

ANNIE POWERS

Die [Fill in the Blank] Scum

A short history

DIE TECHIE SCUM—it’s been tagged on sidewalks in Oakland, printed on posters in the Mission, and chanted during protests at Google bus stops. For some, the violence of the phrase is disturbing; for others, it acts as a rallying point, crystallizing the frustration of those displaced by tech-boom gentrification. It’s not the only slogan being used by activists—it’s not even the only one wishing unkind things on new gentrifiers. But it’s memorable and significant because it taps into a long tradition of activism across the country, and indeed around the world.

As the techie is to today’s gentrification battles in San Francisco, the yuppie was to gentrification battles in New York in the 1980s. Inequality in that city was on the rise, and middle and lower-middle class residents were being displaced by a rising tide of young urban professionals. By the late eighties, frustration was beginning to boil over, and in August 1988, during a riot in New York’s East Village, protesters yelled “die yuppie scum” at newcomers to the neighborhood—and a catch phrase was born. Since then, the “die [fill in the blank] scum” construction has been used time and again, most often when class tensions are in play. So it’s no surprise to hear it on the streets of San Francisco in 2014—and really, what’s a techie if not, most often, a young urban professional?

August 1988 in the East Village might not have been the first time the phrase was used, but the protest launched “yuppie scum” into popular culture. “Die yuppie scum” proliferated in places where gentrification was on the rise—it was used in radical newspapers, on T-shirts, in graffiti murals, in comic books, and on bumper stickers. It was even spray-painted on the wall by yuppie-serial killer Patrick Bateman in the early nineties film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. It has been used to create unity among the dispossessed, its mutations ranging from an expression of anger at another famed symbol of gentrification (“die hipster scum”) to a rallying cry for transgender individuals (“die cis scum”). **B**

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