw from specific legacies that pertain to the history of their ethnic identity, be it in terms of political thought, philosophy, or art. The Latinx artists and organizers examined in section 4.2. position themselves within the Latinx art genre of muralism and within a tradition of public protesting in the U.S. Similarly, the Black artists and organizers in sections 4.1. and 5.2. carry on the legacy of fighting for ownership in the U.S. and the tradition of African American oral storytelling through rap. As the artists and organizers tie their work to pre-existing art and activism, their own contribution is embedded in an established domain, and thus becomes more trustworthy. However, there are also new creative forms of participation, as section 5.1. has explored, that take existing formats a step further. Public murals and artist collectives in Atlanta address a diversifying audience that includes city residents with an Asian and Pacific Islands origin or a Middle Eastern heritage. Similarly, the series *Gentefied* and *Atlanta* broaden what it means to be Latinx and Black in the U.S. Creative endeavors like these strive to include a diversifying population in their vision of the USA. This is crucial work in the light of demographic prognoses that predict a shrinking white and a growing non-white population. This development demands strategies at incorporating communities of color into the civic life of cities, counties, states, and on the federal level. Artistic work has the potential to reach, hook, and mobilize a wide audience, as I have repeatedly shown throughout this study.

While there is a pattern of similarity in the artists' performances of race, there are a few surprising regional differences. Activist art in Los Angeles is deeply concerned with questions of ownership, as the analyses have shown: Who owns capital? Who owns intellectual property? Who owns material property? Who owns urban space? All artists and organizers in chapter 4 address some of these questions. This is in part due to the city's urban history: Indigenous peoples created the earliest settlements of the area that constitutes Los Angeles today. The area was later possessed by the Spanish who founded the city, and then by the Mexican after they gained independence from Spain. In the nineteenth century, Mexico had to surrender California and Los Angeles to the USA. The fights over power and space continued, as Mike Davis illustrates in detail in *City of Quartz* (2018). Thus, space and the question of who owns it have always played a significant role in Los Angeles. Moreover, because of the city's Spanish and Mexican history, the presence of Latinx residents bears a different weight than, for instance, in Atlanta. Because of the city's Hispanic legacy and its

large Latinx population, there are more diverse claims to its space. Ownership and space therefore constitute rallying points for grassroots political participation, be it through protests against gentrification or through mobilization to own intellectual property as well as real estate.

In Atlanta, a different scene unfolds. Here, as the analyses in chapter 5 have demonstrated, the artists and organizers are all concerned with a distinct U.S. Southern legacy and identity. While this involves a critical engagement with Confederate history and a pride in the Civil Rights Movement, it also concerns questions of Southern identity, especially for Black Americans. Black culture is in focus in Atlanta, although I have mentioned how some new efforts target a more diverse group including Latinx and AAPI. Nevertheless, section 5.2. in particular has shown that grassroots political mobilization in Atlanta necessitates addressing what it means to be a Southerner and non-white. Because the South evokes associations with the Civil War, slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, and Jim Crow laws – not least due to many glorifying memorials that are still in place –, activists wonder how non-white citizens can position themselves within that imagery and rightfully participate in shaping the South.

In the two case studies, I have shown how artists and organizers perform race to be perceived as truthful and trustworthy, and thereby to motivate their communities to engage in social and political life. The examined cultural agents work at the grassroots level where they try to create networks of trust that can be integrated into the political fields of their cities, regions and, at last, on the national level (Tilly 2007). Many of these artists and organizers have personal ties to politicians that they leverage for the benefit of their communities. Their work for grassroots political participation includes an awareness of new modes of citizenship that go beyond formal national citizenship, which I have conceptualized as urban and cultural citizenship. In this way, residents without formal citizenship can influence political decision-making too, for instance by participating in the national census and other surveys that lead to ripple effects. In light of renewed voter disenfranchisement and anti-immigration policies during Donald Trump's presidency (and his potential reelection, as I am writing this conclusion in February 2024), enfranchising potential voters through various forms of civic action is crucial to sustain democracy. The cultural agents' efforts I have illustrated stem from a belief in individual self-efficacy that gives each individual the ability to influence their surroundings. Each cultural agent emphasizes the role of the individual in fighting for more

justice and equality. This conviction is related to a deeply-rooted cultural U.S.-American self-concept, as I have outlined in chapter 2. This self-concept understands democratic life as created and maintained by the efforts of ordinary citizens. To emphasize this point further, I have drawn on John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy and on Eddie Glaude's contemporary application thereof concerning Black America. Similarly, I have also referred to W. E. B. Du Bois's view on African American progress and the pragmatic value of art.

Despite their regional differences and their distinct ways of performing race, all activists examined in this work have one overarching motif in common: They are all motivated by a hope for change. Hope sounds naïve, but it is the term that former president Barack Obama used in his condolence letter to Nipsey Hussle's family and that Roderick Hart chose for his analysis in *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive* (2018). This hope, or optimism, stems from the activists' ability to envision a better democracy which they convey through their artistic messaging. The same optimism is mirrored in Amanda Gorman's "Daughter's Metro Map to City Identity" where she imagines how the city becomes a breathing, living thing that brings her into existence, molds her identity and makes her feel connected to others. Similarly, Du Bois imagined how Blacks could elevate themselves through the beauty of art, Afrosurrealists envision alternative realities, and Latinx artists merge lived experience with mystic, religious and cultural icons. Chapter 5.2. in particular examined the visionary dimension of activist work. The first step in taking civic action is to imagine what one could change, as the cultural agents examined in this work urge their communities to do.

Against the backdrop of a radically changing demographic and the potential impact this could have on voter turnout (Z. L. Hajnal 2010), the political enfranchisement of ethnically diverse residents becomes pivotal to sustain a working democracy that benefits all. The present work does not provide numbers for the success of artistic mobilization, nor does it offer any other quantitative information that could guide future work. I have shown instead that art offers various points of access to political participation, and which practices cultural agents use to gain trust. This work therefore addresses the gap that exists in qualitative research concerning the precise practices of cultural agents in mobilizing their communities to participate in social and political life. The lens of performance theory has added a layer to the contribution that allows to fruitfully address the role of race and racial experience in

political participation. Moreover, especially with low trust polls among ethnic communities, tying in artists' trustworthiness has shed light on the importance of trust networks for political participation. There is literature that focuses on the role of new media and popular culture for social change, such as media scholar Henry Jenkins and colleagues' *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (2016) and *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (2020), or Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez and Alexandra Matute's edited book *Cultural Production and Participatory Politics: Youth, Symbolic Creativity, and Activism* (2020a). My contribution ties in with these studies, and adds the dimensions of race, trust and the city to discussions of artistic political mobilization in the USA. A systematic continuation of the present work could investigate the practices of other artists of color, such as from the Asian and Pacific Islander communities, and in different U.S.-American cities. Future qualitative research in this field could provide insight into how different communities can be reached and mobilized. Moreover, adjoining research questions concern the role of governmental structures in political participation: How do city governments enhance or hinder the political enfranchisement of ethnic communities? In what ways can and do politicians at local, state, and federal levels cooperate with cultural agents to mobilize for more civic engagement? Investigating these questions is a task that complements the present research and adds new knowledge to practices of artistic activism and political participation at the grassroots level.

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