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Locating a Sentido de Lugar: Community Writing and Sensorial Storywork as Geographic Method

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Abstract

In this paper, we make a case for community-based writing workshops as a valuable method for understanding senses of place, and how participatory writing can be a powerful tool for developing collaborative community research. We frame this methodology as "sensorial storywork." Drawing on "sensed" and "sensual" written information, we offer sample geographic analyses based on five experimental writing workshops produced collaboratively with community partners in Oakland, California. We find that writing workshops that center marginalized senses of place enables closer study of the coproduction of race and place, while also functioning as sites of solidarity in the face of inequitable development.

Keywords

writing, sensory geography, community-based research, racial geographies, creative methods

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Introduction

Prompt: Write or describe the area in Oakland you most vividly remember and spent time roughly 5-10 years ago.

Written Response:
I've spent a huge chunk of my life on E 14
Or International Blvd for those that don't know
I grew up a 82L Rider
My memory of this main street holds a mainline grasp of what I feel of my city
Where each section holds its own Identity
From 8th to 38th to 98th
This Blvd has Been My Playground
I learned to drive on this Blvd once I turned in my bus pass
I've cried on this blvd
Watched people die on this Blvd
And Even Now I word on this Blvd
My love hate Relationship with My City starts here
I noticed that the Areas Are changing
More Frequently I notice The poverty on this Blvd
Closed businesses I used to love that are now being reused on this Blvd
This congestion created By the BRT
Making every street a 1 lane street
I notice that certain areas don't smell the same
And The energy is a dingy Grey
I don't feel home here anymore
I still see the Taco Trucks But I notice
A lot of my people are gone
2012 till now feels a 1000 years ago
Leaving Fossils of what once was
10 years in the future seems lightyears away
But that's only Because it's Being Rebuilt without us
Holding on to each corner as if it can't slip through my hands

– DaJuan Woodard Carter, September 24, 2023

Figure 1.

The front doors of East Side Arts Alliance (ESAA) face East 14th Street / International Boulevard in Oakland, California. As a cultural center and community space, ESAA serves as a homeplace for local and displaced residents like DaJuan, and artists of color and community organizers of Oakland and the broader Bay Area, to reflect on their relationship to storied places like East 14th. The street itself is a palimpsest of mixed memories: policing, sex trafficking, street art, taco trucks, and identities split between the gentrified visions of diversity that "International Blvd" represents, and "the E. 1-4" of local lingo. There are many ways to tell the story of what it is like to live and die on this street. During this community writing workshop, we collectively recalled the smells, sights, sounds, and memories here. What we learned as a group of writers is that this street is of central importance to those who remember

what it was like early in the wake of abandonment, and are invested in what it might become with a new transit line running down its middle.

In this paper, we advocate for public writing as a community-based geographic methodology for centering the sense of place observations of those who live there. Writing groups offer an alternative method to relay embodied experiences of place that may otherwise be overlooked in qualitative research. Inviting residents to engage in writing is an inclusive way to conduct research that situates the everyday person as the expert in their experience of place, and provides geographers with a granular understanding of how a place is embodied and shaped by spatialized difference. Writing about a sense of place for participants also offers a manner of sense-making that becomes part of a researcher's inductive representations of that place. Writing and sharing narratives about place can be used to understand, and also potentially re-write, structural processes that produce relationships between place, race, and displacement. In particular, our analysis focuses on the sensory and sensed – the physical and emotional feelings of a place – as two aspects of written work that emerged from five experimental community writing workshops. We also assess the value of conducting this written method as a group in which isolated experiences can be validated and learned from. Given prompts about home and safety as marginalized people, these writings provided insight into what is at stake in the racialized struggle over homeplaces in Oakland.

Lastly, we frame this kind of writing – one that develops a community-based, sensory understanding of place as place changes – as *sensorial storywork*. This methodology engages Indigenous, Chicana, and Black theories of earth-writing, land as teacher, and community-based research literatures to demonstrate that writing as a geographic community-based method is a relational, sensorial, and multidimensional spatial practice. The act of identifying shared sensory experiences and stories actually gives shape to political communities. This practice of writing embodied relationships to place is therefore important to recognizing and critically re-thinking racialized spatial narratives.

Workshop Overview

Our collaborative work on these writing workshops began with a shared interest in making space for Indigenous, Black, and People of Color to share and explore their 'sense of place' through collective writing practices. Prior to the series of workshops we co-hosted in Oakland, Author Alcantar hosted a Zoom-based creative writing workshop for bilingual Spanish-English speaking adults located across the United States. The workshop, entitled "Sentido de Lugar,"[1] enabled participants to collectively and individually reflect on their experiences of "homeplace." Our use of "homeplace" reflects bell hooks' (1990) definition as an abstract or material site where BIPOC communities affirm and heal each other by constructing safe and liberatory places. This was particularly important, as Alcantar's workshop audience was composed largely of Indigenous Mexican diasporic kin, which prompted responses around homeplace while considering Indigeneity and displacement. Homeplaces, and critical reflections within them, form the ground for re-writing marginalized relationships to place. Further, 'homeplace' here also refers to the shared "microcosms of mutual and treaty relations between Black and Indigenous peoples" (Maynard and Simpson

[1] This phrase literally translates to "sense of place."

2022, 74). Using this interpretation of 'homeplace,' participants were asked to imagine a liberatory and safe space, and how they existed in this place through their individual senses. Alcantar used prompts that asked participants to reflect on how their selected homeplaces interacted with their five senses, emotions, and commitments to creating liberatory places (Figure 2).

Title of Slide	Body of Slide
'Sentido de lugar' Prompted Writing: Where is YOUR 'sense of place'? What occurs there?	Close your eyes Inhale and exhale 3 big breaths Where is the place you call "home" where you can be authentically YOU? This place can be anywhere: In a city bus, a favorite cafe, your actual home, your grandma's home, your favorite bar or club, your favorite public park, your car…
Hearing	2. Now what sounds do you hear at your home place? Is there music playing? Is it through loudspeakers or headphones? Or a radio? Is there silence so quiet you hear the vibrations of your heart? Is there someone passing by selling items, and yelling the products aloud? What sounds are emanating? And from where?
Touching	3. In your home place, what can you feel with your fingertips? Can you feel someone brush past you? Is there a texture there that stimulates your sense of touch? Is there something you are holding? Or hugging?
Tasting	4. Is there a particular taste to where you are? Are you chewing gum and you can feel the mintiness or sweetness? Did someone offer you something to eat and you can 'saborear' (savor) the flavor? Did you put on a particular chapstick and the taste is clinging to your tongue? Did you light a cigarette and feel the taste on your lips?
Smelling	5. Now, let's turn to our nose. What are you smelling? Is there a food's smell emanating from the stove or oven? Is it the candle or incense you have on? Is there a noxious smell you inhale and choke on? How can you describe your home place through smell?
Emotions	6. Finally, the emotional sense. Do you feel loved and cared for where your 'home place' is? How can you describe those emotions?

	Will you use metaphor or simile, to describe this sensation? Are those emotions just fleeting or are they permanent?

Figure 2: 'Sentido de Lugar' Writing Prompts. December 7, 2024. Provided by Author 2.

Author Heitz was motivated to host similar workshops after conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Oakland on Black senses of place. We organized a series of writing workshops, "Storying Ourselves into Oakland Spaces," to further explore how public writing workshops like "Sentido de Lugar" and community-based sense of place in Oakland might be developed into a more robust framework for similar studies. We proposed this series of writing workshops to Heitz's partners at Eastside Arts Alliance. Importantly, these workshops were presented as an extension of the pre-existing Patrice Lumumba Writing Group hosted by DaJuan Woodard-Carter. Their group, made up mostly of Black Bay Area-based writers, met on Zoom every Tuesday night. Over the course of two hours, participants in this group would introduce themselves and speak about what they had on their mind that week. These issues became the potential writing prompts for everyone in the Zoom room. Often, we would select our own prompts. But there was a synergy created between topics, and participants often found themselves writing with an idea or phrase someone else had introduced. At the end of a 20-minute timed writing period, each of us were asked to share what we had written.

I. Arrival Prompt:
Describe your commute today from the location you were at to the EastSide Arts Alliance for this class. Did you come from the park, your home, a café, or another location? How did you arrive? Did you walk, bike, or drive? Did you use public transportation? What did you experience, feel, or witness on the walk over here? How did you move through space?

II. Introductions & Goals for Workshops

III. Prompt 1 - Oakland THEN, NOW, FUTURE
THEN: Write or describe the area in Oakland you most vividly remember and spent time roughly 5-10 years ago. For those that have moved here more recently, describe the particular location as of the farthest time frame you can remember. What are some of the particularities of this area?

NOW: How does this location appear now, in the present?

FUTURE: How do you imagine this place will look in 10 years from now? Thinking about the changes in the climate, the political, the social, and built environment, how will this location in Oakland change in the next 10 years?

IV. Share Prompt #1

V. Prompt 2: Outside Writing
Everyone will walk outside and find a place to stand or sit. What exists and what's going on in this part of Oakland? What are you looking at (is it a bodega, a market, a tree, a mural)? Write about this location and what you're experiencing. What does this place make you think about? How do you feel here?

VI. Share Prompt #2

VII. **Community Reflection:** How can our stories be part of Oakland's future?

Figure 3. Writing Ourselves into Oakland Spaces Writing Prompts. September 24, 2023.

Our "Storying Ourselves into Oakland Spaces" writing workshops built on this model and infrastructure. Participants were recruited from ESAA and pre-existing research networks via social media accounts and printed flyers in the neighborhoods surrounding ESAA. Attendees could drop into any workshop in our year-long series; upon arrival, participants were greeted with refreshments and prompted to check-in using an online survey. This survey included several questions regarding informed consent; an information sheet about the study was printed and linked in the survey, and participants had the option to release their writing for a community publication only, the academic study only, or both. Participants could also choose whether to publish anonymously. We also asked for participants' consent and preference for follow up.

The arc of our two-hour workshops invited people in with a grounding prompt that asked them to picture a place in Oakland that is meaningful to them. We then used a twenty minute free-writing period to depict this place using rich and varied sensory detail(Fig. 3). The remaining free-writing periods focused on the politics and temporality of this place; for instance, we asked participants to write about ancestors here and/or what this place used to be like. We also asked participants to write about the future of this place, their hopes, and what political changes they are noticing or with which they are engaged. Participants were invited to share their writing with everyone in the room after each writing period. Although optional, most chose to share.

Creative writing is a kind of spatial knowledge-making not dissimilar to art, performance, body-mapping or music. These modes of arts-based study are not unfamiliar to geographic methodologies but might still be productively expanded. The benefit of writing is the immediacy of interpretation that it provides. Writing workshop participants produced stories and textured snapshots of their experiences in Oakland. Beyond their utility in understanding sensory and racial-spatial politics, the authors of this writing preserve creative agency over their pieces in terms of determining alternative venues for circulating their narratives. Rather than being analyzed or dissected, we recognized from the beginning the importance of displaying this writing in its totality, and as refined, edited pieces. To do so, we have continued to work with ESAA to produce a zine from these written pieces. In addition to circulating these stories, ESAA's community archives program will also benefit from this collection of stories, as well as the writing workshop agenda itself. Collecting oral histories as a small organization is a resource-intensive task which ESAA may benefit from by having community members write their neighborhood stories within the container of a writing workshop.

We also experimented with bringing in visual arts practices by collaborating with artists in different host sites. Given our preoccupation with "sense of place," we found it necessary to adjust the prompts to directly engage with the places, artwork, and movement spaces that became part of the workshop. Our first few workshops in the series were hosted in the ESAA performance space, followed by a gallery space featuring Rigo 23's Zapatista and International Boulevard / East 14th inspired artwork, "Intergalactic Boulevard." The fourth workshop was hosted by artist and business owner Binta Ayofemi in her downtown "portal" space, Commune. Given our attention to the politics of each of the places we explored, and

the ongoing street protests occurring in solidarity with Palestine at the time, we invited screen-print visual artist, Eduardo Valadez[2], to conduct an optional political poster-making workshop after our writing period. These varying settings and engagements grafted the political and social history of places like East 14th/International Blvd and downtown Oakland with contemporary place-based artwork.

We realized very early into the process that many people might be uncomfortable with writing. Many of us learn to write in exacting educational spaces that don't necessarily foster creativity or center the marginalized positionality of Black and Brown youth. When youth were asked to share in a different workshop[3], they often summarized rather than read their writing. The addition of a cognitive mapping exercise helped younger participants articulate their experience of Oakland where writing could not. In expanding this practice to include non-literate communities, or people less comfortable with writing, other artistic or interview-based methods may be more practical. We also attempted to recruit Spanish-speakers in the neighborhood; however, publishing our material in both Spanish and English may have sent mixed signals to Spanish-speakers uncomfortable writing or speaking in English. Hosting more targeted writing workshops may help to recruit participants who are new to writing practice. We also recommend hosting more than one workshop with the same community members so that participants might have the chance to develop their writing and trust among one another. Finally, rather than relying on only sharing writing as a group, more room for free-flowing discussion would have been helpful in understanding how experiences may or may not be shared.

Sensorial Storywork: Writing Place & Race

The genealogy of 'sense of place' and humanistic geography literature helps us understand the literal sensations associated with occupying space (Rodaway 1994), and the emotional and political conjunctions that *make sense* of embodied and social experiences of what may be called "place" (Tuan 1977). However, the difference that difference makes in understanding sense of place for those rendered as placeless is important. Katherine McKittrick's (2011) framing of a "Black sense of place," Doreen Massey's (1994) consideration of the fluctuating global power geometries that inform these local, relational senses of place, and Gloria Anzaldua's (2007) configuration of borderland identities demonstrate the way that sensed geographies are necessarily shaped by the ideologies and material realities of embodied difference and displacement. Engaging with the sensate geographies of a people denied the legitimacy of their emplacement, epistemes, or sensory experiences thus requires particular methodological forms of inquiry. Sensorial storywork builds on geographic writings that are attentive not just to the phenomenological or postmodern conditions of embodied experience, but to the ongoing de-legitimization and de-humanization of Black, Latinx, disabled, queer, and migrant geographies, whose very bodies, senses, and ability to form attachments to place are disrupted and made the properties of those in power.

The physical form of a place, too, reflects and perpetuates imagined geographies dictated by those with the power to transform a people's material reality. Such senses of place,

[2] We are no longer affiliated with either Binta Ayofemi or Eduardo Valadez.
[3] This workshop and the additional exercises attempted are not detailed here due to the age restrictions of our IRB protocol.

argues Oslender (2008), are not always positive. Militarized landscapes, urban sites of decay, organized abandonment (Gilmore 2022), and gentrifying spaces are crafted to contain or eject those racialized as Other. Sense of place, particularly for communities racialized as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color, may therefore speak simultaneously of homeplaces and sites of harm. Dispossession and displacement produce disjointed experiences that reflect the nuances of racialized existence in segregated and/or devalued places. Sensorial storywork as method therefore asks what it might mean to write the world from the perspective of the sensual, and to write - or unwrite - the world from the position of wretched sensuality.

In determining how to methodologically represent these scales of the sensed and sometimes uncategorizeable nature of perception, geographers and social scientists have turned toward art and poetry. Simon Springer (2017) writes about geopoetics as an approach to geography that emerged alongside the field's cultural turn as a way to expressively demonstrate how people relate to place. Poetic inquiry is one such arts-informed methodological field that is acknowledged for offering embodied or emotional insights that would otherwise be lost to analytical writing (Eisner 2008; Pendergast 2009). Poetic representation is sensory and offers a more attuned understanding of lived experience (Sparkes, Nilges, Swan, and Downing 2003). It is also a politically salient framework for those considering how to make their research more community-engaged (Knowles and Cole 2008). Rather than remaining inwardly focused, poetic inquiry can be collaborative and ground-truth researcher insights. In her research on women's sense of place and displacement in Newfoundland, Canada, Susan Manning (2018) worked with interviewees to convert their reflections into comprehensive poems that provided a fuller representation of their embodied experience of loss. Alternatively, research participants may become the authors of their own stories, and utilize these narratives to pursue further research questions and/or social activism (Hurtig 2008).

Sharad Chari's (2019) rendition of "Earth-Writing," theoretically expands geopoetics to contend with the storied accounts of dehumanization and displacement as told by "the wretched of the earth." Where Fanon's (1961) "wretchedness" is invoked to suggest the carceral coloniality of Blackness, it is also positioned within Caribbean anticolonial scholarship that expresses a Black livingness and poetics as world-making (Clarke and Mullings 2022). Scientific writing is delimited by its own foreclosure of who and what is Human. But "poetic knowledge" says Aimé Césaire (1990) "is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" (17). Sylvia Wynter takes up Césaire's thinking to develop the idea of bios/mythoi and *homo narrans*: that we are neither wholly biological or narrativized beings, but flesh made symbol (McKittrick 2021). Our methods for writing the earth and racialized life must, therefore, include a consideration of the poetics that animate their physical and ideological forms. More precisely, given that these animating narratives are what made race an economic and ecologically lived condition, contemporary anticolonial geographic thought needs to intervene at the level of the narrative and the poetic in order to see and un-suture the articulations of life as stories of "race." Story-telling, art, music, and poetry have therefore been staples of the Black radical tradition and its methodologies for unthinking colonial violence (Vasudevan et al. 2023; Woods 1998; Kelley 2002). These forms are also integral to Black ecological relations, methodologies, and environmental geographies (Bruno 2024). The imperative of this work is not merely to describe colonial conditions of life, but a method by which life may be relationally reorganized. Katherine McKittrick implores scholars to untangle

poetic narrative and artistic work from description which, she says, is not liberation. Rather, participating in a methodology that is "relational, intertextual, interdisciplinary, interhuman, and multidisciplinary" (Mckittrick 2021, 44) offers a means by which livingness is not just described but re-written for the sake of all kin rendered as non-Human.

Sensorial Storywork: Writing Relationally

Storywork, as outlined by Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), offers a framework for "wretched" narrative methodological work in these spaces of encounter because it triangulates how collective emotional and physical senses of place are experienced and represented by particular communities. Archibald states that, in Coast Salish tradition, storywork serves as an action that binds together storytellers, responsibility to community, communal principles of being, and intergenerational members of the community. In other words, storywork requires and *creates* communal recognition. For Black communities rendered as illegible and aspatial, such storytelling is critical. Stephanie Toliver's (2021) speculative fiction methodology, "endarkened storywork," brings attention to Black girls' silenced and lifegiving forms of creative writing to counter biased assumptions of their educational delinquency or deficiency. Germinaro and Nickson (2024) build on "endarkened storywork," hip hop, and the work of Black Geographies to introduce 'Black Spatial Storylines,' a pedagogical praxis of collaborative co-writing and listening with Black life that requires unlearning Western scripts of time and space.

Nevertheless, stories are limited by the often colonially wrought system of representation through which they are rendered. Formal educational institutions that teach writing fundamentals have, after all, been documented as spaces that reproduce liberal racism (Shange 2020) and Western sensory relations to place (Swentzell, 1997). In their study of poetry as a postcolonial geographic research method, for instance, Eshun and Madge (2012) state that, "The representative qualities of poetry are never unproblematic and straightforward" (1421) despite taking up a collaborative approach to writing ethnographic poems and sharing them in an African oral call and response tradition. Yet, in studying Latinx youth literacy, Flores (2018) found that providing structured spaces to engage in topics of their choosing gave students a way to use writing "as a tool, a weapon, to confront injustice" (659). Similarly, Maori scholar Tuari Stewart (2021) refutes the coloniality of writing, stating that "the power of the written word" can "speak back to the Eurocentric 'archive' underpinning the entire academy" and be used to reclaim representations of Maori identity (51). And on a personal level, writing can offer the writer an opportunity to confront themselves and the categories into which they have been placed; in so doing, Cherrie Moraga (2011), writing on her own practices, crafted truths and worlds not wholly fixed by the facts of their making. The intentional act of writing, therefore, offers both a means of unlearning and repeating the ways underrepresented communities have had to make themselves legible, heard, and cartographic. Writing is not perfectly liberatory; but writing as storywork offers a different approach to written and linguistic forms that are usually taught as a method of upholding empire (Spivak 2010; Morrison 1992; Veronelli 2015) in that the focus is on building a sense of community between writers, learning from and speaking back to the world as it has been rendered, and shifting the narratives about Self and Other, Human and Nature.

Sensorial Storywork: Writing the Land

Indigenous storywork draws people and places into a clear, narrativized relation. Sensorial storywork must therefore also consider land as pedagogy as part of rewriting human-nature relationships as reciprocal, responsible, and ethical. Land, argues Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), is inseparable from thinking about the storywork of place. Simpson insists that learning from and being in relation to land, is to confront and directly challenge the settler colonial authority that imposes upon and dispossesses all life. She argues that Indigenous storywork should not be legible to Empire or settler colonial governments who may use practices of storywork to further divorce people from the land (Simpson 2025). Rather, storywork allows members of a community to make more ethical and grounded relationships to place.

A form of land-based pedagogy is also at work for place-based cultural practitioners and activists who are unlearning a colonial relationship to Oakland. Individual experiences of place are narrated, and shared through murals, poetry slams, and art showcases at ESAA in an effort to produce a radical political consciousness amongst its East Oakland neighbors. The organizers' decision to focus on local communities in East Oakland was an intentional way to bring neighborhoods meaningfully into Third World liberation movement discourse. In this way, the organization is rooted in an intimate and emotional experience of Oakland's racialized communities, and speaks to broader conditions of global inequality. Storywork for a space like ESAA engages the materiality of Oakland as a land warranting ethical relationship, and the wider community through which political consciousness and place meanings are iteratively produced. Although individual narratives may appear powerless to change place, organizations like ESAA, and sensorial storywork interventions, intend to bring people together to exchange and transform their political orientations in place.

Huchuin (otherwise known as Oakland) of the Lisjan Ohlone people has been a site of ongoing settler colonialism, cyclical dispossession, gentrification, and racial banishment (Werth 2025; Roy 2019). Although the writing produced in these workshops is meant to outline the region-specific contours of racial-spatial politics, the experience of organized abandonment, targeted dispossession, extraction, and subsequent accumulation is not uncommon in settler colonial cities. In Oakland, this shift has been orchestrated by de facto segregation, white flight, and what David Harvey has called "feeding the downtown monster" (2001), in which municipalities fighting for industry, tourism, cultural attractions, and higher income residential tax dollars have funneled public funds into flagging downtown spaces rather than lower income neighborhoods. East Oakland – formerly a site of fruit orchards and canning operations – became the receiving ground for Black middle class families fleeing deteriorating, historically Black and migrant neighborhoods of West Oakland. But as retail, industry, and White families left the region, the "flatlands" of Oakland's eastern shore was subjected to higher policing, while proposals for community development went ignored. This pattern of iterative dispossession is critically reflected in Black blues, jazz, and hip-hop musical traditions, which is itself a form of storywork. More recently, the rate of foreclosure in East Oakland has followed an acute trend with 1 in 14 houses ending in foreclosure (OpenOakland 2014); rates of homelessness also reveal that 58% of Alameda County's houseless population live within Oakland (City of Oakland 2024). Organizations like Eastside are working collaboratively on strategies to disrupt the same forms of speculative development and gentrification that have overtaken West Oakland by collectively investing in underutilized lots

across the East Oakland region (Heitz 2024). The question that arises from similar efforts in other gentrifying cities, is: what is the sense of this place that we are trying to preserve, and to whom does it pertain?

Producing sensory narratives about place as place changes, especially with individuals who are differently situated relative to this change, offers participants the opportunity to work through their attachments, disjointed connections with, and desire to advocate for the land they call home. The act of sharing these narratives is storywork: responsibilities to one another's stories may be fostered for the purpose of doing the incremental work of justice-oriented place-making. Looking at the "difficult interrelatedness" (McKittrick 2015) of these stories, and their variegated relationships to spatial racial wretchedness, together can provide researchers with a layered understanding of what is at stake, and for whom, in a changing environment.

The Sensual and the Sensed

"Sense" of place holds two meanings: the sensual, as in the embodied experience of what one can taste, touch, see, smell, and hear; and the sensed, as in what one registers about a place at the emotional or psychic level. The sensual is immediate, like the observed fixtures about Oakland that ground its inhabitants in a rhythm, a knowledge of where and when they are. The sensed tracks change, and the way that people, institutions, politics and economies have influenced individual and collective understandings of place; it also traces the emotional register of such cities (Barclay and Riddle 2021; Lefebvre 1968). In what follows, we divide our analysis of participant writing between these meanings in order to demonstrate the kind of information these narratives can elicit and their potential uses for broader geographic research on spatial relationality and inequality.

The Sensed

Asking participants to write about memories often called forth their relationships to structures belonging. Here, belonging is not possessive. It is feeling a kinship, both strained and easeful, with people and land. For those who were newer to the city (people who had moved here within the last 10 years), and those who did not identify as Black, making Oakland home was fraught with self-conscious questions about how they were navigating prescient topics of gentrification and displacement. One participant, exploring his responsibility to a street that he was less familiar with, found resolve by "working for a safer, liberated place for any all [sic]. And that makes me feel home. And that I belong." Another, expressing her perhaps transient connection to places like Oakland, concluded her piece by writing "With my feet / heavy with desire / to be settled in / and float and in / bone deep."

For Black participants (all men) who had lived in Oakland since their youth, connections to home-spaces in Oakland were equally fraught. Rather than questioning their roots in "The Town," however, these "Love/Hate" feelings were informed by the lack of physical safety they had experienced growing up, and memories of loss.

> I've spent a huge chunk of my life on E 14 / Or International Blvd for those that don't know …My memory of this main street holds a mainline grasp of what I feel of my city … This Blvd has Been My Playground / I learned to drive on this Blvd once I turned in my bus pass / I've cried on this blvd / Watched people die on this Blvd / And Even Now I word on this Blvd - DaJuan

> In my earlier life, this was a place of communion. Union of a community by birth I was placed in….This was a place of brotherhood, a place you could relax and unpack. Also a place where peer pressure ran rampant. This is where older brothers would take care of others to make sure they kept each other up. This is where discussions, jokes, and advice was free to all who hear, this is where I thought I found a home….Here is where I solidified a place in community where I learned how to lose gracefully, comeback in 2 minutes with the same intensity, keep pushing, even if they couldn't see, run all day like I stayed near a party this is that unsafe place that I always was protected at – Papi Grande

Both of these written memories reflect a lifelong love for the city, and an equally profound sense of caution. Even those who offer brotherhood can also become sources of pressure, that places of growth and learning are also sites of trauma and pain, and that an "unsafe place" can also be one where he "always felt protected at." Both of these writers also reflected upon the change that has been occurring in the neighborhoods and on the streets that they remember from their youth.

> I noticed that the Areas Are changing / More Frequently I notice The poverty on this Blvd / Closed businesses I used to love that are now being reused on this Blvd / This congestion created By the BRT / Making every street a 1 lane street …2012 till now feels a 1000 years ago / Leaving Fossils of what once was/ 10 years in the future seems lightyears away / But that's only Because it's Being Rebuilt without us / Holding on to each corner as if it can't slip through my hands - DaJuan

> When I got back here it would always change, different reason, same shit. So it felt insane, the place that beat in my heart it ran through my veins, the place that stored all my loved ones, where we had our struggles but we rose above. Some change comes with time and trust we've had our fun, 23 years, 3 apartments. New neighbors, new options, from family to friends, now strangers, appreciate old times what made us slum lords, bad managers that would blame us and bank on us to do nothing, intentions heinous, rain us in with promise then show they hate us. Life is still amazing and for that you can thank us, home of the greatest! – Papi Grande

Change is an inevitable part of one's evolving relationship to place. It is a common-enough experience to feel a sense of uncanny misrecognition when encountering a once-familiar city. To inquire about the nature and politics of dispossession requires an attention to the banal heartbreak of a lost home. Rather than brushing off the unhealed wounds of displacement, the container of community writing permits the writers and researcher to discuss common frustrations, like the precarious connection between Black community, urban space, and the direction of its development. DaJuan powerfully responds to prompts about the future of Oakland by stating that it is nearly unimaginable for him because it does not appear to include him or the community he references when using "us." The contemporary political climate is one of fervent tenacity, everyone holding "onto each corner" of an intersection or an ecumenical blanket of the city "as if it can't slip through my hands." He admits that it is entirely likely that "we" will not be able to hold on. The unnamed forces that seem to rend this corner

from their hands might be the same as the second participant who states that changes in Oakland occur for "different reason[s], same shit." The reason might be eviction, foreclosure, or the moldering conditions of a rent-controlled apartment; the "shit" is still the uncaring managers, the hate, the slumlords, the systems of discrimination and racialized dispossession that endlessly contain, uproot, and dehumanize Black communities. Together, such narratives map the patterns of Black life, memory, and senses of place. This practice of written analysis may be utilized to understand the intimate politics of racialized (dis)investment across the diaspora of Black geographies.

The Sensual

Visual methods are a popular way to bring community interlocutors into the process of producing shared knowledge about their lived experiences (Thompson 2022). Yet, scholars have called attention to the ocular-centrism of research, especially in geography (Cosgrove 1984) and the way that this privileges a Western rational epistemology bound by observable fact, cartographic representation, and technocratic surveillance. The call in Black Geographies is to attend to the shifting and unknowable qualities of Black life (Hawthorne 2019; Noxolo 2022). Often, this entails a turn toward the sonic, specifically the musical and drumming vibrations that move Black cultural production and subwoofer-rattle the rib cages of Black people walking their streets in equal measure (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017; Moten 2003; Werth 2021). We include sight here less as a medium for truth-telling than as an avenue for witnessing one another. Less discussed, and less representable, are the senses of smell, touch, and taste that comprise sensory ethnography (Martin 2019). These sensory thresholds are the sites of exchange between a geographic site and how that place is lived. In what follows, we briefly review the sensual writing of participants from all workshops to demonstrate what Oakland's sense of place might be, as told through its written sensory details (Sen and Silverman 2014). Our analysis suggests possible routes for integrating poetic sensory information with geo-political and racial analysis.

Nose

"I notice that certain areas don't smell the same." (see Fig 1). There is an uncertainty to smell, an indescribable quality of scent that is extraordinarily visceral and tied to memory. To return to a place and notice that it doesn't smell the same presents a jarring cognitive dissonance; on the other hand, to recognize the inexplicable scent of an area and not be able to communicate this familiarity with those around you can be alienating. Deborah Davis Jackson (2011), describing the importance of smell in environmental justice and Indigenous relationships to place, says "The elusive nature of odor means that smell experiences can be isolating if others do not share the perception (or will not admit that they do)" (612). The nose is one of the most intimate senses, relying on chemical fragments shed from the source of a smell interacting with the exposed nerve endings in our nostrils. It is a physical connection; and yet, smell is also the sensation for which we have the least developed language (Hsu 2020).

Although not mentioned by these participants, smell is an important part of identifying environmental toxins and tracing the subtleties of spatial injustice. The smell of mold creeping in through dewy single pane windows or the diesel fumes emanating from the port in West Oakland where environmental justice advocates have worked for decades to monitor and

improve air quality (WOEIP 2024) demonstrate the smells of organized abandonment and disrepair. It almost goes unnoticed amidst the ecological and cultural suffusion of scents, as with the participant who writes about "[the] lingering smell of marsh, jambalaya and something else." All indicate the way that food, ecology, toxins, and perhaps the new-paint and poured concrete smell of emerging developments, form a thrumming undercurrent of life and the passage of time here; and they raise subtle flags to observers of cultural, environmental, and economic change.

Prompt: Everyone will walk outside and find a place to stand or sit. What exists and what's going on in this part of Oakland?

Written Response:
something about being inside on a sunny day in the east manages to feel like outside, if you can imagine that. try it - close your eyes and wait for a beat. even here, in the closed mouth of burnt sienna walls, a stained glass window facing streetward peeks visibly through an open office and brings a smile to my face, one that's usually only reserved for the open air.

i wonder what other place, or circumstance, or person, can make the inside of four walls feel free?

right now it's a sunday morning: historically a sacred time for black oakland. from the time i was in my mother's womb in 1989 til our family left oakland for sac in 1998, she woke up our household every sunday morning, took out her curlers, applied a demure shade of lipstick. as soon as sister kyle honked her horn in that late 1980's Caddy she'd corral my brother / sibling and i to the carpool; my sibling and i always eager to pretend the car could fly as we bumped off the edwards exit down toward the house of god. we attended mount tabor baptist church on 73rd and garfield, and a sunday in east oakland in the early 90's was black, black, black, blacker than the asphalt we skinned black knees on after sunday school, afraid to admit we'd torn a hole in sunday best clothes and risk a whooping. today the sun still shines, no holes in clothes but the intimate risk of bodily pain on a bright and sunny day in oakland remains.

– Chris Wakefield

Figure 4.

Skin

For one writer, to touch Oakland's rough edges is to experience pain: the skinned knees of black skin and the promise of retribution for childhood carelessness all suggest the perilous intimacy of family (Fig 4). Another participant (Fig 5) writes of the quality of cold he encounters driving from the Central Valley of California toward Oakland saying, "As I start my morning, I notice cotton fields / Cold air on these country outskirt backroads hit differently." The quality of the cold upon his morning commute from the Central Valley, like the smell that has almost imperceptibly shifted, is unique here as compared with Oakland's. The cool air rising among the cotton fields of these rural geographies "hits different"; it is indicative of the way this still-Oaklander has learned to embody this viscerally emblematic space and its plantation histories, presents, and futures. And while the plantation permeates California's urban and rural geographies, the stark transition and cyclic act of return that this participant

must undertake to engage with the familiar Black spaces of Oakland is unwelcome. The cold of the outskirts, the peripheries of both urban and rural space, is painful. It hits. Affectively and metaphorically, the cyclical effects of racial banishment (Roy 2017) and dispossession from a home in the Bay Area have been chilling.

Prompt: Describe your commute today from the location you were at to the EastSide Arts Alliance for this workshop. Did you come from the park, your home, a café, or another location? How did you arrive? What did you experience, feel, or witness on the way over here? How did you move through space?

Written Response:
As I start my morning I notice cotton fields
Cold air on these country out skirt Back Roads hit differently
As I pull into civilization I can tell Saturday Night was way more fun than I anticipated
Interstate 5 is a trucker's playground
It's obvious, that they own the road
Cringing at every Gas station I see
Imagining the Robbery I face at the pump daily
Life decisions can be made at the pump
But the road is where I feel the most Free
I sometimes zone so much I lose chunks of time and Road
Subconscious in full control
My Mind is wrapped around thoughts I've forgotten years ago
Emotions seeping through like pomegranate juice on my fresh smoke shop t-shirt
That's the only time white is my preference
But I'm learning to appreciate Black Much More
From Altamont to 580 is a imaginary Race Everyone wants to win
Things get Brutal along this mountain side
Only for us all to forget once we coast to that infamous check point
Remember that there is a speed limit
The Air feels different once I get to The Bay
My senses let me know I have slipped and slid into another…
Only to let my Radio guide me into the Oakland city limits
Something like a plane gets lead By Central command
And here I am.

– DaJuan Woodard-Carter

Figure 5.

Tongue

Taste, usually told through food stories, is also lacking in terms of descriptive detail, despite references to food like churros and ice cream. What is referenced is important as an index of distance or absence. In Figure 7, we see that there is care in this food memory of an older woman treating this younger man to a bite of food. There is also a disconnect between himself and the food itself that is mediated by the community. Similarly, another participant writes about the memory of his "go-to 420 spot" to smoke marijuana as a teenager. "It's still there / Chicken wings and ketchup on the street is what I recall from my last visit a week ago."

(Fig. 7) He does not describe the taste of chicken wings and ketchup, but there is a visceral, gritty, nearly-tasted quality of cold chicken wings on the street, a remnant of an absent person's late-night munchies. Finally, the same participant who found a haven in a park with the señoras takes refuge in "the longest bar in Oakland" where "the micheladas have resurrection power." Bereft of energy, this participant is enlivened by a sour-spicy drink that is nearly holy in its effects (Fig. 6). Taste, and relatedly, food, is insecurely connected to Oakland's sensory qualities. It is also intimately connected to people practicing rituals of self and communal care in the wake of loss or absence. Food insecurity and the richness of food cultures are both a part of Oakland's palate.

Prompt:
Following our path on 14th Street | *Siguiendo nuestro recorrido en la calle 14*
Write: What does community in this space [on 14th street] feel like? Describe the place in detail, or a meaningful experience you've had here.
Escribe: ¿Cómo se siente la comunidad en este espacio? Describe el lugar con detalles, o una experiencia significativa ha hecho aquí.

Written Response:

1. Long line to get raspado, tostilocos, ice cream, but I have no cash. I have to run back home to find cash - as I'm about to hop on my bicycle the señora behind me says she'll buy it - Gracias - walk out and sit in the park, smelling the churros, overhearing the chisme, gossip of the señoras.
2. 12th ave - Home - A challenge to bike up the hill until I hit the SSO - Care for myself - growth and pain
3. Eastside - culture, revolution, heart, growth, community - home
4. San Antonio Peak - soccer games and elotes - sit on grass and reflect - the oldest park in Oakland - Independence Park -
5. Diamond Peak - green - water - creeks, birds chirping - kinda not close to International but a place to sit and reflect
6. Aloha Club - Food, drinks, a break from walking - a place to land after the journey - a place to set your bendicion - your blessing…- the longest bar in Oakland - the micheladas have resurrection power

– Roberto Martinez

Figure 6.

Ears

"Car horns are a orchestra
And the music is jazz in motion
We give ourselves the permission to feel here"
– DaJuan

East Oakland is defined by a sonic impression of roaring engines and "jazz in motion." This place is understood by inhabitants as one of Black music, spoken Spanish and Vietnamese, and the shattering interruption of the stereo from cruising cars, the screech of others making donuts in the street in "sideshows." Sonic reverberation —that of car horns and engines and synth beats — closes the distance between communities, muddling the stark lines

of segregation and racialized property rights. Familiar sounds create physical and emotional sanctuaries, giving people like DaJuan "permission to feel here." Yet, Sunday morning church songs have become the grounds for noise complaints in gentrifying West Oakland, and African drumming circles have caused Lake Merritt neighbors to call the police (Werth 2021). Cultural sounds are racialized and become subject to nuisance laws in an effort to maintain a white spatial and sensory imaginary (Lipsitz 2011). Meanwhile, Black Oakland is known for its "hyphy" hip-hop scene; from Too $hort to Zendaya, Oakland's Black music scene has been a hotbed of creativity and commoditization. Says the same participant in another written piece, "I let my radio guide me into the Oakland city limits." The radio here is a beacon for those who have been displaced and are looking for a way to close the gap between their new homes and the sonic reverberations of their memories. To be literally moved by the sonic pulsations emanating from a radio in Oakland while one's body is situated in Richmond or the Central Valley offers a tangible connection between Black Oakland and its diaspora.

Prompt: Locate yourself on 14th street. Where do you go for community? (What are places of refuge/care?) What have been gathering locations for the community on 14th street? What does community in this space feel like? Describe the place in detail, or a meaningful experience you've had here.

Written Response:
Food community/ and the lake
Muscle chairs / motorized wheelchairs
Chairs, intoxicated older Black men, on the sidewalk
Trash / litter, laughter, Middle Eastern liquor store clerks
T-shirts, hair weaves on the street / spur of the moment
Sideshow Loud music, roaring bikes, car alarms
Going off , cookin for a center - motor bike crews
Wheeli, it was APT 357 on 81st Ave at Grandma's
For about 10 years back in the 80s
It's difficult to find this center
The house on 69th between Mrs Sanders and us
resonated for a hot sec in 2008-2015.
I'm looking for it. The top of 82nd and a way back
Was fun for - friends cast - laughter new highs
The park/trail overlooking Soledad / was the
Go to 420 spot for my late teens
Its still there
Chicken wings and ketchup on the street

– Bertrell Smith

Figure 7.

Eyes

"Looking a(t) Nia Wilson on the wall I'm [just?] think damn
The souls get captured on walls here
…
I knew I was home when I pass by Plan B

…It's a Mural out in Deep East Oakland
Created by a Oakland Legend
Named Dream
A Filipino Native and TDK Original
But I know the Hall Family wouldn't have it any other way"
– DaJuan

The visual arts-based landmarks that color Oakland's streets depict murals of people like Nia Wilson who have been made into martyrs of racial violence. Yet, as this participant notes, they are also family members in relation to their own stories of place. DaJuan mentions that he knows he's home when he sees the mural tribute to Plan Bee, a local rap artist who was killed in 2000. Beyond representing Oakland's hyphy hip-hop scene, the mural also reminds the participant of the artist who created the painting. Through murals of dead kinfolk and the sense of sight, Oakland residents recursively witness past experiences, loss of life, and their quotidian place-making practices. Visually, timescapes converge. Steven Hoelscher (2008) writes, "Visual imagery closes the gap between first-hand experience and secondary witnessing, as it stands in for the larger event or person it is asked to represent" (197). To be eye to eye with Nia Wilson's mural, or to be level with that of Plan Bee, is to once again lay eyes upon another, and to remember what occurred in that place, and how the witness themselves is also imbricated within these events. In other words, rather than representing only what is visually, "factually" true about Oakland's structure, sight may be utilized to consider how residents have borne witness to the city's history of violence, organized abandonment, and the care people have demonstrated for one another.

Through the combination of sensory and sensed, we begin to understand the importance of Oakland's cool air and sonic vibrations. These are the material stakes that underlie the qualitative experience of life in a place that many have been forced to leave. The politics and economics of Oakland are determined by how people feel about proposed changes: will a new high-rise block the sunlight that drifts down over prime picnic spots at Lake Merritt? Will a sound ordinance disrupt the "jazz in motion" of Oakland's motorbike brigade or Sunday afternoon cruisers? And for whom does this present an improved quality of life? Interpreting these details along their trajectory from the sensory to the sensed, demonstrates the undulating racial politics of development. These reflections, prompted by spatialized, sensorial storywork, reveal the broader political undertones of racialized dispossession and banishment.

"All Hail Scribble": Writing as Storywork

In addition to the community writing workshops, we asked participants to respond to a survey inquiring about their relationship to writing before and after the workshop series' commencement. While this survey was disseminated in order to gain information about the effectiveness of this as a community program, we found out much more about participants' motivations for joining and returning to a writing workshop. When asked "Why do you think you have the relationship to writing that you do?" half of respondents (4 of 8) replied that they use writing as an emotional release, which appears to correlate to the way that emotions were evoked in their writing. The other half demonstrated a desire to express themselves and connect with a community. A higher rate of respondents (6 of 8) relayed the latter sentiments

about community connection when asked "What do you feel like you learned [during these workshops]"? Responses included statements such as:

> "Always felt Oakland was special, it's comforting to hear it echo through history AND peoples lived experience here right now."
>
> "I learned that writing in a group can be fun and rewarding."
>
> "Everyone's life has a unique value and experience you can only get a glimpse of if they share it with you in a setting they're comfortable with."

These responses demonstrate how the act of writing gave participants the opportunity to build community. In the process, these workshops may have actually deepened their knowledge of Oakland by seeing their experience as relative to others' spatialities, temporalities, and background. In her study of Black queer women's placemaking, Alesia Montgomery (2024) suggests that the scope of literary journals like *Aché* not only illustrated but expanded Black women's lifeworlds within and beyond the Bay Area. If, as Jo-ann Archibald (2008) says, "the story is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people" (87) then the writing workshop might be a powerful place by which to share and grow place-based knowledge.

Imagining our places in the world – as they are, as we feel them, and as we wish them to be – becomes a means of altering the condition of a people racialized as less-than human. In our workshops, everyone was invited into the role of storyteller, listener, and participant. These roles enhanced mutual understanding. Writing and narrative, then, become important tools not just for understanding how people live, but also as a way of communicating shared experiences, epistemologies, and visions for collective and radical placemaking that center Black and Indigenous voices. Intentionally writing in community as storywork thus reflects the collective, internal, and intrapersonal learning that is a part of writing, placemaking, and radical worldbuilding.

Conclusion

Waves of color on a well adorned street, omnipresent odors in a building, or a fleeting subwoofer as a car drive by are part of the sensual qualities that a resident may hold onto to describe their memories of place, a changing neighborhood, or the mundane encounters of everyday life. Centering such sensory descriptions, as described first-hand by community members, offers an alternative means by which place-based research can include embodied, emotional, and memory-driven experiences of place that inform and are shaped by racialized productions of space. We argue that this is beneficial for all scholars of place, as "place" is composed of the many layers of emplaced experiences, habits, communities, technologies, political junctures, and economic structures that exist at any one time. Studying a sense of place must also track embodied summations of how these spatial shifts have co-produced raced and gendered experiences. Through participant memory, readers and researchers have a vantage on what residents most closely experience and remember about the material state of their selected site. These become the throughlines of place-based identity.

The process of writing together, too, has political outcomes; recognizing shared experiences of place can ground new solidarities, particularly when practiced with the same group over time. Thus, as a community-based research strategy, sensorial storywork writing

may offer researchers of all stripes the opportunity to study, archive, and produce knowledge about places that are otherwise under-studied, misunderstood, or politically marginalized. But for the communities themselves, collective writing and study offers participants autonomous means by which to connect their experiences and decide how to represent and advocate for the places they've lived, loved, and lost.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Data availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical and Informed Consent Statement

Ethical approval to conduct these workshops was obtained from the UCLA institutional review board protocol # 23-001507. Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation, and through a written survey.

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