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Sacred Grounds in Baltimore: "Dignifying Beauty", "Open Canvas", "Garden Magic" and "Rebel City"

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ABSTRACT:
This paper looks at urban Mural Art, "open canvas" in a city, in relation to social struggle in Baltimore. Focused on a dual character, window/mirror effect, of urban mural art, it explores a visual pattern constituted in the canvas, but also how urban walls changes a sense of place in Baltimore's broken neighborhoods. It is a visual and ethnographic encounter with urban social ecology as it evolves aesthetics, environmentalism and ethics. The creative and environmental practice in Baltimore, are discussed here in light of agency claiming the right to the city to overcome the experiences of trauma and fear, above all a desire for social justice.

KEYWORDS:
Urban Mural Art, Social Justice, Claiming Space, Urban Aesthetics and Ethics, Social Inequality, Rebel City, Urban Gardens, Urban Ecology and Violence, Social Suffering and Urban Space

"Knowledge of places is there closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's own community and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person." (Basso 1996)

"The traditional city has been killed", proclaimed David Harvey in his book *Rebel Cities* (Harvey 2013). The new political task, Harvey suggests, is to "imagine and reconstitute a totally different kind of city." Guided by the sensibility which arises out of the neighborhoods and from marginalization, this essay tells a story about the sense of dignity restored by the "beautification" of urban space. Focused on urban mural art, "open canvas" and urban gardens in relation to urban social struggle in Baltimore, it explores visual patterns confronting violence. Through a "sensory journey", ethnographic methods and photography, it examines urban social ecology as it evolves a relationship between notions of beauty, dignity, and justice (Stoller 1997). The creative artistic and environmental practices in Baltimore, are discussed here in the light of agency and voice "claiming the right to the city" in order to overcome the experiences of trauma and fear engendered by violence and death in the city (Harvey 2013). "We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine", wrote Basso in a different ethnographic context (Basso 1996: 7). Basso's discussion about Western Apache notions of self and place, relates to "the place making" in Baltimore. The "sacred places" materialized in "urban magic" gardens and the "open canvas", establish a unique ground for creative visual and social practices. This ethnographic report concludes that the hope for the city's future as expressed in a shared concept of "beautification" and desired inclusive ecological visions, has been transformed in "the space of anger", and the "open canvas" has become a "rebel art" expressing a radical critique of social injustice in Baltimore.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORY: SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

Exploring Baltimore City over the last twenty years, methods of visual anthropology, photography and ethnography, have all been effective. I remember very clearly my first evening, after the arrival from Prague, sitting in my apartment in Baltimore on a hot and humid August summer night. I heard speeding cars, ambulances and fire engines. I listened to the sound, without seeing and I sensed a rhythm of the city new to me. Since 1994, when I first came to Baltimore, I began systematic photographic work. Aiming to capture Baltimore's habitat, I photographed neighborhoods across the city. In my first days, I saw neighborhoods as islands without bridges, separate little towns, each with a different character, but segregated. During these last twenty years, my visual and cultural anthropology in and of Baltimore has become a participatory creative practice. In some neighborhoods, I found the decay that was familiar to me, its sadness, its sense of abandon reminded me of socialism. I saw wooden boards, sheets of plastic covering windows where glass was missing, porch columns held up parts of these ruins. As I photographed, I strived for the expression of the sense of place. I searched for "the rhythm of the city" (Lefebvre 2006), and urban pulsing so well expressed by the Russian filmmaker Ziga Vertov in his film *Man With a Camera* (1929).

Discovering Baltimore's unique rhythm, I began to ask questions about the history of social struggle. Reading urban anthropologies by Brett Williams, Judith Good, Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Maskovsky, and urban theories of Walter Benjamin, Jane Jacobson, Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey, I asked how people in different neighbor-

hoods claim their right to this city. Walter Benjamin saw social life in urban space linked to the aesthetic forms of art. He emphasized that creative practices in the city historically depended on technologies and the expressive power of dominant ideologies or representations of rebellion, the art of anti-establishment (Benjamin 1955).

Baltimore is an old immigrant city, with neighborhoods having been socially and spatially reconfigured. In the process of redefining the neighborhoods in the city, the efforts of gentrification and development have been counter-acted by grassroots creative practices initiated in the neighborhoods. Urban art, folk art and street art, found its way through the cracks of imperfect grounds, ready to challenge the aesthetics of economic regimes of dominant power occupying urban spaces.

A large population of the Baltimore City, trapped in urban decay and living in the shadow of prosperity and "urban consumerism" (Lloyd 2010), will not overcome structural problems without major support from programs designed to help people "reclaim the city" (Harvey 1990, 2000). Harvey, drawing from his Baltimore urban experiences, presents a radical view of urban inequality and urban crisis in America. He defined this state of affairs in Baltimore as an "awful and old mess" when addressing overwhelming social inequality (Harvey 2000).

Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2012.

When life on the waterfront, in the gated and affluent neighborhoods, modern and privileged, co-exists with life conditions in neighborhoods stricken by poverty and crime, there is an urgent need to find the agency and confront the violence. Anger and frustration caused by the accumulated downfall of American society is part of Baltimore's urban fabric. Most of the city is painfully segregated along the lines of race and class. In many cases, people stuck in hopeless poverty are divided from the wealthy by just one street. In broken neighborhoods on the East and West sides of the city, also known as 'blue light'[1] or 'chalk line', people are oppressed by poverty, health disparity, housing apartheid, environmental injustice and gentrification. The violence, pollution and lack of services in these neighborhoods are overwhelming and traumatizing for people. Major paralyzing problems with drugs, trash and rats provoke frustration and anger among people in the most affected neighborhoods.

East Baltimore. © J. K.Rehak, 2012.

It was this urgency to find voices from the neighborhoods in Baltimore that brought me to partner first with the organization Habitat for Humanity (HFH) in 2010, later with Marian House and with Rebuild Together Baltimore, and teach urban anthropology classes. Collaboration with HFH and their homeowners brought me closer to the multiple communities in Baltimore. In large areas of the city the neighborhood residents are challenged by the overwhelming number of vacant houses. The general city estimate is that there are 16,000 vacant houses in Baltimore. Vacant houses in an urban habitat represent health and environmental hazards, and provides an open ground for street violence. Yet, upscaling and development of the urban space routinely excludes the local people and long term residents. The neighborhood organizers and activists, as well as local civic and faith based organizations, play a major role in the fight for human rights in urban America. As much as we have witnessed a despair and hopelessness in poverty in 'transitional neighborhoods', my students and I have also discovered the creative energy and rising voice from the grassroots in Baltimore's neighborhoods.

Between 2012 and 2017, I have systematically examined the role of public art in Baltimore. On many occasions, I invited students from my urban and applied anthropology classes to join me during some of my fieldwork. These organized group fieldtrips to Baltimore inspired productive discussions, class project presentations and provided a better platform to develop this study further. In particular, we examined mural art and in some cases related city gardens.

Jefferson Street rehabilitation by the Habitat for Humanity in 2013. © J. K. Rehak, 2013.

1 Term "blue light" neighborhood refers to the visually abrasive lights attached to police monitor close-circuit cameras. The term "chalk line" neighborhoods refers to neighborhoods with a high number of daily homicides, visible at the end of the day in the form of chalk lines tracing dead bodies on the street.

DIGNIFYING BEAUTIFICATION

While working with Habitats homeowners, and participating in Habitat's work in the neighborhood in East Baltimore, we met other local residents and community activists. The interviews, casual conversations and life histories of homeowners, led us to activist community members and other homeowners. We found that in every neighborhood, there were key activists and organizations, providing a locus for the neighborhoods in the struggle to improve wellness, safety and support.

Glenn Ross. © J. K. Rehak, 2012.

In the McEldery neighborhood in East Baltimore, during HFH renovations, we met community activist Glenn Ross. When Glenn Ross moved to the neighborhood in the 60s, he was the first African American resident. He witnessed the urban exodus, resulting from strategic fragmentations and institutional violence in Baltimore's housing. Since then, he participated in many movements to revive the neighborhood. In his narrative, Ross insisted on two major themes, "beauty" and the "green", which he believes are grounds for dignity in the neighborhood. When we met him in 2013, one of his many organized activities was leading "Toxic Tours" in East Baltimore. These were group tours in yellow school buses, during which he educated interested audiences about environmental racial injustice in East Baltimore. Ross remembered a field of sunflowers from his childhood in East Baltimore: "There was a beautiful field of sunflowers. We used to walk in this field on our way from school and bring home the seeds and fry them and eat it with salt and butter. Then one day, the area was marked with caution tape. Ross continued, "We of course we didn't know it back then, but the African ferns absorbed the arsenic in the ground, and the sunflowers were there to absorb the lead. There was no warning, no sign." Years later, Ross, a self-proclaimed environmentalist, organized dozens of tours a year, mostly for students from the universities in the Baltimore area. To Ross, environmental activism is not limited to rural lands, as he used to think, but includes the demand for justice close to his home in the city. The toxic tours in Baltimore's poor, predominantly African American neighborhoods, gave Ross the opportunity to engage people on the question of environmental racism. "I used to think of mountains and bears… This only happens in a poor neighborhood, where good political representation is missing", as he stated. He explained further: "I take people in brownfields, rat infestation, truck traffic, illegal dumping sites with vacant buildings and other environmental hazards that poor people have to live with and I make sure the bus windows are open for these outings, I put it right up in their face, they have got to smell it and taste it. By the end of the tour they will get it."

Glenn Ross at his home in East Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2012.

Ross's home in East Baltimore resembles a community center. His living room in a typical Baltimore row house is set up as an office. The walls are fully covered with maps of Baltimore and newspaper articles about political, environmental and other civic issues Ross is involved in. In addition to the Toxic Tours, Ross spoke about housing apartheid, a planned destruction of Baltimore's neighborhoods. He was in particular involved in a campaign against oversized billboards, placed in poor neighborhoods. Ross protested this, finding such advertising oppressive and destructive to the urban community. He pointed out the role of "dignifying aesthetics", reflected in the urban murals and gardens and the planting of tree-lines. For the people in his neighborhood the beautification and the arts, as Ross sees it, are an important way of restoring respect and dignity. To him, urban space aesthetics have a fundamental role in a struggle against structural violence – drug epidemics, a shortage of jobs and services in neighborhoods, and people's displacement by gentrification and development. Glen Ross's advocacy, addressing the aesthetics in the city is a form of agency, a force raising the voice for social justice in his neighborhood.

Ross and Habitat homeowners across the city indicated that people outspoken against the drug trade in their neighborhoods were violently "silenced" and bullied by the drug dealers. People were scared and found the situation hopeless. Police interventions typically pushed the drug trade from the epicenter, the main streets and street corners towards side streets in the neighborhoods. "People, and especially older residents, were afraid to use their front porches because of the drug dealers" shared one of the homeowners. Ross and other activists testified about the old time West and East residents' lost battles against urban resettlement which favored developers. The violence in the neighborhoods most affected the aging people and children, forcing them into confinement in their homes.

"Reclaiming the city" – striving for social justice, confronting corruption and economic exploitation – has a rich history in social movements and the politics of city restructuring. David Harvey's account of a history of urban social movements teaches us that a political restructuring of the city, for example Haussmann's plan of 1853 in Paris or Moses' plan in post WWII New York, had serious implications for low-income populations and led to serious crises in the city (Harvey 1990, 2000, 2013). Baltimore City development processes in the 1990's displaced a larger population in the center city, yet proved not to be an effective solution to major socio-economic problems for the urban working and lower class people.

McElderry, where Glenn Ross lived most of his adult life is one of the injured neighborhoods in the city. In this neighborhood, people suffer from chronic poverty, oppressed by a drug epidemic and related violence. In the 19th century, Eastern and Southern European immigrants settled in this neighborhood. Their lives depended on the industrial waterfront and steel factories in the area. After the World War II, many working class people who grew up in East Baltimore began moving to the suburbs. A steady decline in heavy industry and the new suburbanization trend impacted East Baltimore, just like other parts of the city.

From the 1960s onward, majority of residents were predominantly African Americans, with the exception of Little Italy and Greek

Town. Today, East Baltimore is changing under the influence of immigrants from Central America. However, while the social landscape is changing the aesthetics continue to play a major role in the transition. Neighborhoods community centers and arts organizations, continue to support mural art projects and developed develop new programs for community outreach. Festivals and arts programs include newly developing communities and their visual voice.

Moreover, I also found other activists, faith based organizers, artists, and neighborhood residents, as well as local faith-based, civic and non-profit organizations that are challenging the neglect and decay, cultivated by slumlords and drug lords. "Making a neighborhood beautiful and clean is an act of claiming human dignity," stated Rogucki, lifelong urban activist and city resident. "Children didn't want to talk, they were swept into the drug trade, it was hard to value academics for them. Job creation is a crucial problem just like a need for healthcare in Baltimore. There is a fear of drug dealers. Beauty is then a unifying factor that brings a sense of dignity. With beauty people, people gain safety." (Rogucki 2012)

Rogucki is part of a community with all its fears and obstacles. In our conversations she often spoke about community needs, including a city program to serve the underprivileged, the elderly and children. Her voice conveys that there is a need to get rid of the trash, to create jobs, and to establish the right to a healthcare plan for all. Her voice also conveys the value of academic work to children, and supports positive community movements throughout the city. She also talked about silent acts of resistance. She sees beauty as a unifying factor in confronting violence. For her, the sense of dignity in beauty is a way for neighborhood residents to create safety. Facing the fear of drug dealers with silent beautification is a form of resistance to violence, as she sees it. She emphasized that when people plant trees and flowers, decorate their houses and paint public walls, they are claiming their basic rights when they cannot talk about violence openly in public. In her words, "the public voicing would be dangerous and so they use the green and arts as an effective visual language to confront violence in their neighborhood" (Rogucki 2013). One of the key subjects of "beauty" is the "sacred," wrote Elaine Scarry in her book *On Beauty and Being Just* (Scarry 1999). Gazing at beauty, she suggests, makes us feel "happy and marginal" at the same time. Scarry emphasizes an overwhelming moment of immediate experience in the presence of a beauty, but also a "delay" in the workings of beauty that gives the impulse to create.

For social activists, like Ross and Rogucki, the beautification in the "blue light" neighborhoods of Baltimore, holds the promise of a better future for the city. They raised important questions about the techniques of visual and environmental activism. In their narratives, the beauty and human dignity embodied in aesthetics is the highest expression of claiming the right to the city.

GARDEN MAGIC AND THE URBAN SACRED

Not far from Glen Ross's house in the McElderry neighborhood, hidden inside a city block in a back alley, is a community meditation garden with a mural and neighboring vegetable garden adjoining a mural wall on the Amazing Grace Lutheran church.

It was in early spring when we first visited this urban oasis in East Baltimore, and people from the church community were cleaning the garden before the spring planting.

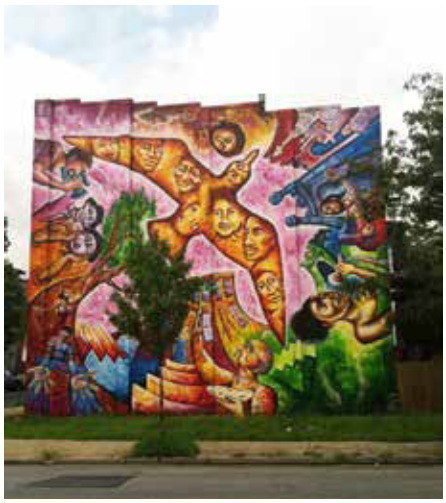
McElderry, Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2013.

The mural on the back facade of the church, facing the vegetable garden, depicts a rural scene with a stream coming from the mountains. Interestingly, in contrast to green lush mountains, the symbol of purity, a small part of the left corner of this mural, painted in brown and grey shades, is the back porch steps of a row house, and rats running over the trash. The mountain landscape painted in this mural, holds the promise of transforming the grim reality depicted in the left corner.

East Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2013.

Nearby, is the community meditation garden, with a walking labyrinth, a couple of bright and colorful pools, and framed by a mural panorama composed in blues – water and sky – and greens – flowers, fields and mountains. The garden is expanding into the imaginative landscape on the walls and blurring lines between the neighborhood and murals. At the entrance to the meditation garden is a sign with the garden manifesto describing it as "the place for all" and "the place for healing of the broken spirit in the neighborhood". The labyrinth pathways in the garden lead a visitor to a sacred space, where sensory experience is stimulated through guided meditation movement, the aroma of flowers and the pictorial illusions of the rural landscape in the painted murals. The imitative magic and illusive landscape in this back street garden in the backyard of the church holds a promise for a "sacred" space beyond the interior of Lutheran Church in East Baltimore. Our experience of "being there", connected a sensory knowledge (Stoller 1997) from this garden and our conversations with the garden keepers, the pastor from the Lutheran Church, and the urban activists, like G. Ross and Rogucki. Their voice whispers across the toxic neighborhoods to people living on the margins in Baltimore about the beauty in the sacredness of their urban grounds.

It was this realization about the power of beauty, that made us search for other sacred locations in the city. Our goal was to find out more about the "urban magic" materialized on the wall canvases and community gardens. Examining other neighborhoods in the city, we found more places showing how people are holding onto a sense of the sacred in order to restore human dignity to people trapped in urban struggles.



"Love in Search of Word", Greenmount Ave. Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

THE WONDER GROUND AND ANOTHER WHISPERING VOICE: THE SCHOOL TEACHER

On the corner of Lanvale and Barclay Streets, we found the Wonder Ground Play Space. This small corner of a park in the Greenmount West community was created by neighbors active in preserving their communal space. In its center is a replica of three, three-story row homes housing books for kids. During our visit, a neighborhood resident, and school teacher and keeper of this free reading destination explained his mission in Wonder Ground park.

Greenmount West Community Park. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

"You know, cause some people think people around here are stupid. But I try to think, I try to model, I try to give to people. That's why I come over here and pick up the trash, maybe if somebody see me doing it they'll do it. Like, for, I picked up the trash over there, where those trashcans are, on that corner right there yesterday, I picked up the trash. But, that was probably the first time in over a month, that I've gone over there and set the trash cans back in the cradle, and picked up the little trash that was around there, 'cause somebody else has been doing it. I forgot to take I usually take the trash out, the trash can there and slide it down the street for the trashmen on Wednesdays, but I forgot on this Wednesday. Now, nobody did it, but the trash can is not overflowing. So um, you know, it's working. This neighborhood is a lot cleaner than it used to be, um the biggest thing that I have a problem with is uh, some people move in here and some people being left behind." (The teacher requested anonymity)

Greenmout Community Park. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

We listened, silenced by his passionate commitment to his neighborhood. He talked to us for over an hour about the neighborhood's struggle in battling a drug epidemic.

"You know the neighborhood was really nice when I moved here. Right where we are, there were houses here. People lived on this side of the street. There was a store right here and the people lived above it. There was a house down to right about where that trash can is right there. And then the rest of it was an open field like it is. There were no boarded up properties, there were no vacant properties at all, when I first moved here. Then, up until about three years ago, from 2000 to just about 2015, I guess. I only had one neighbor. When I moved here all houses were occupied and then it ended up and that was it, for years.

Wall on this building right there, well that's not wall, the wall collapsed. But the building that originally was there had a mural on it and it was 'a rest in peace' mural, that had clouds all around, I guess the gravestone with the initials, there was about 25 maybe initials. They were mostly, well two females, but most of em' were young black men that got killed during the crack cocaine thing. They got involved in that stuff, they were from labor to reward. We've had some ups and downs, but we never stopped working. We lost our elementary school, the crack and cocaine took a lot of kids out of this neighborhood. Then Montessori school was looking for place, to call home and we really pushed for them. We keep working, we have Montessori school, and design school now."

It was clear from the teacher's narratives, that the Greenmount West neighborhood struggled for a long time, but even during the peak of the heroin cocaine epidemic, some residents stayed and did not give up. The level of violence, as described by the teacher, brought hardship in the worst of times. The teacher testified that he "couldn't sit by the window facing the street, there were cars coming and going and open drug dealing all over. I try to be invisible. Then it stopped, dealers got older and had families and many people died".

The teachers' testimony is suggestive of a major shift that occurred in his neighborhood, a space filled with fear, become a space of future hope. His care for free books and a little park, is one activity he sees as positive for his neighborhood. The students who accompanied me, asked him what he thought about gentrification and people coming from outside to this neighborhood. "I think some local input is important. I don't think that anybody is opposed to outside help, but I think where I find myself having a problem is with outside people coming in thinking they are gonna tell you what to do. We insiders know how to do it and we know what is best for you. They should ask us what is the vision and how can we help you to get there?"

The Wonder Ground is part of a larger area with a larger number of murals painted during the Open Canvas event. From the teacher's narratives, it is evident that while he and others in the neighborhood welcome help from outsiders, they have to continue to hold on to their voice, only this time in the face of gentrification. Next, I will contextualize murals from the Open Canvas project and further discuss critical shared visual patterns and symbolism, connecting these with urban murals across the city Baltimore.

Greenmout Community Park. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

THE OPEN CANVAS AND REBEL CITY

Baltimore's mural art, the open urban canvas, aims to empower people in neighborhoods through the visual symbols of a better integrated future, a social urban space. In contrast, the 'radical urban canvas' is intended to shame the neglect of individual slumlords and cry out a demand for social justice in response to the existential pain and suffering of a lasting urban crisis in everyday life in this American city. Murals that pop up on vacant houses, owned by absentee slumlords, are created by street artists, some known as guerrilla artists. In some instances, the guerrilla artists partner with the guerrilla gardeners, and rebel by taking over vacant lots or abandoned lots. They are radical urban artists and activists, confronting property laws and acting in favor of grass roots urban activism in Baltimore.

Community Garden and Mural Art. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

Between 2007 and 2017, Baltimore's mural art went through several stages of rebirth. This renaissance was initiated by a young generation of urban artists from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and was supported by the Baltimore City Mural Art program. Gaia, one of the young artists leading a radical critique of property neglect, boarded buildings lost to decay in urban spaces. His early work appeared, unexpected, on vacant buildings, some on the walls of buildings destined for demolition, like *The Dove*, a mural in East Baltimore on a row house in an old Czech neighborhood, now redeveloped by Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Gaia originally started as a guerrilla artist, wearing a facial mask while working in the city, the artist incognito.

"I hope that it sparks respectful street art throughout Baltimore City," he said. "The city is right for it, and it's extremely receptive. I've never once been arrested in Baltimore, and I've talked to undercover cops… I come from a background of doing illegal work, and I want to stand by that position, not because I think one or the other is better, but I think it's possible to remove the taboo nature of that illegal effect. I'm trying to do something generative and positive, not something against the system and destructive. Which some graffiti is, and some isn't, as well." (Open Walls, Washington Post May 2012 interview)

Gaia in East Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2013.

His most radical critique of urban development is the Legacy Project. "Artists don't gentrify neighborhoods. They don't have the capacity and/or the money and/or the capital and/or anything. But we're used as a tool," says Gaia. "When you think about it, [public art] is something that can be politically charged, but it's bringing beauty and quality and an attractive force to this neighborhood." His public canvases are now present in many parts of the world. Significantly, Gaia's legacy in Baltimore expanded between 2012 and 2014 by his collaboration with other mural artists in the Open Walls project in the Station North neighborhood. The mission of this project, creating an "outdoor gallery for everybody", corresponds with the re-vitalization of the Station North Arts and Entertainment District. Gaia recalls, "Baltimore was such a loving city," he said. Gaia's visual advocacy has grown into a much larger public, global dimension as he painted in cities across the globalscape since 2007.

James Rous on Barclay and 20th Street, Baltimore. © Gaia.

Baltimore murals painted since the 1990s' through 2014, engage with three major themes: social solidarity and justice in the neighborhoods, the power of individual accomplishment and the healing power of nature. From 1978 onwards, murals in Baltimore were typically sponsored by the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Art and Culture and later the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts, with the exception of those which were a part of guerrilla art or radical street mural art. Mural artists, selected by the city, must submit their proposal for an individual mural and be approved by the city office and each neighborhood association. My students and I learned about the process from Baltimore artists including urban muralist Michelle Santos.

Barclay and Lafayette Street, Gaia and Shaw, Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2016.

It was early summer, in June 2012, when we first met Michelle Santos in West Baltimore. She was painting a mural and from her scaffold welcomed our help. It was during our first work time with Santos that we realized how people engage with mural artists in their neighborhoods. People commented on colors, the faces, and the overall composition.

Mural in Druid Hill by Michelle Santos, Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2014.

When painting with Santos, people from the neighborhood brought us water and food, and many engaged us in conversations. Santos is an experienced mural artist. When painting with her, she spoke about her work with Baltimore communities. "People desired to see the faces of powerful leaders, human rights activists and accomplished citizens" said Santos about the murals in the African American neighborhoods where she worked. In her murals the symbols of nature connect diverse people with their neighborhood, integrated within a larger ecological system. In segregated Baltimore, the murals of Michelle Santos, and others, represent a vision of a racially and environmentally integrated world. The vision of a better future, as she paints on the urban wall canvas, is experienced through the contact with all living organisms, not only among people, but people and trees and plants.

Michelle Santos Mural, Pulaski Street, Baltimore. © Santos Web.

While parks and green spaces have traditionally been integrated into architectural plans for urban renewal, cities were generally understood as separate environments from the natural world. It is this idea, "separation of life in the city from the wider environmental context" (Benton-Short & Short 2008), that the symbolism in mural art in Baltimore counteracts. New urban ecological theories represent an important theoretical break from a traditional separation between nature and culture/technology. "The city is an integral part of nature and nature is intimately interwoven into the social life of city" as Benton-Short and Short put it. "In cities around the world – rich and poor, developed and less developed, – the struggle to live in a better urban environment, with clean water, fresh air and pleasant conditions is an

important source of mobilization and platform for action" (Benton-Short & Short 2008).

West Baltimore, Baker St. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

The vision for a new and better urban space, an urban utopia as a moral space, has been mostly treated as a "total construct" (Harvey 2000). Plato's moral city, the *polis*, rests on the idea of the common good. The concept of an imagined urban space as a symbol of a moral and just society, resurfaces in the work of Thomas More in Utopia, Francis Bacon in New Atlantis, Samuel Butler in Erewhon and Voltaire in Candide. Philosophical visions of an urban utopia, which give rise to utopian and dystopian literary genres, feature ideal societies in perfect cities, often envisioned as an isolated place on an island surrounded by water or located on the top of a hill in a pastoral setting. These classic fictive and imagined literary visions of a utopian city, a new protected and pure share an ideal designated location. In utopian visions of socially just cities, listed above, the walls, the hills or the waters separate new places, – the symbol of social justice, from the old ones, – symbolic of social ill. Significantly, it was the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who connected the vision of a new social contract, in human society and ecology. Rousseau's visions of a better society, was built on the idea of human belonging to a wider ecological universe.

During the 20th and 21st centuries, development of new urban areas within older neighborhoods has always promised to solve social problems by using the "aesthetic-economy" (Lloyd 2010). Recent demolition and gentrification processes aggressively displace people and prove to be a most brutal "solution" especially for the aging and younger populations. The archaeology of early urban settlements reveals how the urban structures and economies historically impacted living conditions. Ancient cities were a ground for scientific discoveries, technological and material development, and provided a fertile environment for artistic expression. Yet, the scientific evidence also shows that early urban development resulted in new infectious diseases, malnutrition and a general decline in human health, along with social inequality (see Diamond 1987). The vision of a socially restored moral urban habitat, has been historically founded on the dichotomy between nature versus culture. Nature has been a symbol for moral purity and a healthy life, while the notion of urban culture has become a powerful symbol of moral and environmental degradation.

Pressman St. 592 Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2007.

People in "blue light neighborhoods" in Baltimore today outlived some slumlords and most of the drug lords, as it is evident from the narratives we collected during our fieldwork. Among the survivors are older activists, artists, school teachers and poor working people trapped by the circle of poverty. Joined by a younger generation of street artists and garden keepers, they collectively counteract gentrification.

The beautification projects arising from the grassroots in the neighborhoods are driven by small groups and individuals who are fighting their way through the cracks in weak ground held by developers and corrupt governing systems. They work against the grain when they contribute to Baltimore's energy around restoring human dignity. Maintaining a sense of dignity is a particularly profound feeling about one's sense of self, longed for under the weight of any form of social oppression. In my early work on the experiences of Czech political prisoners in Communist labor camps and prisons (Rehak 2012), I wrote about dignifying beautification practices which provided prisoners with a ritualized rebirth from social death imposed during the regime's interrogations. Women political prisoners practiced the rituals of beautification, to restore their feminine sense of dignity, while male prisoners used humor in their joking performances in the prison labor camps. What connects these two distanced ethnographic studies, is the significance of beautification in as claim for the moral right to space (Lefebvre 1991) in which a person or community experiencing suffering, can restore their sense of humanity.

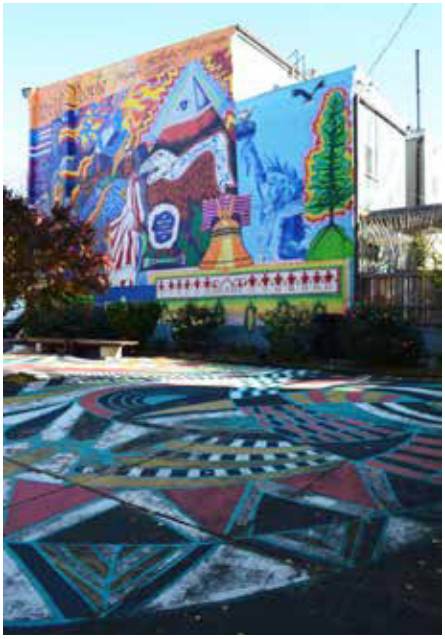
Hunter St. Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

Since, Glen Ross started his Toxic Tours in East Baltimore, other similar environmental justice initiatives have arisen in Baltimore. On November 5th, 2016 Dante Swinton and Mike Ewall organized a Toxic Tour in South Baltimore, shedding light on the trash incinerators and medical waste disposal facilities, Baltimore is hosting and pointing out that "Baltimore has been the highest emitter of stationary toxic pollutants in the country". Urban beautification in Baltimore, the visual and the green, has been adopted by grass roots movements, city government and wealthy developers, all invested in urban renewal. The idea of "nature in the city" as a strategic beautification, has become central to a claim for lost urban space. In some neighborhoods, slumlords and drug lords, were forced out of their businesses, and replaced by gentrifiers, as is evident from our fieldwork conversations with long-term residents. New development has redefined city neighborhoods in favor of profit and surplus accumulation by the select, but not always for the well-being of the local population.

Murals provide an opportunity for visual voices directed to confront the terror and restore peoples dignity, as Ross and others stated. Neighborhood activists and community organizations in collaboration with city organizations, as data proves, invented creative visual and environmental techniques – street art, mural art, folk art and gardening, intended to confront multiple forms of violence and "the new economies of aesthetics of post--industrial", gentrification and real estate development (Lloyd 2006).

From an anthropological perspective, the notion of beauty is a cultural universal, a concept found in all societies, as well as a culturally specific perspective shaped by local values and sentiments. The dual character of a wall canvas and its relation to a sense of place, as is evident from anthropological, archaeological and art history studies, dates to early human history (Soukup 2015, 2016, Půtová 2016). In her article, Barbara Půtová explores in different time and space, the visual symbolism of

Arnhem land rock art in Australia in relation to a changing ecology, aboriginal sense of the sacred and profane, as well as the multisensory aspect of a wall canvas in relation to the spatial experience (Půtová 2016). In this light, a cross time and space, what connects early Australian Rock Art with current forms of urban mural art is the power of the sacred and profane in the open canvas.



St. Paul and Lafayette Street Baltimore. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

The collective imagination of an integrated urban space, as reflected in Baltimore's murals, was ruptured by the events surrounding the death of Freddie Gray in 2016. Ecologically driven visions of the beautification in Baltimore's neighborhoods were transformed overnight into the vision of an urban revolution. The uprising against police brutality in 2016, in West Baltimore, placed the city on the political map of "rebel cities" (Harvey 2013). The death of Freddie Gray gave rise to angry protests against policing resulting in brutality, but it also brought to the surface the accumulated emotions of the urban struggle under massive and long-lasting economic exploitation (Harvey 2013). People, in one of the most broken neighborhoods in the city are traumatized by slumlords, drug lords and poverty. Fatigued by socio-economic inequalities they are claiming their right to the city. In April 2016, in response to the radical uprising the government showed a repressive apparatus and took over the city under the control of the Maryland National Guard. Media, along with the government, dismissed the voices of people in West Baltimore. The mural and small garden a memorial for Freddie Gray, painted by street artist Justine Nethercut, known under the name Nether, represents an iconic example of the most current Mural Art in Baltimore City.

The Memorial for Freddie Gray in West Baltimore, Mount St. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

"Only when politics focuses on the production and reproduction of urban life as the central labor process out of which revolutionary impulses arise will it be possible to mobilize anti-capitalist struggle capable of radically transforming daily life" (Harvey 2013). The most recent Murals in Baltimore have changed from open canvases celebrating beauty and dignity in the visions of an inclusive ecological space with future hope, to a space of anger. The radical street art movement in Baltimore, discussed above, prepared the ground for a new direction in Mural Art, created in the spirit of radical critique, the "rebel city" canvas.

In Baltimore, the significance of beautification in neighborhoods unveils the multi-leveled properties of beauty. It holds the potential for a strategic political voice in claiming the right to the city, as well as a unique opportunity for a community or individuals in the city to restore their injured sense of self in the presence of beauty. If fairness is a common word connecting the notions of beauty and justice, while relying in its principles on a symmetry, as Scarry suggested, then beautification in Baltimore supports her argument well (Scarry 1999).

Fig 23. West Baltimore, North Calhoun St. © J. K. Rehak, 2017.

CONCLUSION

In my effort to understand the unique urban rhythm of Baltimore City neighborhoods, through my collaborative work with my students and social activists, participant observations and visual practice, I encountered a communal desire for a sense of dignity expressed in the form of beautification work in urban spaces. As I followed the neighborhood narratives about the hope for justice, slipping away into the shadows of social suffering, I saw that hope preserved in the visual patterns across the city on painted walls above community gardens, playgrounds and corner parks. Claims to the city through creative processes take on multiple aesthetic forms in Baltimore. The focus of this essay is on the urban desire for social and environmental justice as painted into the "open canvas" of mural walls and worked into Baltimore's urban gardens. Painted on this "open canvas", across the city in Baltimore, these are the visions of an inclusive future, holding the promise for urban communities that they can belong to a vision of a larger ecological space. Connected to these open canvases, I often found the urban "sacred gardens" with mimetic magic evocative of rural and wild landscapes with mountains, streams, and jungles with wild animals. I met social activists whispering their prayers across the toxic urban land and over the designated "sacred grounds" in the city. Listening to their narratives helped me comprehend the sacred character of these urban gardens and mural in Baltimore and further conceptualize the visual patterns and aesthetics of the struggle for the social justice. I realized that the urban renewal from the grassroots in Baltimore, is a process of restoration of human dignity. Whether in practices such as neighborhood organizing, or in the visible sites such as urban murals, magic gardens and free books parks, grassroots development in Baltimore offers people a spiritual and ecological sense of belonging. In some parts of the city, as is evident from my ethnographic journey, beautification proves to be the only available language, albeit a silent one, with which to confront violence. In this context, the concept of beauty, as linked to social justice, is challenging not only street and structural violence, but subtler forms of violence which are slowly creeping into the neighborhoods through investments and development and is in favor of gentrification. This essay's ethnographic-visual journey, for this essay, ends with a focus on current radical mural art in Baltimore, created in solidarity with the "rebel city". I emphasize the memorial to Freddie Gray, as a symbolic representation of a major event which ruptured the silence in the city and became the signature of a new era, revolutionary and sacred, in the "rebel city", – Baltimore.

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