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**“You Know It When You See It: Drug Nuisance Properties
and Municipal Carceral Power in Philadelphia ”**

In 1991 Philadelphia prosecutors formed the Public Nuisance Task Force (PNTF) to close bars accused of harboring narcotics activity. Between the early 1990s and the late 2010s the PNTF would go on to seize nearly 1,700 alleged drug nuisance properties, mostly rowhouses located in Black and Latinx neighborhoods devastated by decades of disinvestment. The unit justified this civil forfeiture program by claiming it remedied the harms associated with the criminalized distribution of narcotics. I contend, however, that prosecutors compounded these harms by extending municipal carceral power over domestic space and property relations in racially segregated neighborhoods.

Former PNTF chief Beth Grossman has claimed that the identification of a drug nuisance property is akin to the identification of “pornography: people know it when they see it.” Through a history of the PNTF’s origins and an analysis of the 1,700 properties seized by the unit, I explore how the legal adjudication of drug nuisance cases operated through ostensibly reasonable observers—such as police officers, prosecutors, and concerned neighbors—knowing a drug nuisance property when they saw it. I argue that the PNTF targeted drug nuisance properties to enforce norms concerning the proper stewardship of property within a context of racialized disinvestment. My research ultimately reveals how the program exacerbated longstanding racial inequities. This finding is most evident in how the PNTF disposed of seized properties: they sold them at auction to the highest bidder, often to developers and speculators betting on the shifting boundaries of race and class in gentrifying Philadelphia.

PLACE 2240 Piedmont Ave., UC Berkeley
TIME 12:45 – 2:00 p.m.
INFO <https://www.csls.berkeley.edu>

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