Beyond 'Literacy Crusading': Neocolonialism, the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, and Possibilities of Divestment

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Abstract

This article highlights how contemporary structural forces—the intertwined systems of racism, xenophobia, gentrification, and capitalism—have material consequences for the nature of community literacy education. As a case study, I interrogate the rhetoric and infrastructure of a San Francisco K-12 literacy nonprofit in the context of tech-boom gentrification, triggering the mass displacement of Latinx residents. I locate the nonprofit in longer histories of settler colonialism and migration in the Bay Area to analyze how the organization's rhetoric—the founder's TED talk, its website, the mural on the building's façade—are structured by racist logics that devalue and homogenize the literacy and agency of the local community, perpetuating white "possessive investments" (Lipsitz) in land, literacy, and education. Drawing on abolitionist and decolonial education theory, I prose a praxis encouraging literacy scholar-practitioners to question and ultimately divest from institutional rhetorics and funding sources that continue to forward racism, xenophobia, imperialism, and raciolinguistic supremacy built upon them.

Keywords

non-profits, divestment, technoimperialism, neoliberalism, urban education, activist literacy

I n a May 2020 *San Francisco Chronicle* article highlighting the work of the literacy non-profit she directs, educator-administrator Bita Nazarian asserts, "We know we have a health crisis and a financial crisis . . . But I would put an educational crisis right next to that" (Anderson). As the article's author Scott Thomas Anderson concurs, COVID-19 has given "a greater sense of urgency" for community literacy centers like 826 Valencia—where Nazarian works—to intervene in the poor education of "underserved students," particularly given "concerns around American students' reading skills." In fact, Anderson continues, "data shows that literacy levels among young people are troublingly low," but "826 Valencia has been one of the few bright spots" through its work "help[ing] kids complete homework, learn English as a second language and turn their daydreams into stories on the page." The article's title, "826 Valencia's Literacy Crusaders Are on the Front Lines of COVID-19's Education

Crisis," reinforces what Anderson underscores as literacy centers and tutors' critical, powerful role to this end.

As many literacy theory scholars have pointed out, the rhetoric of education crisis—often centered on the assumed "poor literacy skills" of students coded as Black, brown, and/or multilingual—is astoundingly commonplace in our cultural imaginary, and, of course, preceded the COVID-19 crisis by decades (Rosa and Flores; Kynard "This Bridge"; Alvarez). So too is the related rhetoric of what Amy J. Wan calls "literacy hope," a trope that improving individuals' literacy skills will result in the alleviation of other barriers they face: poverty, oppression, or, in this case, vulnerability to a deeply racialized pandemic. As are discourses of literacy education as paternalistic saviorism by teachers and intuitions (Kynard "This Bridge"; Hernandez-Zamora), acting as literacy sponsors, or "agents who enable, support, teach, model . . . recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy," via their relative financial and/or cultural capital (Brandt 166–7).

What may be less apparent to a reader unfamiliar with the Bay Area are the specific connotations of the article's language given the historical context of the non-profit's location in San Francisco's Mission District. Though likely unintentional, the article's rhetoric, particularly its use of the phrase "literacy crusaders," blatantly harkens back to the neighborhood's namesake: Mission Dolores (located just two blocks from 826 Valencia). This mission was established in the mid–1700s by Spanish colonizers amidst a genocidal colonial land grab with the express purpose of evangelizing—in a sense educating—the indigenous Ohlone about their religious, linguistic, and ontological inferiority. These missionaries may too have perceived their role as "crusaders," "urgently" needed to attend to the "crisis" of evangelizing the "troublingly" "underserved" local Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC).

Though today's city certainly looks different than that of the eighteenth century, critical-race and Indigenous studies scholars underscore that legacies of imperial, white supremacist dispossession maintain a felt presence (Cushman; Tuck; INCITE!; Grande). Since the late twentieth century, new manifestations of coloniality and racism have emerged under neoliberalism, a pervasive set of policies and ideologies promoting "self-interest" and the "withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective" (Lipman 6). Neoliberalism operates through the trickling upwards and privatization of material goods and land to a corporate elite, accomplished by seizing public resources from the poor—a process historically rooted in anti-Blackness and settler colonialism (Au and Ferrare; Patel). In San Francisco, this dynamic may be most visible as gentrification: so-called urban renewal geared toward a white wealthy class, coupled with mass displacement, typically of low-income BIPOC residents. At the same time, areas targeted by dispossession are particularly vulnerable to the invasion of privatized, sometimes minimally regulated measures to "reform" racialized inequality caused by divestment from public services, such as schooling (Aggarwal and Mayorga). In education, this dynamic has been bolstered by policy trends toward "shifting the implementation" of education "programs from the public sector to the private and nonprofit sectors"— which certainly includes community literacy centers (Patterson and Silverman 2).

As educators, scholars, and practitioners of community literacy, then, we need to be attuned to how colonialism and its neoliberal iterations are transforming our contemporary educational landscape. As Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora asserts, "Poor literacy and school failure are not individual phenomena in the ex-colonial world, but rather the historical and pervasive result of invasions, slavery, and modern 'development policies'" (3). Yet, Leigh Patel cautions, if scholars fail to attend to the histories and material ramifications of literacy education, as is too often the case, then "longer standing patterns of coloniality and oppression can be easily invisibilized and re-seated" (2). In this light, I explore how community literacy education, though often unintentionally and with positive motives, can remain ideologically, rhetorically, *and* materially invested in colonial and white supremacist logics and tactics.

Why This *Case Study?*

In this article, I use the remarkable rise of one non-profit, 826 Valencia, as a case study exploring the challenges and complexities of community literacy education within a San Francisco that has been rapidly gentrified by tech capital. The center was established in 2002 in the predominantly Latinx[1] Mission District by literary celebrity Dave Eggers, a white, Midwestern, acclaimed writer and publisher. Since then, "it has blossomed from a noble experiment into one of the top innovators and influencers in the education field" (Ralston). The nonprofit, which offers local K–12 students free, one-on-one tutoring and classes in expository and creative writing, took off to the extent that it has now established eight affiliated locations across the country and inspired similar sites worldwide (Anderson; Ralston).

826 Valencia and Eggers himself have received acclaim in mainstream media and some education circles, including being featured at the 2005 CCCC (Hesse 374). But as a Bay Area native, I heard about 826 Valencia in high school because I had a few acquaintances—who mostly shared my positionality as a white teen with financial privilege and graduate-educated parents—who'd taken creative writing or publishing workshops there or at McSweeney's (Eggers' adjacent publishing house). I didn't get involved with the organization myself until after I left California: in 2010, on break from my Midwest liberal arts college, I participated in a month-long, unpaid internship at 826 Valencia for school credit. Although this was only my second-ever teaching experience, I recall that I received only a few hours of training before diving into working with students. My main task was providing K–12 attendees with one-on-one tutoring in any subject that they had homework in—not just English and literacy, as I had expected. I also occasionally helped set up writing and publishing activities for classes visiting on fieldtrips. My memories from this short time are mostly positive: I enjoyed getting to know the students, though I remember feeling at a loss when tutoring students in areas I had no expertise in (by that point, I'd forgotten all my high school math), and occasionally bored because there were sometimes more volunteers present than students and little to do. Still, I liked the organization's atmosphere—its shabby-chic hipster aesthetic, its vibrant location—and I liked working with the young people when I got the chance.

That said, while in some ways my time with 826 Valencia was personally grat-ifying, I didn't think critically about my role or the center's work in the context of racial, linguistic, economic, or "spatial justice," or "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them" (Soja 2). Indeed, as I recall, the organization did not directly foster this kind of thinking either: on top of receiving little pedagogical training, I certainly received no information about the history of the neighborhood and its residents; no trainings around educator position-ality; no suggestions for working with multilingual students, given that many of the students and family members the center works with are Spanish speakers. In the years since, even after many other teaching experiences and moving across the country, I've continued to linger on my short time at 826 Valencia. Despite my complicated expe-rience there, 826 Valencia has continued to expand, garner acclaim, and secure dona-tions, even as racialized inequality—in terms of access to quality jobs, housing, and education—has skyrocketed in a San Francisco that looks less and less as the one I remember from growing up, one that is increasingly colonized by the tech industry.

Beginning with the organization's rhetoric but expanding to interrogate the geo-graphic history and funding structure of 826 Valencia, this article examines literacy sponsorship in the context of gentrification and privatization under urban neoliberal-ism. After providing additional context, I discuss 826 Valencia's founding in the Mis-sion by a white, Midwestern, non-educator, and examine the organization's rhetoric at this point, particularly its invocation of deficit rhetorics and tropes of white liberal saviorism and investment in literacy and real estate as "white property" (Ladson-Bill-ings; Harris). I then move to the present to think through 826's rapid, nationwide spread coupled with the financial support of massive for-profit companies, includ-ing major tech firms, coinciding with the Bay Area's intensifying gentrification under dot-com boom "technoimperialism" (McElroy). In doing so, I argue that on top of an organization's rhetoric and intentions, we must consider the material and economic consequences of their presence as it affects a larger community. Ultimately, drawing on critical scholarship in decolonial and abolitionist education and literacy, I think through possibilities for divestment—financially, ideologically, and spatially—as an educational praxis.

My project centers on rhetorical and material features of educational institutions as they intersect with issues of coloniality, race, and justice, rather than on specific decolonial instructional practices, about which there is substantial scholarship.[2] In doing so, this article is by no means intended to be a sweeping critique of *all* edu-cation or literacy nonprofits, nor all educational public-private partnerships. Com-munity literacy organizations vary widely in terms of funding, scope, and approach. Many offer amazing, critical resources; some too draw on radical, activist pedagogical frameworks. Yet, all institutions and organizations are embedded within particular geographic, economic, and historical contexts, which I believe merit interrogation.

Given that neoliberalism is marked by embedded "relationships between re-structuring in education, the increasingly explicit role of market forces that permeate state-driven education reforms, and the gentrification of urban neighborhoods," 826 Valencia felt to me to be a salient example of how literacy education is changing in

our contemporary climate (Aggarwal and Mayorga). I also selected 826 Valencia given its fame, public availability of media and promotional material, specific geographic location, rhetorical features, and funding structure—not to mention my personal relationship with the Bay Area—but these conversations certainly exceed this organization and city. My intention here isn't critique for critique's sake, but rather to attempt a methodology interrogating how structural forces—the intertwined systems of racism, xenophobia, gentrification, and capitalism—have consequences for the nature of community literacy education, and to illuminate the specific ways these consequences play out in a particular geographic context.

Education, Privatization, and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

In a neoliberal landscape where public education is rapidly defunded along deeply classed and raced lines, financial support from the corporate sector and their investment in particular privatized "reform" measures are increasingly seen as the solution to crumbling or shuttered city schools and "failing" students, and is increasingly expected to pick up where public services inevitably fall short. Indeed, low-income Black and Latinx students living in areas experiencing uneven development, often triggered by gentrification, are typically subjected to the most intensely neoliberal approaches to education, given how "neighborhood decline and the demise of public education often occur in conjunction" (Patterson and Silverman 1). Such measures, often sponsored not by education experts but by individuals with economic and/or social capital, include the expanding presence of charter schools, high-stakes testing (Au and Ferrare), "(corporate) managerialis[t]" structures in public education (Lipman 46), and "school-adjacent" institutions (Patterson and Silverman).

The rise of educational but out-of-school nonprofits is particularly relevant to the context of community literacy. A vital concept here is what grassroots activist coalitions like INCITE! call the nonprofit-industrial complex (NPIC), "a system of relationships between the State (or local and federal governments), the owning classes, foundations, and non-profit/NGO social service and social justice organizations" (xiii). Coinciding with intensifying divestment under neoliberalism and a broader state of economic turmoil triggered by the Great Recession, "school-supporting nonprofits" under the 501(c)(3) model rose astronomically in number from 1995 to 2010 (Nelson and Gazley). It is therefore surprising that research directly interrogating the NPIC remains scant in community literacy—and even writing studies more broadly. In a key exception, Cherish Smith and Vani Kannan point to "the material reality we were inhabiting as mentor/mentee" at their community literacy center: "the nonprofit's need to raise money, the coded fundraising language, and by extension, larger trends in public education" (68).

As a concept developed by on-the-ground activists, the NPIC asks us to not just consider the goals or ideologies of community organizations, but their infrastructure, emphasizing that our community work is inextricably tied to political economy and demography. Inspired by this heuristic, I argue that our understanding of community literacy education should be explicitly attuned to the geographic and material speci-

ficity of our own sites, that we think through "the specific locale" of community litera-cy centers as they intersect with the "larger environment" (Rousculp xx). Drawing on scholars who see literacy as material and as inherently shaped by local and transna-tional geographies and literal and/or figurative mobilities (Wan; Lorimer Leonard), I hope to trace the evolving spatial politics that foreground this case study.

The Mission District and San Francisco: Some Brief Context

San Francisco—and the Mission District in particular—has a long history as a locus of immigration and colonialism; of negotiated ownership over its space. For thou-sands of years, a cluster of distinct indigenous communities now collectively called the Ohlone lived in the area eventually named "San Francisco" by colonizers (Alejan-drino; Kamalakanthan; Spencer). During the 1700s period of ecological destruction and imperial genocide by Spanish missionaries, the Ohlone population rapidly dwin-dled, either due to diseases carried over by or being murdered by colonists; while be-fore colonization the Ohlone population was in the thousands, between 1833 to 1841, it plummeted from four hundred to just fifty individuals (Spencer; Alejandrino). Though they have constantly had to combat disenfranchisement since colonization, the Bay Area maintains a vital Ohlone presence, who continue to fight for the return of their land (Kamalakanthan).

By the mid–1800s, working-class migrant settlers were flooding into the Mission, and continued to make up the majority of the neighborhood until the 2000s; though the races and nationalities of these residents shifted with movement into and out of the neighborhood, what remained consistent was the city's remarkably segregated geography by class and race (Williamson et al.; Shange). Initially, these Mission res-idents were white Europeans, whose population continued to rise in the neighbor-hood until the 1960s, when many left due to white flight out of the neighborhood, in part triggered by government divestment, compounded with mass migration from essentially every country across Central and (to a lesser extent) South America (Ale-jandrino). These residents—many of whom migrated due to instability in their home country resulting from US imperialism—soon came to make up the majority of the neighborhood (Cordova; Sandoval).

Although the Mission's Latinx population was extremely heterogenous in terms of race, language, ethnicity, and more, the neighborhood became generally associated with Latinidad, and remained so for more than 25 years (Cordova; Mirabal). How-ever, the late 1990s/early 2000s dot-com boom and local politics spurred "dramatic economic and racial changes": as a result of "housing and rental policies" (notably the Ellis Act, which effectively gave landlords more leeway to evict), "real estate specula-tion" premised upon assumptions of continued technoimperial growth, and increased development, "thousands of Latin[x] families were displaced" from the Mission, in large part by white, wealthier gentrifiers working in tech (Mirabal 7; McElroy). These changes—especially massive rent increases and widespread evictions—spurred grass-roots resistance from Mission residents that emerged in the form of protests, other actions, and political art (Maharawal).

As activists understood and continually fought against, San Francisco was transforming under a neoliberal technoimperialism that has made it increasingly unlivable for many BIPOC individuals (McElroy); yet, the city still maintained—and continues to maintain—a reputation as a hub of social progress and multiculturalism (Shange). For Savannah Shange, the association between San Francisco and inherent social justice bleeds into the education settings, where teachers, buoyed by presumptions of good intentions and appropriating the insurgent language of activist movements, see their work uncritically as progressive and just. However, this often obscures the ways in which San Francisco's "progressive" educational institutions—and individual actors within them—continued to perpetuate antiblackness and colonial violence, manifesting as a sort of well-intentioned "carceral progressivism" that polices and segregates BIPOC students, thereby contributing to racialized dispossession (Shange 14). In his study around decolonial composition instruction based out of his home university in the Silicon Valley, Cruz Medina relatedly observes the "enduring influence that colonialism maintains through monolingual ideology," contributes to non-whitestream English speakers' "isolation and insecurity"—"even in a geographical context as diverse as the Bay Area" (85).

"City" Students and "Trouble[d]" Teachers: Deficit Rhetoric and Literacy as White Property

Eggers established 826 Valencia in the Mission in 2002 during the height of these spatial and educational dynamics. In his massively popular 2008 TED Talk entitled "My Wish: Once Upon A School" (which currently has over 1.5 million views), Eggers begins by describing how he devised his idea for a literacy center prior to 2002, while he still lived in Brooklyn:

> my friends that were teaching in city schools were having trouble with their students keeping up at grade level, in their reading and writing in particular. Now, so many of these students had come from households where English isn't spoken in the home, where a lot of them have different special needs, learning disabilities . . . in schools which sometimes and very often are under-funded. [These teachers would] say, 'You know, what we really need is just more people, more bodies . . . more hours, more expertise from people that have skills in English and can work with these students one-on-one . . . I thought about this massive group of people I knew: writers, editors, journalists, graduate students, assistant professors . . . that had sort of flexible daily hours and an interest in the English word . . . in the primacy of the written word in terms of nurturing a democracy, nurturing an enlightened life. ("My Wish")

This talk may seem heartwarming and inspiring, but also might function within what Sujatha Fernandes calls an "economy of storytelling" weaponized by the for- and nonprofit industries alike, which rely on "curated stories"—palatable anecdotes and soundbites—as self-promotion. Curated stories are rich with pathos, but strategically

portray philanthropy as *the* project that will save and liberate the oppressed, and to do so covers up the complex networks of racism, colonialism, and capitalism that foreground structural inequality in education and elsewhere. In this case, Eggers' story leverages rhetorical tropes such as raciolinguistic supremacy, white saviorism/paternalism, and valorization of the written word to establish the efficacy of his project, even as in key ways he evades or minimizes crucial context around political economy, migration, coloniality, race, and place—a typical feature of neoliberal education rhetoric (Patel; Leonardo).[3] The talk rhetorically functions through perpetuating a binary between educators and students, aligning the former with competent writing skills, education credentials, English monolingualism, bourgeois socioeconomic status, democratic citizenship, altruism, and whiteness; the latter with illiteracy, limited or poor education, multilingualism (especially speaking Spanish), poverty, inability to assimilate, neediness, and Blackness/brownness. This rhetoric is especially effective in the context of the Mission because of the flexibility of Latinx racialization: current scholarly and political rhetorics, leveraged by colonialist tropes in the US cultural imaginary based on "the perspective of hegemonically positioned white perceiving subjects," strategically collapse Latinx identity with brownness and/or proximity to Blackness—contingent on colorism—immigrant and/or undocumented status, poverty, and difficulty in school and speaking English (Rosa 6; Ribero; Alvarez).

Eggers solicits empathy, then, in part by centering "hegemonically positioned" white bodies and simultaneously othering and homogenizing Mission youth. In detailing his decision to start the organizing, Eggers discusses his friends far more than students themselves; in other words, Eggers' concept initially emerged not out of a desire to help youth, but rather "trouble[d]" teachers, painting them as subjects worthy of empathy. His imagined solution to their struggle was simply to leverage his peers in a new, adjacent institution while failing to name the root problem itself: the systemic issues triggering the mass, if uneven, educational divestment and teacher shortages, with schools serving low-income Black and brown students. Eggers' vague description of these institutions as "city schools" has a racialized undertone; it evokes phrases such as "inner-city" or "urban schools" that have been more robustly critiqued as euphemisms to denote Black/brown youth through an assumed proximity to neighborhoods imagined as impoverished, violent, and/or gang-ridden, thus imagining the youth themselves as dangerous, criminal, and incompatible with normative schooling (Watson; see also Rosa; Kynard "This Bridge"; Wynter). For Eggers, the key was adding simply "more bodies," but very particular bodies: those of individuals with "skills in English," such as Eggers' fellow writer, editor, and academic friends.

Eggers explicitly cites his peers' "passion for the primacy of the written word in terms of nurturing a democracy" and "enlightened life" as characteristics that qualify them as tutors. Without providing much evidence, he also homogenizes "city" students as often coming "from households where English isn't spoken in the home, where a lot of them have different special needs, learning disabilities," and thus lacking access to or enthusiasm for the "written word." This language reflects what critical race theorists in education see as a deficit framework (Yosso, Ladson-Billings) or what Eve Tuck calls as a "damage-centered," pathologizing paradigm; both express a

colonial "dualistic thinking" that pathologizes BIPOC students in reference to a white, middle-class norm (Cushman 239). In this case, Eggers rhetorically distinguishes himself/his peers from the Mission community, implying that the former have something to give (expertise in monolingual written English) that the latter clearly lacks. It is precisely this "damage"—marked by raciolinguistic inferiority ("English isn't spoken in the home") and disability ("special needs")—that makes the community a fitting target for the nonprofit. Eggers too implies that students *need* their help to cultivate an "enlightened life," thus not only imagining their deficits, but also their desire to be aided through writing pedagogies possessed by (white) people whom he deems appropriate (see Kynard "This Bridge"). Such rhetoric plays into presumptions of the efficacy and universality of ableist, Western epistemologies of learning/writing (Wynter), which by definition downplay "knowledge bases of [BIPOC] communities" and "societal forces gripping [BIPOC] students, in an effort to find quick solutions" or maybe just explanations as "to why they cannot do as well" (Carey 7–8).

Yet Eggers directly states that "there was no stigma [toward students]. Kids weren't going into the 'Center-for-Kids-That-Need-More-Help.'" However, Eggers' defense here is not, for instance, that they applied a particular antiracist pedagogical model, but simply that the center shared its space with McSweeney's, whose "interns were actually working at the same tables very often, and shoulder-to-shoulder" with students. This language suggests that physical or imagined proximity to the book publishing industry and to "real" writers could in and of itself alleviate stigma against students. Yet Eggers' allusion to an egalitarian writing center directly contradicts discourses he relies on elsewhere repeatedly distinguishing students (coded as Black/brown novice writers) from the "professional" tutors, interns, and publishers (coded as white writing experts). This is reinforced by Eggers' anecdote that he and his colleagues call 826 Valencia a "publishing center" rather than a tutoring or writing center, a framing that also contrasts with tenets of process-oriented composition pedagogy, and translingual/languaging approaches where actively "negotiating assumptions about language is more important than the product" (Matsuda 481; Alvarez and Alvarez).

To exemplify the organization's success, Eggers again harnesses deficit rhetorics to tell the story of a student previously "addicted to video games and TV," unable to "concentrate at home." Such language evokes the racist, xenophobic stereotype that "immigrant parents don't care about their kids in school" and/or have home lives that are antithetical to mainstream/ whitestream education (Alvarez 25). But upon coming to the center, the student received "concentrated attention," and "soon enough, he was writing . . . [H]e's now been published in five books." Eggers here alludes to normative literacy acquisition—in fact, mainstream corporate publishing, the industry that he and his colleagues make their living in, throughout collapsed with bourgeois whiteness—as the end point for students, not, say, cultivating critical or coalitional consciousness. This rhetoric praises one student painted as exemplary within a neoliberal progress narrative, implying that the student had to depart from an impoverished, unruly home life and language to get there.

In doing so, Eggers' talk tacitly invokes the pervasive association between normative literacy and liberal citizenship (Wan), both as inherently white property (Ladson-Billings). Although rooted in earlier settler colonialism, during which indigenous languages were intentionally eradicated (Grande), and chattel slavery, as slaves were barred from learning to read and write (Ladson-Billings), literacy as white property has been cemented under neoliberalism, which underpins both the mainstream rise of deficit/damage rhetorics and meritocratic logics blaming inequality on individual failure rather than systemic racism (Au and Ferrare; Leonardo). Leveraging this ideology, Eggers' rhetoric valorizes tutors' literacies as linked to their "enlightenment" and "democra[tic]" citizenship, racializing and homogenizing students as not only illiterate, but un-enlightened and non-citizens, questioning not only their writing abilities but their personhood (Ladson-Billings; Ribero; Wynter).

The "Printed Word" of the "Human Race": Murals, Whitewashing, and Liberal Humanism

The TED talk's dehumanizing rhetoric goes hand in hand with Eggers' implicit erasure of the neighborhood's identity. In discussing 826 Valencia's origins, Egger offers so little contextual specificity that the talk could be about basically anywhere, nor much explanation as to why he chose to establish the center in the Mission (except that his landlord was pleased and the building was convenient). Yet, Eggers opted to name the organization after its street address, perhaps to suggest to locals a sense of its belonging—while also alluding to an inherent *right* to possess this address and this building. If, following Katherine McKittrick, "naming place is also an act of naming the self and self-histories," then in naming this site after its address, Eggers and his cofounders were inserting themselves and "self-histories" into a neighborhood and building that had only just become "theirs" (xxiii). Yet despite the name, upon opening the center, "we waited" for "weeks and weeks," but "nobody came in." Eggers and his colleagues "never put it together" that there might be a "trust gap," which he attributes to the fact that 826 Valencia had a storefront on the outside, not that it was started by a gentrifier; it was only then that Eggers brought in a co-director with more experience and ties to the Bay Area.

Perhaps to blend in further with the neighborhood (or as a nod to the Mission's cultural heritage) Eggers hired the white, Chicago-based artist Chris Ware to paint the building's façade. One of the Mission's most renowned cultural sites are its alleys lined with murals, including Clarion Alley just a couple blocks from 826 Valencia. As Cary Cordova describes, these murals represent powerful legacies of Latinx aesthetic practices—what I would call literacies—rooted in cultural, political expression that has long existed in the neighborhood. And as Mirabal notes, members of the Mission community often view murals as an element of their ties to the Mission and a site of Latinx advocacy. Many recent murals protest raising rents and eviction caused by gentrification, while centering Latinx art and life (see Fig. 1 and 2, both from Clarion Alley).

Fig. 1 Artist Carina Goldblatt's mural shows a magenta-haired, Brown woman, whose facial features evoke calavera iconography, in a pink maid's outfit holding two pink dog-like pets. She seems to be trying to run but is constrained by a rope wrapped around her right ankle. Above her head are the words "evict," its letters dripping and red like blood, and "Google," in in blue, red, yellow, and green letters like Google's logo.

Fig 2: A mural with "Bomb Condos! Not Murals!" in red letters; a bomb with a face replaces the first O. Below this is a row of gray buildings bordered by dollar signs. On each side of the buildings is a blue, personified spray paint can: one sprays the phrase "crush buses, not art!"; the other, "smash the system instead of our paintings." The mural's lower edge has the tag "respect your wallz | respect cups" atop red flames.
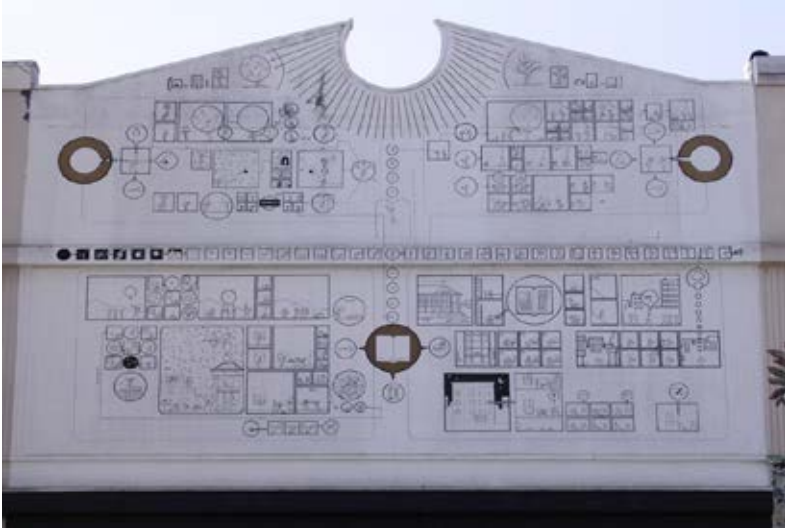
Fig. 3: Ware's mural on a building's white upper façade, above a dark awning (labeled "826 Valencia" in large letters, cropped out). Composed of fine, black pigment, its foreground is separated into quadrants, each containing wordless, cartoon-like sequences of small squares and bubbles with small scenes of people interacting with various objects and settings. Standing out are three, larger bronze circles on the left (enclosing a thought bubble), right (enclosing a speech bubble), and center-bottom (enclosing an open book).

At first glance, 826 Valencia's mural (Fig. 3) has few visual similarities to neighboring ones. It is geometric, linear, and painted solely in black and white. It contains no tags or signifiers pointing to its artist's identity or artistic lineage, nor an insurgent political message speaking to the perspective of Mission residents. Visually, this is both a literal and figurative white-washing of the neighborhood's literate, sociopolitical legacies. Indeed, locals have protested developers painting over or destroying murals in the redevelopment process, "symboliz[ing] for many Latin[x] [residents] the white-washing of Latin[x] culture in the Mission" and the "usurpation of [its] history and public culture" by gentrifiers (Mirabal 24). In this sense, Ware's mural plays into Erin McElroy's observation that the area's gentrification was "correlative to a real estate marketing strategy that preys upon Mission Latinx culture" and literacies "to boost property value" (827).

According to Ware, the mural portrays "the development of the human race, along with its efforts at, and motivations for, communication" (Thompson) or, in Eggers' words, "basically explains the entire history of the printed word." It thus depicts a very traditional type of textual literacy—book-based and embedded within a publishing cycle—which fails to center what Tara J. Yosso calls "community cultural wealth." In this sense, and also by aligning with a sort of hipster/bourgeois aesthetic (Ware's work may be most recognizable from the cover of many *New Yorker* issues), the mural is inherently biased toward what Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores call a "white listening subject," suggesting that this mural—and literacy itself—is by and for

white people. Indeed, Ware explicitly aligns his depiction of "communication" with the "human race" itself, conflating humanity itself with white liberal humanism and normative literacy, both coded as white, while evoking progress narratives of neoliberal "development" (Wynter). Though 826 Valencia may have been attempting to signal openness, its mural also invokes "possessive investments" in both land and literacy, a neocolonial manifestation of "whiteness as property" that is simultaneously ideological and material (Lipsitz; Harris).

826 Valencia Today: Now Sponsored by Tech Capital

In today's San Francisco, eighteen years since 826 Valencia was founded, gentrification has continued to surge, the tech industry has continued to expand beyond levels many could have imagined, and additional start-ups have moved into San Francisco and the neighboring Silicon Valley. As detailed in numerous studies, the Mission has gotten both whiter and pricier—phenomena that are, of course, intimately linked (Garofoli and Said; McElroy). The neighborhood's rent prices and eviction rates have skyrocketed—predominantly along racial lines. As one result, between 2009 and 2013, the Mission's Latinx population decreased by 27% (Maharawal 31).

Concurrently, 826 Valencia has expanded across the country, including sites in Brooklyn, Detroit, and Chicago, as well as two new San Francisco locations, one in the Tenderloin and its newest in Mission Bay; both are neighborhoods, like the Mission, that until recently were largely low-income and predominantly Black/brown but now are less so as they undergo "urban renewal" facilitated by the city in tandem with the real estate sector. Besides its expansion, what's most apparently different about 826 today is its branding. Its website got a major image makeover sometime between 2016 and 2018 (indeed, the long-time chair of 826's board was an advertising executive for BBDO); the new site is minimalist yet whimsical, littered with small animated drawings and bold infographics quantifying the organization's "impact."

At the same time, in line with shifts in mainstream education discourses, 826 Valencia seems to rely less on overtly deficit/damage-centered rhetoric, typically describing the students and communities it engages as "under-served" and "under-resourced" (*Annual Report 2015-16*; "About"). Crucially, this updated rhetoric has shifted away from blaming students' educational struggles on their attitudes, behaviors, or home lives. Yet, it still fails to account for other modes of being "served" in one's education besides in a typical K–12 school setting through community cultural wealth (Yosso). The phrase "under-resourced students" is also quite individualistic in its emphasis on students rather than systems; it describes youth using an adjective typically ascribed to institutions or infrastructures.

For literacy scholars, such as Rousculp and Linda Flower, interrogating and shifting the rhetoric of sponsoring institutions are key ways to encourage more fruitful community projects. Flower proposes we embrace a "rhetoric of engagement," of "making a difference within an intercultural community," which "shifts the locus of agency from the program to the young people" and their community to confront the unequal power relations undergirding many community literacy programs; I agree

that this is vital (228, 149). However, in the context of profound and violent racio-economic inequality, simply shifting away from deficit frameworks—or, per Flowers, coming to view students as agentic—is crucial but may not be sufficient if institutions remain invested in neoliberal spatial and economic (dis)possession, even if these investments are not immediately discernable (Paris and Alim).

Indeed, even as 826 Valencia's discourses have shifted to more closely align with rhetorics of reciprocity, it has increasingly fostered intimate ties to large corporations. For instance, 826 Valencia and its sister sites' current Boards of Directors are made up largely by employers of for-profit companies that benefit from mechanisms of neoliberal accumulation and wealth hoarding, in fields like banking/investment, real estate development, venture capitalism, advertising/branding, and, of course, tech, with Board and Associate Board Members employed by Bay Area-based tech companies like Lyft, Microsoft, Google, Dropbox, Facebook, and Twitter ("Staff "; "The 826 National Team"). Beginning in 2014, 826 Valencia broadened its volunteer force through official "corporate partnerships"; its first was with Twitter; Adobe, Apple, Dropbox, LinkedIn, and Salesforce have now joined ("A Huge Thank You to Our Partners"; *Annual Report 2018–19*). And major donors to 826 Valencia include local tech companies such as Yelp, Cisco, Twitter, and Microsoft (*Annual Report 2018–19*). Google seems to be an especially significant sponsor: 826 Valencia was able to open its second San Francisco site thanks to a $500,000 grant from them ("About").

This arrangement not especially unique. That 826 Valencia has sustained itself and expanded significantly in substantial part through corporate partnerships is the norm for many nonprofits and NGOs (INCITE!; Au and Ferrare). But I cite these affiliations explicitly to name and question aspects of nonprofits that have become so naturalized that they're often not mentioned at all: 1) their deep ties to corporations, including those with stances that lie directly at odds with the community they are supposedly "engaging" with, and 2) the idea that an organization's continued expansion (inevitably through such partnerships) is equivalent to its success. The NPIC isn't simply corporate altruism: companies reap significant tax benefits through their sponsorship. It also facilitates corporate image boosts: through philanthropy work with local organizations, companies appear generous, responsible, and connected with neighborhood residents that they are simultaneously displacing, a sort of band-aid that then enables such companies to proceed with violent capitalist accumulation as usual. This too aligns with neoliberalism's broader project to obscure or justify dispossession of public resources under free-market logics; Ruth Wilson Gilmore in fact refers to philanthropy as "the private allocation of stolen social wages" (Keynote Conversation).

What I think this particular case makes especially clear, though, is that an organization's material infrastructure can actively contradict or negate its espoused goals. As one example, 826 Valencia started building its Google-sponsored Mission Bay around the time the tech firm began building a controversial "mega campus" in nearby San Jose, which has been critiqued for its potential to further displace Bay Area residents (Elias). Yet, though 826 Valencia's rhetoric has shifted in recent years, one thing that has remained consistent is that it frequently cites supporting "overbur-

dened teachers" as a key objective ("My Wish"; "History"). However, San Francisco is currently undergoing a severe teacher shortage—no doubt spurred by the tech boom and resulting rises in rent (Lambert and Willis; Williamson et al.). This suggests that the nonprofit to some degree relies on the expansion of tech—and by proxy, the pushing out of low-income BIPOC, including students as well as public-school teachers—in its ongoing expansion.

McElroy sees the tech industry's enthusiasm to partner with organizations like 826 Valencia as a trend to mask the "malevolent effects" of the neocolonial "extractive technologies" they rely on, including both gentrification-fueled displacement *and* "data colonialism"—the surveillance, extraction, and commodification of internet users' online data (827). We might see these tech corporations, then, as literacy sponsors in another sense aside from their philanthropic partnerships: they also foster and finance new forms of technological literacy, the authoring of codes and algorithms that promote digital surveillance and extraction. The consequences of literate and "technoimperial" (McElroy) mechanisms are, again, highly racialized and classed, since they too are justified by logics of white supremacist coloniality. But their digital nature underscores that these consequences are not restricted to one city, but circulate transnationally, across networks of neocolonial domination. This project, then, could never really be about 826 Valencia as an individual organization, but rather, per Gilmore, "an entire realm of social policy and social investment" made up of "dense and intricate connections" between many institutional actors—connections and investments that were actively made, and thus are *not* foreclosed ("In the Shadow" 42, 47).

Divestment as Educational Praxis

As INCITE! acknowledges, the NPIC operates in complex, paradoxical ways contingent on geographies, histories, and economies. There is no doubt that many nonprofits and/or out-of-school educational organizations do vital work and have the potential to create transformative and liberatory spaces for community members (Alvarez; Alvarez & Alvarez). Thus, as Gilmore posits, "it's not the fact of being a nonprofit, it's rather the *relationship* that the institution has to the institutions of racial capitalism as it is destroying us" (Keynote Conversation, my emphasis). For Nan Alamilla Boyd and Jillian Sandell, who taught a San Francisco State class placing students into nonprofit internships, examining this relationship head-on and interrogating spaces of complicity "in the contradictions of global capitalism" often evokes tension and unease, yet is pedagogically and theoretically useful, perhaps necessary. Their teaching incorporates overt discussions around the contradictions of "service" learning: in interrogating the geopolitical context, aim, and "function of nonprofit organizations," students and professors together "grapple with and confront our own participation" (257).

Informed by Boyd and Sandell's assertion that we examine the "troubling histories and structures" of the community sites in which we work, we might consider what I am calling *divestment as an educational praxis*.[4] My understanding of divest-

ment draws on education scholarship pertaining to both decolonization and abolition. I am inspired here by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, whose vision of education justice draws on Indigenous and Black studies, simultaneously mobilizing abolition and decolonization as frameworks "to contest the violence and legitimacy of the nation-state and its apparatuses, and to refuse routes to justice which require us to appeal for our humanity" (9). I am drawn to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's understanding of decolonization in part "as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological *divesting* of colonial power" (101, my emphasis). I also draw on abolitionist, critical-race education theorists, such as Shange and the coauthors of "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation." The latter project points to the "proliferation of divestment movements" in campus-based organization—organizing that interrogates educational institutions' economic investments in corporations/institutions that promote national and/or transnational militarized violence, inhumane labor practices, environmental destruction, and more.

Drawing on these scholars, then, I see divestment as both material and ideological, a refusal of both "colonial power" foregrounded in indigenous dispossession (Smith; Grande) and the abolition of "institutions of unfreedom" foregrounded in antiblackness, both of which underly neoliberalism (Tuck and Yang 9). In the context of community literacy, as I envision it, divestment as an educational praxis foremost requires us to rigorously understand and attend to the geographic, historical, cultural, racial, and economic specificity of our own sites, which are often hidden or naturalized as inevitable. In writing this article, I've attempted this sort of methodological approach, one built around interrogating educational investments—in particular rhetorics and ideologies that preserve literacy and space as white property, as well as investments in the local and global work of neocolonial capital. Because these investments spread far and wide, across multiple scales and structures, this work therefore requires an intentional interdisciplinarity.

This praxis also asks that we actually take seriously divestment—financial, ideological, and otherwise—as a legitimate political position and practical possibility. One of the challenges of neoliberal austerity logics, pervasive in education settings, is that they can convince us that, due to "limited resources" or assumptions of good intentions, we must accept all aspects of an institution wholesale and uncritically, perhaps because it has a "net positive" effect or "is better than nothing." However, leaning on positive intent, particularly when harnessed as a means to justify problematic associations, is empty "if we do not take responsibility and cannot be held accountable" for these associations and their material ramifications, and are thus not "answerable" to "genealogies of coloniality" (Castagno 43; Grande; Patel 68). In fact, rhetorics of intention echo paternalistic discourses around literacy and literacy education (discussed above in the context of 826 Valencia, but ubiquitous in similar settings) that center the desires, assumptions, and epistemologies of educators and administrators rather than those of students or communities, and thus often work to maintain status-quo investments in neocolonial capitalism.

An all-or-nothing mindset based around assumptions of scarcity and institutional loyalty, exacerbated by neoliberalism, also limits our ability to see alternative ways

of teaching, knowing, and being. As scholars in decolonial and abolitionist rhetorics and literacies remind us, we do not have to accept institutionally sanctioned relationships or conditions, particularly those that pointedly reproduce racial and settler violence (Kynard; Rodríguez; Smith and Kannan). To loosely paraphrase Kynard during the Q&A of her CCW keynote, we all work within educational structures that to some degree perpetuate racist, classist, xenophobic and/or settler-colonial violence, not to mention compounding violence along the lines of gender, disability, and more. So, rather than "institutions or no institutions?" we have to ask ourselves and act on this question: what are we willing to accept and what must we refuse?

Tuck and Yang's barometers for divestment might serve as useful guidance: they refuse education/social justice projects that "rely upon the benevolence of the state or of the dominant in society" to enact change, "require us to prove humanity," center those "white settlers who are presumed to have agency," or "presume compromise as the main avenue for achieving solidarity" (8). However, Tuck and Yang are explicit that they "are not presenting this list as dogma" (8). In calling for divestment as an educational praxis, I'm also hesitant to provide a neat list of universally applicable "solutions" or "quick fixes" to complex, structural problems, which might have the risk of making a largely white, class-privileged audience of educators/administrators feel at ease. I also believe that what divestment looks like will vary significantly given the vastly different histories, geographies, and institutional networks of every community literacy site. What I do propose is that in our theorizing, pedagogical, and administrative work, we follow Tuck and Yang's lead to explicitly interrogate and clarify "the whys and why nots of our own participation," recognizing that in all institutional partnerships, funding sources or educational discourses are sites of *active* investment and divestment (8).

My ideas here are also deeply inspired by the work of on-the-ground organizers for educational and spatial justice within and outside of academia, who have long been enacting and theorizing praxes of divestment. In San Francisco, we can see this through the unceasing work of grassroots activists in the Mission and beyond, who have fiercely called out "connections between inequality, wealth and evictions, and homelessness, and polic[ing], city policy," education, and "histories of colonialism" to refute their inevitability and demand an alternative (Maharawal 39). I see praxes of divestment and refusal in the literacies and actions of muralists who depict the city's neocolonial evolution while insistently taking up city space (Cordova); in the Ohlone's continued demands for the return of their land (Kamalakanthan); in anti-technoimperial actions such as physically blocking Google bus routes bisecting neighborhood streets (Maharawal); through the insurgency and "willful defiance" of Black and Latinx students and organizers to settle for an education where "the liberal eclipses the liberatory" (Shange 138); in collective movements and literacies insisting that a city and an education system divested from neoliberal coloniality are not only possible, but vital.

Notes

1. I use "Latinx" to denote people of Latin-American descent rather than Hispanic (which centers Spain) or Latino/a (which excludes nonbinary people) (Flores and Rosa; Rosa). I want to emphasize that "Latinx" doesn't index a static racial, ethnic, or national identity. Latinx racialization has been historically contingent, varying with evolving applications of anti-Black, settler-colonial logics/tactics locating Latinidad on imagined spectrums between phenotypic Blackness and Whiteness, and Spanish and English (Rosa). However, organizers in San Francisco and elsewhere have unified strategically, if across many differences, under the singular banner of Latinidad as an activist, solidarity-building praxis (Cordova; Sandoval).

2. For analyses of decolonial pedagogical practices by writing studies scholars (mostly in the context of college composition classes), see, for instance, Medina; King et al.; and Ruiz & Sánchez. For analyses of decolonial pedagogies in K-12 English or literacy education, see Paris & Alim; Kinloch et al.; de los Ríos et al.; and others.

3. Literary/cultural studies scholars note that Eggers' novels like *What Is the What* and *Zeitoun* draw on the same tropes: white paternalistic saviorism, individualism, capitalist assimilation, racial othering, speaking on behalf of those constructed as others, overemphasizing humanitarianism as the answer to systemic inequality, and underplaying racism's and colonialism's structural nature and ongoing ramifications. See, for instance, Goyal; Krishnan; and Hartnell.

4. Many thanks to Carmen Kynard for suggesting this phrasing.

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