

## CHAPTER 4



**“You Just Don’t Go Down  
There”: Learning to Avoid  
the Ghetto in San Francisco**  
*Nikki Jones and Christina Jackson*

**M**ore and more people are moving to cities, and in some of them the new urban migrants are younger and whiter than city-dwellers of a previous generation. As the demographics of metropolitan areas continue to change, middle-class urban migrants become more likely to live in close proximity to people of another class position. The challenges associated with these changes have been documented in the literature on gentrification. In this chapter, we look at the ways in which newcomers learn to navigate their new homes, drawing on field research conducted by the first author over a five-year period, including thirty months of continuous residence in the Western Addition, a historically black neighborhood in San Francisco. We begin with a vignette from her ethnographic account of that experience.

Lukas is the owner of a small bed-and-breakfast in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> I was a frequent guest at his inn during the two years before I moved to the Western Addition, a historically black neighborhood in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people refer to the area as “the Fillmore,” but when they are discussing the most troubled parts of the neighborhood, especially the places frequented by low-income African American residents, they are more likely to use the

term “Western Addition” (or “the Lower Fillmore”—we use the terms interchangeably in this chapter). A German immigrant with broad shoulders, white hair, and a thick lingering accent, Lukas arrived in the city in the 1960s. The Western Addition was dangerous, he tells me, like many other urban areas at the time. A lot of people left the city, he says, but not him: “We love the city.”<sup>3</sup> One morning, over a small breakfast of orange juice, coffee, and a fluffy croissant, Lukas offers a brief oral history of his time in the neighborhood. He tells me how difficult it was to get bank financing to purchase and restore homes when he did it back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Up until about ten years ago, he says, the entire area was “redlined.” Banks would not give loans to buy houses in the Western Addition, he says. He could not get a loan for his house when he bought it back then. The mortgage lenders could not be direct about what they were doing—no one said, “We are not giving loans to blacks,” who made up much of the Western Addition’s population at the time. After World War II, migrants from the South had swelled the African American population in the Western Addition from 4,000 to 40,000, and it would remain high into the 1970s (Day and Abraham 1993). In response, Lukas continues, the banks redlined the entire area, making it nearly impossible for anyone to get a loan to purchase the crumbling Victorian homes that are now a fixture of San Francisco’s architectural history.

Lukas also tells me about the impact on the neighborhood of the urban redevelopment carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD cleared the land of all structures and then left the land razed for years before building new structures. In the intervening time, neighborhood residents planted vegetable gardens in the empty lots—an eighty-acre vegetable garden, Lukas laughs. In the 1980s, during the second phase of urban renewal in the neighborhood, the vegetable gardens were replaced by the Fillmore Center apartment complex, where I lived for two and a half years.

Lukas says that, for many people, the name “Western Addition” still means, “Don’t go there.” He explains: “If I picked up the telephone when people called and asked where we were located and I told them right away, ‘The Western Addition,’ they wouldn’t make the reservation. So instead I say, ‘Alamo Square.’ They ask if it is near Fisherman’s Wharf, a popular tourist attraction in the city. ‘No,’ I say. ‘It’s near Alamo Square.’” Near the end of our

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conversation, Lukas makes what I would eventually discover is a distinction commonly made by locals to separate the neighborhood's "great" location in the heart of the city from its bad reputation: "It's a great location, right in the middle of the city. I have never been in a traffic jam," he says. "I could be—Polk, Van Ness, Gough—all traffic jams. Not here." I nod in agreement.<sup>4</sup>

The Western Addition has not been officially redlined, in the ways described by Lukas, for several decades. In fact, the discriminatory housing practices that he describes were made illegal by historic civil rights legislation (Wilson 2009). Yet observations of daily life in the neighborhood reveal that people remain reluctant to spend time in the area. They generally acknowledge that the neighborhood is situated in a great location, but lament its reputation as a bad neighborhood because of its struggles with crime and dramatic episodes of violence. Lukas is aware that the neighborhood's spatial identity encourages people to avoid it, so he describes the location of his inn as within the boundaries of an adjacent neighborhood.

## LEARNING TO AVOID THE GHETTO IN SAN FRANCISCO

In this chapter, we draw on field research conducted in the Western Addition to explain how the neighborhood is constructed as a bad neighborhood in ordinary conversations and the consequences of this construction for neighborhood residents. These conversations reveal a practice of *discursive redlining*: informal, talk-based declarations or warnings that discourage newcomers and outsiders from making interpersonal investments in certain parts of the city. Discursive redlining can be observed in conversations on popular review websites or in face-to-face encounters.<sup>5</sup> Often, these warnings are accomplished without making an explicit reference to race. Instead, the practice of discursive redlining relies on the use of racially coded terms like *ghetto* to describe certain people or places as potentially problematic.<sup>6</sup> "The most powerfully imagined neighborhood is the iconic black ghetto or the 'hood," Elijah Anderson writes in *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* (2011). Such areas are "often associated in the minds of outsiders with poverty, crime, and violence." This idea of the ghetto, which in reality is a "figment of the imagination of those with little or no direct experience with the ghetto or contact with those who live there," shapes how

black people are treated in “spaces outside the ghetto” (Anderson 2011, 29). The practice of discursive redlining reveals how understandings of the ghetto shape newcomers’ perceptions of their neighbors, especially black residents, *within* an area that is now seen by some as “a ghetto on the rise” (Beveridge 2008, 364).

Discursive redlining is distinct from the official redlining of the past in at least two ways. First, discursive redlining operates apart from the type of legal lending restrictions that created the suburbs and the ghetto, since restrictions that would prohibit making financial investments in neighborhoods with a substantial percentage of African Americans no longer exist. In fact, for most of the 2000s, financial advisers were far more likely to encourage a range of actors—banks, developers, first-time homeowners—to invest in an area like the Western Addition. Second, and in contrast to institutional redlining, which warned people away from making substantial *economic* investments in a neighborhood, like buying a home, discursive redlining discourages outsiders and newcomers from making *interpersonal* investments, like dining at a local restaurant or spending time at a café in the area. The consequences of discursive redlining are likely to be felt most by those seen as the most problematic by others, like young black men who hang out on street corners in the neighborhood.

### THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN SAN FRANCISCO

Much of the literature on urban poverty focuses on postindustrial cities in the Midwest or northeastern cities like Philadelphia. In recent years, Chicago’s South Side has served as the site for a number of significant studies on the black ghetto (Small 2008). In contrast, there are relatively few studies that focus on the black experience in the West, and perhaps especially in San Francisco. Yet the unique history of blacks in San Francisco makes it an ideal site to study the black urban experience, especially the experience of African Americans in the later stages of the Great Migration and the process of ghettoization (see, for example, Broussard 1993).

Prior to World War II, the Fillmore neighborhood was home to much of the city’s black community, including a number of black professionals (Daniels 1980). The relatively small black community shared space in the Fillmore with Irish, Jewish, and Japanese residents. The neighborhood’s composition changed

dramatically after the start of the war. African Americans, especially those from states like Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, were recruited to join the war effort (Johnson 1944). African American workers who arrived en masse in the 1940s found crowded but affordable housing in the Fillmore, where they rented rooms in the homes of Japanese residents who had been sent to internment camps by the U.S. government following the start of the war. Once in the city, black migrant workers took up jobs in the war industry and related services, including bars, restaurants, and jazz clubs. The Fillmore became a cultural hub for African Americans during the wartime period (Jackson 2010). This new set of locals would come to describe the area as “the Harlem of the West.”<sup>7</sup>

### San Francisco’s “Negro Problem”

The city’s new black population created a social problem for government officials and city elites: “For the first time in the city’s history, white San Franciscans would have to adjust to a large black community” (Broussard 1993, 142). In some corners of the city, the response of San Franciscans to this new pattern of migration was characterized by tolerance and ambivalence. In other areas, the response to the city’s changing demographics mirrored the discriminatory practices of local officials in other cities. In the area of housing, for example, racial lines were drawn as homeowners used restrictive covenants to prevent the sale of homes to African Americans (Broussard 1993).

The arrival of African American workers in the Bay Area also created a problem for racially segregated industries, including the military and defense contractors. Racial discrimination in industries tied to the war effort was prohibited after President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was influenced by civil rights activists like Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, issued executive order 8802. As ordered by the president, the federal Fair Employment Practices Commission declared that “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin” (Collins 2001, 273). The executive order opened up skilled and semiskilled training opportunities in the defense industry for black migrants in the Bay Area (Fusfeld and Bates 1984). The integration of African Americans into previously restricted workplaces improved the social and economic well-being of black migrants during the war.

Despite the contributions of African Americans to the war effort, some Navy officials viewed the mass migration of African Americans to the area surrounding the shipyard, and the increase in Negro personnel generally, as a problem. The Navy officially addressed this new problem in conference proceedings, memos, and booklets. In a transcript from a 1943 "Conference with Regard to Negro Personnel," an admiral explained the situation quite frankly: "We are faced with a problem—a very serious problem—in connection with our naval enlisted personnel and that is the introduction into the District of the large numbers of Negro personnel. . . . The order has come now and it isn't a question of whether anybody likes it or not."

From the perspective of Navy officials, black migration disrupted the military's social order. As the admiral's comments suggest, Navy officials embraced the increase in African American personnel and integration somewhat grudgingly. Despite this initial reluctance, the Navy began to churn out black workers for the war industry. By 1943 the Navy had trained over 100,000 blacks in shipbuilding, aircraft repair, and machinery. In 1945 Hunter's Point shipyard was the largest in the world: At peak production, it employed 18,235 workers over three shifts per day (Lomax 1972). Many other African Americans found work in the cottage industries that catered to a population of young black migrants with some money to spend, including the burgeoning jazz scene in the Fillmore.

As in other urban industrial centers, the fate of black workers would turn after the end of the war. In San Francisco, African Americans were largely let go from wartime jobs, but remained excluded from other employment opportunities in the city. More than one city official had hoped that African Americans would leave the city at the end of the war, but many stayed. As Arthur Hippler (1974, 14) writes: "The presence of thousands of semiskilled and unskilled black shipyard workers who had been laid off immediately after the war and who stayed on in San Francisco represented what city officials considered a civic problem." Like other cities confronted with a large African American population in the postwar period, San Francisco's city officials hoped to solve this "civic problem" through "cheap public housing and welfare." This would prove to be an inadequate solution.

Before 1940, there had been no black ghetto in San Francisco. In the Fillmore, African Americans lived in an integrated neighborhood and attended integrated schools. The spatial identity of the Fillmore changed dramatically

following World War II. By the late 1940s, the Fillmore was largely considered by middle-class whites and blacks a “cesspool of crime and vice” (Broussard 1993, 231–233). In the 1950s, the process of ghettoization quickened. The Fillmore would become the sort of place described by Herbert Gans (2008, 353) as a “place to which subjects or victims of the involuntary segregation process are sent.” The Fillmore would become a ghetto.

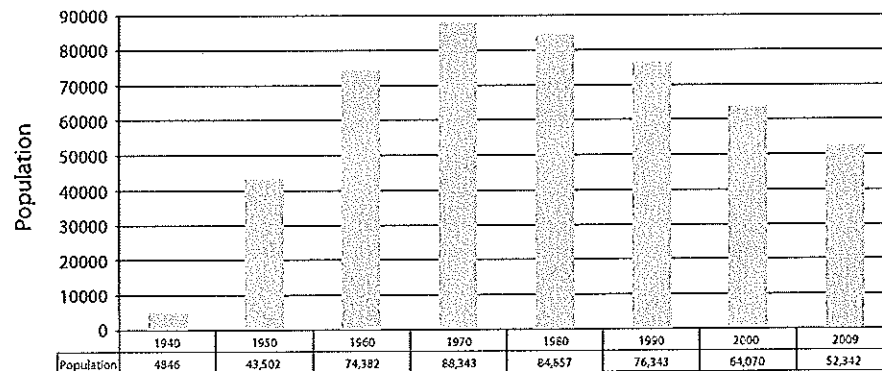
### The Fillmore After the War

Since the end of World War II, the Fillmore neighborhood has followed a trajectory similar to that of many distressed inner-city neighborhoods across the country. In the decades following the war, urban planners and government officials officially categorized the places where poor black people lived as “slums.” This official definition was consequential for neighborhood residents (Bellush and Hausknecht 1967; Geron et al. 2001; Hartman 2002; Lai 2006). Once slums were officially defined as the problem, then institutional solutions were developed to remove the slums from the city (Hartman 2002). The practice of slum removal mirrored the practices used in other industrial centers. Older housing units were destroyed and replaced by public housing projects and other apartment developments. As was the case in Harlem, New York, “the new developments did not come close to housing the same number of people” (Beveridge 2008, 361).

During the first phase of urban renewal, large portions of the Fillmore neighborhood were razed and replaced by federally subsidized housing projects. The neighborhood was also split in two by a cornerstone of the first wave of redevelopment: Geary Boulevard. The construction of this new road, designed to ease the commute of downtown workers to the city’s quickly developing suburbs, would cut through the heart of the black Fillmore. As Lukas alludes to in the opening vignette, many lots in the neighborhood would lie vacant for years. In the wake of urban renewal, the Fillmore neighborhood’s African American population would decline substantially—as would the city’s.

As economic conditions worsened across the country, the Fillmore neighborhood would also face challenges similar to those of other inner-city neighborhoods. The lingering history of these challenges continues to shape the spatial identity of the Fillmore. Dislocation from the mainstream

FIGURE 4.1. Black Population in San Francisco, 1940–2009



Source: Unfinished Agenda, US Census 2010

economy and the deep entrenchment of poverty have exacerbated the neighborhood's isolation from the rest of the city. The neighborhood has faced an increase in crime, rapidly deteriorating schools, and an increase in drug trafficking and the violence associated with the drug trade (Anderson 1999; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1980, 1987, 1996). Today, in the minds of many who are familiar with the city—including the residents of the nearby and gentrifying Lower Pacific Heights and Alamo Square neighborhoods and the smaller Japantown neighborhood—the Western Addition is largely defined as a bad neighborhood marked by crime and violence. Newspaper reports of shootings and gang activity regularly reinforce such assumptions (Martin 2006; Van Derbeken 2005; Van Derbeken and Lagos 2006).

### The Fillmore Today: A Ghetto on the Rise?

Like a number of other historically black neighborhoods in the country, the Fillmore is experiencing a new phase of renewal. Parts of the neighborhood may still fit the definition of a ghetto in that there remain areas in which low-income African American live in high concentrations, but like New York's Harlem and the "U Street Corridor" in Washington, D.C., it is also "on the rise" (Beveridge 2008, 364). Markers of the neighborhood's renewal (or demise, de-



pending on who you ask) are visible to newcomers: a Magic Johnson's Starbucks, a remodeled Safeway grocery store, and, perhaps the most symbolic, the Fillmore Heritage Center, which opened in 2007. The center includes a jazz history museum, a jazz club, and eighty condominium units, twelve of which were slated to sell at under market rates.

The Fillmore Heritage Center sits across the street from one of the most visible symbols of the second wave of urban redevelopment: the Fillmore Center. The Fillmore Center's efforts to attract a new market of residents, along with other new projects in the area, are slowly pushing the boundaries of the Lower Pacific Heights area into the Lower Fillmore. As a result, the boundaries around what is commonly considered the most troubled parts of the Lower Fillmore—especially the federally subsidized housing complexes on Eddy Street, which runs perpendicular to Fillmore Street—are becoming harder. With this pending encroachment, daily interactions between newcomers and longtime residents can sometimes be tense, especially in public forums. But longtime residents also cite the presence of newcomers, especially white newcomers, as a sign that the neighborhood is changing, for good or for bad. People with business stakes in the neighborhood appear to be more open to this sort of neighborhood change, even if it means a change in the demographic composition of the area, but some longtime residents view the changes as the last nail in the coffin of the historically black Fillmore neighborhood.

These changes have also encouraged a new sort of interactional trouble for newcomers to the neighborhood. In the recent past, much of the area below Geary Boulevard was a "no-go" zone, an area identified by residents and outsiders as one that only outcasts of society would live in because of its violence, deprivation, and perceived immorality (Wacquant 1999). This avoidance was not altogether unreasonable in the 1980s. Eric, a key respondent in my field research, explained to me that during this time a group of young men—the "red light bandits"—would target white drivers stopped at red lights in the neighborhood. Since the 1990s, however, and especially during the first decade of the new millennium, much of the violence has turned inward. In the Western Addition, black youth, especially young black men, are the most frequent targets of lethal violence.

The concentration of this sort of crime and violence has been a longstanding problem for local residents, but it presents a different problem for

newcomers to the area, especially those who are unfamiliar with the neighborhood's terrain and its people. Newcomers may be unfamiliar with urban life, or they may have expectations of safety that are challenged by their surroundings. Their efforts to warn others away from problematic people or places in their new neighborhood also reflect a preoccupation with a fear of crime and victimization that has come to order the lives of middle-class people:

The everyday lives of middle-class families [have] been transformed not so much by crime itself, as by "fear of crime." For middle-class families, choices such as where to live, where to work, and where to send children to school are made with increasing reference to the perceived risk of crime. (Simon 2007, 6)

It is in this context that discursive redlining emerges as an everyday practice. Newcomers and outsiders to the neighborhood teach each other, through direct and indirect warnings, about where the danger is and how to avoid it. They learn how to avoid the ghetto.

#### DISCURSIVE REDLINING AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE GHETTO

Whether it's women sharing lunch "up the hill" in Pacific Heights, hotel workers in nearby neighborhoods, or real estate workers eager to attract new residents to the neighborhood, there are many people instructing others in how to navigate the Western Addition. Some people warn friends to avoid the area altogether, while others make suggestions about how to avoid the most problematic sections of the neighborhood. These warnings often draw on anecdotal evidence lifted from newspaper reports or secondhand accounts passed along from a friend or family member. Embedded in this instruction is a warning about the danger that lies in what is widely known as a poor, black neighborhood. The crudest versions of these warnings can be found on websites like Yelp, which newcomers to the area often use to find reviews of potential housing. Despite an advertising campaign that billed the complex as "luxury apartments," the Fillmore Center, where the first author lived for thirty months from 2007 to 2009, generally received low ratings (three stars or less). The pub-

lic postings that generate ratings of the center illustrate the common discursive elements that appear in conversations about the Western Addition.

### **“The Neighborhood Is Ghetto”**

The online conversation about the Fillmore Center is framed by the same distinction that Lukas makes in the opening vignette: Although some reviewers highlight the center’s convenient location (“I like going everywhere in the city, and this is probably the most central location to the core neighborhoods in the city”), others focus on the bad neighborhood that surrounds it. “Apart from the fact that the projects are close by, the location overall is good,” notes one site (Urban D., May 8, 2009). “The location is excellent,” says another (Amber P., October 23, 2009), “although admittedly if you live in one of the buildings further down towards Turk you might not be as big of a fan of your surrounding ’hood.”

These comments demonstrate that, for some, the neighborhood’s good location is tainted by its proximity to a federally subsidized housing complex. Reviewers never use explicit racial references in their postings, but they do rely on racially coded language, using terms like *ghetto*.<sup>8</sup> In the thirty-four postings, the term *ghetto* is used thirteen times.<sup>9</sup>

*Ghetto* is a term that is no longer used solely to refer to a geographically bound place. Inner-city residents use the term to make distinctions among the “value orientations” of their neighbors.<sup>10</sup> Community members use these distinctions as a basis for understanding, interpreting, and predicting their own and others’ actions, attitudes, and behaviors, especially when it comes to interpersonal violence (Anderson 1999; Blokland 2008, 372; Jones 2010, 9). The term is now widely used by individuals outside of the inner city, including people whose understanding of “the ghetto” is largely shaped by popular culture, especially commercial hip-hop music.

In the online reviews, the word *ghetto* is mentioned over a dozen times. At times it is used to describe the area surrounding the Fillmore Center. Jerome F., for example, uses the term to distinguish between the interior of the Fillmore Center, which he describes as “nice,” and the area surrounding the apartment complex: “The complex interior is nice, but the building . . . is surrounded by ghetto-projects and the associated dwellers, crack heads, and a plethora of

shady characters" (June 19, 2008). It is clear what *ghetto* means to Jerome F.: "ghetto-projects and the associated dwellers." His post is one of the few that provides such an explicit definition of *ghetto*. In most of the postings where *ghetto* appears, the term is used to describe essential characteristics of the surrounding area: In other words, the area is not described, as it is in Jerome F.'s posting, as *a ghetto*, but as *ghetto*. *Ghetto* is used in this way, for example, in G.G.'s post from June 25, 2007: "I agree with the other reviewers: this place is heinously ghetto!" When used by these online reviewers as an adjective, *ghetto* provides a shorthand and color-blind description of the essential character of the people and places that "surround" the Fillmore Center.

What is it that makes the area surrounding the Fillmore "ghetto"? The postings suggest that it is not just the presence of federally subsidized housing complexes—or "projects," in the words of Jerome F.—but also the perceived threat of exposure to violence and personal injury. For example, when listing a "con" of living in the Fillmore Center, W.D. writes: "1. The neighborhood is ghetto. You have to cross over Geary [the boulevard constructed for commuters] for decent restaurants and *safety*" (November 16, 2007, emphasis mine). The following remarks from Miss K. also reveal the relationship between ghetto and perceptions of safety. The place is ghetto, her post suggests, because it is marked by danger, crime, and violence. It is an especially strong warning in that it mentions not only the danger surrounding the area but also how that danger penetrates the physical boundaries of the Fillmore Center:

did i mention this area is dangerous? they have security on premises and cameras everywhere but obviously they need it. my friend knows someone who got held up at gunpoint in the elevator. many cars have been broken into in the garage. and not too long ago, someone got shot in the safeway parking lot across the street. jazz district, my ass. we live in the ghettos baby! truth be told, i felt safer (ok, less scared) in my boy's old tenderloin hood. (February 20, 2007)

In this post, Miss K. provides the sort of secondhand account of violent victimization that might otherwise be passed along during a conversation among friends in a café. This disclosure acts as a warning. The message to readers of this review is clear, perhaps especially to children from middle-class

families whose choices about where to live are often made with “reference to the perceived risk of crime” (Simon 2007, 6).

Not all of the Fillmore Center’s reviews are negative. Some reviewers even challenge the definition of the surrounding area (or at least some parts of it) as ghetto. However, their postings do not entirely disrupt the framing of the surrounding area as ghetto but instead dispute the degree to which this is the case. On December 18, 2008, Mollie S. writes:

i totally disagree with all the reviews posted here. . . . Yes, some of the neighborhood is ghetto . . . but right across the street there’s Yoshi’s and the Kabuki Theater and some other awesome Jazz Clubs, and walking up Fillmore Street toward Pac Heights is really pleasant. I’m a girl, and I walk to Safeway at night by myself quite a bit and have never experienced any problems. It’s not the best area, but it’s up-and-coming, and let’s face it: San Francisco is a CITY. At least you aren’t living in the Tenderloin.

Brad D. had this to say on January 10, 2008:

Ok, from the comments I keep reading I have to say that yet again I continue to be amazed by my “friends and neighbors” in SF. I live in the Fillmore Center. I moved here last year on a moment’s notice after a short stint in sunnier climes, and 15 years living in London and New York. Yes, there is alot of public housing around us, yes there are some interesting characters in the parking lot at Safeway, but this is hardly ghetto living.

Several common themes emerge from reading these postings side by side, including, as already noted, the distinction between the good location and the bad neighborhood. Commenting on the good location, reviewers note that it not only sits in the center of the city but is easily accessible to public transportation. Yet the neighborhood and, especially, the people who live on the borders of the Fillmore Center (who have lived there for generations) and the places they frequent, like the Safeway (the only grocery store in the area since another that catered to the black community closed down), are represented as “ghetto.” These postings do not seem to refer to the ghetto as “place.” Instead, they use the term *ghetto* as an adjective. These postings suggest that

the neighborhood is bad because of the people—the poor black people—who live in the nearby projects and make up much of “Baby Compton.”

These postings are also largely ahistorical: They reflect an ignorance of not only the ghetto as a product of structural circumstances but also the particular history of the neighborhood. The declarations and complaints in these postings ignore the institutional history of the neighborhood. The Fillmore Center apartments were a product of one of the largest redevelopment projects in the country, as were the nearby “projects,” yet the postings reflect an ignorance of how the problems that “surround” them are connected to the monumental mismanagement of the area by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency or the dramatic shifts in the economy that isolated generations of African Americans from the mainstream economy. The ghetto is not represented as a “place to which subjects or victims of the involuntary segregation process are sent” (Gans 2008, 353). Neither is it represented as a consequence of the city’s failure to adequately address its “Negro problem” in the wake of World War II. Rather, the online conversation suggests that a concentration of certain types of people and behaviors in an area is what makes a place ghetto. The consequence of this framing of the problem is obvious. If it is the people who *make* a place ghetto, then the ghetto is no longer the problem to be solved. Instead, the people and the places they frequent are identified as the problem. The solution is to avoid the people or, in time, remove them from the area (Beckett and Herbert 2010).

### Avoiding the Ghetto: Face-to-Face Warnings

It is possible that the anonymity of the Internet encourages the practice of discursive redlining (although people do sometimes post their names and pictures alongside their reviews), but discursive redlining is not restricted to online conversations. In this section, we offer a final illustration of discursive redlining. As in the online conversations, everyday conversations reveal an effort to educate newcomers about the problematic areas in the neighborhood by reconstructing the spatial identity of the Western Addition—as demonstrated in this field note of June 18, 2006 (from the first author’s fieldwork in San Francisco):

My partner and I noticed signs advertising the Alamo Square Condos the last time we were driving through the neighborhood together, but we didn’t

stop in then. Today, we follow the signs posted on sidewalks near Alamo Square, an area that is technically in the Western Addition. We are staying at an inn that borders the square. The condos are just down the street, a couple of blocks off of Fillmore Street. The signs advertising units for sale lead us into a small office area. Several white professionals who look to be in their mid-thirties are at work inside. A few desks are crowded into the small front office area. Another desk sits off in the back. A poster that hangs above the desks displays a variety of floor plans: studios, 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom units. Two women who are sitting at a desk greet us after we step into the office. I announce that we are interested in looking at what's for sale. One of the women grabs a clipboard and asks for some information. After we provide the information, a sales representative takes us on a tour of the complex.

The buildings that make up the complex reflect the Victorian-style architecture that now characterizes San Francisco. I ask when the complex was built. "1999," the sales rep says. She explains that owners leased the units for five years and are now selling the units as condominiums. The interiors of the units have been gutted and now reflect the most recent design trends: New stainless steel kitchen appliances, granite countertops, and tiled bathroom floors have been installed in each of the units. Each unit we see is about 700 square feet. The starting price for a unit on the ground floor: \$535,000. This price does not include any of the possible upgrades available to buyers. The first unit we see has a small patio off the bedroom that opens onto an interior courtyard with a large fountain. Two-story, two- and three-bedroom townhouse-style units are located on the third level of the complex. We look at a unit on the second floor. It is slightly smaller than the unit on the first floor and doesn't have a patio. It doesn't come with the standard maple floor that we saw in the downstairs unit either. Starting price: \$519,000. As we look around the unit, the sales rep tells us that the area is great—easy access to so much of the city. As we finish up our tour, she asks us if we'd like to talk to the Wells Fargo mortgage representative. We agree to do so.

The mortgage representative is enthusiastic. At times, she comes across as slightly aggressive in her pitch. She reviews the incentives that are being offered to buyers: Sellers are paying the first two years of the HOA [home owners' association] fee. This is about \$10,000 in savings she says. She then takes us to her office in the back room. We take a seat as she begins to work through some numbers. She asks a series of questions: Which units were we

looking at? How much are we interested in putting down? 10%, I say. 10% down would mean a first mortgage of \$415,000 at 6.35% interest, she explains. This would translate into a \$2,205 monthly payment. The second mortgage, she explains, would cover the additional 10% down at an interest rate of about 8%. That would add another \$375 to your monthly payment. Property taxes that are payable every six months would average about \$480 per month. The HOA fee is \$350 per month. The monthly expense of living in the advertised Alamo Square Neighborhood: \$4,310 per month.

Near the end of her pitch, the mortgage rep hands us a brochure shaped like a picket fence: "Alamo Square: Welcome to the Neighborhood." A trio of pictures is arranged vertically. One picture is of the famous Painted Ladies, the Victorian homes that are San Francisco landmarks, that are just a short walk away. Another picture is of a smiling young white woman with her dog at a park. The last picture is of two hands clasped in a handshake: One of the hands is brown the other white. The mortgage rep writes the prices of each unit we looked at on the brochure. When I turn the brochure over I notice a final picture of a middle-class professional African American couple.

With the formal pitch now over, the mortgage rep shifts into informal conversation. She tells us that she used to live in this neighborhood, but now lives in Bernal Heights, "where all the lesbians with kids live." We got priced out of the Castro, where the boys [a reference to gay men] are, she tells us, and couldn't afford Noe Valley, where lesbians used to go, so we went to Bernal Heights. It's great. Kids everywhere. It was great living in this neighborhood too, she says. Great bus lines. She then adds, while motioning her thumb over her shoulder toward the direction of Fillmore Street: "You just don't go down there."

Decades ago, it is far more likely that young professionals like us would have been discouraged from purchasing a home anywhere within the boundaries of the Western Addition. It would be difficult to get one mortgage to purchase a home in the neighborhood, much less two mortgages on the same property. By 2006, times had changed. The mortgage representative did not warn us away from purchasing a home within the neighborhood's boundaries. In fact, the mortgage rep provided a rather aggressive pitch for purchasing a home in the area (a home that we could not afford—a harbinger of the economic crisis to come).



In her pitch, the mortgage rep also employs the common good location-bad neighborhood distinction used in the online conversations. She offers some instruction on how to avoid the more troubled parts of the neighborhood: "Just don't go down there." Her warning does not refer to race explicitly, but it is racially coded language. She offers this warning after a series of neighborhood descriptions that made explicit reference to the types of people who lived there. Her descriptions of the specific neighborhoods in the city suggest that each neighborhood belongs to a particular group of people. The Castro is where the "boys" (gay men) are. Noe Valley is where the lesbians used to go. Yet she stops short of identifying who lives "down there," even though it is generally known that low-income and working-class blacks live down there. Here the omission leaves a space for us to fill in—a space that is often filled with stereotypes of poor, black people.

This is another way in which the practice of discursive redlining is different from the overtly racist practices of urban planners and mortgage lenders in earlier periods. In those times, racial restrictions were officially written into policies and practices. Now, in the postracial color-blind era, race is not used explicitly. Instead, the reference to "down there" stands in for race and class and is used to discourage people from spending time in specific areas of the city, especially those with higher concentrations of low-income African Americans. The accumulation of these warnings over time solidifies the spatial identity of the Western Addition as ghetto and discourages newcomers from making substantial interpersonal investments in this area.

### **Avoidance and Isolation: Young Black Men in the Western Addition**

The mortgage rep did not know that the first author, as a field researcher, would deliberately spend a good deal of time "down there." She would come to know residents who were, as they often said with pride, "born and raised in the Fillmore." She would also interact with young men who were seen by outsiders, newcomers, and some longtime residents as the most troublesome young men in the neighborhood. In San Francisco, perhaps nobody is viewed as more dangerous than the poor, young, black male.<sup>11</sup> Viewed from a distance, these young men appear to reinforce widely circulated stereotypes about urban black youth: The "young ghetto male's self-presentation is often consciously off-putting or 'thuggish,' a 'master status' that overpowers positive qualities"

(Anderson 2008, 3). Implicit in the instruction to avoid certain areas of the Fillmore is the warning to avoid the poor, young, black men who live there. These warnings contribute to the process of ghettoization: "The very space of the city becomes identified with the stigmatized; persons living outside of the Ghetto view the behavior and beliefs of those inside the Ghetto with suspicion and their bodies as dangerous" (Haynes and Hutchison 2008, 348). The media also contribute to the public identity of black men in the city. Newspaper articles refer to black assailants as "thugs," and targeted policing practices officially, and quite publicly, define groups of young men as gangsters. As a consequence, young black men in the Western Addition felt the brunt of the calls for increased police surveillance. Together, these patterned avoidance practices and police surveillance practices that targeted young black men reconstruct not only "the ghetto," but also poor, young, black men *as* ghetto.<sup>12</sup>

The interpersonal consequences of these patterned avoidance strategies are significant. Such practices exacerbate the social distance between young men and their neighbors: "People—black as well as white—necessarily avoid him, and through their avoidance behavior teach him that he is an outsider in his own society" (Anderson 2008, 6). During a 2008 conversation at a local cheese steak shop, I asked a small group of young men about how they thought others viewed them. These young men, who had grown up in the housing complex referred to as "the projects" by some Fillmore Center reviewers, often congregated on a street corner that was visible to Fillmore Center residents. Their friends had been victims of the violence commonly associated with the area. A gang injunction that included young men from their housing complex was introduced in the neighborhood in 2007.<sup>13</sup> We were meeting in 2008 to discuss what life was like after the injunction. One of the young men named on the injunction joined the conversation.

The gang injunction issued by the city attorney had received a good deal of coverage from the press and was also a topic of conversation in the neighborhood. I asked the small group how they thought the injunction shaped people's perceptions of them.

"Do you think it changed how people look at you in the neighborhood?" I asked. Tre, a twenty-one-year-old, said that he thought that the injunction did not change perceptions among people who had known them for much of their lives, but that it did change how housing security and other outsiders

saw them. In general, he thought that the gang injunction helped to “paint a picture [of young men] from the outside looking in,” including other young men not named on the gang injunction. “From the inside looking out,” he said, “the people who know us already know. They know what we do, you know what I’m sayin’? Old lady might come, she got a cart full of groceries, we goin’ help her. She don’t even have to ask. We gon’ come help her. Period. Somebody need help getting in the gate, anything. We gon’ automatically help, know what I’m sayin’?”

Elaborating, he added, “So they paint a picture from the outside looking in so people who is on the outside looking in could think that we these bad people, gangs.”

Tré was aware of the message that media coverage and targeted policing strategies send to outsiders, many of whom already avoid the neighborhood and the young men who live there. As Anderson (2008, 19) describes it in *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black and Male*: “Every newspaper or television story that associates a young black man with a violent crime sends a message to everyone that reinforces the stereotype of class: the dark-skinned inner-city male who is to be closely watched, feared, not trusted and employed only as a last resort.” In the Fillmore, young men routinely were “closely watched” by police and were often seen as suspicious or dangerous by their neighbors. The degree to which young men understood how others perceived them was also revealed during a conversation that included young men from a set on the other side of Fillmore Street. Near the beginning of the conversation, I posed a question similar to the one I had asked of the young men gathered at the cheese steak shop.

“I would like to ask you how you think other people in the neighborhood generally think about you. Do you think they generally have a positive feeling? Do you think they stereotype you?” I asked.

“People in the neighborhood you said?” one young man asked.

“Yeah. What do you think? Do you live in this neighborhood?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Some people look at us in a positive way and then some people don’t.”

“And so if you are thinking about who those ‘some people’ are, who are some people that think about you in a positive way?” I asked.

In his response to my question, the young man made a distinction similar to the one made by Tré. People who knew the young men knew that they were

not one-dimensional stereotypes. It was the people who did not know them who were likely to think of them in negative ways.

People who know you look at you in a positive way, he explained. He added, "Most people that don't know you don't look at you positively."

This young man's comments reveal an appreciation of his position in the postindustrial city (Anderson 2008). His comments also reveal his own understanding that, in the minds of many people, he was no more than a stereotype—he was a problem.

Later in the conversation, a young father who was named on the recent gang injunction validated his peer's assessment:

People that don't know us might think negative about us. People that do know us, certain peoples, like our friends' mothers, probably think positive of us. They probably don't always think that we do positive stuff, but they probably think that we want to get away and, you know, and don't always want to be around this, so I think they think positive about us.

Like the young man who spoke before him, this young father's comments reveal an appreciation of the consequences of social isolation, which is a defining characteristic of ghettoization. People who knew them knew that they might not always do "positive stuff," but they also knew that these young men had a range of hopes and dreams. They might have presented themselves as tough or thuggish on the block, but they might also have wanted to "get away" and escape the tough circumstances in which they were coming of age. To understand this, the young men suggested, people needed to get to know them, but that was not likely when so many people were actively working to avoid them.

Negative perceptions about young black men are held not only by outsiders and newcomers to the area but also by some of their neighbors. A comment from one mother who joined the conversation highlights the layers of negative perceptions that young black men confront in their daily lives. In response to my question about perceptions, she responded: "Everybody out here, everybody out here look at them bad." She continued:

I'm not lying. They look at them bad and, you know, I have a son that's out here with them as well, but if you don't know them, you will never know any-

thing about them. You know, like, I see them every day, and I know that they are not always up to no-good. I mean every kid is mischievous. Nobody is perfect, even the parents. Nobody is perfect. But if you don't take the time to get to know the person, or get to know your neighborhood, you will always think that something bad is going on. Always.

As in the comments from the young men, this mother's comment highlights a consequence of social isolation, even for people who live in close physical proximity to the young men in the neighborhood. From a distance, only the most problematic qualities of the young men are apparent. People who do not know the young men may see their public presentation-of-self or their behavior as reinforcing widely held beliefs about poor, young, black men. Some of this behavior is likely to cause real trouble in the neighborhood, especially violence, but people are likely to see this trouble not as a consequence of structural circumstances, but solely as a consequence of the behavior of problematic people within the neighborhood. From this perspective, the danger does not lie in the ghetto as a historically constructed space, but in the bodies of the young black men who live there. People instruct others to avoid the places where poor, young, black men congregate—"down there"—and in doing so reinforce the social distance that defines the ghetto: "If you don't take the time to get to know the person, or get to know your neighborhood, you will always think that something bad is going on, always."

### The Social Consequences of Patterned Avoidance

It is not uncommon for people who live in neighborhoods like the Fillmore to develop strategies to navigate potential threats to their well-being. In her analysis of how inner-city adolescent girls navigate the "difficult and often unpredictable inner-city terrain" (Jones 2010, 53), the first author writes that these girls develop a set of "situated survival strategies: patterned forms of interpersonal interaction, and routine or ritualized activities oriented around a concern for their personal well-being." The two main strategies she describes are "situational avoidance" and "relational isolation":

The concept of situational avoidance captures all the work teenaged girls do to avoid social settings that pose a threat to their well-being and situations

in which potential conflicts might arise. . . . The concept of relational isolation illuminates the work girls do to isolate themselves from close friendships. . . . By avoiding close friendships, girls can reduce the likelihood of their involvement in a physical conflict. (Jones 2010, 54)

In some ways, the practice of discursive redlining is similar to the set of survival strategies often developed by inner-city youth, but there are also significant differences between the two strategies. In particular, the practice of discursive redlining encourages a set of avoidance strategies that are much less nuanced than the strategies commonly used by inner-city residents (Anderson 2010; Jones 2010). Instead of avoiding troublesome corners in the neighborhood, for example, people who practice discursive redlining warn others—typically others whom they perceive to be like themselves in class or status position—to avoid certain parts of the neighborhood *entirely*.

Discursive redlining also discourages newcomers to the neighborhood from building relationships with a wide swath of people who live in the nearby federally subsidized housing complexes, but especially the young black men who are often seen as the most problematic residents in the area. In doing so, people are warned away from making the kind of interpersonal investments in the neighborhood that, according to many researchers, are important factors in combating the crime and violence that plague the neighborhood. In the end, these patterns of generalized avoidance provide tacit support for institutional policies and practices that systematically remove or displace problematic people from the neighborhood.

#### DISCURSIVE REDLINING AND THE SOCIAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE GHETTO

In *Culture and Civility in San Francisco*, Howard Becker and Irving Louis Horowitz highlight the lack of conceptual clarity in planners' definitions of areas as "slums" and the consequences of such definitions for urban residents:

Thus when we confront the problem of slums and urban renewal, we send for the planner and the bulldozer. But the lives of urban residents are not determined by the number or newness of buildings. *The character of their relationships with one another and the outside world does that.* Planners

and technocrats typically ignore those relationships, and their influence in shaping what people want, in constructing solutions. They define “slums” impersonally . . . and fail to see how an awakened group conscious can turn a “slum” into a “ghetto,” and a rise in moral repute turn a ghetto into a “neighborhood.” (Becker and Horowitz 1971, 40, our emphasis)

The practice of discursive redlining, and especially the use of the term *ghetto*, tells us a good deal about the contemporary relationship between people who live in the Fillmore and the outside world. The people and places that surround the Fillmore Center are largely seen as a problem to be avoided or removed. As is often the case, the assessments made by newcomers lack the sophistication of the distinctions made by inner-city residents in the neighborhood (Anderson 2008; Jones 2010), yet they are still consequential for patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Longtime Fillmore residents, especially those who are seen as the most problematic, are aware of how people view them, especially young black men. These patterns of avoidance and young men’s awareness of how they are perceived by newcomers exacerbate the social distance between the two groups. This social distance can make it more difficult for locals to make use of the social capital that newcomers may bring to neighborhoods in transition.

Although discursive redlining is a practice that is embedded in everyday interactions, it can lead to serious institutional consequences. The online reviews and the face-to-face warnings described in this chapter encourage an ahistorical sense of the ghetto as a problem. Embedded in the warnings is an understanding of the ghetto not as a place but rather, as Elijah Anderson puts it, as something that people carry with them, whether they want to or not. The online conversation about the Fillmore Center uses *ghetto* as an adjective to refer to the essential and problematic qualities of places and people. These types of conversations also suggest that the ghetto is carried in the adolescent bodies of poor black youth, who are seen by others as “thugs” or “ghetto chicks.” This perspective reinforces the basest stereotypes about black people and erases the experiences of longtime residents in the neighborhood, including residents who take some pride in being “born and raised” in the Fillmore.

Framing the problem of the ghetto as a problem of the moral or behavioral qualities of a particular class of people has serious consequences for neighborhood change. In the recent past, scholars argued that addressing power

relationships was instrumental to changing the conditions of the ghetto: "In order to change the conditions of the ghetto, residents needed to change the power dynamic between ghetto residents and the majority society outside the confines of its 'invisible wall'" (Haynes and Hutchinson 2008, 351). Such an understanding reflects an appreciation of the relational and institutional dimensions of the problem. Herbert Gans (2008, 356) explains this relationship in a recent comment on the ghetto: "Even in the very poorest areas, the deleterious effects of poverty are not caused by the neighborhood, but by institutions, most of them outside the neighborhood, that initiate or perpetuate poverty and conditions associated with it." People who practice discursive redlining do not identify crime or violence as *institutional* problems or as symptoms of a city's failure to incorporate African Americans into economic and civic life in the postwar era (Anderson 2008). Instead, discursive redlining suggests that it is the people, their bodies, and their behaviors that are the problem. The sorts of solutions that follow this conceptualization of the problem are obvious: patterned avoidance or systematic removal.

### From Ghetto to Neighborhood

In the mid-twentieth century, the problem was officially defined as "slums," and slums were, in turn, removed. Today the problem is defined both officially and in everyday talk as the people, and it is the problematic people, especially young black men in public spaces, who are the target of removal efforts. The practice of discursive redlining sets the stage for targeted policing practices and criminal-civil hybrids like gang injunctions, which have the consequence (unintended or otherwise) of encouraging the displacement of young men and their families from the neighborhood through eviction, incarceration, or mandatory exclusion (for example, stay-away orders as a condition of probation). In short, when newcomers to an area think of the ghetto as something that *people carry with them*, then institutionalized efforts to get rid of the ghetto are naturally tied to getting rid of the people who are seen *as* ghetto.

Discursive redlining is a key mechanism in the reproduction of a neighborhood's spatial identity and can have an indirect effect on people's willingness to make economic and interpersonal investments in a transitioning neighborhood like the Fillmore. Identifying the interactional mechanisms by which



people are warned away from the Western Addition is important not only because doing so reveals how inequality is reproduced, but also because doing so identifies potential sites for intervention. Recent efforts to combat the concentration of poverty encourage just the sort of housing patterns that are becoming more evident in the Fillmore. But the presence of mixed-income housing does not necessarily mean that the ghetto will disappear. Instead, understandings of what "ghetto" means may shift from a type of place to a quality of a people, as appears to be the case in the Fillmore. In this context, daily interactions, especially in cities that offer few spaces for people to gather under cosmopolitan canopies (Anderson 2008, 2011), are likely to exacerbate the social isolation of longtime residents and newcomers.

Contemporary urban renewal efforts are focused primarily on the deconcentration of poverty. Yet today's class of ghetto scholars and urban planners should pay serious attention to the character of the *relationships* that develop in the newly configured ghetto. The character of these relationships will play a key role in determining whether places that were largely seen as ghettos in the twentieth century will become neighborhoods in the twenty-first century.

### Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The first author lived in the area for about a month in 2004 and two months in 2005, then returned several times a year until taking up primary residence there for the next two and a half years, from July 2007 to December 2009. She ended formal data collection for this ethnographic project in 2010, but still returns to the neighborhood periodically.
3. Field note entry, July 12, 2005.
4. Field note entry, November 3, 2005.
5. After reviewing thirty-four postings for this analysis, the first author created a database of the reviews, manually open-coded to generate a coding scheme, and then completed focused line-by-line coding using dedoose, a qualitative analysis web-based software program. She retains an archived copy of the reviews in her files (last accessed April 9, 2010).
6. This practice is distinct from the situated survival strategies (Jones 2010) used by residents of distressed urban neighborhoods to avoid areas and groups of people that are likely to attract violence.
7. For a pictorial history of the Fillmore's jazz scene, see Pepin and Watts (2006).
8. A search for the term *black* on the website turned up zero references, but the common usage of terms like *ghetto* and *'hood* makes it clear that the Western Addition is a place where poor black people live and that this fact is *the* problem with the neighborhood.

9. See Yelp, "The Fillmore Center (Apartments)," [http://www.yelp.com/biz/fillmore-center-apartments-san-francisco?rpp=40&sort\\_by=date\\_desc](http://www.yelp.com/biz/fillmore-center-apartments-san-francisco?rpp=40&sort_by=date_desc) (accessed April 4, 2010). Eleven (Urban D., Willie A., Mollie S., Jerome F., Max A., Brad D., W.D., Summer D., G.G., Miss K., and James D.) use the term *ghetto* in their postings on the Fillmore Center.

10. Bruce Haynes and Ray Hutchinson (2008, 352) discuss the migration of the word *ghetto* from popular culture into academic research. The term *ghetto* is now used to refer to speech, dress, or behavior.

11. This image is paralleled only by the image of the gang-affiliated Latino adolescent male.

12. Elijah Anderson (2008, 7) writes: "The black male may 'put white people off' just by being black, and the younger he is and the more 'ghetto' he looks, the more distrust he engenders."

13. A gang injunction is a civil injunction that restricts the behavior of the individuals named on the injunction within a geographically defined area.

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