

DESIGNING CITIES & MEN: POST-WWII URBAN RENEWAL, BLACK MASCULINITY,
AND AFRICAN AMERICAN AESTHETICS

By

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To my family: Dad, Mom, Gloria, John, and Richy

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE BLUEPRINTS OF BLACK MALE DISPOSSESSION

Sequential sledgehammers fall, stone
shaped into dry air
white soundsystem of loose metal
under every footstep. Wrecking crews,
men unable to catch sparrows without breaking
wings into splinters. Blues-horn
mercy. Bloodlines. Nothing
but the white odor of absence.

-Yusef Komunyakaa, "Urban Renewal"

Why Black Masculinity Matters

I am a woman of Ghanaian descent who was born in a middle-class, mostly black suburb outside of Philadelphia. Why would I be interested in writing about African American men living in the nation's inner cities? The trajectory of my research, I think answers this question. I began my career at Vanderbilt with the intent on studying migration narratives in African American literature and film. Migration has made me who I am. In the 1980s, my parents, both from Ghana, moved from England to the United States. As a second generation Ghanaian-American, I was always interested in where I fit in, and in my scholarship, I learned that fitting in was indeed a matter of space. My feeling of being an outsider really sensitized me to my surroundings; I was hypersensitized to and anxious about how people saw me, and how I saw and engaged with them. My turn to migration later in my undergraduate career, where I still felt like an outsider, grew out of an affiliation with the feelings of estrangement protagonists such as

Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Nella Larsen's *Helga Crane*.¹ The visceral nature of migration narratives, particular those written by black men about black men became an object of study for me. It was certainly because I was drawn to the descriptions writers such as James Baldwin and Chester Himes rendered in their work; they were descriptions of the very physical nature of feeling alienated and constantly being prepared for oncoming danger. Such writers, in my opinion, brilliantly captured, too, the anxiety of powerlessness and the existential dread accompanying feelings of homelessness. These visceral descriptions, I came to believe, had very much to do with how prevalent violence was for all black people, but also with the legacy of physical violence directed toward black men and discourses on the "crisis" of black masculinity.

I wanted to learn more about why the hard-boiled, crisis-infused aesthetic seemed to be so popular with black male writers writing in the 1940s and 1950s and what value this aesthetic had in communicating aspects of racial trauma. While at Vanderbilt, the more and more I delved into black masculinity studies the more aware of the theoretical frame of the kind of project I wanted to fashion. It was theories of space and spatiality that I really wanted to explore.

My research into theories of space and race matured at the same time that police brutality and violence toward black men was catapulted back into the national headlines. Trayvon Martin's death really affected me, primarily because my youngest brother was around his age at the time. While I grew up pretty much insulated from violence, Martin's case brought the issue of black vulnerability closer to my attention. It catalyzed my thoughts on the everywhere-ness of violence and the contingency of black male life.² My thoughts on a dissertation project sought to

¹ And an interest in how such characters attempt to flee from these feelings of estrangement and alienation.

² Abdul R. JanMohamed's text, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Duke, 2005) attends to the precarity of black male life, interpreting it as always-already oriented toward death.

pull my different interests and convictions together: the everywhere-ness of danger, the vulnerability of black male life, theories of how racist spaces are “structuring structures, and historical events such as WWII, the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement. The period between 1945 and 1965 was burdened by so many critical stakes merging together at the community, national, and global level. My simple and not so simple curiosity was how did black men fit into all of this?

My project, *Designing Cities & Men: Post-WWII Urban Renewal, Black Masculinity and 20th Century African American Aesthetics* examines the interplay of African American aesthetics, architecture, literature and art in post-WII artistic representations of black masculinity.

Designing Men intervenes in scholarly conversations about how architecture shapes racial, gender, and sexual identities. The value of this project lies in its multidisciplinary approach, which attends to different disciplines—including urban studies, black masculinity studies, and African American aesthetics—and how they come together in the history urban redevelopment between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s. Post-WWII urban renewal has been well-researched in historical scholarship, and my intention is to contribute to this discussion by illuminating the role of urban renewal in influencing African American aesthetics and poetics.³ I am engaged

³ See, for instance, Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Nicole Stelle Garnett, *Ordering the City: Land Use, Policing, and the Restoration of Urban America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal : Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Wade Graham, *Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shaped the World* (New York: Harper, 2016). Post-WWII urban renewal has generally been viewed negatively in critical scholarship on its lasting effects, especially in today’s inner-cities in the United States. Jane Jacobs, a community activist, was highly critical of Robert Moses’ urban planning strategies in New York during the early 20th century up until the 1960s. Rather than the modernist, rationalist planning Moses advocated, Jacobs favored mixed-use development and planning strategies informed by the particular needs of a respective community. Both Samuel Zipp and Christopher

with particular themes of urban renewal and their presence in African American literature and art. These themes include architectural redevelopment, eminent domain, slum clearance, dispossession, eviction, and low-income housing. *Designing Cities & Men* not only assigns importance to the racialized nature of these themes, but also their gendered components. Scholarly books such as Carlo Rotella's *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* gesture toward the conceptual idea of my book, which is to challenge the generalizing discourses in urban renewal scholarship about urban renewal's impact on urban African Americans communities by using aesthetics to open up discussion for more investigation into the particular psychical and physical challenges that urban renewal has posed.

Designing Cities & Men argues that African American male writers and artists producing work amidst the urban renewal programs happening throughout the United States following World War II were examining the impact of such programs on the constitution of African American urban male identities and attempting to portray these affects through their aesthetics. The writers I consider in my project include Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Lloyd B. Brown and Frank Marshall Davis. Additionally, I examine the work of artists such as Romare Bearden, Hughie Lee Smith and Gordon Parks. *Designing Cities & Men* also argues that these writers and artists referred to urban renewal metaphorically in their work while also using redevelopment terms such as demolition, redlining, dispossession, and eviction as metaphors and tropes for thinking philosophically and artistically about how men, spatially dispossessed to varying degrees, perform masculinity. Not only are these writers and artists conceptualizing the black

Klemek outline the ideologies of urban planning that governed post-WWII urban renewal strategies. Both authors conclude that the crucial reason urban renewal was unsuccessful lay in urban planners' uneven approach to development. While commercial districts prospered from urban renewal, many city neighborhoods across the nation suffered from disinvestment and continued housing shortages, opening the way for more systemically-induced societal issues.

male body through urban renewal, but they also use urban renewal as a touchstone for thinking about the crisis of representing the black male in art, a crisis that is not insulated from questions about what it means to be a “black man.”

In this dissertation I am preoccupied with how to approach urban renewal from the stance of human sensory experience, or a phenomenological stance. By phenomenological, I refer to the nature of a human being’s experience in and physical relationship to an environment and the nature of how a human being comes to understand himself and the environment around them through senses and sensations. The value of studying the consequences of urban renewal from the standpoint of bodily experience is that it particularizes and differentiates the experience of people affected by urban renewal. And for the purpose of my project, this philosophy supports my argument that urban renewal cannot only be studied through the vantage point of race and class, but also through gender. Of course, gender has surfaced as an important dimension when one considers the impact of urban renewal on the black community. Scholars, for instance, have addressed the trajectory of the prison-industrial complex and its criminalization and imprisonment of black men as starting from the disinvestment in black communities, which were sparked by redevelopment projects, zoning laws, and white flight. And gang violence and police brutality directed toward black men in inner-cities across the nation has been traced to the economic impoverishment of these areas. Black men, like women, have been affected by a lack of access to resources, such as healthcare, adequate food, educational institutions, and safe residences.

My claim is not that gender has been completely missing from the discussion on the formation of the ghetto, which was quickly sped by the urban renewal that happened following World War II. Scholars such as Tyrone R. Simpson, author of *Ghetto Images in Twentieth-*

Century American Literature: Writing Apartheid, have written on how the inner-city, marked by poverty, low employment and a lack of resources have brought about what he refers to as “ghetto masculinity.” This masculinity is attributed to acts of masculinity that showcase dominant practices of masculinity but in ways that are criminal and make men who perform this type of masculinity susceptible to street violence and imprisonment. Mitchell Duneier has written a sociological study on black men’s experience in Chicago in his book *Slim’s Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). This book speaks more to what my project does because it addresses individualized experiences of men in the inner-city. While my project is not sociological, I am invested in the particularities of urban black male experiences that deal with emotion, physical sensations, perception and relationships. While Duneier tackles these issues from the vantage point of sociological theory, I turn to African American aesthetics and poetics to address them.

The stakes of my project in particular and black masculine studies in general are high, because there are important things at risk for understanding how racism and structural inequality impacts constructions of black masculinity, which deeply impacts conditions in vulnerable places like the inner-city. Issues of crime and domestic abuse can be traced to structural disinvestment of communities. If black men are told through different media circuits that to be men is to be mobile, strong, autonomous, emotionless—and they do not have access to conventional ways of meeting this demand—then attention has to be placed on the other ways that these men do act this role out and what impact these alternative modes of masculine behavior haven on black men and their communities. If black men are held up, and hold themselves up as well, to be protectors of their communities, what is the danger of such a position in light of the many instances when their masculinity is put into question? How should it be reworked to alleviate this heavy burden

felt?⁴ The way to get at these questions is to start from the place of better understanding how these stakes are felt and how this urgency is felt. Scholars of black masculinity, like myself, work to understanding what it may *feel* like for a black man to experience his manhood as perpetually being at risk of being rendered invisible or subjected to violence. My project examines the hypersensitivity imbued in representations of black men trying to protect their masculinity from emasculating environment and simultaneously carving out literal and figurative spaces where they can perform their masculinities. Given the spatial nature of black masculine crisis, urban renewal history presented itself to me as a framework through which the crisis of black masculinity magnified itself.

The Architecture of Black Masculine Crisis Discourse

Though questionable and problematic, the health of the black community has historically been gauged by the state of its black men. The lynched black man has stood as one integral symbol of the racial violence and trauma that has shaped the African American experience.

There is not doubt that the terrorized black man has been mobilized as a political object to

⁴ I am indebted to Ronald L. Jackson II and Mark C. Hopson's edited collection, titled *Masculinity in the Black Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood* (New York: Peter Land, 2010), for its urgent call that black masculinity must be reimagined in ways that extends the scope of what is legible as black masculine identity. Kimberly J. Chandler's chapter in the collection, "How to Become a 'BlackMan': Exploring African American Masculinities and the Performance of Gender," notes how the "absence of research focusing on diverse performances of Black masculinities [is] a communicative phenomena" (55). For Chandler, Myopic theorizations of black masculinity runs the risk of reestablishing the stereotypes attributed to black manhood that have rendered black men vulnerable to particular systems of racial oppression.

catalyze an ethos of urgency and galvanize anti-racist discourses in the black public sphere. The political debates concerning how the black community might achieve civil rights has also been influenced by gender conventions; I am specifically referring to notions of leadership, strategies of black community protection, and self-making discussions. Such discussions and ideological exchanges have positioned black men as the protectors and defenders of their communities. Their inability to do so, for a range of reasons, has been considered pathological and symptomatic of the crisis of the black community. For these reasons, then, there have been high stakes for black men to meet the conventions of masculinity as a means of showing their humanity, individualizing themselves, and, also, for the sake of their community. Such an urgency however, has met the issues and challenges that stem from the unavoidable fact that the systems and structures of racism have and still do interfere with black men's adherence to these conventions. Thus, black men have faced a crisis of masculinity produced by the intersection of race, class, and gender and sexuality.⁵

⁵ The Moynihan Report is a famous example of how the American public sphere has taken positions on the private lives of African American families, denouncing "The Black Family" as a pathological institution by nature of it being headed by a black woman rather than a black man. The report, which was actually meant to make urgent the needs of black communities, did so in a way that built on stereotypes of the lazy, irresponsible black male who is devoid of the capability to lead and provide for his family. There have been many instances when black male political and social groups have stood against the stereotype of the "absent black father"; one example is the Million Man March, an annual event bringing black men together who advocate for black male responsibility, black male visibility, and respect and care toward black men. Performances of black male respectability have also been used to counter stereotypes of black male ineptness. Black male leaders such as MLK and Malcolm X were celebrated as family men and thus qualified to speak on behalf of their communities. The Black Panther Movement, as another example, ran on a heteronormative platform, in which case black men were challenged to protect their communities against those who wish to do harm to them. In his book, *New Black Man* (Routledge, 2005) Mark Anthony Neal goes into depth about how black male heteronormativity became a response to what was considered racism's emasculation of black men. Neal considers how the image of the "strong black man" ran counter to the image of the weak, infantile black man Moynihan visualized. And in the contemporary moment, there have been many discussions about the loss of black men to the prison-industrial complex, gang culture, neighborhood

My project, *Designing Cities & Men: Post-WWII Urban Renewal, Black Masculinity and African American Aesthetics*, looks at this crisis of black masculinity in light of a particular period in history when black communities across the nation faced the urgency of the state of their communities following WWII.⁶ I look at how particular members of these communities, African American male writers, represent black men's relationship to their own bodies in spaces to be dismantled and condemned and spaces to which they have been confined. I look at representations of black men to their community in light of issues such as increased violence, lack of viable jobs, and claustrophobia as black people squeezed together due to zoning laws and policies. Fundamentally, I am invested in thinking conceptually about how urban renewal troubles masculine conventions tied to mobility, success, spatial autonomy, control, resolve, and

violence, drugs, and suicide. In these conversations, there still lies the assumption that the black community is at risk because of the state of black men. For instance, Obama's famous speech to a crowd of black people on Father's Day in 2008 strongly encouraged black men to be present in their communities. Obama referred to "the family" as an important foundation and how "critical every father is to that foundation." (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj1hCDjwG6). For more information about the lasting impact of the Moynihan Report, see bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); James T. Patterson, *The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Daniel Geary, *Beyond*

⁶ Of course, black communities were struggling before World War II. Urban ghettos sprang up in the early 20th century as blacks made their way en masse to the nation's industrial centers. Black riots over issues such as housing shortage and white violence in cities such as New York and Chicago can be traced back to the early 20th century as well. What I argue was different about the urban protests in black communities post-WWII was the way these issues were talked about. The unevenness of urban development in the nation was made glaringly apparent in light of the nation's victory abroad. For many black Americans, it was a slap in the face for the nation to expend so many resources abroad in the name of democracy while many of its black citizens experienced abject poverty and lack of access to economic, social and political resources. Also, the urban renewal projects following the war further entrenched the boundaries dividing lower-income residents from urban neighborhoods with more equity. The solidification of the black ghetto and the concordant violence, poverty and criminalization that urban renewal helped produce pushed the way for the beginnings of the civil rights movement we associate with the 1960s and 1970s. For more information on the relationship between post-WWII urban renewal and the development of the Civil Rights Movement, see Carl Grodach and Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Urban Revitalization: Remaking Cities in a Changing World* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

emotional stability. While this issue of black masculine crisis is not unique to the post-WWII era, I find it generative to look at how a certain strain of the aesthetics popular during this time—incorporating noir, hard-boiled sentiments, existentialism, modernism, and sexism—became the avenue through which black male authors and artists confronted the issue of urban renewal. Writers and artists such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gordon Parks and Romare Bearden employ an aesthetics permeated with a masculine ethos which is understandable given the climate they were writing in. World War II had come to a close and the events of the war, including the Holocaust, the mass death of Allied soldiers and the issue of the shell-shocked war veteran, were still fresh in the minds of Americans. The emergence of the Cold War and the threats of the atomic age, too, caused palpable insecurities and considerable existential angst. Fundamentally, the American social, economic and political landscape was undergoing significant change at the beginning of the post-WWII era. Questions of the future, meaning, understanding, and certainty were brought to the fore in the art, literature, film and music following the war. The aim of this project is to explore where black masculinity fits in within the period of anxiety, paranoia and disorientation that characterizes the period between 1945 and 1956.

My conceptualization of black masculinity is influenced by the widely accepted understanding in gender studies that sex and gender are not the same.⁷ The sex of an individual refers to the individual's biological characteristics while gender identity is a social construct referring to a set of customs, behaviors, cultural expression and practices influenced by a range of factors and contexts (geography, culture, tradition, law, time period, religion, etc.). Gender performances can align or misalign with a particular convention that orders what practices and

⁷ In my project, I use African American masculinity and black masculinity interchangeably.

behaviors correspond to a particular sex. One convention, for example, is the idea that men work outside and women work at home. In this case, one who is biologically categorized as female is pressured by the now outdated convention that a woman is one who works in the home. The convention, though, is troubled, for instance, if a woman does work outside. This woman could be understood as displaying “masculine” behavior, or behavior that in the context of this convention would be attributed to an individual who is biologically categorized as male. This example of “gender troubling” to use Judith Butler’s book title, along with many other examples, has brought to light the instability of the relationship between sex and gender. Gender is not an identity one is born with and is not intrinsic to one’s biological makeup. Contrarily, as Butler argues, gender is something that is repeatedly practiced and performed, and through the “sedimentation” of performances a gender, a gender identity is built. These performances involve behaviors, speech, movement, dress, speech, work, beliefs, and an other host of gender-making practices.

I understand black masculinity as a performance that lies at the intersection of African American identity formations and American masculinity identity formations. African American identity is not static, but there is a set of historical events, socio-political, and economic experiences that have shaped the identities of people who are African American, who can be said to share a set of similar experiences. By “black masculinity,” I am talking about a subject position that is molded out of dual and interlocking experiences of being African American and male. My work falls in line with several scholars who have written on black masculinity, including Maurice O. Wallace, Mark Anthony Neal, Ronald L. Jackson, Roderick A. Ferguson,

Darieck Scott and Robert F. Reid-Pharr.⁸ What these scholars and I share is the position that the African American experience cannot be fully understood without understanding the particular

⁸ Critical scholarship that has been formative to my analytic approach toward black masculinity include Maurice O. Wallace's book *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), Mark Anthony Neal's *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), Ronald L. Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) and Robert F. Reid-Pharr's *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). In *Constructing the Black Masculine*, Maurice O. Wallace considers the multi-dimensionality of black masculinity by isolating the separate but interlocking factors that shape black male identity. The spatial foundation of Wallace's analytic encourages thinking about how black masculinity is a constructed system of practices, behaviors, and obligations that has been shaped heavily by systems of racism and prejudice. Neal's text, *Looking for Leroy* interrogates black heteronormativity by focusing on representations of non-normative black masculinity. What Neal's text reveals by doing so is that blackness has always been seen as illegible, which makes any further removal from what is considered societally legible both abject and revolutionary. Paralleling Wallace's book, Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* locates black masculine identity within an array discourses, all of which circulate throughout popular culture. Jackson examines discourses on black masculinity in areas such as hip-hop music, pimp movies and news. What Jackson traces are particular historically-informed scripts that play out in our contemporary moment; such scripts are influenced by stereotypes making black men out to be minstrels, hypersexual and criminal. However, because masculinity is a "perceptual and cosmological category in flux," Jackson shows how dominant scripts manage to get taken up and recoded in a way that rewrites narratives of black masculinity in productive ways. I owe an important part of my critical framework to Ferguson's *Abberations in Black*, which is a book that helped me interrogate the tenants of black masculinity and dislodge this identity formation from heteronormative discourses. By illuminating the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, Roderick Ferguson exposes the instability of categories such as black masculinity. What proved to be a model that I found portable for this project were Ferguson's fascinating close-readings of works that open up the fluidity of race, gender and sexuality. Robert F. Reid-Pharr similarly opens up the category of black masculinity, using parts of his own biography as a gay black man to do so. What Pharr offers is insight into the very damaging and destructive ways black masculinity has been mobilized to make certain black men legible, and other men illegible. What Pharr's own story showcases is the blatant homophobia that runs rampant in black communities and how heteronormativity is an ideology that has done more harm than good in the black community. Lastly, Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* has figured importantly in my research on the ontology of black masculinity. Scott's book helped inform my thoughts on the import of thinking phenomenologically about how racism affects the black male body both physically and psychically.

experiences that have and still face African American men. The understanding, too, is that the African American experience and what it has been informed by—systems of inequity, disenfranchisement and racialized violence and terror, has constituted African American men in particular ways that are partly, but importantly, different from African American woman. A very important difference, for instance, is the added challenge African American men have faced in adhering to the conventions of American masculinity; this adherence has both resulted in the criminalization, bodily harm, and death of black men and feelings of despair by nature of black men facing challenges of being African American that limit their ability to perform American masculinity. Such challenges have resulted in particular cultural expressions practiced by black men that both align with American masculinity but also misalign in very important and influential ways, some of which have become, in the contemporary moment, very much global symbols of American popular culture.⁹

Fundamentally, the belief of black masculinity scholars, including myself, is that American racism cannot be understood apart from how it affects gender expression. And also, black masculinity, as a gender expression, cannot be properly understood apart from studying the intricacies of American racism. Black masculinity has historically been understood by white people as a threat to white patriarchy in the United States. It has also historically been juxtaposed to American white masculinity, to which has been attributed the power of spatial ownership, mobility, economic success, civilized behavior, and the ability to self-make. African American

⁹ As Rolland Murray notes in his book *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), masculinity is a “floating signifier” (3). And as such, masculinity that is formed out of histories of racial violence and trauma directed toward black people bears semblance to conventions of masculinity but also diverges from it in very important and illuminative ways that reveals how racism and anti-black ideologies operate.

masculinity has been typified as violent, uncivilized, hypersexual, invested with superhuman strength, infantile and overly threatening.

The tension between white patriarchy and black masculinity can be traced all the way back to slavery. The slave ship, a fundamentally dehumanizing structure, was symptomatic of how blacks were seen as both sexed and unsexed. Aboard the slavers, African men and women were not separated by sex and were stacked without regard to physical size. At the same time, at the slave auction, male slaves were valued for their strength and size. Male slaves who freed themselves or escaped their plantations had to deal with the hardship of having to find and support their families and make a living, abilities that underline conventions of American masculinity. Following Reconstruction, black men faced the threat of chain gangs and prison along with the economic and social challenges of convict-leasing sharecropping, which was ultimately another form of enslavement. Thus, black men still did not have autonomy over their spaces or bodies. Their bodies were vulnerable for containment and their spaces, such as areas of land they worked, was owned by a white authority.

The era of Jim Crow saw a high instance of racial violence against African Americans. African American men were lynched in much higher numbers than their female counterpart as consequence for not adhering to the South's Jim Crow laws and etiquette rules. The hypersexualization of black men was significantly contributed to to the high number of male lynch victims. Accusations of disrespecting a white woman or raping a white woman could result in being lynched.¹⁰ And in the 1980s and 1990s up until the current century, the War on Drugs

¹⁰ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Andrew B. Leiter, *In the Shadow of the Black Beast: African American Masculinity in the Harlem and Southern Renaissances* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2010).

has resulted in a disproportionately higher rate of black male frisking, arrests and imprisonment than any other population in the United States.

Certain practices of black masculinity have risen out of a history of violence and mistreatment in conjunction with the production of African American cultural expression. Practices of coolness, militancy, bourgeois respectability and gangsterism, for example, have served as avenues for black men to perform a masculinity that both answers to and veers away from conventional understandings of American masculinity. The black male gangster, for instance, might be understood to showcase certain attributes of manliness, namely, power, spatial autonomy, fearlessness, and economic success. However, this individual, perhaps due to poverty or denied access to resources, accomplishes his performance of masculinity through underground and illegal methods. This example shows how racism and inequity forces black men to either renegotiate what is considered masculine or comply with the status quo by using perceivably non-normative ways of doing so.

The photograph (**Figure 1**) below serves as an example of a representation of black masculine crisis and non-normative displays of masculinity. This photograph was taken in 1962 by Charles “Teenie” Harris, who was an African American photographer and documentarian of the majority-black Hill District. At the time this image was taken, Pittsburgh’s city government, with the aid of federal money, launched an urban renewal program known as the “Pittsburgh Renaissance.” The Hill District was once a thriving black neighborhood, but amidst the Renaissance, a significant area of the district went under redevelopment. Areas that once belonged to residential homes and business stores were demolished to make room for highway construction, streets that would facilitate easy access to the city’s commercial areas, and a sports arena. In the photograph, Harris documents one of the Hill District’s demolished areas. The

grounds are entirely cleared, and it is uncertain if a building ever stood here, and if so, what building it was. Completely surrounding the figure is a lot of stones and pebbles. The background is wilderness, including an array of different sized, unwieldy bushes and rows of weeds. The vegetation in the background is a foil to the very urban symbols in the forefront of the image, chiefly the street clothing, the city newspaper Harris' subject holds, and the vehicle on the right hand side of the photograph. The subject's clothing gestures to the cultural richness of African American urban culture. The razed down area of land that the subject stands on symbolizes a threat to such richness. Given that the subject's dress is a product of black urban culture, his dress appears more like a memorial to a culture being threatened by redevelopment than a celebration of the culture. The vehicle is barely inside of the frame, which is, in essence, displaying a tension between wilderness and urban presence. Only a small portion of an automobile appears in the right hand side of the photograph. Perhaps, the vehicle belongs to the man in the photograph or Harris, driven to this site for the photograph shoot. The appearance of the car draws attention to the constructed nature of the image. The photograph is not simply a documentation of a barren landscape but the presence of these two men in this barren landscape, a presence that is in violation of what the sign dictates.



Figure 1 Charles Teenie Harris, “Man Holding Copy of Pittsburgh Press,” 1962. Carnegie Museum of Art.

The photograph bears witness to the interplay of image and text. A man dressed in fine urban clothing is rendered partly invisible by the text that stands in front of him. The sign, a

notice, designates the ground that the figure stands on as in possession by an architectural firm. The sign is thus a written representative of the firm and a contract between the firm and the city government that holds anyone who attempts to make use of the grounds without the firm's consent in violation of city ordinances.

The zone ordinance, surrounded by pieces of rubble and stones and in front of the subject, marks the space as the property of the architectural firm. The date establishes when the land became the firm's property. The notice says that the placard should be easy to see to communicate to people that it is illegal to use this space for any purpose; the space cannot be occupied. Harris' subject holds a newspaper directly above the zoning notice, the front of which includes a leading front story with a byline about drug laws. Despite the zoning ordinance, the subject momentarily occupies the space and does so with the intention of unveiling zoning's affect on the black community. The juxtaposition of word and text in the photograph suggests that urban renewal has undone Harris' community in general, and his subject in particular. The bold letters of "**ZONING NOTICE**" and "**U.S. Tightens Rein on Drugs,**" draw a connection between the two seemingly disparate topics of urban renewal and black drug use. This connection is drawn, too, by Harris' subject placement of the city newspaper right above the zoning notice.

Harris' subject is both a foil to and symbol of American masculinity. Its popular narratives characterize the ideal man as one who is self made, self-reliant, physically and mentally toughened, and has spatial autonomy. As such, the man in the photograph is presented as a heroic figure, a representative of a fractured community who, by holding the newspaper up, problematizes zoning by pointing attention to the socioeconomic effects of zoning, or, in other words, the interplay of the politicization and regulation of space and black suffering. The

subject's pose, though vulnerable, is also defiant. The unpopulated area of land he stands on emphasizes his "singleness." The majority of the image is negative space, and the only crowded area is in center of the image, where Harris' subject stands with his knees close together, his shoes close together, and his elbows tucked in close to his torso. The subject's solitariness and his closed-in posture is framed by the cleared land that completely surrounds him. Harris' subject is composed in Harris' frame as an intruder, an antagonist to the empty, weedy, rubble-filled space.

In his singleness, the subject appears as representative of his community and a trespassing witness, and his individuality grants him a measure of power as a witness. At the same time, the subject's position as a witness gestures toward a non-normative performance of American masculinity. The "ideal man" should not, as the dominant narrative would go, just stand there. He should display dynamism, activity, and spatial autonomy. However, Harris composes his subject as meek, vulnerable and still. The way the man's suit pants hover at his ankles conveys vulnerability; so, too, do the ankles, which appear close together. And while masculinity is premised on complete visibility, Harris' photograph displays black male visibility as always already fractured and discontinuous. Because the man in the photograph stands right behind the zoning placard, most of his legs are blocked from view. Furthermore, not only are the subject's legs blocked from view, but so is most half of his face. Only his nose and mouth are visible inside of Harris' frame, which makes it difficult to ascertain who the figure might be. It is most likely that Harris had photographed his subject's entire face but altered the image in his dark room, cutting away a portion of his subject's face. In this way, Harris mediates black male visibility, both revealing and hiding his subject.

Harris' photograph provides a frame through which I can explain the methodology of my project, including its multidisciplinary approach. In my project, I pull from urban studies, urban

renewal history, architectural theory, literary studies and visual studies. Post-WII urban renewal history serves as a critical foundation for my analysis of the artistic work produced during the years between 1945 and 1965. The process of urban renewal refers to a variety of architectural and infrastructural developments that are put in place to improve a city. From the information that can be gathered from Harris' photograph, for example, Pittsburgh's city officials granted an architectural firm the right to redevelop an area of land in the Hill District in the hopes of improving the area. Improving a city could involve a range of activities: heightening living conditions for residents; creating or improving a city's commercial and business districts; increasing accessibility between suburbs and a city's popular destinations, improving public transportation; making a city more easily negotiated; drawing money and investments by making a city attractive to future residents and businesses; providing public places residents; providing housing to the homeless or low-income residents; and beautifying a city's environment. Urban planning decisions are contingent on a particular city's condition, location, and, importantly, on the people who are in charge of a city. Usually, plans are created at the level of city government, deliberated on by not only the mayor and other city municipal officers, but also investors, business leaders, city organizers, designers and architectural firms. Because urban planning is such a collaborative project, there can be different influences and political investments that shape an urban planning strategy. An architect, for example, who is participating in developing a planning strategy might give suggestions based on his artistic vision and architectural expertise. A mayor might, on the other hand, be making suggestions based on his political obligations and affiliations. A business might give suggestions that are influenced by its profit strategy. And a city organizer might offer directions based on his direct engagement with city residents and knowledge of their living situations and needs. Thus, urban planning is a very dynamic,

constantly morphing process instigated by competing and non-competing political investments and aesthetic ideologies.

What urban renewal history shows is that architecture is not insulated from politics, including racial ideologies. While urban planning is not intrinsically racist, it has no doubt historically resulted in the mass displacement and dispossession of African American communities all across the nation, especially following World War II. During the war, so much focus was directed at the war effort and so many resources were sent abroad that many of the nation's cities fell into varying states of disrepair and disinvestment. After the war, focus returned to urban redevelopment, especially in the nation's leading cities such as New York and Chicago. Officials at the federal and state level responded to the state of the nation's cities with almost a militant-tinged urgency, which likely was influenced by the nation's victory abroad and dedication to strengthening its global image. But another reason for the legislative urgency to get urban renewal programs started was the very poor conditions of low-income neighborhoods in the nation's cities; poor residents from different races inhabited sections of cities with buildings in states of disrepair and abandonment. Such living conditions posed health issues and issues of crime and violence. Lower-income housing had to be created in conjunction with planning how to redevelop these areas. Another issue that had to be tackled was the suburbanization boom happening across the nation involving mass relocation of mostly white people to city suburbs. As a consequence, leaders of urban renewal strategized how to design cities in a way that would compliment such a change of America's layout; cities had to be accessible, streets had to be widened to accommodate more car traffic, and highways had to be built.

The federal housing act of 1949 was so influential in helping to intensify and expedite urban renewal measures in the nation.¹¹ The federal government aided city governments with the money they needed to rebuild their cities. Legislative policies such as eminent domain made it possible for cities to ordinance zones as belonging under city management. In this way, areas could be condemned, and thus, belong to the city government to implement their planning strategies. Eminent domain measures were heavily racialized and classist because planning boards and commissions had free domain to decide what constituted an area or building as condemned. Slum Clearance committees determined city locations that they considered to be slums, or “blighted,” and, therefore, ordered them to be condemned and demolished. Committees used an assortment of strategies and methods of ascertaining which areas they believed to be blighted. Documentary photographs, including aerial photography, and written reports recorded such blighted areas that needed to be demolished.

And in many instances, areas that were wholly condemned and completely razed did not deserve to be because they only showed relatively minimal states of disrepair. However, the move to condemn served planning strategies by giving reasons to displace residents—mostly black and lower-income—and repurpose the area for constructing bridges, creating superblocks, widening avenues, providing land for hospitals, universities and other institutions needing more space, and building high-capacity lower-income housing. Planners also aimed to reconstruct mixed-use areas, favoring a more systematic organization of cityscapes where there were

¹¹ The federal government administered more than \$1.5 billion dollars in aid for nationwide urban renewal projects. This data is taken from Neil A. Wynn’s *The A-Z of the Roosevelt-Truman Era* (New York: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009) 291. For more information on the Housing Law of 1949, see Ashley A. Foard and Hilbert Fefferman, “Federal Urban Renewal Legislation,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1960): 635-684. Fundamentally, the federal housing act of 1949 allocated money to state and city offices across the nation for the purposes of infrastructural and architectural redevelopment, which including low-income housing, slum clearance projects, building construction, highway construction and the creation of public parks and other public facilities.

divisions between residential areas and commercial districts.¹² Redlining involved a set of practices implemented with the outcome of creating rigid socioeconomic spatial divisions. The consequence was that lower income residents in a city, which included a high percentage of black people, were economically restricted to particular areas of a city, making black belts an escapable area for black people who wanted to leave as a result of such areas being disinvested and lacking sufficient resources. Black neighborhoods were literally under attack in the time of post-war urban renewal and really have not recovered since then. Public housing complexes gradually turned into dilapidated buildings with high crime and drug activity. The concentration of black residents into small zones of consigned spaces with no access to sufficient resources have left blacks in hopeless situations that are hard to leave due to lack of money. Urban renewal, indeed, created the modern-day black ghetto.

My decision to analyze literature and art stemmed organically from the subject of my study, black masculinity. Blackness as an object of theorizing and study has always been very visible.¹³ The history of slavery, racial inequity, and racial violence has underlined visibility as an important matter through which the systems of racism could be studied and understood. And Harris' own photograph, for example, serves to highlight the interplay racial violence in the form of architecture, the written word, and visibility. Scholars such as David Marriott, Michele

¹² Planners were either intentionally or unintentionally disregarding the existent community ecologies of areas they aimed to demolish and how this would affect residents and cultural makeups of communities.

¹³ See David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visibility in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

Wallace and Nicole Fleetwood have expressed how urgent visual studies is to understanding systems of black oppression and fleshing out visibility as a very political, and historically dangerous, tool of black subjugation.¹⁴

While visibility has posed as threatening to black civil rights, the visual has also been a representational medium for African American artists and scholars to consider how blackness can be reconfigured through the dismantlement of anti-black images of black people and the inclusion of more truthful images of black people.¹⁵ Cultural movements including black renaissances that emerged in different cities, the Black Arts Movement and the Civil Rights Movement included a saturation of a liberatory black visual aesthetics and experimental black visual art. The visualization of the black body was thus a site of contestation. And the black male body has definitely been its own site of contestation.¹⁶ Groundbreaking exhibits such as Thelma Golden's "Black Male" at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1994 and the recent exhibition at the Du Sable Museum, "Question Bridge," have explored the hypervisibility of black men and the

¹⁴ In her book, *Dark Designs & Visual Culture* (Duke University Press, 2004), Michele Wallace calls for a decentering of African American musical tradition as the loci of black scholarship, positing that visual studies warrants serious critical inquiry. Wallace's text has been formative for my analytic approach to black visual studies because of its attentiveness to the way anti-blackness as a visually-oriented ideology organizes the visual field through which blackness becomes visible as an object category. I am also indebted to David Marriott's scholarship, which includes both *Haunted Life* and *On Black Men* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000). One of Marriott's most illuminating passages about the centrality of the visual in black life, in my opinion, can be found in the author's introduction to *Haunted Life*, where he writes how the "power of exclusion... shapes black experience of political and ethical life and the awful feeling of one's visible invisibility" (xxi).

¹⁵ See Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

¹⁶ Jacqueline Goldsby lynching, and it as a visual trope. Stereotypical images of sambo/ visualization of black male body as bestial/ hypersexualized/ Robert Mapplethorpe and Carl Van Vechten

consequences that it holds for societal perceptions of black men, how structural racism operates, and black men's perception of themselves and their relationship to society.¹⁷

It is with this consideration of how visuality has played—and still plays—such a formative role in the constitution of blackness that I not only incorporate painting and photography in my analysis but also approach the African American literature I study in this book with the knowledge that while it has its own structure and mode of representation, it is also very visual. Furthermore, considering that several of the artists and writers I study either knew each other or knew of each other's work, I believe it is generative to put their work into a larger conversation about how post-WWII urban renewal programs informed and shaped the stakes of artistically representing black masculinity.¹⁸

To make clear, the intent of this project is not to describe to the reader what I think the experience of urban renewal felt like for African American men living in the nations cities in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. My objective is to use a collective of authors and artists whose work provides insight into the ways in which this experience can be imagined and articulated.

¹⁷ Hank Willis, Sanford Biggers, Rashid Johnson

¹⁸ Two texts that have helped me considerably in seeing the interplay of African American literature and visual art are Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin?': The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Sara Blair's *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Griffin's seminal work on representations of black migration in literature features several instances when the author pinpoints migration tropes that are present in both African American literature and art. For instance in her chapter on black experience in the urban space, Griffin begins with dual close readings—one visual and the other literary—of the tenement, looking at Jean Lacy's artwork, "Welcome to the Ghetto Land" (1986) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). In *Harlem Crossroads*, Blair examines the centrality of the visual in the work of African American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Blair illustrates how the contentious nature of African American visuality and its oppressive underpinnings surfaces in these writers' works and how such writers negotiate the terrain of the visual.

In this project I examine how writers use particular literary, narrative, and rhetorical devices to represent their male protagonists' relationship to the cities they inhabit. My close readings are attentive to, for instance, the rhythm of sentences, which coordinate with the way a character feels or moves; dense, thick descriptions of the black male body; and metaphorical words and phrases. What these close readings yield is a body of examples showing how urban renewal terminology is directly and indirectly present in the way writers describe the physical and psychical characteristics of their protagonists. Similarly, urban renewal frames the way I analyze the way visual artists render black male subjects in their photography and painting. Aesthetic techniques I examine include compositional organization, the use of scale, lighting, color schemes, and lines. For instance, painters such as Hughie Lee Smith and Romare Bearden use composition in contrastive ways but communicate similar messages about black male visibility and invisibility. Smith renders his subjects in a somewhat realistic manner and uses softer brushstrokes which gives the impression that subjects are melting right before the viewer. On the other hand, Romare Bearden renders his male figures with bolder colors and gives them more angular shapes. From Bearden's artistic viewpoint, black men are embodied collages, exhibiting mix-matched shapes, facial features and clashing colors. And for Smith, black men resemble moist-clay figures that are acquiescent to the political forces around them.

My methodology incorporates the theories of New Historicism, a branch of cultural criticism that relies on historical data as an important resource for understanding cultural production. It takes as its rationale that in order to understand the aesthetic choices of a cultural product, one has to understand the conditions that produced it. The conditions of the cultural work I analyze that are important to my analysis revolve around the spatial contexts of these cultural artifacts. My book will be divided into three sections, each one focusing on a particular

city: New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. In each section I will focus on literary and visual works that represent black men in the given city. For instance, in my section on New York, I look at the relationship between Gordon Parks and the culture of violence in Harlem. In the section on Chicago, I include the paintings of Hughie Lee Smith, who was greatly influenced by the suite of changes that affected South Side Chicago. My analysis of Pittsburgh examines the imagery and acoustics of steel in Romare Bearden's Pittsburgh-influenced collages and examines the role they play in voicing the history of black male labor and the post-war challenges black men faced in securing work and housing.

This project focuses exclusively on New York City, Chicago and Pittsburgh. I selected these cities for different reasons. One important reason is that both New York City and Chicago are commonly written about in African American literature and represented in African American art. This is primarily because the two cities became important destinations for blacks and were two important centers of African American cultural production. I incorporate Pittsburgh as another center of African American cultural production that was heavily shaped by the city's industrial identity. All three cities were integral locations where the strategies of urban renewal on the city-scale were experimented with and tested.¹⁹ These strategies, then, were adopted by other cities whose officials were developing similar urban renewal plans. The size of the cities I write about, along with the fact that their black belts were sites for widely recognized political movements and cultural works, gets at why the wide-scale restructuring of these black belts appeared to touch a nerve in the nation's black public sphere and gained significant attention

¹⁹ New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh were not only cities that became testing sites for urban renewal approaches but they were locations for renowned black cultural production. When deciding which cities I would focus on, I chose ones that corresponded to a large enough literary and visual archive that would enable me to see specific patterns of representation and trace the temporal trajectory of these representations. Simply put, one can find a decent percentage of African American literature and art that represent the three cities I focus on in my dissertation.

with writers and artists who did not even live in these cities. My logic for choosing the writers and artists that appear in this project is because these figures spent significant time in the respective cities they use as the background for their work; for example, Ralph Ellison lived in New York, Richard Wright in Chicago, and Romare Bearden spent some of his formative years in Pittsburgh. The familiarity these artists have with the cities they represent is very clear through their intimate engagement with the cities' landscape, social environment, tempo and general "feel." The value of this intimacy for my analytic approach is that the artists' portrait of these cities are visceral, highly spatial, hypersensitive and intricate and thereby allow for rich close readings that dig into fictional black characters' engagement with their respective cities.

Organization of the Project

Fundamentally, my dissertation is looking at three different tropes, which are in essence three different ways of conceptualizing black men's sensorial experience with urban cities undergoing redevelopment. These three tropes are outsidership, clogs, and steel. They burgeon from the different sets of authors and writers I bring together and the types of aesthetic treatments they use to represent their fictional black male characters. What I hope the reader learns through my analysis of the urban renewal tropes I present in this project is not only how influential urban renewal was in the formation of urban African American aesthetics, but, also, the underpinnings of urban renewal discourse in African American aesthetic representations of black masculinity.

Chapter one, "New York," discusses the role of urban renewal in propelling black men into perpetual "outsidership." By this term, I refer to black men's circumstances of not having access to the insides of buildings that offer resources and protection. To build my argument, I

analyze the interplay of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, and Gordon Parks' photographic representation of the novel for *LIFE*. I particularly look at how Parks communicates the blurred line between public and private that constitutes urban black male life in New York City. Parks does so by composing the city's architecture as complicit in rendering black men like the Invisible Man visible. And as the frame for Parks' artistic work, Ellison's novel conveys black masculinity as a hypervisual subject position that is both invisibilizing and deindividualizing. This notion is made apparent in another book I analyze in this chapter, James Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*. Black, male, and impoverished, the novel's protagonist, Rufus Scott, is both a spectacle and one who white acquaintances and passersby pretend not to see. The assumption of several white characters in the book that the protagonist is strong—a dangerous stereotype that has followed black men—works against Rufus Scott, who is desperate for help and, ultimately, visibility. The protagonist's abjection translates into his dreams of New York City's destruction, which, I argue, exposes the immoral foundations—"the bottom" if you will—of the city. Alongside Baldwin's novel, I look at Gordon Parks' photography of a Harlem-based youth gang called the Midtowners. I attend to the frequency with which Park captures the buttocks of the gang members. They are frequently captured crouching with their bottoms to Parks' camera, and, thus, I build on this pattern to theorize black masculine existence as a perpetual defense against literal and figurative "penetrations." This penetration comes in the form of physical violence and surveillance.

The historical context for my concept of outsidership is Robert Moses' slum clearance efforts in predominantly black neighborhoods in New York and his well-known affinity for modernist design. I read outsidership as a spatially-driven physical and existential crisis that fuels black men's feelings of being unsafe, needing to constantly be on the run, always being watched,

and wistful for safe, private spaces. I read black men's forced outsidership within the context of the queer terminology, "being outed." This phrase alludes to the event by which an individual's sexual orientation, once private, is forced into the public without the individual's consent or planning. Once private, the individual's identity now becomes open to observation, reception, judgment, inspection and consumption. The act of "outing" someone is viewed as a violent assault on the person who was in the closet, deprived of the ability to stay in the closet for as long as he wants or choose when, where, how and to whom he wants to make his announcement. To be outed, then, is to be stripped of the ability to plan and shapes one's relationship to the outside; the private is violently cast into the public. While conventions of American masculinity convey men as impenetrable, the male characters I examine in this chapter are consistently penetrable and vulnerable by nature of their perpetual outsidership. Such men are vulnerable to violence and surveillance at every turn.

In chapter two, titled "Chicago," I use the image of the crowded tenement building, a popular spatial trope in the black cultural imaginary, as the starting place to think philosophically and aesthetically about how spatial issues such as congestion, suffocation and stuckness are ultimately conditions of embodiment. Feelings of being "clogged" were shared by many black residents in neighborhoods such as South Side Chicago in the 1950s, the decade I primarily focus on. In my chapter I look at how congestion raises existential questions about black men's relationship to their community, their relationship to their own blackness, their attitudes toward vulnerability and their concept of individual freedom. These questions of black masculinity, I argue, can be productively explored through the metaphor of "clogging." I explain how conventions of masculine appearance and behavior drastically change in the face of black congestion. The black men I look at in Richard Wright's 1953 novel *The Outsider*, Frank

Marshall Davis' 1948 poetry collection, *47th Street*, and Hughie Lee Smith's 1950s urban landscape paintings are turned into vulnerable, malleable and viscous subjects who heavily refigure what it means to be a black man in particular, and a man in general. I position these kind of aesthetic representations of black men as working against the common figure of the sturdy, nonfearful, unreflective man who is quick to think, move and act. This figure is dominant in the hardboiled genre of the 1950s. While work such as Richard Wright's novel, for instance, does incorporate aspects of this genre, his protagonist, Damon Cross, acts within a liminal space that merges displays of masculine strength and reactivity with displays of periods of hesitance, vulnerability, and slowness—all attributes that can be likened to the behavior and characteristics of clogs. Such a merging is constituted by the nature of black masculinity, which is heavily shaped by conventions of American masculinity but simultaneously shaped by structures of inequity and dispossession that poses limits and challenges to black men's adherence to these same conventions. Fundamentally, the chapter hypothesizes the import of thinking about black crowdedness both literally and figuratively and considers how physical experiences of being packed within tight spaces with black people affects a black man's relationship to his masculinity and how he performs it.

My third chapter, "Pittsburgh," analyzes what I call the "poetics of steel" in Lloyd L. Brown's 1951 prison novel, *Iron City*, Romare Bearden's collage series, *Pittsburgh Memories* and Charles "Teenie" Harris' photographs of the Hill District undergoing redevelopment. Pittsburgh's position as one of the nation's major centers of steel production greatly influenced the way Brown, Bearden and Harris represent black male subjectivity and show how steel structures the relationship between black men and Pittsburgh's deindustrialized and revitalized landscape. In the context of the artists' representation of black men, steel acts as a medium

through which one can see the tie between black masculine identity and systems of confinement and dispossession. Lloyd L. Brown's semiautobiographical novel takes place in a fictional Pittsburgh jail, a location that I identify as a microcosm of 1950s Pittsburgh, heavily segregated by race and class and having a culture heavily influenced by the city's steel industry. I examine how the prison as a steel structure, befit with a myriad of interlocking systems of confinement and restriction, raises pertinent questions about the centrality of mobility to masculine identity. I also examine how steel permeates the broken male bodies Romare Bearden configures in his collage-series on Pittsburgh. In particular, I imagine Bearden's art process as evoking the behavior of the steel furnace, which is machine that melts and reconfigures iron ore. With the steel furnace in the background of my visual reading of Bearden's work, I illustrate how Bearden's abstract rendering of the black male body alludes to the way in which black steel workers in Pittsburgh have been violently shaped, physically and psychically, by the city's industrialism. I end my chapter on steel with Charles "Teenie" Harris' mid-20th century photographs of Pittsburgh's Hill District. I exclusively look to images of the legendary black neighborhood undergoing demolition projects and examine the posture and appearance of black men who Harris captured along with the presence of steel bulldozers, tractors and building debris. My reading of Harris involves juxtaposing steel-based demolition equipment with the invisibilized black male bodies, victims of Pittsburgh urban renewal project called the "Pittsburgh Renaissance."

To close this section on my project's organization, I do want to take the opportunity to make clear what this dissertation is and is not doing. I envision this project not as a thorough sociological study of the effect of urban renewal on black men. My goal is to use the particular histories of urban renewal in each of the cities I look at as a touchstone, a platform for then

thinking aesthetically and philosophically about how writers and authors, all black men, represent the physical and psychical lives of black male victims of urban renewal in their artwork. This dissertation is very much about representation and how artists and writers thought through the sociological and economic and political crises of urban renewal on the entire black community through aesthetic representations of black men. The aim is to put weight on pulling out the rhetorical, literary, visual and thematic devices, to closely analyze how they structure black men in their work, or, in other words, how they design the sensory perception and emotional worlds of their subjects. Additionally, I hope to show the value of conceptualizing urban renewal as a disciplinary architectural system linked with literary and visual metaphors (e.g. blank space, crowded descriptions, invisible characters) that promote critical thinking about race, gender, class and sexuality.

What has been missing in scholarship on urban renewal is a sustained analysis on the particular effects urban renewal and its attendant dangers--dispossession, eviction, eminent domain, criminalization--has had on black men. Missing, too, is critical work that focuses heavily on the interplay of urban renewal and African American poetics.²⁰ In other words, what this dissertation does to “fill the gap” in a sense is to look to the field of literature and art as an archive of information about what it “feels” like from the perspective of black men to live in a neighborhood or community undergoing redevelopment. What are the psychical, physical and other sensorial experiences of such men and how do these experiences both inform their masculine performances or expose the conventions of masculinity on which these men have built their identities? While the writers and artists I look to are not social theorists in the formal sense,

²⁰ A scholar whose work comes relatively close to the theoretical designs of my project is Carlo Rotella, author of *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (University of California Press, 1998). Rotella takes a fresh approach to urban studies by charting the redevelopment of cities including Chicago and Philadelphia and how it translated into particular stylistic and poetic choices in the urban fiction of writers such as Nelson Algren and William Gardner.

they do borrow on their own experiences and that of men around them and use aesthetics and their respective mediums—whether literature, poetry, painting, or photography--to communicate the intricacies of black male life and experience in such cities such as New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh. By focusing on the experiences of their protagonists and subjects, the writers and artists are able to imagine the kind of inner dialogues, bodily stresses, sensory perceptions, emotions, movement, behaviors that black men may have experienced as their communities were systematically dismantled. By focusing on the humanity of these black men, the writers and artists I examine write against the architectural paternalism that was at the crux of urban renewal projects across the nation, the tenets of which were that those in charge of the projects knew what was best for their cities. Furthermore, the architectural paternalism of those in charge of urban renewal projects homogenized the residents in the communities they deemed blighted and fit for demolition. The particularities of such communities were not taken account. Planning meetings, commissions and authorities and architects and business leaders did not actually work with the communities they were dismantled. They saw these communities as made up of faceless people without particularities, and thus did not take into account the different effects evictions and dispossession would have on these communities. As such, the artists and writers I study have an aesthetics fueled by embodiment and particularly, subjects that were ignored in architectural conversations about and blueprints for city redevelopment. In opposition to the deindividualizing, disembodied language of urban renewal, the African American writers and artists in my project focused heavily on the individualizing and rendering particular the effects of urban renewal on black men.

CHAPTER 2

NEW YORK: BOTTOMED-OUT MEN

IT'S COLD CONCRETELY COLD

IN STONE COLD KILLER COLD NYC

AND ME CAUGHT COLD HAND IN AMERICA

Ted Joans, "Cold"

Introduction: Outing Black Men

The conversation about the meaning of public and private space has its difficulties as it pertains to larger discussions about black male safety. Where exactly can black men go to be safe? Is there a safe space to begin with? While public and private space is inflected by a gendered hierarchy—where the public space is masculinized and the private space if feminized—the meaning of belonging to either of these spaces gets recoded in consideration of where black men “belong.” The public space has historically been a violent arena for African American men. Anti-black ideologies have certainly made black men vulnerable in such spaces as the public space, which has resulted in increased self-consciousness, spatial pathologies and anxieties, and paranoia. While the private space might typically be considered as a safe space because of the degree of concealment and anonymity it provides, it has not necessarily been a

completely safe space for black men either. The urban renewal strategies carried out in New York in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s proves this much.

Robert Moses, New York's legendary urban planner, once described urban redevelopment in a manner that not only was disturbing, but revelatory: "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat axe." At the time Moses had full rein over New York's urban redevelopment, the city certainly did need an architectural and infrastructural makeover. Congestion, insufficient public spaces, and dilapidated housing were prominent issues that needed to be addressed by the city's municipal offices. In response to these issues, Moses, with the assistance of redevelopment boards, slum clearance committees, business partners and architectural firms, orchestrated a major urban renewal program that not only tackled New York's cosmic issues but also literally restructured the cityscape. An enthusiast of modernist urban design, Moses proposed open vistas and green space, wider boulevards to ease traffic congestion, superblocks, and an increased number of bridges. The New York Housing Authority provided concrete, multi-storied, "efficient" public housing units for relocated low-income residents whose neighborhoods were condemned for redevelopment or were in search for better housing. Fundamentally, efficiency was the *modus operandi* that guided Robert Moses' plans for New York City.

Despite the need the city had for redevelopment, the urgency with which Moses and his partners attacked the city's infrastructural problems revealed a viciousness toward the communities deemed to be standing in the way of New York's progress. Moses' own metaphor for urban renewal, likening it to butchery, conceded a dangerous, opportunistic approach to design, in which case, people WERE indistinguishable from the same buildings slated for condemnation and demolition. Moses' choice of metaphor illuminates the way he saw New

York's environment and the people who inhabited it. The make of a meat axe allows it to cut through animal meat, which is fibrous, sinewy and tough. Also, the weight and shape of the axe's blade makes it easy to cut through bone. Ultimately, the meat axe is a tool with which to cut meat into pieces suitable and manageable for preparation and consumption. Moses' planning approach evokes the meat axe in its disciplining and rendering of urban space, especially in terms of the rationalization of space and the blunt, ruthless method by which communities were divided up to make room for redevelopment. In the names of congestion and blight, many low-income residents in New York's boroughs were literally put out, evicted from their homes.

The experiences of being "put out" underlines the representation of black masculinity in the fiction and photography I look at in this chapter: Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, Gordon Parks' photographic representation of Ellison's novel as well as his documentation of a Harlem gang, and James Baldwin's novel, *Another Country*. To be "put out" connotes the event when a person is forced outside of a building, typically as a punishment. The idea that being sent outside can be a form of punishment typifies the public space--which I define as any space outside of the domestic—as potentially unsafe and offensive. The individual put outside is rendered vulnerable and subject to the contingencies and unpredictability of the public space. By contingencies and unpredictability I am referring to the fact that the public space is a dynamic that is constantly changing depending on the people that inhabit it at any given moment. Thus, a person put out into a public space is not necessarily powerless in the space, but is largely dependent on the surrounding people and environment out of which the public space is constituted. And in the age of urban renewal, private space stood on nebulous grounds. What was supposed to be private—the home—was open to public investigation and governmental

ownership. If one's home stood in an area needed by another or appeared in disrepair, it was no longer the resident's but the governments.

I lay out the definition of being “put out” as a platform for thinking about how the systems that made Moses' urban renewal projects possible, particularly eminent domain, slum clearance, and eviction, serve as frames through which we can read the black masculine crisis of penetrability. I use the ideology of slum clearance advanced by leaders of urban renewal to problematize the public and private divide, which does not hold up when considering the safety of black men. Of course, this binary has already been troubled enough within the scope of African American scholarly criticism. But the way I wish to trouble this divide feeds off of the destruction of the black private space carried out so traumatically by architects and planners. In this age of post-WWII urban renewal, black private space virtually was non-existent. No space belonging to lower-income blacks were thoroughly private. There was always already the risk that this private space could no longer be one's anymore. And many private spaces become public, invaded by interstate highways and avenues.

By nature of the white supremacist logic and discourses that render the black man as pathological, criminal, and hypersexual, black masculinity has been an identity formation forced to make themselves as invisible as possible. For the sake of avoiding violence and recrimination, black men have historically had to make themselves invisible. They have done so by retreating to private spaces like the home, ensuring that they are not visible to the criminal system by strictly following laws, or perfecting modes of secrecy and discretion. However, black masculinity is intrinsically spectacular by nature of it being produced out of a white supremacist ideology. However, similar to the dominant discourses on gay sexuality, dominant discourses on black

masculinity have made the identity a threat and thus have created the closet in which black men have had to hide.

This chapter looks at representations of black male penetrability in order to show how black masculine identity is heavily informed by anxieties about being penetrated by the outside. Furthermore, this chapter explores how private spaces, which are forms of closets, do not necessarily protect black men from the dangers of the outside. The outside can come in the form of another human being or can be unprotected, open spaces. By using the word, ‘penetrated,’ I acknowledge the sexual allusions that undergird images of insertions, invasions and punctures and the sexual nature of violence directed toward black men, whose sexuality is particularly what has made them threatening. If black masculinity is a state of existence premised on the threat that one’s maleness can be forcibly taken away, then the black male is always already subject to the penetrative gaze of the public space, and, coordinately, to the dangers that accompany outsideness for black men. Ultimately, what Ralph Ellison, Gordon Parks and James Baldwin communicate is the intrinsically fluid nature of outside and inside for black masculine existence. Setting their representations of this crisis in New York City, the three artists foretell the particular vulnerabilities attached to the urban space. Marked by congestion of people and traffic, limited semi-private spaces, more crime, and more police, New York City, like other high-density urban spaces, serves as a space where black men, already hypervisible, or made even more visible and vulnerable to their environment.

For instance, James Baldwin’s homeless protagonist in *Another Country*, Rufus Scott, feels constantly bombarded by New York City’s advertisements and billboards. They appear to be reminders to Scott of his inability to work or make a living, two things that define, in popular culture, masculine success. In a sense, the advertisements penetrate Scott’s sensory

mechanism, encouraging him to participate in an economy that is fundamentally responsible for the dispossession of black people. And in Gordon Parks' photo-essay documenting the everyday lives of Harlem youth gang members, images abound depicting young black male teens in violent situations. Harlem's renowned position as one of the nation's most celebrated scenes of black cultural life and most disinvested serves as the background of Parks' photographs. Scenes of black dispossession and architectural disrepair interlace with scenes of black boys standing with their backs to Parks' camera and black boys being frisked by rivaling gang members. Parks conveys how risk permeates black youth's everyday life in 1950s Harlem and how this perpetual danger of emasculation nurtures a palpable paranoia amongst young black men of being penetrated by fists and weapons. Fundamentally, Parks draws a relationship between the disinvestment of Harlem and scenes of black male penetration that inform black masculinity identity. In the Harlem Parks depicts, black men penetrate and are penetrated.

The vulnerability of black masculine life does not wholly prevent ways that black men evade penetration. Thus, I turn to examples of displays of black masculine defensiveness in works such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The novel traces the negotiations of a protagonist who desires visibility at first but becomes so disenchanted by pressures to assimilate that he encroaches into invisibility. However, there are displays of black masculine visibility that appear to grant agency. For instance, I turn to the performances of a black male zoot suitors who intrigue Ellison's protagonist because of their displays of finesse and handsomeness. For the protagonist, the zoot suitors defy the closet by spectacularizing their already spectacular masculinity; instead of retreating to a norm that would grant some semblance of assimilation, the zoot-suitors enhance their alienated position in society. Being "outside history" affords the men a form of protection and self-assuredness that Ellison's protagonist is amazed by, and to some

degree, even envious of. And it is no surprise that the protagonist finds the zoot suiters existence outside history to be terrifying. To be outside a historical narrative is to be rendered placeless in time and space. It is to be reduced to a continuous present, supposed not to exist as a past or future self. It is to suggest that one is outside of a narrative telos. It is to suggest that one's culture, habits and practices do not have a context that would make them legible. The zoot suiters that Ellison's protagonist encounters display a radical presentism in the face of anti-black ideologies that render them history-less, and, simultaneously, placeless. Their vibrant clothing and movement demonstrates an attempt to make a place for themselves in spaces where they are rendered invisible by means of violence and dispossession.

Gendering Dispossession

In the below passage, the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, gives a passionate, galvanizing speech critiquing New York City urban renewal as an endangerment to African Americans' gender identities:

“Dispossession! *Dis*-possession is the word!” I went on. “They’ve tried to dispossess us of our manhood and womanhood!...These are the days of dispossession, the season of homelessness, the time of evictions. We’ll be dispossessed of the very brains in our heads!”

The protagonist stresses the word dispossession throughout the speech, a word referring to the state of losing one's belongings, particularly one's home. The protagonist's speech codes dispossession as having more than dealing with just homes, but identity. Dispossession, race, and gender are unified through the protagonist's words. Gender is something that, vocalized in the

Invisible Man's speech, can be taken away. Thus, the protagonist's logic communicates that gender identity is supported and maintained through spatial autonomy, or the ability to hold ownership over space. The protagonist makes this argument when he says, "they are trying to dispossess us of our manhood and womanhood." The fact that "they" are not given a specific identity helps spur the anger of the crowd. "They" becomes a dispersed being: impalpable, everywhere, and far-reaching.

I use this passage from Ralph Ellison's novel to expound on the artistic representations of the effect of dispossession and eviction on black masculine identity. I refer to the speech on dispossession in Ellison's novel and the condemnation of black homes under the rule of eminent domain and project of slum clearance to talk about the vulnerability of "publicness." As a leader and model of urban renewal strategies, New York City, under the leadership of city commissioner Robert Moses, became a model for many other American cities in terms of its strategies for limiting city blight and, to its mind, restoring the city's architectural infrastructure. The Housing Act of 1949 allocated more than \$65 million dollars to the city for its development projects and gave New York City's redevelopment leaders free reign to implement the strategies they saw fit to revamp the city.²¹ Eminent domain gave the municipal system the right to take control of residential areas and business properties that were deemed to be unfit for occupation, and thus, blighted. This housing policy consequently displaced populations without much attention to the value invested in these areas and the history-making happening on the

²¹See Themis Chronopoulos' "Robert Moses and the Visual Dimension of Physical Disorder: Efforts to Demonstrate Urban Blight in the Age of Slum Clearance," *Journal of Planning History* 13, no. 3 (2013): 207-233

community level.²² Now homeless, African Americans were put into high-capacity, low-income housing or directed to relocation agencies. There was no documentation kept that tracked the whereabouts of all black residents evicted; it is safe to assume that a significant percentage fell through the cracks. The displaced and dispossessed were fundamentally thrown out to the curb.

The Invisible Man's speech suggests that intrinsic to black masculine identity is the condition of outsideness, a forced publicness that jeopardizes the ability of a black male to be "inside" his manhood or to fully occupy it. Being at home in one's manhood is jeopardized because of the very nature of the ideology of American masculinity, premised on spatial control, groundedness, and the freedom to occupy. The danger of being dispossessed of one's manhood, made clear by the Invisible Man, is the subsequent danger of being dehumanized. Emasculation and dehumanization are inextricably tied. Thus, the construction of masculine identity that plays out in Ellison's novel reveals a perpetual tension within the black male to hold on to a manhood that is always threatened to be taken away. Tied to this tension is the pernicious risk of the black male being "outed" by the city's architecture in such a manner that dispossesses him of his masculinity by making his masculinity open for discussion, surveillance, dissection, and recrimination. Openness and outsideness, thus, in Ellison's novel, proves to be a risk for such violence to happen. What I seek to accomplish in this section is to point to the seeming paradoxical nature of black masculinity. The fictional black male subjects I analyze fight in a myriad of ways against an ongoing threat of being dispossessed of one's masculinity, as though a black male can be evicted from his masculinity.²³ This image of male dispossession conveyed

²² See Samuel Zipp's *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²³ In his book, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) Ronald L. Jackson II argues that, theoretically, masculinity is not something that can be lost or taken away. Regardless,

by the Invisible Man likens gender to a space of habitation and dwelling. For the Invisible Man and other black male characters in Ellison's novel, the Invisible Man's message about gender dispossession stands to describe their struggle with emasculation. Ellison illustrates, specifically through the Invisible Man, the emasculating and dehumanizing nature of publicness. This publicness—being “thrown” out into openness—finds the black men in Ellison's novel as limited in spatial agency and made vulnerable to visual—and even literal—dissection. Eviction out into openness also subjects Ellison's black male characters to the unpredictable nature of the outside. Anything might just happen. Despite the emasculating nature of publicity, black masculinity has proved to be paradoxical in that the outsideness has also been the catalyst for and nurturer of a hypermasculine behavior, a physical and psychic toughening through the continuous engagement with outside elements. Yet, this same toughening makes the black male subject even more vulnerable and threatening to the outside. It is a perpetually vicious cycle.

Gordon Parks photographic representation of Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the August 1952 issue of *LIFE* explores the intertwining emasculating and dehumanizing nature of black male visibility and openness while also staging black male subjects' wrestling against this violence. In this section, I study Gordon Parks Ellisonian photoessay, selecting images from the magazine and images that did not make it into the magazine. Created amidst the wide sweeping activity of urban renewal head mastered by Robert Moses, Parks' photographic representations of *Invisible Man* viciously collide with the practices of urban renewal, which ran on slum clearance, evictions without proper notice, and a “bulldozer” mentality. The effects of Robert Moses operation literally opened gaps and holes in New York City's black communities, then vulnerable to be used by the city. Approached like a land occupied by enemies—both human and

Jackson points out that the fear black men have of being stripped of their masculinity is real and has material consequences.

built—Moses’ slum clearance turned the city into a field under total war. The effects were that black residents were evicted from the spaces and turned outside and made vulnerable. I use this imagery as the framework for thinking about how Gordon Parks conceptualizes the nature of black masculinity in New York City by using the camera, architecture, and open spaces as co-conspirators and investigative instruments that attempt to force the Invisible Man into visibility. Conclusively, Parks reframes outside and inside and what each means in the context of black masculine identity. In his photographs, outside and inside seem to invade each other’s spaces, which for black male subjects, has historically been dangerous. Black masculinity has historically been cast as a state of perpetual openness to the environment. And in the case of urban renewal in 1950s New York, perpetual openness became a rapid and pervasive state of existence for residents in the city’s marginalized communities. Slum clearance and bulldozer redevelopment put to the forefront an issue already affecting black men.

The subject playing the Invisible Man in Gordon Parks’ photographs is both victim of this push out into openness and outsidership but is also used by Parks in ways that suggests attempts to push back against this exposure. Still, even moments when the Invisible Man attempts to go “inside” the architectures Parks depicts, he remains a spectacle; the outside is always near. The structures meant to protect and hide betray him. What Parks illuminates is an active betrayal of New York City’s space.

Written in 1952, *Invisible Man* was received very well by the nation’s readers and considered an American masterpiece. Thus, it is no surprise that Gordon Parks, who was close friends with Ralph Ellison, and *LIFE Magazine* decided to advertise the novel to its readership.²⁴

²⁴ To read about Parks and Ellison’s friendship and collaborative work, see Michael Raz-Russo, Jean-Christophe Cloutier and John F. Callahan, *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2016).

Not only did the novel offer a drastically alternative image of black people, but its display of the urban condition in New York City—weaving in urban poverty, the black underclass, race riots, and the dramatic pace of urban change—was also at the novel’s foreground. Ellison wrote his acclaimed novel amidst the large-scale displacements that drastically changed the model of New York City after WWII. Under eminent domain, the city’s officials had the legal right to condemn communities as blighted, and thus, condemned to be bulldozed. The space left by these razed communities was used to expand business and commercial districts; create superblocks and build highways.²⁵ Such condemnations and evictions happened frequently in lower income and lower-middle income communities. Robert Moses, the leader of the Slum Clearance Committee, which directed mass removal, described the slum as a “disease” needing a cure.

²⁵ See Wendell E. Pritchett, “The ‘Public Menace’ of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain.” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 21, no. 1 (2003): 1-52.



Figure 2 Photograph, dated 1959, of Robert Moses standing on a tractor (*The New York Times*)

Writing in the June 1945 issue of *The Atlantic* about the importance of slum removal, Moses notes that “almost no city needs to tolerate slums. There are plenty of ways of getting rid of them.” The idea that New York City has to “rid” itself of slums reveals the attitude Moses had toward the slums as a pestilence and the recklessness behind the demolition projects he commanded. While Moses indeed replaced the slums and blighted buildings with low-income

housing projects—particularly because it was cheaper to buy this land— most of these buildings were built closer to New York City’s coastline and away from majority-white neighborhoods.²⁶

LIFE’s artistic collaboration with Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison, titled “A Man Becomes Invisible,” is best described as a photo-narrative that provides a very brief textual summary of Ellison’s novel combined with poignant images that correspond to the text.²⁷ It is uncertain who is responsible for the photographic captions because there is no name provided in the beginning of the photoessay. This anonymity, perhaps, allows for Gordon Parks and his photographs to be at the forefront of the reader’s attention. The text act as a supplement to the images, and together, the word-image representation of the novel not only advertises the work but also provides social commentary on the black male experience in New York City. Gordon Parks’ experience as a photographer for the WPA lent the key element of social realism to his photographic representations of *Invisible Man*. Hired to document the social ills affecting the nation, Parks’ aesthetic not only documented but simultaneously communicated critique. The grittiness and starkness of Parks’ images, far from dramatizing social ills, are meant to communicate hidden truths and to darken the moods of images to the point that they are forced

²⁶ Jonathan Mahler describes Moses’ housing projects bluntly when he writes, “Moses may have thought he was breaking up the city’s ghettos; in fact, he was relocating them and setting them in concrete.” See Jonathan Mahler, “How New York City’s Coastline Became a Place to Put the Poor.” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2012.

²⁷ Not all of Parks’ Ellison-inspired photographs were included in the magazine. For these images, visit the Gordon Parks Foundation website here: <http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/archive/invisible-man-1952>. Additionally, the Howard Greenberg Gallery’s website. Contemporary artist Glenn Ligon formed an exhibit based on Parks’ collection that showed at the gallery, titled “Contact: Gordon Parks, Ralph Ellison, and ‘Invisible Man.’” The exhibit debuted on September 14, 2012, commemorating the 100th anniversary of Parks’ birth. To see installation shots visit the following website: <http://www.howardgreenberg.com/exhibitions/contact-gordon-parks-ralph-ellison-and-invisible-man>

into view to be contended with.²⁸ Parks' photographic representation of the *Invisible Man* is influenced by social realism and communicates a tension between the Invisible Man and New York City's landscape; a push and pull, I argue, that bespeaks a-not-so social realist dynamic of the city's architecture having a dynamism capable of invading the black male body and subjecting it to a publicness that threatens and conspires to dissect. The entanglement of invisibility and publicness that the Invisible Man finds himself caught up in is portrayed through a scene picturing the Invisible Man resurfacing from his hideaway underground, a photograph of the Invisible Man's basement apartment, and an image of Rinehart under a lit, building awning.

The opening image of the feature depicts the Invisible Man (**Figure 3**)—played by an unknown black actor—under a partially lifted sewer cap. This image adds a visual to Ellison's novel by portraying the moment when the protagonist resurfaces after jumping down into the sewer after the race riot he helped to begin. When two white men threaten him, he escapes down into the sewer. The two men, instead of chasing after him, close the sewer with the lid. The pull quote underneath the image reads, "Photographer re-creates the emotional crises of a powerful new novel." Following the title of the feature, a link is made with the process of becoming invisible and emotional crisis, which is poignantly captured in the opening image of the feature. In this photograph is a black male figure whose upper torso is sticking out from a manhole. The actor's lips appear cracked and both eyes are widened as he looks at something off the frame to

²⁸ See Dan Flory's *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2008) for more information about the intersection of film noir and black aesthetics. Flory directly refers to Gordon Parks as a director among a group of directors associated with the "Blaxpotation" genre that heavily incorporated noir aesthetics in his films.

his left; his eyebrows are raised in worry and alertness, and one boldened, blackened line on his forehead registers deep concern.²⁹



Figure 3 First page of Gordon Parks' photoessay in LIFE, August 25, 1952

²⁹ Note the red editing note written over the image in the contact sheet, which reads "print dark." It appears that Parks perhaps wanted an even grittier aesthetic conveyed.

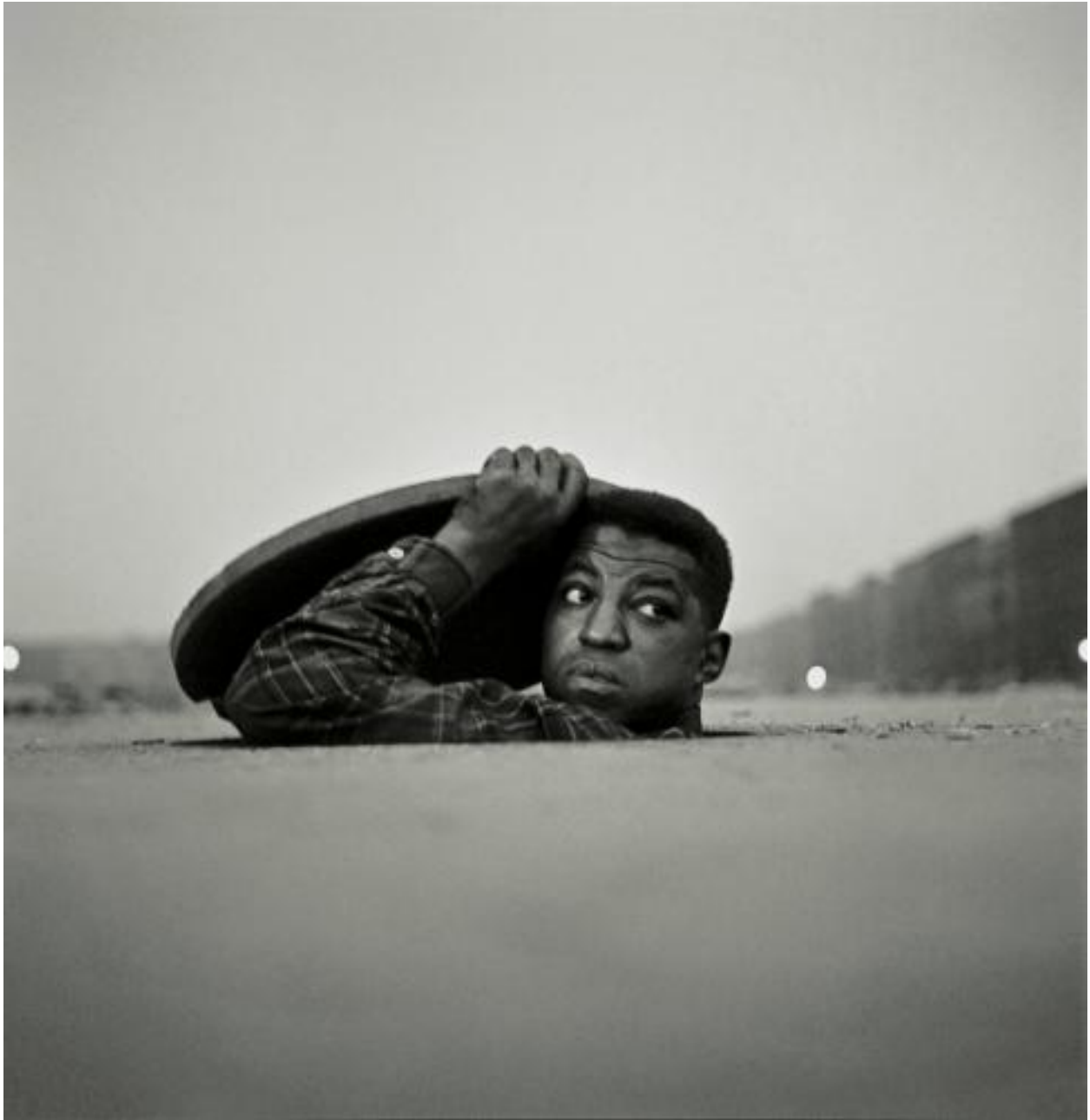


Figure 4 Close-up reproduction of opening image for Gordon Parks' photoessay in *LIFE*, August 25, 1952

His facial features convey fear and distrust as he decides if his surroundings are safe enough for him to exit the manhole. The protagonist's arms and elbows are close to his body, mirroring the purpose of the manhole cover by protecting the protagonist from the outside world. The way the protagonist is clutching the manhole cover conveys distress considering the tight grip. The crisis that this photograph communicates is the protagonist's struggle to become invisible. While the title underneath the photograph describes the protagonist as "becoming invisible," he is very much visible in the photograph before the viewer. His features even appear to be retouched in order to underline the gritty nature of the story. The photograph's viewer is positioned eye level to the Invisible Man's face, permitting an up-close view of his features and clothing. Thus, while the sewer cap closes the subject off from part of the space surrounding him, the lifted side of the sewer cap is where the audience gains access to him through the camera's lens. The presence of the camera as viewer—and that we can see the Invisible Man's "inbetweenness"—dispels the notion that the photograph captures an intimate, solitary moment. While the subject is looking off in fear of an oncoming danger, the viewer gazes upon him, with the subject seemingly unknowing. The gaze is voyeuristic considering that the viewer looks at the subject in his state of vulnerability. It is as though the street is interrupted and has an edge at the image's forefront, allowing the viewer to be at ground level with the subject. The head-on cameral gaze alludes to the perpetual inspection black men experience.³⁰ While the black male subject in the photograph looks elsewhere in fear of being seen, he is composed as being unaware of a gaze is both intimate and intrusive. The questionable identity of the viewer intensifies the feelings of

³⁰ Maurice O. Wallace, too, refers to the racializing and sexualizing "cameral gaze" in his book *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Literature and Culture (1775-1995)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Wallace approaches his study of black masculinity from the standpoint of performance theory, arguing that black masculine identity is heavily mediated through the cameral gaze.

danger that surround the image. The absence of any visible threat makes the reader think about what the protagonist is fearful of and there is a multitude of possible threats that could exist in this open space.³¹ The vanishing line in the photograph directs the viewer's vision to the right-hand side of the photograph. The lines give the illusion that the buildings stretch out all the way back into the photograph. It is as if the lines meet at a point that is blocked by the subject's head. The long stretch of buildings, particularly on the right hand side, gives the impression that the subject is being closed into a simultaneously large and imposing space. The largeness of the space suggests the Invisible Man's vulnerability upon resurfacing from an enclosed, underground space into the open, public, city space.

Lines and perspective are central in making meaning from Parks' photographs. The way by which the viewer's eyes are guided by lines allows for the viewer to register depth. The lines in this photograph are meant to convey the vastness of the urban space in which the protagonist inhabits. It connotes the agoraphobic sensibility of the protagonist, particularly since he is resurfacing back into society. The vastness provides a look into how the protagonist sees the city from his point of view; the background is blurry, which connotes a foreignness. The gray color scale of the photograph conveys a looming darkness.

Parks' use of space and confinement communicates the conflicting relationship Ellison's narrator has with the urban space. While the aboveground is spacious, this spaciousness is threatening. The claustrophobic feeling of the image results from the chromatics Parks uses, particularly his use of gray colors. The gray color of the sky matches the gray color of the

³¹ See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). In her chapter on anxiety, Ngai explains how an anxious individual fears a threat that lies elsewhere. I read this chapter from the standpoint of space, and how for black men, the unpredictable location of a threat—and the fact that this threat constantly moves from place to place—translates into hypervigilance.

cement, blurring the boundary dividing the aboveground from the belowground. The expansion of the sky gives it a visual weight, as though it is pressing down and around the subject.³² The volume of empty space in the photograph is antagonistic, against which the protagonist shields himself from using the manhole cover. The relationship between the subject and the manhole cover is not only created tactically (the protagonist is clutching the cover) but also through color. The darkness of the protagonist's shirt matches the dark color of the manhole cover. The black and white photographic style of the image does a lot in blending body and thing. For instance, the line dividing hair and manhole cover is indistinguishable. The left hand falls under the shadow created by the manhole cover. There is a stark contrast of colors between the black manhole cover and the lightness of the empty space.

The contact sheet (**Figure 5**) displays a range of different postures Parks' experimented with in order to convey black male vulnerability to urban space. This range of postures—10 total—reaffirms the fact that for the Invisible Man, danger is everywhere, and it will call for different postures. In the different images, the model adopts different poses and faces different directions. Because his back never faces the camera the viewer is able to see his face in each picture. With all of these photos together, the contact sheet is like a collection of surveillance shots. In each of the images, including the one selected for Parks' feature, the model, as the Invisible Man, uses the sewer cap as a protective shield. He engages different lines and levels of vision; he looks to the left, to the right, high up, mid level, straightens his neck, and also looks

³² The weightiness of open space in Parks' photograph speaks to the causes of spatial anxieties Kathryn Milun describes in *Pathologies of Modern Space: Empty Space, Urban Anxiety, and the Recovery of the Public Self* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Milun examines how urban architecture's constant demands on the urban citizen body results in his or her desire to turn inward. Agoraphobia, Milun argues, is a "spatial disorder" that should be examined as a possible result of living in an urban space. Milun's theorization of empty space helps explain Parks' use of empty space in his photograph, especially as she points to how identity can contribute to spatial disorders, including racial identities.

over his shoulder. The sewer cap is used to shield different parts of his body from view. For example, in the image in the second row, second from the left, the Invisible Man shields the top of his head and back from view. The sewer cap and street create a 45-degree angle from inside which the Invisible Man gazes. In another image, on the first row and third from the left, the subject raises the sewer cap, almost heroically, with one arm blocking the vanishing point from view and thus limiting the depth of the image.³³

Despite the messages carried through these images, notably to communicate the Invisible Man's strong desire for self-protection, Parks' aesthetic captures a non-remitting invasiveness that challenges the protagonist's objective. This invasiveness not only reveals itself through the incomplete protection the sewer cap provides and the intimate line of vision offered to the viewer by way of the cameral gaze, but also the presence of a stranger in two of the images found on the contact sheet (the second and third rows). The anonymous figure, most likely male, appears like a dark shadow, his solitariness underlined by the large building behind him. The Invisible Man appears to detect this stranger's presence and is captured looking over his shoulder. His vulnerability to surveillance, however, is still present considering that the viewer is still available to see his face, which, unlike in the other images, is brightly illuminated on the left side by an unknown source outside of the frame. In the image, Gordon manages to represent a carceral network of gazes that, despite the subject's attempts, work to expose his blindsides and unprotected areas. In the image, the camera, stranger, and "superbuilding" collaborate and conspire against the subject. The nature of the superbuilding being behind the Invisible Man is fitting considering its largess and purpose. Most likely one of New York City Authority's low

³³ In comparison, to, for instance, the image used for the magazine feature. In that image, the viewer gets a better view of the street's depth as the eyes, directed by the long line of buildings, goes far back into the image.

income housing projects, this mass housing project was built to house the low and middle income tenants moved out of their homes during the slum clearance projects. In Parks' image, the housing project looms large in the background its blocks jutting outwards on different levels. This symbol of displacement encroaches on the Invisible Man's, looming large behind him and shortening the depth of the image.



Figure 5 Gordon Parks' contact sheet, 1952



Figure 6 Enlargement from Gordon Parks' contact sheet, 1952

In the other image with the stranger, the Invisible Man has completely resurfaced (**Figure 6**).

The camera's position is below the subject, looking upwards. The angle of the shot elongates the subject and gives the impression that he is looming over the viewer. Compared to the other images in the contact sheet, the Invisible Man, here, is a lot more vulnerable now considering the

viewer can see his entire body from head to toe. The focal point on the Invisible Man's body is the awkward arrangement of his legs, which make a upside down V. He looks either to be bowl-legged or has widened his legs and shifted weight to one leg in a manner that makes him look unstable. This awkward positioning of the legs is dramatized by the slim cut of the pants. Because of his stance, the viewer sees the depth of the image through his legs, which is a sliver of the superblding that looms in the background. Another strange aspect of the photograph is the presence of the anonymous figure in the background on the left hand side. Wearing the same color of clothing and standing in a similar open posture as the image's main subject, the stranger appears to be in the Invisible Man's likeness; he is a double. Why this doubling? I would argue that this doubling gives the impression that the Invisible Man is both in the foreground and in the background of the image. By showing the Invisible Man occupying two spaces simultaneously, Parks communicates the subject's "hereness" and "thereness," that prevents total invisibility.

In another image, titled "Emerging Man," (**Figure 7**) not included in the contact sheet, the only visible parts of the subject are his head and fingers. The small pebbles on the right of the image give the impression that the subject has just removed the sewer cap. Unlike the other photos, the Invisible Man looks straight into the camera. This returned gaze weakens the power of the camera in that its power in the other images comes from its ability to see without being seen. Its invasiveness in this image is neutralized by the subject's returned stare. While the title of the photograph is "Emerging Man," the Invisible Man does not look prepared to leave. Contrarily, he appears very settled in the position is in now. He displays settledness through the stable nature of his pose. His frame, with the street pavement as a base, makes a triangle shape, doubled by the triangle created by the subject's nasolabial folds (nose to mouth lines). Further

illustrating his rootedness to the sewer hole is how the Invisible Man's dirty fingers grip underside and top of pavement circling the hole.



Figure 7 An image from Gordon Parks' archive of the Invisible Man resurfacing, 1952

The image preceding Parks' staging of the Invisible Man's underground basement is Parks' image of Brother Jack's prosthetic eye, titled "Brotherhood Sacrifice" (**Figure 8**). The prosthetic eye is emblematic of the character's myopic understanding of the Invisible Man's possibilities and a shortsidedness that obscures an ability to see the dynamics of existence in any other way but limited, teleological and mechanical. The photograph borrows visuals in Ellison's scene where Brother Jack removes his eye—to the Invisible Man's surprise—and drops it in a glass of water. This scene evinces Brother Jack's monocularistic, limited vision of the big picture. On the

other hand, this limited vision has power over the Invisible Man, and, hence, the single eye registers a power of vision and omniscience. The grotesqueness of the eye, the enlarged blood vessels, and the dilated pupils all underline the power of the gaze. Brother Jack's extraction of his eye connotes a vision unlimited by embodiment. The single, prosthetic eye symbolizes the relentless pressure on the Invisible Man to conform. In order to escape such pressures, the protagonist moves from an underground sewer to a basement apartment. Parks' constructed his representation of this apartment as part of the photo-essay, incorporated after the photograph of Brother Jack's prosthetic eye.



Figure 8 Spread in *LIFE* featuring Parks' representation of Brother Jack and the Invisible Man's hideout, 1952

Borrowing from the Invisible Man's description of his "hole...warm and full of light" (6), Parks built a stage of this space, photographed it, and transposed this picture onto a photograph of New York City's skyline (**Figure 8**). From what can be gathered by the picture, Parks photographed his subject in the corner of the room—it may be possible that Parks built only this corner to be photographed.



Figure 9 Gordon Parks' contact sheet, 1952

The subject is seating on a chair with his legs crossed. Behind him are a series of light bulbs connected by wire. The light bulbs are located on the ceiling and on both sidewalls. The subject

sits between two phonographs that are mounted to each wall. Parks' representation of the underground space appears like a stage or the background of a Broadway performance. The eye-catching labyrinthian design of the lights commands attention and invites the viewer to look into this private space, unlike the skyline in the background. How Parks darkened the photograph of the city skyline is responsible for the disorganized, diminished appearance of the lights. Lights do not emit from each floor of these buildings and are very disconnected. Some buildings are more lit than others; more white dots crowd the second building from the right while the building furthest from the right only has several white dots poking through. The stage is meant to be the focal point of the photograph and echoes the statement the Invisible Man makes in the Prologue when he says that his underground space is more lighted than the city.

A message of invisibility and visibility are entangled in this photograph. The stage setting is theatrical, as though the subject habits a semi-public space and we are witness to his private acts with the skyline as the theatrical backdrop. The theatrical nature of the image puts into question the privacy and intimacy of this space. The corner in front of which the protagonist is placed communicates the area as both a site of privileged information and a restriction of spatial agency that makes the protagonist susceptible to being gazed. The paradoxical nature of Parks' image is that while the basement apartment is meant to be a private, protective space, the room is made to be viewed. The minimalist style of Parks' stage is inviting and attractive and beckons the viewer's attention. The attractiveness of the corner belies the symbol of the corner, too, as a vulnerable site for black men because of its hypervisibility. The Invisible Man's position in Parks' photograph in the corner enunciates his solitariness and isolation, drawing in the gaze of the viewer.

Not only does the viewer's gaze intrude into the Invisible Man's private space, but the city itself does so as well. The city's atmosphere lingers at the edges of the basement's outline like a black fog. The resisting move against this gaze is conveyed by Parks deciding to have the subject's head slightly turned so the viewer sees a $\frac{3}{4}$ profile of his head. Furthermore, although lights surround the subject, his face is shadowed. Thus, Parks plays against the conventions of portraiture in that the subject's face is not fully open to view.



Figure 10 Close-up of Gordon Parks' photograph of the Invisible Man's hideaway



Figure 11 Gordon Parks' contact sheet for Rinehart, 1952

In another series of images of Parks, not included in the *Life*, the photographer visually represents the Invisible Man as Rinehart (**Figure 11**). What I would assume to be a tricky task in representing Rinehart is that he is the quintessential invisible figure. Thus, the artistic endeavor of Gordon Parks was how to photograph—to make visible—a character that takes pride in his invisibility and carries a multiplicity of identities. Parks chooses to do so through the use of an awning and building corner. In the contact sheet Parks photographs his model standing under a building's awning, looking around the building's corner. Rinehart in the photograph wears very loose clothing, abundant with folds. He wears a tie, hat, and dark sunglasses. In each image, Rinehart maintains a very relaxed posture. In the left hand side of several of the images, in the background, appears a group of people with their backs turned to Rinehart and the camera. This staging of subjects in the background dramatizes Rinehart's invisibility in that he is able to go undetected by people on the street.

The purpose of awnings is to provide shelter by shielding its occupant from outside elements such as weather. From the information gathered from the frame, however, there is no perceivable threat present; there is not inclement weather and the individuals who are present around Rinehart have their back turned. This fact begs the question about why Parks chose to photograph Rinehart beneath an awning of a nondescript building. From Rinehart's description in the novel, he is essentially a man of the streets. The streets stand as a synecdoche for the culture tied to the street: its transitory and constantly shifting nature; the hyperawareness needed to survive, underground economies, and vulnerability to criminal persecution. The street life is vulnerable considering a person's high visibility and being able to be seen from multiple vantage points. On the other hand, the subject as a man of the street also has multiple vantage points, which provides him with not only a nuanced communication network but also a skillful, sly, and

quick ability to maneuver away from possible situations of surveillance. Thus Parks' images of Rinehart attempts to provide an unsteady balance between displaying a spatial autonomy on Rinehart's part but, coextensively, the very delicate nature of his existence on the street. Similar to what Parks communicates in his images of the Invisible Man, the danger of the black male subject being outed is a perpetual threat. As such, the architecture and lighting in the photograph work together to bring Rinehart, supposedly the symbol of invisibility, forward for view. The awning, for instance, communicates Rinehart's secret nature but also showcases him. A light is on under the awning, which illuminates the subject. Furthermore, Parks positions his Rinehart in a manner in which Rinehart is not completely under the awning. If he was, the camera, and thus the viewer as well, would not be able to see the figure because he would be blocked by the building's corner. Simultaneously, Parks positions his camera at an angle, in which case Rinehart is visible but also appears to be hiding. Thus, the camera angle plays a role in creating this in-between image of hiddenness and visibility. Paradoxically, then, an instrument of documentation and recording also figures in representing invisibility.

This invisibility and transitory nature of Rinehart, registered partly by the camera angle and the subject's positioning, is also registered by the viewer's experience of looking at Rinehart. It as though the viewer is hidden away, looking slightly around the building corner at Rinehart. The criminalization of the viewer's gaze is made so by the notion, created compositionally by Parks, that the viewer should not be able to see Rinehart. Rinehart, through his unthreatened, relaxed posture, appears unassuming and unaware of the camera's gaze. In several of the images on the contact sheet, for instance, Rinehart not only has his left hand in his pocket, but is eating as well. This stance communicates relaxation. This relaxation, however, is out of tune in relationship to the other components of the image. The relaxed, slouched posture strongly

contrasts, for instance, the lines that appear on the building's corner on the right hand side of the image. The bold lines direct the viewer's gaze to Rinehart through the slight convergence at Rinehart's midsection. Thus the architecture surrounding the subject is complicit in making Rinehart visible.

The message that Parks communicates is an entanglement of public and private when it relates to black male presence, especially in the city. Parks gestures towards the impossibility of black male anonymity. Through Parks' photographs, black male privacy is always already public. Black male visibility wedded to a critical reading of slum clearance intensifies a discussion about the susceptibility of black male life, always already exposed, to an even greater level of exposure: a double exposure. This notion of multiple exposures is best communicated through Parks' staging of the Invisible Man in his underground basement, an image transposed onto an image of New York's skyline. While Ellison's prologue gives the impression that the protagonist is completely closed off from the city and that it is his decision alone to make about when he will resurface, Parks' blending of the protagonist's basement with the New York City's black fog posits a different story. In this story, the city has the ability to push the protagonist out into the open.

Parks' representation of New York presents a city that is invasive in two different ways. It is either evacuated of architecture to the extent that its vast, empty spaces become a visibilizing force for emphasizing the presence of the black male subject. Or, on the other hand, Parks shows a sight of the city with towering superbuildings whose presence and occupation of the frame acts as a site of surveillance that challenges the black male subject's invisibility. I draw a connection between these two pernicious images of New York City and the practices of slum clearance under the Housing Act and Robert Moses' supervision as head of the Slum Clearance

Committee. The disorganized, unorchestrated chaos of slum clearance made it so that landscape became characterized as unpredictable and threatening. The nature of slum clearance removal was contingent on the decisions of municipal leaders, businesspeople, investors, universities, hospitals, architects, insurance agencies, and a whole host of other players. The unpredictability of the city's landscape was an exposing force and black and brown residents could be displaced quickly without being provided enough help finding another housing situation. I channel this threat of eviction—the state of being put out in the open—through Parks' photography to make the case that the unpredictable environment of New York City bears influence on Parks' compositional strategies to communicate the cyclical points of visibility and invisibility that frame the black male experience. The chief component of Parks' strategy is to use the camera as not only an objective witness that showcases the trauma of black male spectacularity, but also an accomplice in consort with architecture to evict the black male subject from his hiding place.

Composures of the Dispossessed

What about those three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their hard conked hair? It was as though I'd never seen their like before: Walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug above their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men.

-Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

In the scene above, from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the novel's protagonist gravitates to the stylistic finesse of three young, black male zoot suiters waiting in a New York subway for a train. Their graceful composure animates the rhythmic style and hypnotizing nature of the

passage as the allured protagonist strings s-lettered words together: *slowly, slender, stiffly, swinging, shoulders*. The protagonist desperately clings to language while attempting to convey the sophistication that these young men convey. Along with his careful descriptions are periods of stumbling and unbelievability, which are marked by a series of commas, questions marks, and semicolons. Given that young black man, Brother Tod Clifton, was murdered on the same streets prior to this scene, the protagonist is bewildered by this show of hypervisibility and black male confidence. The more bewildered he is by their presence, the more he stumbles through his description of their physicality and movement, to the point that when they all make it to the subway platform, the protagonist experiences a dizzy spell and interferes with his own rendering of his memory to describe a point at which he had to rest on a trash can for support. What is so powerful and perplexing about this scene of zoot-suiters? What makes the strength of their presence possible and simultaneously stunning in its mundaneness? I venture to argue that what bewilders our protagonist is the very possibility that such a scene of black male aliveness and agential presence can exist in the same breath as black male death and trauma.

In the previous section I explored the metaphorical significance of eviction and outsidership in order to make sense of the aesthetical vagueness Gordon Parks wields to make visible the perpetually blurred lines of black male invisibility and visibility. In this section, I direct attention to methods of black male self-possession amidst urban scenes of dispossession. Using Ralph Ellison's novel, I will first illuminate the fact that urban renewal in cities such as New York engendered an atmosphere of threat, suspicion, and militarism that, to authors like Ellison, was just as pernicious and psychically debilitating as the demolition of black neighborhoods and the eviction of black residents. Secondly, the main objective of this section is to argue that Ellison offers a black male prototype—the “cool” and steady urban black man—not

as a panacea to the instances of black male emasculation happening in the revitalized city, but as a figure that offers insight into possible ways that black men have responded to and navigated atmospheres of dispossession and loss. Thus, in light of Ellison's novel, black male coolness becomes more than an unassuming stylistic posture, but a critical stance with a spatial politics.

The Invisible Man's navigation through commercial New York prior to his encounter with influential, cool black male figures reveals the manner by which a culture of surveillance and militarism has the capacity to reduce black male bodies into statistics and units to be measured, accounted for, and controlled. In a particular scene in the novel, when Ellison's protagonist makes his way to one of the city's business districts, his masculinity is put up against New York's architecture. He is on his way to the Wall Street District to submit one of his recommendations (or what he believes to be recommendations) to a potential employer. His description of the experience travelling to the district and negotiating its space reveals a tension between the city and his identity. The protagonist recounts how: "The next morning I took an early subway into the Wall Street district, selecting an address that carried me almost to the end of the island. It was dark with the tallness of the buildings and the narrow street" (164). The passage gives the impression that the narrator's fate is predetermined. The subway is described as "carrying" him to the Wall Street district. Carrying denotes possession and a holding onto. With the organization of the sentence structure, it is as though the Wall Street address itself has possessed the protagonist, beckoning him to come to it. The subway and the Wall Street address become one in the same enforcing mechanism; the subway train takes the protagonist to his destination and the destination calls for his presence. The way that the protagonist describes the district's location is almost hyperbolic—he recalls travelling "to the ends of the island," which

summons up the colloquial phrase, “to the ends of the earth.” This particular phrase connotes a long distance travelled and exploration through a foreign place.

As a southern migrant in New York City for the first time, for the narrator, Wall Street is indeed a foreign place. Thus, the protagonist’s recollection of the activities he witnesses in the district is not from the perspective of someone experienced with city life, but one who is a total newcomer and completely unprepared to fit into the city tempo. He describes how the district “was dark with the tallness of the buildings and the narrow streets. Armored cars with alert guards went past as I looked for the number. The streets were full of hurrying people who walked as though they had been wound up and were directed by some unseen control” (164). The first thing the narrator notices when he enters the district is its architecture. The tall financial buildings shield the city blocks from sunlight. The narrow widths of the streets are overshadowed by the height and width of the buildings. The street’s darkness sets the stage for the narrator’s characterization of the district as antagonistic, impersonal, and militant. The literal darkness of the streets carries a metaphorical darkness as well. Darkness traditionally alludes to evil and secrecy. Furthermore, darkness may either totally obscure vision, or transform mundane objects into things of fear. Darkness can also magnify the fearfulness an object already stirs within its viewer. Thus, the protagonist’s description of the district’s darkness intensifies the images he subsequently describes: “armored cars with alert guards” and “hurrying people.” From the narrator’s description, one would think he has entered a military front. War tankers abroad double as securitized vehicles at home, fitted to transport money. And soldiers abroad—trained to protect and invade—on Wall Street districts streets, carry the responsibility of protecting money. The protagonist’s pluralization of cars and guards gives the impression that the district’s streets, though narrow, are filled with them. One gets the sense that the narrator is immersed in a

volume of high activity made up of moving vehicles and people. These people, from the narrator's description, are akin to wound up toys, which begs the question: who or what has wound them up? The narrator describes the responsible actor as an "unseen control." The controller's power is enhanced by the ability to go unseen yet still manage to stir a sense of hurriedness in the minds and bodies of the district's workers. In all likelihood, this controller could be the ideology of Wall Street, unseen but powerful. This power, conveyed through the hurried nature of the district employees, is similarly conveyed through the image of bound and bounded employees. The narrator remembers "Negroes who hurried along with leather pouches strapped to their wrists. They reminded me fleetingly of prisoners carrying their leg irons as they escaped from a chain gang... Perhaps the man with rundown heels ahead of me was chained to a million dollars!" (165). The protagonist uses his southern memory to read and make sense of what he sees before him. Black men "chained" to pouches holding money or important business documents only reaffirms the disciplinary nature of the financial district. The 1937 photograph below (**Figure 12**), by photographer Carl Mydans, gives a visual idea of what Ellison's protagonist sees.



Figure 12 Chain Gang, Wall Street, 1937, Carl Mydans

Yet, the fact that the men the protagonist's sees are black and chained to pouches, the soles of their shoes worn down, summons up a history of black exploitation and confinement that the photograph alone does not call forth.

The ideology of the district, with its attendant drive for increased tempo and a sense of business and responsibility, greatly influences the protagonist:

This was Wall Street. Perhaps it was guarded by men who looked down at you through peepholes in the ceiling and walls, watching you constantly, silently waiting for a wrong move. Perhaps even now an eye had picked me up and watched my every movement. Maybe the face of that clock set in the gray building across the street hid a pair of

searching eyes. I hurried to my address and was challenged by the sheer height of the white stone with its sculptured bronze façade. (165)

The protagonist opens this passage with a short, but grand statement: “This was Wall Street.” The briefness of such a message carries a poignancy and significance. It serves as a punctuative sentence following the narrator’s earlier questioning about how it could be possible for a black man to walk around the district with one million dollars, seemingly unsupervised. The protagonist answers his own question with “This was Wall Street.” The protagonist goes on to imagine the great lengths taken to securitize Wall Street against criminals, including the possible outfitting of financial buildings with peepholes. The protagonist’s imagination is fitting as it builds off of the previous scenes of suspicion he witnesses. Peepholes are fundamentally criminalizing tools, in other words, instruments of suspicion. The looker can see an outsider without being seen. And though small, a peephole provides an adequate range of coverage for the onlooker. What the narrator imagines are not just standard peepholes built into doors but dispersed throughout the financial buildings. Rooms abound with multiple peepholes to provide various lines of surveillance. In line with his imagination, the narrator begins to hurry, ultimately adjusting, instinctually, to the pace set around him. He hurries under the belief that he might already be surveyed and that a “wrong move” on his part could criminalize him.³⁴ The fear of criminalization follows our protagonist to the building address he was looking for. The façade

³⁴ Foucault’s theory of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) and Andrea Vemer Andrzejewski’s study of architectural surveillance in *Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008) help us understand this fear, since what the protagonist is witnessing around him are self-governing, punishable bodies vulnerable to the district’s architecture. Andrzejewski reaffirms the connection between Foucault’s panopticon theory and architectural design. In her chapter, “Efficiency,” she specifically examines how the layout of work buildings such as the postal office alerts employees that they could be reprimanded at any time. Andrzejewski offers insight into how architecture and capitalism work together to produce efficient laboring bodies.

of the business building is enlivened in the eyes of the narrator and, thus, intimidates him. This intimidation is expressed by his use of passive voice (was challenged by), which communicates that the building is acting on him. His reference to “sheer height” emphasizes the building’s height as alone being challenging. Thus, the building’s height, along with the sturdy, solid material out of which it was built (stone, which is protected by bronze), is even more challenging.

For the protagonist, being inside the financial office building is no more comforting than being out on the streets. His hurriedness to escape the surveillance he imagines himself to be under is met with a following experience of feeling fractured. In this passage, the narrator is referring to a normal feeling that can accompany an elevator ride: the feeling that one’s stomach is dropping. However, the narrator’s physical experience on the elevator is rather peculiar because it is sexualized. His stomach does not jump, but he feels as though his genitals have dropped. Almost subtle, the narrator’s experience gestures to a kind of imagined castration. This allusion to castration makes something as mundane an elevator ride rather violent. This violent description can be a result of this ride being the protagonist’s first experience being on an elevator or that the elevator ascends in such rapid speed. It could possibly be both. The protagonist’s first experience on an elevator, the elevator’s speed, and the protagonist’s earlier intimidation by the business building all seem produce a feeling of being castrated. Castration carries a history of sexual violence and trauma that constitutes the history of African American manhood. The narrator’s feeling that he has left “a very important part” of himself behind in the city building’s lobby puts his masculinity in the forefront of his experience in the elevator. Such a gory and traumatic image, it seems, would be out of place as an image to accompany a memory of an elevator ride. Yet, the narrator’s hyperbolic description of this ride operates in showing

how disparate his experience being in the elevator is from his previous life in the South. It dramatizes the division between his earlier life and his city life. What this hyperbolic description also accomplishes is gesturing towards a relationship between the bureaucratic, over-reaching, militaristic, high-speed nature of New York's environment and the narrator's racialized masculinity.

The formalist International Style's philosophy of design—its focus on order and the verticalization of space—agreed with the goals Robert Moses and his colleagues had of organizing the New York City landscape. Clearly influenced by Le Corbusier's violent modernization of Parisian infrastructure, Moses borrowed the modernist design principles of creating plenty of open, grand vistas to provide a sense of openness: from superblocks, to wide boulevards, to the creation of large public parks, to highways.³⁵ In other words, Moses' intention, akin to Le Corbusier, was to build a more "efficient" city.³⁶ This efficiency heavily depended on slum clearance. Thus, New York City's infrastructural and architectural revitalization depended on the mass displacement and surveillance of its African American population, whose presence seemed to be a challenge to Moses' city vision.³⁷ In order to create wide, open spaces, Moses authorized the bulldozing of spaces he and planners considered to be blighted or on their way to becoming so. And incidentally, a large percentage of these spaces were in low to middle-income black neighborhoods. Surveillance played a central part in Moses' strategy, and he used aerial views of the city, documentary photography, and statistical data to serve as justification for his

³⁵ See Paula Geyh, *Cities, Citizens, and Technologies: Urban Life and Postmodernity* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

³⁶ Speaking on Moses' goal of efficiency, Roberta Brandes Gratz describes Moses' desire for the New York City's "built form to be more orderly, less congested, and cleaner..." (172)

³⁷ See Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

program and information that would help rationalize the condemnation of black neighborhoods.³⁸ These strategies of inspection stir up notions of an architectural paternalism predicated on liberalism; an invisibilizing and infantilization of populations; and a rendering of them as incapable of self-determination.³⁹ The idea of city planning as carrying a paternalistic ideology becomes clear, then, in the Invisible Man's experience in the Wall Street district, where he is, fundamentally, asked to give an account of himself and give himself over to the expectations of city behavior: busyness, responsibility, dutifulness, quickness, nervousness, and timidity. The protagonist's adoption of these sensibilities emasculates him, and Ellison makes it clear that this emasculation is tightly connected to New York City's landscape. The higher the protagonist ascends in the financial building, --symbolizing his devotion to uplift—the more metaphorical distance there is between his genitals—the signifier of his masculinity—and the rest of his body.

I want to contrast the protagonist's lack of masculine self-possession that marks his early experiences in New York City with the stylistic grace and finesse of the cool black male figures in the novel, one including the protagonist as Rinehart. The other figures I will look at are the bluesy junkman, Peter Wheatstraw, and the anonymous zoot-suiters I described earlier in this section. These figures wholly resist the urban landscape Robert Moses envisioned, one that invisibilized black people. Not only do these characters carry a visual, stylistic excess, but shirk the responsibilities of accountability to the behavioral scripts the city perpetuates. A common attribute these men share is comfortableness in their illegibility and a self-containment that

³⁸ See Themis Chronopoulos, "Robert Moses and the Visual Dimension of Physical Disorder: Efforts to Demonstrate Urban Blight in the Age of Slum Clearance," *Journal of Planning History* Vol. 13(3), 2014, 207-233

³⁹ See Jim Sleeper. *Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

catches the reader's attention, especially because in such an unpredictable, tumultuous place as New York City in the novel, comfortableness seems impossible.

My close attention to these marginalized male characters is a divergence from Myka Tucker Abramson's scholastic approach to reading urban renewal in Ellison's novel in her article, "Blueprints: Invisible Man and the Housing Act of 1949." The value of Abramson's insightful article is the attention she brings to elucidating the impact of New York City's slum clearance programs on Ellison's novel, particularly useful to him as a running trope throughout the novel as he narrativizes the themes of black dispossession and invisibility. Yet, where I disagree with Abramson's theory is her application of the theme of eviction to ascertaining the importance—or unimportance—of particular characters in the novel who, on face-value, seem marginal, or, in other words, "outside" the integral narrative events in the novel. Abramson writes:

Throughout *Invisible Man*, the minor characters are repeatedly excised from the novel. From the war veterans he [the protagonist] encounters at the Golden Day pub who have been removed from society and locked up in an asylum; to Brockway, who is confined and contained in the boiler room of the Liberty paint factory and who ultimately vanished; to Tod Clifton, who is cast into the underground economy and then gunned down by the state (5).

Abramson's description of the "excision" of characters in the novel is, in her opinion, a supporting piece of evidence that shows how much of a role eviction and dispossession Ellison's

novel. Excision refers to the process of a thing being cut out of something. This kind of removal is skillful and precise.⁴⁰

By paying close attention to the physicality of the cool black male figures in Ellison's novel, I want to move attention to simultaneously appreciating how eviction works as a trope in the novel—as Abramson rightfully argues—while also examining how the seemingly “minor” urban black male figures or not quite minor at all. I am particularly invested in how these characters stand their ground in the city by making their physicality—and their ability to “take up” space—known. The way I understand coolness operating in the characters' ability to express self-containment and partake in a rebellious occupation of space is that coolness is tied to a range of behaviors, movements, communicative expressions, bodily postures, clothing, and accouterments that communicate a sense of composure and imperturbability (whether authentic or not) in the face of unpredictability and danger.⁴¹ This posture toward the urban environment for the cool characters of Ellison's novel enables a way of coping with the unpredictability of urban life, artistically sidestepping the demands of social accountability, and, generally,

⁴⁰ The meaning of excision would seem to link very well to the history of urban renewal in New York City from which Abramson draws from to make her argument. The process of eviction was strategic and calculative in its violence. Abramson conceptualizes eviction as a method of excising black people from city spaces given over to redevelopment projects and translates eviction into a metaphor to describe Ellison's narrative style. The disappearance of minor characters, for Abramson, is symbolic of the eviction of black residents in New York after post-WWII. Thus, in her passage above, Abramson lists a couple of black male characters who are examples that she believes to support her argument: the shell-shocked veterans earlier in the novel, Lucius Brockway, and Tod Clifton. Abramson does concede a little bit later that these characters seem to disappear and reappear, haunting the protagonist throughout the novel. But I want to argue that these characters do not actually ever leave the novel. They are not outside of the novel. And they are more than haunting figures in the novel, which has problematic undertones of disembodiment and unimportance.

⁴¹ In *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992), Richard Majors traces cool performance back to West African culture. See Chapter 5, titled “Genesis of Black Masking.” Majors analyzes how the West African mask—its stoic, expressionless appearance—translated into the 20th century mask trope.

confidently expressing an ownership of one's body and the literal space it occupies.⁴² In his book, *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), Jeffrey Q. McCune defines coolness as “a performative utterance and action, whereby men define themselves within and against traditional standards. Indeed, like all performances, it changes depending on those involved, dimensions of space/place, and who is reading and interpreting the scene of action.” (6). What stands out in McCune's definition of coolness is how much focus he puts on the contingency of coolness and its dependency on the actor's spatial location, his embodiment, and his perception. I am particularly fascinated by McCune's inclusion of spatiality as an integral component of cool performance. Specifically, McCune refers to the “dimensions’ of space and place, which rightfully nuances the spatial meanings of coolness. By using dimensions, McCune shows that coolness is inherently spatial; and if we continue with McCune's logic, then coolness can have spatial markers, occupy space, and has a continuum of scale. It is a performance that carries a spatial trace. These illuminations underscore how I want to integrate spatiality into a reading of cool performance and pull out the way they relate in Ellison's descriptions of his cool figures. By doing so, I bring into focus the possible ways coolness can be read in Ellison's novel as a defense against the spatial regulations of urban renewal. An example that emboldens this point is Peter Wheatstraw, who the

⁴² I would say that coolness as a performance—and a spatial practice—is heavily inflected by African American existentialist crisis; what DuBois calls “double consciousness.” DuBois defines double consciousness—seeing oneself from one's perspective *and* the perspective of the white gaze—as both a product of racism and a necessary tool for survival. Paul Lawrence Dunbar's acclaimed poem, “We Wear the Mask” (1896) anticipates DuBois' philosophy of double consciousness by speaking of “twoness” in terms of performance: Why should the world be over-wise, /In counting all our tears and sighs?/Nay, let them only see us, while/ We wear the mask. Dunbar's mournful black speaker describes the existential crisis of black performance, bringing to light the necessity of appearing content in public while being forced to keep one's angst private. With all of this, I do not want to suggest that coolness only be read as tragedy or a pathological reaction to the environment in its seeming promotion of emotional deadness and nihilism. I have come across such notions in critical theories on black male coolness.

protagonist meets while walking out in New York City. Peter Wheatstraw's kinesthetic display of ease amidst clear impoverishment communicates cool performance. His demeanor is relaxed and confident, which seems to belie his impoverishment. His clothes are dirty and his eyes are red. He resembles a cross between the corner drunk and the junk man. Ellison's protagonist is uncomfortable with the character's appearance and his seemingly nonsensical lyrics and aphorisms. The protagonist's dialogue with Wheatstraw might give one the impression that the two are speaking two different languages. Technically, they are both speaking English, but each man's understanding of the city's logic diverges from the other. While Wheatstraw does not appeal to the protagonist physically, his intrigue largely has to do with his oratorical flair and eccentricity. The protagonist describes him as a street preacher whose pulpit is the street curb. His sermon is a blues lyric about a speaker's love for his part-human, part-animal woman. The subtext of the lyric, I believe, is a love for difference and the sphinx-like nature of life. His alignment with the unpredictability of life is also communicated by his hoarding of blueprints of buildings and layouts that never came into fruition. These failed blueprints are tangible reminders of the tentative nature of the city's landscape, which is always changing and developing, evacuated and renovated. For Wheatstraw, the only way to survive such a landscape is to keep on top of the changes and be at home in a constantly changing city. Wheatstraw keeps on top of these changes through a chameleon-like practice of existence. He is part street corner preacher, part blues singer, part comedic entertainer (with his Charlie Chaplin pants), and part trickster. His lyrics are akin to a linguistic version of bebop, nonsensical but carrying a resonance. This rhetorical finesse is central to Wheatstraw's practice of coolness, along with his ease of movement. When he and protagonist reach a street with a downward slope, Wheatstraw applies his improvisational sensibility to strategize a way for him to maneuver the city landscape:

“This here's one of them good ole downhill streets. I can coast a while and won't be worn out at the end of the day. Damn if I'm-a let 'em run me into my grave.” In the passage, Wheatstraw takes on his own performance of urban planning. This planning is conveyed by his use of “I can” and “won't be worn out.” The phrases convey strategic thinking. Wheatstraw uses the city's landscape to his benefit, reading the city's landscape and using its slopes and surfaces in a way that facilitates easy movement and allows him to avoid overexerting himself as he negotiates the city streets. Thus, while his proximity to the curb gestures to his social-economic position as a member of the black underclass, he uses this spatial marginality in a way that facilitates a way of moving through the space. Coasting resembles a way of moving that I read through cool performativity. Coasting, for Wheatstraw, is an art of city movement that allows for quickness and weightlessness. I contrast this ease of movement with the movements of the black men the protagonist witnesses in Wall Street; one of these anonymous men has walked so much that the soles of his shoes are worn down. Wheatstraw's strategy allows him to avoid as best as he can forms of movement that could possibly “run him into the grave.” Wheatstraw refuses to run through the city streets like the money-strapped black men in the city's financial centers. Coasting also allows him to use his cart with ease. Not only does coasting allude to moving in a way that does not require a lot of energy, but it also refers to the practice of ships moving along coasts. The “coasts” of the city, for Wheatstraw, are the curbs. By walking on the street by the curbs, Wheatstraw is not impeded by the constant starts and stops of sidewalks and pits and cracks that would require him to lift his cart up and down and exert energy. By staying on the street, Wheatstraw has a continuous, flat surface over which he can roll his cart. Cool performativity includes this art of repurposing and improvisation. This repurposing is a performance of intelligence and imagination. It is also artistic in that Wheatstraw, as a musical

artist, uses the same musicological devices of improvisation and lyrical turning and riffing but in the vein of movement.⁴³ There is an element of kinesthetic playfulness in this act which simultaneously is a strategy Wheatstraw uses to avoid being worn down.

Another cool figure in Ellison's novel is one I have referenced earlier in this section, the zoot-suit figure, the quintessential cool figure. Ellison's introduction of the zoot-suited youth comes after the murder of Tod Clifton, a black man and former member of the Brotherhood who is killed by police after protesting on a sidewalk against the organization's mistreatment of its black followers. I want to diverge from a heavy focus on a portrait of black masculine fracture in this particular instance and move to presentations of unification and wholeness. Fracture, of course, has been one of the most described aspects of the black experience. And the concept of fracture has purchase as a metaphor to describe the historical experience of a community of people uprooted and disenfranchised. It has been used as term to explain what effect these modes of violence have had on the psychological bearing of African Americans.⁴⁴ I do not intend to dispel fracture wholesale, but to address what I sense as reaches toward a display of

⁴³ See A. Timothy Spaulding. "Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" *Callaloo* 27.2 (2004): 488–489.

⁴⁴ Psychological fracture has been well described and analyzed by scholars studying African American culture and history. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin?': The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Cassandra Jackson's *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Christina Sharpe *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Robyn Wiegman *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Lindon W. Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). Ellison himself has written about the fracturing of the black psyche in his acclaimed essay, "Harlem is Nowhere." And writing about Ellison's novel in particular, scholar Kimberly Lammin her article titled, "*Visuality and Black Masculinity in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man' and Romare Bearden's Photomontages*," has looked specifically how fragmentation translates into a fragmentary aesthetic used by both Ellison and Romare Bearden in their representations of black men.

wholesomeness amidst a fractured and fracturing urban landscape. A powerful part of the novel is a scene of three young black men who display a confidence that is unsettling because of its out-of-placeness and inappropriateness. Who dare heighten one's visibility as a black man amidst fresh mourning of a black man murdered by police?

While coolness is certainly a product of fracture, and especially a response to fracture, as a practice, it seems to be a nuanced, delicate practice, of composure, a striving to put together a unified display of relaxation, robustness, and fullness of presence.⁴⁵ The youth display a kinesthetic grace and simultaneously a militant disposition to their environment. They are not ones who are mastered by the space, but display mastery over the space. Their presence is also magnified by the fact that they walk in a group of three. Their moves and appearances are coordinated. The protagonist's documentation of this scene is monumentalizing despite his being conflicted about their future. Regardless of this indeterminacy and the challenge of perpetual violence endangering black men, the men give the appearance of timeliness and stability. This projection stands as a refusal to be invisible. It is an invitation to look at them, but on their own terms. Furthermore, in a space characterized by invisibilizing on a host of levels—urban anonymity, renunciation of self, tenement living, slum clearance, and state sanctioned death on and off the streets—the zoot suiters appear as a united, synchronized front. They give an appearance of not being reduced to bare life. The protagonist contrasts their practice of solidness with southern migrants to New York who have not adapted to this new environment: "...[W]hat about those of us who shoot up from the South into the busy city like wild jacks-in-the-box

⁴⁵ In *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, authors Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson write that for black men, "presenting to the world an emotionless, fearless, and aloof front counters the low sense of inner control, lack of inner strength, absence of stability, damaged pride, shattered confidence, and fragile social competence that come from living on the edge of society" (8).

broken loose from our springs—so sudden that our gait becomes like that of deep-sea divers suffering from the bends?” The protagonist equates migrants with a broken jack-in-the-box. One will recall that with this toy, one continues to wind the side of the box, and, unexpectedly, the toy figure, connected to the spring, jumps violently from the box, surprising the viewer. The tentative nature of these migrants is suggested by the protagonist’s description of them in the form of a question: “What about those of us...?” Their delicate situation is also communicated by the fact that they are no longer, in the context of the metaphor, connected to the spring, which, metaphorically, is rooted in the South. No longer attached to the spring, the violence of their uprootedness contributes to a feeling of wild disorientation and a sense of hurriedness and rush, as though they do not have the ability to slow down the inertia of their trip. The em dash in the protagonist’s passage operates as effecting the feeling the protagonist is describing—a sense of a sudden, abrupt transition, or, in another way, a discontinuous movement from the South to the North. The protagonist transitions from one metaphor to another, communicating a rhetorical anxiety or a crisis in representation. The southern migrant, a detached jack, becomes a deep sea diver who, because of descending to such a deep level, once surfaced, encounters a potentially deadly health emergency; the body does not accustom to the atmosphere above water. The protagonist translates this image of a deep sea diver unaccustomed to the environment to describing migrants as metaphorically stumbling and uncoordinated; it is as if they move unsteadily through their new environment.

The portrait of the three zoot suiters the Invisible Man outlines appear in stark contrast to the uncoordinated gait affecting many of the southern migrants, including the protagonist himself. The protagonist asks, “What about those three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-for-

summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their hard conked hair?" The narrator's description of these three young men is marked by a simultaneous distrust of their gallantry and, yet, an awe. The description is very photographic in the way the narrator takes inventory of the young men's stature, clothing, accessories, and hairstyle. The frequent commas in the passage connote a periodic pause as the narrator moves from one aspect of the men's appearance to another. As I have described previously about this same passage, the coolness of the boys' presence seems to call forth the method and lyrical style the narrator uses to describe them. His description is not only methodical and detailed but also alludes to swing; this allusion is made possible by the repetition of "s" words in the passage: slender, stiffly, swinging shoulders, and summer suits. Not only is swing conveyed, but also jazz as well, a musical form characterized by tension and in-betweenness. Displaying stylistic grace, the young zoot-suiters perform a balance act between looseness and stiffness and formality and informality. They walk stiffly like soldiers but swing their shoulders as though they are also dancers. They wear "cheap felt" hats but in such a manner that conveys "severe formality" and regality ("crown of their head"). The men also convey an attention to their bodies that communicates a degree of respect and self-involvement. They appear tall and lean, and not crouched. Their clothing is ironed. Regardless of the summer heat, they wear their zoot-suits as though their impressive style is more important than convenience. They also wear their hair conked. And while the texture of conked hair makes it hard to begin with, the narrator gives the impression that the young men have applied even more product to their hair to ensure that the shape of their hairstyle stays intact. The men, fundamentally, convey a degree of excess and particularity of style. The protagonist's passage is dense with adjectives and adverbs, one following after another smoothly.

The smooth manner of the protagonist's description mimics the men's stroll to the subway platform. The stolid appearance of these men is definitely in contrast to the stumbling that characterizes a population of southern migrants the protagonist sees in the city. This is not to say, however, that these men do not experience trauma that often accompanies the urban black experience. These men could potentially be experiencing this trauma, but, outwardly, do not convey this. Their appearance, thus, has a protective function for the zoot suiters, who, on face value, appear confident and unaffected by their environment. The advantage of this appearance is a feeling of a control and freedom that can come from the practice of self-containment.

The zoot-suiters control and freedom is brought into relief when returning to the Invisible Man's speech about Tod Clifton's death to Harlemlites. In his elegy for Clifton, the Invisible Man uses his death to galvanize Harlem's black community to riot:

Such was the short bitter life of Brother Tod Clifton. Now he's in this box with the bolts tightened down. He's in the box and we're in there with him, and when I've told you this you can go. It's dark in this box and it's crowded. It has a cracked ceiling and clogged-up toilet in the hall. It has rats and roaches, and it's far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it'll be cold this winter. Tod Clifton is crowded and he needs the room. 'Tell them to get out of the box,' and go teach the cops to forget the rhyme. (458)

The protagonist compares Clifton's coffin to a run-down tenement room. Not only is Clifton in this tenement but also the Invisible Man and the rest of the Harlem community attending the funeral. The protagonist points to common issues of tenement living—tightened living quarters, cracked ceilings, poor plumbing, pests, and poor insulation. At the core of the problem with low-quality housing is the vulnerability of the residents to harsh weather and disease. The tenement building fails to provide shelter, or, in other words, protect their bodies. It fails to provide a

sufficient private space where a private life can thrive.

As foils to the cramped community the zoot suitors “seemed to move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony, swaying, going forward, their black faces secret, moving slowly down the subway platform, their heavy heel-plated shoes making a rhythmical tapping as they moved. Everyone must have seen them, or hear their muted laughter, or smelled the heavy pomade on their hair—or perhaps failed to see them at all. For they were men outside of historical time, they were untouched, they didn’t believe in Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it, or perhaps like Clifton would mysteriously have rejected its mysteries; men of transition whose faces were immobile” (440). Tod Clifton and the fleeting nature of black male existence the Invisible Man is troubled by comes into conflict with the protagonist’s monumentalizing descriptions of the zoot-suiters. The men connote durability and they are sartorially flexible in a way that comments on their acceptance of being outside history. What the protagonist’s finds so confusing is how these zoot-suiters manage to keep calm, to keep stable amidst the transitoriness that marks their existence. The zoot-suiters make their home, their place, through the sartorial.⁴⁶ Even in such a transitory space like inside the subway—a temporary space where people come in and leave—the zoot suiters establish some form of permanency, occupying the subway in a way that reaffirms their space. For instance, the Invisible Man watches one of the zoot-suiters use the interior of the subway to check his appearance and comportment. He is looking at himself in the subway window, and thus,

⁴⁶ See Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 77-155. In the chapter on “Zoots, Jazz, and Public Space,” Alvarez focuses on the importance of the zoot suit in post-WWII Harlem. Alvarez describes the zoot suit as a source of “dignity” for black men in a city district marked by poverty and political inequity. Also, see Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). In Chapter 4, “Rags to Riot,” Peiss analyzes the zoot suit within the context of Harlem’s race riots during the 1940s.

transforming it into a cosmetic mirror. The group also uses the subway as a space to read their magazines, in which case the subway is transformed into a space for leisure. The Invisible Man watches them with a feeling of both awe but doubt, amazed at how calm they are in the midst of what has transpired on their city streets.

While a hegemonic conception of history would find these men as being outside history—and thus illegible—the protagonist’s monumentalization of their appearance, dress, and physical movement resists the dehistoricizing and, simultaneous dehumanization that often attends urban black life, especially under the auspices of dispossession.⁴⁷ The zoot-suiters protect themselves from the culture of dispossession, and I investigate coolness as the practice they use to do so. Coolness is communicated through the zoot-suiters’ presence and expressiveness. Coolness is all about presence and expressiveness. I read this practice of cool in the light of the systematic assault on black livelihood and liveliness. I also read their bold settled-down-ness in light of the systematic transitoriness that governed black life in New York City. The climate of the city was clearance, removal, and negation. Thus, the very presence of the zoot-suited men seem antagonistic to the landscape: their pressed collars are "snug" around their necks, their pant cuffs fit "snug" around their ankles, and their coats are "hip-tight." The young men's bodies appear insulated from the environment according to the protagonist's description. It is as though no air can get its way inside the zoot suits. Such self-containment and creative energy, for the protagonist, seems impossible and foreign in a place like Harlem. A victim of urban renewal, it is no surprise that the protagonist communicates such a sense of suspicion as he describes these men. His suspicion and uncertainty echoes a similar sentiment Ellison himself shares in his essay

⁴⁷ I am indebted to Monica L. Miller’s *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). I highly recommend a particular chapter in this book that culturally and historically speaks to black fashion in Harlem, titled “Passing Fancies”: Dandyism, Harlem Modernism, and the Politics of Visuality.”

"Harlem is Nowhere" about the threat of dispossession on black cultural production. Ellison writes: "For this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the frustrations of social discrimination. Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man, but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity." Here, Ellison explains how the quest to survive for Harlemites is such a central part of their existence and occupies so much time that there is no breathing room for creativity. The zootsuiters appear to make room for and energize their creativity, despite what their circumstances might be. Their lives are stylized and made into a conscientiously artistic performance. While already a performance, masculinity serves an artistic purpose for the zoot suiters. The shoulders of their suits, for instance, are broader than even the normal broad shoulders of men's suits. The masculinity they proffer is thus dramatized to a level of excess. Coolness' dramatization of masculinity historically stems from a desire on black men's part to regain or fortify their masculinity amidst emasculating spaces. Cool performativity becomes a strategy for black men to access the normative practices of masculinity. These include practices of control, stability, spatial autonomy, largess, power, and handsomeness.



Figure 13 Gang-member in hiding

The photograph above radiates tension and an atmosphere of suspicion. The young boy kneels on a pool of an uncountable number of cement debris of different sizes and shapes. He has shifted most of his weight to his right arm, communicated by the raised tendons and veins that

run up and down his straightened arm. His right arm is equally tensed, with his fingers uncomfortably spread wide apart so from each other that the tendons running from the forearm to the hand jut out. The awkward angle of the arm gives his hand its wrinkled and puckered appearance; the arm is not bent at the wrist but at the junction where the upper palm and the base of the digits meet. While the young boy seems to have cleared a small area of space on the ground to place his palm, the surrounding rubble still tightly frames his hands in such a manner that his pinky fingers appears obscured by one of the thicker pieces of rubble. The amount of tension in his fingers, hand, and entire right arm makes them the focal point of the photograph. This focal point, thought, competes with the boy's left hand, which is palm upward and loosely holds a thick, cube-shaped piece of cement rubble. The solidness and visual weight of this rubble draws attention to it as a potential weapon, providing the photograph a context for the viewer. The subject of the photograph is trying to defend himself, resorting to what we might consider to be a very brutal, Spartan method of inflicting injury. The way the boy holds this weapon, his fingers loosely curling around the side of the block, implies that he would be quick to release the block and throw it at his anonymous enemy, who, importantly, is not shown in the frame.

What brings the boy's hands into focus as brutal weapons is the juxtaposition of the jagged sharpness of the rubble and his sinewy tendons with the gentle wrinkles of his trousers, the smooth ripples in his shirt, the sheekness of his glamorous fedora, and his youthful face. The romantic, soft light framing the front half of his hat and outlining his face emphasizes his identity as a young boy. The photograph is a portrait—albeit a disturbing one—of stylized innocence, from the humble kneeling, to the youthful face, to the soft light and focus would typically with studio portraiture of the black bourgeoisie. The composition of this photograph, taken by Gordon Parks for *LIFE* photojournalist assignment, triggers a sense of grotesqueness and disturbance,

particularly as an image in which is entangled youthful masculinity with roughness, abjection and death. Through Parks' composition of the image, the boy is confined within the frame of the photograph. While looking in the direction of the approaching danger, the boy's back is vulnerable to the camera, as though the camera is in his blindspot. The framing of the image makes it so that the door and its keyhole barely make it into the frame, suggesting their unimportance and uselessness in protecting the boy from impending violence. Parks' photograph exudes the boy's penetrability, from the way his back is made open to the camera's gaze, to the door being rendered partly invisible, to even the medium-sized hole that is at the boy's eye level, its darkness emboldened by the white peeling circling it. Parks' camera does not appear as a detached eye merely gazing onto this scene of violence, but an eye that is invested in a careful study of the condition of this young, black male body under a danger that is nowhere in particular and certainly everywhere. It is elusive yet penetrating.

In this section, I look at the tropes of penetration and penetrability and how they operate in Gordon Parks' photography of a Harlem-based black male gang for the November 1, 1948 issue of *LIFE* and James Baldwin's 1962 novel, *Another Country*, which features a queer, impoverished black male musician from Harlem. Through my readings of both the photography and the novel, I merge a critical analysis of Harlem as a site of black male vulnerability with an inquiry of how to map queerness onto this particular urban geography of black male penetrability. While a queer reading of black men might quickly bring to mind gay black male sexuality, I consider queer studies as not limited to this subject for the purposes of my study. Queer studies is a critical methodology that, at its core, is unflinching with its exploration of the territory of the profane, the crude, and the taboo. It does not shirk away from the semantic messiness brought about by counterintuitive or paradoxical close readings. Its value also rests on

its standpoint that sexual acts, relations, and desires can be generative metaphors in theorizing a host of socio-economic and cultural conditions.

In the vein of queer literary and visual analysis, I read Parks' photographs and Baldwin's novel in light of Kathryn Bond Stockton's study of the interplay of queerness and black masculinity in her book, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (2006). What Stockton's critical lens permits is the mobilization of the sexual position of the "bottom" as a way to conceptualize racialized, impoverished geographies. These bottom economies, for Stockton, operate on a system of abjection and shame. Stockton writes that "the bias against queer anality (and against its pleasures) oddly speaks to the stigma of people who live at the bottom of an economic scale"⁴⁸ (68). I want to extend the parameters of Stockton's analysis of bottom geographies to ascertain what a queer reading of Parks' photography and Baldwin's novel provides in terms of understanding the urban bottom and black men's occupation of such a geography. In Stockton's chapter on the bottom she concentrates on reading bottom geographies in Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*. Queer anality in the novel is practiced in a manner that calls forth both horror and a "beautiful shame," as the queer practices involved is for the protection of black life. For instance, the character Eva desperately forces foot into the anus of her hungry child. Such a violent, cutting, and shameful act registers as both a redemptive act but also a manner in which the child is impregnated, physically and psychically, with a traumatic history. In Stockton's example, the bottom fosters feelings of desperation and restriction and is a geography that precipitates the queering of black bodies as strange, non-normative, and perpetually at risk for penetrative acts of violence.

I am interested in incorporating Stockton's reading of a small, Midwestern town as a

⁴⁸ See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

bottom to reading Harlem as a bottom with its attending dangers that come out of the characteristics of the urban space: anonymity, increased risk of danger, higher density of people and buildings, and tenement culture. In this section I focus on two different yet converging representations of Harlem as a bottom. In Parks' photographs, the Harlem-based young black male gang, the Midtowners, are bounded, haunted, and penetrated by the abandoned builds of their neighborhood. I read the rendering of these young black boys position t as bottoms through the use of composition, lighting, and angle. My reading of Parks' subject is in light Lee Edelman's theory of futurity and the absence of the child in tandem and Carla Freccero's theory of queer temporality, which encourages my strategy of reading Parks' young black male bodies backwards—literally and figuratively. In James Baldwin's *Another Country*, the protagonist, Rufus Scott, shares a similar predicament to the boys Parks' captures with his camera. As a queer, impoverished, black male Harlemit, Rufus is constantly bombarded and mocked by New York City's visual messages of material excess and power. Despite being bombarded—or visually and aurally penetrated—by such messages, Rufus becomes hostile toward his city surroundings and channels his rage into his apocalyptic dreams of New York City torn apart by structural collapse and fire. Such dreams, I argue, queers the city by transforming it into something other than what it is and, by filtering out the loud distractions of mass urban culture, uncovers the moral barrenness of the city.

Scenes of penetration run rampant throughout Parks' photographs of the Midtowners, a young black male gang in Harlem in the 1950s. This project was Parks' first assignment for *LIFE* and, upon its publication, launched Parks' career as a nationally-renown documentary photographer. Fully aware of the magazine's taste for the "real" and dramatic, Parks set on

revealing the poor conditions of black people in Harlem through the eyes of its young black boys. As Parks shares in his memoir, *A Hungry Heart: A Memoir*, **date** he considered it a challenge to find a Harlem gang who would agree to being photographed.⁴⁹ Following a serendipitous encounter with the leader of the Midtowners, Red Jackson, Parks earned his chance to follow the gang around Harlem, even through dangerous situations. Parks willingness to immerse himself in this underground world of gangs communicates itself in the dynamic, energy-filled images he captured of the Midtowners.

Parks is both witness and artist, using the aesthetics and representational style of photography to draw the viewer into the both highly visible and politically neglected geography of Harlem. In order to arrest his viewers' attention, Parks uses the visual signifiers commonly associated with Depression-Era photography, street photography, war imagery, and film noir.⁵⁰ The disaster imagery Parks photographs dangerously borders on fetishization, given his textural preoccupation with Harlem's ruined architectural structures and counter-public spaces. Parks photographs of ruins are aestheticized along with the black male figures that occupy them. Thus, Parks' work encourages us to question the "realness" of photojournalism. Parks is doing far more than providing viewers with an unbiased document of Harlem life. Rather, Parks provides visual

⁴⁹ Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart: A Memoir* (New York: Atria Books, 2005) 113.

⁵⁰ For more information about Parks' artistic influences, see Colleen McDannell's *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005); and Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* (New York: Harlem Moon, 1990). Unfortunately, the amount of scholarship that focuses solely on Parks' photography aesthetics is lacking, and I believe more work needs to be done in theorizing Parks' role in influencing the genre of documentary photography and studying Parks' aesthetic influences. Parks was no doubt influenced by what I could call the "Work Progress Administration (WPA) aesthetic" or the "New Deal" aesthetic, which is in reference too the gritty portrayal of the United States' impoverished communities. The goal of the WPA was to employ photographers such as Gordon Parks, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Walker Evans to travel throughout the country taking images that would highlight the great need of governmental assistance. These images heavily incorporate social realism.

commentary on the relationship between black masculinity and post-war urban blight. Parks' aestheticization of Harlem—his careful attention to surfaces, the graininess of ruins, the jaggedness of building fragments, and his use of color to denote lifelessness—draws the viewer into a geography that was, as Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts states in *Harlem is NoWhere* (2011), “structurally neglected” amidst the post-war building boom in New York.

Gordon Parks' interpretation of Harlem as a nihilist geography is communicated by his artistic preoccupation with presenting the city section in terms of war. The Harlem Parks represents appears war-torn, visually disorganized, and is characterized by a rough, gritty texture. As a film director, Parks employed the noir aesthetic that puts into relief blackness, urbanism, and nihilism. As a nihilistic geography, Harlem becomes associated with death and the death-drive; in contrast to the idealized smooth, modernist surfaces New York's urban developers called for, Harlem's surface was devastated. Physical war is not the cause of this devastation, but neglect. Redevelopment for Harlem meant containment and erasure without the attempt of addressing the systematic inequities driving and sustaining the architectural collapse occurring in Harlem. My reference to nihilist geography is meant to account for the spatial organization of nihilism, or how nihilism communicates itself spatially and architecturally. With the discourse of containment and neglect encapsulating the discourse on Harlem, Harlem as a space was characterized as representative of the nation's overall neglect of its black population and disregard for spatial security. This disregard for Harlem's space spurred the hopelessness that Ellison addressed in his 1964 essay “Harlem is NoWhere.” Though Harlem was historically seen as the location of black cultural advancement, it was also one of the many urban spaces where black nihilism ran rampant, expressed through crime, alternative modes of law and order, the instability of the private/public divide, and the everydayness of death and destruction.

This urban nihilism, I argue, is communicated by Parks through the artistic traditions he uses, including war photography, and hard-boiled, noir cinema. Harlem is not a Harlem Parks' viewer is meant to feel safe in; its openness and lack of sturdy enclosures—its vulnerability—means that the viewer is both invited into this world but also aware that it is not a place of solace. In each photograph, the source of the danger is invisible and we as the viewer are given the context through text, but the invisibility of the source addresses the omnipresence of danger and violence. Openness and nihilism go hand in hand because the redevelopment policies that structured Harlem enforced the vulnerability of the city section's architecture. Parks' photography focuses on this lack of enclosure that encapsulates the black male urban experience. Openness refers to the lack of architectural protection or the instability and intermittency of architectural protection.

The young black male gang members try to evade the penetrative elements of their surroundings but this evasion always seems incomplete. A significant portion of the photographs Parks takes of these young men have been shot in abandoned buildings in Harlem. These buildings stand as sites of the city's underground economy, including temporary and unreliable stops for waiting out dangerous times. In his 1990 memoir, *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks describes the lives of these young men as bleak. He writes: "...in the weeks to follow, I found how indifferent death could be in this warring place, where honor meant spilling blood over the most trivial thing—and accident bump on the shoulder, a dispute over a stolen bicycle, an invasion of the wrong territory, a girl's innocent wink or a game of stickball" (136). In such a climate as 1940s and 1950s Harlem, it is understandable why there would have been such a masculine paranoia about possession and property. Gangs such as the Midtowners developed amidst disenfranchisement, poverty, and a lack of access to resources. In an environment where

the right to space, particularly for black people, was severely protracted, gang culture served as an underground environment where space could be fought for and protected. And from what Parks indicates, gang culture was also an underground space where masculinity could be fought for and protected. Such a paranoia of being in ownership and possession of space, one's own body, and the bodies of others intensifies to such an almost illogical degree that what would perhaps not normally be considered to be issues of life or death—like a street baseball game—is infused with life or death stakes. Parks manages to construe his images with this prevalence of black male death and how death structures the postures and compositions of young black masculinity.

Parks images are queer in what I see as scenes of penetrable young black boys whose socioeconomic condition requires them to fight for their masculinity. They are forced to be a fully formed black male adult at a young age or be at risk of being vulnerable to their environment. Yet, the paradox of this situation is that the gang members' navigation through this underground economy makes them just as vulnerable to death. Thus, what I find to be queer in Parks' photographic documentation is the pursuit of a black masculinity that is perpetually at risk of being cut short. As Parks makes clear in his memoir, the figure of the young black male is uncertain: "Teen-agers, talking about death, took blood oaths to die together. Mothers feared a knock at the door, afraid it was the police to say that a son was dead. All the Midtowners had knife or bullet wounds and they wore them with bravura" (137). The everywhere-ness of wounds in the forms of slashes and puncture wounds becomes a way for Parks to communicate the highly violent nature of Harlem gang culture. This notion of wounds and wounding opens the way of thinking about the vulnerability of Parks' black boys to the penetration of puncture wounds and gashes which are symbols of grisly deaths. These wounds also mark the transitory nature of these

young black male bodies. But as Parks also describes, these same wounds were honorable, and the celebration of these wounds by the gang members illustrate what I consider to be a very queer relationship with death; it is a willingness to flirt with the boundaries between life and death on an everyday basis and to do so for the sake of practicing masculinity. The very nature of their youth makes such a flirtation with death horrific. While boyhood is usually associate with potentially and a budding virility—a future in other words—Parks’ photographs, though, show a youthful black masculinity at times being literally torn apart. Parks also shows vulnerable members of a bottom geography, which they fight and die over.



Figure 14 Picture of Red Jackson in *LIFE*, 1948

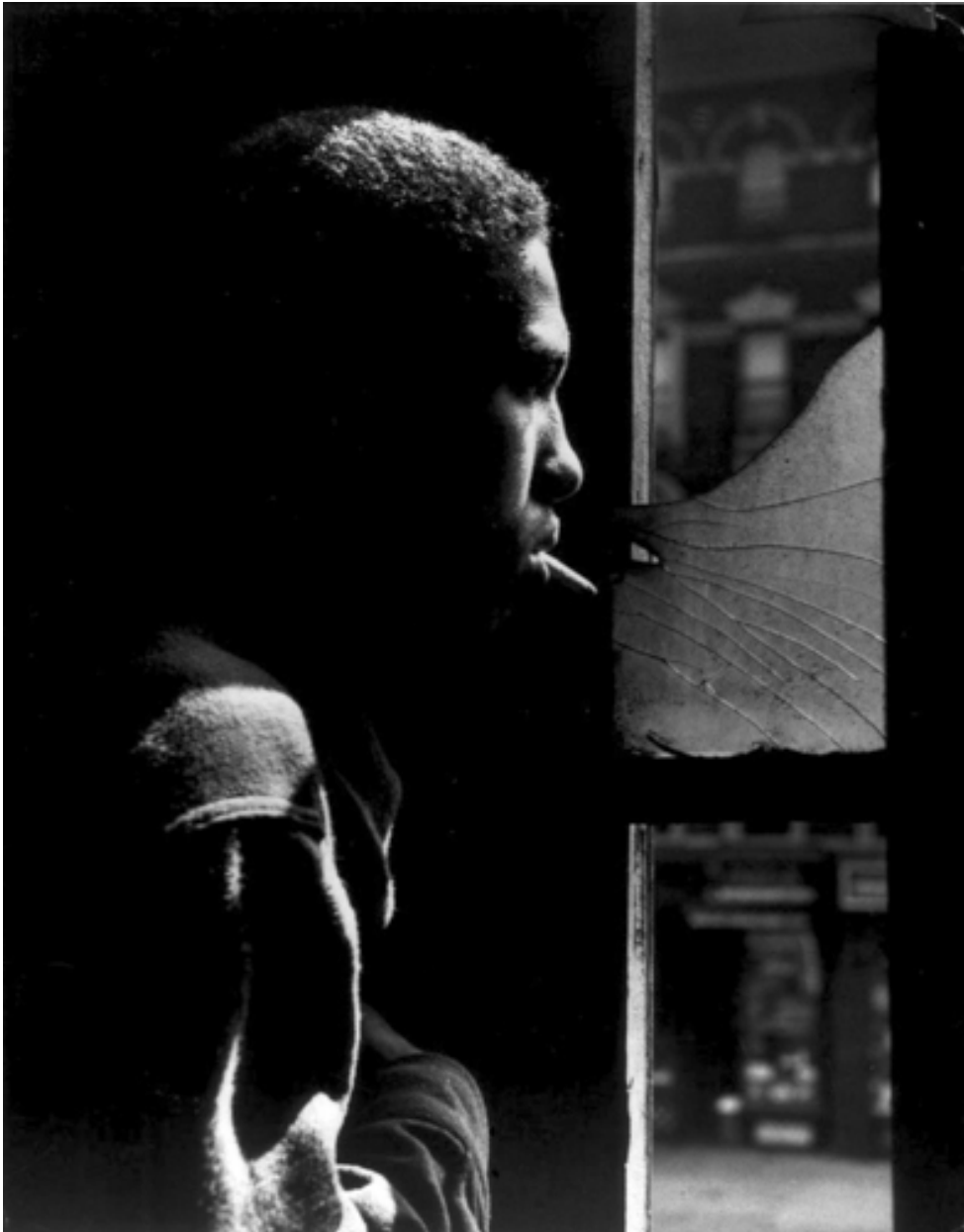


Figure 15 Picture of Red Jackson in *LIFE*, 1948

Parks' "Red Jackson" photograph (**Figure 13**) was taken for a November 1, 1948 spread in *LIFE*. The article gives a biographical account of Jackson's life, but also characterizes Harlem as both a reflection of Jackson and also a geography informing Jackson. Parks manages to depict this exchange in his photograph. Juxtaposing word and image, the photograph's caption informs us that Jackson is hiding from a rival gang in Harlem in an abandoned tenement house. Already, the architectural condition of Harlem shapes how Jackson is situated in the photograph. The history of abandonment also forms the grammar of this photograph, as the dilapidating buildings, lack of jobs, and the cramming of black people into small living quarters all fueled the violence in Harlem. Harlem becomes an important character for Parks as he uses his camera to depict a particular form of black masculinity that is informed by the structural inequalities organizing Harlem's landscape.

"Red Jackson" is a black and white photograph depicting Jackson standing in front of a cracked window of an abandoned Harlem building. He is peering above the window surveilling the outside and on watch for the rival gang. At the onset, the viewer is introduced to a new way of thinking of abandoned buildings. A central question Parks' photograph poses is this: To whom are these buildings abandoned? Something that is abandoned is not formally tied to an entity and not identifiable as something of importance. Yet, Jackson and his gang, along with other Harlem gangs, found importance in Harlem's abandoned buildings as counter-hegemonic architectures that, as a whole, provided an alternative urban landscape through which Harlem's gangs could act out their power struggle, and, ultimately, an alternative masculinity that was structured by such a landscape. Parks' play with shadow and texture are central in his depiction of urban black masculinity. Textural and surface dissonance permeates through the image. Parks captures a

variety of different surfaces. The window, for instance, is virtually without glass, save for a trapezoid-shaped remnant of glass in the uppermost window frame. The remnant itself is cracked, with close to 11 lines running across it, varying in length and width; the lines almost take on a sinewy appearance. The angles and planes of Jackson's face feeds into my reading of the black male body as its own topography that both aligns with and diverges from the urban architecture in which it is situated. The lines on Jackson's face almost parallel the lines that run through the window fragment; particularly, the line that runs from Jackson's temple, down across his pronounced cheekbone, and to the corner of his lip. There is also a very darkened line that hugs Jackson's right nostril. The line that makes up Jackson's profile—the line we trace from the forehead to the tip of the nose—appears to run into the upward slope of the topmost of the window fragment, connecting Jackson to the fragment. Parks continues to play with depth and surface in terms of the how sparse the light is in this photograph—the thickness of Jackson's shirt, for example, is conveyed by its deep folds. A part of Jackson's conked hair is captured under the light—his textured and layered strands combed back.

Shadow is central to Park's ability to sharpen Jackson's multidimensionality. While we might normally consider shadow—darkness—as obfuscatory, Gordon's use of darkness becomes revelatory, illuminating non-normative ways of looking at black men. The abandoned building is responsible for the darkness of the photograph, along with the fact that Gordon must have photographed this image at night. The natural light in the image is probably from the street lights outside, issuing light into the windowless frames. The low-quality of light and the permeation of darkness communicates how space can alter vision, and particularly, in this case, how blighted spaces can alter vision.

The cracks in the glass window over which Jackson looks over reads as a text reaffirming

the dangerous predicaments Jackson is in. These cracks could be attributed to a range of situations, possibly someone physically breaking the glass to seek refuge in the abandoned building. Or, it could be attributed to a gunshot shattering the window. Either way, the cracked nature of the glass—the wounded architecture—speaks to the vulnerability of Jackson. The architecture offers him a limited degree of protection. Like the window, he too is exposed to the outside. The exposed window frame, our voyeuristic gaze, and the gaze of the camera reaffirm Jackson’s vulnerability to being wounded while also pointing to the cinematic tradition of noir, which creates an urban space where one is always already in inescapable danger. Jackson’s vulnerability stems from the over-circulation and over-production of violence. My idea of “violent openness” helps us understand this vulnerability. Moreover, Elizabeth Grosz’s theorization of the body helps us to theorize how Jackson relates to his architectural surroundings and how they shape his vulnerability. Grosz argues that a body’s atmosphere writes on the body. Thus, we can think of the exposed window frame in Parks’ photograph as being imbued with a history of the neglect of black spaces, a neglect that figured importantly in Red Jackson’s constitution as a black male gang leader. He is in constant exposure to elements that create Harlem and his body is always already at risk of being exposed. Jackson seems to be combatting this exposure in the photograph by one, using the fragmented glass as a shield, and two, wrapping his right arm across the front of his body. The shattered window helps Parks tell the story of the delicate boundary or permeable boundary separating the public space from the private space. The abandoned tenement serves as a momentary domestic space for Jackson, although this space could be infiltrated at any given moment. The length of Jackson parallels the length of the window, in which case his body is an easy target.

Parks captures the paradox of these boys’ experience—inhabiting a masculinity that may

protect but also can kill—excellently in the photograph below (**Figure 14**), its directive caption in the magazine reading: “In mortuary Red and Herbie Levy Study Wounds on face of Maurice Gaines, a buddy of theirs who was found dying one night on a Harlem sidewalk.



Figure 16 Picture of Red Jackson and comrade looking at Maurice Gaines body, 1948

In the photograph, Red Jackson and the leader of another gang look over the body of a fallen gang member from the other gang, most likely killed in a street gang by a rival gang. The two boys concentrate on the dead boy's battered face. His lips are cut and blistered and his left eye is also swollen. What dramatizes the deceased's grotesque face is the soft, rippled white coffin lining on which he lays. The linen suggests an innocence in death that does not correspond with the state of the boy's body. The coffin lining and the flowers—barely in the frame but located at the head and feet of the dead boy—appear out of place, their presence disturbing and somewhat gaudy. Parks' angling of the camera intimates that the subject of the photograph is not solely the dead boy, but but also about the two living gang members as they view the boy's body. Parks positions the camera at a slightly higher angle to give the viewer the perspective of looking down at the boys as they look down on the deceased's face. Both boys look as if they are in a silent state of contemplation, immersed in their own individual thoughts. Red Jackson, on the left, appears solemn and still while his comrade expresses a more invested gesture; he leans forward to get a closer look at his comrade's swollen face. Levy's hands and arms are behind his back, complementing his inspective gaze. Contrastingly, Jackson's arms are limply at his side, indicating, either a feeling of dumbfoundness or complete absorption; Jackson's slightly parted lips also substantiate these feelings.

The context of this photograph foregrounds the loneliness and aloneness that marks the death of Maurice Gaines. A section of the article is dedicated to explaining the meaning of the image:

“We went to a chapel to see a dead pal” says Red. The pal was Maurice Gaines, 15, who belonged to a friendly gang called the Nomads. The Nomads had fought as allies with the Midtowners for years, and when Gaines was found dying on a Harlem sidewalk the police decided it was an accidental death. But Red and “Little Buddy” the Nomad leader, were sure

that a rival gang had done the job and went to the mortuary with their friends to confirm their suspicions by studying the cuts around Gaines's lips and lumps and bruises on his head and face (101).

As a member of the Nomads, Gaines' social position is communicated through the gang's own name. A nomad is one that does not have a steady home, and, because so, is perpetually en route from one temporary shelter to the next. The nomad, thus, is a very public figure, and is always on view. The idea of the nomad paints Gaines' life on the streets while also underscoring the conditions of his death. That Gaines is found dying publicly on a random Harlem sidewalk features importantly in his nomadic lifestyle and is the brutal, naturalistic outcome. Obviously a homicide, the police refuse to pull resources to find those responsible for Gaines' death. This decision is twofold: a lack of empathy toward the loss of black life—particularly a life lived in the city's underground—and a refusal to go on what would have been likely a goose chase in search for Gaines' killer or killers. Gaines' killers could have been anyone in such a climate of widespread gang activity and frequent, random crimes. Because of the lack of police help, Red Jackson and the Midtowners and Herbie Levy and the Nomads resort to studying Gaines' wounds. The cuts and swollen patches of skin become the evidence, the things that substantiate Gaines' status as a murder victim (and not the police).

The funeral—already queer in the presence of death amongst life—is doubly so due to the underground culture of gang life. Jackson and Levy's attendance is not merely to commemorate the dead. Funerals are typically not the place where postmortem examinations take place to ascertain the method of death. This process usually happens in a morgue, where a medical examiner conducts a careful examination of the dead body, taking note of the body's appearance and the condition of its interior cavities. Funerals follow such an investigation. In the

case of Gaines, however, the developments following his death happen out of order—they fundamentally happen, queerly, or backwards. Funerals are rituals for the living to commemorate the dead and bring resolution to the death, an ending. Thus, the strangeness of the visitation Parks documents is its purpose. The photograph’s descriptive caption—categorizing the visit as a “study”—attests to the overall queerness of this viewing. The visitation is used as a time to gather evidence in preparation for figuring out the culprit of Gaines’ death, exacting retribution, and thus, holding to the codes of gang conduct (protecting and serving one’s own). The visitation stands as a way of obtaining an alternative form of justice to be doled out with bricks found on the street. Parks’ photograph shows Jackson and Levy’s postmortem study of Gaines’ body. Levy’s posture, as the leader of the gang Gaines belonged to, takes on the role of a forensic examiner, and, Jackson, a partner in this study. Both of the boys’ eyes linger on Gaines’ face, visually penetrating him as they inspect the severity, number, and size of his cuts. They are perhaps thinking about the objects used to create such ghastly wounds and what type of rival gang would have resorted to this method of inflicting harm.

Gaines’ exposure is fourfold: he is exposed to the gang who killed him, exposed in the very public nature of his death, exposed to those acting on his behalf, exposed to Parks’ camera lens, and exposed on an international stage as his battered face circulates and proliferates through its publication by *LIFE*. Gaines penetrability also conveys bottomness in his position in Parks’ frame. The camera angle looks down at Gaines’s down, which allows the viewer to better see his wounds. Thus, regardless of the coffin’s beauty, the white flower pinned to Gaines’ gray, rigid, broad-shouldered suit, and the flowers placed dutifully at each end of his body, his abjection is out in the open and jars with these beautiful objects, which become insincere in their task of beautifying Gaines’ death.

Not only is the photograph queer in its showing of a postmortem operation in a chapel room, but it is also queer when contextualized by the events the article shares after Parks' photograph about what followed Jackson and Levy's examination of Gaines' body. The article details how, following their visit to the chapel, the two gang-member leaders, shortly after exiting the chapel, are followed by a rival gang bent on inflicting violence. The two manage to escape because of the presence of witnesses, which thwart the rival gang's intentions. This occurrence shows the perpetual danger of the public space for these gang members. As well, the chapel, housing Gaines' battered body, is, strangely, a place of safety. The chapel, then, is both a morgue and a temporary safe house wrapped in one. What the rival gang's presence illuminates is how quickly gang members can reach the same fate as Gaines. Thus, the viewer's reading of Jackson and Levy's close encounter with death following their visit to see Gaines' body colors the viewer's reading of Parks' photograph. One can read their study of Gaines' body as also framed by the danger of death that shapes and haunts their day-to-day lives. In other words, the juxtaposition of word and text invites a way of reading the failed gang fight "backwards" onto Parks' photograph, queerly reading Jackson and Levy's close encounter with death at the hands of a rival gang onto their encounter with death in the form of Gaines' body.



Figure 17 Red Jackson and comrade hiding, 1948

We find an eerie doubling of images of black male danger in another of Parks photographs (**Figure 17**). On the left, in the image, is Red Jackson, who is standing with his shoulders bent forward as he looks down toward the street. On the right-hand side is a fellow member, crouched down among rubble and seemingly leaning back on a wall, his right arm hugging an equally vigilant dog that is also looking outside the building. Despite the column in the middle of the

image visually dividing the two boys from one another, it is as though they are positioned back to back. I want to read this as though their rear ends face each other as a means of protection. This back-to-back coupling is an effective means of scouting a dangerous place as the back is safe from harm and attention can be placed on what is forward or on the sides. The building ceiling appears to be in a serious state of disrepair; the various cracks and areas of peeling surfaces suggests that the ceiling could fall down at any moment. Thus, Jackson and his fellow gang member are vulnerable to threats from both outside and inside the abandoned building they are momentarily finding comfort within. While a place of refuge, the abandoned building also has the capacity of harming its residents.

Park's vantage point is from the outside of wall that has apparently been broken into two places, leaving vertical openings that are separated by a thick, vertical boundary. This vantage point allows Park to capture the building facing the building out of which the two gang members are peering. This building's surface is covered with windows, two of which are undraped (far right), one of which is partially draped (the window right above Jackson's partner's head), and one of which is slightly uncovered (far left side). The multitude of windows gives the impression that Jackson and his companion are always under the threat of surveillance. The partially draped windows of the abandoned building suggest that someone who may be able to watch the gang members can also manage to make this surveillance invisible. Regardless that both Jackson and his partner are both looking out for trouble, the two are essentially unable to detect all forms of danger, nor the directions from which these dangers might come. As mirrored subjects, Jackson and his partner convey vulnerability while simultaneously using their sight as lines of defense.



Figure 18 Gang-member graffiting wall, 1948

The queerness of the underground space of gang culture in Harlem is also conveyed in another of Parks' photographs (**Figure 16**) that explores the nature of gang graffiti. In this photograph, a young black boy is captured right as he begins to graffiti what looks like a makeshift wall made

out of stacked wooden planks. By the existing words on the wall, it belongs to a gang called The Gypsies. If this boy is a member of the Midtowners, which is more than likely given Parks focus on this particular gang, then his act is antagonistic as he intrudes on the wall by marking the wall with his own gang's symbols. The anonymous Midtowner adds a symbol of his presence to phrases on the wall, written in large and small broad strokes: "Joe of The Gypsies," "Bugs," "Lucky of 1945," and "Tiny." The graffiti seems to refer to different members' nicknames in the gang and convey vulnerability. One who is considered to be "lucky" manages to have good fortune despite the high odds of failure or danger. It is by chance that one receives this fortune. Bugs are commonly considered as pests and are unwanted indoors. Tiny refers to something or someone being diminutive or very small. What all of these nicknames have in common is their connection to transience.

The paint is spread out on the wall, making the boys' presence known and announcing the wall's purpose, which is to honor the gang and mark their occupation of this wall space. The gang shows this occupation through the repetition of its name on the wall. "The Gypsies" is repeated three times on the piece of the wall that is captured in Parks' frame. The gang's name is written vertically and boldly on the right hand side of the image; the name's outline is emboldened by thick, black paint. All of the painting on the wall is sloppy and unevenly spaced. Some letters run together, "Tiny Tim" for example. Characters are tilted like the "4" in 1945, which gives the date a disunified appearance. The lines between the wood planes, evenness and vertical, are in stark contrast to the looseness of the writing which connotes a freeness and flamboyance. The words and phrases are not painted within the lines. They appear uncontained and not seeming to follow any rule or order. For instance, "Joe" is written small and large, horizontally and vertically. Color abounds on the wall and conveys a visual noise. The objective

of the gang seems to saturate the wall with color. While there are words and phrases, it also appears as though gang members from The Gypsies also threw paint at the wall and smeared some areas of the wall with paint. The “everywhereness” of this gang’s presence on the makeshift wall makes the Midtowner member’s act that much more intrusive. He is shown crouching as he sits on a some kind of seat and leans forward in order to make contact with the surface. He paints an upside down U—perhaps the beginning of the letter of “M” for Midtowners. His right arm is somewhat strained as he grips the handle of the paintbrush. His stance and face connote careful attention and methodicalness.

The two small holes in the boy’s shirt, right below his right armpit, seems to shed light on the interworkings of poverty, the structural disregard for blacks, black male vulnerability, and graffiti in the photograph. The two small holes in the boy’s shirt, right below his right armpit is shown because of his extension of his arm as he paints. Additionally, the boy’s crouched and hunched over position voices these issues as well. The crowdedness of the wall on the sides and top of the wall forces the boy to crouch and graffiti the remaining open space on the wall. What I find to be the paradoxical nature of the boy’s act is that his graffiti does symbolize a penetration of this space, a masculine act of taking ownership by violently occupying a space or making another territory one’s own. This subversive act, however, seems to be betrayed by the visual penetrability that the boy’s shirt conveys; the shirt has been either worn out to the point that the seams are beginning to separate or the shirt has been punctured in the midst of constant activity. In either case, the hole becomes a distractive element in the photograph, and it becomes easy to associate the holes with the possible impoverished condition the young gang member lives in. Conveying this, too, is the subject’s bent over position. The position of the camera provides an outline of the boy’s slightly curved back. The lightness of the subject’s shirt directs attention to

his posture, especially since his face seems dramatically darkened, engulfed in a shadow.

The reason for exposing the vulnerable aspects of the photograph is to consider how even in what would be considered as a image of black male rebellion is always accompanied by reminders of risk and vulnerability. While the image is loud with words and phrases of territorialization and black male claiming of space, a more pernicious message is conveyed. The gangmember's likely impoverishment casts his graffiting of the wall as a desperate act of claiming a space of his own on a wall that showcases voices that are just as vulnerable as his, regardless that they may belong to a rival gang. The wall is loud with references to vulnerability and penetrability. The very name of the gang is borrowed from a derogative name for the Romani, an ethnic group who have historically been on the move and persecuted because of their uprootedness. There is a case where the experiences of this ethnic group have been used in the context of describing the experiences of people in 1940s and 1950s New York City who were evicted from their homes because of urban renewal. Eric C. Scheider, author of a book that historically contextualizes postwar youth gang culture, titled *Vampires, Dragon, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, describes the evicted as refugees before referring to a report a tenant made in response to Robert Moses' slum clearance program: "...refugees from Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway moved from one building to the next "like gypsies," complained one tenant, always one step ahead of the wrecker's ball. The city's Tenant Relocation Bureau not only failed to find them permanent homes, but it also threatened to cut their relocation allowances if they resisted moving." (45). Schneider's passage illuminates the relationship one tenant forged between his or her experience and that of an itinerant people. The Gypsies, too, must have similarly perceived this relationship. The gang's graffiting of their name on the wall communicates a queer embrace of their vulnerability and showcases of their

rebelliousness by using this name as a means of branding spaces, and thus, making these spaces their own. This contentious nature of their existence—the move to make their vulnerability a platform—is showcased by the transient, but bold, nature of their graffiti.

The Midtowner in Parks' photograph, through his graffiti, adds to a invasion of public space, which also proves to be a spectacle of the city's disregarded. Historically, graffiti has been criminalized as the vandalism of public property, making city surfaces "ugly." The criminalization of graffiti diminished the fact that the graffiti was not simply an attack on public space, but the outcry of a population who was responding to the bad conditions of their communities and neighborhoods. In Parks' photograph, The Gypsies seem to do more than just communicate the conditions of communities, but embrace their abject statuses. This move to embrace reads as rebellious and what I would argue, to borrow a phrase from Jack Halberstam, an act of "radical passivity," which is a passivity that, under the surface, acts. While graffiti would most likely not be thought of as a passive activity because of its display of masculine energy, rebellion, claiming of space, virility and vivacity, the graffiti also boldly, fearlessly expresses their bottom existence. They not only make a spectacle of this bottom existence, but, through naming, take ownership of it as a means of cultivating ties with fellow gang members and displaying an alternative mode of masculine self-assertion. What Parks' graffiti photograph shows, fundamentally, is a queer interrelationship of masculinity and bottomness, and how one feeds the other and vice versa. The masculinity Parks captures is constantly accompanied by tropes of penetration, and the gang members the photographer captures appear to both penetrate and be penetrated; being penetrated, it seems, is a fundamental condition of the masculinity they practice and inhabit.

Black masculine ownership and bottomness takes a very literal meaning in another of

Parks' photographs (**Figure 17**), capturing a moment when Jackson frisks a gang member may have possibly had a gun. This gang member's back faces the viewer, and he appears to be looking down on himself, perhaps in the process of unbuttoning or rebuttoning his vest. Jackson's pats the boy's rear with both hands. While the image is suppose to document a frisk, which, by nature, does not involve extended periods of touching, or lingering on one area of the body, the photograph stills a moment in time, capturing Jackson in a manner that gives the impression that is hands are resting on the boy's backside. The caption does not provide a name for the boy going under inspection or refer to the gang to which he belongs. He is a stranger to both the viewer and Jackson. As though performing something normal, Jackson's hands seemingly caress the boy's rear while Jackson, wearing shades, jests towards something or someone off to his right, which is not pictured in the frame. Jackson's left thumb digs into the boy's right back pocket, wrinkling it. The rest of his fingers appear to cup the curve of the right buttock. Jackson's right hand appears to press on the boy's left hip. A piece of fabric dangles from the vest and over the left back pocket, interfering with the polished appearance of the vest. In all appearances, Jackson's act of self-protection borders on the homoerotic. Again, the paradoxical nature of the performance of masculinity reveals itself. Jackson's face being turned away from the boy as he inspects him, in addition to the fashionable black shades, connotes a detached posture and a measure of coolness. Despite this detached posture, Jackson's hands tell a different story as they fondle the gang member's hips and explore his bottom. Furthermore, Parks' compositional decision to capture the frisk from behind envelops the act with an air of homoeroticism that mingles with the violent nature of the act.

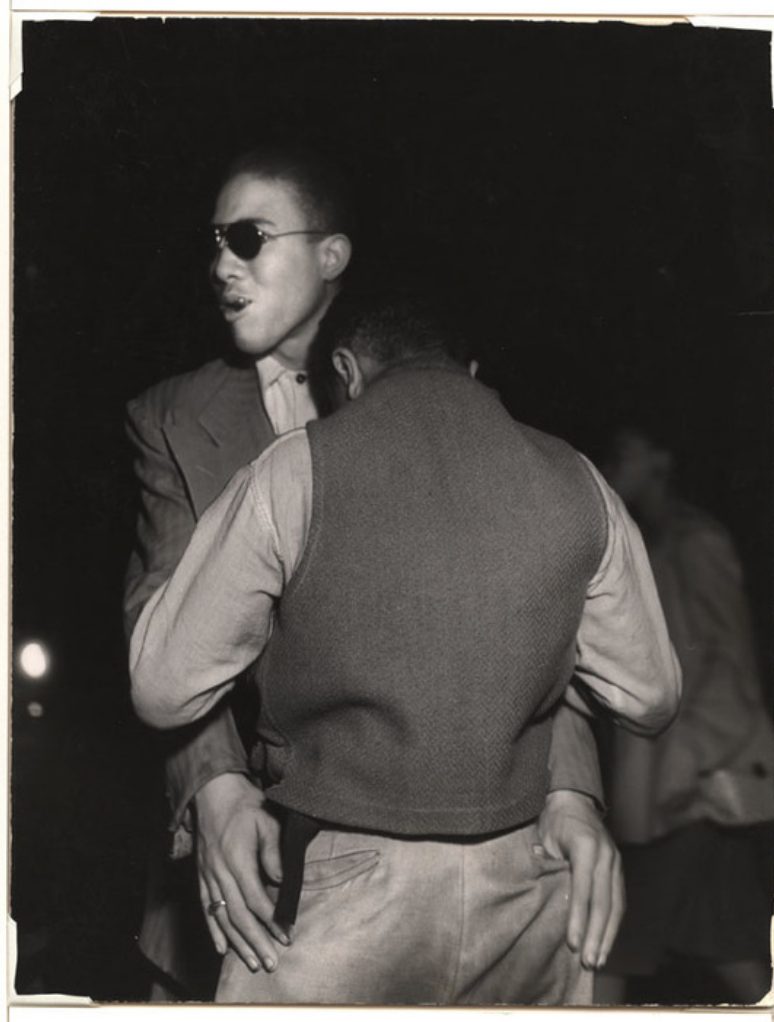


Figure 19 Red Jackson patting down an anonymous gang member, 1948

The perpetual danger that infuses the urban landscape of Harlem makes such a scene of homoerotic closeness necessary. Out of vigilance, Jackson penetrates the anonymous boy's rear with his hands, "feeling up" on him and "digging into" him before this boy could be in his vicinity. In order to enter the Midtowners' space, the boy is required to open himself up for

inspection.⁵¹ What the above paragraph shows in particular and Parks' photographic collection of the Midtowners shows in general is an underground economy that throws masculinity on its head while simultaneously adhering to the dominant script of American masculinity. An underground economy fueled by a community literally torn apart by urban renewal, Harlem youth gang culture operated on the basis on the basis of a masculinity suffused with vigilance and vulnerability to penetration, whether by the gaze, violent touch, weapon, or bodily inspection. What Parks reveals in his photographic collection is the queer nature of masculinity, which is intensified in such as paranoid, vigilance-inducing environment where the proving of masculinity is akin to a turf war, where the terms of masculinity has to be fought for at every corner. Such a hypersensitive environment breeds homoerotic impulses that are imbricated in turf wars over space, which are, fundamentally, also turfs war over masculinity. Parks method of showing this homoeroticism is through the positioning of his camera, which is always lingering on the backs and rear ends of the Midtowners. The boys are perpetually crouching or hunched over, which instigates my move to conceptualize Parks' photography as a visual of masculinity with its "bottom up."

⁵¹ The erotic nature of this photograph might bring to mind Robert Mapplethorpe's photography of black men. There certainly is a big difference between how the erotic is expressed in Mapplethorpe's images and its expression in Parks.' Mapplethorpe's subjects were commonly undressed and in unmistakably erotic positions. Parks' eroticism, I would suggest, is subtly communicated, though the frisk photograph would be one of his images that is strongly erotic. I also want to note that quite like Mapplethorpe's work, I find Parks' photographs of the Midtowners to be subtly pornographic in the sense that Parks pays very careful attention to the bodily compositions and silhouettes of his black male subjects. I think this notion of Parks' pornographic gaze on these young black men—particularly as a black male photographer—is very interesting and generates an interesting dilemma of thinking about the "white cameral gaze" or the "white documentative gaze" and how Parks invites and disrupts it in his work.

Apocalyptic Wanderings and Black Male Rage in James Baldwin's *Another Country*

“He was facing Seventh Avenue, at Times Square. It was past midnight and he had been sitting in the movies, in the top row of the balcony, since two o'clock in the afternoon. Twice he had been awakened by the violent accents of the Italian film, once the usher had awakened him, and twice he had been awakened by caterpillar fingers between his thighs...”

-James Baldwin, *Another Country*

James Baldwin's novel, *Another Country*, parallels Gordon Parks' visual of queered masculinity in his photography of the Midtowners. The protagonist in Baldwin's novel, named Rufus Scott, is in a similar predicament to these young men. In this section I want to look more closely at how Baldwin portrays New York City—and its mass culture—as bearing a penetrative quality that is constantly assaulting the protagonist's senses. While those around him grasp onto these modern distractions, Rufus finds them to be purposeless, a feeling that is guided by a rage against the city's mistreatment of him as a black man. Rufus' shame about being an impoverished black man proves mostly to be debilitating and crippling. However, there are also some moments when Rufus' shame transforms into an apocalyptic rage, and he imagines fire, water, and infrastructural collapses taking down New York City. Rufus' urban imagining is a land “clearance” in its own right, if one evokes Moses' grand slum clearance methods. The difference would be, however, that Rufus' clearing of New York is a queer one, a fictional catalyst for not more of the same but for creating new social and political grounds for a racially equitable urban space. In truth, Baldwin's protagonist desires “another country.”

The novel metaphorically—and sometimes even literally—explores the bottom of its protagonist Rufus Scott, a black male musician from Harlem who belongs to the black underclass. The city and its inhabitants are constantly penetrating the protagonist. Skyscrapers, ornate hotel buildings, billboards, ritzy film advertisements, Times Square, policeman and anonymous passersby overly stimulate Rufus’ attention and make him highly self-conscious of his low socioeconomic status and feeling of masculine lack.. To Rufus, New York City mocks black people whose poverty renders them incapable of sharing in the scenes of conspicuous consumption, despite the fact that the city in particular and the world in general make money off “black flesh” (7). The penetrability and vulnerability of Rufus’ black flesh is brought to light in the novel’s very opening: “He was facing Seventh Avenue, at Times Square. It was past midnight and he had been sitting in the movies, in the top row of the balcony, since two o’clock in the afternoon. Twice he had been awakened by the violent accents of the Italian film, once the usher had awakened him, and twice he had been awakened by caterpillar fingers between his thighs” (3). While Rufus wants to use the movie theater, located in Times Square, as a temporary shelter to sleep at night, he is constantly disturbed. In the theater, language morphs into a means of sonic violence, contributing to the fits and starts of Rufus’ sleep. The usher assigned to survey the theater and evict loiterers prevents Rufus from using his stay in the theater as space for rest. The Italian language and the usher—the innocuous—is coterminous with the harmful: the “caterpillar fingers” belonging to an unknown finger making an unwanted sexual advance while Rufus goes back and forth between consciousness and semiconscious. Rufus’ genitals and the fingers both become synecdoches revealing the vulnerability of Rufus’ masculinity to exploitation and the encroaching effects of the city.

The repetition of “awakened” in Baldwin’s passage conveys the mounting pressures that

prevent Rufus from sleeping. The word also bears a sexual connotation in terms of the idea of someone being “sexually awakened” and, thus, losing his or her sexual innocence. Rufus’ response to this encroachment on his masculinity borders on passiveness and revolt. This conflict is captured in the image of Rufus denying the unwanted sexual advance. Rufus’ refusal—specifically the way he practices the refusal—to be serviced only heightens his abjection: “He was so tired, he had fallen so low, that he scarcely had the energy to be angry; nothing of his belonged to him anymore—you took the best, so why not take the rest?—but he had growled in his sleep and bared the white teeth in his dark face and crossed his legs. Then the balcony was nearly empty, the Italian film was approaching climax; he stumbled down the endless stairs into the street” (3). Rufus’ refusal is mixed with exhaustion and the willingness to allow the unwanted suitor’s advances. The amount of strength Rufus needs to deny the advance is captured by the image of Rufus “baring his white teeth.” This image is both animalistic and also demonstrates that it takes considerable strain for Rufus to fight his own complacency and garner the energy to process his emotions and cross his legs. As a black man, Rufus tries to regain control of his sexuality, a sexuality that has historically been monopolized for the services of others. However, the passage that details this effort to regain control is mired in images of dehumanization. By Rufus baring his teeth, the whiteness of his teeth is put into relief and dramatized, by the darkness of his face. Darkness alone is not meant to be a term of abjection, but the fact that it is in the darkness that Rufus is sexually assaulted puts the darkness of the movie theater and Rufus’ darkness as an African American onto the same plane. Rufus’ race, then, is infused with a history of black male hypersexualization and vulnerability. The paradox of Rufus’ masculinity in this passage is that in the efforts to defend his humanity, he simultaneously

reveals his abjection.⁵² His destitution and abjection makes him highly sensitive and vulnerable to the stimuli around him.⁵³

This theater passage encapsulates Rufus Scott's urban experience living in New York City; his abjection organizes the way he perceives, hears, and feels his way around the city. His perpetual fear of being seen and threatened guarantee that he will be continuously wandering through the city. Rufus becomes a symbol of this predicament of being "bottomed out" by New York City:

The great buildings, unlit, blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear, guarded the city which never slept. Beneath them Rufus walked, one of the fallen—for the weight of this city was murderous—one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell. Entirely alone, and dying of it, he was part of an unprecedented multitude. There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode subways all night long, why his stomach growled, why his hair was nappy, his armpits funky, his pants and shoes too thin, and why he did not stop and take a leak.

⁵² James W. Coleman explains this paradox in his text, *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban* (2001), in which he explains the inescapability of black male dehumanization in fiction that serves the purposes of humanizing black male protagonists. Coleman specifically analyzes what he defines as "Calibanic discourse" in narratives about black men. While black male protagonists such as Rufus attempt to express their humanity and dignity as black men, this same expression also exposes the possibilities of this humanity not being able to be fully recovered.

⁵³ In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Imagination* (2010), Dariack Scott explains this sensitivity while also illuminating the gendered component of physical sensations. Scott explains how the ontology of black masculine identity shapes the body; the constant fear of threat and bodily harm lends the body to hyperactivity and hypersensitization.

The word “fallen” in the passage has several connotations, one of a sexual nature. To be “fallen” denotes a “fall” from innocence or grace. Historically, to be “sexually fallen” refers to one having either lost their virginity before marriage, committed adultery, or engaged in promiscuity. Fundamentally, to be sexually fallen is to be categorized as sexually deviant, and, thus, unredeemable. The use of fallen to describe Rufus’ position in society achieves two interrelated things. It first sexualizes his abjection, or, in other words, underscores the sexual nature that always accompanies abjection. The image of the phallic skyscrapers falling down on the protagonist projects a “bottom” and “top” sexual relationship that underscores the power imbalance between Rufus as a symbol of Harlem (“...the beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart” (5)) and commercial New York, the financially and institutionally buttressed megacity.⁵⁴ From the above passage, the line separating success in the city and socio-economic “bottomhood” is very delicate, and from the behavior of those who come into contact with Rufus, this delicacy is very real. Their treatment of Rufus as a pariah indicates a fear that his circumstances are easily communicable, like a contagious disease. As a member of the “fallen,” Rufus lives in an interstitial space—not literally dead, but, as Orlando Patterson would explain, socially dead. His inability to surmount urban challenges renders him invisible and cast off as different from those who are succeeding in the city or entranced by the urban distractions that are meant to create a wedge between their experiences and Rufus’ existence. Considering that the novel was written only seven years before the Stonewall Riots and a little over twenty years before the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s—and the AIDS activist movements that

⁵⁴ The bottom and top sexual positions have been well analyzed as physico-politico-ideological positions. For more information read Nguyen Tan Hoang’s *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Hoang attempts to redeem the sexual bottom as one who is granted a valuable vantage point for not only political, social and economic critique, but also for interpersonal connection.

accompanied this crisis—*Another Country* throws into the relief a paranoia about bottomness and the strategies put forth by cities to hide those considered to be bottoms. This could be via disregard—as in the behaviors directed toward Rufus’ life and death by suicide—the spatial preventions put in place to keep bottoms out of private establishments, and the criminalization and punishment of bottoms.⁵⁵ Rufus’ associations with Harlem, what I would refer to as a historically “bottomed” neighborhood of New York City, is colored by scenes of institutional disregard. At one point in the novel, the narrator shares how Rufus remembered: the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls behind the stairs and the roofs, the white policeman who had taught him how to hate...It was to remember the jukebox, the teasing, the dancing, the hard-on, the gang fights and gang bangs, his first set of drums—bought him by his father—his first taste of marijuana, his first snort of horse. Yes: and the boys too far out, jackknifed on the stoops, the boy dead from an overdose on a rooftop in the snow.” Rufus’ lyrical cataloguing of Harlem experiences includes scenes of exposure and struggles for emotional release. The stoop and the rooftop become the public stages where Rufus witnesses the state of his community as expressed through the condition of its young. Leona’s mental breakdown, a result of being pushed to her emotional and physical limits, finds a common language in the scenes of black youth’s bodies being pushed to their limits. The black male bodies Rufus’ accounts are vulnerable, undignified bodies—bodies sprawled backside up on stairs and left alone on rooftops, both open and closed to viewing. With his statement “Yes,” Rufus gives himself permission, dares himself to go

⁵⁵ In her book *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75*, Maggie McKinley reads Rufus’ suicide as a response to his feelings of masculine incompetence. McKinley writes that the protagonist’s suicide, “is...a result of his inability to face the socially favored heteronormative definitions of masculinity, and thus serves not only as Baldwin’s commentary on the perpetuation of racial divisions, but on the restriction of sexual identity as well.” See Maggie McKinley, *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (New York: Bloomsburg, 2015).

further in his memory to recall these scenes of death. Before “Yes” were scenes of innocence and violence that made up Rufus’ childhood, including experimentation with sex and drugs, police brutality, and his introduction into art. Rufus’ weaving in and out of the innocent and the violent casts a mundaneness over the entire experience. Even the scenes of death that punctuate Rufus’ memory are described in such bare-boned terms, which communicate the regularity of these scenes for Rufus as a child witness. Rufus’ periodic flashbacks to Harlem as he roams the commercial scenes of New York punctuate his movements through space—he moves back and forth between two geographies. The shame of an entire community infuses Rufus’ individualized shame.

When juxtaposed, these geographies bring out a cognitive dissonance for Rufus, whose witnessing of bustling scenes of finance and commercialism in sites such as Times Square is always haunted by traumatic scenes of Harlem. For the most part Rufus’ shame turns him inward and strives to make himself invisible, especially in places of economic and material wealth. Yet, the narrative conditions of Baldwin’s novel make it so that Rufus’ psychological life is far from invisible but, contrarily, open to the reader. And importantly, the reader is exposed to Rufus’ imaginings of an apocalypse that brings New York City down to a metaphorical bottom as it collapses in on itself. Rufus’ apocalyptic imaginations are far from redemptive, and I would argue, that they are not intended to be. As Rufus collapses in on himself—culminating in his “final descent” to the bottom of the Hudson River—he dreams of taking the city down with him.

What these apocalyptic visions point to is how the stability of the city’s ideologies of progress and distraction are intertwined in or stabilized by the city’s architecture and infrastructure, that camouflage its proneness to political and social rupture and the possibility for

change.⁵⁶ However, Rufus' existence exposes what is always already there: instability and chaos literally held at bay by infrastructure and architecture. We begin to see the vulnerabilities of the city through the eyes of Rufus; the first example is when Rufus imagines a subway accident while he and other individuals wait for an incoming train. As the abject, it is glaring to see Rufus as being described as an "upright pole" amidst the fluid nature of passenger movement. On the other hand, he is the metric by which we calculate the health of the city. In keeping with this, Rufus becomes the "upright pole." His abjection is the only thing keeping these people on the subway from realizing their own alienation. The notion of the city being on the "edge" of the is captured by the memory of innocence and fear Rufus has, remembering seeking his mother as an anchor that would protect him from falling into the path of a train. Rufus foresees the crowd he is in the middle of falling off of the platform, recalls the biblical passage where demon possessed swine run off of a cliff to their death. It is no surprise that Rufus uses this biblical imagery to establish his critique of urban society. The apocalypse, in Baldwin's opinion, removes the veneer off of the urbane crowd, who, in the train scene, are controlled and participating in a seemingly mundane activity. Rufus' vision of water wreaking havoc in the underground queers this mundane event, and provides a totally grotesque view of the urban crowd, who, when structure and a common goal—the goal to get to a particular destination—is removed, turn in on each other, and have the propensity to kill. The malfunctioning of the train leaves the crowd without

⁵⁶ See Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz's book, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Day Life* (1995). Charney and Schwartz tie together theories of modern perception while also historicizing the development of film. The joining of both scholastic endeavors yields an insightful reading about the manipulation of modern attention, especially by film camera. I note this book particularly because of how Baldwin opens his novel with Rufus roaming into a movie theater in order to sleep. Like I mentioned before, Rufus is at odds with the Italian film playing in front of him; while he tries to sleep, the sounds keeps wakening him. One could read this scene as a symbol of Rufus' disconnection from mass culture and modern forms of entertainment.

commonality, a commonality structured by the train and organized by the subway platform. The water Rufus imagines as sweeping over the platform destabilizes the architecture of order and stability. The subway is defamiliarized as Rufus envisions the subway train derailed and moving aboveground; without this train, the waiting passengers end up fighting each other.

In another passage, the urbanity of a crowd in a Greenwich Village bar is completely stripped in Rufus' presence: "To Rufus, the bathroom "smelled of thousands of travelers, oceans of piss, tons of bile and vomit and shit. He added his stream to the ocean, holding that most despised part of himself loosely between two fingers of one hand...He looked at the horrible history splashed furiously on the walls—telephone numbers, cocks, breasts, balls, cunts, etched into these walls with hatred. *Suck my cock. I like to get whipped. I want a hot stiff prick up my ass. Down with Jews. Kill the niggers. I suck cocks.*" In this passage, Rufus registers the smells, writings, and drawings of abjection, the variety of writings resembling carvings from an unrecognizable society. Rufus projects these alien signatures onto his penis, communicated through the uncommitted way he holds it while urinating. Baldwin, here, comments on the history of the black phallus, a symbol both desired and hated. While Rufus' nostalgia for the past includes the celebration of his sexual prowess, his current perception of his penis is marked by shame and disgust. The black phallus' indeterminacy, constantly shifting between being desired and hated, explains Rufus' inability to differentiate between the two at times, which drives him to an insurmountable paranoia. His feelings magnify the abject material in the bathroom, where possible *puddles* of urine become an *ocean* of urine. Rufus imagines the drawings of objectified, isolated body parts as being splashed onto the bathroom wall, speaking to their lack of organization and the horrific, free association style of writing. Couched between commands to penetrate or be penetrated are commands for mass death. The transitory nature of the bar

bathroom, and particularly its unpredictable, anonymous clientele who are never the same and the contingency of the meaning-making that happens on the room's walls, becomes a metaphor for communicating Rufus' transience and invisibility as a member of the black underclass.

Rufus' abjection is the foreground for the hopelessness and distraction that permeates through New York City. In his state of misery, Rufus witnesses an array of city scenes and hears a variety of sounds commonly associated with the city. His abjection distorts and defamiliarizes these episodes of city life. Sights and sounds that are commonly glorified and valorized betray the fact that they are hollow and without substance. The advertisements Rufus sees while he walks through Times Square convey his hollowness: "A sign advertised the chewing gum which would help one to relax and keep smiling. A hotel's enormous neon name challenged the starless sky. So did the names of movie stars and people currently appearing or scheduled to appear on Broadway, along with the mile-high names of the vehicles which would carry them into immortality." (4). The chewing gum advertisement directs our attention to the earlier passage that describes the attention Rufus pays to his "filthy mouth." However, this filthiness Rufus feels is not necessarily solely attributed to a lack of physical cleanliness. And furthermore, it would take more than a stick of gum to distract Rufus from his material existence; it would be safe to argue that nothing would be able to distract Rufus. The chewing gum advertisement, then, becomes an absurd sign of the concentration the city puts on surface. The abjection Rufus feels is more than just a physical abjection or a minor psychological issue that chewing gum would be able to erase. His abjection, on the other hand, is an existential issue—this abjection is an interior issue, and the excess of this abjection communicates itself through an outpouring or an overflow—his urine on the sidewalk would be a prime example. The hollowness of the gum advertisement and its absurd prophylactic qualities carries over into other urban signs of New

York's commodity/consumer culture.

Rufus' identification with this history of abjection begins a more intense spiraling as he makes his way to the George Washington Bridge to commit suicide. He leaves the Greenwich Village bar, unnoticed by his friends, and walks to the subway station, waiting to take a train to the bridge. There, Rufus' imagining of a subway catastrophe reveals more about how civility and artificiality hides the existential fright of the city's residents. The subway's architecture typically guarantees orderliness and a predictable choreography of movement. Rufus' imagination, however, disrupts this choreography. The narrator states that:

Then, as the man gave him change and he moved toward the turnstile, other people came, rushing and loud, pushing past him as though they were swimmers and he nothing but an upright pole in the water. Then something began to awaken in him, something new: it increased his distance: it increased his pain. They were rushing—to the platform, to the tracks. Something he had not thought of for many years, something he had never ceased to think of, came back to him as he walked behind the crowd. The subway platform was a dangerous place—so he had always thought; it sloped downward toward the waiting tracks; and when he had been a little boy and stood on the platform beside his mother he had not dared let go of her hand. He stood on the platform now, alone with all these people, who were each of them alone, and waited in acquired calmness, for the train. But suppose something, somewhere, failed, and the yellow lights went out and no one could see, any longer, the platform's edge?

Rufus' rumination attributes the civility of the passengers to the individuating, regimenting architecture of the subway. The purpose of the turnstile, for example, is two fold. It ensures passengers are paying the train fare and it manages the flow of people into the subway in order to

prevent risk of accidents. Passengers enter one by one, in single files. Thus, flow is broken into units, enforcing temporal gaps between the first incomer and the next. Rufus, nevertheless, imagines chaos, and the inevitability of the crowd's proneness to rupture and need for emotional release. He envisions the solitary train passengers' development into a crowd that creates the apocalypse he desires to take over the city. This desire for ruin is juxtaposed with nostalgia for his childhood. His mother, holding her son away from the train tracks, is a barrier, a figure of stability that the adult Rufus no longer has, given that he is too ashamed of his current situation to return home. Rufus' feelings of instability mirror the image of the crowd of subway-riders morphing into a body of water whose force could carry Rufus off of the edge of the platform. In his smallness, Rufus imagines the complicated, intricate system that orchestrates the arrivals and departures of the subway trains going awry. The grandness of the system and the inability to know it as a totality—which I would suggest gestures toward the larger system of power Rufus finds himself in—is affirmed by Rufus' vague wish that “something, somewhere” fails. For Rufus, it only takes the failure of the part to bring the whole into a state of chaos—and those who have ridden on trains or any taken other forms of transportation can understand this. Rufus' sensitivity to the infrastructure and architecture that keeps large modern systems going reveals the risk that is always embedded in modernity, and how the shortcomings and inadequacies of such systems become visible if and when disruptions and accidents occur, or, when events happen out of sequence. Rufus' imagined disruption, of course, is hyperbolic but nevertheless serves a purpose. Initially, Rufus visualizes the subway riders falling onto the path of a train because of their failure to see the edge after the light goes out. Next, Rufus imagines water breaking into the subway, and a subway train traveling upward and away from its waiting passengers, who are now abandoned. Consequently, they turn on each other, “breaking limb for

limb and splashing in blood, with joy—for the first time joy, joy, joy after such a long sentence in chains...” (85). The crowd, albeit hypothetically, find release in bloodshed, their propensity to kill unleashed after the structuring, disciplinary elements of the subway are compromised. Before having this dream of anarchy, the narrator describes Rufus’ attention to how self-contained each subway-rider he passes on the platform appears, and how preoccupied the riders seem to be with their own lives, and consequently moving by each other in an unseeing, disconnected way. The passengers appear in bondage to their self-containment and the alienation that results from it. Their imagined resort to violence is a release from these chains of alienation, because as antagonistic as the bloodshed appears, the narrator’s description of it also suggests a form of grotesque solidarity. This crowd, as a mobilizing force, mirror Rufus’ rage and the chaos and indeterminacy that characterized the national climate in which Baldwin wrote the novel. The rage the crowd feels, though absurd, provides an outlook onto the effect the reliance on modernity’s distractions can have when they are unexpectedly silenced. Rufus’ creative removal of the structures that uphold modern distractions.

Rufus witnesses how the people drawn to the city’s environment seemingly lose themselves in its structure—they are whirred away in taxi cabs, walk hurriedly down the streets, laugh maniacally in the exoticized black dance clubs and Greenwich Village bars. These scenes of abandonment, through Rufus’ visuality, register as strange and queer.⁵⁷ Rufus’ queering visuality helps reveal the existentialist crises that undergird the urban scenes of entertainment that the city spaces facilitate. Rufus queering visuality is fundamentally shaped by the spatial distancing

⁵⁷ These scenes of abandonment develop meaning in the context of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), where she describes what is essentially a death-drive fuelled by the need for attachment. Berlant describes the “cruelty” of attachments that are meant to secure what she describes as the “good life.” Oppositely, these attachments are harmful and do not secure the good life.

between him and the scenes he witnesses, and, coextensively, a desire to shorten such a distance and create “another country” that provides an equal footing for black men in particular and the black community in general.

Rufus’ suicide, which happens fairly early in the novel, carries similar generative measures as his apocalyptic imaginings. While physically absent, his memory haunts the lives of those he has left behind, including writers Eric and Vivaldo—both Rufus’ friends and previous lovers—writer Richard and his wife Cass, and his sister Ida. Ida’s rage over his brother’s death impedes on the walls the characters try to build between themselves and their guilt about Rufus’ death, which is symptomatic of a general discomfort with engaging with his identity with his race, gender, and sexuality. Rufus proceeds to haunt the rest of the novel in the form of dreams and interpersonal conflict. Particularly, in order to forge a new conception of love, Vivaldo and Ida must structure it around Rufus’ memory. Consequently, Vivaldo and Ida battle against a historicized power dynamic, hoping to create a relationship that is unfettered by racial histories is fathomable. The couple dwells heavily on thinking about the “unchartered territory of love.” Yet, particularly for Vivaldo, remembering Rufus circles up pain, guilt, and exhaustion. At one point in the novel when Vivaldo pleads to Ida that he no longer wants to talk about Rufus, she metaphorically brings up Rufus’ body for discussion: “When we [father and Ida] saw Rufus’ body, I can’t tell you. My father stared at it, he stared at it, and stared at it. It didn’t look like Rufus, it was—terrible—from the water, and he must have *struck* something going down, or in the water, because he was so broken and ugly. *My* brother. And my father stared at it—and he said, They don’t leave a man much, do they?” (416). Following this passage, Ida proceeds to share a traumatic family history about her paternal grandfather’s gruesome murder by hammer at the hands of a railroad guard. In the passage, Ida renders Rufus’ disfigured body grotesque and

unfamiliar to his own family. The distance she wedges between herself and her deceased brother is dramatized by her use of the pronoun “it” to refer to Rufus. While a grotesque sight, Rufus’ body, in its very grotesqueness, holds the attention of his father, who appears to have been stricken by the body’s condition and his own father’s gruesome death. Ida’s repetition of “stared at it” is an attempt, I would argue, to make it clear to Vivaldo the gravity of her family’s loss. Despite Rufus’ feeling of smallness in life, his presence was an importance piece of the social fabric made up of his family and friends. This importance, however, is only clear after his death, which creates a wide, gaping hole in this fabric. I suggest that Rufus’ bottom existence haunts those who knew him and also forces them to contend with their personal challenges that prevented their ability to see Rufus as more than a black male caricature absent of deep feeling, a propensity for emotional pain, or a need for help. In order for Rufus’ friends to move forward, they are forced to turn backward in the sense that they must revisit repressed traumas, past grievances, regrettable decisions, and their own racism. In other words, Rufus’ suicide initiates individualized and communal reflections of “bottoms” that are in the form of things ignored.

An example of a character’s “bottom” is displayed in Cass’s venture through Harlem for Rufus’ funeral. She is a wealthy, white woman living with her husband Richard and two children in an upscale part of the city. Cass is wholly unfamiliar with Harlem’s geography: The driver let her at the corner of 125th street and Eighth Avenue and she realized, as she hurried down the wide, crowded street, that she was in a strange, unnameable state, neither rage nor tears but close to both. One small, lone, white woman hurrying along 125th street on a Saturday morning...” (117). Cass’ feelings of alienation and loneliness echo Rufus’ feelings of these same emotional states. Having the “heartbeat” of Harlem, Rufus and the circumstances surrounding his death mark the landscape. Thus, Cass wanderings through Harlem—in a desperate pursuit to find a hat

to wear to the funeral—suggests a wandering through guilt about her lack of closeness to Rufus before his death.

Vivaldo and Eric, two of Rufus' friends and sexual partners engage with "bottoms" on both a psychical and physical level. Again, Rufus' death brings up the bottoming of his loved ones' lives. In this particular circumstance, the two men engage in sex as a means of comfort. But the sexual intimacy is also the grounds for tapping into the triangulated desire between Rufus, Eric, and Vivaldo. For both men, the sexual liaison becomes a way of reaching and feeling for Rufus, which is something they failed to do well when Rufus was alive. As the sexual bottom, Vivaldo practices a self-shattering that his egotistical and self-absorbed behavior prevented him to do in the past. Sharing Vivaldo's insecurities about the bottom position, the narrator says: "[h]e associated the act with humiliation and the debasement of one male by another, the inferior male of less importance than the crumpled, cast-off handkerchief" (384). Vivaldo's decision to be the sexual bottom shows a denial of self, a desire to sacrifice his previous ways of understanding that, perhaps, may yield a new capacity of self-denial in his other relationships. Vivaldo's desire for penetration mimics a desire at the same time for Rufus and a wistfulness to have had felt for him as deeply as his bottom position allows him to feel with Eric.

Rufus' suicide sets into motion a series of what I would call mini-apocalypses, or a chain of "self-shattering" events. The regular routines and practices of his family and friends are thrown completely on their heads, a metaphor that I am using purposefully here to evoke the imagery of exposed bottoms and the vulnerability this position generates. Rufus' death forces a "bottoming out" where characters such as Cass and Vivaldo must do away with prior notions of the self in the effort to connect with others. Ultimately, Rufus imagined apocalypse of New York

City begs for a similar outcome, connection.⁵⁸ This connection would be born out of a geographical flattening, wherein the institutions of diversion and architectures of division are no longer present, which animates a simultaneously terrifying and gratifying turn both inward and outward. Rufus' position as an impoverished, black male initially seems to put him in an alienated position that is totally out of the bounds of empathy. At the same time, what Baldwin's use of apocalypse does is to provide a queer vision of the city that removes the veneer of rigid social boundaries that would cast Rufus' situation as grossly unordinary or unconscionably abject.

Conclusion

So what exactly does a private space look for black men? The objective of this chapter was not to come to a definitive conclusion, but to capture the transient nature of privacy for black men. For black men, private spaces constantly morph, and thus offer only varying *degrees* of protection from the public space. I would venture to argue that we can think of the private/public space divide not exactly being a strict binary. The case studies I address in this chapter convey a range of combinations: private public spaces, public private spaces, semi-private public spaces, semi-public private spaces, mostly-private public spaces, etc. It does make sense why in conceptualizing urban renewal's production of space there could be different permutations of private space. What urban renewal accomplished was a systematic dismantling of black private

⁵⁸ I do want to avoid drawing a romantic conclusion about whether or not Rufus or those who know him are redeemed by the end of Baldwin's novel. I agree with Maxine Lavone Montgomery who writes in her book, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) that "Baldwin's writings reveal a refusal of compensatory Christianity" (60). I take Montgomery to mean that Baldwin veers away from any complete resolutions in his works, and *Another Country* is an example. Rufus is as abject in the end as he is in the beginning, and while his loved ones attempt to make peace with their role in his death, this process is forecasted to be one that is incomplete and discontinuous.

spaces and the criminalization of black occupation of public spaces. The artists and writers I concentrate on in this chapter approach the crisis of black private space from varying standpoints. In Parks' photography, black males venture to create private spaces in abandoned properties that are neglected by the city. These spaces, however, only provide temporary anonymity to the Midtowners. Parks' representation of the Invisible Man's "secret" apartment shows a private space that is compromised by visibility. Compared to Ellison's written description of his protagonist's private space—which, by nature of written language, puts more responsibility on the reader to imagine this abstract space—Gordon's rendering of this private space offers a lesser degree of anonymity and transience given his camera's intrinsically documentative function. Yet, the camera's documentative function is not completely successful because Parks positions his Invisible Man in a manner that simultaneously reveals and hides the subject from view. This strategy of simultaneously revealing and hiding black male subjectivity permeates Ellison's own novel. Rinehart is the prime example of a black male figure who reveals while he conceals. While a man of the public, Rinehart creates privacy by way of slipping in and out of identities. His "true" self is unknown, and, virtually, nonexistent. James Baldwin's protagonist, Rufus Scott, like Rinehart, negotiates New York City's landscape with an anonymity that stems from his underclass status. This anonymity, while tragic, also spurs a critical energy with which Rufus uses to imagine a more equitable landscape that could accommodate black men.

CHAPTER 3

CHICAGO: VISCOUS SUBJECTS

Introduction

In the chapter “The Resistance of the Object,” in his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Fred Moten describes black culture as vested with “animateriality,” or, in other words, as an animated material. The premise of Moten’s argument in this particular chapter is the overlooked value that is vested in black culture. Historically rendered as an object, black culture has been marked by white ideology as inactive, stagnant, and reactionary. Moten sets out to deconstruct the racist logic surrounding black culture by conceiving it as an animated, reactive entity that, by delving into the “breaks” created by histories of racial violence, can be rescued from the logic that attempts to keep its animateriality secret. With this term, Moten does not wholly rescue black culture from its naturalized objecthood. What Moten does accomplish is problematizing the idea that objecthood is categorically agentless. From Moten’s perspective, it is worth considering the power—and value—that lies in an object.

In this chapter I unsettle stereotypes that cast black men as rash and unreflective by working through the trope of the “clog-like body” in the work of artist Hughie Lee Smith, poet Frank Marshall Davis and novelist Richard Wright. Each of these artists was influenced to varying degrees by black Chicago’s landscape. The packed, congested public housing, a very visible symbol of the housing shortage in Chicago’s black community; the prevalence of red-

lining and predatory landlords; and the dehumanization of black people, who were essentially clogging up these units. The public housing unit, like the Chicago tenement of the early 20th century was filled with many bodies and constant, perpetual stimuli producing activity. The image of the public housing unit is generative in its viscerality and brings attention to the ways congestive architectures can heighten the sensory mechanisms of its occupants. One can imagine this being the case with the mass relocation of blacks into public housing units. The constant noises, acts of violence, and lack of sustained privacy could result in a hypersensitivity to one's surroundings and also produce a radical inwardness.

My argumentative move is to borrow this image of the tenement for the purpose of thinking about how Smith, Davis and Wright's work, which incorporate Chicago, portray black male bodies as sharing the attributes of clogging substances. Clogs can be disgusting and messy; they register slowness, filth, and viscosity. They usually are a product of the gradual buildup of a thickening substance, which either slows down or entirely prevents the flow or emptying of the thing that needs to move through. Clogs can be very stubborn and resistant to methods of removal. They can also draw attention to humans' everyday dependence on circulation and flow. In this chapter, I want to think about how clogged spaces activate existential questions about black masculinity, particularly the challenges of black male individuality and congested black spaces.

I counter pose the image of the black male clog with the 1940s and 1950s image of the hardboiled male subject. The hard-boiled genre rose during the 1950s, a product of the pulp fiction market of the 1930s and the 1940s.⁵⁹ These narratives involved very action oriented plots that would grip readers' attention. They were thus, shaped by a very masculine ethos, and had

⁵⁹ Pulp fiction refers to often cheap, disposable publications of stories that were highly dramatic, action-packed, and had a social-realist bend.

narratives led by strong, muscular, and active men who moved through plots with a physical and emotional sharpness.⁶⁰ These plots are wrought with action and suspense and are abundant with heroes and anti-heroes. It would make sense that the figure of the black male, already stereotyped as super strong and capable of enduring physical and emotional pain, would be situated within the hardboiled genre. Novels such as Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* are several examples of African American works that center around hard-boiled black masculinity. The novels are charged with scenes of black male excitability, where the black male protagonist does not seem to be thinking reflectively about his circumstances but is just acting, poised to fight against the constant barrage of racist structures. There is no doubt that the image of the superhuman black man has been such an influence on perceptions of black men. Depictions of the strong, black man has played a central role in African American male cultural production. Its value has been to show black male protagonists are shown as resistant, revolutionary figures who fight relentlessly against racist systems.⁶¹ But, this idealized image of black men has been detrimental by erasing images of black male vulnerability, weakness, sadness, confusion, and myriad feelings, behaviors and practices that would be read as effeminate or emasculating.

⁶⁰ In *Sociology Noir: Studies at the University of Chicago in Loneliness*, Roger A. Salerno reasons that the pulp fiction phenomenon was a symptom of a national feeling that men were in a state of crisis. Salerno argues that women's relocation to the nation's cities, occupying positions that had once been only for men, might have contributed to this masculine anxiety.

⁶¹ In his book, *Black Masculinity and Sexual Politics* (Routledge, 2010), Anthony J. Lemelle Jr. posits that African American find themselves trapped between the dangers of "social feminization" and "stereotyped hypermasculinization" (2). Such consequences is the possible paranoia that accompany the danger of being emasculated, and simultaneously, dehumanized. However, as James W. Coleman argues in *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), black men's avoidance feminization or emasculation through acts of hypermasculinity works in shoring up the ideologies of anti-black masculinity that maintains this trap that black men find themselves in.

The purpose of this chapter is not to wholly undercut the black masculine hard-boiled genre of African American literary and artistic production, because such a portrait of black men did have resonance and served a crucial purpose in conceptualizing not only black men, but the black community as up to the challenge of fighting against what must have been felt as insurmountable systems of oppression.⁶² However, my aim is to show a subtle, alternative portrait of black men that challenges the notion that black masculinity is only defined by superhuman strength or unbound mobility. The advantage of reading the black male body as a phlegmatic, clog-like subject not only invites a reassessment of masculinity in particular, but allows for understanding a distinct urban sensorial experience for black men whose lives are circumscribed by the problems of neighborhood congestion and feelings of physical and psychical confinement.

My argument is not that the works I analyze in this chapter do not invest in the black male spectacle, but they make the black male body visible in a way that brings about tension between hard boiled masculinity and what could be considered as a soft boiled masculinity.⁶³ For instance, in Richard Wright's 1953 novel, *The Outsider*, the plot is saturated with descriptions of the black male protagonist's body at rest. The narrator lingers on Damon Cross' body in a manner that dramatically slows down the development of the plot. The reader is not invited into a narrative that is sped up by an emotionally-imperturbable black male character that is quick

⁶² I am thinking particularly about the Black Power movement that wielded a masculinist, militaristic pathos. There are certainly problems that accompanied such a pathos, but it is worth considering how black masculinity influenced a particular kind of activism.

⁶³ For information about the term "hard-boiled masculinity," see Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and Jopi Nyman, *Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997). Breu describes hard-boiled masculinities as "cultural fantasies" that perpetuate the stereotypes of American men being stoic, fearless, and heroic as opposed to the image of the "soft-boiled" man (141). Nyman discusses the patriotic underpinnings of the hard-boiled man, who is essentially the manifestation of American values (freedom, democracy, self-actualization, individualism).

and perpetually prepared to spar against his environment. Contrarily, Wright's novel invites the reader into a fictional representation of Chicago with a landscape the protagonist slowly and deliberately moves through. He leaves traces of his bodily fluids around the city, quite comparable to the way a clog moves slowly through channels, leaving behind residue. In Hughie Lee Smith's stark, urban landscape paintings, black male subjects appear to be drooping as they stand in front of backgrounds of urban decay and black male criminalization. Quietude pervades Smith's images, all of which have only one male figure occupying the frame. Not only do the solitary black male figures appear static, but they give the impression of clogs in that they appear heavy and settled, quietly occupying the pockets of urban space they are painted into. They appear contemplative, meditative and quiet. Smith's representation of black masculinity puts mobility into question as one of the most defining attributes of normative American masculine performance. Frank Marshall Davis' subjects and speakers also appear contemplative. I choose to end this chapter with my analysis of Davis 1948 poetry collection, *47th Street* because its poems, in their hopelessness, imagines what a black masculine liberatory politics looks like that is not structured solely around privileges of mobility. For instance, in his poem "Black Weariness," Davis' speaker hopes to transcend the external limitations on his body. In essence, the speaker feels unable to be free because of the societal limitations imposed on his black body. As a clog, then, the speaker's body is that from which he dreams of escaping. Davis' speaker dreams, with the help of alcohol and jazz music, of disembodiment and spiritual flight. Such imaginings engages an alternative consideration of mobility that is not predicated on physical movement but the imagination. Fundamentally, my analysis of Davis explores how the poet conceptualizes black masculine practices of flight in situations of stuckness.

Chicago's Clogged Tenements

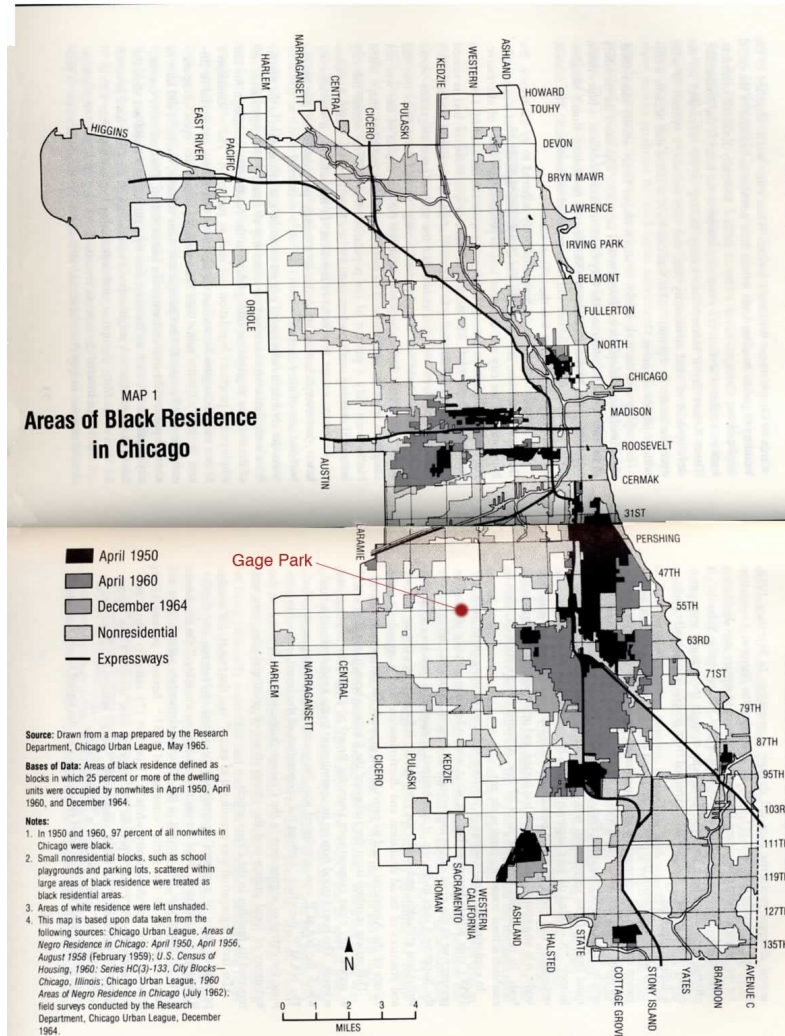


Figure 20 1965 Map of Chicago's South Side

Post-WWII Chicago is just one example of where we can see the clogging metaphor working. As the map of Chicago (**Figure 18**) above shows, areas such as South Side Chicago

became the home of many of the city's black residents after WWII.⁶⁴ The area is saturated with the color black, indicating a high population of black residents. I use the visual this map communicates as a starting place for thinking about how clogging promotes a reading of the environment as a topography and landscape that operates on a system of constantly morphing, uneven, discontinuous pressures that bear on and mold subjects. More specifically, the metaphor of clogging helps illuminate the aesthetics used by African American writers and artists to describe the existential feelings of a black male individual living in an environment that feels clogged; a space where there is a built up volume of blacks pressured to live in tight, designated living quarters. I use clogging because of its visceral effect; it captures the suffocation feeling that charges the fiction and art I look at in this chapter by Hughie Lee Smith, Richard Wright, and Frank Marshall Davis. These artists use elements of what I call a "clogged aesthetic" that evokes suffocation and congestion. Clogging in the painting, fiction, and poetry of these artists takes the shape of a black male feeling stuck in the clog of racialized trauma and neglect. The clog takes a variety of shapes: the individual's black community can be a clog, wherein the homogenization of black people in the gaze of white supremacy threatens the individual. The city itself is a clog, wherein the black male individual feels stuck in the material and immaterial institutional and infrastructural systems from which escape is grueling, inexact, discontinuous and downright messy. White supremacist ideologies are clogs in themselves. We will see, for instance, how Davis' anonymous black male speaker in his poem, "Black Weariness," feels "worn" down by his journey through Chicago's racist, fiery "Nordic sands." Thus, this speaker wishes for flight, to leave his raced body. In this case, his own body is a clog that he is stuck inside.

⁶⁴ Although this part of Chicago was home to blacks before WWII, the demand for labor during and after the war drew more blacks to Chicago who ultimately ended up in South Side Chicago.

The image of the public housing unit packed with black bodies is one central trope of the black urban imaginary. It symbolizes several things, one being the inconsistency of the urban dream. While the North, Midwest and West were thought to be symbolic of a better life for blacks who migrated en masse, these regions fell short.⁶⁵ Although black Americans were initially encouraged to come to cities such as Chicago to replace a temporarily missing labor force, their presence after the World War became a problem.⁶⁶ Low-income black residents in Chicago were restricted to regions such as the South Side of Chicago and parts of the West Side. And during the heavy period of urban renewal, which was meant to revamp the city's appearance and infrastructure, the South Side's perimeters became harder and harder for black residents to move beyond. The goal of urban renewal was to heighten property taxes and bring income to the city by drawing up- and- coming businesses and potential residents with high incomes. What that translated into was plans to fight "blight"; certain areas were thought to have to be protected from those whose presence would lower property values. Furthermore, to make more room for a proposed influx of people with money, buildings and areas that were considered to be unlivable were torn down in the name of eminent domain, which refers to the right of the city government to take control over the fate of a property. Thus, a resident in one of those "blighted" buildings legally gave up the right to occupy them and would be forced to leave; the building was in the hands of the municipal system. Such laws as eminent domain and restrictive covenants—a de

⁶⁵ In his book, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Davarian L. Baldwin traces the beginning of mass black migration to Chicago.

⁶⁶ See Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2007). Pattillo does commendable work outlining the tensions low and higher income black residents and between black residents and white residents following World War II. Also see Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). What Pattillo and Smith bring light to is the role both black and white residents played in contributing to the formation of lower-income, black neighborhoods.

factor method of restricting who could reside in a particular area—affected Chicago’s black population.

Several major players in Chicago’s urban renewal strategies in the 1940s and 1950s played a significant role in perpetuating the congestion found in Chicago’s South Side and West Side. The Metropolitan Housing and Planning Council, formed in 1934 to aid in providing affordable housing to Chicago’s low-income residents, and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), created in 1937 for the purposes of creating public housing projects, helped orchestrate a targeted approach for developing Chicago’s South Side. In reality, the South Side had desperately needed redevelopment. It was congested with buildings that had been in disrepair since the 1920s and the 1930s. And black residents suffered the consequences of the city’s long disinvestment in the South Side. Poverty spurred violence and black people’s own neglect of their neighborhoods. Institutions that bordered these scenes of abject poverty such as the University of Chicago and the Michael Reese Hospital were also impacted by Chicago’s neglect of the South Side.⁶⁷ Violence was a major issue for these institutions, and in order to protect their image, urban renewal of the South Side was of key importance. And thus, the MHPC, CHA, the South Side Planning Board, University of Chicago, the Michael Reese Hospital, were key participants who worked together to help attack blight in South Side Chicago. Both University of Chicago and the Michael Reese Hospital financed acquisitions of land and property in their surrounding neighborhoods for the purposes of expanding and developing their campuses. The

⁶⁷ For more information about the role the University of Chicago played in helping redevelopment Hyde Park, see Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and John W. Boyer, *The University of Chicago: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Jeffrey Helgeson examines Michael Reese Hospital’s approach to urban renewal in Chicago’s South Side in *Crucibles of Black Empowerment: Chicago’s Neighborhood Politics from the New Deal to Harold Washington* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

South Side Planning Board, founded in 1947, concentrated specifically on reducing blight in South Side Chicago.⁶⁸ Thus, it provided incentives to businesses and institutions interested in purchasing property in the area. As such, the SSPB did not look at South Side Chicago as an area made up of historic neighborhoods and close-knit communities, but as a pathological space that had to be meted out, square-inch by square-inch, to businesses and institutions that by purchasing land, would rehabilitate it. In conjunction with the SSPB's war on blight, the CHA and the MHPC coordinated public housing construction. The objective was not to use city redevelopment to change the social landscape of the city, but to maintain the racial makeup of the city's neighborhoods; black residents moving into these new housing projects would remain in primarily black neighborhoods. Thus, one can see the beginnings of what scholar Arnold Hirsch referred to as the making of Chicago's "Second Ghetto": prominent Chicago institutions and businesses bought up tracts of land in South Side Chicago, and lower-income black residents were allotted less and less land to occupy.⁶⁹ If black residents either refused to relocate to or were not qualified to live in housing projects such as, Dearborn Homes, Harold Ickes Homes and LeClaire Courts, they really did not have much choice in where they could move.⁷⁰ Not only

⁶⁸ See Michael Carriere, "Chicago, the South Side Planning Board, and the Search for (Further) Order: Toward an Intellectual Lineage of Urban Renewal in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (2012): 411-432. Carriere offers key insight into the early formations of the South Side Planning Board and offers background information on key members of the organization, including Wilford G. Winholtz and Reginald R. Isaacs. Carriere also examines how the Chicago School of Sociology heavily informed the strategies of urban renewal prepared by the South Side Planning Board. By tracing the ideologies of the Chicago School in the SSPB's planning protocols, Carriere identifies the racial underpinnings of the organization's design decisions.

⁶⁹ See footnote 3 for more information about Hirsch's book.

⁷⁰ Rashad Shabazz appropriately describes inner-city Chicago as a "prisonized landscape" (2) in his book *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (University of Illinois Press, 2015). Thinking about the spaces that lower-income black residents were confined to as a prisonized landscape allows for a consideration of the overlapping institutions of discipline and power that helped solidify Chicago's black ghetto. Along with the

were they economically limited to low-quality rentals in the South Side, but restrictive covenants—which were not made illegal until 1948—also limited black residents’ housing options. Even black families who were financially secure enough to move into white-majority neighborhoods in Chicago faced physical violence by white residents.⁷¹

The areas where black people in Chicago could call home were severely restricted. The subtext of this mass herding of placeless blacks into housing buildings were anti-black ideologies that rendered these people as “stuck” together; they were deindividualized and deemed nondescript and ill-equipped to determine how and where to live.⁷² Not only did Chicago’s civic and business leaders perpetuate this ideology, but so did the city’s black middle and upper class residents who focused on their inclusion in the housing market at the exclusion of their lower-income counterparts. Thus, what we see in Chicago was an intersection of a number of antagonistic architectural and discursive practices that rendered the black underclass silent in matters dealing with housing needs; these needs were decided for them and dictated to them. Ideologically labeled as “place-less,” or undeserving of valuable places, blacks were restricted to

restrictive covenants that ultimately ensured that blacks could not move out of South Side Chicago and areas in West Chicago, white neighborhood residents essentially formed mobs that attacked black families attempting to integrate the white neighborhoods. In this way, black residents in Chicago were indeed victims of surveillance strategies that ensured housing inequities.

⁷¹ One particularly serious riot was the Fernwood Park race riot of August 1947 involving white residents attacking a group of black families who were relocated to segregate the Fernwood Park Housing Project. For more information see Ann Durkin Keating, *Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs: A Historical Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷² For more information about the architecture of mass housing in Chicago, see D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Press, 2009). In chapter 3, “Clearing Chicago’s Slums,” Hunt calculates that between 1945 and 1966, the Chicago Housing Authority built a total of 23,400 apartments for the city’s lower income residents. These public housing units did not integrate Chicago but kept black residents where they were before redevelopment took hold. Hunt describes how public housing was constructed using a “poverty aesthetic” approach to exterior and interior design. The sheer size of the public housing developments and this poverty aesthetic certainly contributed to the later decline of such units as centers of crime, violence and disrepair.

areas such as Southside Chicago. Without choice to choose a place to live beyond these places, blacks were taken advantage of by slumlords who charged exorbitant rent for residences unfit for human life.⁷³ Black-run Chicago newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* lambasted the mistreatment and neglect of black renters at the hands of businessmen looking to profit from the housing shortages and restrictive covenants black faced. Articles reported many blacks packed into tenement buildings with no working plumbing system. Others reported deaths of black renters who died in electrical fires because of their tenement's faulty electrical wiring. And others reported large rats running through tenement rooms as families slept. In the face of Chicago Housing Authority's project of slum clearance and eminent domain rules, low-income blacks were moved into large low-income housing buildings such as Cabrini Green.⁷⁴ Many of these housing projects, including Altgeld Garden Homes, were built near toxic industrial dumps and manufacturing warehouses, which put residents at risk of diseases such as cancer. They were not built to be aesthetically pleasing but functional and for the purpose of housing many people.⁷⁵ Such concentration of people with low-income and a lack of resources made it so that these projects gradually became sites of crime and violence.

The amorphousness of anti-black violence calls for a critical look at the different ways black men and their experience of such violence can be articulated. Regardless of the fact that the portrayals of African American men in post-WWII literature is certainly influenced by the

⁷³ See Thomas Dyja *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013)

⁷⁴ Large, solid, modernist design by architects such as xyz. Architectural firms that did commercial buildings hired to build high-capacity buildings. Certainly contrary to the prairie style that built horizontal buildings paralleling the cities flatness and evoking a symbiosis between land and shelter. Studs Terkel calls Chicago the "architectural athens" on page 14 in *Chicago*. The first housing project built in Chicago.

⁷⁵ Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954*

hard-boiled aesthetic, this aesthetic runs into complications that are given rise by the atmospheres and environments that the characters are shaped by. It is hard for them, for instance, to carry on an with individualist state of being when they are a product of environments where blacks are kept in close quarters. Also, complete control over one's environment, especially one's space, is challenged for the African American man in the urban setting, whose race and class prohibit him from having a free range of movement. And while normative masculinity is dependent on a heavy presence in the public space, one can imagine how performing it becomes difficult for black men living in a city where safe public spaces for blacks were limited. The challenge African American men faced in post-WII Chicago was not only in finding safe spaces, but also non-crowded spaces.

Hughie Lee Smith, Richard Wright, and Frank Marshall Davis take into consideration how the massive holding of black bodies bears on the formation of black male subjectivities. The portrayals of black manhood and Chicago in their work evoke the metaphor of clogging. The characters in Wright's and Davis' work, for instance, display sluggish behavior as they ponder the conditions of their existence. Their feeling of being stuck in a clog informs their spatial practices and sensibilities. In their portrayal of these practices and sensibilities, Wright and Davis draw upon a condition of life in Chicago's black slums. Their aesthetics, such as Smith's brooding, alienated black male figures, is colored the existential angst generated in the black community by poor housing conditions.

If masculinity is premised on individuality and the clog is representative of a holding up, a bottling up to the point where free movement is if not totally blocked, is made difficult, then I am interested here in how artists and writers portraying black masculinity express this suffocation, viscosity, and thickness of atmosphere through how their black male protagonists

perceive themselves and their environment. What I also study is how these representations of black male subjects and how they perform their masculinity in such an environment. Ultimately, The literature and art that I examine in this chapter calls for a reworking of what we consider to be masculine expression. It also calls for different ways of conceptualizing anti-black violence that is not just spectacular. What if, for example, we thought of anti-black violence as slow, persistent, tough, combative, putrid annoying clog that black men get stuck in, that slowly erode the skin. Imagine the surface of this clog congealing at points with the surface of the body, trying to engulf it.⁷⁶ Imagine the type of violence this visual evokes; it is a violence that is slow, gradual, and sticky. A body caught in such a substance like a clog is constantly trying to break free.

The clog metaphor, thus, for the purposes of my argument in this chapter, promotes reading the environment as a topography and landscape that operates on a system of constantly morphing, uneven, discontinuous pressures that press upon and mold subjects. Clogs are created through accumulation; at some point, a material builds and cannot make its way through a channel. The channel might be too narrow or is made out of material that does not facilitate movement. The clog itself can be made of a substance that is too viscous or sticky to be able to move through a channel, or if it can, it is very slow. I use the clogging metaphor to describe an aspect of the urban black experience and how the feeling of being clogged up and subsumed in a clog translates into black masculine feelings of hopelessness and the complicated desire to flee. The authors and artists I examine do not necessarily make judgments, but desire to get a better

⁷⁶ The clogging of the tenement buildings and other living spaces did have bearing on black masculine identity. As scholars such as Rashad Shabazz describe, the inability to provide and to lose control over one's environment has a debilitating impact on a sense of self, particularly if that sense of self is heavily dependent on the ability to hold oneself to the standards of masculine expectation.

understanding of the individuals who inspire such fictional characters. Specifically because masculinity has for so long been associated with activeness and movement, the artists and authors I study not only expose the faultiness of such an association, but elucidate the stops and starts that underscore the realities of masculine practice—especially masculine spatial practice.⁷⁷

Clogging as a Existentialist Dilemma in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

Richard Wright's novel, *The Outsider*, is not entirely biographical but shares some parallels to the author's life in Chicago. Originally from the South, Wright followed some of his relatives to Chicago and looked for work. He worked menial jobs and managed to find relatively better work as a postal clerk. Despite the advantages of such work, it was also alienating. While living in Chicago, Wright was an active member in the Communist Party but later grew disenchanted with the organization's disregard for race and anti-individualist agenda. Wright communicates his disenchantment in the novel when his protagonist is caught in the middle of a fight between a Fascist and a Communist and chooses to murder both of them so he does not have to choose a side.⁷⁸

The Outsider is about a black male protagonist named Damon Cross who lives in South Side Chicago. He is a worn-down postal worker who has scholastic interests in Western philosophy and the history of modern civilization; existentialism is a heavy component of his

⁷⁷ Charles Johnson's essay, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," captures the feeling of losing oneself—and one's control of self—and the physico-psychical behavior that accompanies such feelings of paralysis. This paralysis I equate to the feeling of being stuck in a physical and metaphysical clog.

⁷⁸ Hazel Rowley details Richard Wright's experiences in Chicago in her book *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). What may be of particular interest is Rowley's information about Wright's experience working in a Chicago post office, an occupation that is both mentally and physically demanding. Rowley describes how Wright's workdays involved standing for more than 8 hours straight and being surveilled by technological systems such as weights and timestaps to ensure productivity.

intellectual ruminations. Before he is in a life-changing subway crash, Cross is caught in several familial and work-related problems. Cross finds out that his mistress is underage and pregnant with his child. He is therefore guilty of statutory rape, and fails to get his mistress to have an abortion. Cross' wife takes advantage of his predicament by forcing him to take out a loan from the postal service following her discussion with the postmaster about Cross' illegal conduct. Now in a financial, domestic, and potentially legal bind, Cross runs into a chance situation when he is falsely assumed to have died in a subway crash. In actuality, a man that resembled him died. Cross capitalizes on the news stories that publicize his death, which circulate well before Cross makes his way home. Amidst his pressing personal difficulties, Cross decides to change his identity, which begins his journey through questions of existentialism: What does it mean to be human? What is freedom? What does freedom look like for a black man living incognito in the city? How does one form a new identity with new sets of moral codes? Cross takes on several stolen identities, including Lionel Lane. He moves to New York City in order to get as far as possible from his family, workmates, and acquaintances. Here, Cross' previous life catches up with him, which forces him to continue switching identities. He runs into a climatic feud between a Communist and Fascist, and in order to silence them both, he kills them. He takes the Communist member's wife as a lover, who kills herself when she finds out Cross' crime. Soon, a hunchbacked lawyer investigates the murder and is on Cross' trail as a suspect. At a point, Cross is brought into custody and is confronted by not only the lawyer, but his abandoned wife and sons. He makes the choice to part from them permanently. At the end of the novel, suspected Communist sympathizers avenging their fallen comrade murder Cross. The lawyer has a final exchange with Cross, who, as he dies, comes to the conclusion that community is important for the individual, but also, that his environment led him to make the choices he felt he had to make.

Interestingly enough, *The Outsider* is not as celebrated as his acclaimed novel, *Native Son*.⁷⁹ In *Native Son*, the story is told by a third-person narrator who is able to get inside the head of Bigger Thomas, a poorly-educated African American man who has dreams of flight, of escaping his circumstances. The novel is relentless in its naturalistic portrayal of black male life in Chicago; the city, at the time of the novel, is facing a brutal winter, with snow and ice completely covering the landscape, akin to how whiteness disperses itself through the city. In an unfortunate turn of events, Bigger becomes a fugitive and tries to escape capture only to be cornered atop of a building. He is arrested, tried in court, and at the end of the novel is awaiting capital punishment. Bigger is made out to be the victim of his circumstances; he is poor, black, male, and uneducated. Such circumstances impede his ability to think and communicate his desires and thoughts clearly. He lacks eloquence and the ability to communicate his thoughts clearly; it is questionable whether he is actually able to be in touch with his own thoughts. Wright's novel was celebrated but also critiqued by writers such as James Baldwin as overly-deterministic. Writers such as Ralph Ellison believed Bigger Thomas to not be fully representative of the African American experience.

Perhaps Wright wanted to prove his ability to create a black male character with intellectual depth and the capacity for serious self-reflection. Whether or not Wright manages to do so with the same amount of grace as Ralph Ellison accomplishes is up for debate. There are many instances in the novel when the story's seams show. The monologues and philosophical riffs Damon Cross goes on are at times inorganic and do not quite fit perfectly into the particular scene. They come unannounced and can be, oftentimes, disorientating and frustrating to the reader. While scholars, though, might want to put *The Outsider* in the category of Wright's

⁷⁹ General criticism about the novel disproves of how Wright incorporates French existentialism into the narrative, characterizing his approach as heavy-handed and too conspicuous.

subpar writing, I think that a closer critical look at Wright's novel could be helpful. It is helpful to think about why in fact Wright wrote such a discontinuous novel in the first place. A possible answer to this query is the novel's subject matter. The novel features a protagonist who is living a life of multiplicity. He is both a postal worker and a student of philosophy. Thus, there are times he narrator feels intellectually stunted by his occupation. Philosophy serves as a channel through which the protagonist can be intellectually challenged. The transcendental nature of philosophy allows Cross a birds-eye view of not only Chicago, but Western civilization. He hopes to break free from societal affiliations that demand his worship and allegiance. But at the same time, the protagonist's identity as a black man, and, thus, a member of Chicago's black community, prevents absolute individualism. Cross' feeling of stuckness when he is on the run from his life explains his disruptive, high monologues about the history of Western civilization. Perhaps there are not meant to be smooth transitions that deliver these monologues, which resemble discursive blobs that stop up the narrative flow of the novel. Simultaneously, these clogs help the reader to understand the protagonist's existential angst, feeling free and captive at the same time. His journey stops and starts, particularly because of the existence he has to have to go undetected. He has to be visible and invisible. Fundamentally, the formal challenges of the novel are indicative of the existentialist questions Wright and his protagonist attempt to answer.

The different formulations of clogging in *The Outsider* enable the protagonist's existentialist ruminations. Not only is the city clogged with black bodies, but also with snow. There are several passages in the novel that feature black residents of the city fighting their way through the snow. Wright uses snow as a means of describing Chicago's institutions and sociopolitical infrastructure. Snow and cold weather, as tropes, convey a brutal and passive

social atmosphere.⁸⁰ The whiteness of the snow, as writers such as Wright show, forges a connection between the city and white supremacy. The behaviors and structure of white supremacy is likened to the invasiveness and omnipresence of snow. Brutal weather, like white supremacy, requires protective layers and the ability to fend for oneself in a passive, naturalistic space. Coldness as an attitude conveys the temperament and rhythm of the city; it is not an environment that necessarily caters to the needs and desires of its occupants. Contrarily, the urban space is brutally indifferent to its occupants, in which case the onus rests on the individual to survive the space's elements.

Wright's choice to stage his story with a brutal Chicago winter as its backdrop plays an important role in situating Cross' existentialist dilemmas within the clogged up landscape of Chicago. Cross feels stuck in his personal situations while at the same time, Chicago experiences inconveniences in the form of snow clogging up its throughways and slowing down the city's productivity and tempo. After the subway incident, the snow allows Damon to go under the radar of a range of bureaucratic identification systems that are unable to detect Damon's activity for a number of intersecting reasons: the systematic homogenization of black people (statistics premised on black sameness), the disregard for low-income and black-populated communities, modern technological disasters, and accident-related system glitches. Fundamentally, the protagonist takes advantage of Chicago's landscape by moving as a clog-like substance; he moves discreetly, apprehensively, strategically, and slowly when needed. Damon Cross' slowed

⁸⁰ In African American migration narratives and urban narratives, snowy weather in northern and Midwestern cities operates symbolically to describe the shortcomings of "freer" geographies in terms of adequately being a refuge for southern black migrants in search of opportunity. Richard Wright incorporates snow in his other novel, *Native Son*, as a feature of Chicago's brutal naturalism. Towards the end of the novel, Bigger Thomas, a fugitive, is literally trapped by ice and snow, making it easier for the Chicago police to arrest him for murder. Snow, thus, works *with* the city's juridical system.

down engagement with the city helps him clarify the very existentialist underpinnings accompanying his feels of entrapment and suffocation. Simultaneously, the protagonist's viscous embodiment and clog-like negotiations of Chicago exacerbates his existentialist dread and intensifies his philosophical ruminations.

Cross' existentialist ruminations and his clog-like negotiations of the cityscape are entangled. Wright's novel is clearly influenced by European existentialist thought, and Damon Cross, to a degree, is similar to Wright, who worked as a postal worker in Chicago while nurturing his skills as a writer. In the novel, Cross is a postal worker who also takes classes in philosophy at the University of Chicago. And throughout the novel, Cross relates his very personal struggles with making a living with very large-scale, intense musings about the fate of Western Civilization, the responsibility of the individual to making his own fate, and the complexity that attends the formation of black subjectivity. Damon's musings evoke the philosophical writings of existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sarte, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Albert Camus, who were invested in questions of individuality, fate, freedom, religion and responsibility.⁸¹ Richard Wright's deep influence by such French existentialist thinkers accords

⁸¹ Several scholars have written about Wright's existentialist writings, including Sarah Relyea, Joseph Keith, Michael Fabre, George Cotkin, Yoshinobu Hakutani, and Nina Kressler Cobb. See Sarah Relyea, "The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 187-219; Joseph Keith, "Richard Wright, "The Outsider" and the Empire of Liberal Pluralism: Race and American Expansion after World War II," *The Black Scholar* 39, no. ½ (Spring-Summer 2009): 51-58; Michael Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," *MELUS* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 39-51; Nina Kressner Cobb, "Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism," *Phylon* 40, no. 4 (1979): 362-374; George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003); Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996). Relyea, Keith and Cotkin emphasize the connection between Wright's existentialist leanings and his interest in the climate of the Cold War Era. Relyea notes how Cold War anxieties about mob violence and the pressures of nations to affiliate with the two superpower blocs parallels Cold-War era existentialist preoccupations with freedom and individualism. Black existentialism has an important dimension, which is the preoccupation with how black people, who share the

with the type of questions the author engages with in *The Outsider* in particular and his oeuvre in general. Specifically, a guiding question Wright works towards answering through Damon Cross is the relationship between the black individual and his black community. Damon Cross expresses clear dissatisfaction with institutions of black community, including the family structure and the church.

When Cross formally decides to break affiliations with his former life and the relationships out of which his life was formed—postal work, work friendships, family connections—the protagonist is likened to a newborn baby learning a language that is foreign to him: individualism. Cross learns what it means to begin a life “from scratch.” Cross’ distrust of affiliations and societal relations plays out in his tentative, contentious relationship to his surroundings. Hesitant to be forced into any form of a relation, Cross shows a degree of self-containment that mimics clog behavior: he sticks with himself, pulls himself inwards, and is slow to act before thinking about that act’s consequences. The protagonist grows increasingly reflective and preoccupied with questions of responsibility and ethics as it pertains to the steps by which he creates his new identity.

The simultaneous dreadful and freeing nature of individual responsibility is a topic Sartre

common history of racial oppression, are inhibited by this oppression from being an individualism and achieving “absolute freedom.” As such, Wright’s exploration of freedom is colored by history of racial oppression and the significance of post-WWII and the Cold War in intensifying philosophical inquiries into the fate of American individualism and democracy. While many scholars have referred to Wright as an “existentialist writer,” Michael Fabre argues that Wright not only was not an existentialist, but did not have as strong a kinship with Paul Sartre as some scholars have suggested. Fabre ultimately argues that it is Wright had questions shared by existentialists but came to these questions before the philosophical movement formed. Wright, then, could be considered a proto-existentialist for the purpose of exploring how Wright’s questions align with existentialist philosophy. However, from Fabre’s view, Wright need not be considered a existentialist for such a study to take place. This argument is certainly up for debate, especially since scholars such as Nina Kressler Cobb have made a strong case, using the archive, that Wright and Sartre did in fact have an intellectual kinship, particularly when Wright traveled abroad to France.

and other existentialist philosophers tended to in their work. The premise of existentialism is that the individual creates his own fate and that there is no presiding force that guides and individuals thoughts, actions, and choices.⁸² To put this in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, “existence precedes essence.”⁸³ Thus, the onus rests on the individual to make his choices, decide on his beliefs, and choose his own affiliations. In other words existentialism presumes that the individual is made by his choices. Such a responsibility on the individual can imbue them with feelings of both dread and freedom, and the entanglement of the two feelings has been an object of study for existentialist thinkers and writers. Even the first part of Richard Wright’s novel is fittingly titled “Dread” and includes the point at which Damon Cross realizes his individuality after the freak subway accident. Dread as an existentialist term connotes bodily entrapment and the feelings and emotions that accompany the realization of one’s uniqueness as an individual and the inability to escape one’s embodiment. Dread can spur the strong urge of flight, a need to escape one’s own existence and the responsibility attached to it. The inability to do so, however, compounds the dread.

Despite the critiques made about Richard Wright’s foray into French existentialism in *The Outsider* as somehow “anti-black,” there is a palpable parallel that links this philosophy to the complexities of the African American experience. Feelings of entrapment in one’s blackness, the pursuit of individuality in the face of the systematic homogenizing of black peoples, and the quest for freedom in the face of racial violence and oppression can be explored through

⁸² Phenomenology becomes crucial here as a study of the way a person forms his life in the world. If one becomes who he is through choices, then one’s engagement with the world through senses and perception shapes the being one becomes.

⁸³ Existence refers to the state of existing, or being. Essence refers to a person’s identity, what makes them who they are or identifiable as such. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 1957), Sartre writes that “man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing” (15).

existentialist philosophy, which is preoccupied with issues of individuality, responsibility, and freedom. Such issues direct the storyline of Wright's novel, which begins with the protagonist's feelings of entrapment and the perception of his racialized body as a heavy burden. The novel's opening sets the atmosphere for the rest of the novel. On a street in South Side Chicago, time is slowed down: "From an invisible February sky a shimmering curtain of snowflakes fluttered down upon Chicago. It was five o'clock in the morning and still dark. On a South Side street four masculine figures moved slowly forward shoulder to shoulder and the sound of their feet tramping and sloshing in the melting snow echoed loudly" (369). The non-descriptness of the passage blends these characters together. Instead of identifying the four black male postal workers individually, the speaker describes them as though they are one organism or a connected mass. The snow is the catalyst behind this oneness that these characters are pushed to embody. They huddle together closely for warmth, which requires a slowness and synchronicity of movement. It is easily imaginable that the four men have walked down this South Street so many times that it has become a routine. The jokes and complaints appear routine. We find later, after the passage above, that the men have just left the night shift at the postal office and are exhaustedly heading to their regular bar.⁸⁴ Thus, the weather and their fatigue, together, produces their slow movement through South Side Chicago. The novel's speaker captures the heaviness of the men's existence when Damon is described as looking for support: "One of the men threw out an arm and grabbed a companion about the neck and crooned. Booker, let me rest this tired old body on you, hunh?" This visual of Damon "throwing" out his arm rather than, say, "raising" his

⁸⁴ Wright perhaps chose the postal occupation for his protagonist because of his own experience as a postal worker in Chicago. Post WWII, this occupation was heavily populated by African Americans, its value being that it is a government job. African American postal workers spearheaded the call for labor rights and collectivization. What makes this occupation central is its importance as part of a communicative network, ensuring the flow of written information.

arm and putting it around his workmate, solicits an image of a weighty arm being so heavy that energy has to be exerted to raise it. Damon's friend refuses to lend support to Damon, which suggests that the fatigue that all four men face makes it so that they all require support and do not have the capacity to provide it to each other. Each is, existentially speaking, alone in their problems.

Cross finds his lifestyle to be fatigue inducing and restrictive. The slowness with which he and his workmates traverse the snow-clogged Chicago streets echoes the slowness with which Damon finds his life to be moving. While he feels trapped in his lifestyle, the protagonist is too confused and depressed to make any changes, particularly because a change of routine seems impossible for him. He is obligated to work at the postal office to support his wife and children. And when his wife discovers that Damon has impregnated his underage mistress, which is a criminal offense, she reports him to the postmaster at his workplace and blackmails him to take out a considerable loan from his post office. Not only is the protagonist at the mercy of his wife, but he is also in servitude to the post office until he can pay back the loan. The situation Damon finds himself in almost pushes him to the point of suicide. Unable to sleep one night, Damon grabs his gun and contemplates suicide as a path to absolute freedom: "He was despairingly aware of his body as *an alien and despised object* over which he had no power, a *burden* that was always cheating him of the fruits of his thought, mocking him with its *stubborn and supine solidity*" (381). Existentialist thought saturates this passage. Words such as "despairingly," "alien," "object," and "supine solidity" convey Damon's feelings of being stuck inside his body, paralyzed with dread about his future and the monotony and blandness of the present. He dreads the repetition of his problems. This repetition is in the passage itself, with the alliteration of "s" in "stubborn," "supine," and "solidity." These words, aggregate into feelings of stuckness.

Damon's body is described as being his own enemy, mocking his desire for change and shutting down at times when he wants to move toward or even contemplate change. He feels as though his body is inclined to lay face up and alert Damon of its presence—its weight, and its labor-induced fatigue. Damon's body as threat explains why he entertains suicidal thoughts. His body is ultimately an enemy to his desire for flight and Damon desires to break free from it: 'it would be *manfully* better to let others see a bloody hole gaping in his temple than to present to the eyes of strangers a *mass of black flesh* stricken by stupor" (381). This mass is slow, non-descript and stuck. Damon's meditation here offers a critical juxtaposition. Masculinity and "mass of black flesh" are adversaries in Damon's thinking. Masculinity is associated with action and choice, which are not attributes associated with a "mass of black flesh." Alliteration resurfaces again with the phrase "stricken by stupor" which connotes heaviness and the building of one problem on top of another. For Damon, suicide would be a masculine act because in shooting himself, he has made a decision how and when to die. The grisly sight of his shot head would communicate the violent ends he goes to assume power over his life.

Damon's passion for life is only reinvigorated during and after the subway accident. While watching the train crash, Damon is described as being catapulted into blackness. The expansive space through which Damon is catapulted symbolizes the plasticity of blackness. It represents itself as both material and immaterial, stretching out before the protagonist. Cross being catapulted through black space also changes his perceptual framework. People, objects, and time seem to speed up and slow down. At the same time, the grim disfigurement of the people who die in the train accident becomes a perverse learning moment for the protagonist, who sees in a very literal way the plasticity of identity. At first, the carnage of the train accident—human flesh intertwined with broken metal and unsecured, splayed electrical wiring—are a literally and

metaphorical hindrance to Cross' livelihood. In order for him to escape the train, Cross realizes that he has to break away from the bodies around him. Fighting his way out from underneath a dead black male passenger who he previously realized bore a likeness to him, Cross asks himself:

Could he beat down that foolishly staring face belonging to that head pushing against the seat wedging his leg to the wall? He shut his eyes and lifted the gun by the barrel and brought down the butt, and, even though his eyes were closed, he could see the gun butt crashing into the defenseless face...Sweat broke out on his face and rivulets of water oozed from his armpits. He opened his eyes; the bloody face had sunk only a few inches; the nostrils, teeth, chin and eyes were pulped and blackened. Cross sucked in his breath; a few more blows would dislodge it. He suit his eyes and hammered again and suddenly he heard a splashing thud and he knew that the head had given away, for his blows were now falling on air..."

Fundamentally, the subway accident forces Cross to engage his existentialist thinking by making choices and decisions. At the same time, he must commit acts of violence on dead bodies if he wants to free himself. The protagonist's engagement with his bodily double is akin to an anatomical study of the human body.⁸⁵ In other words, by bludgeoning the body to the point that it no longer looks human, Cross comes into direct contact with the reality that the body is a malleable, acquiescent substance.

. For Cross, the accident makes room for an alternative ethics for the living. His newness to these ethics—his uncertainty—is expressed by the fact that he closes his eyes when he makes the choice to bludgeon his double's head so that he can free his leg. His extremity takes precedence

⁸⁵ I think that the significance of this uncanny doubling is that Cross' double represents the black community, a mass of people that Cross feels stuck inside.

over the head. The head's delicacy is communicated by its defenseless state and how it gives way to Cross' blows. The pressure he applies to the head is intense—he is “crashing” the butt into the head. The balance of ethics goes to the limit in the other direction as Cross focuses exclusively on his survival. The energy Cross exerts onto the surface of the head is shown by the sweat and the connotation of “oozing.” This exchange of fluids between the bodies shows both their pliability and liquidity. The liquid that comes out of Damon Cross exposes his materiality. Damon's twice killing of his double—a man not only dead but now pulpy and unrecognizable—suggests that Cross' identity, too, becomes unrecognizable—plastic and in a state of flux. His body is literally contorted—the angles contingent on the other bodies' angles. Sweat “breaks” from the pores of his skin—entryways and points of openings for his thick fluids are released in order to cool his body after his exertion. It is as though the outside surface bears the presence of his insides. The words “pulp” and “sunk” give the impression of an elastic container such as a balloon whose air is being compressed. The air that gives it shape gives way; the skeletal structure is broken, culminating in the folding of the structure. Pulp corresponds to remains or an excess left over or behind. Cross takes in breath to exert more energy in making the double appear as lifeless—as less human—as possible. The more subhuman the body appears, the more able Cross is to free himself. In essence, the double's bodily fluids are exchanged through Damon's act of bludgeoning. Broken apart, the double's viscous body both impinges on Damon's freedom and submits to the protagonist's desire to separate himself from him. Not only does Cross disfigure his doppelganger, but he also walks across a black woman's body on his way out of the train: “He stepped upon the body, feeling his shoes sinking into the lifeless flesh and seeing blood bubbling from the woman's mouth as his weight bore down on her bosom.” Cross' treatment of the dead levels sexual difference, even if momentarily. The unknown

woman's body gives way, her insides made outside when the body is stepped on and blood seeps out of her mouth; her breasts—dominant symbols of womanhood— used as a stepping ground.⁸⁶

Cross' escape from death sets into motion his subsequent escape from the familial, romantic, and work-related disasters that were just as imprisoning for him as the dead, heavy body double who weighs down on him. The dead bodies that clog up the wrecked subway's aisles and interfere with Cross' escape serve as a grim parallel to Cross' feeling of being suffocated by his affiliations. His wife, mistress, children, and workplace are akin to a clog from which the protagonist desires to escape. Cross' actions aboard the train—his bending and breaking of bodies—imbues him with a feeling of freedom and possibility. Just like the human body can morph from one constitution to another, one's identity can take multiple forms as well. With this newfound knowledge, Damon's entrance into the world from inside the subway is likened to the experiences of a newborn baby: "His body felt weak and he could not quickly orientate himself." Cross enters a death and rebirth in the subway crash, exhibiting behavior that mimics the movements of a newborn and gelatinous matter. He is weak because of his injuries and overexertion, sensitive to stimuli like light, and is disoriented. Cross does not have bearings, which proves useful after the subway crash as a grounding for him to philosophize the meaning of the human when it is detached from habit and tradition. He is essence a pulp, a remainder to be built up from.

Instinctual decisions Cross makes as soon as he departs the train prove crucial for setting in motion the events that come together that allows Cross to begin a new life. Thus, when Cross is mistaken for the doppelganger in the city's news circuits, he comes to a crossroads where he has

⁸⁶ There is definitely a way to read this act as a juxtaposition of masculine action and feminine passivity. The women in Wright's novel are portrayed as objects inhibiting Damon's freedom. In the subway passage, the woman is an object Damon can step on to leave the train.

to make a decision.⁸⁷ The gravity of his decision reveals itself to him, and the questions he poses to himself illuminate his existentialist thought process: “Others took their lives for granted; he, he would have to mold his with a conscious aim. Why not? Was he not free to do so?” Damon’s choice of words evokes existentialist preoccupations with individuality and responsibility. Even the protagonist’s reference to life as something that should be molded alludes to the existentialist principle that an individual should be responsible for his own life and direct his life in the way he sees fit. Molding a life has a different connotation than, say, building or constructing a life. Mold gives the impression that the matter of life—what it is made out of—is soft, flexibility, rubbery, moist enough to be sculpted or, in other words, life has a materiality, a consistency that makes it solid and not totally solid. Its properties allow for indexical printings to be applied to it.

Chicago appears as both facilitating and inhibiting Cross’ ability to mold his identity, which explains why Cross ultimately decides to leave the city for New York City. Before he decides to make this move, Cross uses the Chicago landscape for his benefit because of the short-term anonymity it provides. Also, Chicago as an information system, with a network that dispatches information quickly, is a tool for Cross. The news circuit ensures the public that Damon Cross is dead. Also, Damon can use the news circuit as a forecast for planning where and

⁸⁷ Andrew J. Webber’s book, *Double Visions in German Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), discusses the role of the doppelganger as both a threatening and potentially liberating figure. Webber writes: “The Doppelganger drama enacts a most fundamental form of existential ‘Widerspruch’ by doubling the self and giving it two contradictory life-stories. That is, subjectivity is shown to be dialectically constituted between two identities. The Doppelganger and his abused or evicted host are radically at odds: the presence of one is the absence of the other, the desire of the one displaces that of the other, and their dialogue can only take the form of a life-and-death agon...” (210). I refer to this specific passage because it addresses the philosophical and existential nature of Damon Cross’ relationship to his doppelganger. It is doppelganger that allows Cross to be reborn as a subject without a perceived identity or past. Unbeknownst to the protagonist, his desecration of his double’s body is the catalyst for his freedom. Symbolically, Cross is destroying himself, his essence, to live a different life. The doppelganger is both an enemy and benefactor.

when he should hide. He can also keep up to date about the subway incident. The snowy weather, which reduces visibility, decreases the risk of Cross crossing someone who knows him. Following the accident, he goes to the city's poor districts to get his resources, including a seedy, low-cost hotel room, which is open to both black and white customers. At the hotel, he runs into an acquaintance who he believes will jeopardize his plans of creating a new identity: "Tension made him hot as fire; he had to check a crazy impulse to wave his arm and try to sweep this man from sight and keep his freedom. It was big, fat, black Joe Thomas who stood in front of him..." (475). Similar to how he perceives his doppelganger amidst the train wreckage, Cross sees Joe as a threat to his freedom. The speaker in the passages gives the uncomfortable impression that Joe's blackness, itself, is something akin to a heavy, stagnate, annoying object. Cross measures Joe by his physicality, whose fatness and blackness is, in Cross' eyes, repulsive. It is a mass that needs to be destroyed. Eventually, Cross murders him by hitting his head with an alcohol bottle. Now a murderer, Cross escapes from the hotel room and hides in an alley behind a restaurant, thinking about his next move.

The alley scene operates as a semi-climatic point in the novel when the story's existentialist nature comes into full focus. In this scene, Cross escapes to an alley to contemplate his previous actions—he has just murdered an old friend in order to ensure that his plan of escape to New York is not compromised. In the spatio-imaginary, the alley is usually relegated to a site to be avoided or feared—where marginal or illegal conduct occurs. It is where acts take place that are looked down upon as inappropriate modes of conduct and behavior can take place given that the alley is a semi-private space. The particular alley is a place of respite for Cross where he can rest and plan his future moves. The narrator describes how "Cross rested his wrists on his knees and his eyes traveled without purpose over the steaming pile of refuse, the top of

which was crowned with a mound of wet, black coffee grounds that gleamed in the light of the street lamp; some of the grounds spilled over a bloodstained Kotex which still retained the curving shape of having fitted tightly and recently against the lips of some vagina; there was a flattened grapefruit hull whose inner pulpy fibres held a gob of viscous phlegm...” Cross’ proximity to the trash the restaurant moves outside—no longer needed food items and products its customers or workers have used—beckons perhaps his identification with these same items, or, alternatively, a time to reflect on the human condition by studying waste. Some of the products that have been used, through its use, produce by-products that cannot be used. Some of the coffee grounds—leftovers from the brewing of coffee—run into a used up Kotex, which is saturated with discharged uterine lining. Cross’ eyes moves from the sanitary pad to indigestible grapefruit pulp. The eater not only leaves behind the pulp, but bodily mucous transmitted through the eating process.

Strewn throughout this catalogue of garbage are images of remainders—the pulp of objects. Pulp refers to the essence of the object, its concentrated, denser material, what cannot be digested. Pulp is a leftover but also potent. What constantly surfaces in Wright’s novel is the image of the leftover, the pulp that becomes leftover after a period of trauma.⁸⁸ This image

⁸⁸ On a theory of black flesh, see Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skins Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Stephens writes, “The flesh represents the body that sits on the very edge, on the underside, of the symbolic order, pre-symbolic and pre-linguistic just before words and meaning. It has yet to be sealed away in an image or bodily ideal. Instead, it is the underside or rough side of the bodily surface and image subsequently sealed over with racial meaning. The flesh is the side of the skin, the hide, upon which we see the scratchings of discourse” (3). Stephens categorizes flesh as existing in a liminal space and, therefore, granting it agency. I think Stephens argument here offers a different way of conceptualizing black flesh that instills it with power while still recognizing the violence enacted on black bodies that rendered them as flesh, and, thus, outside of the realm of language. In Stephens’ reading of flesh, flesh speaks, but in a language that operates outside of dominant systems of meaning-making. The fleshy remains of items Cross meditates over appear to occupy this same liminal space that black flesh does.

appears first after the subway accident, when passengers' dead bodies appear as remainders, only *gesturing* toward something human. Instead of their entire bodies being referenced, the bodies are thingified, magnified and dilated—one person's head is referred to, next someone's bosom. Such an atomic description of the bodies serves dual purposes. One, the congealed matter suggests the existential predicament of Damon and the community he represents. He represents the black community, historically subjected to violence and disregard. It has also been subject to homogenization. The garbage-filled alley also serves as a testing ground for Damon Cross to think about what constitutes himself as a human being and how to account for his material body when it is no longer under the direction of things external to him; things such as black community, wage labor, and racism. Cross is now pulp. He has wrestled the portion of himself that is not—in his opinion—influenced by society. He can build on his “pulpiness” by accumulating a new sets of experiences as he moves, clog-like, around the urban space, picking up new meanings along the way.

Ultimately, the Chicago alley is a literal representation of the protagonist's process of peeling back all the layers that constitute modern subjecthood, particularly including the affiliations that grants one legibility to societal institutions. In essence, the concept of “grounds,” “pulp,” and “fibers,” addresses what is leftover in the process of Cross' breaking away from societal standards and affiliations. He attempts to build a life starting with the pulp of himself—a pulp he is also trying to conceptualize. The trash surrounding the protagonist spur existentialist questions: Is one anything apart from his affiliations and the laws and regulations that shape and constitute him or her? Is the only way one can conceptualize or recognize oneself is through one's affiliations and obligations? The narrator brings Cross' inquiries to light when he describes how the protagonist “for years...had been longing for his own way to live and act, and now that

it was almost his, all he could feel was an uncomfortable sense of looseness...His past had come to him without his knowing; at some moment in the welter of his spend days he had just simply awakened to the fact that he had a past, and that was all. Now, his past would have to be a deliberately constructed thing.” In another passage, the narrator describes how Cross thinks about how “others took their lives for granted; he would have to mold his with a conscious aim. He went into an ill-lighted tavern that reeked of disinfectant and sat in a rear booth and listened to the radio pour forth a demoniacal jazz music that linked itself with his sense of homelessness...He ordered a beer and sat hunched over it, wondering who he would be for the next four or five days until, say, New York.” Cross has the ability now to think of his identity as a loose, moldable substance that he can enter into. This is the opposite of a tight, bounded and *bounding* identity, which has no extra space that allows one to move around and make it easy for him to escape from. Cross’ ability to inflate into an identity and to shed it off allows him to slide through the crevices and cracks left unguarded by Chicago’s surveillance and identification processes.

Frank Marshall Davis’ “Weary” Subjects of 47th Street

Recounting his impressions of 1920s Chicago in a memoir, the journalist and poet, Frank Marshall Davis, describes the city as a “broad-shouldered brute of a burgh, dirty and rough.”⁸⁹ For Davis, a black southern migrant, the adjustment to Chicago life was gradual. And even when the writer grew to love Chicago, his writings record a very contentious relationship with the mid-Western city, filled with scenes of abject poverty and inequity that populated South Side

⁸⁹ From memoir edited by John Edgar Tidwell titled *Living the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

Chicago. Davis' affinity for Chicago did not prevent him, as a prolific city journalist, from recording the harsh realities of the city where "a quarter million souls strained at the restrictive covenant buckle fastening the Black Belt" (128).⁹⁰ Chicago proved to be a very central and formative place for Davis artistically, whose writing is greatly influenced by his and other people of color's experience living in the city. This is not surprising because Chicago was one of the nation's cultural hubs. Jazz and the Black Nationalist and labor movements that took hold of the city following the World War heavily inform Davis' poetry. Davis' poetry is an interesting, dynamic calculus of journalistic writing, jeremiad rhetoric, jazz cadence, grittiness, realism and fantasy.⁹¹

Davis' contention with the limiting nature of blackness as a category is palpable in both his journalistic and artistic work. In a poem titled "Self Portrait," for example, the speaker protests that "I would be/A painter with words/Creating sharp portraits/On the wide canvas of your mind/Images of those things/Shaped through my eyes/That interest me; But being a Tenth American/In this democracy/I sometimes sketch a miniature/Though I contract for a mural." In this extended metaphor, the speaker likens poetry to visual art. While the speaker has the artistic capability of painting a mural, racism and his second-class citizenship only permit him to paint a

⁹⁰ As soon as he moved to Chicago, Davis worked for a variety of city newspapers as both a journalist and fiction writer: *The National Magazine*, *The Chicago Evening Bulletin*, and *The Chicago Whip*. After spending some time away from Chicago, he returned in 1934, engaged in different occupations. He taught a jazz class at a local school, worked as a disc jockey for one of the city's radio stations, and continued his career in journalism, writing music reviews about jazz, and founding and editing for the *Chicago Star*. He was a prolific writer in Chicago, moving from the city in 1948 to Hawaii, where he continued his journalistic and creative writing.

⁹¹ Unfortunately, scholarship on Davis' journalistic writing and poetry is seriously lacking. I agree with scholar Kathryn Waddell Takara who describes Davis as an "understudied resource" in her 2002 article "Frank Marshall Davis: A Forgotten Voice in the Chicago Renaissance." In my opinion, what makes Davis' work such an important resource is its attentiveness to the intricacies of Chicago's racial problem. Also, Davis' almost encyclopedic knowledge of what was happening in the Cold War-era at the global, national and local levels makes for rich, dynamic poetry that telescopes both inward and outward.

miniature-sized image. Ultimately, racism poses a risk to the amount of creative, imaginative space the speaker-artist has access to. A mural is not intrinsically better than a miniature but the speaker's creative vision necessitates a mural-sized space to work on. Indeed, the speaker's experience as a "Tenth American" results in what could be conceived as artistic confinement.⁹²

Davis' 1948 poetry collection, *47th Street*, attends to the limiting nature of racism for black men. The collection bears the name of one of Black Chicago's historic streets, and Davis' poems catalogue a variety of street scenes, inviting the reader into the bars, barbershops, pawnshops, and street corner activities populating the "Chicago Congo." Whilst providing these scenes, Davis heavily incorporates—or, I would say, packs in—a volume of themes and subjects that go beyond 47th Street. Davis has poems dealing with American fascism, the Atom Bomb Scare, the black South, the colonization of Africa, U.S. nationalism, the Scottsboro Nine, police brutality in Detroit, and unrequited love. The list just provided does not even capture all of the topics covered in Davis' collection. Metaphorically speaking, Davis's encyclopedic poetry is weighed down—and not in a negative sense—with localized, nationalized, and internationalized events that appear to converge at the subject of the crisis of black masculinity. For the purposes of illuminating the interlocking tensions that bear on the black male body in Davis' poetry I return again to the metaphor of clogging. Several of Davis' speakers and subjects experience a feeling of suffocation and confinement similar to Wright's protagonist in *The Outsider*. Specifically, the black male characters experience their blackness and maleness as a heavy burden that limits

⁹² It would be helpful to inform the reader that Frank Marshall Davis and Richard Wright knew of each other because they participated in some of the same artistic and political circles. Both were involved with the Communist Party, which is palpable in both of their work. The two writers also share similar philosophical inquiries, mainly pertaining to questions of individualism and freedom. For more information about Davis' exploration of freedom in his writing see Kathryn Waddell Takara, "Rage and Passion in the Poetry of Frank Marshall Davis," *The Black Scholar* 26. no.2 (Summer 1996):

literal and symbolic flight. Flight has been a critical trope in the African American cultural imaginary in addressing the existential experiences of black people feeling trapped in a nation so entrenched with anti-black ideologies and racialized violence. Flight underscores the very spatialized nature of racialized violence, and in African American cultural production, black subjects who either literally or metaphorically fly away from their conditions, are rejecting the literal grounds of racism. Black men's particular desire for flight—as will be seen in Davis' poems—is both a reaction against racialized trauma and the burden of normative masculinity, which posits that men should withstand pain.

For the most part, Davis' characters appear unsuccessful in their hopes of transcending their conditions, for the matter of racial inequality—its consistency—is too viscous for escape. For this reason, Davis' poetry collection evokes an atmospheric and textural thickness resulting from the poet's layering of a multitude of themes and subjects. While 47th Street is the subject of the collection, Davis floods his poems with historical context that puts the “Congo of Chicago” into conversation with a host of pressing issues. 47th street as a clog seems to engulf, or take in, traumatizing events happening on the global stage in the late 1940s. The anxiety over the Atom bomb and the globalized fears of nuclear annihilation, for instance, permeates Davis' descriptions of the city's Black Mecca. By juxtaposing the anxieties of the Atom Age and racial inequity, Davis draws parallels between the possibilities of unfathomable mass death and the disturbingly mundane scenes of black male subjection. This aesthetic move inserts the same kind of urgency the Atom Age produced into the descriptions of inescapable, concentrated black suffering on 47th Street. Davis' black male subjects appear in varying degrees of confinement on Chicago's 47th Street that they either hope to transcend or, at the least, be able to navigate in a survivable way.

In the foreword to his poetry collection Davis shares his personal desire for flight, protesting against the category of race as biological, arguing that it is a construct used to subjugate people of African descent. He desires to have the category of race dissolved. To argue for the dissolution of race, Davis points to empirical data, including scientific and anthropological discoveries about race. He points out the falsity of pseudoscience and the “scientific discoveries” that used racial difference as a means of hierarchy making. Davis also refers to evolutionary theory and the scientific discoveries of the genetic and physical characteristics of black people that tried to make sense of their skin color. He points out that, anthropologists, too, examined racial difference as not marking racial hierarchies; racial difference was based on histories of people adapting to their different environments. At the end of all of this cataloguing of empirical data in support of race as a constructed, sociological category, however, Davis explains how the effects of race have still produced very material consequences.

The preface illuminates a tension between a desire for race to be seen as the construct that it is, and the understanding that despite race’s construction, it still materially impacts black bodies. Describing his formation as an African American writer, Frank Marshall Davis writes in his preface to *47th Street* that “Living in the special circumscribed world set aside by the rest of America for those known to have had dark African forebears produces certain distinct ways of thinking. I am not an escapist running to an ivory tower to blot out life. I am not an embittered black nationalist. I am a realist, and so I write primarily of the impact of discrimination upon me and the others singled out for this specialized treatment... America will have Negro writers until the whole concept of race is erased.” The tension between race as immaterial and material that one finds in Davis’ preface to the collection also materializes in the poems as well. This tension,

I will argue, brings out a level of indeterminacy that makes the metaphor of the clog apropos to an analysis of how Davis constructs the black men in his poems about 47th Street. For a writer who wished that the category of race disappeared, but realized his entanglement in the repercussions of racial discrimination, Frank Marshall Davis' representations of black male subjects are molded out of his frustration. The writer's fictional male speakers, too, expresses a desire in themselves to both not be identified with their race and also want to examine their relationship to their race. In doing so, the writers draw attention to the sticky, viscous, often immobilizing nature of blackness.

Davis speakers characterize Chicago's cityscape as a sticky, viscous landscape to which its black male residents are bound. In one scene, for instance, the narrator runs through a series of black men who make their living on the street. The narrator focuses on the faces of men: gamblers, street preachers, and pimps:

Faces of gambling men and preachers:

Of pigfaced pimps and hognursed physicians.

Of beaten men hauling dead minds in two-legged tombs

And of pale and paunchy merchants. (104)

The stanza is reminiscent of Ezra Pounds poem "Station of a Metro," where the protagonist communicates his or her experience of looking in terms of impressions and does not provide full detail of the people they see, which in turn, presents them as haunting figures. In Davis' stanza, the speaker, too, identifies the men by their faces. Each line in the stanza references two different kinds of men, juxtaposing occupations that would seem to be contrasting. While one occupation is societally deemed to be upstanding, the other is not as upstanding. The first line juxtaposes gamblers and street preachers and the second line juxtaposes pimps and physicians.

The men's occupations run together—there are no hierarchical distinctions. The men are also animalized as pigs and hogs, which characterize them as deceitful or greedy. The gamblers and preachers share a line, while the pimps and physicians share another. By combining occupations line by line, the narrator communicates that one occupation is not more redeemable than the other. But it also conveys the close proximity between these men, and how they are all changed by their pursuit of money and the economic struggle that defines 47th Street. The narrator characterizes the street's beaten men as walking tombs. Their interiority is gone and they are merely alive as a surface—as a walking semblance of the living. A tomb is a structure, an architecture that holds a dead body. The men's bodies are both flesh and tomb and they carry a deadened mind. These men perhaps are exhausted or depressed by the continuous, Sisyphean pursuit to survive. To haul an object means to pick and move something around which is usually of great weight. What Davis' narrator examines is the effect of landscape on the perception of the body.

Following this stanza is a continuing catalogue detailing men and their professions. There is a union forged between nihilism and work. Some men run in underground economies. The burden of capitalism makes it so that the black men in the poem have to pursue alternative, illegal means of making money. And others legally profit from the burdens affecting others. For instance, the image of the morgue weaves into another snapshot of black male life on 47th Street. A pawnbroker is described as open for business when the morgue is. It is death that allows him to populate his store. One of the objects his store houses is a wedding ring that a woman who has lost her husband searches for and finds. It is as though the pawnbroker works with ghosts because the objects in the store are described as such. The pawnbroker profits, essentially, from death. He makes a profit from residents having to buy back their own items in order to obtain money. The

shop itself is called a morgue, where people come to collect things parted from in the midst of death. The pawnbroker, thus, if we continue with this metaphor, keeps this morgue running. Another person the poem characterizes is the numbers runner, whose description comes right after this extended metaphor of the pawnshop being a morgue. The number runner beckons people to put down money and to pray to God that they “hit.”⁹³ But what the street seems to symbolize is a place run by circumstance and choice, not a place run by any supernatural existence. The number runner’s physical description characterizes him as someone who makes a profit by deception, using religion, perhaps, as a way to trick people into putting money down. He is described as being “as long and brown as an earthworm.” Again, the non-human is used as a way of characterizing the human. Earthworms characteristically live underground, surfacing every now and then to travel over the surface of the earth. The movements of the earthworm help provide a portrait of the way the numberrunner functions. Given the illegal nature of his activity, the earthworm helps explain the movements and posture of the numberrunner, who is described as crawling. This image of crawling draws attention to the criminal nature of his line of work, as he profits from the community’s desperation and hope. He profits, essentially, from these lost hopes and his job also rests on chance. Thus crawling could pertain to to the lowliness of his job. It may also refer to the secrecy and discretion he must have as part of his job. Crawling is associated with being low to the ground and not walking upright. He is described as “crawling familiarly into barbershops and poolhalls.” These are essentially places of congregation and the

⁹³ Numberrunners were involved in a illegal money making activity where they would collect bets and guesses about insurance company numbers. These activities were common in low-income urban communities as they provided sources of income for struggling residents. This business was indeed an underground economy that ran outside the legal means of generating and circulating income.

circulation of information.⁹⁴ In the African American cultural imaginary, the numberrunner--running numbers back and forth from the community to the main location--is sly, slick, and needs to practice discretion in order to go undetected by police as he transports the numbers, on pieces of paper, from community to the place where the numbers are produced.

The fluid description of black men also ventures into music performance. The music and labor and product of black jazz musicians are described as that which “enters the arm of 47th Street.” The street is categorized as an arm that has an artery whose life force runs on the music that these jazz musicians create. The sounds produced out of their instruments are described as a fluid that can be injected.⁹⁵ It is significant that their sound, emitted from their bodies, is akin to an illicit drug that the street needs and is addicted to. The speaker’s metaphor of heroin to talk about the movement of jazz music throughout black Chicago resonates considering the rise of heroin use in cities like Chicago after the war. In the visual metaphor, the straight, belted black arm is 47th street. Such a metaphor invites the image of a community bound together by similar challenges and conditions. Jazz’s function, in the poem, is to circulate through this circumstantially bound community. The similarities of the men described in this poem—from the doctor to the jazz musician—are tied to the condition of street life, marked by hardship and a struggle to survive. All men belong to the amorphous clog that is the black experience. The poem, essentially, is a portrait through which black male individuals belonging to this imagined black mass are brought to the forefront. As a group, the black men’s trials and the metaphorical descriptions of their bodies and experiences are bound together stuck to the other people in their community.

⁹⁴ Barbershops are notorious for being places where gossip and information can travel and also where sellers come in to sell their products.

⁹⁵ Read Eric C. Schneider’s chapter on the interrelation of jazz and heroin use in his book *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 17-34.

In Davis' poem "Black Weariness," the black male speaker uses jazz music to describe his existential angst and feelings of suffocation. The setting of the poem is a cafe called "Mojo Mike's Cafe." The rhythmic sound of the cafe's name is a result of the repetition of "m," with the first word in the title, *mojo*, which refers to the notion of energy. The repetition of the "m" also sounds curative, and the cafe itself provides healing for the speaker. The speaker imagines the ability to lose himself in the music in the cafe, a death that would erase his racial difference. This imagining is temporary but also a means of respite for the speaker.

Black weariness, for the speaker, is both a physical and existential condition of black male crisis. The speaker is a black man; this information is provided at the end of the poem, when the speaker is hopeful that perhaps one day he is called by his white counterparts "brother" and "American." The black weariness is a problem of citizenship and wrought by the existential dilemma of being American but labeled an exile. To be a stranger in one's own country, for the speaker, is existentially exhausting. The state of being weary refers to being tired, of being "worn down" as one's constant exertion of energy is never-ending even though it is a limited supply. The protagonist seeks the solace of a bar and music as a space of revitalization.

In Davis' poem, weariness is racialized as a condition of blackness. Weariness becomes a condition of being depleted of the energy required to negotiate through racial issues. To be "worn" down may also have a material dimension. A worn surface, for example, has been repeatedly used—repeated actions toward it break down its material. Thus, there is a temporal element to the process of wearing down. It is a result of a continuous application of pressure that reduces the vitality or newness of the thing or person. In the poem, the narrator has gotten to the point when he desires to disappear as a means of escaping his body, and thus escaping his feelings of weariness, induced by the violence that attends blackness. Mojo Mike's

Café is described as a place where the narrator can momentarily escape his racialized body, and thus, restore his energy.⁹⁶ The release from the body and its limitlessness this release can provide is both sensually pleasing and a relief for the narrator; he is metaphorically getting his “mojo” back. There is the desire to transform into fluid matter—to be liquefied by the “molten” notes of jazz music:

I am tired this night

I shall go alone to Mojo Mike’s Café and bathe my body in high breakers of
hot jazz flung tableward...molten notes falling in a crimson spray (122)

Jazz is transformed into a violent body of water. The narrator sees jazz music as a purifying medium. Jazz is materialized, then, as being more than invisible frequencies; it has a weightiness, force, and volume. In contrast to the weariness and dullness of the speaker’s body, the music, with its jagged, loose rhythms is vivacious, described in terms of hot matter:

“‘molten,’ ‘breakers,’ and ‘crimson spray.’”⁹⁷ The paradox of the poem is that the narrator’s aliveness is a by-product of an imagined state of being metaphorically eviscerated and pummeled by jazz’s frequencies. The narrator’s description of jazz is violent; it has the power of changing the narrator’s metaphysical state.⁹⁸ The narrator desires anonymity and imagines achieving it in a

⁹⁶ See Katrina Hazzard Donald, *Mojo Workin’: The Old African Hoodoo System* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Mojo refers to an amulet used in African spiritual practices. Thus, in the poem, Chicago Congo is a union of Chicago’s culture and ancestral Africa.

⁹⁷ Davis’ journalistic exploration into jazz parallels his narrator’s perception of jazz. In a column titled, “What Jazz Is,” dated August 11, 1955, Davis commends jazz’s ability to make its listeners feel a sense of “virility.” Davis describes it as a “feeling of aliveness and flowing strength” (17). The paradox of the poem is that the narrator’s aliveness and flowing strength” (17).

⁹⁸ In his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Radical Black Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Fred Moten writes that he is “after the way concern with perception and cognition (of the things themselves) leads to the deconstruction of ontology; the way deconstruction generates riffs and rifts, odds and ends, of philosophy and of the intersection in philosophy of semiotics and phenomenology; the way we move beyond such productive cuts

violent way so that, “For these hours I can forget that I am black.” By positing the black male subject as weak and in need of the opportunity to disappear, Davis helps dispel the stereotype of the strong black male that has circulated through U.S. discourse since the 19th century. The narrator’s body is contentious: it shows strength and a desire to continue resisting white supremacy while getting to points when his “arms hang weary from battle.” The bar, thus, becomes a space for the narrator to “bathe his body.” He expresses his sensuality and a need to find a place where he can let go, be “loose.” His weariness and point of breaking down makes him more vulnerable to the sensations and affect the bar’s music and alcohol provide.

Architectural metaphors runs throughout the rest of the poem as the speaker remembers the failed attempts to use education as a protective layer against white supremacy, as though it is a encasing akin to the plush material he imagines his mind to be. The anonymous narrator shares his past actions of protecting himself from black weariness. In particular, he describes his vain attempt to use education as a combatant against white supremacy. The narrator states that:

At school I honed my mind against sleek sides of white ideas
Mine was a leather covered silence in a room of chintz and red plush sound
as I packed my bag with silver bits of knowledge (122)

The narrator describes how he pursued an education that attempted to train him against white, western epistemologies; this could have been a black-centered epistemology. He spatializes white knowledge as a means of conveying the way it operates and feels. A sleek object can be lengthy, durable, tractionless, and erotic. This sexiness and allure can lend the object protection against challenges and questioning. The speaker’s use of alliteration when he refers to white

and eccentric arrivals to something more intense—like an “active forgetting” (90). Moten speaks of rescuing the black body from totalizing discourses. He turns to phenomenology and philosophy’s theories of existence in order to make the case for thinking of the black subject as fractured and porous as jazz music.

knowledge's "sleek sides," contributes to this knowledge's alluring, yet potentially specious nature. The speaker's description of white ideas also has an architectural component considering that something that has sides has to have volume, thickness, and a dimension. As a challenger to white knowledge, the narrator describes his absorbing mind as leather, a durable yet flexible textile. His mind operated as a form of protection, which is the reasoning behind the metaphor of his mind being a "leather covered silence." Going further with his extended design metaphor, the narrator describes his old educational institution as a protective and illustrative space, comparative to plush surfaces and exotic floral designs. The narrator's institution, juxtaposed to the "sleek" nature of white epistemology, is welcoming, warm, and protective. Yet, as the narrator's present circumstances indicate, his previous learning does not rescue him from Chicago's "burning Nordic sands."

While portraits of hopelessness certainly occupy the majority of Davis' poetry collection, this is not to say that the poet does not find ways in his work to challenge Chicago's "Nordic Sands." Davis' collection is simultaneously an eulogy and a jeremiad that posits that the city is vulnerable to the same kind of violence that it imposes on its black residents. For example, in Davis' poem "Chicago Skyscrapers," the speaker describes the city as "fat" in that it is filled with a lot of activity and populated with a lot of people and buildings. The speaker goes on to explain how the architecture, created by planners and architects, are ideologies and desires that are "frozen" in time. The skyscrapers are also described as "thin fingers," which anthropomorphizes them.⁹⁹ The speaker details the cycle of building in Chicago; skyscrapers that were once the tallest buildings become "dwarfs." The speaker describes urban development as "evolution in stone." But what appears to be glorification is cut down in the end of the poem,

⁹⁹ What the speaker manages to do in the poem parallels Marshal Berman critical study of modernity.

when the speaker imagines that a limit is reached when heaven becomes the ground floor of a building, and God, who finds this skyscraper race to be intruding and knocks it down. The speaker ends the poem by bringing up the Tower of Babel and the story of how the primordial civilization's desire for knowledge and progress brought about their violent dispersal. The speaker in the poem essentially goes back and forth, both glorifying the city but also delivering a biting critique of city development. It starts off playful and full of jest but then becomes gory when the speaker describes God toppling over the skyscrapers, the rubble crushing its planners to death. For the speaker, urban renewal has a limit.

In another of Davis' poems, "Peace is a Fragile Cup," the speaker describes how "We have not been left among the living/To become a new generation of dying;/They who survived at Stalingrad/Do not covet the breath/Of the untouched millions in Chicago." The speaker makes a comparison between the trauma of war in Stalingrad and the conditions of life in Chicago. The speaker essentially says that the people in Stalingrad would not trade their experience for those in Chicago. While Chicago was certainly not a war zone, Davis is perhaps referencing the controversy of the nation fighting fascism abroad and not fascism at home. And in terms of life in Chicago, the tough conditions of residential housing, crime, a general feeling of danger, and the threat of being moved out of one's home during the vast changes of the city's layout did cause fear in black communities. The speaker shows how these experiences are, too, traumatizing. And judging from the title of the poem, "Peace is a Fragile Cup," the speaker is gesturing toward the very possible event that those traumatized by Chicago's housing policies seek redress through rioting. Chicago as a "fragile cup" contains populations of disenfranchised people who can threaten to break open the modes of containment that keep them confined.

The Bodies at Rest in Hughie Lee Smith's Landscape Paintings

Hughie Lee Smith's interest in metaphysics bears heavily on the framework I use to attend to the artist's representation of black masculinity. Smith expresses a deep interest in the materiality of human existence. His paintings displays black male corporeality with the attributes of wetted clay, which evokes impressionability. His paintings are an alchemy of surrealism, urbanism, social realism and existentialism.¹⁰⁰ Smith's visuals, I think, helps my reader have a visual sense of my clog metaphor while reading my analysis of Wright's novel and Davis' collection of poetry. The method by which Smith registers black masculine skin in paint parallels both Wright's and Davis' rendering of the black male body as caught up in the viscous consistency of an anti-black urban space. What also makes a pairing of Smith with Wright and Davis illuminative is the productive tensions between Smith's minimalist interpretations of the urban city and Wright and Davis' more detailed references to Chicago. Working with the visual image, Smith, in essence, distills his analysis of the city into single frames. Wright and Davis' medium gives more room to unpack the images that Smith provides his viewers with. Wright and Davis build an architectural image of the black male body line by line, paragraph by paragraph, and page by page. Thus, the reader's experience with these viscous black male bodies with amorphous forms and fluid edges are different when looking at a painting versus having these bodies reveal themselves over a course of 300 pages or a multi-line poem.

Hughie Lee Smith was an African American painter whose affiliation with Chicago is somewhat looser than Richard Wright's and Frank Marshall Davis'. Born September 20, 1915 in

¹⁰⁰ I want to express my gratitude, again, to the staff at the Smithsonian's Archive of American Art, where I conducted my archival research on Hughie Lee Smith. As several of the staff members vocalized, Hughie Lee Smith, unfortunately, is not written about much in scholarship. Yet, Smith's papers include rich ideas about the meaning of art, theories on composition, and the interplay of art and philosophy.

Eustis, Florida, Smith first moved to Atlanta to live with his grandmother and subsequently moved to Cleveland, where he developed his artistic skills.¹⁰¹ His experience in the military opened him to travel, wherein he managed to stay for periods of time in Chicago. He would return there to exhibit his work, which celebrated amongst black Chicagoan artists.¹⁰² Surrealism and the carnivalesque impact his work, as Smith believed that the surreal could speak truth to the realities of the human experience.¹⁰³ His painted environments demonstrate a keen feeling for space. Sensitive but unemotional, his handling of subjects conveys their desolation and alienation and but not in an overly excitable or sympathetic manner. Smith's black male bodies, like clogs, are not particularly attention-seeking. They appear as invisible subjects of their urban environments. At the same time, their disturbingly serene appearance does not seem to fit with the starkness of the landscapes Smith paints. Is this dissonance that is provoking.

Smith's paintings do not directly refer to Chicago; there are no identifiable landmarks that if present, would identify the landscape as Chicago. The value of this is that Davis' work reduces a city like Chicago to its bareness, allowing for more focus on the black male subjects in his work than the specific architecture of the city. The work conveys more of a feeling than a desire for exact reproductions of a particular city. Smith's "Slum Lad", for instance, is a gesture to surrealist art in its portrayal of black life amongst architectural decay. Nothing in the painting's landscape points directly to Chicago. In the painting, a young black male is dressed in black and white with his hands in his pockets. He looks straight onto the viewer, while in back of him

¹⁰¹ See Samella S. Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Lewis provides an insightful overview of Smith's compositional strategies in representing the urban landscape.

¹⁰² See Leslie King-Hammond, *Hughie Lee-Smith* (Petulama, California: Pomegranate, 2010).

¹⁰³ In an artist statement written in 1977, Smith describes his role as an artist to create a "visual world" and "a new death of seeing" for his viewers. Information found in box 8 folder 840, Hughie Lee Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

stands a severely dilapidated building that takes up most of the background. The color of the painting is grayish and dull for the most part, but contrasts with the dull rusty red brown and brownish-yellow colors of the broken down brick building. What is the most odd about the painting is its non-descriptness and the stoicism of the subject in the painting. The subject matter is almost rendered with a dream-like atmosphere. What one would assume to be an everyday, common--and thus invisible in its commonality—is made the main feature of this work of art.

Hughie Lee Smith's "Slum Lad" (**Figure 19**) is a painting that evokes the sentiments of a freshly made sculpture--its surface carrying the indexicality of its sculptor. The texture is still wet, as though the skin-like clay-is still in the midst of hardening. In the painting, the young black man is casually planted in front of the dilapidated building. His wrinkled clothing gives him the impression of being casual and non-assuming. In the background is the heaviness and solidity of a dilapidated building. It is both solid given its architecture is of brick but transitory given that its form is slowly eroding away, captured in a state of its elements breaking down. The boy is rendered in a painterly, sculpted way.



Figure 21 Hughie Lee Smith, “Slum Lad,” ca. 1960, oil on canvas

The shirt, for instance, looks pressed upon in several areas—as though it has been carved. The body’s softness is in stark contrast with the building.

Smith’s painting gestures toward clogging because of the paradoxically desolate and suffocating nature of the scene. The background is heavy and weighty. The building’s interior is clogged with its own material, leaving no room for anyone—particularly the figure before us—to occupy. Considering the scale of the building, it takes up most of the painting’s background. Smith intertwines clean lines with chaotic structure; the clean lines magnify the decayed environment. The building’s roof, toward the right side is broken. Three beams stick out. It

seems like a building trying to save itself from ruin.¹⁰⁴ On the left, the building is holding its own broken bricks, making sure they do not spill out onto to the painting's foreground, where the black boy is standing. The wooden door seemingly holds back the decay inside the house, blocking it from view. The dilapidated building in Smith's painting parallels the scenes of blighted buildings that were common in post-WWII Chicago. Amidst the slum clearance program, residential and commercial buildings were gutted and cleared, quite like the building shown in the 1959 photograph below from the *Chicago Tribune* (**Figure 20**).

¹⁰⁴ Scholar Geoff Manaugh writes brilliantly about the symbolic role of ruins. Manaugh writes: "Ruins are that which has struck around for longer than necessary—or, at least, longer than expected. Ruins are the guest who won't leave, lingering and pensive, unsure of when to say goodbye..." (viii). See Geoff Manaugh, *Modern Ruins: Portraits of Place in the Mid-Atlantic Region* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

Demolish Building as Step in Slum Clearance



Wreckers demolish three story building at 1251 N. La Salle st. as first stage in slum clearance project on near north side by Chicago Land Clearance commission. Entire project will cost estimated 30 million dollars. (TRIBUNE Photo)

Figure 22 Image of demolished building in the *Chicago Tribune* (February 12, 1959)

In the image, three men are pictured gutting a building in North Side Chicago. In front of them, outside the building, is a truck more than filled with building material. There is a stark contrast between the truck filled with the insides of the blighted building and the building itself, which appears empty and hollowed. This newspaper clipping and Smith's painting both touch on clog in similar and divergent ways. The newspaper images indicates a large-scale citywide problem due to the high volume of blighted buildings that were clogging up the city by taking up space that was planned on being used to create new property.

The young black body hauntingly stands slightly off center, looking disheveled with both hands in his pockets. He has look on his face that is between sternness and resignation. His facial features are recognizable, but at the same time, not a clean composition—it is as if his facial features have been molded out of clay—it has that type of sculpted consistency. There is more focus on the flesh than the identifying features of the body—his composition borders on expressionistic—capturing a mood.¹⁰⁵ The young boy in the painting appears not exactly confrontational, but open to being looked at—the hands in the pocket suggests a relaxed, non-threatened outlook. The posture also suggests a lack of shame and a lack of need to explain what is behind him. The obvious disrepair of the building needs no further supplement—there is no identifiable trauma bore onto the subject who stands in front of it. Smith underscores the youth of the figure in his painting in the work's title. Why does Smith use the moldedness of the boy speaks to his youth, his state of being easily impressionable and in the midst of transition—similar to the building behind him? The hands in the pockets connote the idea that the subject has nothing to give to his viewer. It also demonstrates a level of comfort, relaxation, and informality.

¹⁰⁵ In a review of one of Smith's exhibits, Lowery S. Sims describes Smith fittingly as a "romantic realist" and a "poetic alchemist." Lowery S. Sims, "As Enigmatic as His Art," *International Review of African American Art* 23, no. 2 (2010): 53-54

One would assume, perhaps, that the disrepair behind the figure would encourage a higher level of energy or demand a more excitable attitude.

The figure's stance seems to be in contrast to what we witness going on behind him: tension, breaking, a dammed overflow of ruin, a building falling in on itself. The thin ends of the three sticks on the upper right connote such tension—snapping and breaking under pressure. The subject, on the other hand, is loose and informal: his shirt appears as that which one might lounge in. It is loose and relaxed—the sleeves are loose and the front of the shirt is creased and has folds. Smith points to one of the effects of existing in a clogged environment: nihilism. In the painting, the building sucks up all of the vitality in the atmosphere, even the figure's as well. The figure seems to be non-combative, not hostile to what is happening behind him.

Hughie Lee Smith's painting, "The Piper," (1953) depicts a young black boy who is playing a pipe in front of a decrepit building whose wall is peeling (**Figure 21**). The young boy stands slightly off to the left side of the painting. He stands in another building's shadow. The ground is smooth and plain save for a crumpled piece of paper and a number of small pieces of debris scattered around this crumpled object. The young boy looks painted not to scale; he seems squat, like he is being vertically flattened. His cap appears pressed down onto his head, seemingly flattening the top of his head. He almost looks cartoonish. His jacket is non-descript and does not have clean lines. It looks like his torso is crumpled. The left side of his face is in the light while the other half of his face is in the dark. The wall has white-chalk letters that reads: "Post No Bills." The setting seems like a space of despair, a place where communication and visibility is not facilitated. There are rules about what can be visible in that space.



Figure 23 Hughie Lee Smith, “The Piper,” 1953, oil on canvas

Even Smith's grown black male subjects bear an air of innocence. They do not appear mobile, but in waiting. In "Man on Rooftop" (**Figure 22**), the subject is rendered in a manner that externalizes his contemplativeness and displays his stillness. The wires or ribbon are very noticeable in the painting, largely because most of the composition of the painting features straight lines—the verticality of the black man, the verticality of the pole, the small, straight tree in the background, the antennas in the background, and the linear architecture of the building. The ribbons appear out of place in a painting that largely consists of repeated lines. That there are only two strands of cord draws attention and invites us to examine the intertwinement of the two cords; one wrapped around the other. The strands are just as sparse as the landscape. Yet, they carry a dynamism that the black male figure does not have. The blue background of the sky serves as a contrasting feature to the slim subject and the slim. The visual gives the impression that the subject's sides are being pressed upon. The term stark helps us categorize the aesthetic appearance of the painting, along with the feeling of barrenness, plainness, and the lack of adornment. What reifies this look of barrenness is the formal dress of the figure, who wears a formal suit. The figure's solitariness is brought to the forefront by the barrenness of the image. He seemingly makes himself at home on the rooftop, creating a comforting position by laying his arm on the rooftop, putting himself in a state and position of rest as he observes his environment. But this alienating existence is also universal, which might explain why Smith uses a generalizing, formalist, seeming bare bone title: "Man on Rooftop." What Smith also draws attention to is how one can reside in a seemingly hostile environment. The subject's suit operates as a stabilizing force while also intensifying the dissonance of the painting; the figure's alienation and the decaying rooftop makes the suit into a façade, a surface whose seams show. As a modern, masculine textile, the suit in Western culture operates as a symbol of power,

formality, and attraction. However, Smith's alienated black male figure does not seem to be protected by the suit's structure. His suit only underscores his powerlessness as he stands alone, his face rendered in an impressionistic, surrealist manner.

The figures Smith portrays are amorphous, but recognizably black and male. It is as though Smith attempts to portray his figures in a state of delicacy; they are in an alienated, transitory position.

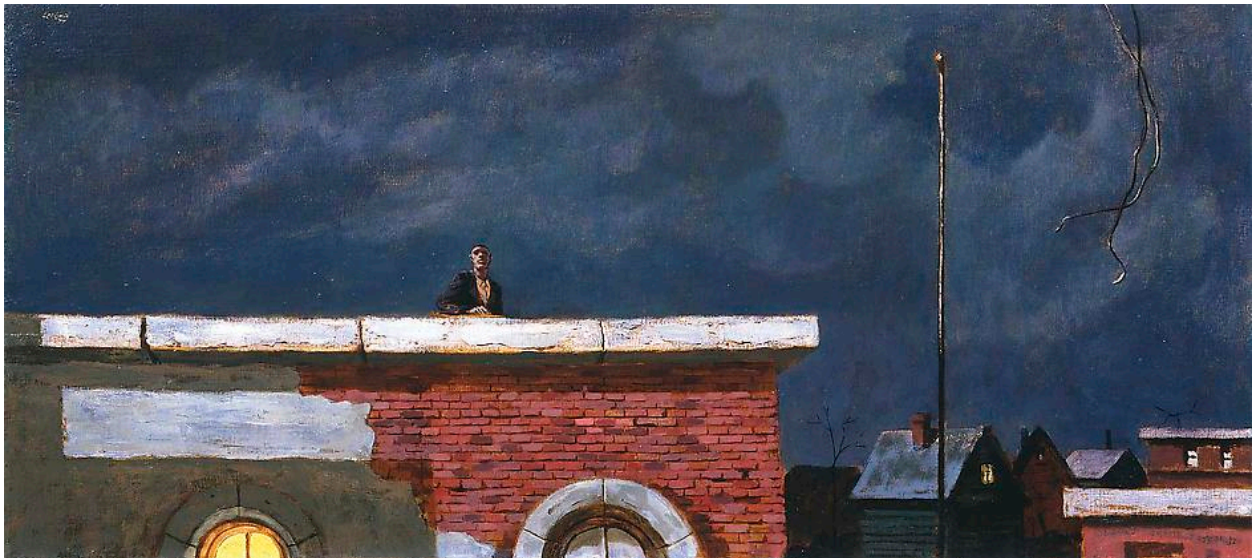


Figure 24 Hughie Lee Smith, “Man on Rooftop,” 1954, oil on Masonite

The figures Smith portrays are amorphous, but recognizably black and male. It is as though Smith attempts to portray his figures in a state of delicacy; they are in an alienated, transitory position. Smith's interest in the intersection of metaphysics, black masculinity, and urbanity seems to fuel his compositional direction in the paintings described above. Smith approached his work from a metaphysical standpoint, illuminating the state of being of individuals in a barren

landscape. He also portrays individuality, alienation, solitariness, and quiet.¹⁰⁶ In Hughie Lee Smith's urban paintings, there is a visceral quiet, a stillness and an airiness that one might not ordinarily associate with a big city like Chicago. Smith quiets down the city, emptying it from its lights, producers of noise, and crowds of people. He slows the city temp in order to make room for that feeling of emptiness, alienation, and strangeness. What is left is a palpable transitoriness of the lone figure, as though without his surrounding and things around to contextualize him, his form is both visible and invisible.

Smith illuminates the bare bones of urban life by dilating the lived experience of one to two two figures per image. He still captures the relationship between the individual and the mass. The figures in his paintings look both formed and formless, separated from the urban mass so that the viewer can get a closer look into their private worlds. The dilation does not guarantee that the subjects will appear to us in full form. Smith does not, for instance, provide a lot of angles to the subjects and their faces are not fully formed.

Are Smith's representations of black men incapacitating or agential? I venture to argue that Smith's painting is agential in the very fact that black men are presented just as they are, and their humanness is what is meant to be the subject matter of Smith's paintings. The boys and young men Smith represents are not displayed as figures right at the verge of action; we actually do not know what they are doing. They virtually just "stand there." Such a phrase is usually directed as a form of chastisement at someone who *should* be doing something. In the context of Smith's paintings, however, it is important that these black males do not do anything. The surrounding environment of disrepair and exclusion says everything that needs to be said. The atmosphere in Smith's landscapes is thick with histories of racial trauma and conveys a

¹⁰⁶ Kevin Errod Quashie provides an interesting critical study of the element of quiet and solitude when it comes to critical race studies.

weightiness that fills the frame. And yet, Smith's figures *just* stand there. Perhaps this is an image of black men that is missing in public discourse about what black men should and should not be doing. In Smith's visual world, the black males refuse to act, and this image of the still black men, I believe, opens up the meaning of black masculinity.

Conclusion

Even on the Chicago South Side, where I was but another drop in a black pool, I was painfully conscious we had been baled, like cotton, into this area because whitey so decreed.

-Frank Marshall Davis

Nowhere is vast and somewhere is compressed
And my dreams need room to stretch out its legs
And it can run around for miles when it's with itself
With even more stride than the gum itself
I feel my sanity is picking on my fantasies
And reality is pulling out the man in me
But drive, could give a shit about your asthma
Just kick you in the ass and tell you to run faster...

-Chance the Rapper

In his song, "Somewhere, Nowhere, USA," Chicago-raised Chance the Rapper raps about

loneliness, the street, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of suffocation over sounds that seem produced by banging on metal.¹⁰⁷ One could picture the song's speaker banging with his fists from inside a cage as he shares his confessional poetry, grim with visuals of slashed wrists and marked with fears of emasculation and disability: "And her knight in shining armor is looking for martyr/Like playing a game of operation with Parkinson's..." What becomes more apparent by the end of the rapper's song is a growing sense of entrapment. The speaker's desires are larger than the room permitted to him, yet his urban pessimism casts a shadow on these desires, labeling them as no more than mere "fantasies." Still, at the end of the song, Chance's speaker desperately maintains hope, opting to try to outrun the predatory thing—somewhere and nowhere—that tries to keep him stuck.

The feeling of being stuck and the desire to push through is pervasive through Chance the Rapper's body of work; same for fellow Chicago rappers such as Kanye West, Common, and Vic Mensa. While the overly violent images of police brutality and black on black crime are issues that cannot be ignored, rappers such as Chance the Rapper also bring attention to the slow violence happening in places such as South Side Chicago. This slow violence is pernicious and psychologically and physically debilitating. And it seems that the only way the rapper's speaker can escape this violence is at the cost of another's body ("could give a shit about your asthma"). The clog reappears. This alarm Chance the Rapper raises about the angst of stuckness is decades old, shared by the artists and writers I engage with in this chapter. But how does one get unstuck from the clog of nihilism and anti-black discursive and institutional practices? The black male bodies Smith, Wright, and Davis provide are languid, forlorn, and macabre. The muscular black man that Wright provides his reader in the beginning of *The Outsider*, is, by the end of the novel,

¹⁰⁷ "Somewhere, Nowhere, USA" is from Chance the Rapper's 2013 mixtape titled *Good Enough*.

dying in a hospital; his death is the price he must pay for his radical negation of belonging. Davis' speakers vow to get lost—if only for a while—in their inner, personal worlds only to be violently shook awake by the sharp edges of Chicago. Hughie Lee Smith's young black boys appear as meager subjects, discarded by the urban space, but in this discard, stuck within a long history of black displacement and placelessness.

CHAPTER 4

PITTSBURGH: BLACK MEN OF STEEL

Iron ore has to be mined in immense quantities and then smelted, mainly in gigantic blast furnaces that spew liquid iron out the bottom at 2,800 degrees Fahrenheit (lava from volcanoes being 1,300 to 2,200 degrees). The resulting pig iron, running almost as thin as water and too bright to look at directly, then has to be refined in steelmaking furnaces. Finally, the steel has to be shaped by rolling mills into I-beams, sheet metal, or other products.

-Brooke C. Stoddard, *Steel: From Mine to Mill, the Metal that Made America*

The sun falls out of heaven like a stone. The fires of the steel mill rage with a combined sense of industry and progress. Barges loaded with coal and iron ore trudge up the river to the mill towns that dot the Monongahela and return with fresh, hard, gleaming steel. The city flexes its muscles. Men throw countless bridges across the rivers, lay roads and carve tunnels through the hills sprouting with houses.

-August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

In vain the tower clock strikes out the hours of night: time, caged in with a man behind McGregor steel, cannot move. To Do begins at six when the door clicks open for impatient time and man to rush out to the runway, to the main street of this iron city of life and men and struggle, linked by visible and secret ties with the greater iron city beyond the walls.

-Lloyd L. Brown, *Iron City*

Introduction: An Aesthetics Right out of the Furnace

As I have shown thus far in this project, there is a relationship between the urban renewal processes of post-WII and African American poetics of black masculinity. I would theorize poetics here as a the styling of language, and in the case of my project, I am equally invested in how post-WWII urban renewal influenced the styling of black male bodies in post—WII African

American literature and art. In Part I, I analyzed the work of Ralph Ellison, Gordon Parks and James Baldwin in light of Robert Moses' wholesale slum clearance project and how the social issue of blacks' lack of inhabitable spaces permeates the poetics of these artists. I looked at, for instance, the bottomization of Harlem and what that brings to bear on conceptualizations of *bottomhood* in Gordon Parks' eroticized images of black male violence. In Part 2, I analyzed the poetics of urban clogging and existential "stuckness" in the works of Hughie Lee Smith, Richard Wright, and Frank Marshall Davis. Davis' poetry, for instance, includes speakers whose language conveys their feelings of racialized claustrophobia. One of Davis' poems features a narrator who employs metaphors about disappearing in the lava of music and drinking to the point of disembodiment. A running thread in these two chapters of my book is the centrality of the body in the experiences of dispossession and the multitude of ways this dispossession is physically realized—or imagined to be physically realized. This chapter is on Pittsburgh and contributes another frame of conceptualizing the relationship between the black male body and the American post-WII revitalizing city and thinking critically about the political and cultural import of conceptualizing this relationship from the standpoint of African American literary and visual poetics. This part of the dissertation hones in on Pittsburgh following the war, the celebrated "Iron City" and/or "Steel City" of the nation. The city's post-WWII landscape, populated by steelworkers and looming with steel bridges and blast furnaces influences what I refer to as a "steeled aesthetics" showcased in Lloyd B. Brown's 1951 novel, *Iron City*, Romare Bearden's collages of Pittsburgh and Charles "Teenie" Harris' photography of the Hill District. By "steeled aesthetics," I am referring to aesthetics that convey the sounds, textures and weight of steel and steel production. These aesthetics constantly allude to steel, even as they are representative of images, people, events, and sounds that do not, on the surface, seem to have

anything to do with steel. Allusions to steel are used as a way to set up a particular tone or environment that is fraught with tension and violence, whether physical or symbolic.

Furthermore, in the literature and art I examine, descriptions of bodies are rendered with a steel aesthetic in the way the artists infuse the male body with the properties of steel: strength, flexibility, ability to stand heat, and noisy. Plots rendered with this aesthetic of steel are tirelessly looming with literally and metaphorical clashes between people and between people and objects. The most mundane events are injected with chaos, tension and an intensity that appears, on the surface, incommensurate with the event. Fundamentally, what a study of a steel-infused aesthetic achieves is an attentiveness to how steel is invested with a political and cultural energy that is not divorced from modes of representation, especially as it pertains to representations of cities that have been wholly influenced and structured by steel.¹⁰⁸

Pittsburgh's Steel History

Pittsburgh's coke and coal resources are the reason that the city was the destination for steel and iron mills. Its location near the Ohio, Monongahela and Allegheny rivers, providing means of transporting commodities, also made it a destination for financiers and industrialists opening steel and iron mills. The Carnegie Steel Company was one of the most influential companies in Pittsburgh and the first to set up mills in the city. The city's steel and iron industry

¹⁰⁸ Thing theory scholars such as Bill Brown have been valuable to my consideration of how objects help express histories, memories and narratives. See Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Brown's chapter titled "The Tyranny of Objects," underscores the ability of objects to command attention, compel action, and manipulate the desires of their owners. I want to venture away from describing steel as some sort of a magical object, but I do want to draw attention to how steel, like other objects, holds dynamics borne out of the conditions of their production.

influenced the city's culture as a working-class and blue-collar geography.¹⁰⁹ The city's parts are connected in many instances by steel bridges—currently there are more than 400 bridges in Pittsburgh. The city's high number of bridges have given it its name “City of Bridges.” Steel has certainly made an impact on the city's look—one only needs to picture Pittsburgh's large, arched bridges spanning across the city's rivers; the factory and industrial aesthetic of the city; its many mills and factories and general look of being "worn down." It is very much clear that Pittsburgh is a factory city.

Following WWII, the need for steel grew immensely as cities across the nation sought to rebuild its infrastructure. The high demand of steel called for laborers who would work in steel production factories. Following the war, steel was still in demand, needed, for instance, for prefabricated homes for returning American soldiers and new corporate buildings in downtown Pittsburgh. African American men made up a noteworthy percentage of the steel worker population. And like their white counter-parts, African American steel workers joined in protests and riots against the steel industries, fighting for better wages and work conditions. These workers, too, however, were also kept out of protests and riots, silenced by white-majority unions. Thus, at the same time the demand of steel grew, labor unions grew, intra-union fighting grew, and overall political unrest grew.

The fusion of steel and aesthetics also has a context in Pittsburgh's architectural history of the 1940s and 1950s. The urban renewal program in Pittsburgh that started shortly before the close of WWII, popularly known as the “Pittsburgh Renaissance,” was, like urban renewal programs in other cities, a measure to get rid of obstructions to architectural and infrastructural

¹⁰⁹ In the early 1950s there is estimated to have been up to 160,000 people working in the city's steel mills. See John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

soundness and the environmental health of the city.¹¹⁰ The Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a chief organization involved in Pittsburgh's urban redevelopment was formed in 1943 by Richard K. Mellon, the grandson of industrial tycoon Andrew Mellon.¹¹¹ The very fact that the conference was heavily backed by banker Mellon highlights the profit driven nature of the city's redevelopment program, which included demolishing and restructuring mix-use land as a means of reducing congestion and creating more accessibility to commercial areas and drawing in revenue through commercial building.¹¹² There were of course important measures put in place to reduce pollution and prevent flooding.

A model for urban renewal programs around the nation, the Pittsburgh Renaissance included strategies to clean up the city's sewer system, reduce downtown congestion, give corporations incentives to stay in Pittsburgh, and implement ways of reducing the mill-produced smog that enveloped the city.¹¹³ But what also attended these wide-sweeping infrastructural

¹¹⁰ In *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015), Allen Dieterich-Ward explains how integral the Mellon Family was in planning and execution of the Pittsburgh Renaissance, heavily financing some of the city's most important projects (see page 74).

¹¹¹ Alongside this organization were the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association and the Pennsylvania Economy League. For more information about these organizations, see the chapter "The Urban Community in National Life" in Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

¹¹² For more information on Richard K. Mellon's involvement in Pittsburgh's urban renewal strategy see Michael P. Weber, *Don't Call Me Boss: David L. Lawrence, Pittsburgh's Renaissance Mayor* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988). With supporting evidence, Weber characterizes Mellon as a very influential businessman whose clout and economic resources gave him access to Pittsburgh's municipal office as a major player in the city's urban planning operation.

¹¹³ Edward K. Muller writes in his essay, titled "Downtown Pittsburgh: Renaissance and Renewal," that "[w]hat set Pittsburgh apart...was its ability to get the renewal process underway before the federal acts of 1949 and 1954 jump-started urban renewal in most cities. State legislation passed between 1945 and 1947 allowed Allegheny County and Pittsburgh to undertake redevelopment and set up authorities that could raise revenue, operate beyond the jurisdiction of a single municipality, and avoid local political embroilments" (9). For the essay, see Joseph L. Scarpaci with Kevin Joseph Patrick, *Pittsburgh and the Appalachians: Cultural*

changes—as we have seen in both New York and Chicago’s urban renewal programs—was the treatment of blacks and lower income residents of Pittsburgh as collateral damage.¹¹⁴ Mostly black-populated neighborhoods such as The Hill District and East Oakland were cleared for multi-million dollar building projects.

The photographs below show the Lower Hill District, populated by mostly black residents. The circle in the photograph highlights valuable area in the Hill District, where there were once residential homes and businesses. This photograph shows what the Hill District looked like before the Renaissance took place. The white lines show the streets paved to create access to the Civic Arena. As one can see, residences and businesses had to be demolished to make the room for these new routes. The other photograph shows the Civic Arena under construction. The steel scaffolding offers a look at the skeletal structure of the dome-shaped civic center. The area surrounding the large building is completely razed down. Juxtaposing the two photographs offers a clear image of how an entire neighborhood was demolished to make the space for commercial architecture. We see the steel actually encroaching over the district in the photograph. What was once a historic black community populated by homes and local businesses is an open, bare space occupied by steel scaffolds.

The militaristic, invasive approach of the Pittsburgh Renaissance, which set off clashes between black residents and the city’s renewal program, is part and parcel of Pittsburgh’s gritty history. The cultural imaginary of post-war Pittsburgh evokes images of social rest met by

and Natural Resources in a Postindustrial Age (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

¹¹⁴ See John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). Hinshaw writes: “While this ‘Pittsburgh Renaissance’ arguably slowed the rate of regional decline, it did little to address the endemic problems of unemployment and poverty that remained particularly acute for African Americans.” (107)

institutional resistance and a general working-class, masculinist affect: the hammer and sickle of the communist party, bloody riots, heavy pollution from mills, steel and iron weaponry, and prisons.¹¹⁵ I will argue that the cultural imaginary of Pittsburgh intersects with constructions of black manhood in Lloyd L. Brown's prison novel, *Iron City*, Romare Bearden's Pittsburgh Cycle collages, and Charles "Teenie" Harris' photography of the Hill District in the early 1950s. What analyzing these objects in light Pittsburgh's steel history yields a framework for thinking about the aesthetics these authors use in their representations of black men in post-war Pittsburgh.

The crucial question that needs to be addressed is what does this "aesthetic of steel" have to do with representations of the black male body in Pittsburgh?¹¹⁶ The long-standing discourse about black men is that they are hypermasculine, and thus, able to withstand pressure and pain. This assumption about black men stems from the *pathos*—the poignancy— of the racist's objective logic, a logic which ordinarily frames black men's masculinity as pathologically *extra-ordinary*, as more than normal/usual, rendering them less than human. Similar to their female counterpart, black men have been labeled as wholly exterior, replete of interiority. But this lack of interiority for black men is attributed to the ideology that ascribes them a mythic, almost-superhuman strength and bestial sexuality and limits their intellectual and moral capacities.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ I want to ensure the reader that I am not essentializing masculinity here, but mobilizing icons that have, through history, been incorporated into dominant discourses on masculinity. Thus, by "masculinist pathos" I am referring to a kind of affect that is intertwined dominant masculine images of strength, power, individualism, male collectives, and patriotism.

¹¹⁶ See Lawrence Rainey, Christine Pogany, and Laura Wittman's edited collection, *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), has been very thought-provoking for my interest in the relationship between black men and technology, a topic that I plan on exploring in the future. In the context of this chapter, I imagine steel as a technology that is inextricable from the history of racial violence against black people. I am invested in the way, then, steel is both an antagonist to fictional black male characters but also influential in the way these characters get represented (as strong, durable, and relentless).

¹¹⁷ Riché Richardson's text, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) offers keen insight into how the myth of the

Black masculinity, then, has been something to be reined in. Historically, the attempt to rein them in was through chain gangs, prisons, and threats of death. The discipline of black men has been excessive and incommensurate with the level of threat black men actually posed. The force reveals several things about the tactics used to discipline the black male body. It shows that the structure of racism itself does indeed find black masculinity threatening and perpetuates the image of the threatening black male subject. It also reveals the inherent weakness of a system that maintains a high level of suspicion and caution even when the threat of black male backlash is neutralized. Think, for instance, of the lengths white mobs went to destroy the black male body; they not only would lynch the body, but often burn it and dismember it. This kind of destruction of the body suggests a heightened fear and hatred toward it.

The production of steel and the discipline of black men merge together in the work I analyze here. The visual of the steel factory, with its fiery furnaces, towering smoke stacks and workplace noise communicates modern power and industrial strength. The steel factory is one of the symbols of modernity, representing progress and fueling the construction of modern landscapes and infrastructures. Still itself, I would argue, manifests a masculine affect, which grows out of the ideology of work, and particularly construction, as a masculine enterprise.¹¹⁸ Evoking strength, modern power, and a masculine affect, steel works well as threatening, violent antagonist in the realm of fiction and art, particularly in respect to representations of African

superhuman black man operates within systems of white supremacist, anti-black violence. The ideology particularly helps justify high-intensity forms of physical violence by positing that black men's high level of strength necessitates high levels of violence. The ideology of black hypermasculinity also posits that black men are immune to pain and must be objected to brute force to get them to act.

¹¹⁸ Anne Bailey offers an insightful sociological study of the relationship between gender and the steel mill in *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steel Workers* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014). See, in particular, chapter 5, titled "Male Masculinity in the Steel Mill."

American men in conflict with hostile American landscapes. Fundamentally a threat to white patriarchy, fictional African American male characters find themselves in tension with environments that evoke white patriarchy in all of its hostility, paranoia, perpetually threatened frenzy.¹¹⁹ In the literature and art I analyze, black male steelworkers literally and figuratively clash with steel that threatens their freedom at every turn. Some of these steelworkers manage to measure up to steel's strength, positioned somewhere between a hero and anti-hero by wielding a masculine energy that saves them from the dangers of a steel-based disciplinary system while, simultaneously, using strategies of resistance that resists normative ideals of masculine power. Amidst these black men are steel environments that threaten to dehumanize them by emasculating them; the men face threats of being made invisible and being silenced through the visual or sonic loudness of steel and threats of confinement. The particular challenges of black masculine performance has been the pressure for black men to behave like a "man" should while, at the same time, either criminalized for this behavior or denied the space to perform masculinity.

Black life, let alone black male life has involved an existential wrestle with confinement. Black literature and art has tied this existential burden with black masculinity, possibly because this trauma of confinement does not necessarily cause more harm to men, but its effects seem magnified by black men's shortcoming to meet the measurements of manhood, which is wrapped heavily with displays of mobility and spatial ownership. If being seen as human is fundamentally

¹¹⁹ bell hooks has written thoughtfully on white patriarchy and how it operates on white supremacist logic. Black men have suffered particular forms of systemic racism and racial violence at the hands of the interlocking ideologies of white patriarchy and white supremacy (in fact, I would agree with hooks that you cannot have one without the other). See bell hooks' chapter "Doing It For Daddy" in the edited collection *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Also see bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

tied with displays of masculinity for black men, then things such as mobility carry high stakes. Mobility, or the state of movement, carries a high stakes if we consider what it includes. Mobility involves the freedom of a range of movement that is needed to move in space from one point to another. Mobility also requires adequate space around a person that provides room for the use and extension of limbs. Steel operates as a potential inhibitor to black male mobility through the containment or confinement of the black male body and wearing down the body by applying pressure onto it. Thus, masculine performances of mobility include physical motion and other acts that reinforce presence or occupation of space. Interlocking forms of confinement, thus, challenge black male mobility. For instance, in Brown's novel, the criminal system views black men as threatening and pathological. Consequently, steel, in the form of the prison, is used as a way of securing the "public" from them. In this way, black male prisoners are rendered invisible and are forcibly silenced; the prison's clanging steel and echoes literally drown out their voices.

In Brown's, Bearden's and Harris' work, steel is as an extension of a multifaceted disciplinary system that is heteronormative, antiblack and patriarchal. In this system, authorities mobilize steel as a medium that disciplines and invisibilizes its "victims." Thus, black men stand to have their masculinity violated and tested by steel's ability to weaken and silence. Steel's power becomes its ability to intrude and impede on; to consume and contain; to damper the sound of. In light of steel's seemingly omnipresent nature and its forceful presence in the life of Pittsburgh's black men, I posit that steel shapes the black male subject's sensorium to interpolate stimuli as things that mimic steel: i.e. humans, sounds, language.

In my reading of Brown's novel, I look at steel's role in the confinement of black men via the prison industrial complex. I study the literal and figurative clashing of black men against the

steel of the prison, an architecture that is a microcosm of the city. My analysis of Romare Bearden's collage, *Pittsburgh Memories*, looks at how he deconstructs the black male body as though it is broken down, steel-colored pieces sutured together. The subjects themselves are reminiscent of steel. Like Brown's novel, Bearden represents steel as not only animating the black male body but reassembling the body. Steel in Harris' photography of the Hill District's is equally animated in the photographer's series of images where steel appears to haunt his pictures of the black community, evoking the processes of urban renewal amidst black daily life. What connects the works I analyze is not only the presence of steel but a rendering of steel that is fused with tropes of black male confinement and the fragmentation of life as a result of economic and political rearrangement in light of architectural and infrastructural restructuring. As a consistent presence in the lives of the black community in post-WWII Pittsburgh, steel becomes the questionable mediator through which questions of black male materiality and strength are relayed. But particularly in Brown's novel and Harris' photographs, the relationship between black men and steel is antagonistic. Despite its properties of flexibility and durability and resistance to erosion, within the context of the art, black male subjects particularly in Brown's novel are contenders against the iron alloy, their hardships molding them physically and psychically to contend with the violence that steel represents.

Fundamentally, steel reverberates—and I use this verb intentionally—in all three artists' works, which is inscribed with echoes, ringings, and clangings of unrecognized black labor, spatial dispossession, and the early stages of the prison-industrial complex, which has become, virtually, a form of mass housing for black men that exploits their labor.¹²⁰ As a political object,

¹²⁰ The architecture of an echo chamber has allowed me to conceptualize how symbolic and physical violence operates. If we think of violence in terms of the way sound in an echo chamber, then violence bounces off surfaces, echoing as it does so. There would be aftereffects

steel is a conduit through which we can think about the systems of containment and dispossession that affected Pittsburgh-based black male laborers. In Lloyd Brown's novel, steel is used as a metaphor to describe the vigor and strength of black men but also evocative of the literal solidity of prisons and the difficulty black men have of escaping the criminal system once they are inside. Brown uses literary devices such as onomatopoeia, allusions to the aural quality of steel, descriptions of prison echoes, literary "closeups" of black male hands gripping the steel bars of their prisons, and "grating" language to convey the nature of black male imprisonment and confinement. In Romare Bearden's collages, steel fundamentally reshapes the black male body into something that dangerously comes close to being unrecognizable as a human being. If the black male body is shown to be a landscape in Bearden's collages, it is that which is invaded by steel. Steel is part and parcel of the scaffolding of the black male body in Bearden's work. In Charlie Teenie Harris' photographs, black men are replaced by steel, and quite literally so. Harris' has a range of photographs that show black men looking on quietly as bulldozers and steel scaffolds take over their community.

of this violence, or in other words, echoes. This theory of how violence works in conjunction with Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment, which posits that discipline operates as a network of interlocking institutions. Yet, I do think that violence as bouncing sound waves makes room for considering how violence sent out from an oppressor can return back to him. It also makes room for thinking about the repetitive nature of violence and its unexpected byproducts.



Figure 25 Pittsburgh's Hill District



Figure 26 Construction of Civic Arena, ca. 1960s

Black Male Imprisonment and the Poetics of Steel

In Lloyd Brown's novel, *Iron City*, steel's disciplinary function appears in the architecture of a fictional jailhouse modeled after Pittsburgh's Allegheny County Jail.¹²¹ In Brown's novel, "inside" becomes a condition of existence for those who find themselves in prison. "Being inside" is a circumstance describing limited mobility; constant surveillance; being cut-off from people, things, ideas, and services that are "outside,"; and an awareness of being enveloped by the processes of the criminal justice system. In chapter one of my project, one will recall the argument I made about the fragile divide between inside and outside that governs black masculine life. In my readings of black masculine aesthetics in the Pittsburgh-inspired art I look to in this part of my book, I want to point to representations of black male life that makes the divide between inside and outside appear as though it is set in steel and iron. The fictional jailhouse in the novel is modeled after Pittsburgh's now-closed Allegheny County Jail. Several of the black male prisoners who are the leading characters in the novel literally and figuratively clash with jail's architecture. This insubordination is a refusal to be wholly confined inside the prison's walls and a resistance to the regulations that demand their silence.

Lloyd L. Brown's prison novel is semi-autobiographical. A political prisoner in the Allegheny County Jail for 7 months because of his communist activities, Brown used his experience in his novel, particularly his knowledge of a fellow prisoner named who was falsely

¹²¹ Designed by American architect H.H. Richardson and built in 1886, the design of Allegheny County Jail influenced the construction of many prisons in the United States. See Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson: Complete Architectural Works* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996). Ochsner provides detailed information about the construction history of Allegheny County Jail and the influence Richardson's design of the jail bore on the design of other American jails.

convicted of murdering a white businessman.¹²² Unfortunately, the efforts to fight for a retrial were unsuccessful, and he was executed in 1941. Brown's novel works as a way of providing insight into the workings of a prison born protest and how prisoners, whose actions and words and opportunities for recourse are severely obstructed, find alternative modes of mobility.

Iron City is a fictional account of the experiences of black male prisoners who are kept in a prison, named Monongahela Country Jail, in in the fictional Iron City. The plot is about the plan of three political prisoners to orchestrate the release of a black male prisoner on death row, named Lonnie James, who is falsely convicted of murdering a white man in an alleged business holdup. As the plot unfolds, the lives and failed dreams of these prisoners also emerge out of a shared narrative of exploited black male labor, black male mistreatment in the criminal justice system, and the dangers that accompany a move to speak politically against political and economic corporation. The men take James' case as symbolic of racial and class injustice and use resources both inside and outside of jail—wives, female acquaintances, reverends, and communist members—to assist in galvanizing enough of an uproar outside to encourage the Supreme Court to support a retrial or life imprisonment. At the end of the novel, it is not certain whether the character's desired outcome is realized, but the ending does gesture toward a hopeful ending.

¹²² See the following website for an in-depth explanation of Brown's entanglement with the FBI: <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fbeyes/brownlloyd>. The website provides actual documentation from the FBI's archive pertaining to Brown's participation in the Communist Party. Also, see William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Maxwell traces the FBI's surveillance of black writers such as W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughies, Lloyd L. Brown, Frank Marshall Davis, Chester Himes, and Richard Wright.

Brown renders the ethos of this prison architecture by way of metaphor, symbolism, imagery and other rhetorical devices.¹²³ The systematicity of the prison cage is mirrored by the organizational structure of the novel. The prison architecture conveys rigidity and individualization; think of, for instance, the intersecting bars of a jail cell that creates rectangular units. The prisoners in Brown's novel are units as well, assigned a number and organized by color and crime committed. Each prisoner is accounted for and forced to abide by a regimented schedule, which pushes time out of their control and ownership. The prisoners are carefully watched and punished for insubordination. The prison's architecture helps facilitate prison regulations by structuring where prisoners can and cannot go and when they can and cannot go. Dignity is challenged by the inability to perform activities where, when, and how one wants to. For instance, private acts are forced to become public because of the criminal status prisoners are

¹²³ I am indebted to several texts that have helped me think about the relationship between prison literature and Brown's novel, which is partly about his own experience in prison. These texts include Howard Bruce Franklin's edited collection of prison writings, *Prison Writing in 20th-century America* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1998); Tara T. Green's edited collection *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008); and Doran Larson's "Toward a Prison Poetics," *College Literature* 37, no.3 (Summer 2010): 143-166. Franklin's collection is essentially a survey of prison literature that includes the work of black writers such as Malcolm X, George Jackson, Iceberg Slim, Assata Shakur and Mumia Abu-Jamal. Additionally, Franklin provides a comprehensive overview of prison writing's history. Tara T. Green's edited collection focuses specifically on how confinement has been one of the defining factors that have shaped the African American experience. Carol E. Henderson's article, "Writing from No Man's Land: The Black Man's Quest for Freedom from Behind the Walls," addresses the nature of prison autobiographies and the complexity that attends the prison writer's use of "I." An illuminative passage in Larson's essay, "Toward a Prison Poetics," reads: "No passive consumers, prison writers write with as keen an awareness of the gazing, talking, and documentary circles that surround them as they do of the concrete and steel that contain their bodies. It is not mere coincidence then that a recurring trope in the work of the prison writer is to inscribe an alternative map of her/his cultural, social, and moral location by writing alternative bonds of personal and historical association" (5). Larson strikes a chord with my understanding of how Brown's experience in prison guided the way he composed *Iron City*, which borrows from several registers, including journalism, prison conduct manuals, political writing, and action literature.

assigned; as a criminal, they lose the right to privacy. Sleeping, dressing, undressing and using the toilet are watched from outside the jail's cell. A cell's steel bars guarantee that the prisoner cannot escape, but provide a degree of exposure so that prisoner guards can see them. The steel used for the prison, thus, contributes to the pathos of suspicion that organizes the prison's architecture. Steel bars and doors deny and facilitate access, confine without hiding one who is confined, and fundamentally reminds the prisoner that the prison is a threatening, fortified and punishing space.¹²⁴

Steel is a central player in this architectural pathos of regimentation and individualization. Brown translates steel's properties in the novel in a variety of ways. In between third person narratives about the black prisoners are prison regulation codes that have to do with prison inmate behavior and rules of conduct. These codes literally break up the narrative, dividing passages into narrative "units." And while the prisoners attempt to enact agency, the looming regulatory codes are a constant reminder that they are always at risk to be punished, which includes ending up in solitary confinement. In addition to the periodic prison behavior codes are newspaper clippings that also appear between sections of the novel. The clippings

¹²⁴ The architecture of the prison and how it facilitates disciplinary measures has been analyzed from varying standpoints. Michel Foucault has famously written about the development of modern punishment in his book, *Discipline and Punishment*, mobilizing Jeremy Bentham's blueprint of the panopticon to explain how the hypersurveillance of prisoner behavior conditions their psyches and physical bodies. Additionally, Foucault also examines the isolating nature of prisons insofar as cells and solitary confinement personalizes the disciplinary measures and adjusts them to each prisoner. Philosophers studying the intersection of prisons and phenomenology, such as Lisa Guenther, have delved into the psychical-spiritual-somatic ramifications of prison life in general and solitary confinement in particular. Critical writers such as Russel Shoates, who is in fact writing from solitary confinement, unifies the violence and injustice happening from inside the prison to a larger, global structure of injustice, making the case that the prison as an architecture is a concentrated, more confined model of this larger structure. What these writers make clear, in concert with Brown, is the centrality of the prison's architecture in not only facilitating discipline but also structuring forms of discipline.

cover James' trial and appear as reminders of James' wrongful conviction and as misinformation constantly conflicting with James' testimony of his innocence. Overall, the narrative structure of *Brown* corresponds to affect of steel that permeates the novel. Steel's resistant and strong nature and its functions as a disciplinary object that divides and regulates corresponds to the purpose of prison codes and media statements that further enmesh Lonnie James in the criminal justice system by repeating his guilt.



Figure 27 Allegheny County Jail, 2002

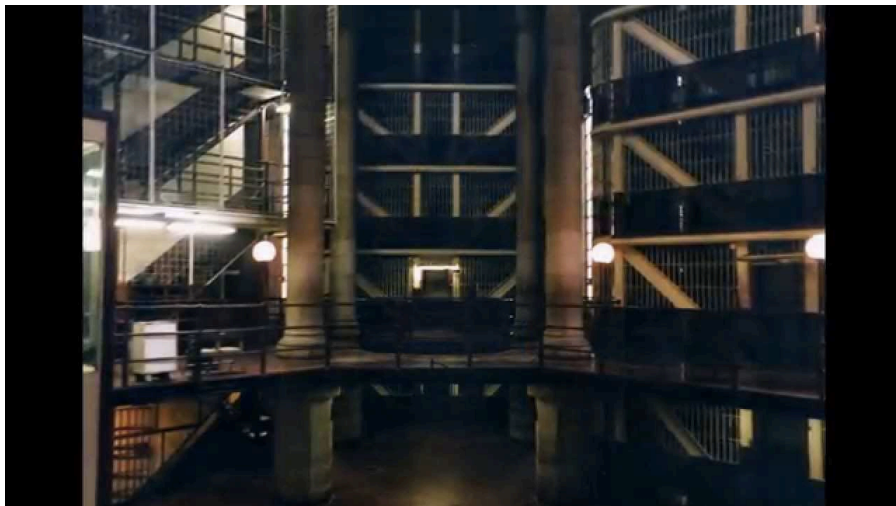


Figure 28 Allegheny County Jail, 2002

The idea of disciplinary repetition can be better understood visually. The two photographs above—**Figure 25** and **Figure 26**—show the inside of the Allegheny County Jail, which at the time the photographs were taken, had been closed. The purpose of showing these two images of the jail's interior is to lay down a framework for thinking about steel, prisons and the confinement of black men. The two images show columns and rows of jail cells. What comes to the forefront of these two images is the multitude of steel bars that make up the architecture of the interior. In the first image are two stairways on opposite ends of the building section, which sits between two Greco-Roman inspired columns, conveying grandeur and solidity. The geometric design of the jail cells is elaborate and precise. It is calculative in terms of its symmetry and repetition. The layout and intersection of bars yield hundreds of small vertical rectangles. The staircases help create triangle shapes that the viewer can apprehend from the outside. These isometric triangles, which make up squares that make up columns. Repetition, uniformity and simultaneity are at the forefront of this design, which is both basic and elaborate at the same time. Such a design ensures that a person, once inside the stairwells, cannot escape; the rectangles are too slender for a body to pass through them. And from the outside, the strong geometric shapes and bold red color evoke a disciplinary ethos that for an incoming prisoner, would serve as an indicator of the prison's function; the prison isolates, individuates, regulates, and depersonalizes the prisoner.

As an architecture, the prison interior carries a disciplinary function by emphasizing systematicity. The armor that secures the stairways appears as a grid or matrix made up of intersections and overlaps. The intricate division of spaces that makes up the cage-like look aligns with the multiplicity of lines of surveillance, divisions of space and regulations of space. The interlocking steel bars shown in the above photographs allude to the intricate, network-like

nature of the prison-industrial complex. Brown casts light on the vamping up the prison industrial complex and the factors behind the mass incarceration of black men: low-quality jobs, poor housing, poverty, hypersurveillance, and racism. The plight of the character at the center of Lloyd B. Brown's novel, *Lonnie James*, is symbolic of how black men are systematically fed into the U.S. prison system. Lonnie is mistaken as a murderer of a white man and lacks the resources and community that could help. His own public defender is in consorts with the steel company who prospers from the jail and a justice system who rather keep the wrong black man in jail than have to admit wrongdoing or expend resources to find the true murderer. Desperate to prove his innocence and render himself visible in such an invisibilizing system, the death-row convict resorts to incessant pleading, telling as many prisoners as possible that he is innocent. Fundamentally, Lonnie rests on making enough noise until his innocence figuratively and literally echoes throughout the jail.

The Monongahela County Jail, built, donated and seemingly financed by a fictional corporation, McGregor Steel, is befit with steel: steel rivets, steel bars, steel stairs, steel screens, and a special steel cages for disobedient prisoners. The prisoners also associated wear steel. They walk back and forth in their steeled cells wearing steel-toed shoes. And the central characters come from a background in steel: James is a former steel worker a chipper at McGregor Steel, Faulcon a former worker for McGregor, Isaac Zachary once a worker in the hearth at McGregor and Paul working in casting. The reader comes to find out that the characters might have produced the steel that now confines them:

“Paul looked closely at the curious ridges on the gray paint and finally he made out what it was: raised letters cast on the steel beneath. “McGregor steel,” he said. “Ain’t that a bitch,” said Faulcon. “Half the guys in here, including me and Zach, have made

McGregor steel. That's a fact, we made this here jail from them to put us in." He shook his head at the wonder of it. "We sure did." (103).

In this passage, the prisoners come to understand the nature of their confinement and the intersection of industry and the criminal justice, or, in other words, the privatization of the prison system. This privatization of the prison system, and the network of industry, the criminal justice system and anti-black ideologies is so complex that it sparks wonder and for the prisoners, also disbelief. On the very bars of the jail cell, the bars that trap the prisoners within their cells, is McGregor's name. Paul's stubby fingers tracing the steel conglomerate's name subtly displays masculinity by evoking strong, working hands. The raised letters on the bars make it so that the prisoner can trace his fingers over them. This tracing and engagement with the letters of the company's name draws a relationship.

Steel, in essence, is the other central character in Brown's novel. Its presence is very difficult to ignore as the plot progresses. The jail itself is earlier in the novel referred to as the iron city within the iron city. As a double, the jail reflects the look and organization of 1940s and 50s Pittsburgh. The levels of the jail are organized as ranges, D being the lowest row and A the highest. Murderers Row is the highest range and integrated with black and white prisoners. The black prisoners are on the lowest ranges while the white prisoners are on the higher ranges. Those on the higher ranges have a privileged overview of the prison's layout in comparison to the black prisoners. As the narrator points out, the organizational system of the prison is not immune to Jim Crow but is built on Jim Crow. The black prisoners are disproportionately mistreated compared to their white counterparts, save for white communist prisoners, who also are seriously mistreated. The history of Jim Crow certainly echoes in the prison, literally

organizing how black and white bodies occupy the space.¹²⁵ The reader can see echoes of Jim Crow through Paul's eyes as he studies the prison's structure in one scene: "They get some sun up there on A and B ranges—at least they can see slices of it coming through the window slits. But not down there where they put folks. They say the Hole's down there too...somewhere" (22). The prisoners have assigned this seemingly unfamiliar space a name, "The Hole." It is as though this place of solitary confinement is given a formal name, and its terrorizing nature is made apparent by the capitalization of "h." The reference "They say" makes this solitary confinement intangible, as though the space is a passed around myth for those who have not experienced time in solitary confinement. As the novel makes clear, the prisoners who are sent to The Hole are mostly black. And again, the ideology of blacks as belonging to a "lowly race" not only makes itself present in black prisoners' assignment to lower ranges but also to the metaphorically "lowly" space of solitary confinement. The Hole's geographical coordinates being unspecified and referenced as being somewhere "down there" in the prison puts a divide between prisoners outside The Hole and those who are inside. The prisoners in solitary confinement are fundamentally "inside" in two ways; they are inside the prison and inside another form of confinement that is inside this prison.

The "Bum Side", a "long steel-wired cage," refers to the most abject geography of the prison. While already, arguably, an abject space, the prison's allocation of a section of its prison population to "Bumside" demonstrates the hierarchical division that structures the prison system. Bumside most literally refers to the buttocks, and the treatment of the prisoners who are contained in this cage are treated as though they are waste, the prison's leftovers. Bumside

¹²⁵ Describing the history of the modern-day prison system, Robert Perkinson puts it bluntly in *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010) that "...Jim Crow has moved behind bars" (9).

supposes the possibility of a double abjection, where a prisoner is confined in a cage within a cage. While this prison geography is meant to be disconnected from the rest of the prison, the experiences of the prisoners here voices the predicament of the prisoners outside of Bumside—contained in a cage within a cage. This parallelism is best illustrated by the Bumside prisoners' sounds reverberating from their cage and heard by those "outside." Thus, the segregatory nature of the prison's geography is negated/neutralized by echoes, particularly of hit steel. A likely mentally disabled "Bum Sider" shouting about "Babylon falling" and rattling the cage that Lonnie, up in Murderer Row, hears makes so much noise that it is impossible not to hear his screams: "The screams were coming from somewhere down below, coming up in roman-candle bursts, rising, spreading, falling and rising again, higher and higher until the whole place was flooded and quivering with the agony that welled up from Bum Side" (42). This description highlights a way of conceptualizing the way the prison's architecture shapes the acoustics of the space and the way sound moves through the prison. The prisoner's screams are described in terms of fireworks launched from Bum Side. The prisoner's voice being characterized as a spurting firework accounts for a way of thinking about the prison's management of bodies and the sounds they produce. The prisoner's voice regardless carries throughout the prison, an intrusion into the routine. Its force becomes akin to the power and force that sends off a firework. Such force says much about what it takes to be heard in this prison. The prison is described as quivering. This seems to counter an image of the heavy, immovable prison. Agony is characterized as an aural medium that carries its own weight and velocity. The agony of confinement, described also as overflowing water, also presents itself as uncontainable, pouring out through the steel gates. This visual suggests that while the prisoner is confined, his agony partially escapes this confinement. The prisoner's message designates the jail as Babylon that is

on the verge of collapse, meeting the same fate as the historically power city. While it is very clear that the prison is not only sound, but buttressed politically and economically, the prisoner's unlikely prophecy manages to temporarily occupy a space that is built to silence: "There it is, the narrow steel door that opened in from the bridge they had crossed from the courthouse. And this is what they call the Hub. Of course...the five oblong cell blocks, rising one, two tiers above this level and the two tiers down below, went out from here like spokes. All around the sides was the granite outer shell and high overhead the great bronze dome" (22). The speaker in the passage takes a cameral or navigational approach to familiarizing the reader with the Cathedral of Justice's aesthetics. As in other descriptions of the prison, steel plays a fundamental role in demonstrating the jail's security and architectural soundness. The narrator's eyes goes from one structure to the next like a surveyor measuring a territory; the narrator goes as far as counting the number of levels in the prison. Counting and measuring figure importantly in the description of the jail. As the narrator systematically points out the features of the prison, the grandeur of the prison is communicated. As the "Hub," the bridge connecting the jail and the courthouse is visualized as a site of concentrated activity. The narrator describes the jail cell blocks—which evoke the image of the neighborhood street block—as sticking outwards from the hub. This particular organization of space allows prisoners to all look in on the activity in the hub. The organization of prisoners contribute to the idea of the jail cell being an iron city within the iron city. The black prisoners are forced to reside in the lower tiers—called ranges— while the white prisoners are kept in higher tiers. Racial hierarchy and white supremacy are maintained through the verticalization of space. Murderer's Row is on the highest range, where those awaiting execution, black and white alike, are confined but are free to move throughout the space however they please. The top of the jail is a shell, and one gets the sense that while the prisoners are

already confined within their jail cells and ranges, they are also confined within several more shells of confinement. In sum, the prison is a condensed version of the environment and atmosphere beyond the jail cell. The difference, however, is that the forms of physical and social confinement—even psychical confinement with lack of access to desired literature—is rendered hypervisible in steel. The country jail is the quintessential echo chamber, where the sounds of violence reverberate and spread throughout the space.

The prison's architecture is symmetrical, as referenced through the metaphor of prisoners on one side of the prison appearing to look in an "angled mirror." The magnanimousness of the inside of the prison is brought to the fore in the passage. Alliteration brings attention to how the prison's steel influences the language used to describe the structure: "sheer steel walls." The narrator emphasizes how steeled the prison's interior is. Sheer connotes absoluteness and totality but also refers to verticalness and sharp angles. Thus sheer is polysemic in this instance, but the word itself also indirectly reflects the word "steel." Both steel and sheer share the "s" as the first letter—a fricative—and also both have two of the letter "e." One word following the other—and both starting with "s"—conveys noisiness and hissing, or a seething sound. The narrator describes the prison's architecture as being "softened by the enclosing trellis-work of bars" (31). This delicate adornment of steel bars clashes with the reality of what they are meant to do, which is to hold prisoners inside their cells. For the prisoners, the prison transforms right in front of their eyes. At first a reflection, the side of the prison appears as an ocean steamer, which is a huge passenger ship with many windows. The men held in their cells peek out as though from grated windows. The metaphor of the individual prison cells comprising a steamboat gives the impression of forward movement. The prisoners would thus be passengers. Being symbolically "eager to port," the prisoners are hoping to be released to the outside. The paradox of the

metaphor is the inherent stillness and the dead weight that characterizes a prison; it is an architecture where movement of time feels as though they have come to a halt. It is also a place that structurally forces stillness or confined movement. Particularly for the black prisoners, their stillness is highlighted by this metaphor: “running the length like a waterline, the row of faces was dark; and on the next range down which was the bottom.” The black prisoners, kept on the lower levels of the prison, symbolize the water that surrounds the steamboat. The purpose of this metaphor is to highlight the black men’s restricted mobility and restricted line of vision. The metaphor also says much about how black male bodies have historically facilitated the development of the prison-industrial complex; they are the waves that push the steel ship along. The mobility of this particular prison architecture is created out of black male confinement and black male labor, which created the steel for this very prison.

In vain the tower clock strikes out the hours of night; time, caged in with a man behind McGregor Steel, cannot move. To Do begins at six when the door clicks open for impatient time and man to rush out to the runway, to the main street of this iron city of life and men and struggle, linked by visible and secret ties with the greater iron city beyond the walls. (181). The passage displays the clock as though conventionally the arbiter of time, not having control over how time operates within the jail. The way time seems to operate inside has much to do with how the prisoners experience time phenomenologically. One being confined to the prison and only given some time “outside” in the prison courtyard along with the experience of living out a long prison sentence significantly shapes perception of time. Time can appear to move slowly even though it has not actually slowed down. In the passage, time is described as caged in the cell. But this seems not to actually be the case as time is abstract and intangible; it should be able, if we were to follow the metaphor, to pass in and out from the jail cell by moving through

its bars. The way this metaphor operates is to collapse body and time in the sense that time cannot be discussed apart from phenomenological encounters with time. In other words, the body is time and time is the body. Time in the passage is not divorced from the body and thus experiences the same forms of discipline as the prisoners' bodies. When a prisoner's body moves, then time also moves. The cathedral's clock, then, is a useless measurer of time and duration, even as its hour and minute hands read out the standard time—a time, it appears, can only be felt normally on the outside. The clock's striking codes as a violent, certain measurement of time. And yet, the clock's dutifulness is useless. The passage also personifies time as not wanting to be contained. It is displayed as pushing out against a door that does not open out fully but "clicks open," which evokes the notion that the prison's architecture itself is wholly bent toward setting time or man free. McGregor Steel becomes a way of communicating the steel as a metonym for the bars but also implicates the steel industry as the real arbiter of time, having the capacity to build an architecture that disciplines and criminalizes the time of prisoners. The range is described as a main street, where there is a traffic of prisoners and prison guards. Describing the main path as a main street operates in picturing the inside of the jail as a microcosm of the Iron City or a smaller model of the city. The jail's architecture and topography is described as being embedded with the struggles of its male prisoners. But the other way of reading the preposition of is that the iron city that is the jail is literally formed out of the lives and struggles of its prisoners. Reading it this way would invite a reading of these men as being imprisoned within their own bodies and time being constrained because the bodies are restrained.

The architecture of Brown's book gestures toward ideas of confinement and structuralized methods of quietening. Numbered prison regulations operate as periodic breaks in the narrative flow of the novel and emphasize the structured and regimented lives of the

prisoners. For instance, following the narrator's description of food being issued to the prisoners is Regulation 61(a) in block quotes and in all caps: ANY INMATE DROPPING HIS FOOD ON THE STAIRS WILL BE DEPRIVED OF FURTHER MEALS ON THAT DAY AND/OR SUCH OTHER PUNISHMENT AS THE WARDEN MAY DIRECT."(32). And preceding a point where Paul Harper is sending a letter to his wife to request that she galvanize outside support for James is regulation 117(f), which also happens to be the epigraph for one of the book chapters: THE RANGEMAN WILL REPORT ANY DISORDER OR VIOLATION OF RULES BY INMATES." (73). The regulations usually correspond to the narrative events of the story, including acts of prison insubordination. The regulation numbers are non-sequential and are often followed by letters. Thus, the reader is given the impression that regulations abound in this prison. The reader only receives a snapshot of the regulation list. The regulations are irregular but permeate the narrative; they are in fact structuring the novel. This last point evokes a prior point I made about the novel's architecture. As a prison novel, *Iron City* is organized thematically by a plot that follows the activities of several black prisoners as they negotiate the space of the prison. The disciplinary nature of the prison as a confining space and confined space is made clear by the narrative parameters of the story. The whole novel takes place in the prison except for moments when prisoners have flashbacks to their life outside prison and when the narrator shares characters' biographies. Aside from those instances, the story is focused on their present circumstances. The plot is prison based and so is the language; it as though the reader is invited inside and familiarized with the nicknames and jargon exchanged between prisoners along with the formal judicial language used by the wardens, prison authorities and lawyers. The novel's organization, too, is structured by the architecture of the Monahagela County Jail. The prison rules and regulations greatly influence how Brown writes the story, down to typography. The

regulation notes, capitalized, appear as the scaffolds of the novel. And the narrative of the black male prisoners' activities appear as a counter-discourse to the regulatory notes. Thus, the novel contains a discourse and counter-discourse that repeatedly clash. The regulation notes constantly alert to the reader that prison is a disciplinary space organized by a never-ending ledger of rules. Thus, as the prisoners constantly evade the prison regulations, their insubordination is thrown into an even bolder relief given that the regulations loom throughout the novel. I want to read the regulations as metonyms of the jail's steel bars against which the prisoners rebel. Between the steel bars are gaps and breaks, spaces where the prisoners exercise strategies of breakthrough. I read these moments of insubordination as metaphorical and literal clanging against the jail's architecture.

The protagonist's literal and figurative battles with iron and steel echo appear to originate before the time they entered the little Iron City. In a passage, the narrator describes Paul and Henry Faulcon's time of sharing the experiences that led to their involvement in Communism and "brought them behind bars" (52). The narrator writes: "Paul's was the story of the chamber-pot, as Faulcon called it, though there was a stove in the story--the stove was an important part; and people. The people were important, too" (53). A worker at a casting plant aiding his disabled father, Paul is deeply influenced by an eviction scene near his home. The two objects that hold his attention is a chamber pot laid by the street curb and the heavy iron stove several neighbors attempt to pull back into the home because it gets stuck in the stairway and stops the moving out process. It is Paul who leads this effort to pull the stove back in the house. Paul's interest in the abandoned chamber pot is not made fully clear. What might factor in his interest is the fact that

such a private, intimate household item is not only on display, but that it lies by the curb.¹²⁶ The sight of this evicted chamber pot stirs Paul's desire to help those who are struggling with the stove. He displays heroism as he struggles with this heavy iron object. The cast stove appears as a symbol of black burden, the weightiness and gravity of eviction, and the brutality of poverty. Paul's literally wrestling with iron evokes a masculine energy that symbolizes his contentious relationship with labor, particularly with the iron factory he is forced to work for to care for his father. Thus, iron is significant outside the prison and inside the prison, and becomes a mediating element that exposes the relationship between inside and outside. Becoming stuck in the middle of the stairway the iron stove becomes this heavy object that limits flow. The iron, steeled prison, too, obstructs the mobility of those inside and those on the outside who are connected to the prisoners. Unlike the stove, the prison is not able to be moved. As a metaphorical city, it has a foundation and a system that predetermines what can and cannot be executed in the space. Negotiating the prison system, then, takes much more effort and trial and error than negotiating the dimensions of an iron stove. But what the eviction scene does do is layout how masculine energy becomes a possible resource to wrestle with the properties of iron and steel. There is a similar wrestling with these properties and the ideologies that they communicate in the jail.

The antidote for retaining one's masculinity in a space of confinement, in this particular novel, appears to lie in identification with hypermasculine behavior. What I want to pay attention to in my analysis of Brown's novel is how the black male prisoners choose strategies of resistance that are metaphorical clashes with the prison. An architecture that functions to isolate and dampen the individualities of its occupants, the prison in Brown's novel is a space that the

¹²⁶ This scene is very reminiscent of the eviction scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in that Paul's witnessing of the evicted chamberpot is a changing moment, after which Paul becomes political and involved in labor protests.

prisoners not only contend with, but find ways of using its structure in ways that make their presence—and hatred toward the prison system— visible. Their masculinity is rendered through noise, clamoring, and carrying out of a militant agenda and ideology within the walls of the prison that echoes throughout the prison. Yet, there are a range of ways, too, that the characters in Brown's novel display a masculinity that literally and figuratively rail against the prison system from within that does not fall under what would normatively be considered masculine. The black masculinity that Brown forges in his novel borrows from iconographies and symbols of working-class labor and protest. Thus, Brown relies on a common and familiar image of the strong man metaphorically breaking free of his constraints. The ending of the novel confirms the type of masculinity the author illustrates. At the end, Henry Faulcon has an idealist dream that the vision of Communism is fully realized, bringing about allegiance and equality among blacks and whites, men and women. One folk hero that surfaces in the dream as a summative figure of the strength of this community is John Henry, competing against the steel machine. John Henry's presence in Faulcon's dream while sleeping in his prison cell asks us to consider how what he symbolizes seems to be communicated through the black male figures as they battle against the prison industrial complex and the ideologies and exploitative measures that accompany it. As the novel unfolds, the network that the prisoners are enmeshed within is gradually exposed. The steel company finances the prison and also has the justice and criminal system at its beck and call. Labor, imprisonment, finance, and law are shown in consort with each other. Aware of these interworkings as Communists, the characters use their voices, writing, slyness, and physical strength as tools to communicate their anger toward the prison industrial complex and their desires to break free. The burdensomeness of the prison and the charges that weigh on the prisoners are represented, for instance, earlier in the novel when all of the jail cells close in on

the prisoners:

A shattering burst of thunder rolls around the jail, echoing and re-echoing from the high-vaulted walls as a thousand steel-barred doors slam shut; the rumbling mounts to a roar, to a soaring roaring booming crashing, a thousand kettle drums pounding, a thousand cymbals clashing; the thunder rolls away, rumbling over the stone horizon, and all is still; then into the heavy silence steals the sound of violins singing, soft as angels winging; then there is light, and from on high a mighty voice is heard intoning... (46)

The passage is filled with descriptions of the types of noises that circulate throughout “Iron City,” a Pittsburgh prison that, metaphorically, evokes a city’s geography. Nicknamed the “Iron City” because of its abundance of steel and iron—along with its characteristics of a brutal, working-class, masculine city—Pittsburgh’s atmosphere is doubled within the prison, where the city’s issues are duplicated in the social relations of prisoners. Characterized as the city of steel, Pittsburgh in Lloyd L. Brown’s novel is suffused with noise—echoes of laborious sounds, echoes of African American protest, and the sounds of iron on iron—that reverberates throughout the prison. The raucous noise is brought to the forefront in this passage, characterizing the prison as a conglomeration of loud noises: thunder and clashing metal pervades the space as the institution’s prisoners have their cages closed on them, securing them inside. What first sounds as a burst of thunder morphs into rumbling and crashing and clashing. It not only echoes but reechoes, which refers to the echoing of an echo. Sound waves permeate this space and are imbedded with a violence, drawing attention to the violence that underlines life in the prison. The noise is weighty and omnipresent, its grandiosity further realized its disappearance when jail doors are closed and their sounds no longer reverberate. I am interested in the property of steel as a means of analyzing the meaning of containment in relationship to the

prison system. I am particularly invested in analyzing the interrelationship of black masculinity, labor, and sound as it circulates throughout Brown's novel. The novel centers around the experience of black male political prisoners whose work in obtaining rights for its community's working class results in their imprisonment. The prison becomes a means of silencing and invisibilizing these political prisoners. However, this passage suggests a loudness of discourse and ideology that makes the prison a spatial structure and architecture that seems to echo and reecho the grievances and personal stories and histories of its prisoners. Labor thus continues to be central in considering the types of cultural production and practices that occur in the prison as the political prisoners exchange information about the events leading to their arrest and imprisonment. I am interested in the ongoing metaphors of Pittsburgh as a steel and iron city and how these building blocks of labor and city growth figure in the types of discourses that happen within the prison as it relates to labor injustices and discourses about black activism and its relationship with Communism. The metaphor of steel and iron in a way command a high level of attention to the aural of these prisoners and also code their activity as working-class and blue collar. The passage is inundated with action and sound as matter meets matter. Pittsburgh as a working class city, or emblematic as this working class city, seems to bring out this "steely" discourse or aesthetic.

There is a clear intersection that brings together masculinity, blackness and labor. The normative considerations of masculinity rest on the idea of material production and ownership of that production. It also rests one's ability, strength and capacity to not only work but also work effectively and tirelessly. This is certainly the case with notions of working-class masculinity. The black male characters in Brown's novel seem to embrace this notion of working-class masculinity but also seem to run against the challenges of factory labor. Before being in prison,

nearly all of the men worked in some degree in the production of steel and iron parts. This labor seems to catapult these men into realizing the structural nature of racism and how it ties into their labor and the inequities that structure their relationship to labor in the sense that they do not receive the same money as their white counterparts are access to higher skilled positions in their job. Their subsequent activity in social protest organizations and communism stem from this dissatisfaction with the structure of labor. Protest, community engagement, and communist activity become not solely an outlet for their own personal grievances but an arena where they can use their labor in a generative way. Consequently, their communist and left-leaning activities result in their imprisonment. In a sense, their quest to access the fruit of their labor and perform what masculinity means to them is the catalyst for their being sent to prison, a place that both ignites hypermasculine behavior and fights over the status of masculinity but also a space where men feel a danger of being emasculated, particularly if they identify masculinity with the ability to provide for family, look out for those they are responsible for, work they want to work, enjoy the benefits of their labor, and, importantly, be free to move where they please. This state of existence, being entirely stripped of one's choices and forced to labor for nearly no return is likened to a form of emasculation, an endangerment to their masculinity. Even for one of the prisoners, being touched by the prisoner guards without permission is emasculating.

Simultaneously, the prison is also a hypermasculinized space as prisoners essentially take part—encouraged by the system—to out-masculinize the other. This comes in the form of male prisoners fighting with male guards and prisoners fighting with each other for respect. In what turns out to be a means of showing one's masculinity is the condemnation of communism in front of the prison officials and a display of American patriotism.

The black male prisoners in the jail, thus, are inundated with pressures to align themselves with the type of masculinity that the jail demands. One that is severely regulated, one that is pacified, one that is neutralized, and one that adheres to the demands of an inherently white patriarchal system that demands subservience, agreement and ultimately, forced quiet. The characters that Brown issues forth are far from quiet, but find a range of ways to resist the burdens and weight of the prison. The steel and iron of the prison is there to quiet, both literally and figuratively. The jail is in essence run by the McGregor Steel Company, which works with the justice system in maintaining a prison population. It literally built the jail for Iron City, a jail that is a shell, in a shell, in a shell, confining the prisoners to such small spaces that inhibit a wide range of different movement. The prison regulations make it so that the prisoners could only send mail every so often, and their communication is carefully looked at. Fundamentally, it is a space that disciplines by forcing quiet. And Brown seems to put forth prisoners who do not shirk away from normative meanings of masculinity—heavy presence, mobility, displays of physical strength and acuity—by making noise, particularly around the innocence of Lonnie James. This working-class masculinity is also turned on its head, as it really is on the onus of the black women in the novel, who galvanize outside noise around Lonnie James. These events are not detailed in the book, not present to the reader just like they are not present for the prisoners, who are stuck inside the prison and do not really have access to the outside. Through coded letters, the prisoners ask their wives and female friends to help raise money for legal fees, help look for leaders who will support cause, and travel throughout Iron City collecting signatures that protest Lonnie James' execution.

I imagine the black male body in Brown's novel as a terrain embedded with an assortment of affiliations.¹²⁷ The black male characters are affiliated with a working class masculinity that is heavily imbricated with the flesh, with physicality and the importance in working class jobs of the hands, arms, muscle, and general strength of the employee. It is no surprise that the iconography of working class labor unions and communist groups is heavily masculine as labor and masculinity have historically had such strong ties, to the detriment of the lack of recognition of women's labor and labor rights movements.¹²⁸ Thus, mythical figures such as John Henry were not only mobilized for racial justice but also for labor movements and thus showcasing the intersections of civil rights and labor rights. The characters in the novel are bodies on which has been built the steel industry and launches a cycle of black male incrimination that garners profits for industries that have a stake in this imprisonment of black men. These characters' objections toward factory work criminalizes them and they consequently find themselves in prisons whose steel they have helped to manufacture. It is as though steel becomes an inescapable, unavoidable substance with which the black men cannot avail themselves of. Throughout the novel then we view characters as they struggle with steel as an antagonist. James' ability to hit the baseball over the wall that McGregor Steel built launches a reading of this athletic feat as a display of mythical masculine strength and heroism, akin to John Henry. His display of black masculine strength is particular as this strength has historically been

¹²⁷ Michelle Ann Stephen's text, *Skin Acts*, interprets the black male body as a site of multiple contestations. Describing the black male body Stephens writes that we should read the black male body as "an active, sensory, intercorporeal site...the ground of a performative but also profoundly epidermalized psyche."

¹²⁸ Kimberly Fain pg 32 Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature

constructed as dangerous and thus needing to be criminalized and confined.¹²⁹ James' ability to make a home run is symbolic of his dreams of flight and escape, tropes that have historically been important in the black masculine cultural imaginary in particular and the black diasporic cultural imaginary in general.¹³⁰ James' baseball becomes an extension of his body that transgresses the prison regulations that do not permit prisoners to hit the ball over the wall lest they be banned from the field. James' athleticism is fundamentally insubordinate. The regulation seems to put limitation on displays of prisoners' strength—one is forbidden to make home runs. Communist mobilization of the black male body as symbol of labor exploitation.

One of the climatic points in the novel is this spectacle of black masculinity through which the black prisoners can see themselves as black men. The prison plays on the radio a Joe Louis boxing match, which galvanizes and energizes the prisoners who are locked in their cells. The match divides the prison populations; black prisoners root for Louis and the white prisoners root for the white opponent. The rowdiness at points leads to authorities threatening to turn off the radio, which causes even more rowdiness. When the authorities do turn the radio off, the prisoners make noise, slamming against their bars, until the authorities turn the radio back on. The black prisoners seem to live vicariously through Joe Louis' physical movements in the boxing ring. Following the match on the radio, which by nature only provides descriptions and a punch by punch, round by round, commentary, the prisoners imagine themselves seeing Joe Louis. Moving while listening to the radio, it is as though the prisoners imaginatively inhabit Joe Louis' body:

¹²⁹ Darcy Zabel *The (Underground) Railroad in African American Literature* pg 78—Henry not suppose to be a raceless everyman—blackness and masculinity come together and cannot talk about one without the other

¹³⁰ Books like *Song of Solomon*, Richard Wright *Native Son*, Ishmael Reed *Flight to Canada*/ Katherine Thorsteinson

Through each round Lonnie would stand rigid at the door, his face pressed to the bars as he strained to catch each racing word of the blow-by-blow announcer. Between rounds he would resume the rapid pacing, pounding one hand with his fist as though to add power to the Bomber's punches, his lips moving in whispered advice to Joe-Watch him! Get him quick! Don't let him get away agin! At the warning buzzer for the next round Lonnie would spring to his place as though the bell that would come ten seconds later was for him. This is what he had done for the other seven fights and he would follow the pattern tonight until the terrible third round. Joe is hurt! the announcer screamed. The dancing Billy Conn was grinning his scorn. The champ is dazed...confused...and the swelling roar of the crowd showed that something was happening. At the end of the round and through the rest of the fight Lonnie would not release his grip on the bars"(241).

In the passage, Lonnie appears to be play fighting with an imaginary opponent. He imagines himself as both Louis and Louis' coach, giving his mentee strategies for winning each round. Although trapped within his jail cell, James takes advantage of the space he does have, stretching out his limbs as he throws imagined punches at an imagined figure; perhaps this figure is not only Conn but the very space of the jail cell. James envisions his punches as supplements to Louis'; he imagines his punches as helping Louis with his own match. What the passage displays is an overt physicality, a exertion of energy that because of the nature of prison life, has been stilled. For James, listening to the soundspeaker is a visceral experience, even if the visuals of the boxing match have to be imagined. James not only depends on his hearing to engage with the fight but he uses other senses as well. He appears as though he fully embodies Joe Louis, his own body tensing, embodying both opponents: one hand punches the other in order for Lonnie to feel his own power. The alliteration of "p" in the passage—with "pressed," "pounding" and

"pacing"— communicates power and energy, especially since the p sounds is a plosive. The jail cell appears as this pressurized space that Lonnie fully occupies as he imaginatively transforms his space into a boxing ring. The passage shows the alienation of the prisoner as Lonnie must engage with the match individually, and in a sense, internalize the match. The muscular power and energy conveyed through the loudspeaker translates into Louis' own fight against his confinement. Throughout his time listening to the match, he grips his cell's bars, pushing himself between them as far as possible in order to hear the match better. The jail's cells, then, appear disciplinary in that they limit the range of a prisoner's sensory experience. Consequently, Lonnie is forced to push his body and head between the gaps of the jail bars, which conveys claustrophobia and a literally pressing of James' body between steel. This tactile engagement Lonnie has with the steel bars is circumscribed within the match between a black and white boxer, who represent to the prisoners two ideologies: black and white. Conn as the white, and anti-black ideology also appears to represent the black male confinement. Thus, for the black prisoners, Louis' battering of Conn's body represents their own struggles against the white ideology that is at the foundation of the prison they are confined to. The pressing of the bars and violent squeezing of James' head gestures toward the brutal and violent nature of the boxing match, as the opponents impact as much pain as they can on each other, strategically hitting areas that will give and lead to a win. At the same time, the other black prisoners who are kept in their own individual cells yell together at the loudspeaker, rooting for Louis. Louis and Lonnie become more entangled and figuratively occupy similar spaces when the white prisoners cheering on Conn seem to be rooting for Louis' to loose but their words also seem to address Lonnie as well: "Again at the end of the seventh [round]: KILL THAT NIGGER! Lonnie was braced for it to come and now he was sure that the cold flat words had come from Murderers'

Row and that they were meant for Lonnie. It was Al Reardon, eight cells away, though the voice was disguised. And now there were other voices shouting: it came first from Cell Block Three- "NO! NO! NO!" The radio clicked off and more voices joined the yelling: KILL THAT NIGEER! and NO!NO! NO! The rival chants clashed and swirled, the dome overhead echoing the clamor." (242). Nigger in the prisoner's chants appear to be directed toward both Louis and Lonnie. Wishing Louis dead in the match means that the prisoners hope that he loses. But at the same time, "KILL THAT NIGGER!" also is directed toward Lonnie and the prisoners hope that he is executed. Thus, Louis and Lonnie appear to share an identity; Louis is a literal fighter and Lonnie is fighting against the prison's order that he be executed. The fighting of ideologies appears magnified and intensified in the space of the prison, whose enclosure makes it so that sounds bounce off each other and echo. Two competing exclamations, one supporting Louis and the other one defaming him both compete for space inside the prison. The black prisoners attempt to create more sound in favor of Louis that drowns out the violent language the white prisoners use against Louis. It appears as though the prison's architecture again, with its shell-like exterior and dome not only traps in sounds which fuels this discordant amalgam of competing and contrasting sounds, but amplifies their volume.

This ideological tension represented through sound is apparent throughout the narrative. In one instance, demands for James' freedom is symbolized through music: "The committee inside. The committee outside. Working. Fighting. And invisible banner fluttering atop the wall McGregor had built. And above the roar of the mill and blare of the Hut Sut Song a voice was carrying out to Iron City-*LONNIE JAMES SHALL NOT DIE!* The passage eludes to what can best be described as an aural fight. The sounds are metonyms for competing ideologies. The punctuation sets the arena for these contestations. The periods after "Working" and "Fighting"

paints a militaristic picture of this ideological struggle. The fact that the pressure takes up in the spring is symbolic of the idea of an awakening or a vital moment. The roar of this movement to halt James' execution is described as emitting a roar that is powerful enough to drown out the noise of the steel mills. The fact that the mills even make a presence in this passage makes it a significant contender, a great obstacle. The sound of steel being produced is antagonistic to the rally behind Lonnie James' innocence. The Hut Song is about a teacher that poisons a stream to prevent students from skipping school to play in this stream. The meaning of the song lyrics parallels the situation of these men who are all confined to the prison and face things that operate to keep them inside. The invisible banner gestures toward a victory after a battle win. A disembodied voice marks a transcendence of prisoners' voices supporting James that is not brought to stop by the prison, but is able to be carried the distance to Iron City. While earlier in the novel, the prison is called a small Iron City sitting within the actual city of Iron City, this later passage paints a completely different geographical relationship so that the prison, while resembling the social organization of Iron City, is so isolated from the city that it might as well be apart from the city. However, the prisoners' mobilize enough support inside and outside the prison that the social distance between it and the city is shortened. Furthermore, the boldened and italicized nature of the exclamation, "*LONNIE JAMES SHALL NOT DIE!*" visibilizes someone who by nature of being not only a black man, but a black man who is a prisoner, is systematically rendered invisible. In this passage, Lonnie James' innocence and humanity transcends his literal invisibility. Voice becomes a strong substitute for the body and its presence and strength.

What exactly does Lloyd Brown illuminate about black masculinity within the context of this fictional Pittsburgh prison? Fundamentally Brown plays both with and against the standards

of masculinity. Within the confines of the prison, mobility takes on both familiar and unfamiliar appearances. While prisoners are confined to the prison, they still are physically mobile, traveling between cells in order to plan and execute a strategy on the outside. The prison yard also serves as the ideal place for normative displays of masculine mobility to be displayed. James becomes a celebrated baseball player within the prison community, displaying heroic strength that is not restricted by the prison walls. At the same time, performances of masculinity seem to be interfered with or impeded on. But with this compromise, space has to be widened for their to be included acts that do not compromise the dignity of black men in the story but are indeed not normatively masculine. For example, the prisoners must heavily depend on the freedom and mobility of their wives and female friends whose labor and canvassing make the freedom movement even possible. Thus, the black masculinity Brown gestures toward a black masculinity heavily shaped by the prison that, by necessity, resorts to an alternative masculinity that seems to be an amalgam of both normative and non-normative behaviors associated with masculinity. Displays of physical, masculine strength and power that is individualistic is forced to be substituted with careful community building, cross-gender alliances, letter-writing, secret operations, and the use of quiet.¹³¹

Steel Becomes Flesh, Flesh Becomes Steel

In Romare Bearden's Pittsburgh collages, steel is a material that has the power to consume black male bodies. The two collages I analyze portray bodies that appear as a fused amalgam of steel and human skin, a display that draws attention to steel as a foreboding force driving Pittsburgh's economy and black men's vulnerability as steelworkers. I use Bearden's collage to speak to how steel can be imagined to shape and inform black male sensoriums and

¹³¹ See Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

sensory experiences. Brown's rendering of his Pittsburgh jail as an echo chamber within which the sounds of distress and rebellion are thrown from one end to another, from top to bottom, forwards and backwards finds a parallel in Romare Bearden's collages that were inspired by his experiences in Pittsburgh. While Bearden's entire oeuvre of artistic work varies in style and themes, a summative word that could best describe his art is dynamic. Similar to my reading of Brown's novel, I read steel as an energizing force behind the artist's Pittsburgh collages and a conduit for the artist to throw into relief seemingly disparate tropes and motifs that he shows not to be that disparate at all. The steel making process becomes an excellent framework to consider Bearden's artistic process and the way steel appears to be a mediator for the echoes of a black community that was dissembled during the Pittsburgh Renaissance. Speaking to African American painter Romare Bearden's capabilities of rendering African American urban life on canvas, Ralph Ellison writes in his essay "The Art of Romare Bearden" that "Bearden has used—and most playfully—all of his artistic knowledge and skill to create a curve of plastic vision which reveals to us something of the mysterious complexity of those who dwell in our urban slums" (696). In this celebratory passage on Bearden, Ellison alludes to the surrealist nature of the artist's paintings and how it does not diverge from reality but unfolds new, challenging perspectives on reality. Ellison characterizes Bearden as surpassing the limits of a sociological study of African American life by pushing the boundaries of the plastic arts. In other words, Bearden approaches the tropes and motifs that circulate as representative of the black experience and often times reassembles them into a fresh grammar that not only expands the visual vocabulary used to represent blackness but also calls into question what blackness means and the artist's position as an interpreter of blackness.¹³² What Ellison considers being imperative

¹³² Bearden conceives art as "an open-ended semiotic system, a preexisting visual vocabulary

in black visual art in particular and black cultural representation in general is artistic play, which, I would argue, produces a space where tropes, symbols and the materials of art rub against each other in violently generative ways.

Bearden's collages that are inspired by Pittsburgh's industrial landscape exemplify this rubbing together of different media, tropes and motifs. In these works, the black male body is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, a paradox that was likely influenced by Pittsburgh's industrial economy. Originally from Charlotte, North Carolina, Bearden spent time in Pittsburgh visiting his grandmother. *Pittsburgh Memories* (1964) accordingly, serves as a reflection for the artists on the tropes and motifs that have commonly been associated with Pittsburgh culture: working men, steel mills, bridges, and myriad tones of silver and gray. Bearden's use of these tropes and motifs in his collages appear as broken, uneven fragments that are pieced together. The fragmentary quality of Bearden's collages have been discussed in scholarship, usually as a representation of the fragmented nature of the African American experience and the tumultuous nature of events such as the black migration to the North. In tune with surrealism, cubism, and futurism, Bearden's collages also speak to the dynamism and vitality that make up everyday life, especially in the American city. The very creation of a collage features a self-referentiality and meta-discourse that illuminates how modernity transforms the very medium of the art and the techniques used to make art. Bearden's *Pittsburgh Memories*, for instance, thematizes the dynamism of a modern, industrialized space on the level of subject matter and on the level of composition. Bearden's artistic method involved cutting out images from photographs and magazines and transposing them onto a canvas. This practice of cutting up images and shapes

that the artist must acknowledge and revise according to personal and social-historical imperatives.” 411 Lee Stephens Glazer *Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections*

from different sources and piecing them together into his own composition evokes the themes of industrialism: the labor of the hands, mechanic reproduction, the fusing together of parts, and the sound of grating.

I attend to the *way* Bearden constructs his collages as a segue into discussing how the tropes of black masculine work emanate throughout Bearden's collages of black men in Pittsburgh. *Pittsburgh Memories* being a distinct example of the artist's influence by labor and the black male body, Bearden's Pittsburgh collages are not simply general commentaries on fragmented black male life but tend specifically to how black male labor—especially concerning steel—constitutes the fragmentation of the black male body. Instead of displaying black men surrounded by images connotative of steel, Bearden's men appear to be steel incarnate, consumed by steel. Steel consumption, I suggest, is a critically driving force behind Bearden's Pittsburgh-inspired collages, which are art objects that construct steel as a dynamic, consuming, and consumed racio-political alloy that influenced the ideology of urban planning in postwar Pittsburgh.

Spearheaded by the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Renaissance involved the expansion of the city's steel industries, particularly those located in Pittsburgh's South Side.¹³³ Huge steeled buildings such as the Civic Arena rose and took the place of largely black and lower income communities. A section of the Hill District was demolished to make room for this multiplex arena, made of more than 2,950 tons of steel.¹³⁴ The famous Gateway Center was built out of partly 12,000 tons of steel forged from USSteel

¹³³ Don't Call Me Boss: David L. Lawrence, Pittsburgh's Renaissance Mayor Michael Weber pg 418 and Twentieth-century Pittsburgh: The post-steel era Roy Lubove pg 4

¹³⁴ Sports Memories of Western Pennsylvania pg 77 Arcadia Publishing

Homestead District Works.¹³⁵ As Roy Lubove puts it in his text on Pittsburgh, “the physical presence of heavy industry—steel above all—was inescapable.”

The inescapability of steel drives my reading of Bearden’s collages of Pittsburgh and the black men that lived in this city. Images of stainless steel and steel beams, of perpetually expanding steel corporations and steel-made sports arenas dropped in the middle of a newly demolished black community figure steel as such a looming force in post-war Pittsburgh, a medium that found its way in many aspects of Pittsburgh’s infrastructure and architecture. The steel industry historically had laid the groundwork for the migration of southern blacks to the city to work in the steel mills.¹³⁶ And while these jobs proved to be a step-up from the lack of job opportunities in the south, black steelworkers did face challenges of income inequality, job stagnation, and injuries in the workplace as they were put in jobs that were more physically demanding and had an increased chance for injuries such as burns.¹³⁷ What I find particularly illuminating is black migrant’s migration to Pittsburgh to work in the same steel mills that, following WWII, would conspire in the demolition of their homes and communities.

What I will analyze specifically are two of Bearden’s collages inspired by his recollections of Pittsburgh. The first is technically outside the temporal bookends of my project but constructs a particular representation of black Pittsburgh that corresponds to the steel motifs I trace in Brown’s novel. This collage, titled *Pittsburgh Memories* (1984), is very much representative of Bearden’s approach to the canvas. The subject material is based on Bearden’s memory of the boarding house his grandmother ran for Pittsburgh’s black steelworkers and also

¹³⁵ <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19510122&id=atdaAAAIBAJ&sjid=TomDAAAIBAJ&pg=2698,4831746&hl=en>

¹³⁶ Pg 32 Making Their Own Way Peter Gottlieb

¹³⁷ Dennis Dickerson Out of the crucible page 2

his own experience working in the steel mill as a teenager.¹³⁸ The collage depicts a cross section of the Pittsburgh boardinghouse. The viewer is privy to the activities happening inside the house because a section of the building's exterior is not present. What is shown in the exposed section of the boarding house are several tenants sitting around what is possible a dining room table. A steelworker, dressed in all blue save for a brown worker's cap and a red necktie is apparently on his way to the steel mill. His head hangs low and he carries a white lunch pail. The city's steel aesthetic pervades the collage, which features the front of a locomotive train on the left side of the collage; the moving train—indicated by the steam billowing from its stack—looks as though it is about to run right through the home. Right above the train is a communication line and a pulley. What looks to be the actual roof of the home sit seven smoke stacks, which could possibly atop a factory that is right behind the boarding house. On the top floor of the house, poking out of two windows, are two large heads, one gray and one white. They could possibly be looking at each other or both looking down at the scene in the kitchen. The dominant colors of the collage are gray, blue and red. While the majority of the image is rendered in solid blocks of color, Bearden's kitchen bleeds with different colors blended together: yellow, light green, dark green, red, and orange.

The visual liveliness and loudness that the kitchen evokes sharply contrasts the dominant color scheme of the work of art. Bearden's composition suggests a thematic division between the kitchen and the rest of the boardinghouse. While the women that perhaps care for the house evoke a liveliness of color and both stand upright, the figure headed to work is rendered in solid colors with his back hunched over. His occupation and the demands of the job literally color the steelworker, whose hunched back signals the physical demands of the steel job. Furthermore, the

¹³⁸ pg 17 Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension

position of the locomotive gives the impression that if the scene happened in real life, the train would run over the steelworker. Bearden's choice to limit depth in the collage, or, in other words, his choice to flatten out the image so that there is no depth, makes different scenes happening in the collage appear to be on one a single dimension. What, then, can one make of this one-dimensional narrative Bearden renders? What is Bearden communicating when a train and a being are on a single plane, facing each other? Bearden's strategy could possibly be attributed to the postmodernist climate in art and culture, where the decentering and multiplying of narratives was a popular feature in the visual and literary arts. Bearden's collage shows a flattening of varying narratives that merges these narratives together in a way that seems to be illogical and incoherent but also invites connections. Thus, the train's potential head-on collision with the steelworker violently connects them together, portraying the steelworker as a victim of industrialism, and particularly, a victim of steel and iron. The faceless men, too, are representative victims of the steel industry being that Bearden virtually strips them of facial features and a racial identity. The figure on the left appears rendered out of steel itself with Bearden's use of gray. The figure on the left appears as a white silhouette or a whitened cutout; this present absence or visible invisibility communicates an environment where the worker is defaced by his labor. Without eyes, this faceless figure is positioned in a way that his "gaze" is directed at the steelworker exiting the house. Through this seemingly impossible gaze, the exiting steelworker and the faceless figure are also connected. This connection is further illustrated by diagonal line of white made from the white figure, the white triangle placed near the kitchen roof, and the exiting steelworker's white lunch pail.

While this collage was created in the 1980s, it has much to do with Bearden's vision of Pittsburgh within the period of time I study in this project. By the 1980s, Pittsburgh's industrial

economy was in sharp decline with the demands of steel dramatically lowered as newer building and construction materials were found. Bearden's collage, then, works as a flashback to a time in Pittsburgh when steel seemed to literally structure the climate and environment of the city, and even its affective dimensions. In Bearden's collage, steel radically shapes the viewer's perception of the Pittsburgh home and the black steelworkers who dwell there so they can be close to the steel mill. In the collage, it is virtually impossible to demarcate where the house begins and ends, let alone piece apart the house and the steel mill; they are rendered as one and the same. The heavy nature of the industrial economy seeps into the postures and color of the steelworkers who appear in solid colors; the steelworker on his way to the steel mill appears more like a geometric shape than a human figure. Bearden's intention here could be to imply that there is something abstracting about the nature of steel work. The work not only seems to de-individualize the worker but also break his body down, both literally and figuratively.

The next collage, which is part of *Pittsburgh Memories* (**Figure 27**), takes as its subject the physicality of the black steelworker. At the time Bearden produced this work of art, Pittsburgh's Hill District experienced a major facelift as steel dramatically reshaped its landscape. I read steel here as a particular kind of intrusion that has the ability to subsume and dramatically alter a landscape. Similar to how steel operates in the previous collage, it subsumes this other canvas as well, splitting up objects and bodies and creating gaping spaces that, theoretically, should be filled.

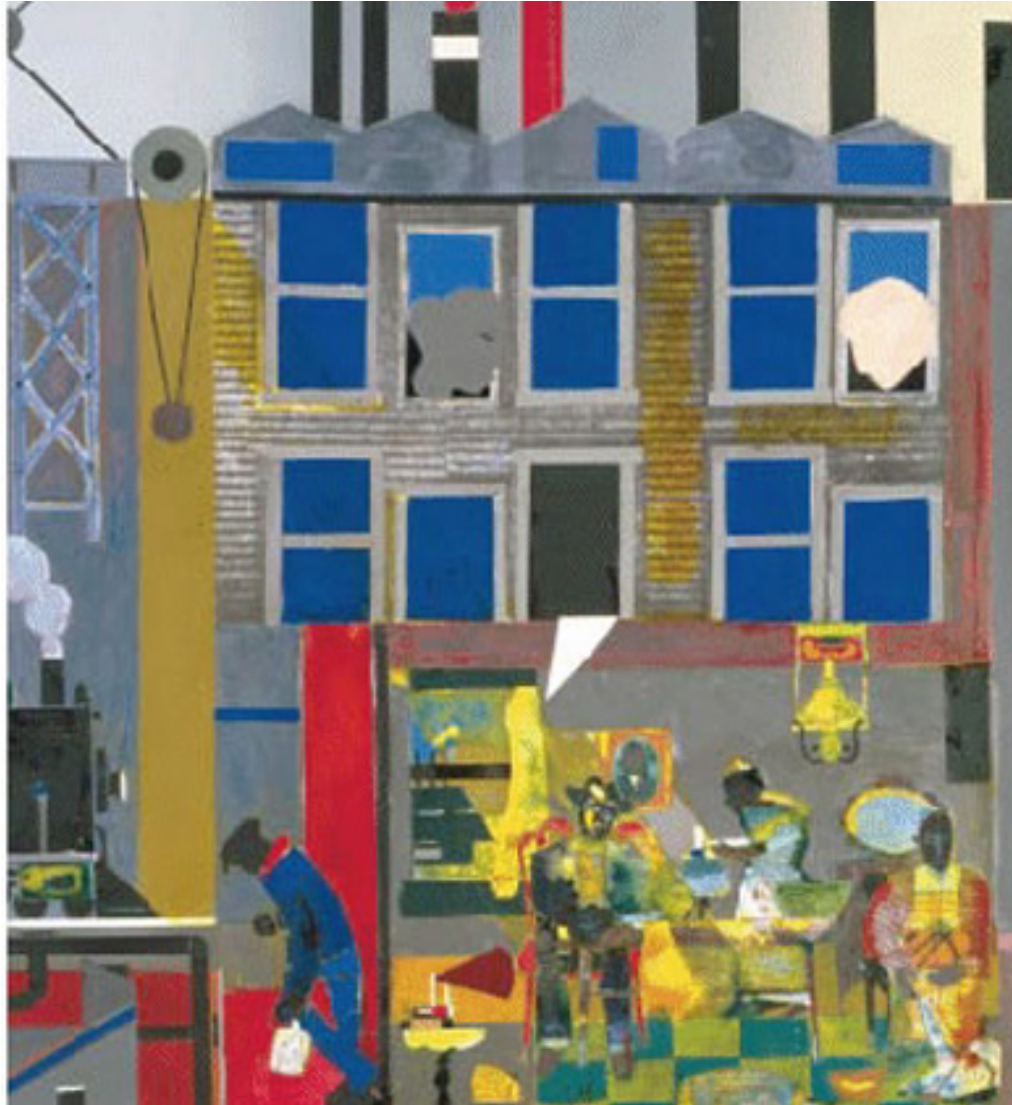


Figure 26 Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memories*, 1984, collage on board



Figure 27 Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, 1964, collage of printed papers with graphite on cardboard

Pittsburgh Memory (1964) is a collage that features two black males who are composed out of clipped images from different sources (**Figure 28**). The image is composed out of paint and clippings and evokes the geography of Pittsburgh through the presence of steel-beam bridge in the upper-right corner. The image is rendered with a combination of cool colors, including variations of gray, black, and steel-colored blue. The title of the image evokes the notion that Bearden is piecing this collage out of bits and pieces of his recollections of Pittsburgh. If memories are abstract and gesture to the real, then Bearden's turn to collage makes sense as a genre that rearranges the "real" as a way of presenting its latent underpinnings. While a memory could possibly be rendered using an impressionist, blurred design, the memory of Pittsburgh in Bearden's collage is stark and comprises sharp, angular fragments. While the image is certainly not realist, there are areas in the collage where realism comes into focus, especially in some fragments that make up the two men's faces. Notice, for instance, what appears to be the magnified pores of skin in the fragment that makes up the left side of the figure on the left. The skin texture appears sweaty and overtly fleshy. A whitened line runs from where the bridge should be and extends outwards, roughly outlining the half nostril. The left nostril appears flared to the point that there is a black dip right outside the nostril. What the fragment is reminiscent of in the context of the Pittsburgh steel mill is blackened skin that is sweating from the heat of the blast furnace. In the steel mills throughout the nation, black male steel workers were mostly placed closer to the steel blast furnace and coke ovens in relation to their white counterparts.¹³⁹ Reading the skin fragment with this fact in mind renders black male skin as literally transformed by steel production.

¹³⁹ See Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

The figures' disfigured faces highlight the very nonhuman elements of the collage and encourage questions about blackness and humanness. The facial features of the two perceptibly male figures are composed out of different geometric shapes that are placed out of order, spaced too far apart to accurately portray facial proportions, and are placed in a way that they crowd each other. For instance, the figure on the left bears lips and a nose that virtually sits one on top of the other. The lips are raised higher than they normally would be. Because the cutouts are angled and sometimes roughly cut, they do not piece together perfectly, fitting one inside the other. Thus, there are several gaps between cutouts, a technique that really emphasizes the nature of Bearden's technique. And furthermore, the discontinuity that Bearden relates through the use of rough textured pieces that are visibly masculine and other pieces that are smoother or do not appear to be gendered, makes for a image that, through its makeup, distorts the black masculine body.

Labor is the frame through which the collage makes sense. The subject on the right conveys masculinity in the heavy, burrowed eyebrow on the left and the textured, broad, cleft chin. The left side of the figure's face is dramatized by the right side of the face, which is not as heavily textured and does not have as pronounced facial features. In comparison to the texture of the right side of the face, the left side is relatively smoother, especially in the area of the forehead, around the eye and right nostril. The hair on the viewer's left side is notably coarser than the area of hair on the viewer's right side, where the hair is lower and lays closer to the scalp. The figure's hairline is grossly un-uniformed. The bridge of the figure's nose is reminiscent of a thick stone beam and the figure's left brow does not actually an eyebrow but is a stone platform that is supported by the stone beam. The figure's eye seems to look at the viewer from right under the platform. This particular composition suggests a relationship between vision

and labor, which is a relationship that is the guiding principle behind the viewer's relationship with the collage.

Bearden certainly plays with scale in the collage, and the bodies appear as though composed for different-sized steel scraps. For instance, with the figure on the viewer's left, the right side of the nose is large and clearly defined--the curvature of the nostril is strong and the nostril, too, appears slightly flared. The size of the left nostril, on the other hand, is smaller and is slender and cut from an image of something that is clearly not a nose. This side of the nose is slender, lacks curvature, and looks more like a funnel than a nostril. The other brownish geometric shape that is part of the subject's face is a triangle that makes up the left cheekbone. While the right cheekbone is made of continuous material and most likely from one image, the triangle violently disrupts the continuity on the left side of the face. The triangle does not even seem to be necessary but something that was added onto an already formed composite of a human face.

While the collage is almost a continuous steel color scheme, the bronzeness of the brown fragments, surrounded by this steel color tone, are all the more visible. I read the collage's color scheme as a metaphor for thinking about steel as a thing that consumes, that which takes into itself all that it touches, either literally or figuratively. These brown shapes appear to jump out at the viewer, and a reasonable question to ponder is what are these shapes doing in a collage that is mostly gray? I suggest that the random traces of brown represent the flesh of the figure. Steel arguably consumes not only Bearden's canvas, but the very process he uses to make this artwork. Fragments appear jammed together and areas on the bodies that should be smooth are made up of triangles and fragments with sharp corners. Some fragments looks wedged between other fragments, such as the upside down triangle fragment in the middle of the right subject's

forehead. The tight space it occupies and has opened up is made clear by the fact that the wedge-shaped fragment is bulging and does not fit in perfectly. The puckered and ridged look of the right side of the subject's forehead can be imagined to be a result of this wedge. Ultimately, the black male subjects are not rendered stably. The pieces and fragments that they are composed of clash and are disjointed and, thus, the figures appear to be able to collapse.

The two figure's humanity appears to be contingent. While the men are most certainly suppose to resemble human laborers, their facial makeup and postures bring their humanity into question. The figure on the right, for instance, looks as though he is resting his head on his hand, but it also looks like he is holding his face as though it is a masquerade mask. His only recognizable features are the half-circle piece that includes an eye and nose. The position of his hand appears as though it is holding this particular fragment up. The worker's hat that he is wearing displays his position as a worker. The left hand side of his face looks as though it is drooping, which would make sense considering that his head is bent somewhat to the side. Compared to the figure on the left, this figure's face is most evocative of a West African mask with the flared nostrils flanked by deep creases, imitating chiseled wood. Both figures' constructedness is so palpable; from the incorporation of constructions parts as facial features to one of the figures actually holding up his face. Eyes, ears, and noses do not resemble each other and are totally asymmetrical. However, the fact that the figures are human beings is clear in the recognizable body parts and physical characteristics of human beings. While the facial features are asymmetrical, they are generally in the space where they would need to be for a viewer to recognize them as belonging to a human.

Bearden gestures toward black male humanity but does not represent it realistically. This sets forth what I want to consider as an artistic technique that evokes the workings of a blast

furnace, a machine that breaks down, assembles, ignites, liquefies, and fuses. This idea of the blast-furnace inspired art that I allude to as emanating from Bearden's work builds on the techniques of collage. Fundamentally, collage is the breaking down, the deconstructing of what is normatively considered to be unified and a constructing and edification, in the primary sense, of what is normally considered disjunct. The use of fragments is meant to reveal the disunified nature of a thing or object. I point to the steel furnace as perhaps an object whose purpose and production aligns with the purpose and production of collage making. Collages break down like steel furnaces do; they create new unities like steel furnaces do through fusion. If one imagines the figures in Bearden's collage as products of the blast furnace, the violent disintegration and reintegration of their body parts—and the many instances where points of fusion are incomplete, and grotesque—are better grasped. Bearden's turn to collage to represent the black male experience in Pittsburgh becomes not just a gesture toward the fragmentation of black male life, but really gets to the process of fragmentation and the affective valences that accompany it. Furthermore, Bearden's collage-making, in light of the centrality of the steel blast furnace in postwar Pittsburgh, becomes a product of the city, rooted in Pittsburgh's identity as a "Steel Town."

As products of the blast furnace, the black male figures in Romare Bearden's collage are so violently and arbitrarily put together that their facial features are mix-matched and uneven. Their flesh is mixed in with concrete beams, steel-colored and smooth surfaces, labor caps, woodchips, and bronze-colored material. They are products of a fusing process that is determinative but simultaneously arbitrary in that the men's parts are assembled in a way that they appear as men, but the assembling is grossly imperfect. This imperfect assembling makes it possible for a new perspective on black male masculinity to be realized. For if Bearden's

investment in surrealism was in its value to uncover the real, then Bearden's grotesque black male workers evoke something real about the conditions of black labor in postwar Pittsburgh. They evoke a population of black male steel workers—and other workers in construction-related occupations—that were physically and psychologically transformed by the conditions of their labor. In the collage, Bearden's men are transposed right over Pittsburgh's architecture; a tower building appears lodged in the relatively younger figure's scalp. And the older figure is placed right below a suspension bridge. The vertical, thin beams of the bridge loosely evoke puppetry strings that are attached to a marionette. Several of these lines run into the older figure's labor cap, thus giving the impression that without such lines and the hand holding up the chin, the figure's head would be in suspension, hovering in space. A miniature steel-beamed transmission tower is transposed onto of the bridge, its triangular shape set within a shape that echoes the fragment that is a substitute for the older man's nose. Bearden's composition of the image makes it so that Pittsburgh's architecture and the black labor bodies cannot be sorted out from each other, they, together, make the image.

The black male flesh in Bearden's collage has to be *searched* for; it is discontinuous and literally pokes out in several places on the canvas. Brown segments are few and jut out because of the dominance of grayish and bluish metallic color scheme. The smooth nature of many of the fragments that make up the two men's bodies facilitate the hyper-textural look of these "fleshy" fragments. The familiar Marxist narrative of the dehumanization of the laborer would be one way of reading what appears as a discontinuous layout of humanity; in the collage, flesh does not appear with any discernible pattern. The younger figure bears more flesh in relation to the older figure. Does the length of time we could imagine the older figure working in the factory for diminish his humanity, and therefore his flesh? Or is the assignment of relatively more flesh to

the younger male simply arbitrary? The inability to know for certain the organizing logic behind the placement of flesh contributes to the themes Bearden evokes in the collage, namely the unpredictable nature of industrialism and the contentious relationship between the body and exploitative labor. But Bearden's collage, evokes, too, the centrality of black male labor to the construction of postwar Pittsburgh. The figures' very bodies alludes to construction and the welding of material to the degree that Bearden's collage is not just about the dehumanization of black male laborers in Pittsburgh but also is a commentary on black male construction of Pittsburgh, a construction so generative that in the collage itself, this constructive energy transforms the workers' own bodies.

Bearden's title of his collage, *Pittsburgh Memories*, locates black men in a history of Pittsburgh that includes the structural dismembering and un-remembering of black Pittsburgh. A memory recalls a past event or point in time. Bearden's memory of Pittsburgh summons up not only childhood memories of his grandmother, but eulogizes the place of black people in the Steel City. By the time Bearden's collage was complete, the Civic Arena was complete, a project that almost singlehandedly destabilized the Hill District and forced black residents out of their homes. Bearden's collage is a place-making artistic strategy that locates black men particularly as a forgotten segment of Pittsburgh's population, even despite their role in literally building the city. What Bearden metaphorically spews forth is a discombobulated, puzzle-like image that throws together black male bodies, tropes of labor, and Pittsburgh's architecture together in a way that interlocks them together; removing one piece of the puzzle is not only impossible but untruthful. Rearrangement invites attention and lingering. So too, does the way the figures, in their rearrangement, also crowd the frame. The right figure is positioned closer to us and next to him is the other figure. It is as though the two figures crowd the forefront of the frame. The

impact of this crowdedness is that the two men dominate the space of the canvas. They look huddled together as they stare out of their frame and onto the viewer of the image. The mismatched sets of eyes both communicate a level of intensity and watchfulness. While we as the viewers reciprocate the gaze—studying the subjects' faces and distinguishing the different substitutions made for the various facial features—the fact that these two men are indeed men and human is dangerously at risk of being lost. The different fragments that in a sense mediate the viewer's ability to see human faces also encourage and invite misreading and misunderstanding. It is difficult to ascertain the different sources Bearden used to compose his figures.

Steel and the Un-Made Man

Charlie "Teenie" Harris' photographs of the Lower Hill District, a mostly black neighborhood that fell victim to the Pittsburgh Renaissance, is a rich and vast archive. Known for his photographs depicting the district as a thriving community with its own resources and institutions, Harris also managed to archive the beginning of the end of the Lower Hill District.¹⁴⁰ I zone in on several photographs picturing black men looking at the tearing down of their community. They are pictured looking out inquisitively onto spaces cleared by bulldozers, standing in torn down sections of the community. Such images offer up occasions to consider the

¹⁴⁰ For more information about the Hill District, see Samuel P. Hays, *City at The Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991). The Hill District certainly has a very rich history. It started as an area mostly populated by Jewish, Lebanese and Syrian families. Around the 1930s, African American residents continue to move into the Hill District while its previous residents moved out. By the 1940s and 1950s, the Hill District was recognized as a black community.

relationship between masculinity and ownership of space and how steel violently refigures such a relationship for the black men Harris' captures with his camera.¹⁴¹

Charles "Teenie" Harris photography of Pittsburgh's Hill District spans the early twentieth century to the gradual redevelopment of the neighborhood. While Harris' work has not been typically celebrated for its aesthetic value, recognition has been placed more on the breadth and volume of Harris' photography. For instance, in her book, *Troubling Visions: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), scholar Nicole R. Fleetwood describes Harris' value as a documentarian of a once thriving black community who made himself present in all aspects of life in the city section, capturing a myriad of mundane scenes of black life.¹⁴² As scholars have emphasized to varying degrees, Harris' work seems to lack the aesthetic sophistication one might associate with other black photographers such as Addison Scurlock and James Van Der Zee.¹⁴³ My contention, however, is that attention *should*

¹⁴¹ Louis Kaplan's book, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), offers a framework for thinking about the role of the black photographer in the black community. Using Benedict Anderson's critical term, "imagined community," Kaplan describes how a photographer who documents the ongoings and scenes of a community is creating the image of the community at the same time. I am interested in Harris' role as the neighborhood photographer, a role, that is far from objective. As I go on to argue in this section, Harris was invested in documenting a particular representation of the Hill District community premised on black respectability politics. This representation, however, ran into trouble when the district was systematically dismantled.

¹⁴² In 2011, Carnegie Museum of Art exhibited a large collection of Harris' work, interpreting it as an integral historical record of black Pittsburgh. At the same time this work was being exhibited, many conversations emerged in regards to the condition of the Hill District. I was a student at Carnegie Mellon at the time and remember the charged nature of community discussions about historic black-owned buildings in the Hill District that were on their way to being teared down. The childhood home of renowned poet August Wilson, who was born and raised in Pittsburgh, was in discussion, and residents of the Hill District were fighting against the plan to demolish Wilson's home. Fortunately, after a lot of protest, Wilson's home was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013. Yet, not too long ago, it was reported that the house neighboring Wilson's was in danger of collapsing.

¹⁴³ Addison Scurlock was an African American photographer who documented scenes from black Washington D.C. in the early to mid 20th century. James Van Der Zee is one of the most

be placed on the composition of Harris' photographs because his use of angles and scale adds a component to his work, particularly the images that document the tearing down of the Hill District. In these images, Harris captures the magnitude of such drastic urban changes to the Hill District. Pictures of looming cranes and bulldozers casting shadows over crumbling building foundations; residents standing in wide, empty spaces; and wide shots of dilapidated but once revered buildings tell a particular story to the viewer. The Hill District community that Harris documents seems overrun and dominated by the machines of urban renewal: steel scaffolds, bulldozers, and city planners officials. And in a range of Harris' photographs, African American men stand before scenes of destruction with often forlorn and stoic expressions, visibly looking helpless. They look as though submitting to the scene in front of them.

The photographs Harris had taken before urban renewal took over the Hill District presented portraits of the community that mostly fell in line with normative constructions of the social. Harris' images feature smiling men, women and children; well-to-do families; sunny Little League games; glamorous banquets; heroic-looking athletes and prideful businesspeople. In photographs such as the one below (**Figure 29**), Harris captures the lives of the black middle and upper class. Here, a newly wed couple poses on the front steps of a community building. The groom looks stately and stoic, dressed in a double-breasted suit jacket with white pants. His bride, wearing a small smile and holding a billowing bouquet, is dressed in an elaborately-laced white wedding dress and a veil that has such a long trail that it blooms down onto the foot of the cement steps. The bride's left arm hugs the groomsman's sturdy arm in partnership.

well-known early 20th century African American photographers. Van Der Zee captured many well-known New York City based images we have come to associate with the Harlem Renaissance. Both Scurlock and Van Der Zee were skilled at portraiture and had a studio where members of their respective communities would visit to have their pictures taken.



Figure 28 Charles “Teenie” Harris, Rowland M. Sawyer and Aileen Eckstein Sawyer, 1938, photograph

Symbols of normativity and social status dominate this wedding portrait. The husband and wife wear wedding ceremonial attire belonging to western culture, including the suit and white dress. The husband stands on the left and the wife stands on the right, which, too, belongs to a heteronormative custom. By taking their wedding portrait on the steps of this respectable community building, the wed couple communicates their upwardly mobile social status. Additionally, the couple’s bodily gestures communicate an adherence to normative gender roles. While the woman holds a bouquet, smiles, and laces her adorned arm through her husband’s, the groom looks stern, detached, and military, which communicates masculine strength and the role of protector and provider. The rigid tree on the left is by coincidence a mirror for the groom, as both stand tall and strong. The photograph bespeaks of domesticity by nature of Harris’ distance

from the married couple. He appears to be standing at a distance, right at the start of the bush-flanked walkway to the front of the home. With this distance between the photographer and the groom and bride, Harris has a larger frame to capture not just a wedding portrait, but a scene of domestic life. The man and woman, from head to toe, performing normative gender roles, the front steps, the little door-awning, the perfectly plotted bushes, and the middle-aged, stately woman sitting on the right are all props that communicate social mobility, the importance of familial relationships, and homeownership.



Figure 29 Charles “Teenie” Harris, “Soldiers from the 327nd Infantry,” 1942, photograph

The wedding portrait becomes not only an intimate keepsake for the couple, but one of many photographs that, together, become testaments to a thriving black community. The photograph attests to the ability of black people to live out—or in another way, perform—the social roles and customs that at one point were denied to them. Furthermore, such photographs capture black respectability politics, which advocate that in order for blacks to obtain rights, they have to prove their ability to integrate into society by having middle and upper-class sensibilities. Customs that communicate social health and wealth such as marriage and homeownership fall under black respectability politics. Harris' documentation of such customs, then, are an archiving of symbols of black respectability and social progress. And for the purposes of my argument, heteronormative masculinity is something Harris also captures as a sign of community health and social strength. The groom in the photograph above displays rigidity and strength that aligns with normative understandings of masculinity. This display of masculine strength manifests in another of Harris' photographs, pictured above (**Figure 30**). The image shows a troop of cavalymen marching down a popular street in Pittsburgh holding American flags. The crowd of spectators includes rows of stylish suit-clad black men who, similarly stoic and self-composed, look onto the parade. The photo captures an essence of patriotism and black pride in America. Patriotism and black masculinity are linked in this photograph by the scene of black male stoicism, uniformity, strength and militant apparel.

Similarly, the following image displays black masculine strength and labor. (**Figure 31**). The image shows a children's field trip to the offices of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a widely celebrated black-run newspaper company that declined by the end of the Pittsburgh Renaissance. Young children and their teacher look on as an employee demonstrates a part of the print-making

process. His bare arms communicate labor and strength through tensed muscles that facilitate his work with iron and ink.



Figure 30 Charles “Teenie” Harris, “Children Visiting a Printing Shop,” ca. 1945-1949, photograph

The photographs of a torn-down Hill District appears not so normative in relationship to the type of community Harris helped to depict through his images; a community that was thriving and just as prosperous as white communities. The images paint a portrait of men in control of their bodies, social positions, and, importantly, their spaces. In Harris’ photographs, men proudly look

into the camera and are captured as they perform civic duties, sports, business activities and social activities. The Hill District's appearance of health shows itself in the ability of the community's men—and women—to perform gender conventions. Thus, through Harris' images, the black male residents of the Hill broadcast a measure of strength and leadership as the conventional protectors of the community. Yet, Harris also shows the representations of and performances of conventional masculinity being threatened by the changing landscape. Bulldozers and scaffolds loom large in these images, their scale imposing and threatening.

I read these particular images as scenes depicting black masculinity and steel as antagonists. Contrasting the images populated with scenes of community aliveness are Harris' stark scenes of a community quickly disappearing; such scenes are relatively empty, stark and appear ghostly. The Hill District's black men as models of a middle to upper-class masculinity appear forlorn, powerless and dominated by the machines of renewal that dominate Harris' image frames. My argument is not necessarily that Harris' pictures of what we could call heteronormative scenes of black community life came to a stop in the face of the Pittsburgh Renaissance. This would be entirely untrue. However, when one moves through Harris' archive of images, the scenes of construction, bulldozing and redevelopment interfere with the particular narrative that from the early 20th century, Harris wanted to help portray. But as the city documentarian, or truth-teller, Harris shows a narrative of city redevelopment as a threat to this narrative of a thriving black community.

The photograph featured below (**Figure 32**), for example, captures the ghostly presence of the bulldozer and an atmosphere of foreboding as the Hill District becomes vulnerable to the city office's architectural planning. In this image, a black man stands in the forefront with his back to the camera while another black man is captured walking past of the dilapidated building

in the background.



Figure 31 Charles “Teenie” Harris, *Workers Demolishing Roof of Crawford Grill No. 1*, 1956, photograph

The atmosphere Harris captures can best be described as solemn and despondent. The man in the image's foreground shares the viewer's gaze by looking at the demolition work. The viewer looks at the derelict building but also, too, looks at the anonymous man looking at one of the community's historical buildings being torn down. By way of different gazes present in the photograph, I revisit a theme I discussed earlier in this project, which is the hypervisibility of black men. In Harris' image, the building is not the only thing that is vulnerable or permeable, but the figures in the photograph are as well. By nature of them being captured outside of the poolhall, the two men are, in the context of the image, outsiders who witness the demolition of a building they may have frequented. Yet, Harris manages to capture an element of estrangement, notably between the abandoned poolhouse and the subject closer to the camera. The poolhouse is no longer a place of entertainment and lively social interactions. Contrarily, the building conveys deadness through the windowless rectangle-size openings to the inside of the building. The dark interior prevents both the bystander and viewer from seeing what is inside, but we can assume that the inside has been evacuated. Another element of the image that communicates estrangement is the row of doors that line the front and side perimeters of the building. These two lines of doors are haunting because these doors are taken out of the context in which they would make sense. The purpose of doors is for privacy and to keep elements from entering an indoor enclosure. Doors are fundamentally domestic in nature. But in this image, the doors, perhaps once inside the grill, are now outside, in different states of disrepair. They appear to be used to section off the spaces right in front of the building, blocking access by communicating boundaries, or areas where the public cannot enter. While the demolition workers are mounted on the building's roof, hunched over to work, the bystander stands upright with both hands in his pockets. The hands in the pockets convey resignation and inactivity. The contrast between the

laboring bodies on the rooftop-working to bring the building down—and the still body displays a visual crisis of masculinity set in motion by redevelopment.

The way that Harris shoots his images makes the steel bulldozers and scaffolds into antagonistic objects. The bulldozer below, for example, takes center stage, occupying the middle of the photograph (**Figure 33**). A line of black men is at the forefront of the photograph with hands meeting each other behind backs. Similar to the earlier photograph of the anonymous man looking at the demolition of the grill, these men appear reserved and at rest while they look on at the bulldozer activity. The anonymity of the men, emphasized by their backs being turned to the viewer, drives the interpretation of the bulldozer as an antagonist.



Figure 32 Charles “Teenie” Harris, *Civic Arena Groundbreaking*, April 1958, photograph

With their backs turned, the men appear as an audience, and the viewer, too, stands in the position as an audience to the scene of urban renewal and machine power. Specifically given the bulldozer's name, the bulldozer is attributed a masculine ethos that could be viewed as a catalyst for black masculine crisis. Just like the previous photograph, the black men are pushed out to the margins as the bulldozer occupies a perimeter of land, its digging the start of the development of the Civic Center. By being pushed to the margins of the frame and captured with their backs facing the camera, the line of men inhabits the position of observer. While the observer role is not intrinsically a passive role, there is a degree of passivity that destabilizes the narrative arc of Harris archive. While Harris' archive is full of images of men who look on into the camera, displaying resolve and spatial autonomy, the men who share Harris' frame with symbols of redevelopment appear to experience a crisis of spatial autonomy and are caught as witnesses to scenes of redevelopment. Such images motivate a query into how Harris' compositional pattern of capturing black men's relationship to scenes of redevelopment might not intentionally revolve around what I would call an "aesthetic of black masculine crisis," but certainly does evoke it. The appearance of dug ground, partly demolished buildings, scaffolds, planners and bulldozers bring about points in the experience of looking through Harris' archive when the narrative of black masculine spatial ownership is brought into question, and thus opens the ground for thinking about the meaning of black masculinity when it appears not to adhere to gender conventions. Primarily because Harris' archive does show a general adherence to conventions of masculinity, the images that display the troubling of such conventions call for attention. How do these images, taken in the midst of the Pittsburgh Renaissance, speak to urban redevelopment's role in complicating black men's relationship to the conventions of masculinity? Urban redevelopment has been considered by scholars as paternalistic in nature, especially because the

decision over where, how, and when architectural and infrastructural changes would be made were in the hands of city's political and economic authorities. The demolition of lower income and middle class communities took place without feedback from these communities. Officials believed they were doing what was "best" for their cities and that they had the foresight and knowledge to be the master planners. This architectural paternalism translates into Harris' compositional practice of archiving the decline of the Hill District. Black community members are, in a sense, depicted in infantilizing postures as they gaze onto men and machines at work to "better" their community. Black male subjects are not depicted in certain images as individuals with control. While they display masculine conventions of stoicism and reserve, their masculinity is also portrayed as in crisis within the context of their community being virtually occupied by steel. In the image below, for example, scaffolding displays a masculine ethos of spatial autonomy and architectural power. Though partially built, the scaffolding provides the outline of the remaining project. The viewer can see the shape the dome will have and the large scale of the building. The scaffolding conveys human ingenuity. It is an architectural prelude to what is to come and also serves the functional purpose of allowing workers access to the areas of the building that are to be constructed. Harris' image does not have any people. Cars, parked at different angles, line the foreground of the photograph. The objective of this photograph seems to be to put a spotlight on the magnitude of the civic center, with its sheer size and functional dome. Considering that the area that the multiplex covers was once populated by residential homes, Harris' photograph is especially haunting with the lack of black presence. In a sense, it is the Civic Center, in this instance, that fully occupies the frame while the row of cars, symbols of industrial progress, sits in the foreground of the frame.

A pattern that is noticeable in Harris' photographs of demolition activity is the focus on men's backs. In one image, included below, two black men have their backs to the camera but stand at a slight angle and are apart from each other. One has his arms crossed. The other has his arms at his sides, slightly bent at the elbows. While the one on the right wears glasses and a short sleeve plaid shirt, the one on the left dons street clothing. The angle at which the man on the right is standing permits the viewer to see somewhat of his profile. The other man's stance, angled with his left shoulder more forward than his right, does not allow the camera or viewer to see his face. The way the men stand gives the impression that while they are looking at the same scene, they are looking at it from slightly different angles. Additionally, the distance between the men achieves two other things. The distance individualizes their experiences, making them individual witnesses who can bond as they look at a single scene. Also, the space between them invites the camera and viewer to participate as an additional witness.



Figure 33 Charles “Teenie” Harris, *Two men watching collapsed building being removed by bulldozer*, June 1959, photographer

The image communicates a dissonance between masculine gender conventions and the threatening nature of demolition on black masculine life. The binary of masculine and feminine has heavily influenced the conventions of gender. To be masculine is to be mobile, active, and in control of public spaces. To be feminine is to be passive, immobile and without control or ownership of space. It would indeed be incorrect to argue that the scene of dispossession the image above depicts emasculates the black male bystanders Harris captures. However, such a scene, marked by a heavy-duty excavator and piles and piles of wood debris bears a relationship to the way Harris decided to compose the frame and the subjects within it. With their backs

facing the viewer, the two men are passive watchers who stand at a distance; the space is under the oversight of the Housing Authority. In the photograph, the only face that looks onto the camera belongs to the man working the excavator surrounded by building debris. He looks over his shoulders at the bystanders, which also includes Harris as well. The blurriness of his face emphasizes the distance between him and the bystanders. Essentially, the demolition worker is in the background of the image while Harris and his captured bystanders occupy the foreground, particularly the lower right hand corner of the frame. The dangerous nature of demolition work offers a reason why Harris and the two men stand at a distance. This distance, too, shapes the viewer's understanding of the relationship between the bystanders and the demolition site; the demolished building, unrecognizable, is unfamiliar and alien. At the same time, the bystanders' shared gaze also suggests an attachment to the site on which stood a building that they might have known. The building no longer stands, but the chaotic stacks of wood planks convey its presence. It appears as though a disaster just occurred, an earthquake or tornado splitting the building up so severely that its very foundations are missing.

The disappearance of buildings and their foundations parallels signs of black male "unmaking" that Harris gestures towards in his images. Take, for instance, the image below. While no demolition machines are actually present in the frame, the condition of the house and the rope tied to one of its columns foretells that the house is going to be taken apart. In the image below, members of the Housing Authority each hold on to a segment of the rope in self-congratulation. A tractor will pull on this rope, resulting in the column being ripped out. The committee member second from the left holds both the rope and a white document, which could perhaps be information about the condemned building, a demolition timeline, or even blueprints. Black demolition workers, in pairs, stand on varying levels of the condemned building, looking

on at the scene below them. The faces of the demolition workers get increasingly hard to distinguish and get more shadowed the higher the demolition worker is. The faces of the workers on the highest level of the building are not discernable.

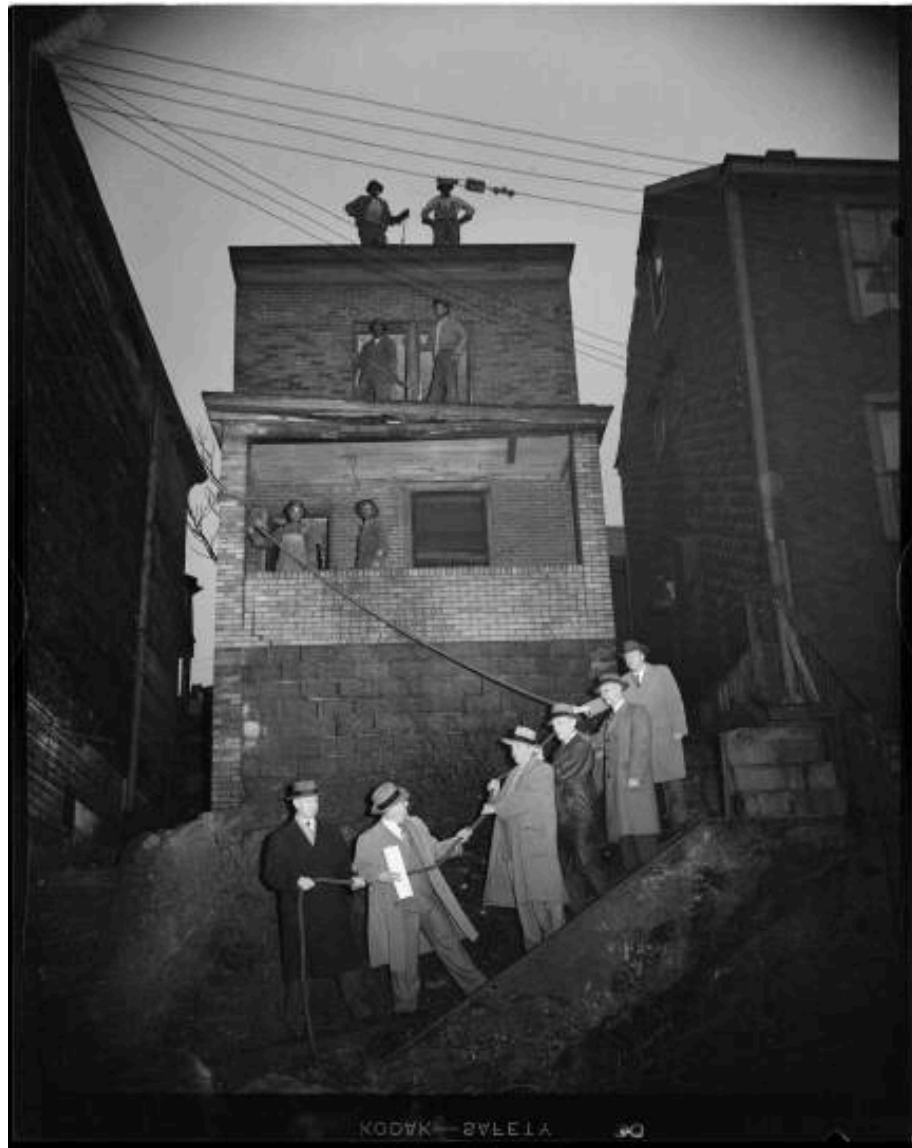


Figure 34 Charles “Teenie” Harris, *Members of Pittsburgh Housing Authority and politicians pulling rope attached to pillar of dilapidated house, March 1951, photograph*

What is discernable, however, are their stances. One rests his hands on his hip as though he is resting or in waiting. The other leans on some kind of stick or pole, which also conveys anticipation. While the demolition workers look down below at Harris and the Housing Authority members, the members themselves seem preoccupied with each other and the rope. Caught in the midst of activity, the members contrast the stance of the workers, who are captured at rest. A sense of estrangement permeates the image. While the Authority members smile at each other and hold on to the rope—an act comparable, perhaps, to ribbon cutting ceremonies—the demolition workers appear forgotten. They stand on roofs that will soon come down. It is unsure whether these workers live in the Hill District, but, if so, a question that can be raised is what it means to these men to participate in the demolishing of their own community.



Figure 35 Charles “Teenie” Harris, Workers in, an on roof of, house under demolitio with collapsed porch, March 1951, photograph

In his book, *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* (Southern Illinois Press, 2001), scholar James V. Catano describes masculinity as an “oscillation or negotiation (as in negotiating a minefield) between dominant mythic rhetoric and the particulars of a personal situation” (3).¹⁴⁴ What makes Catano’s definition of masculinity productive is the attention placed on the constant gaps that occur when conventions of masculinity and the behaviors and practices of a male individual do not align. The question, then, is whether or not the individual who has not met the expectations of masculine conventions is still masculine. For a segment of the black community who have fought for their humanity through claiming their masculinity, black men’s ties to masculinity raises very high-stake questions: How do black men practice masculinity in situations where the resources needed to meet conventions are literally demolished taken away? Should this constant crisis for black men as they repeatedly fall short of masculine conventions—and penalized for it—mobilize new ways of conceptualizing masculinity and call for the deconstruction of masculine conventions? Or should the prerogative be to fight and protest for the accesses black men need to be able to meet the demands of masculinity? Charles “Teenie” Harris’ photographs do not necessarily provide answers to these questions, but they put the questions into the spotlight. Harris’ archive yields a simultaneity of seemingly opposing portraits of black masculinity. On one side are the portraits of black men as successful, thriving members of their community. On the other side are images like the one above, with black men literally standing on a demolished building in the Hill District. Reading Harris’ archive as a narrative, one conclusion that could be drawn is the challenge black men have faced in terms of being under pressure to be “men” but meanwhile being caught up in systems and structures that impede their pursuit. The images of black male

¹⁴⁴ The parentheticals belong to Catano.

respectability are shaken to their cores, and Harris' images of black men facing scenes of destruction are symptomatic of a crisis of black male representation. The title of this section, "Steel and the Un-Made Man," is meant to be a pun on the "self-made man," which is the ideal image of masculinity. It involves a man who gathers the resources needed to make himself successful. Harris' scenes of demolition point to an invisibilizing of black men; men with their backs turned away, crowded in the margins and corners of the frame, staring with expressionless faces at bulldozers and tractors. The demolished architecture of the Hill District parallels the destabilizing of its black male residents, who, summoned as the providers and protectors of their families, watch with Harris as many of their businesses, homes, places of entertainment, and civic centers were run to the ground.

Conclusion: A Masculinity Cast in the Furnace

In this chapter, my goal was to draw attention to how steel becomes an avenue for discussions about the relationship between urban renewal and black masculinity. In the literature and art I have analyzed, steel is at the epicenter, a fundamental building block in the very practice of urban renewal in not only Pittsburgh, but in many other cities following the World War. The production of steel is a very violent process. It includes the pulverizing of mined iron ore into small fragments through crushing and the filtering out of impurities through the use of heat. The process is very noisy and such a detailed process along with the handling of very hot and combustible substances makes the work physically demanding and potentially dangerous. The casting of steel can be dangerous given the presence of metal splinters. I read this process of making steel as the catalyst for the steel influenced aesthetic I examined in this chapter. The narratives and art I examine refer to the rendering of the black male body as if it is steel that has

been produced out of tumultuous and high pressured and caustic and dense events. The artists in this chapter explore the challenges these bodies endure, imagining them as being at risk of being crushed, pushed to shattering moments or points of disintegration. In Brown's novel, Bearden's collages, and Harris' photographs, steel's presence reaches into the lives of black men and turns them upside down. Not only are their lives dismantled, but so are any foundations that appear to concretize what black masculinity is and what black men's relationship to the conventions of masculinity should be. Brown, Bearden and Harris each incorporate the crisis of black masculine representation into their aesthetic representations of black men. In *Iron City*, the black male characters forge alternative routes of self-possession, autonomy and mobility. Bearden's black men are literally a hodgepodge of steel, skin, and construction-related objects. And Harris' archive points to a traumatic doubling: the black man "is" and he "is not." He is both the groom looking proudly into the camera as he stands on porch steps and he is the anonymous man, vulnerable and dispossessed.

I use the photograph below, **Figure 36**, as one final point of reference that can be used to think about how the nature of steel production and the properties of steel influences ways of thinking about violence affecting black men. The photograph shows a black male steelworker at an open-hearth furnace in a Pittsburgh steel factory. The high temperature at which steel is made is clear by the way the worker is dressed and the tools he uses to keep the production process going. He wears goggles to protect his eyes from the heat and elements that could combust and escape the furnace. His body is fully covered; he wears what looks like a long heavy worker's coat. He also wears long pants and a hat and long gloves. His clothing appears dirty with the by-products of the steel-making process. His face runs with sweat as he looks intensely into the furnace. His jaw looks clenched as though he is in heavy concentration. The photograph does

well to register the heat and intensity that fills the steel factory. The worker appears wrapped up in this intensity and heat; his left jaw dramatically bulges out of the left side of his face, communicating masculinity and strength. His posture is careful as he maintains a relatively safe distance from the furnace's opening. But danger still seems to threaten the mill worker because sparks leap out of the furnace like yellowish fireworks, spraying the mid-ground of the photograph. The beautiful intensity of these hot sprays of metal is made so by the black and white rendering of the photograph, which aligns with the industrial and gritty pathos of the image.

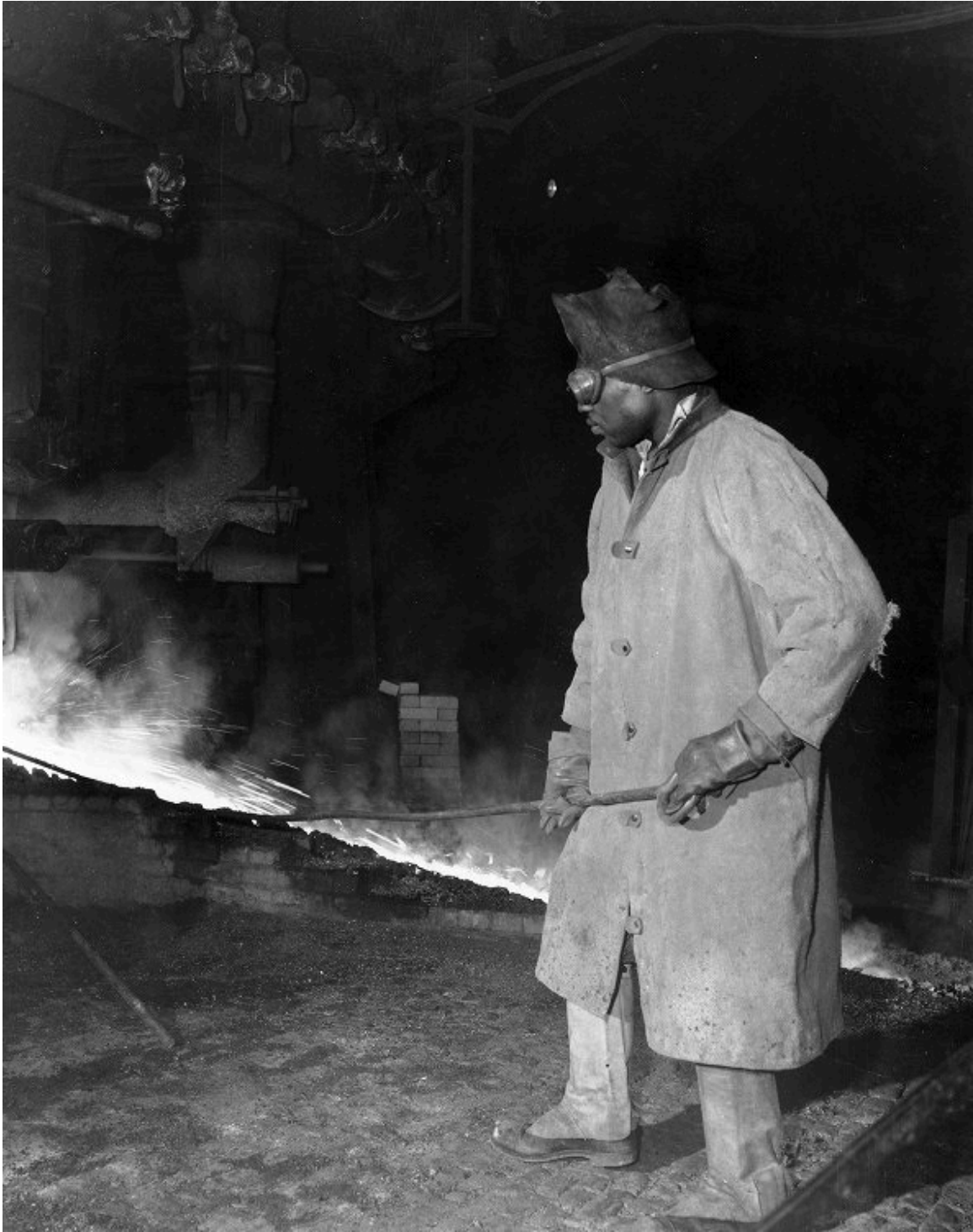


Figure 36 William J. Gaughan, *African American Steelworker Tending the Hearth*, March 5, 1954, photograph

The pathos of steel, industrialism and grit, along with Pittsburgh's urban renewal history, tie together in conversations about the spatial discipline and regulation of black communities. The Pittsburgh Renaissance was, like other urban renewal programs around the nation, about the discipline and regulation of urban spaces. For such measures to be put in place, an affect of suspicion and the criminalization of certain spaces as blighted became necessary in the eyes of city developers. I read steel as an imagined conspirator, a non-human agent in Pittsburgh's revitalization efforts. Steel was used to make the bulldozers that tore down black neighborhoods and was also used as scaffolds for the buildings that stood where these neighborhoods once were. What, then, can we imagine black communities relationship with steel to be in light of scenes that portray steel as an intruder and threat to black livability? The value of looking at steel as an influencer of black poetics is that it contributes to conceptualizing the intricacies of black confinement in general and black male confinement in particular. I attend to metal in general and steel in particular as very important materials that are part of a history of literal black confinement. One can think of shackles, branding instruments, iron bits, jail cells, and handcuffs. I translate the suspicion of steel and a historically-driven black antagonism to steel as permeating the aesthetics that deal with black struggle with systems of racism.

EPILOGUE

FROM “URBAN RENEWAL” TO “GENTRIFICATION”

And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

Claudia Rankine, “Stop and Frisk”

I have half-joked in conversations about gentrification that the telltale sign that a neighborhood is in the process of being gentrified is the presence of cupcake shops and yoga studios across the street from the neighborhood liquor store and Advance Financial. While comedic in a way, this stereotypical joke about gentrification gets at one of the pernicious aspects of urban renewal, namely its specious benignity. Discussions about the benefit of gentrification put this strategy of city planning in a language that renders invisible its damage. City leaders, developers and even residents often refer to city redevelopment as increasing a city’s attractiveness, or its “cool factor.” It is coded as bringing in opportunity and pouring in investments that will benefit a city’s entire population. Supporters of urban renewal also portray city development as an opportunity to better the lives of the city’s lower-income population who live in neighborhoods that are perceivably derelict, dirty, and lack adequate resources.

In our contemporary moment, urban renewal goes by the name gentrification. Gentrification has been a hotly contested discussion in the 21st century. This process looks

similar to that which occurred in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in that ethnic minorities, including those of African descent, are being moved from neighborhoods where they had been established for decades. It is important not to forget that today's culturally hip hot spots were once historically black neighborhoods: Brewerytown in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; East Nashville in Nashville, TN; Harlem in New York City; the Shaw-Howard neighborhood in Washington D.C.; the Fillmore District in San Francisco, California; Woodlawn in Portland; the "Third Ward" in Houston, Texas; the Woodward Avenue area in Detroit, Michigan; and Roxbury's Dudley Square in Boston, Massachusetts. The list, truly, goes on and on.¹⁴⁵

Neighborhoods such as the ones listed above have seen a dramatic increase in new residents flocking to these hip areas. City governments have assisted in drawing influxes of new residents by offering tax benefits for new businesses and relocating businesses and working with property developers and construction companies working to build luxury properties that are only affordable to those with a high income. Cultural districts, too, have flourished in these gentrified areas, where one can find small art galleries, coffee shops, artisan grocery shops, specialty shops, lifestyle boutiques, and more.

Opinions on gentrification range depending on who one asks. Lower income residents who can no longer afford living in their homes and neighborhoods do not see gentrification as a good thing. There are other residents, however, who find gentrification to be a necessary antidote for their communities that often look bad and lack necessary resources like a well-stocked

¹⁴⁵ For information on the process of gentrification, see Lance Freeman, *There Goes the 'Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2006); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012);

grocery store and nice community facilities and absent of aesthetically attractive blocks. There are those moving into gentrified neighborhoods that may have share a host of oftentimes conflicting feelings. They might have been drawn to the cultural richness of these neighborhoods but feel conflicted about their role in displacing those who lived in the community before them. Other new residents might be ignorant of this displacement, or frankly, do not care. Municipal leaders commonly have taken a pragmatic approach to defending redevelopment, arguing that the benefits of urban redevelopment outweigh the effect it has had on lower-income populations.

The street photography of *New York Times* photographer, Robert Stolarik, complicates this defense of redevelopment by depicting the anti-black violence that gentrification promotes. I choose Stolarik's work as a fitting last case study for my project because it contemporizes the issues of mid-20th century urban renewal. Too, the gentrification of New York, particularly Brooklyn, has become one of the exemplary examples of the consequences of urban redevelopment for lower-income African American communities. Brooklyn has become so infamous for its gentrification practices that gentrification happening in other cities around the nation has been referred to as "Brooklynization." Stolarik drew attention to the unconstitutionality of Stop and Frisk, a nationwide, legalized police protocol designed to deter illegal activities and lower crime rates by having police officers stop, question and frisk suspicious-looking people. As studies have shown, most of these people have been men who are of African descent or Latino. Robert Stolarik photographed these men in the process of being stopped by the police for as part of a 2010 investigation by the *Times* into anti-black police violence in New York's low-income communities. These photographs draw attention to the invasive nature of Stop and Frisk, and, too, the complicity of gentrification in spurring this protocol. The photographer captures black men who have, fundamentally, no right to the city.

They are viewed by the police officers in the pictures as intruders in the city, a threat to the intertwined issues of property value and public safety. As the ideology undergirding Stop and Frisk follows, black and brown men give up their right to privacy in the public space because they are threats to property.

Because gentrification is predicated on the creation of property value, and black men are criminalized as threats to public and private property, it is important to consider the tight relationship between gentrification and police brutality against black men. Police tactics such as Stop and Frisk, in essence, incites fear in black communities, using invasions of bodies and public embarrassment as a means of making black residents feel scared to go beyond their homes. Such a tactic works well as a means of keeping black men especially from redeveloped areas in a city where newly moved-in residents and businesses need to be assured of their safety in return for their investments. Thus, the police become defenders of urban space, waging what looks and feels like as total war against men of color. The photograph below, for example, demonstrates the heightened visibility of black men at the hands of the NYPD. The man in the photograph has been stopped by two police officers and questioned. The composition of the photograph enhances the already tense atmosphere displayed before the photographer's camera.



Figure 38 June 13, 2012-Brooklyn, NY, USA: Derrick Smith has been stopped and frisked by members of the NYPD in East New York Brooklyn, Robert Stolarik, <http://jjie.org/one-photographers-long-witnessing-of-stop-and-frisk/>

The man's facial expression denotes vulnerability and confusion as he is, fundamentally, forced to give an account of why he is in the area he is in and what he is doing there. The two police officers in the photograph, a white man on the left and a black woman on the right, flank both sides of the image; their stance serves as a frame within a frame, that which gives the black male victim's presence meaning. In order to see the black man in the photograph, we have to see him within the frame the two police officers' stance creates. Not only do the officers' positions present a vertical frame through which we see into, but they also flatten the depth of the image. The shortened depth in the photograph makes the distance between the black male suspect and the police officers appear shorter than it actually might have been. The suspiciousness of the black male subject in the eyes of the police officers is demonstrated by the photographer's close

shot of their holsters, which are at the forefront of the image. Handcuffs, notepads, guns, a pepper spray holder, and radios are in clear view to the viewer, signifying the police officers' power. The photographer's focus on the waistlines of all three individuals communicates a grossly uneven balance of power. The officers' weapons and communication tools at the forefront of the image is a strong foil to the empty-handedness of the stopped black man. His belt holds no weapons, its only purpose being to hold up the man's baggy jeans. The subject appears to be proving this fact to the officers by raising his shirt for them. His left hand holds up his shirt from his waistline and his right hand holds his belt. Framed so tightly by the two officers, the subject appears to be closed in and cornered. Instead of looking at the police officers, the subject looks into the photographer's camera, which, by documenting the scene, exposes its violence. Though an apparent ally of the man in the photograph, the camera is not his savior. The camera's safe distance from the "suspect" signals the photographer's respect for the police officers' authority and notes the black male subject's aloneness in his experience of being stopped and interrogated. The camera serves as a witness from a distance and does not disturb the composition of the scene, which is dictated by the police officers' positions.



Figure 39 Robert Stolarik, *August 20, 2012-Brooklyn, N.Y.: People walk past a mural depicting the practice of stop and frisk on Livinia Avenue in East New York section of Brooklyn, 2012, photograph.* <http://jjie.org/one-photographers-long-witnessing-of-stop-and-frisk/>

Although the issue of Stop and Frisk is not a new phenomenon, the debate about its unconstitutionality has been heavily discussed in our contemporary moment alongside inflamed criticism of anti-black police brutality, the disproportionate imprisonment of black men, and the constantly limited resources invested in lower-income black communities. The photograph below taken by Robert Stolarik of a mural integrates the multivalent issues that affects such

communities. This mural is found in East New York, a predominantly black neighborhood that was hit so hard economically by urban renewal strategies in the 1970s that it never recovered.¹⁴⁶

On the furthest left-hand side of the mural is painted the head of a black man who is yelling, his mouth opened to its limit and his eyes tightly closed. The back of his head has perceptibly crumbled away, and so, too, has his left jawline area. Couched in the empty space where the back of the black male screamer's head should be is a white police officer who is frisking a black man dressed in street clothing: a "white T," baggy shorts, and a pair of white Jordan's. Next to this scene is a black female officer frisking another black man. A heroin and blood-filled needle intersects the black man's arm at the elbow, supposed to be imagined to have been the utensil with which has been written the outline of "GUNS" and "DRUGS." A black right hand gripping a gun is between the two words, facing another gun. Between the two opposing gunfire sits a human skull shrouded by white sparks of fire. Right below the gunfire exchange is a Daily News headline that reads: "4 Year Old Shot." Taking up the forefront of the mural is a sheet of paper titled "The Fourth Amendment," a painted reproduction of a photograph of Trayvon Martin in a hoodie, a painting of Eric Garner, and incomplete renderings of two black male figures.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Blockbusting in the 1970s is the chief culprit behind the disparity and disinvestment seen in East New York today. Blockbusting refers to the now illegal practice used by real estate agents to rip off black homeowners. It involved scaring white property owners into selling their homes for a low asking price with the fear that black people were going to move into their neighborhoods. These properties would be sold to black homeowners for a price higher than what these properties sold for. Consequently, these homeowners were made to take out large loans that they could not afford to pay back with the income they were making.

¹⁴⁷ The fourth amendment is meant to protect U.S. citizens from illegal invasions of private property, which includes one's own body. Trayvon Martin was a who was shot and killed by a fellow resident living in a gated community because he "looked suspicious." Eric Gardner was killed by NYPD after resisting arrest for selling loose cigarettes.

The passersby in front of the mural, a black mother and daughter, dramatize the nature of the mural because they are doing something so mundane and routine: walking in the city. The mother looks on straight ahead of her while her daughter, dressed in what seems to be a school uniform, looks either at her mother or the mural. This scene of liveliness that the mother and daughter present to the viewer is a foil to the themes of black male silence, erasure and death that the mural presents. The gender difference that the photograph captures also dramatizes the issue of black male invisibility the mural presents. The identities of the passersby as two black females are brought into focus by the fact that the mural concentrates heavily on black male death. The absence of real-life black men in the photograph and only artistic mediations of them gives the impression that they are extinct, non-existent. The two black females walk before what is in essence a public memorial to black men not only dying in New York, but around the nation.

The identity of the artist responsible for the mural is unknown, and this anonymity seems fitting given the theme of the mural and the theme of my dissertation: black male invisibility. However, not only does this dissertation attend to the how urban redevelopment invisibilizes black men by means of slum clearance, eviction, relocation and policing, but the dissertation also works toward finding evidence—real or fictional—of how black men have either combatted invisibility or made invisibility work for them. What I hope I achieved through this dissertation is a generative complication of the division between black male visibility and invisibility. While black men are absent in the mural above, they are also present. And while city officials rather deny the interrelatedness of gentrification, police brutality and the disinvestment in poor black urban communities, the mural brings into relief this narrative, connecting the dots around the figure of the black male.

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