

# LITTLE

CONFRONTS GENTRIFICATION,  
DISLOCATION & EVICTIONS

# HAITI

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## INTRODUCTION

MARIANNE LAMONACA

In 2019, a cross-institutional team of faculty and students from Miami Dade College (MDC) and Florida International University (FIU) received a multi-year Collaborative Research Grant from The Humanities Edge to investigate the gentrification of Little Haiti. The project, *Little Haiti Confronts Gentrification, Dislocation, and Evictions*, sought to address the question: *How do Little Haiti's families, small businesses, and community at large attempt to cope with the neighborhood's rapid gentrification, including dislocations and evictions?*

The research team was led by FIU Associate Professor of Sociology Richard Tardanico, MDC Associate Professor of Arts & Philosophy Joseph Tamargo, and FIU Adjunct Photography Instructor Peggy Nolan. Professor Tardanico supervised student community research activities, and Professor/Photographer Tamargo and Instructor/Photographer Nolan provided instruction on photography and photojournalism and supervised student photographic documentation.

Students set out to document Little Haiti's families, small businesses, and wider community, all of which are confronted with dislocations and evictions in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, and to photographically document the depth and vibrancy of Little Haiti's culture(s), daily life, and architecture and urbanism. These components of the community fabric, and the community itself, are at risk as the neighborhood gentrifies.

This publication is a record of collaboration: between two educational institutions, among community college and university students and faculty, and most importantly with the people of Little Haiti. It is a testament to the project's goals of using visual documentation to increase awareness of the cultural depth and vibrancy of Little Haiti, and to foster community-building opportunities for neighborhood revitalization in the face of the deleterious consequences of large-scale gentrification.

## **THE THREAT TO LITTLE HAÏTÌ AND MIAMI'S COMMUNITIES OF COLOR**

***RICHARD TARDANICO***

Steamy, swampy, hurricane-prone, and geographically out of the way, the Florida peninsula has been a cherished home to mosquitoes, cottonmouths, and alligators but historically marginal to European colonization, the Dixie plantation regime, and—until the end of World War II—the U.S. national economy. The previous centuries, however, established the template of Florida's contemporary political economy: subordination to external powers, events, cycles, and trends; devastation of indigenous populations and nature; refuge for exiles; haven for the rich; racialized repression, dispossession, and exploitation; centrifugal loyalties; atomized government; and the brazenly orchestrated image of tropical paradise. Superimposed on this template have been massive post-World War II in-flows of diverse peoples—first, from the U.S. North, as federal government programs created the Sunbelt; and second, from the global South, unleashed by the Cuban Revolution and reinforced by broader Caribbean-Latin American tumult and transformations. Given that foundation, global restructuring has situated Miami as the nexus for economic, social, and cultural flows connecting Latin America and the Caribbean with the U.S. and the world. The overall business, political, and cultural clout of its Latin American-Caribbean populations is exceptional, as is Miami's transnational sociocultural fluidity.<sup>1</sup>

Yet beneath Miami's tropical glitz, multicultural flair, and pandemic-era wooing of tech and cryptocurrency bros, affluent escapees from frigid weather and weighty taxation, and real estate speculators from around the world lurks a flimsy substratum. As climate and sea-level catastrophes threaten, a peak below the hype reveals a tourism-hospitality-services economy of marginal small commerce, precarious labor, and lagging productivity, as reflected in Greater Miami's bottom-tier rankings among major U.S. metropolitan economies. Correspondingly debased are its indices of social welfare, as Miami ranks among the worst major metropolitan areas in socioeconomic inequality and poverty, including as

these cut across race-ethnicity and neighborhood. Greater Miami also ranks among the worst such areas in the proportions of cost-burdened renters and homeowners. Regarding governance, the twenty-first century's local/global reconfigurations have decentralized Miami-Dade County's decision-making clout across an array of Latin American/Caribbean immigrant-based groups, with corporate real estate and associated interests being politically dominant as are Cuban-Americans within the City of Miami government. The metropolis's heterogeneous Black communities remain decidedly subordinate within this arrangement, as in the case of Haitian Miami.<sup>2</sup>

Haitians escaping the brutal U.S.-backed Duvalier dictatorships from the 1950s to 1980s settled increasingly in the City of Miami's deteriorated north-of-downtown districts left behind by suburbanization. The emerging aspirations of what became informally known as "Little Haiti" devolved into stark realities of impoverishment in the face of the systemic racism of U.S. foreign policy and apartheid-like Greater Miami, compounded by the departure of the community's upwardly mobile members to the suburbs. By the 2000s, however, a Haitian cultural revitalization coincided with the consolidation of the community's institutions (anchored by churches and social service hubs) and the political maturation of its leadership. This conjuncture culminated in a successful campaign to win the City of Miami's approval in May 2016 to officially rename its Lemon City district as Little Haiti. The campaign overcame strident opposition by a multi-racial-ethnic fusion of real estate developers, business owners, homeowners, preservationists, academicians, and others. The victory celebration notwithstanding, Little Haiti's iconic community leader Jan Mapou lamented: "These people [real estate developers] have money, big money. We cannot stop them."<sup>3</sup>

The land-speculation challenge to Little Haiti had previously embodied

a stealth pattern of gentrification. But given its strategic location and devalued real estate market, the district found itself trapped within an ever-tightening spatial vise: to begin with, the encroaching Design District from the south and affluent neighborhoods and their consumer markets from the north and coastal east. As Greater Miami has become more firmly ensconced in the national and global economies, exerting additional pressure on this vise has been Little Haiti's proximity to the burgeoning downtown and the Brickell financial district; the international airport and its surrounding import-export and corporate hubs; and both the container-shipping port and the world's busiest cruise port. Of mounting salience is the real estate impact of climate crisis and its rising sea levels, as Little Haiti's average elevation is higher than that of affluent coastal zones. The vise has particularly tightened since 2008's Great Recession, as the gateway location, tropical glitz, and permissive governance of Greater Miami area's real-estate centric economy have bolstered its attractiveness for global financialized property speculation. Providing impetus to Little Haiti's sweep of real estate speculation is the Miami 21 zoning code's provision for Special Area Plans (SAPs)<sup>4</sup>, epitomized by the City of Miami's green lighting of the large-scale Magic City Innovation District which, despite its hype, is no more than a massive mixed-use real estate venture geared to middle and upper-middle class consumers.<sup>5</sup> Miami 21's SAPs have inadvertently unleashed a post-Great Recession, financialized-speculative version of the metropolis's apartheid-like history of racialized dispossession and expulsion. Notwithstanding recent reforms, Miami 21's SAPs remain the policy sledgehammer that, intertwined with real estate speculation's ground swell of housing and small business dislocations, threatens Little Haiti as well as Miami's other disenfranchised communities.<sup>6</sup> That sledgehammer is enabled and wielded within Greater Miami's transnationalized apartheid-like legacies that militate against effective countervailing grassroots action.

A local community organization member asserts that the metropolitan area's "... single most pressing threat ... is to become a ghost town that serves people who live elsewhere, while climate change threatens its very existence."<sup>7</sup> A glimmer of hope is an incipient patchwork of cross-community, multi-class resistance mobilizing around the trope of "climate gentrification." A fundamental question is the extent to which climate crisis itself will become a decisive force, drastically remaking Miami's geographic and sociopolitical landscapes or returning its porous land mass to the sea.

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3. Nathaniel Sander. “Developers, Historians, and Activists War Over the Future of Little Haiti.” *Miami New Times*, 26 July 2016. <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/developers-historians-and-activists-war-over-the-future-of-little-haiti-8628829>
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**PHOTOGRAPHS AND REFLECTIONS**  
*STUDENTS AND FACULTY*

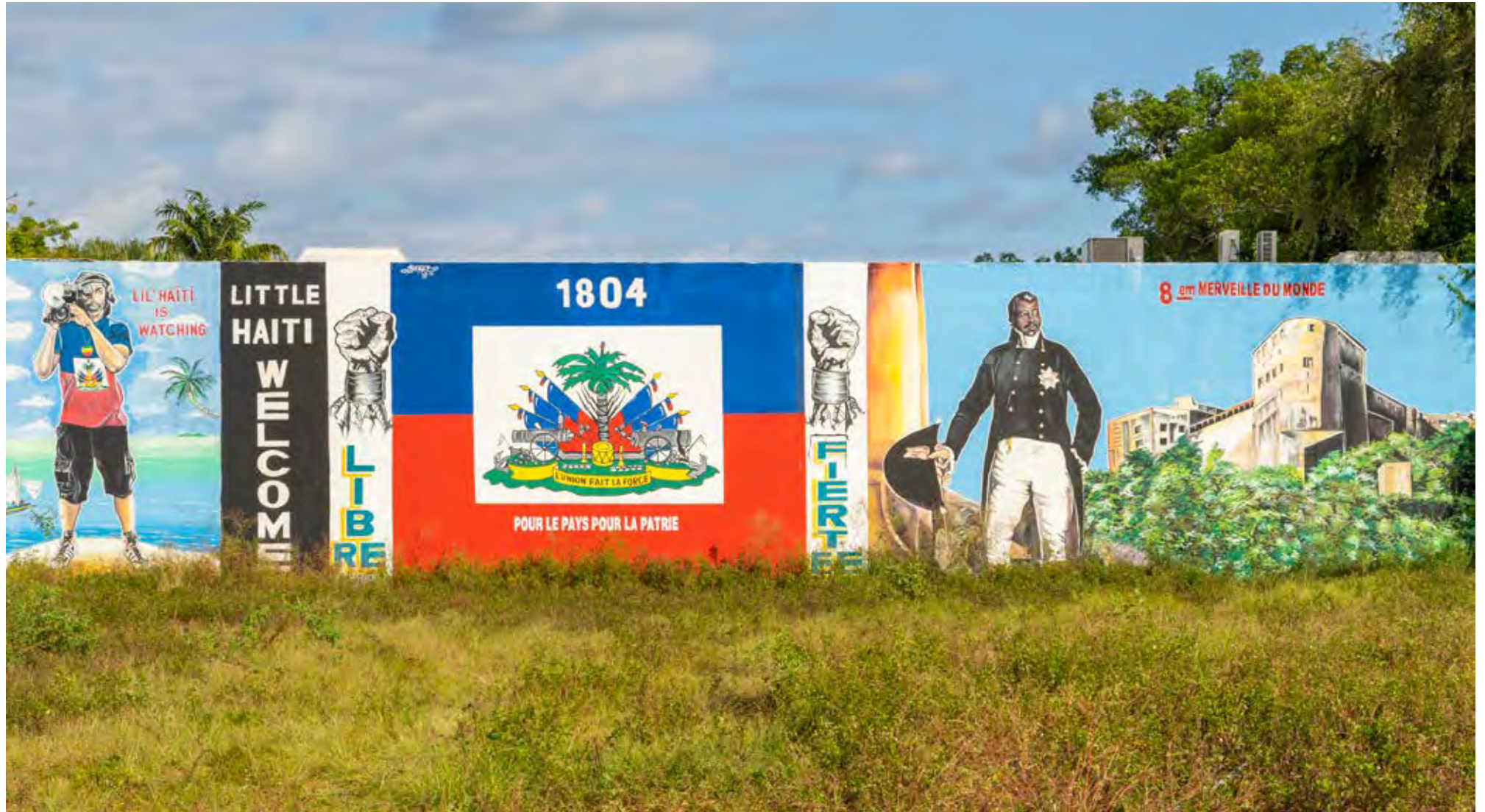






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I have a special connection to the Haitian community since I was born and raised in Miami, lived in the Little Haiti community, and have nieces and nephews of Haitian descent. Having the opportunity to walk the streets of Little Haiti and take pictures of its landmarks, people, and community has made me feel that I am doing some part to preserve the culture of this neighborhood. I focused my images on physical locations within the neighborhood, highlighting the architecture and art that local artists have painted on its buildings. An image that has impacted the way I see the community is that of an elderly gentleman whose face is printed on a paper taped to a light pole on the street corner adjacent to the Little Haiti Cultural Center. There are no words on that paper: it contains only the image of his face with his glasses resting on his nose while his eyes seemingly pierce through the print. It felt to me as if the gentleman was gazing at the changes happening in his community but could only look on from a distance with no words to say. I hope that the images we have captured in this project give some voice to the people of Little Haiti and help to preserve the soul of the neighborhood.

ARNOLD MELGAR



TWA ZOM FO BOTANICA



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The Little Haiti project has changed my perspective on the communities around me because it has taught me that everybody has a story to tell. Walking around the homes and meeting residents of Little Haiti has shown me how people try to protect what is valuable and close to them. Each one of the persons we met has experienced what it's like to be pushed aside, misunderstood, and ignored. The project has shown me the importance of sticking together as a community. It has shown me how having conversations with the people around us can positively impact both our lives and theirs. The people we met were open to our taking photographs of them because we engaged in sincere conversations with them. We heard stories of where families came from and how long they have lived in their homes. We watched their kids playing outside with other kids and adults going about their daily lives, giving me a sense of family within a community. Whether they have been living in Little Haiti for weeks, months, or years, the people we met are willing to stick together.

CLAUDIA BLANCHARD

































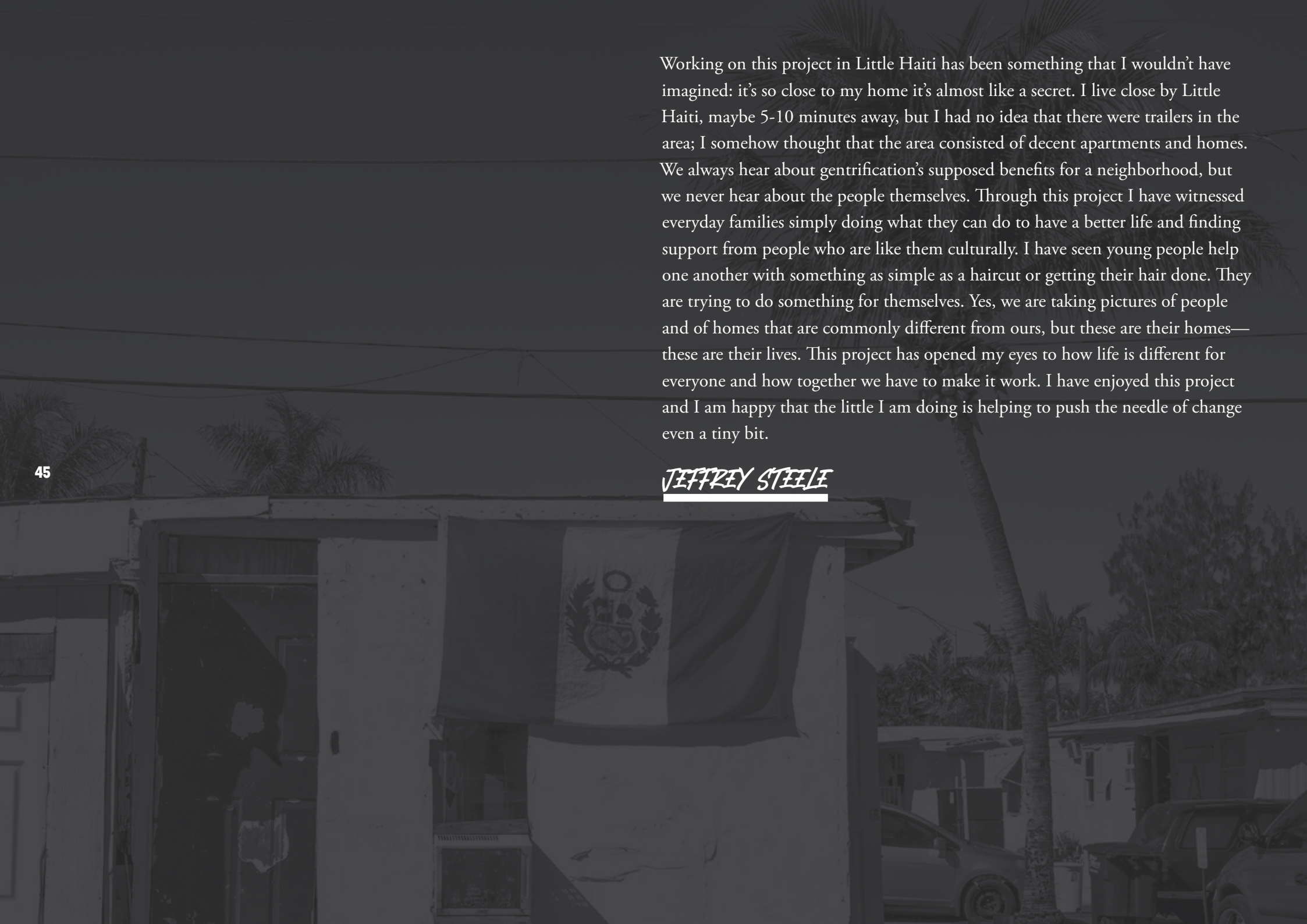








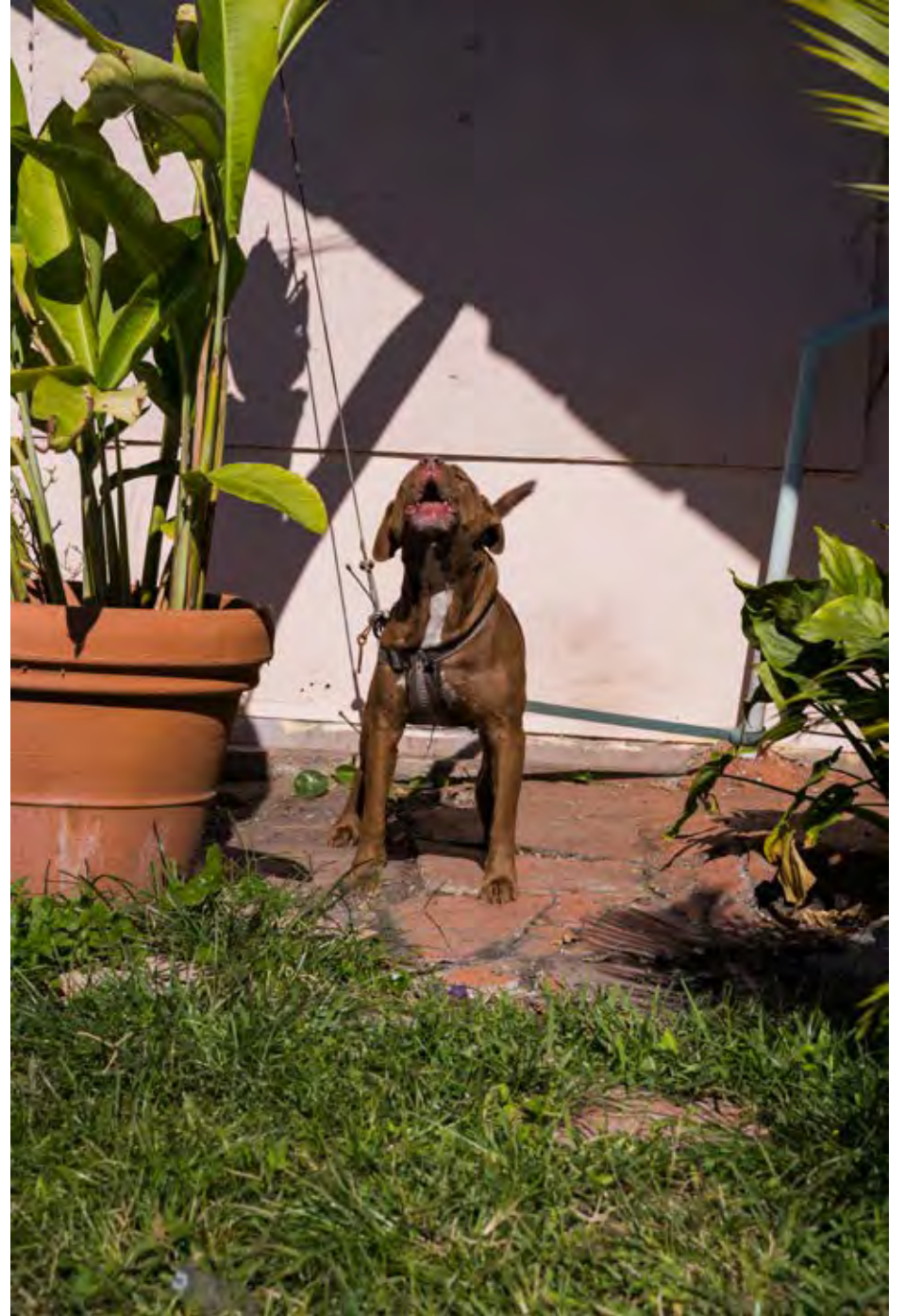




Working on this project in Little Haiti has been something that I wouldn't have imagined: it's so close to my home it's almost like a secret. I live close by Little Haiti, maybe 5-10 minutes away, but I had no idea that there were trailers in the area; I somehow thought that the area consisted of decent apartments and homes. We always hear about gentrification's supposed benefits for a neighborhood, but we never hear about the people themselves. Through this project I have witnessed everyday families simply doing what they can do to have a better life and finding support from people who are like them culturally. I have seen young people help one another with something as simple as a haircut or getting their hair done. They are trying to do something for themselves. Yes, we are taking pictures of people and of homes that are commonly different from ours, but these are their homes—these are their lives. This project has opened my eyes to how life is different for everyone and how together we have to make it work. I have enjoyed this project and I am happy that the little I am doing is helping to push the needle of change even a tiny bit.

***JEFFREY STEELE***





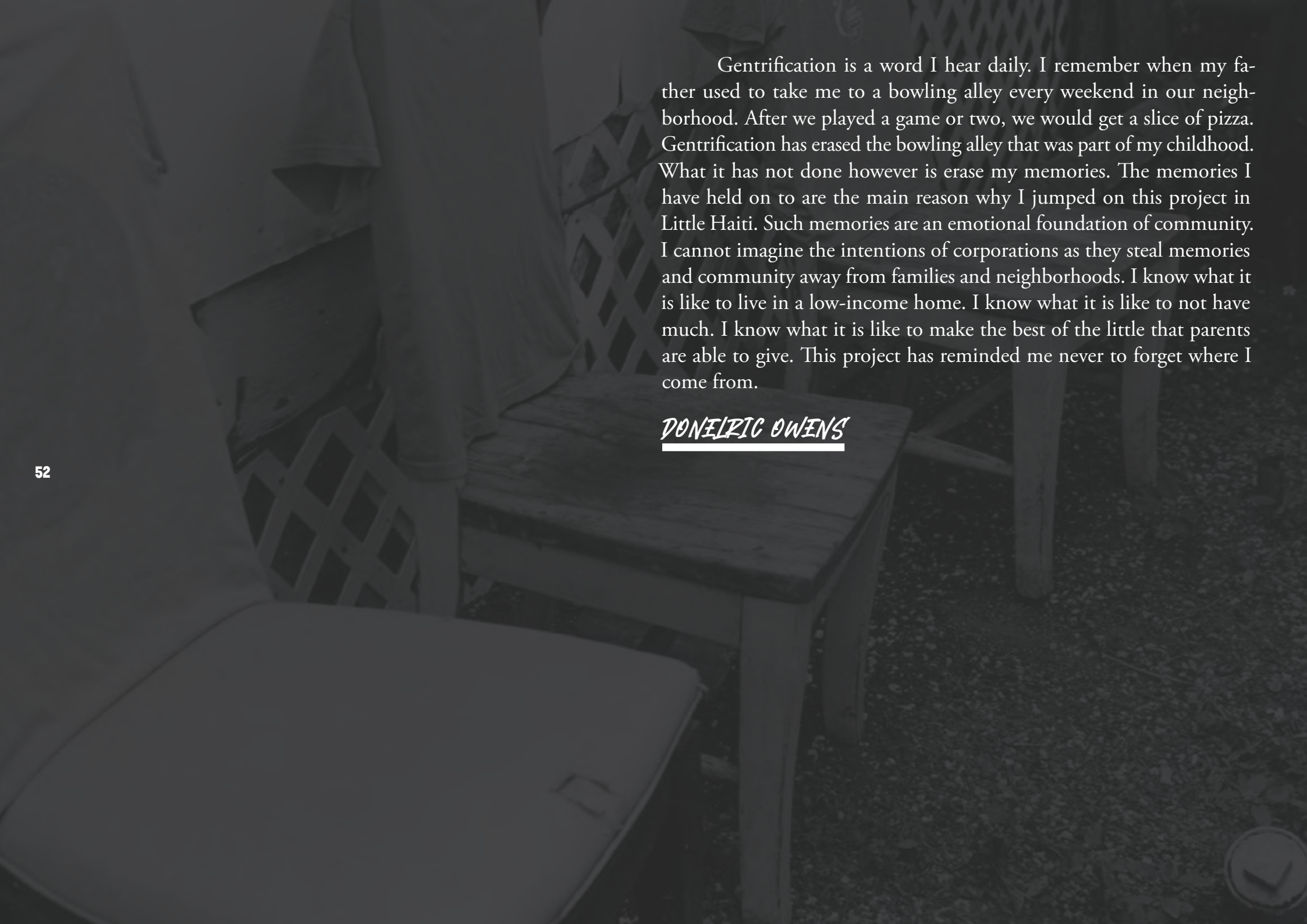












Gentrification is a word I hear daily. I remember when my father used to take me to a bowling alley every weekend in our neighborhood. After we played a game or two, we would get a slice of pizza. Gentrification has erased the bowling alley that was part of my childhood. What it has not done however is erase my memories. The memories I have held on to are the main reason why I jumped on this project in Little Haiti. Such memories are an emotional foundation of community. I cannot imagine the intentions of corporations as they steal memories and community away from families and neighborhoods. I know what it is like to live in a low-income home. I know what it is like to not have much. I know what it is like to make the best of the little that parents are able to give. This project has reminded me never to forget where I come from.

*DONELRIC OWENS*





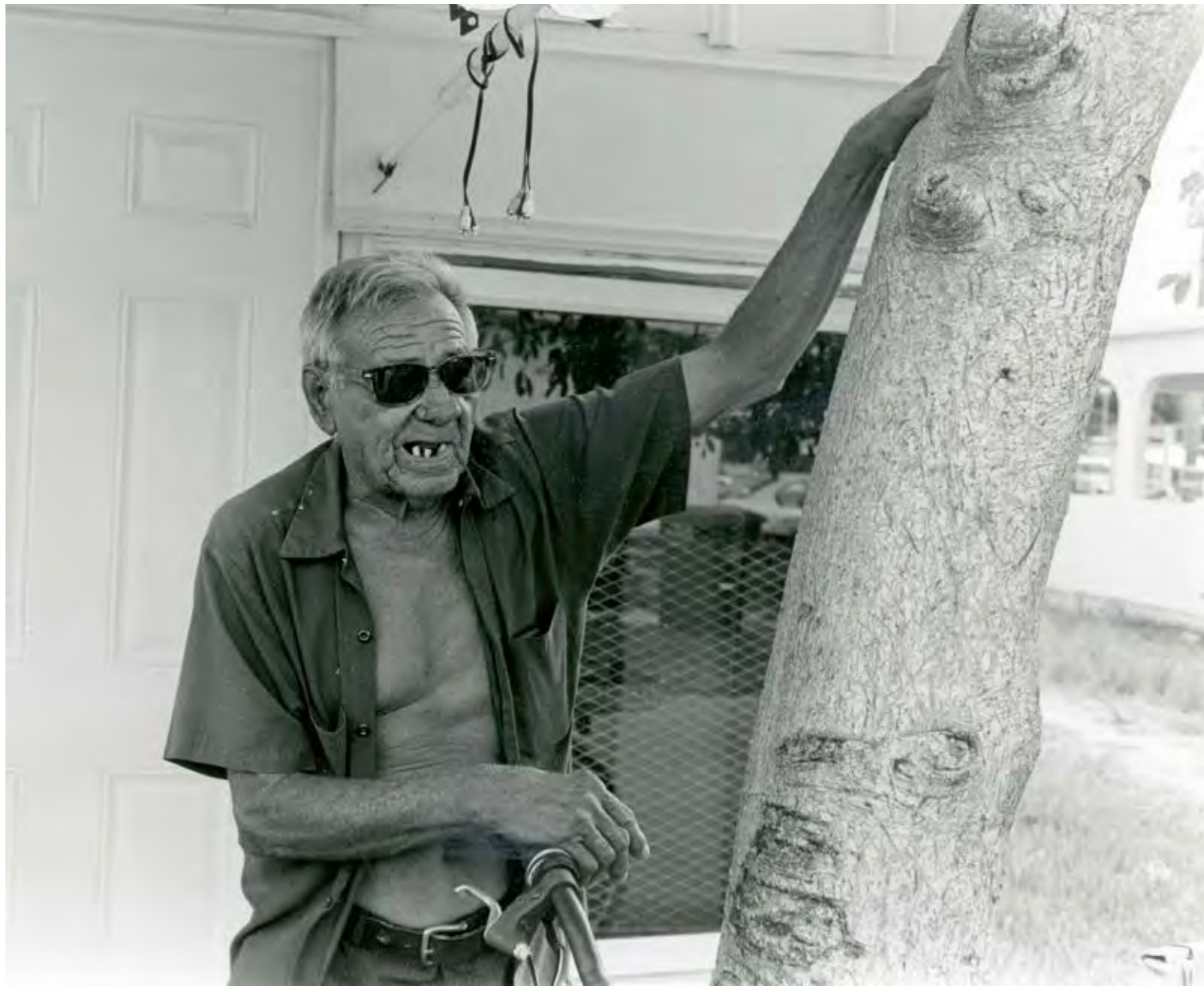














During the Spring semester 2019, when Professor Tamargo announced that a project to photograph Little Haïti was in preparation, I was super excited!! He said that he was thinking about me because he knew that I love to go there, that I love the Haitian culture and that's little to say... I was super enthusiastic!

So we started the project in September 2019. The very first day, we had a meeting at the Trailer Park with the other selected students from FIU, all the Professors, everybody was there. It was impressive, everybody was excited, we were discovering the place and we talked to some residents for the first time.

It seemed like a maze that day, all these trailers one after another. I thought it would be easy to get lost but I was wrong. Every weekend, sometimes weekdays, we were there and we felt more and more comfortable. Trying to adapt to the way of life of the residents, identify their habits, talk, exchange, explain why we were there. It was easy to approach people because I speak Creole and I was always with Barbara who speaks Spanish fluently and Claudia who also speaks Creole.

Some people were eager to tell their story, tell the problems they were facing but also tell how they like Little Haiti. I felt very early that this project was more than photography... One of the people that completely changed my perception and my way of doing the project was named Marie. She was a Haitian woman, I would say in her seventies, she didn't speak English, only Creole. I met her at the little 'market' in front of the Trailer Park. She was sitting on the floor and she was selling little plastic bags of cashews. I approached her, introducing myself and asking for her name. I told her that I was a student and that we were doing a photography project. She was surprised and was laughing at the fact that I was still a student at my age but said that she would love to

go back to school too... She was smiling and she accepted that I would photograph her with the only conditions that I didn't photograph the cashews and that she could fix the way she was looking. I didn't tell her but I thought she was very elegant and beautiful. Maybe I should have. Two weeks later, when I went back to give her the prints, people at the little 'market' told me she passed away a few days ago. It was a shock for me because I was excited to go back, talk to her and give her the prints.

This experience marked me because after that I was afraid to talk to people, afraid to get too attached and I even wondered if I was made for photography. But I probably needed it, it finally strengthened my desire to photograph and my wanting to show people as they are.

I am really grateful to have met so various people during this project, some were very appealing, atypical, talented,... and I know I will continue to go there, to keep in touch with them and to photograph.

CELINE BOURSEAU









It comes as no surprise that Little Haiti, the point of highest elevation in the city, a beacon, has become a target. Over the past few years, it became impossible not to see the signs. One in particular - those 5 steel letters, erected on an increscent strip of concrete where 62nd St. diverges - MAGIC - felt like an augury. It stood for all the tactlessness of big-money developers hawklike circling Little Haiti and the utter lack of concern for the agency or the dignity of those who already call the neighborhood home. The situation, in many ways, has become dire - family homes and local businesses raised to make way for cookie-cutter condos, and those that have held out finding themselves increasingly underserved. Even the Little Haiti Cultural Center, the jewel of the neighborhood, a meeting place, is now under threat from the city, on the (dubious) pretense that health and safety codes have been violated. Nevertheless, the strength of the community is unbounded. It was humbling to be welcomed into the homes of residents and organizers, to come to understand their perspectives. I hope that these photographs can be a record of what is so special about South Florida as it faces down the prospect of immense change, and an accompaniment to the story of a community that must continue to be told and retold.

*CONOR ANDRICH*

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I joined in this project in order to draw students into active engagement with the communities of Little Haiti. Academia often shelters inhabitants from the world outside its walls and students study many issues from afar without the experience of real time exchange.

This adventure took fledgling artists and photographers into the lives of strangers, folks struggling with survival issues of health and welfare unknown to those behind their cameras. Dialogues ensued and friendships were formed seamlessly between the subjects and the documenters. All of us came out of this experience humbled by our more fortunate positions and anxious to act, whether it be in pictures or civic engagement or both. Some students attended city government meetings and were shocked at the tangled web of political maneuvers carried on for hours on end in order to manipulate zoning laws and roll over existing communities. Many students made portraits of the residents of two trailer parks threatened with all manner of evictions and cruel management tactics. In all, it was a learning experience that will have unpredictable resonance for all of us. It will manifest in complex ways, due to the demands of a college education reconstructed in the field.....almost like a cake baked from a recipe that doesn't turn out like expected.

***PEGGY NOLAN***

In the spring term of 2019 I was approached by Peggy Nolan to see if I wanted to work on a project with her and Richard Tardanico. The project would be a joint grant between Miami Dade College and Florida International University. This was to be my final year teaching. I thought what a great way to go out giving students the opportunity to be productive photographers and make a difference in the community. I also thought of change that was happening and how these young students could become involved in Social activism. Activism for the greater good of individuals in a community being uprooted for monetary gains, against all odds. The photographs show what was a deep commitment by these young photographers trying to help bring a cause to the forefront of our community leaders. In the end the pandemic sidetracked much of the great work that was yet to be done, and left unfinished. This book is a testament to the students hard work and effort to make a difference. To the community a visual dialogue that some young university students took up their cause and are trying to make a difference. As for me the beauty of teaching photography has always been when a group of students come together and bond through the photographs they produced during the year. My last year teaching couldn't have ended any better as a facilitator what a ride. To the students you made photographs that will forever tell a story of caring, I thank you for your relentless effort and commitment, to Richard, Peggy what a amazing experience working with you and to the grants administrator at FIU and MDC, thank you for the opportunity.

***JOSEPH TAMARGO***

**70 PHOTO CREDITS**

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <b>CONOR ANDRICH</b>         | <b>23, 28, 31, 37, 38 48-50, 56, 58</b>                    |
| <b>CLAUDIA BLANCHARD</b>     | <b>21, 24, 35</b>  |
| <b>CELINE BOURSEAU</b>       | <b>15, 18 (RIGHT), 20 (LEFT), 22, 60, 63</b>               |
| <b>ELICAIRE JUNIOR CADET</b> | <b>10, 12, 55, 57</b>                                      |
| <b>DEVIN FULLER</b>          | <b>20 (RIGHT), 39</b>                                      |
| <b>IMAN KIFFIN</b>           | <b>11, 43 (LEFT)</b>                                       |
| <b>BARBARA MATEHU</b>        | <b>26, 31, 41, 64</b>                                      |
| <b>ARNOLD MELGAR</b>         | <b>13, 18 (LEFT)</b>                                       |
| <b>DONELRIC OWENS</b>        | <b>51, 59</b>  |
| <b>JOHN PIERRE SCHOLL</b>    | <b>9, 16, 17, 19, 47, 53, 54, 65</b>                       |
| <b>JEFFREY STEELE</b>        | <b>27 (RIGHT), 34, 36, 44</b>                              |
| <b>ANONYMOUS</b>             | <b>2, 6, 27 (LEFT), 29, 32, 33, 40, 42, 43 (RIGHT), 46</b> |

This is an acknowledgement of a teaching philosophy that has been developed and nurtured by professors and students at Miami Dade College and Florida International University. Over time it has evolved with empathy, intellect, accident and adventure into a complex sense of obligation by all of those witnessing behind their cameras. It is also an acknowledgement of the wonderfully generous and helpful folks living in the community of Little Haiti. We honor all of you with this work of art.

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