



# **Data for Justice: Tensions and Lessons from the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's Work between Academia and Activism**

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## **Abstract**

What does it mean to do community engaged research as a scholar-activist? The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP) is a project grounded in a critical orientation towards academic knowledge production. Instead of producing data for the academy, the scholars within AEMP see themselves as producing data for justice. The authors reflect on how, over the course of the project, AEMP has discovered the challenges of straddling the unequal terrain between academia and activism and offer three

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principles which have become key to AEMP's own navigation of this academia-activism divide: mutual aid, accountability, and embeddedness.

## Keywords

Scholar-activism; displacement; housing justice; feminist and decolonial epistemology; mutual aid; redistribution

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## Introduction

Originally begun in 2013 as an attempt to make visible the connections between real estate speculation, tech-driven growth, and eviction in San Francisco through digital mapping, today the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) (AEMP) is a dynamic collective of scholars, story-tellers, organizers, activists, and artists using data to fight for tenants' rights and housing justice throughout California and beyond. From its origins combining academically-grounded critique and political practice to its ever-evolving mix of members, ideas, data, and funding from both scholarly and community-based sources, AEMP is a project that has always straddled academia and activism. As two long-term members of AEMP, we have discovered first-hand the tensions produced by this straddling act.<sup>3</sup> This essay charts the space between academia and activism through our experiences with AEMP to distil the principles AEMP has found most essential to negotiating this uneven terrain: mutual aid, accountability, and embeddedness.

Although this essay primarily reflects upon AEMP's origins and evolution as a project in isolation of broader, ongoing conversations about the role of critical cartography in ongoing political struggles, this is not meant to suggest that AEMP is alone in exploring the space between academic critique and activist practice. In addition to building on previous scholarly treatments (including some from our own collective members) which have focused on analyzing what is critical about the tools of critical geography (Burns, Dalton, and Thatcher, 2018; Counter Cartographies Collective, Dalton and Mason-Deese, 2012; Giesekeing 2018; Kwan 2002; Maharawal and McElroy, 2016), this essay also focuses attention on a slightly different but just as important question. We ask: who has access to the tools of knowledge production, and, by extension, whose perspectives are being privileged and to what effect? Or, in the language of this special issue, who gets to "narrate displacement?" Centering this latter question puts AEMP in conversation with work on participatory GIS and earlier "expeditionary" methods in particular, as well as broader debates on community-engaged scholarship in general (Elwood, 2006; Kent

<sup>3</sup> Terra Graziani and Mary Shi have both worked with AEMP in the San Francisco Bay Area since 2015, contributing to both data and narrative projects of AEMP as well as assisting with grant-writing, presenting AEMP's work, and facilitating classroom collaborations. In 2017, Terra Graziani founded the Los Angeles chapter of AEMP.

et al., 2017; Ryan, 2004). AEMP's experience straddling academia and activism provides insight into the challenges of tackling these questions head-on.

This essay is intended as a reflection written from the perspective of two people actively doing the work of AEMP, written for other scholar-activists negotiating similar tensions. As co-authors, we in many ways represent either side of the academia-activism divide. For Mary Shi, who has her feet more firmly planted in academia but is very much on precarious ground as a PhD student, her work with AEMP has been an extended exploration of the role of academia in social justice work. Working with AEMP has demonstrated to her the power of the critiques and tools she has learned in the classroom, but has also taught her that there is often a gap between the work that is rewarded by the academy and the work that most directly empowers communities. For Terra Graziani, who comes from just as much a tenants' rights and anti-racist organizing background as an academic one, the work more-so starts with organizing. She approaches AEMP's work as a useful contribution towards building collective power and as a meaningful, if fraught, practice in producing collective knowledge. As a reflective essay, we do not seek to present a comprehensive introduction to AEMP and its work.<sup>4</sup> Instead, after briefly introducing AEMP's origins and methods, we selectively discuss the projects we have been most involved in and learned the most from as they relate to the question of working between academia and activism. We hope that our limited standpoints and our reflexive mobilization of them have produced an essay that other scholar-activists in diverse domains can see themselves in and draw inspiration from.

### **Critique and Practice: AEMP's Activist and Academic Roots**

AEMP was founded as a collaboration between community activists at the San Francisco Tenants Union in 2013. In producing its first maps documenting eviction and tech-led speculative displacement in San Francisco, AEMP's members implicitly asked, "What if we mobilized the accumulated epistemic privileges of the academy to radically empower our local communities instead of silence them? What if we used the data and methods of the university to tell the stories of those who have been told, time and time again, that their experiences were 'only anecdotal,' 'missing the bigger picture,' or 'reactionary?'" It was in this spirit that AEMP produced its first maps, appropriating the scholastically legitimated tools of online mapping and data visualization to document what San Francisco residents already knew from experience but did not see reflected in dominant discourses: that the incidence of [no-fault evictions](#) was precipitously rising, that the arrival of a [tech bus-stop](#) down the street meant displacement was soon to follow, that [real estate developers' maps](#) of San Francisco did not reflect a city its existing residents had a place in, and that poor

<sup>4</sup> For those interested in a more comprehensive discussion of AEMP's origins and methods, see Maharawal and McElroy (2018) and AEMP's Handbook (2018). Both can be found on AEMP's website, [antievictionmap.com](http://antievictionmap.com), which also provides the most complete archive of AEMP's work available.

and working class, [black and brown neighborhoods](#) like the Mission and Tenderloin were disproportionately bearing the brunt of the crisis.

AEMP's critical perspective, while being constantly renegotiated through AEMP's ongoing practice, is also rooted in the long line of feminist and postcolonial thought that critiques the epistemological and political presuppositions of Cartesian, objectivist knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Spivak, 1988). One of the chief strategies knowers in this objectivist epistemic tradition have used to claim authoritative knowledge for themselves is the elision of their own positionality. By presenting themselves as the unmarked knower--devoid of interests and history (including the historically constructed and physically embodied differences of race, class and gender)--and therefore able to provide an "objective" account, the perspective of traditional, "authoritative" knowledge is also necessarily a mode of knowing that obscures the power relations at its core. This elision does not only have political consequences; it also has deep analytical ones (Harding, 2005; Sweet, 2018). How can one accurately know anything when one insists that their partial perspective is complete? Or that the knowledge of situated others is irrelevant--or more commonly, illegitimate? By only privileging the perspective of "objective" knowers (in the case of the West, this has historically meant the unmarked category of white, property holding men), this objectivist epistemic position leaves itself vulnerable to structural blind spots and unable to recognize the role of subaltern agents and their struggles in shaping history (Chakrabarty, 2000; Roy, Schrader and Crane, 2015).

As a feminist and decolonial project, AEMP's members recognize these critiques as central to their work producing data for justice. AEMP recognizes that if it seeks to fight for housing justice without reproducing the oppressive power relations of the past, this objectivist epistemic tradition must be disrupted and the perspectives of the historically marginalized must be privileged and used as the basis for building new forms of collective power. If AEMP is to serve as an accurate archive of this historical moment, it cannot accomplish this without recognizing and centering the agency of the dispossessed, both in their loss and their resistance. While AEMP began as a collaboration between housing activists, graduate students, organizers, artists, and local residents have since played vital roles in the project throughout the course of the project, with many of AEMP's members troubling these categories along the way.<sup>5</sup> Whether discovered through academic critique or lived experiences of marginalization and erasure, AEMP is a space where the diverse array of people for whom this approach resonates can mobilize these insights to produce data for justice – data that can disrupt the unequal and oppressive power relations embedded in structures of traditional, objectivist knowledge.

Over the course of its work AEMP has developed a toolkit of approaches to produce data for justice from its critical perspective, many of which are documented

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one of AEMP's originators who would go on to become a key member of the project, Erin McElroy, began the project after having recently completed a Masters degree in Anthropology and Social Change rooted in postcolonial theory. McElroy then went on to earn their PhD in Feminist Studies shortly after helping launch AEMP.

in its Handbook (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2018). Here we briefly introduce the three main themes around which AEMP's overall approach can be summarized: countermapping, storytelling to build community power, and an open and horizontal organization structure that allows for the generative intermixing of community and university-based actors, tools, data, and perspectives.

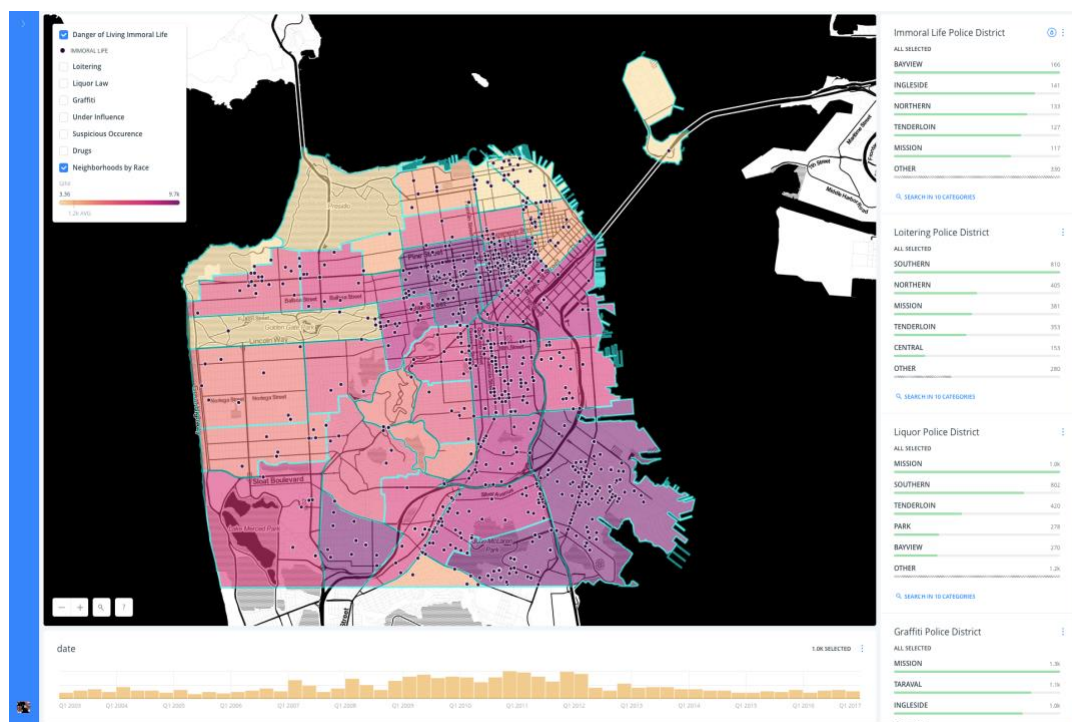
### ***Countermapping***

AEMP's first map, the [Ellis Act Eviction Map](#), served as a countermap to the depictions of San Francisco produced by the city's real estate and techno-utopic led growth machine (McElroy, 2016). AEMP's Ellis Act Eviction Map visualized the city's erased history of "no-fault," Ellis Act evictions as a series of time-lapsed, exploding, black and red circles. By culminating in the image of a city pockmarked by eviction, this visualization served to re-signify San Francisco as a site of mass displacement and thereby counter growth machine imaginaries of the city as an unblemished terrain ripe for capital accumulation. In typical AEMP fashion, the ideas behind this first map were conceived of between AEMP founders and San Francisco housing activists around a table in the San Francisco Tenants Union, and the data visualized was the result of a public records request to the San Francisco Rent Board (Maharawal and McElroy, 2016). Since the Ellis Act Eviction Map, AEMP has gone on to produce over one hundred maps and data visualizations that analyze and make visible the Bay Area housing crisis from an intersectional, decolonial, feminist, anti-neoliberal, and antiracist perspective, with leads and questions often supplied by the organizations and communities with which AEMP partners. These efforts include maps linking tech bus stops and AirBnBs to evictions, mapping geographies of surveillance and police violence through 311 calls and police killings, overlaying historical maps of redlining with contemporary foreclosures, extensive research into the area's serial evictors and real estate speculators, and demographic maps highlighting the displacement and re-segregation of the Bay Area's black, Latinx, Filipino, and fixed income residents (Figure 1).

### ***Storytelling to Build Community Power***

Storytelling to build community power has been just as central to AEMP's work as countermapping. One of the first projects in this vein was AEMP's Narratives of Displacement and Resistance (NDR) Oral History Project (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2018; Maharawal and McElroy, 2018). This ongoing project intertwines a participatory oral history format with the work of direct action, community organizing, and place making to empower and activate project participants to collectively fight for their homes. The NDR's archive of oral histories is accessed through an [online map](#) that co-locates personal narratives against the geography of evictions in which they were produced. This map thus serves to link narrators' individual experiences of displacement and resistance to their larger social, political, and geographical contexts while also building solidarity among project participants. To date, working in direct partnership with a wide array of

community partners, AEMP has produced more than 115 oral histories and a diverse collection of storytelling tools including multiple videos, a mural in San Francisco's Clarion Alley, a zine, and a community power map of Oakland, and narrative maps in San Francisco, Alameda, and Los Angeles counties.



**Figure 1:** Countermapping Policing, Race, and Gentrification. This is [a screenshot](#) from one of AEMP's many interactive, online maps. Here, viewers can counterpose layers of minor, quality-of-life citations and arrests from the San Francisco Police Department from 2003 to 2017 against a baselayer visualizing San Francisco neighborhoods by their black population. The above screen capture displays the aggregated "Danger of Living Immoral Life" charges over this time period, a charge specifically targeted to juveniles.

### *Open and Horizontal Organizational Structure*

For AEMP, data for justice has always meant both expanding access to and radically re-envisioning what counts as authoritative knowledge production. This commitment is expressed through AEMP's organizational structure, which has proven to be another key component of AEMP's particular mode of critical data production. Since its beginning, AEMP has eschewed the vertically integrated and rigidly credentialized structures of traditional academic and policy-oriented knowledge production by making all of its work available for free on its [website](#) and by opening its doors to any person who wants to get involved regardless of qualifications or experience. Once volunteers begin to regularly attend meetings,



AEMP's data archives and access to mapping and storytelling platforms and tools are freely shared. From AEMP's perspective the diverse community of scholar-activists AEMP has helped to train and empower is just as meaningful an outcome of its work as any of its maps, reports, or narratives. AEMP's open structure has become a key driver of AEMP's ongoing evolution, expanding AEMP into a collective of members each with their own partial perspectives to be privileged, tools to be integrated, and questions to be addressed. Indeed, it is AEMP's open-door policy that has produced many of the collaborations and that fuel AEMP's work while at the same time ensuring its work remains grounded in the communities it is meant to serve.

### **Tensions in Straddling Academia and Activism**

Counter-mapping, storytelling, and an open organizational structure that allows for deep collaborations with community partners are all strategies AEMP employs to disrupt traditional, objectivist knowledge. This praxis—born from the combination of academic critique and activist practice—has allowed AEMP to construct a space between academia and activism from which to produce data for justice. Maintaining this space between has proven to be a constant balancing act. Two dynamics we've come across in AEMP's work most clearly illustrate the sources of tension that must be navigated while occupying this space: power imbalances in access to data and resources, and the persistent privileging of arms-length objectivity in research.

### ***Power Imbalances Between Academia and Activism***

Academia has historically enjoyed a monopoly on the legitimate production of knowledge. With this monopoly has come vastly unequal access to data and data analysis tools. In the case of large-N, quantitative data such as real estate trends, court records, or Census and American Community Survey data, while in theory there are laws in place ensuring public access, in practice accessing and analyzing these data still requires amounts of labor, time and money that leave "the public" behind paywalls and circuitous records requests. Even with data in hand, the tools used to aggregate, visualize, and display data are similarly hidden behind high software subscription fees or mystifying user interfaces. Given this unequal access, it is unsurprising that the work of grassroots groups is largely considered inadequate by objectivist epistemological standards.

One way AEMP combats this power imbalance is by acknowledging that all data necessarily offers only a partial perspective, that our definitions of data and data analysis can and should be expanded, and that this critical re-imagining is possible even with tools that have traditionally been used for oppressive purposes (Kwan, 2002). Both data wrestled from courthouse archives and data produced from the first-hand accounts of community members are held equally valuable in the eyes of AEMP and the organizations and individuals it works with. As discussed above, projects such as AEMP's "Narratives of Displacement" oral history map, or our

[Oakland Community Power Map](#) speak to this commitment clearly. Nonetheless, AEMP's community partners have just as often asked the project to appropriate traditional understandings of authoritative knowledge as they have to subvert them.

As Elwood (2006) has shown, the world of actual politics is not as clear cut as the dualisms academic critique would imply, and working in direct coalition with community partners often requires using impure tools. Absent the financial resources that private developers have, the data, skills, and tools required to carry out comprehensive, large-N data collection and analysis largely remain sequestered in the university. As a consequence, community organizations as varied as Tenants Together, San Mateo Legal Aid, the Eviction Defense Collaborative, and the California Reinvestment Coalition have approached AEMP to collaborate on research and report writing. Thus far, not to mention the myriad other topics besides displacement which AEMP has systematically studied, AEMP has collected comprehensive eviction data at scales as disparate as the evictions of [a single landlord](#) to all unlawful detainers within the [state of California](#) with many neighborhood, census-tract, and city-level data sets in between.

Other scholars have noted this resource imbalance between academic and community-based organizations and as one solution have suggested developing and disseminating "good enough software" instead of submitting to the corporate-dominated status quo (Giesekeing, 2018). While AEMP makes use of a variety of free online tools such as the story-telling platforms developed by the [Knight Lab](#) at Northwestern and takes advantage of the institutional access student members have to services like [Social Explorer](#), AEMP also uses its own funds to maintain subscriptions to Esri and CartoDB Geographical Information System (GIS) tools. AEMP thus finds itself balancing its decision to operate at least partially within the status quo against the benefits of ease of use and aesthetic appeal offered by pay-to-play platforms. It is primarily these benefits that allow AEMP to produce the types of analyses and visually arresting visualizations its community partners call upon it to make while also operating as a volunteer collective open to those with minimal technical skills. Although AEMP does support for-profit, private GIS software companies with its funds, by making AEMP's data and tools widely accessible through its non-hierarchical organizational structure AEMP also encourages and supports a multiplicity of analyses in hopes of eventually evening the playing field between scholars who are and are not situated within groups and institutions historically granted access.

One challenge AEMP faces in doing this redistributive work is the question of its position and sustainability in this unequal space. Maintaining AEMP's access to essential software requires a steady stream of funding, and although AEMP is entirely volunteer run the costs of maintaining the project are not inconsiderable. In part to meet its financial needs, AEMP members are constantly applying to grants, both scholarly and community-based, and taking on new collaborations which make their own institutional and epistemological demands on the project. Although AEMP maintains a certain distance from the nonprofit industrial complex (INCITE, 2007),



both by not incorporating as a formal non-profit and by not seeking grants that limit its political freedom, it still relies on periodic grants to sustain its larger work. These grants are often to support more policy-facing or academic work, as these are the projects that get funded. A perpetual struggle AEMP finds itself facing, then, is how to secure financial support for the more radical, non-university, non-policy-facing work it is always already doing without funding. Nonetheless, although the work of engaging the demands of institutional funders while maintaining AEMP's critical perspective is necessary, unavoidable, and exhausting, it also pushes the project to grow, seek out new audiences, and regularly reflect on its own work and has allowed the project to become what it is today.

### *The Perils of Objectivity*

This brings us to the second tension. Even with access to data and tools, the grassroots analyses AEMP is involved in producing are often seen as serving a political agenda and therefore irrational, subpar, and unreliable. Within mainstream academia, studies that claim objectivity, neutrality, and a flattened view from nowhere are praised, while studies that tackle head-on the impossibility of these assumptions and the unequal, power-laden structures behind them are dismissed.

For example, consider the recent discussion of Matthew Desmond's Princeton Eviction Lab in *Shelterforce*, which critiques Desmond and his team for constructing their nationwide database of evictions largely without the input, expertise, or critical perspective of local tenant organizers, including some from AEMP's own collective (Aiello et al., 2018). This mode of birds-eye-view research privileges national coverage over local nuance, ignoring the fact that the actual processes which produce displacement are locally varied and therefore require a local scale of analysis. As AEMP's work parsing various sources of displacement data in the Bay Area shows, ignoring local nuance is analytically dangerous as the eviction count generated by, for example, a county court system tracking eviction lawsuits which only captures tenants whose cases make it to court can be very different than that of a city rent board enforcing Just Cause eviction protections (Graziani, McElroy, Shi and Simon-Weisberg, 2016). In addition to producing more accurate knowledge, properly emplaced work also produces more politically actionable knowledge. Such work can point to interventions, campaigns, and projects that can be undertaken at the local scale by local actors on much shorter timeframes than would be required by state or national-scale mobilizations. Finally, ignoring the pre-existing work of local tenant organizers also gets in the way of, and in some cases--as the example of Oregon discussed in the *Shelterforce* article demonstrates--erases local efforts to resist and mitigate displacement, undoing years of hard-won gains in the process.

AEMP's work refuses the de-politicizing "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988). One part of AEMP's value to the communities and organizations it works with is its ability to access and redistribute the accumulated epistemic and material privileges of the academy. This requires maintaining access

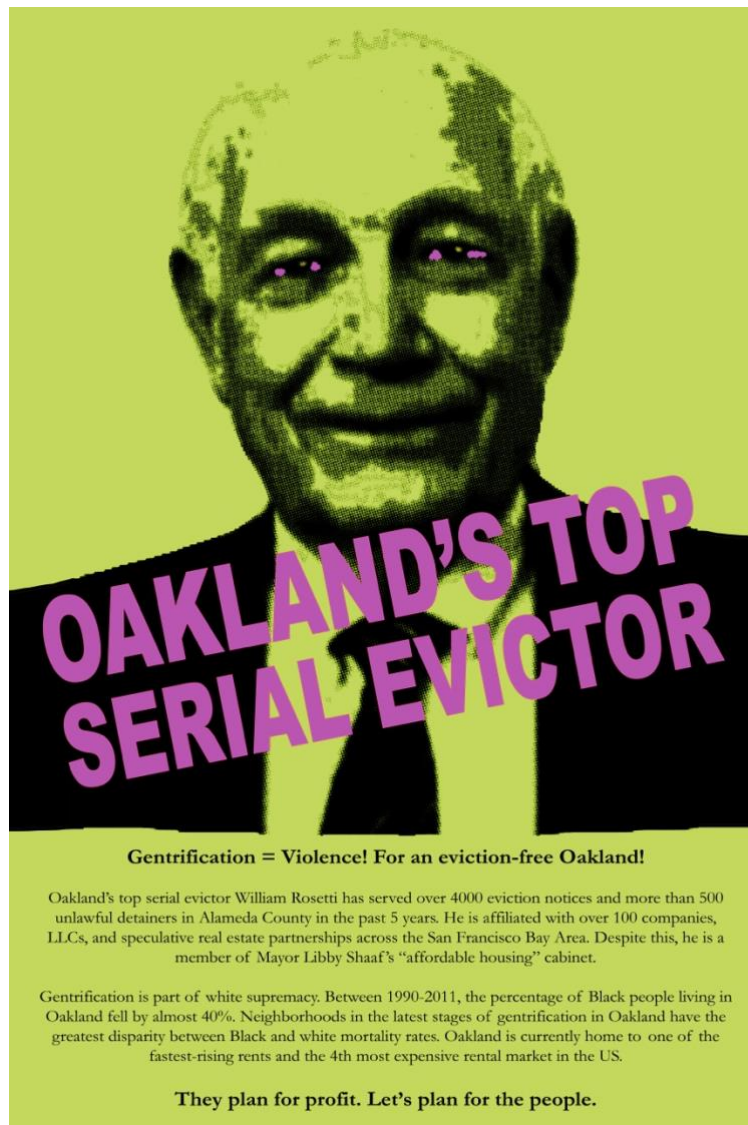
to and re-appropriating the tools of traditional academic knowledge production, but only up to a point (Harney and Moten, 2013). Several of AEMP's projects redistribute resources while also intentionally maintaining their distance from academia. AEMP's role as a watchdog on serial evictors and real estate speculators embodies this strategy (Figure 2). For example, AEMP has recently supported several rent strikes in Los Angeles with data and storytelling, using striking as a tactic to build community power without regard for how far outside the norms of scholarly production such a full-frontal attack on individual evictors might be. In a manner similar to what has been called "autonomous cartography," (Counter Cartographies Collective, Dalton and Mason-Deese, 2012), AEMP works from within tenant organizing spaces to build power through tactics and discourses like these, not for recognition from academics and other institutional actors, but rather for *us*, for the movement to use, only orienting energy towards institutional actors when it is strategically beneficial. Maintaining this protected distance is necessary if, in the spirit of abolition and within this landscape of unjust institutions, AEMP's work can help "build movements," not "incorporate" them (Dozier, 2018).

### **Lessons in Producing Data for Justice**

These reflections bring us to articulate three principles which have proven critically important to guiding how AEMP navigates the space between academia and activism: mutual aid, accountability, and embeddedness. As AEMP has been pushed to constantly negotiate its own position in this intermediary space, the following criteria have emerged as those which most consistently guide us towards producing work in line with our commitments.

#### ***Mutual Aid***

The first principle we have found necessary to navigating this space is that of mutual aid. For AEMP, mutual aid means first and foremost respecting the autonomy and self-determination of community partners, both political and epistemological. AEMP fights for the immediate needs that have been identified by those facing and fighting displacement, speculation, and erasure, while at the same time supporting and creating spaces where those most directly engaged in the work of organizing can carve out time and energy to think through these processes and build collective consciousness in opposition to them.



**Figure 2:** Serial Evictor Watchdog. AEMP partners with community organizations to use a range of tactics to fight for housing justice including strategies that are solely oriented towards building movement power without consideration of scholarly payoffs. This work includes acting as a watchdog on serial evictors and real estate speculators and using that research to directly apply pressure on displacers through rent strikes, direct actions, and public shaming through our online database as well as posters such as the one shown above.

For example, as AEMP was working on its 2016 *Counterpoints* report with Tenants Together, AEMP members lent their labor to canvass and collect signatures with the Alameda Renters Coalition (ARC) to put rent control on the ballot, produced videos that were used by community organizations such as the Oakland Creative Neighborhood Coalition and the Bayanihan Youth Group to help fight imminent

evictions, and targeted their data analyses to answer the demographic questions most pressing to local organizers (Graziani, McElroy, Shi, and Simon-Weisberg, 2016; McElroy, 2018). Instead of insisting that AEMP, with its academic credentials, accolades, and funding provide the ‘theory’ or ‘scientific knowledge’ while our community partners did the practical work of organizing or played the passive role of data points, AEMP built what we have elsewhere called “shared authority” with our partners, mixing together idea and action at every step of the process to co-produce experiences, conversations, and knowledge that could empower all participants (Maharawal and McElroy, 2018, 384). Just as Newman and Safransky observe in the case of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute and their own Uniting Detroiters project, when done in non-reductive or tokenizing ways the *process* of building knowledge collaboratively can be just as important an outcome of the work as any text, map, or video (Kent et al., 2017).

Mutual aid also means standing with community partners and supporting them in whatever multiplicity of strategies they choose rather than imposing theoretically abstracted frameworks such as cooptation or resistance that cannot capture the complexity of actual politics (Elwood, 2006). Sometimes, as in the case of the rent strikes described above, this means building power autonomously outside of electoral politics and city planning offices. At other times, as the examples of ARC above or our earlier discussion of AEMP’s decision to use pay-to-play tools illustrate, this means working within the constraints of formal politics and speaking to more conventional epistemological audiences.

### *Accountability*

The second principle we have found essential to guiding our work is accountability. This means continually asking ourselves, “Who is our work serving?”. On the surface, it seems that the answer to this question should be simple. However, as our experiences have shown us even well-intentioned projects go astray. Broadcasting and translating the work of AEMP for multiple audiences is a key part of how AEMP accomplishes its mission. But a danger emerges when these acts of translation become acts of appropriation. As the example of Eviction Lab shows, there is a way in which translating work done in the community, for the community, can easily elide the actual work of the community. With its critical origins and purpose erased, data expropriated in such acts of translation no longer benefit the communities they purport to serve.

AEMP’s many classroom collaborations with Bay Area schools and universities have pointed to another moment of slippage between work that meaningfully serves the community and work that ultimately serves the academy. In an era in which the neoliberalized university is under constant pressure to ‘satisfy student demand’ for creative, ‘entrepreneurial’ learning projects and produce ‘relevant’ research (Brown, 2011), community-engaged learning projects conveniently check many boxes. While AEMP stands firm behind the transformative power of youth organizing, especially when it is within youths’ own communities,

AEMP is also deeply attentive to the positionality of participants on both sides of the projects it supports. Local high school students interviewing their parents and community elders about their experiences of neighborhood change and mapping their own community assets are different than undergraduates from all over the country descending on a local neighborhood to make their first forays outside of their campus bubbles. With these considerations in mind, it is clear that the ethical considerations of community-based learning must extend beyond the traditionally narrow concerns of participant confidentiality, deception, and harm that currently delimit guidelines for ethical research practices.

### ***Embeddedness***

The third and final principle we offer is the principle of embeddedness. This means many things, but in sum they all amount to the same result: resisting the tendency for traditional knowledge to obscure difference, ignore local and temporal nuance, and strip reality of its meaning-laden texture. This means always looking and listening carefully to the local context and remaining flexible and responsive in order to work with these structures instead of against them. Careful attention over time necessarily means leaving room for adjustment as situations, collaborators, and communities evolve, and moving at the speed, scale, and pace of community collaborators instead of according to the expectations of the academy (Ryan, 2004). AEMP's more recent work with the Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (LACCLA) documenting displacement is an excellent illustration of this principle. Once AEMP began to engage with LACCLA it quickly became clear that recording Ellis Act evictions (which had been central to understanding displacement in San Francisco) was not relevant in the unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County that still lacked renter protections. In partnership with LACCLA, AEMP adjusted its analyses accordingly and is now providing research assistance that better serves LACCLA's fight for tenant protections.

### **Conclusion**

It is no accident that AEMP, as a project fighting displacement, finds itself straddling the space between academia and activism with its epistemologically critical perspective. Like traditional, objectivist knowledge, displacement is a strategy of violence through erasure. Resistance, therefore, requires strategies that fight this erasure at each point. Countermapping, story-telling, and deep collaborations with community organizers are all strategies AEMP has developed to fight such erasures at multiple levels. And as the guiding principles of mutual aid, accountability, and embeddedness illustrate, it is not only the critical nature of AEMP's tools but also AEMP's constant assessment of its work's impacts as measured from the perspective of the communities, organizers, and activists it is meant to serve that allow AEMP to pursue its mission of producing data for justice.

Projects like AEMP are being offered new opportunities--often by sympathetic insiders--to take advantage of the centuries of resources accumulated by

universities, research institutes, and other such organizations in pursuit of their critical objectives. AEMP recognizes these as redistributive opportunities that should be taken with eyes wide open. In this spirit, AEMP continues straddling the space between academia and activism despite the challenges this position entails. The path AEMP has discovered in navigating this terrain is not disavowal and exit but rather constant critique and strategic engagement. We offer our reflections not as an end-all-be-all guide for scholars seeking to do critical, community engaged work, but instead as a sharing of the surest signposts we have discovered along the way. As more scholars reevaluate the way they study changing urban landscapes in particular and the relationship between academia and activism more generally, we hope this piece can contribute to the forging of a more just and reparative relationship between academia and the publics it serves.

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