In many large urban centres around the world, processes of gentrification have been accelerated during the past decade by real-estate speculation and the development of arts districts and creative city paradigms. These transformations of urban space often involve the displacement of low-income people who are pushed out to make room for new condo buildings and the amenities that typically accompany them, including coffee shops, breweries and art galleries. In this chapter, I look at what happens to the stories and memories of those who are evicted or priced out. How might these become part of a broader sociocultural movement against gentrification and displacement? I focus on the work of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, a collective of artists and activists based in the Bay Area in California. The group has produced dozens of interactive, online maps that visualise displacement, accompanied by a growing number of oral histories.

Over the past several decades, many artists, curators and critics have examined maps and cartographic practices in their work. For example,
the Museum of Modern Art’s *Mapping* exhibition in 1994 included historical maps as well as map pieces by artists such as Jasper Johns and Alighiero Boetti, and looked at maps as emblems of power that combine strategies of representation and abstraction. A number of exhibitions and publications in the 2000s took an approach that focused more on social activism, and explored links between art and geography. *Atlas of Radical Cartography*, curated by Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, examined “social issues from globalization to garbage; surveillance to extraordinary rendition; statelessness to visibility; deportation to migration.” Nato Thompson’s *Experimental Geography* project also looked at links between art, representation and spatial politics, and included a range of art practices, including “sewn cloth cities that spill out of suitcases, bus tours through water treatment centres, performers climbing up the sides of buildings, and sound works capturing the buzz of electric waves on the power grid.”

Commonalities among these projects include an interest in exploring links between space, representation and politics, through practices that challenge conventional understandings of Cartesian objectivity. Many of the artists, curators and theorists involved in these explorations have grounded their perspectives in the writings of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and/or the Situationists, and visualised the production of space through mapping everyday practices, social relations, or political confrontations. Trevor Paglen has referred to these forms of experimental geography as involving “practices that recognize that cultural production and the production of space cannot be separated from each another, and [demonstrate] that cultural and intellectual production is a spatial practice.” More recently, in the past decade, numerous artists have experimented with geographical information systems, or GIS, technologies that have made mapping projects more accessible and interactive through a variety of different online platforms.

This brief overview provides background context for considering the practices of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project—which looks critically at the production and uses of space in the Bay Area in California, and emphasizes Paglen’s argument that cultural production and spatial practices are intertwined. These connections are highly visible in San Francisco, which along with Manhattan, is the least affordable place to live in the United States. There are symbols associated with displacement that are unique to this region, including shuttle buses that transport well-paid tech employees from San Francisco to their campuses in Silicon Valley—a
highly visible symbol of the privatization of formerly public services. The consequences of the housing crisis in this area are widespread: displaced individuals and families have been pushed further and further away from jobs, services and communities, and homelessness and housing instability have increased—dramatically illustrated by the 2016 fire that destroyed the Ghost Ship warehouse in Oakland, killing 36 people. Many were artists, and some were living in the building because of its low rents, affordable because of the lack of proper safety features. It must also be noted that gentrification in the Bay Area disproportionately affects people of colour, as with other cities, and many neighbourhoods in San Francisco and Oakland have grown increasingly white in the past several decades.

The Bay Area is home to numerous Silicon Valley startups that have promised to change the way we live, work, travel, entertain ourselves and socialize, in part through the emergence of the sharing economy. While this now seems like a ubiquitous part of everyday life, some of its philosophical underpinnings can be traced back to countercultural movements of the 1960s and 70s. In his book *From Cyberculture to Counterculture*, Fred Turner examined the growing appeal of network building and technological entrepreneurship for the counter-culturalists of the 1960s, and described emerging tech industries as part of a “New Economy” that involved the breakdown of traditional relationships between employers and the work force. During this time, as employment became increasingly precarious, it became necessary for many workers to turn to the gig economy, or to become more entrepreneurial, constantly updating and promoting one’s skills and personal brand. Turner made these observations in 2006, the same year that Facebook began to allow users to create a public profile. Since then, networked entrepreneurship has greatly expanded through the use of social media, which gives new meaning to the concept of a ‘global village’ and its promises of community and connection.

The sharing economy may be seen as an expanded form of the “New Economy” described by Turner, and many of the same conundrums are visible in contemporary examples that have promised to change our lives, bring us closer together and disrupt tradition, but which often produce issues associated with the “Old Economy,” including labour disputes and inequalities between owners, workers and users. Adding to the conundrum is the fact that many of the CEOs and entrepreneurs behind sharing economy companies see themselves as liberal, enlightened thinkers leading the way toward a more equitable society. For example,
some tech entrepreneurs and CEOs have participated in efforts to position San Francisco as a liberal enclave in opposition to Trump, by defending its status as a Sanctuary City, protesting Trump’s travel ban, or vocally supporting so-called DREAMers after their legal status was threatened by the federal government. But while the ideas driving the development of such companies might have once been progressive and visionary, the material reality is now very different. Both San Francisco and Oakland face extreme income inequality, largely driven by the rapid growth of the tech industry, a consequence of which has been widespread displacement in the Bay Area.

The services that make up the sharing economy offer new forms of convenience for users and consumers, along with the promise of increasing our social capital. However, they also provoke important questions about privacy and surveillance, and contribute to rising levels of employment precarity through the growth of the gig economy. Sharing is undeniably a major appeal of Airbnb, for example, and it offers many undeniably attractive features: in addition to paying less than you would for a hotel, you have the conveniences of a home in a new city, and the opportunity to meet new people. Regardless of its worldwide reach, and its multi-billion-dollar value, it does offer intimate, personal experiences to its customers, who are encouraged to feel that a transaction is more than just a transaction.

However, many critics have pointed out that Airbnb’s success has come through avoiding traditional rules and regulations. These issues speak to some of the hypocrisies within the sharing economy more broadly, which have existed for decades in Silicon Valley with the interconnected growth of cyberculture and counterculture. Tom Slee writes about Airbnb that “despite its talk of community, the only logic it seems to understand is that of the free market: the right of property owners to do what they want with their property.” The company has also been criticized for failing to prevent discrimination against guests and hosts of colour, creating a form of digital redlining. One of the biggest critiques of Airbnb has focused on its effects on cities and housing patterns, and the role that it has played in driving up median rents. This is highly visible in San Francisco. It is common to hear stories of landlords evicting tenants or raising rents to get them to leave, and then listing units on Airbnb. This has become so common, in fact, that some tenants unions have used private investigators to find out where this is taking place, in order to file lawsuits against developers.
The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project was initiated in the fall of 2013, in part as a response to displacement driven by the sharing economy and other large tech companies in the Bay Area. It was started by artist and housing activist Erin McElroy along with a collective of others as a way to address the increasing number of evictions and foreclosures in the Bay Area after the 2008 recession. McElroy was interested in finding ways to push back against the tech industry in Silicon Valley and the encroachment of its white-collar workers into city spaces that were once affordable for the middle classes. Over the past several years she has worked with other artists and activists to compile data on evictions, getting information from public records, court documents and online database searches for property listings, in order to figure out where evictions were taking place, why they were increasingly common, who was responsible for them, and what they could do to make it visible through a series of interactive maps that could be accessed through the project’s website.

There are maps on gentrification, evictions, homelessness, the proliferation of Airbnb and short-term vacation rentals, policing and race, and dozens of other subjects. The maps are made using sophisticated cartographic software. They are interactive, they can be added to, and they are frequently updated by the collective and by website users with new data. One example is a map that shows all San Francisco evictions from 1997 to 2020, and includes information on the evictor, the type of eviction, and how eviction rates compare across different neighbourhoods (Fig. 4.1).

Users can zoom in and look at the neighbourhood, or even search block by block. We see that those who are displaced are much more likely to be low-income people of colour. Other maps show how displacement results in the breaking-up of communities and longer travel times to places of employment. It also results in the homogenization of urban space in terms of race and socioeconomic status, a process often termed whitewashing. This is apparent in a map of formerly Black neighbourhoods in San Francisco and Oakland, which are visualised at different points in time to reveal the erasure of Black communities (Fig. 4.2).

As the maps demonstrate, Ellis Act Evictions are the most common—this refers to a California law stating that landlords have the right to evict tenants in order to “go out of business,” and then must either sell the building or change its use, for example, from rent-controlled units to condos. It is a law that has been abused frequently and is often used by landlords to raise rents or convert housing into profitable vacation rentals. Several of the maps on the website are intended to call out those
responsible for the evictions, for example, one titled “Bay Area Evictor: Michael Marr” (Fig. 4.3).

In viewing the map, users learn that Marr, one of the region’s biggest landlords, acquired more than 1500 properties in the Bay Area and flipped many of them for huge profits. In 2017, he was convicted of setting up a bid-rigging scheme, through which he purchased hundreds of foreclosed homes at suppressed prices in 2008.\textsuperscript{13}

In 2020, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project collected and displayed data on the COVID-19 pandemic and how it had affected tenants around the world. Millions of people were sickened by the virus and millions more lost their jobs. Housing instability and homelessness greatly increased as a result, and in response to this, housing activists called for a global rent strike, sometimes using the hashtag #CancelRent.\textsuperscript{14} In alignment with this movement, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project created a map showing places where officials had passed emergency tenant protections, and places in which rent strikes were occurring. The map was interactive, meaning that users could continuously update it with new data. Hundreds of strikes were posted by users across the map, illustrating the massive scale of the crisis and the drastic need for government action.
Fig. 4.2  Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, *SF Loss of Black Population, 1970–2017*, 2017 (Image courtesy of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project)
Eviction involves a traumatic act of forced exposure—furniture and personal possessions are dumped on the curb for all to see. Yet the systemic nature of eviction is often hidden or obscured, in favour of the familiar narrative of individual failure. What these maps seek to do, then, is to make visible the degree to which eviction is a social problem and not the result of poor choices. What we see through the maps is that displacement is widespread, and is exacerbated by the inability of governments to regulate the housing market and provide urban dwellers with adequate public services.

In addition to the maps, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project also collects oral histories from people who have been displaced, providing a humanizing component to the map data. According to McElroy, the collective “felt uneasy about reducing complex geopolitical worlds to dots on a map, and they wanted to add more nuance.” The group began to collect interviews through their work with tenants unions and other non-profit groups, and hundreds of these interviews are now available on their website. The stories tend to follow a similar narrative: they are about growing up in San Francisco neighbourhoods, living there for decades, witnessing changes, and then being evicted. Many of the storytellers express feelings of loss, not just of their home, but of their community as well. Displacement means that communities are broken apart, resulting in the breakdown of networks of neighbours, relatives
and friends—networks that might be conceptualized as informal sharing economies, in which use value is prioritized above exchange value.

The narratives of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project emphasise collectivity, and there are opportunities for storytellers to find common cause, or to recognize similar themes or characters in each other’s stories. One woman speaks about moving to New York from Chile, and then to the Mission in San Francisco, where she lived for ten years and owned a small empanada shop before being evicted. A disabled senior discusses his battle with AIDS and how he felt about receiving an Ellis Act eviction notice after living in the Castro for nineteen years. He decided to fight the eviction with the help of Eviction Free SF and the Tenderloin Housing Clinic. There are numerous artists and cultural workers who have been evicted and have shared their stories on the website. One man, a photographer, describes making his own camera lenses out of the bottoms of wine glasses. He lived in a rent-controlled apartment for 34 years before being served an eviction notice by the Harshawat family, named by multiple individuals and families as responsible for evictions. Another woman describes living in Section 8 housing in the Tenderloin with her family for 13 years, and then receiving an eviction notice along with other families in the building, who joined together and successfully fought the eviction. Since most tenants in the building speak Cantonese or Vietnamese, she took on the role of translating during their appeal. She also took it upon herself to do research online, finding out that the owner was planning to convert the building into condos.

The aesthetic of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project’s website mimics certain features of sharing economy platforms like Airbnb, but it repurposes their designs in order to critique their promises of collectivism and their material impact on neighbourhoods. Both websites feature bird’s eye view maps of the city covered with individual dots representing homes. The design of the oral history component of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project’s website parallels the personalized testimonials of Airbnb and the sense of trust and authenticity they provide.

In addition to Airbnb, the oral histories evoke the aesthetics of online fundraising platforms such as GoFundMe, in which personal stories play a key role. Eviction stories are extremely common on GoFundMe—a keyword search on any given day might turn up more than 10,000 results. At first glance, the narratives seem similar to the oral histories of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. Yet, in looking in more depth at the stories and photos presented in GoFundMe campaigns, a different
approach to storytelling becomes evident. Expressions of anger, outrage or blame are rare. Instead, fundraisers portray themselves as decent, deserving people who worked hard and tried their best, but suffered from unavoidable circumstances, and need a helping hand to get back on track. Many provide specific details related to their employment history to emphasise that they are hard workers and are not just asking for a “handout.” One man describes falling behind on rent because of a roommate who gambled away all of his money. He says, “As many know I am not one to ask for help. I was raised to be the giver. The supporter. The helper. I was raised to work hard for the things I want and need. To be self-sufficient and strong.” Another man in Los Angeles expresses shame for being evicted: “Yes I am COMPLETELY embarrassed and humiliated to have to post this, but honestly I don’t know what else to do… I’m sorry to put this out there I really am, but I guarantee that I will pay this back when I receive my retirement funds.”

There are thousands of similar stories. Yet while the personal narratives on GoFundMe are just as poignant as those told by participants in the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, there are few attempts to connect these to a broader political analysis, or to use them as a starting point for action. I could not find any examples while doing research. This may be due to the structure of the website, which spotlights individual stories and is not designed to promote social movement building. What this point demonstrates is that eviction-related narratives can be thematically similar, but activated in very different ways through framing and context.

A valuable question to ask about the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project might be: what do participants get out of telling their stories? According to McElroy, the individuals who have participated are “outraged about what’s happening and think that their story is part of the greater picture and want to share it…and there are a lot of people who are wanting to document these things as they happen because they’re happening so quickly.” Storytellers on the website express frustration and anger at being evicted, and in some cases, explain how they fought back. Together, these stories are a powerful tool of protest, linking together disparate individuals who have experienced the same thing, and who might learn from each other’s actions.

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project appeals to viewers’ desire for individual stories and personal insights, by positioning faces and testimonials alongside its map data—we learn that an eviction took place, and we
learn the reasons why. However, evictions are not portrayed as individual failures, but as political and social failures caused by the inability of governments to take action and stand up against the powerful real-estate lobby. We are invited by the project’s organisers to contribute money to support an individual’s eviction defense, or help someone pay rent, as with GoFundMe, but we are also invited to learn more about who is doing the evicting, and join coordinated actions to protest developers who profit from dispossession.

By engaging with politics outside of the sphere of aesthetic representation, the project may be seen as a form of intervention, disruption or transgression. It draws certain art historical parallels with institutional critique and tactical media, by using tech tools to investigate the material and symbolic effects of the sharing economy’s entrepreneurial cybertecture. For example, it may be looked at in relation to Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, a work that famously resulted in the cancellation of an exhibition by the artist at the Guggenheim. Museum director Thomas Messer refused to include the piece in the show, writing that museum policies “exclude active engagement towards social and political ends.” Haacke’s piece involved an investigation of the holdings of real-estate developer Harry J. Shapolsky, who owned more than 200 tenement buildings in Harlem and the Lower East Side. Shapolsky’s identity became public through the work of the artist, as did the fact that he was making huge profits by renting out substandard housing units, primarily to poor people of colour. Haacke collected information by searching through public records, similar to the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, and displayed photos alongside short texts providing data on the building, including addresses, size of the lot and date of acquisition, producing an aesthetic that now looks very much like a website or database. Created nearly 50 years after Haacke’s piece, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project could be seen as a high-tech, interactive form of real-estate investigation, that similarly places a spotlight on the powerful individuals and corporations responsible for evictions.

In addition to institutional critique, The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project may be looked at as a form of tactical media, which works by exposing previously obscured power structures and hierarchies, often by using forms of mimicry and satirical reproduction. In their text “ABC of Tactical Media,” David Garcia and Geert Lovink defined it as a way of using the texts and artifacts of everyday life in a rebellious manner.
Informed by Michel de Certeau’s writing on tactics and use value, they argue that tactical media practitioners similarly use what is available within popular culture, but in ways that subvert the original intentions of a particular cultural form, to produce “an aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring.” They view tactical media as a “qualified form of humanism,” that involves “an antidote to newly emerging forms of technocratic scientism.” The maps produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project demonstrate aspects of tactical media as outlined by Garcia and Lovink. As McElroy told me, “we’ve been written about as anti-tech a lot, but what I always say is, no, tech has many lives and iterations, and it’s possible to utilize digital technology with an anti-capitalist agenda even if you’re immersed in a capitalist system.”

In addition to using high-tech cartographic software, the collective has employed techniques such as crowdsourcing to produce their maps—mimicking the supposedly democratizing aspects of sharing economy companies. The project seeks to tell stories and offer humanizing connections to the effects of displacement, and in this way, the quantitative and qualitative are brought together. This is a design quality that once again parallels Airbnb: both platforms allow users to easily comprehend certain patterns on a neighbourhood or city-wide level. Both also offer an inside look at what goes on behind closed doors—Airbnb in the form of hosts’ personal stories and guests’ experiences, as well as photos that provide details of decor, taste and furnishing, and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project in the form of oral histories from individuals who have experienced displacement.

In her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche argued that “urban space is the product of conflict.” Conflict is part of what becomes visible through maps produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. They reveal the scale and pattern of evictions in the Bay Area, and the processes and power structures through which individuals and communities are displaced. They name names—exposing the developers who are responsible. But they also do something else that goes beyond exposing the existence of conflict. In their open-ended, interactive nature, their usability, and their links with other organisations, they move beyond moments of revelatory visualisation, and they attempt to connect the production of visibility with community organising efforts. McElroy frequently organises community mapping workshops, to encourage residents to become more familiar with who pulls the real estate strings in
their neighbourhood. The work done by the collective has contributed to a greater awareness of some of the specifics surrounding eviction: many people in San Francisco are now more aware of policies such as the Ellis Act and have been actively organising against landlords who use it to evict tenants.

Within the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, personal stories are a way to organise politically, and they demonstrate that the issue of displacement is a matter of social, not individual failure. Collectively, the stories become something more than they would be on their own, or if they were told through GoFundMe or social media. They are amplified and recontextualised, and they offer insight into the lives and experiences of others. The maps and stories have been used in city council meetings and local hearings, to sue landlords, and to push for different policy amendments. In this way, narrative is used as a method of building social movements and political resistance. In 2016, the group pushed for legislation to place restrictions on Airbnb, which ultimately failed, but sparked public outrage and a broader debate about the company. This is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the work done by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project: it informs public conversations, provokes debate and provides evidence, and in doing so, it has become part of a broader narrative focused on displacement in the Bay Area.

The maps and stories produced by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project exemplify how disruption has evolved as a form of artistic intervention. They share Deutsche’s focus on exposure and revelation, making evictions visible, and publicising the names of developers who are responsible. They play with iconography as forms of tactical media, mimicking the design features of websites associated with the sharing economy, but subverting their narratives of individualism, profit and private property. However, their initial intervention is positioned as a starting point rather than the end goal. The project’s production of visibility may be seen as a foundation, upon which advocacy for affordable housing is built by a community of people on and offline who want to turn stories into action.

Notes

1. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project website: https://www.antievictionmap.com/.

2. *Mapping*, exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 6–December 20, 1994.
3. Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest), 2007.
4. Nato Thompson, curatorial statement on *Experimental Geography* website. See, also, Nato Thompson, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* (New York: Melville House, 2009).
5. Trevor Paglen, “Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2009.
6. Sarnen Steinbarth, “Breaking Down the Highest and Lowest Rent Costs in the U.S.,” *Forbes*, February 4, 2019.
7. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
8. Ian Sherr, “Here’s What Tech Has to Say About Trump’s Immigration Ban,” *C-net*, February 2, 2017.
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10. Elaine Glusac, “As Airbnb Grows, so Do Claims of Discrimination,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2016.
11. David M. Levitt, “Prying Eyes Are Watching Airbnb Users as Tenants Fight Back,” *Bloomberg*, December 27, 2016.
12. Saul Martinez, “Evicted: How the 1985 Ellis Act Can Be Used to Kick You Out of Your Rent Controlled Apartment,” *KCRW*, June 30, 2016.
13. Teresa Watanabe, “3 Northern California Men Convicted in Massive Bid-Rigging Scheme to Buy Foreclosed Properties,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 2017.
14. Annie Lowrey, “Cancel Rent,” *The Atlantic*, May 2, 2020.
15. Erin McElroy interview, January 10, 2017.
16. A search performed on March 28, 2018 turned up 16,714 results. A search performed on April 11, 2020 turned up 19,330 results (most likely higher due to the Covid-19 crisis). See www.gofundme.com.
17. Postings on GoFundMe, accessed March 25, 2018.
18. McElroy interview.
19. Michael Brenson, “Art: In Political Tone, Works by Hans Haacke,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1986.
20. David Garcia and Geert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media,” 1997, available at: http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html.
21. Ibid.
22. McElroy interview.
23. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 278.
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