Belonging is an Act of Resistance: A Conversation with Dorothy Lazard

It is increasingly vital for us as community members, educators, employees, students, public servants, etc., to find equitable and effective ways of getting to know those outside of ourselves, approach our positions of power or influence with understanding, and more actively participate in building the world we want to live in.

by Vanessa Perez Winder



Left to right: Julia Grinkrug, Dorothy Lazard, and Tricia Brand

Photo courtesy of Jaime Austin



How can we better foster a sense of belonging in spaces and communities marked by historical displacement, ongoing gentrification, and broader systemic injustices? This multi-layered question set the tone of a recent, thought provoking conversation with Oakland-based public historian and former librarian Dorothy Lazard at the CCA Campus Gallery.

Part of the Deborah and Kenneth Novack Creative Citizens Series, organized by Creative Citizens in Action (CCA@CCA), Lazard joined CCA community members for a conversation at the Campus Gallery on February 29, 2024. "Belonging Is an Act of Resistance," organized by Julia Grinkrug (Adjunct II, Architecture Program), was originally scheduled to be a joint conversation between Lazard; Tricia Brand, CCA's Vice President of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB); and David Peters, an Oakland-based community organizer and founder of the Black Liberation Walking Tour, which runs through West Oakland's Hoover-Foster neighborhood. Unfortunately, Peters was unable to make it to the event.

Having dedicated her life to public service and advocacy for over 40 years, Lazard retired in 2021 from her position as the head of Oakland Public Library's History Center. Since retiring, she has taken the time to work on her own projects, including her memoir, What You Don't Know Will Make a Whole New World, which was published in May 2023. In the book, Lazard recounts, with rigor and emotion, her nearly 55+ year-long history of living in the Bay Area, honing in on her experiences moving to San Francisco from St. Louis, MO in 1968, and later to West Oakland in the 1970s. Along with discussing her family dynamics and several personal anecdotes, Lazard also includes and documents elements of a painful history, shedding light on the ways in which anti-Black racism has impacted the residents of Oakland. As she points out in her book, this was done through social segregation, architectural destruction, re-development of imposing structures like freeways, and various other tactics of disruption and displacement.



Beginning the event with a quote from the book describing West Oakland, Grinkrug read Lazard's words aloud:

"Like us, our neighborhood was in transition. There were a lot of promises being made to the people of West Oakland then. Everything was coming. Supermarkets were coming. Jobs were coming. Newer, affordable, modern housing was coming. Oak Center, as our section of West Oakland was called, was composed of large vacant lots waiting to be filled in the name of progress, of urban renewal. Across from our apartment, a large billboard on the corner boasted that new houses were coming, but several years would pass before any houses would appear in the lot."



Photo courtesy of Jaime Austin

Asked what it means to build a sense of belonging in light of this enduring state of transience, Lazard first shared her perspective as a Black American woman. She pointed out that her ancestral history—since the time of enslavement—has inherently become one of migration and displacement. She reminded us that even public institutions we have grown to hold with such high reverence, such as libraries, universities, or museums, were once spaces in which Black people and many other marginalized groups were actively barred from participating. While centering these realities specific to BIPOC communities, Lazard also noted that folks of all backgrounds feel a longing for rootedness and have likely faced some sort of parallel, albeit different, experiences with displacement. "The work of belonging is in everyone's wheelhouse," she said.

Thinking through the proliferation of institutionalized "DEIB-type" initiatives, like the one at CCA, Lazard posed a rhetorical question to the audience, asking us to consider the societal conditions that spurred the existence of such initiatives in the first place, and what opportunities we may have "squandered in the process." In dialogue with Grinkrug and Brand, Lazard also affirmed that our institutions should be interrogated and critiqued in order to understand what kind of societal values they prop up or perpetuate- both positive and negative- reminding us that at the end of the day, these spaces are reflective of who holds power within them. Therefore, it is increasingly vital for us as community members, educators, employees, students, public servants, etc., to find equitable and effective ways of getting to know those outside of ourselves, approach our positions of power or influence with understanding, and more actively participate in building the world we want to live in. Noting that sometimes we can live in a kind of bubble where we "assume everyone thinks the way we do," throughout the conversation Lazard emphasized the power of critical reflection, both internally and in community.

Despite Peters' absence, as we spoke about the connotations of the word 'public,' Grinkrug mentioned how he often talks about sitting down on his front porch as an act of asserting belonging in his own neighborhood, where he is a third-generation resident.

This spurred a lengthier discussion between students, faculty, and staff about what each person considers to be CCA's equivalent or metaphorical porch. This conversation was particularly resonant in light of the closing of the Oakland campus and the decentralized San Francisco campus we have now while we await the completion of Double Ground, CCA's campus expansion planned to open in Fall 2024. However, faculty member Steve Jones (Senior Adjunct, Critical Ethnic Studies) intervened to remind us that the porch should not be reduced to a mere architectural feature. Instead, it holds specific cultural significance for Black people, both as a communal gathering space and as a site of visibility.

Living in the same neighborhood that Peters does myself, which continues to face increasing gentrification and policing, I understood his practice of sitting on the porch as a kind of defiant act; an act in line with the idea of belonging as an act of resistance against the status quo, and which demonstrates creative agency and cultural preservation.

The event ended with some collective musings on the role of the artist within all of this. Lazard affirmed that there is no political movement that "hasn't in part been fueled by artists," while continuing to stress the actual social and political work that needs to be done in tandem. Admittedly, I was slightly disappointed that Peters could not join the conversation. Living in West Oakland, I can see much of what Lazard and Peters both discuss in terms of this history of development, disruption, transition, and failure. These realities are quite visible on a day-to-day basis–a result of urban planning policies that isolate and segregate, such as freeway construction.

Thinking about the burgeoning role of artists, designers, and architects in changing or altering these existing structures, I had wanted to hear the panel speak a bit more intimately about Oakland history, architecture, and what the role public *urban* space has in promoting or preventing "belonging" on a broader, systemic level. Still, receiving the opportunity to hear a long-time Bay Area resident and historian like Lazard speak, and to learn about her memoir, felt incredibly valuable, and I would highly encourage folks to learn more about her and her work.



Left to right: Julia Grinkrug, Dorothy Lazard, and Tricia Brand Photo courtesy of Jaime Austin

Vanessa Perez Winder (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) is a writer and RRR's Assistant Editor. They believe in working toward liberatory and experimental forms of art historical study and curatorial action, and are interested in collaborative, community based, and site specific artistic practices and public interventions.