Writing the Street: Discourses of Choice, Agency, and Mobility in Twentieth Century Street Lit

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that the street, as a space of contact in which many different narratives, perspectives, and stories converge, operates as a compelling lens through which we can read twentieth century multi-ethnic literatures of the United States. While there exists a significant amount of critical literary scholarship on urban literature, these studies often focus on urban space more broadly and as represented via the ostensible canon of urban American literature—one dominated by white, male authors. In centering the street as the focal point, I move beyond these canonical standards by engaging a more expansive variety—both in terms of style and authorship—of urban fiction. Thus, this project conceptualizes street literature not as a subgenre within urban fiction but as a distinct literary category that includes a diverse range of genres and forms. Centering the street in this way reveals how the subversive and evasive

movements of literary subjects continue to shift and adapt to the effects and agencies of particular historical moments. In street literature, the street emerges as a contested space between 1) the dominant cultural narrative put forth by urban sociological rhetoric that, I argue, emphasizes stagnancy and victimization and 2) literary representations that, I argue, subverts this narrative by emphasizing dynamic movement through both city space and oppressive circumstances.

In order to effectively trace this contestation, I employ a sociohistorical methodology grounded in critical spatial theory. This methodology rejects the impulse to think of physical and material space as a mere background or stage against which stories play out, and instead accounts for how space contains the agentive energy of the various sociopolitical and sociocultural ideologies that govern a particular historical moment. I use Edward Soja's notion of a "socio-spatial dialectic"—one that animates the influence of the spatial as an active participant that both shapes and is shaped by its users and the influence of a particular historical and cultural moment—as a productive means of reading literary representations of the street. This project argues that authors such as Mike Gold, Odie Hawkins, Chester Himes, Ann Petry, Sister Souljah, and Anzia Yezierska use the dynamism of the street to challenge urban sociological narratives that attempt to stabilize, rationalize, and explain the unpredictability of literary street space. The texts examined in this project fight for their right to the city by imbuing the space with rhetorics of movement, choice, and the philosophies of the absurd. These rhetorical and philosophical moves not only speak back to urban sociological discourses that seeks to control, simplify, and, thus, stabilize the productive chaos of the street, but also assert a sense of agency tied to the vitality of the city street, and one in direct opposition to the disciplining discourses that victimize residents. Thus, this dissertation demonstrates that the reclamation of the city street on the part of

the literary category of street lit results in the production of new perspectives and narratives regarding the street and urban space.

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Discourses of the Street

In 1975, the Council for Public Safety, a group of public-sector unions for police officers and fire fighters, produced a pamphlet of nine guidelines essential for one's survival in New York City. Emblazoned with a "hooded death's head" and entitled "Welcome to Fear City", the pamphlet warns of "shocking" increases in crime and violence on the streets of New York City, that, allegedly, due to mayoral budget cuts, continue to get worse (Cush). Visitors, they warn, should, if at all possible, "stay away from New York City." If that is impossible, visitors have a chance to "survive and keep their property intact" if they closely follow the listed guidelines: stay in Manhattan, watch out for fire hazards, thoroughly conceal property in automobiles, and "firmly" clutch handbags or other personal luggage at all times (Cush). Perhaps most important of all, the pamphlet warns, visitors should avoid the city streets, an especially, if not *the* most, dangerous and vulnerable space to inhabit in the city: all visitors should "stay off the streets after 6 P.M.," as they are "deserted", and one should "never ride the subway for any reason whatsoever."[1] If you must go out after 6 P.M, avoid walking at all costs and be sure to call a cab before leaving the safety of a restaurant or one's hotel room (Cush). Hailing a cab on the street or walking through the city at night risks isolation and, subsequently, vulnerability to attack.

While this pamphlet is certainly couched in a particular historical moment and used for specific, political reasons, it also dramatically illustrates and plays upon an extensive history and mythology of "the street" in American[2] popular culture. In this mythology, the danger and drama

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[1] Riding the bus during the day in midtown Manhattan, however, poses only a "slight risk."

[2] Throughout this project I use the terms United States and America interchangeably. That said, I recognize the problematic nature of this rhetorical choice as the term America encompasses many countries and the insistence on using such a term only reifies the mythology of the United States as superior. Ann Douglas, for example, notes that in the 1920s in particular Americans "liked the term 'America' precisely for its imperial suggestion of an intoxicating and irresistible identity" (3). The term "United States", in contrast, "admits to possible divisions among separate parts of the national self" (3). That said, since much of the field continues to use this terminology I am compelled to use it as well, though I try do so sparingly.

of the street, especially the ghetto street, operates in our cultural imagination as simultaneously, and, consequently, somewhat paradoxically, a space of violence, poverty, filth, immorality, pleasure, temptation, and possibility. It is the danger attributed to the street, however, that is routinely magnified and exploited—to varying degrees—throughout the twentieth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, as cities in the United States continued to grow and expand at exponential rates[3], the street's reputation as a space that not only inspires, but also encourages the more insidious aspects of human nature grew as well. Housing reformers[4], for example, explicitly sought to cut off the "street habit"—the "bustling activity on front stoops, sidewalks, and back alleys" (Wright 125). Access to this space, they argued, would contaminate those who were learning to navigate the "dangers lurking in shared facilities and indistinct boundaries" (125). These "dangers", while not always explicitly articulated, reveals a larger preoccupation and fear of the vastness of public, urban space and an inability to control who or what one might come into contact with while hanging out on the front stoop or sidewalk[5].

And this fear of contact continued to grow as cities continued to expand and diverse populations—black migrants from the South and the influx of immigrants from countries from around the world including Italy, Eastern Europe, China, and Japan—transformed American cities within the first few decades of the twentieth century (115). By 1938 cities in the United

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[3] In fact, in 1920, the United States census designated the country "for the first time in its history an urban nation" (Douglas 4). And it was during this era that the United States first assumed its role as "the world's most powerful nation", and New York City, by extension, became the "world's most powerful city" (4).

[4] While crucial in revolutionizing living conditions for tenement dwellers at the end of the nineteenth century, it should be noted housing reformers regularly employed primitivizing language that insisted residents needed to be "rehabilitated" in accordance with certain ideologies and standards regarding family life and domesticity

[5] This attempt to control the kind of contact the city and its street facilitates is especially interesting when one takes into account race, ethnicity and class. Historian Lizabeth Cohen notes that in Chicago factory owners worked to maintain the residential segregation inherent to the city as a means of keeping workers from uniting over the issue of class. Before prohibition, she notes, saloons were a space in which "workers of different ethnicities" mixed (29). Prohibition made the "fragmentation of the workforce" much easier to maintain. The street's ability to facilitate this kind of contact across difference, then, is, arguably, a threat to systems of power and must be controlled, hence the housing reformers preoccupation with controlling access to the street.

States had grown so much and so quickly that sociologist Louis Wirth asserted "never before have such large masses of people of diverse traits as we find in our cities been thrown together into such close physical contact as in the great cities of America" ("Urbanism as a Way of Life" 71). In fact, fears similar to the ones the 1975 New York City[6] pamphlet exploits—crime, vice, poverty, and, arguably, Otherness—that motivated the Chicago School of Sociology to "make readable" all parts of the city as a means to attempt to organize and control the ever expanding chaos of the growth of U.S. cities. This attempt to understand the city in such scientific and diagnostic terms resulted in compartmentalizing the danger to only certain sections of the city—an effect that continued to impact 1975 New York because, as the pamphlet warns, visitors should stay within the boundaries of Manhattan in order have the best chance of survival. That said, despite this attempt to eradicate, or at the very least segregate and isolate to certain "problem" areas, the fears and dangers associated with the city and its streets, the cultural products that engage this almost mythical reputation make it clear that the particular dynamism of the urban street—an energy that makes it "the primary symbol of modern life" (Berman 316)—depends, in part, on maintaining this seemingly paradoxical balance of danger and possibility, filth and beauty, and violence and pleasure[7] that contact on city streets affords.

While cultural products from music and fashion to movies and television certainly contribute to imbuing the city street with this productive paradox, this project is primarily

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[6] Perhaps unsurprisingly, this emphasis on fear and the city continues to influence the sociopolitical landscape into the twenty-first century. In 2019, for example, a local TV station in Seattle, Washington produced an hour-long documentary entitled "Seattle is Dying" in which dramatic, suspenseful music hums over shots of Seattle's streets filled with wandering and drug addicted homeless. The repeated images of these individuals within earshot of and physical proximity to families and tourists makes it clear that while the "hearts of Seattleites" go out to those suffering, Seattle's streets are anything but safe. A logic that brings to mind, among others, Samuel Delany's analysis of Times Square in New York in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue.*

[7] Michael Denning notes that by the end of the twentieth century, the story of the street —and its more nefarious manifestation: the ghetto street—becomes a part of our cultural mythology and "quintessentially American" (231). Clearly, there is a cultural fascination with the intoxicating danger and possibility implicit within a city's streets that it simply cannot be ignored.

concerned with urban writers and the literary identity they create for the street. As I will discuss in more detail momentarily and throughout this project, "street lit" is a dynamic and flexible literary category that incorporates a range of texts, genres, and ideas. This, however, is not necessarily a widely shared approach within the field of urban literature. Instead, references to "street lit" as a genre are often conceptualized within a particular, temporally bound frame of reference. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for example, scholars and readers of urban fiction affiliate "street lit" primarily with black ghetto fiction—a genre that derives from the Blaxploitation films and "black experience" novels of the 1960s and 1970s, and until recently, were often sold almost exclusively on the street itself. Authors such as Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck), Donald Goines, Sister Souljah, and Omar Tyree are some of the best-known figures in a genre that portrays life on the streets of America's major cities as predominately lived and experienced by black Americans and consumed with violence, gambling, drugs, pimps and prostitutes—a topic and representation that earned the genre the designation of "smut" by author and journalist Nick Chiles[8] and is considered "destructive and racist" by novelist Terry McMillan (Norris xxiii). But street lit, as I conceptualize it, has an extensive history that reaches back and across the twentieth century. More literary category than genre, my archive includes a wide variety of texts from the more traditionally recognized examples of street lit such as *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah to texts rarely, if ever, categorized as street lit such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower.* Part of what unites the seemingly unrelated texts I've gathered in this archive is their shared insistence on exploring not only the "the repressed history

[8] In a now infamous editorial entitled "Their Eyes were Reading Smut," Pulitzer prize winning author Nick Chiles writes about how he was shocked when he walked into a Barnes and Noble and saw that street lit—shelved under the category of African American Literature--engulfed "the whole community of black authors—from me to Terry McMillan and Toni Morrison [we were] surrounded and swallowed whole…by an overwhelming wave of titles and jackets that I wouldn't want my 13-year-old son to see" (Chiles).

of vice and crime, misery and graft, panic and despair, chaos and saturnalia" (Sante xv) that dominates the history of the twentieth century street, but also the absurdity of this history and the possibilities of laughter, play, and choice that derive, in part, from recognizing and confronting such absurdity.

While there exists a significant amount of scholarship on urban literature, these studies often orient their analyses around genre[9], aesthetics[10], urban space more broadly[11], or reader response/reception theory[12]. Furthermore, what can be amassed as the canon of urban American literature is dominated by white, male authors such as Nelson Algren, Stephen Crane, James T. Farrell, Jack London, Frank Norris, and the classic hardboiled detective fiction made famous by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. While authors such as Richard Wright and John Rechy are often included in these areas of study, they become representative of the urban experience as seen through the eyes of an angry black man, as with *Native Son*, or a gay hustler, as with Rechy's *City of Night.* Scholarly work on "black experience" novels or black ghetto fiction has begun to emerge in the past decade[13], but even that frame of reference risks imposing parameters on a genre that is much wider than the limits scholarly work has tried to place in the past. In centering the street as the focal point, I hope to move beyond these canonical standards and engage a more generative variety of street literature.

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[9] See Justin Gifford's analysis of black pulp in *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Publishing*, Jon Thompson's analysis of crime fiction in *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism,* or Christopher Breu's analysis of the hardboiled genre in *Hardboiled Masculinities*.

[10] See, for example, James Giles's focus on naturalism in *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man*

[11] See, for example, Liam Kennedy's *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* or Carlo Rotella's *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*

[12] This angle is especially popular with regards to black ghetto fiction or "hip-hop lit" for its use in getting high school-aged students of color to read more.

[13] For just a few examples see Justin Gifford's *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Publishing*, Kinohi Nishikawa's *Street Players*: *Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground*, Keenan Norris's *Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape*

More specifically, my project contributes to the development of this body of work by zeroing in on the space of the street and using it as a lens through which we can trace how scenes of movement, choice, and possibility manifest in the highly oppressive and semi-contained circumstances of the American ghetto—a socio-spatial reality I will speak to more momentarily. By examining how the street manifests in these novels, I argue street lit participates in a "political act of reimagination"—one that that facilitates the freedom to challenge, confound, and alter the established spatial orders (Stoller 126). These spatial orders derive, in large part, from the work of urban sociologists at the turn of the twentieth century who argued it was beneficial and necessary for cities to grow according to "coherent social knowledge or orderly social effort" (Mumford 27). This attempt to rationalize and organize cities into a set and coherent form of knowledge results in, as critic Katherine McKittrick argues, "formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point" (xiii). This practice of conceptualizing space and place as stable backgrounds or containers that hold rather than socially produce "human complexities and social relations" (ix) restricts the fluidity and possibility the city street can offer both in its physical and literary manifestations.

Thus, I suggest street lit challenges this attempted stability and offers "imaginary and real respatializations" of the street—ones that imbue the space with dynamism and rhetorics of movement, choice, and the absurd, as a means to speak back to these efforts to control, simplify, and normalize the chaos of the street. Part of this dynamism results from assembling texts that represent the street as at once beneficial and oppressive; it is this complex representation and negotiation between these polarizing realities that authors are able to co-opt this contradictory space and use the streets to speak back to, subvert, and resist systems of oppression. Perhaps

literary critic Deborah Parson put it best when she described the urban writer as "not only a figure within a city; he/she is also the producer of a city, one that is related to but distinct from the city of asphalt, brick, and stone, one that results from the interconnection of body, mind, and space, one that reveals the interplay of self/city identity"(1). This ability of the urban writer to produce a city that is similar to but distinct from the material reality on which it is based illustrates how imaginary respatializations—ones that, for the purposes of this project incorporate rhetorics of choice, movement, and the absurd—are constructed and affirms the productive capacity to speak back to the inherent injustices that the material reality of the built environment projects. While the subsequent chapters will explore this claim in more detail, I turn now to a discussion of how I conceptualize street lit as a literary category and, as such, what is included and excluded from this designation.

What is "Street Lit"?

In John Rechy's *City of Night* the streets are worlds unto themselves[14]. The narrator—an unnamed male hustler—travels across the country in search of the unique and yet, to some extent, indistinguishable "darkcities" that are fused together in an "unmistakable shape of loneliness" (15). The streets of these "darkcities" create worlds that exist outside of but parallel to the larger world of the city, and, often, dominant society. The other worldliness of this space simultaneously holds, ensnares, and protects the male hustlers, drag queens, prostitutes, and addicts who populate the pages of this text[15] in which the "only reminders of the world beyond

[14] This sense of other-worldliness permeates much of the literature that makes up this archive. Odie Hawkins's 1972 text *Ghetto Sketches,* for example, explicitly highlights this tension by repeatedly contrasting life in the ghetto to life in the "square world"—a process which emphasizes the sense of Otherness that pervades this space and, laden with a sense of dry, jabbing humor, serves as a reference point for outside readers. In Hawkins's ghetto, for example, he explains that the look a pimp gives his prostitute "might be considered, in the square world, a look of affection" (23).

[15] James Giles argues that Rechy's novel dramatizes, in particular, the desire of "straight America" to keep the existence of a gay subculture "submerged in the darkest recesses" of these cities (Giles 140).

its boundaries are the police wagons that cruise the streets" (116). Of course, while the policing of the city street suggests a binary between "straight America" and, for this novel in particular, gay subculture, like many boundaries[16], these seemingly separate worlds have the potential to be porous, "open, yet closed" (Daniels 197). Thus, it is the paradoxical space of the street—a space that is used simultaneously in this novel as a means to support and deconstruct this binary—that the narrator finds so compelling. Intoxicated by and addicted to the vitality and diversity of the city, the narrator walks the streets of New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Hollywood, and San Francisco, searching for, hustling, and procuring interclass, interracial, and sexual contact—a kind of contact that tempers the incessant loneliness that threatens to overwhelm him. Because of this, the street operates in the novel—and indeed in most of the texts that comprise this archive—as a "varied and welcoming harbor" for the "bodily, material, sexual, and emotional needs" of a range of people: "male and female, gay and straight, old and young, working class and middle class, Asian and Hispanic, black and other, rural and urban, tourist and indigene, transient and permanent" (Delany xviii). The dynamic, "wild, alive determination" (256) this kind of indeterminate contact the street procures generates a sense of anarchy that contests the various borders, binaries and barriers embedded—both implicitly and explicitly—in the materiality of the city and "bursts like a rocket into a shattered phosphorescent world… swallow[ing] you so deep you won't know where you got sucked in" (30). The beauty, pain, lust, determination, sexual freedom, and all-encompassing aliveness of the street this novel celebrates is, in essence, the intricacies of what constitutes street literature.

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[16] As I will discuss in more detail in chapter one, Michel Foucault's theories of space and power argue that spaces of "otherness" or "deviant heterotopias," hold "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (5). And as I will return to throughout this project, this disciplinary space seeks to manage and populations that, in this case, are defined predominately through the intersections of race, class, and, as we see in Rechy's novel, sexuality.

It is, in part, this sense of aliveness, I argue, that makes street literature relatively distinct from the larger category of urban literature and makes it difficult to establish a formal and specific definition for it. Therefore, in part because previous scholarly work on urban literature has been defined by what it has overlooked and because street lit's dynamic potential is driven by adopting a generic flexibility, I am resistant to establishing any sort of firm parameters or definitions for it. While formal definitions are understood to establish a sense of rigor, formality, and exclusivity, they also, as Samuel Delany has argued, heavily restrict any notion of "originality, creativity, variation, and change in new examples" which can lead to "violent exclusions and stasis" (238, 268). As such, instead of constructing a "restrictive wall of definition", I choose to put forth what Delany terms a "functional description" of street literature: one that focuses on the individual texts themselves and accounts for "never-before-seen aspects, point[s] out the most interesting examples, describ[es] the myriad and fascinating ways in which those aspects react with one another and how they interact with readers and the world" (244, 238).

Because of this complexity, a "functional description" of what constitutes street lit will ultimately emerge over the course of the following chapters. That said, generally speaking, street literature can be described as any text that incorporates the city street to tell its story. This often means moving beyond simply using the street as a setting for a narrative. In fact, the street in "street lit" often operates as a character in its own right, influencing and shaping the characters as much as the characters use it for their own purposes. Because of this flexible definition, much of what I consider street lit is often categorized—whether by bookstores, readers, and/or the author themselves—in a variety of literary genres and includes everything from urban fiction to black ghetto fiction, hardboiled detective fiction to naturalist novels, and ethnoautobiographies to

slumming novels. Additionally, the narratives that comprise my archive do not adhere to a singular aesthetic, though literary naturalism and realism tend to dominate, as does a reliance on developing various personas that verge on the absurd and hyperbolic in their depiction of characters and realities of life on the street. Perhaps, more than anything else, street literature, first and foremost is, as poet and scholar Vanessa Irvin Morris argues, "all about stories: stories that come from real lives lived in neighborhoods where streets, sidewalks and corners interweave and intersect and connect" (Morris). And it is this possibility—of a diverse range of stories intersecting, interweaving, and connecting as a result of and facilitated by the space of the street—that makes the street lit archive from which I am working such a compelling, and dynamic genre within American literature.

While I often use the broad designation of "city street" or simply "street" throughout the dissertation, the majority of the texts I examine are working from and within the "ghetto street" in particular. Therefore, in providing a "functional description" of this genre, it is important to also address the connotation the "ghetto street" holds in popular culture, one that as I mentioned earlier often conjures images of violence, poverty, drug addiction, and gangsters. And while the novels in this archive certainly further and promote this reputation[17], they also simultaneously play with, subvert, and speak back to the various manifestations and representations in mainstream popular culture. Given that the term "ghetto" is social and racially charged and often used as a slur to disparage not only certain neighborhoods, but also and anyone who behaves, looks, or embodies the characteristics particular to impoverished neighborhoods[18], I want to

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[17] After all, writes Morris, street lit is all about truths that are "for the thick-boned and thick-skinned… don't read if you are easily offended … fuck you if you can't take a joke" (Morris). The sense of humor and play at work in the intense depictions of violence and poverty are important to keep in mind as one consumes this genre, especially the black ghetto fiction that compromises much of later twentieth century street lit.

[18] As of April 2019, Urbandictionary.com alone has 168 entries for the term "ghetto" and the entries, which are crowdsourced, illustrate the stereotypical and racist associations associated with the term. Definitions, for example,

briefly explain why, despite the various complexities and challenges the use of this word brings, I use this particular term to describe the kind of "street" this project takes as its focus. I use this term for two main reasons: 1) the majority of the authors I examine use this term to describe the settings of their novels[19]--a rhetorical move that illustrates the reclamation of the potentialities associated with the space, and 2) as Richard Rothstein suggests, the many euphemisms mainstream society uses to describe the ghetto, such as the "inner city", are used as a means to avoid confronting and recognizing the fact that the United States created, and more importantly, still maintains ghettos segregated by race[20].

In fact, the primary residents of many "inner cities" are not necessarily the same demographic the word connotes in popular culture. In the wake of deindustrialization, many working-class communities[21] left the area in search of work now located beyond the inner-city ring. Those who remained were eventually pushed out as the mass exodus of jobs and workers "provoked a power" of government sponsored urban renewal "through massive clearance and

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range from "an impoverished, neglected, or otherwise disadvantaged residential area of a city, usually troubled by a disproportionately large amount of crime" to "anyone who loves fried chicken."

[19] While authors of early twentieth century street literature tended to use "slum" interchangeably with ghetto, I have decided to simply use "ghetto" throughout this project because it draws attention to the overt racial discrimination and segregation that has created the space. The term "slum", by comparison, is broader and does not necessarily account for the racial and ethnic segregation that characterizes the urban landscape of most major American cities throughout the twentieth century. See, for example, Jane Jacobs's definition that argues a slum is inhabited by a group of impoverished individuals, while a ghetto is inhabited by a "minority people group together in a slum" and are in segregated part of the city either officially or unofficially (283). Or Louis Wirth's definition of a slum as "beset by internal social dysfunctions that, reasonably enough, the majority culture needed to restrict and keep under control" (Duneier 45). A more progressive definition offered by William Whyte, a protégé of Wirth, still does not account for race: A slum, he wrote, "was simply an urban area where there was a high concentration of low-income people living in dilapidated housing and under poor sanitary and health conditions" (45). The absence of race in these descriptions of slums suggest it is not the most accurate and useful term to use in characterizing the streets in the novels I examine.

[20] In the 1940s, Cayton and Drake used the term ghetto deliberately to describe the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago in order to emphasize "that nothing about the concentration of more than half the blacks of Chicago in the most 'blighted' areas of the city was natural" (Duneier 233).

[21] It should be noted that the working-class communities that could more easily leave the inner city ring were primarily white as racial discrimination in housing and employment made it difficult if not impossible for people of color, especially black Americans to leave.

reconstruction of old city centers" (Harvey 69). The renovation of the Times Square area in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, sought to make the area "safer" for middle class consumers and their families, required demolishing the "visible signs of sex" in the area (Delany 95). This includes not only prostitution but also the porn and sex theaters that characterized the area. In part because the renovations of city centers were directed at bringing middle class consumers back to the city, these spaces that once held and fostered numerous communities, became "hubs for finance and upscale shopping," (Harvey 69) contributing to the gentrification of the area to such an extent that by the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the "inner city," geographically speaking, no longer houses the ghetto for many cities across the country.

It should also be noted that while the term "ghetto" today is affiliated predominantly with poor black American neighborhoods, the term did not always have this connotation. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, in his description of the Seventh Ward in *The Philadelphia Negro* never uses the term ghetto because, at that time, those who knew the term used it to "refer to early modern dense Jewish neighborhoods" (Duneier 4). The Jewish ghettos of the 12th and 13th centuries were places of "enforced residence" based on religious affiliation—an important distinction given the current racialized connotation of the word (13). The arrival of Nazi ghettos, however, altered the connotation of the word, as Jewish ethnic identity was the target, regardless of religious devotion or practice. Thus, it was not until after World War II, with black soldiers returning from the front lines and reporting the horrors of the Nazi ghettos, that the term was picked up as a "powerful metaphor for their own experience" and " a crucial reference" point for civil rights advocates moving forward (24). Of course, the Nazi ghetto was "just as different from Harlem and the South Side of Chicago as it was from 16th century Rome and Venice" (24), but the shift in affiliating ghettos with racial as opposed to religious affiliation marks a key

turning point in the history of the word and its applicability to contemporary usage in the United States.

Throughout the twentieth century, the connotation of "ghetto" continues to shift according to the historical and cultural context. Early twentieth century ghettos, for example, tended to have a more multi-ethnic population of inhabitants. The increase in immigration[22] between 1880-1920 transformed the composition of major American cities, and by extension, the ghettoes as "Blacks from the American South, Italians, Eastern Europeans, and Russian Jews arrived in unprecedented numbers" (Wright 114). Towards the middle of the twentieth century, however, the population began to shift dramatically as ethnic groups who could pass for white moved to, what the Chicago School of Sociology termed, areas of second settlement. Robert Park and the Chicago School of Sociology, however, attributed this ability to move out of areas of first settlement, which tended to be overcrowded and impoverished, as the product of immigrants who were "keener … more energetic and the more ambitious" (qtd. in Duneier 36). In truth, "strong anti-black racism and the violence that accompanied it" prevented blacks from moving out of the ghettoes and into the more, as Park described it, "cosmopolitan areas" of the city (36). Thus, as the walls of immigrant ghettos were crumbling, the "black ghetto's walls were rising," (Douglas 320) creating an affiliation and understanding of the term ghetto that, by 1965, becomes synonymous with black (Duneier 84).

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[22] While it may be obvious, it is important to explicitly note that the ties between the street and immigration continue throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. And while immigration in the early decades of the twentieth century often refers predominately to immigrants from Asia and Eastern Europe and Black migrants from the South, street lit offers an especially compelling look into the history and circumstances of Black immigration. See Claude McKay and Rudolph Fisher for twentieth century examples of Caribbean writers that interrogate the intraracial tension this historical reality manifests. Ibi Zoboi's 2017 young adult novel *American Street* offers an especially compelling twenty-first century example.

Yet, even with the adoption of this term to describe living conditions for many black Americans living in the United States, the term's definition and connotations continue to shift over the course of the twentieth century. William Julius Wilson, for example, defined the ghetto of the late twentieth century as "an area where 40% of residents lived in poverty, regardless of their race;" a definition that supports his larger goal of emphasizing the impact of class over race in "understanding the life chances of blacks" (qtd in Duneier 139). This definition, however, is in direct contrast to Kenneth Clark, St. Clair Drake, and Horace Cayton who, in the 1960s, began "with the assumption that racial segregation was the ghetto's defining feature" (158). My first chapter will continue this conversation and discuss in more detail three key moments that significantly shape the definition, materiality, composition, and structure of American ghettos: the construction and maintenance of immigrant ghettoes in the first few decades of the twentieth century; the shifting notion of and the loss of equal access to public space in the wake of urban renewal projects in the middle of the twentieth century; and the subsequent (re)segregation of American cities. For now, I turn to a discussion of why the street, particularly the ghetto street, remains such a vibrant and viable space of literary (re)imagining.

Why the street?

If the city is, as philosopher, Henri Lefebvre asserts, "a place of social and economic advantage, a focal point for the workings of social power and hierarchy and therefore a potent battleground for struggles seeking greater democracy, equality, and justice" (qtd in Soja 96), then the city streets that traverse and intersect across the urban landscape offer a microcosmic reflection of these larger sociopolitical issues. As such, the street offers a productive critical lens through which we can engage twentieth century multi-ethnic literatures of the United States and track how these texts specifically use the street to subvert and evade disciplining powers that

seek to contain, marginalize, and isolate particular populations. Yet, before diving into the nuances of why and how this takes place, it is important to note that, for the purposes of this project, the "street" is both physically and politically distinct from the "road." While both the "street" and the "road" function as "site[s] between sites", in the era of the automobile, the road is more often associated with long-distance travel and is symbolized by freeways and interstates that begin to decorate the landscape in the second half of the twentieth century (Alworth 80). Texts such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* pair the road with scenes of driving whereas street lit novels such as *City of Night* engage the street primarily on foot. Given that "road" connotes driving and speed more often than "street", I argue the "road" and freeway/highway are more interchangeable and, thus, will proceed from this point of reference.

The distinction between the street and the freeway/road is a particularly historically situated tension: while the road is celebrated for its liberating sense of mobility and a raw demonstration of technological innovation, the development of freeways and highways in the middle decades of the twentieth century completely transformed—and in many cases utterly destroyed—segments of cities in the United States. More specifically, in the middle decades of the twentieth century city officials and planners "reconceive[ed] the use of street space" (Golub 39) to make it more habitable to the increasing presence of automobile traffic. Urban sprawl, argues Edward Glaeser, is, in part, a result of cities transitioning from streets being dominated primarily by foot traffic to being dominated by cars (177). Foot traffic, he argues, kept cities fairly dense, but because cars require more space than the average pedestrian[23] the city's actual

[23] "Nine square feet of road space," Glaeser argues is enough for a pedestrian. A "modest sized car" by comparison "takes up about a hundred square feet on its own"—a number that does not take into account the amount of space it needs around and in front of it. This "fortyfold increase in space," he argues, "explains why so much of the land in car-based cities is given over to highways" (177).

topography was forced to change as roads were designed and built to accommodate the automobile; a process that ultimately results in making the streets and the pedestrians who use them more vulnerable in the city because they must now navigate roads designed for rush hour traffic and larger vehicles. This change in topography also includes the construction of freeways and highways that tore through the hearts of city neighborhoods, razing or permanently altering the geography and lives of established communities[24]. Philosopher Marshall Berman, for example, writes of his own personal experience encountering a "depopulated, economically depleted and emotionally shattered" former thriving neighborhood of "60,000 working- and lower-middle-class people" in the wake of the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway in New York (Berman 292).

There are also numerous examples illustrating the literary response to this historical tension[25], but Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* offers an especially compelling and unique example of a street lit text that productively plays with and interrogates this tension between the street and the road. Alternating between Los Angeles and Mazatlán Mexico the climax of the novel centers around the Harbor Freeway as disaster unfolds. While the novel's events are complex—among other things it "irreverently juggl[es] magical realism, film noir, hip hop, and chicanismo" (paratext)—the novel's treatment of the tension between the Harbor Freeway and the city streets it destroyed both physically and economically is helpful in

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[24] This targeted process is not new of course. Aaron Golub cites a lengthy history in which transportation planning of all forms—from public transit options to rezoning practices and freeway construction—erected "numerous barriers" that prevented minority and low-income communities from being able to participate in the conversation (40). "Even to this day," he argues, "regional transportation decision-making has been shown to be biased to favor the needs of whiter and more suburban jurisdictions" (40).

[25] While one could argue that the plot of any street lit text written after the 1950s is a direct result of this transition from cities being designed to accommodate pedestrians versus cars, examples of texts that at some point explore this tension between the street and the freeway include *City of Night* by John Rechy, *Run Man Run* by Chester Himes, *Howard Street* by Nathan Heard, and *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty. Post-apocalyptic city novels such as *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler also engage this tension albeit from the perspective of pedestrians taking over the massive freeways that were for so long dominated by cars.

illustrating the distinction between street and road for street literature. One of the novel's protagonists, Buzzworm, for example, is the self-appointed guardian of his neighborhood streets—a space crumbling with the weight of urban renewal programs that have sacrificed his neighborhoods in the name of modernity and progress. He often stares at the palm trees lining his neighborhood streets and realizes they are the only living things that can "see over the freeway" (32). An actual, physical barrier built to separate and isolate his neighborhood from the rest of the city, the Harbor Freeway allows motorists to "speed over the hood like the freeway was a giant bridge…you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever" (33). It is through the manifestation of the freeway that cities were able to literally and physically push marginalized groups out of the sightline of the dominant culture. The road, therefore, becomes a symbol of this isolation and exclusion.

Thus, the assumption that streets/roads are interchangeable and, in that interchangeability, share the same primary purpose—a space intended for cars—is not a "natural fact" but a "social invention secured to some extent by mass preference and by raw power" (Norton 21). A power, in this case, that is both physical—it is, obviously, unwise for a pedestrian to take on a moving vehicle[26]—and institutional. The "road" is, in essence, a product of "infrastructure investment programs through the New Deal [which] spent many times more on roads, highways, and bridges than on public transit systems" and the streets that surround them[27] (Golub 39). Over time this investment strategy led to "staggering differences in performance

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[26] The Governors Highway Safety Association recently released a report on the number of pedestrians that have been involved in traffic accidents in 2018. The number is staggering and is the highest it has been in 30 years: 6,227 pedestrian fatalities took place in 2018. This increase is due, in part, to "stretches of roads without crosswalks and people needing to walk on roads built for rush hour traffic." In the twenty-first century, this problem is compounded by the fact that drivers and pedestrians are also now mutually distracted by smartphones (Ellington).

[27] Urbanist Jeff Speck notes that in the middle decades of the twentieth century the United States invested "ninety cents on the dollar" for road building. Canada, by comparison, spent ten cents on the dollar (Speck 77).

between the road network and public transit services"—a reality which disproportionally affects the more public transit dependent working-class and a means of travel that requires more foot traffic (40). These investments and projects create a cultural shift that "casually disembowel" the productive potential of city streets and breaks them down "into loose sprawls, incoherent, and vacuous for anyone afoot" (Jacobs 354). This inability for the pedestrian to productively use the city streets results in a decline of the potentialities of this space in the larger cultural imagination.

Thus, in the wake of the development of the road, the city street comes to symbolize all that is "dingy, disorderly, sluggish, stagnant, worn-out, [and] obsolete" (Berman 317)—a cultural shift that further illustrates the tension between the "street" and the "road" for street lit. Contrary to this dominant cultural perception, however, street lit resists the impulse to ignore this seemingly obsolete space and instead engages the nuances of the street by confronting both its failings and its possibilities. For example, despite the city's plan in *Tropic of Orange* to enact "just a little freeway widening"—an act that initially devastates Buzzworm's neighborhood (82)—Buzzworm refuses to allow the streets to die. While the city promises the freeway widening project "wasn't gonna affect" his grandmother's house, the bureaucrats, he notes, have "time and paper on their side"; the process of tearing down houses, the old freeway ramp, and the overpass crossing the freeway ends up taking decades and "people forget what they got promised" (82). The constant construction "slow[s] down the foot traffic and the flow"… abandoned homes are left on purpose "for everyone to see. Use for illegal purposes. Pass drugs. House homeless" (83)—a process that contributes to the further decimation of his neighborhood in the minds of city officials and property owners alike. And yet, Buzzworm refuses to give his neighborhood and his streets over to the city and the monstrous freeway. He enacts a process of "self-gentrification" in which he employs a "do-it yourself gentrification …. Restore the

neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people" (83). Significantly, his desire to "clean up the streets" is less an echo of zero tolerance reform projects that sought to remove and further isolate those living on the margins of society, and more of a desire to reclaim his neighborhood from the blight the freeway—and, by extension, city officials—created. Thus, Buzzworm's refusal to give in to the pounding and roaring of the freeway nearby and instead invests his efforts on the crumbing streets in front of him illustrates how street literature's emphasis on the street—and not, explicitly, the road—seeks to, in part, reanimate and revitalize this rejected and worn out space in the cultural imagination.

As a more familiar, localized space, the street operates as an especially compelling lens because it also functions as simultaneously a space of contact and a space that can be used to enact subtle moments of escape and evasion against dominant systems of oppression. In particular, the act of walking becomes a tool for expressions of agency against disciplining effects imbued in urban space. Therefore, the street in the literature that comprises this archive plays a central and distinct role because it operates as a space of contact—and is most often characterized from the perspective of the pedestrian rather than the automobile—that facilitates the kind of productive collisions and confrontations that transform the city street into a space of dynamic potential and possibility and in so doing challenge the "controlling forces of homogenization" (Soja 99). While these "primal encounters" on the street may seem "unpurposeful and random," it is this kind of interaction that positions the city streets and sidewalks as the "most vital organs" of a thriving and vibrant city (Berman 165; Jacobs 72, 29). It is by walking the city streets and sidewalks that, as Michel de Certeau argues, pedestrians can disrupt discourses of urbanism that not only seek to design and rationalize how the consumer will use the city, but also operate as methods of containing and isolating various populations to

the margins of city life as a means of social control. Pedestrianism, in particular, contributes to the discursive, dynamic, and productive nature of the street—characteristics essential for artistic and creative production. After all, it was Georges Haussmann's nineteenth century Paris boulevard that, according to Baudelaire, operated as a source of constant creative material for artists, writers, painters, and photographers. The boulevard had this reputation in part because "for the first time in its history" it was now possible to walk through and amongst the various neighborhoods that had previously sectioned off the city, creating "a unified physical and human space" (Berman 151). While the original plans for the development of New York City lacked the "grand boulevards and parkways" of Paris, the corridors of the tightly compacted city facilitate the kind of productive and essential contact particular to Parisian boulevards, especially as the city's population dramatically increased at the turn of the twentieth century.

It was the immigration boom at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth century, in particular, that exemplified the kinds of interracial, interethnic, interclass contact possible on the streets of New York City. Between 1880 and 1920 more than 28 million people arrived in the United States[28], and by the early 1920s "half the nation's population was first-or second-generation immigrant" (Douglas 304). Facilitated in part by the "exceptionally broad" sidewalks on busy New York streets, pedestrian traffic—intent on

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[28] And this process continued throughout the twentieth century: the 1990s "saw more new immigrants enter the United States" than any other decade in the twentieth century creating the possibility for contact with individuals from around the globe. Many of the immigrants from the 1990s, for example, were from West Africa, making a living as street vendors in Harlem, Brooklyn, and lower Manhattan" (Stoller 9). While West African traders shared "informal vending space" around the city with a variety of ethnic and racial groups including "African Americans, Jamaicans, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Pakistanis, and Afghanis" (7), the highly compact open-air urban market at 125th street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem was dominated by West African traders and operated as a "transnational crossroads" in the city (14). The market's location on a public street corner facilitated an economically and socially productive contact with a variety of people: traders spoke with "shoppers in American English of varying degrees of sophistication, a lingo influenced by local African American idioms" and, amidst the "periodic lulls in trading", spoke with each other in "English, French, and a variety of West African languages" (14).

traversing the city, selling various wares, and/or seeking out adventure, all while interacting with one another—dominates city space (Sante 46). Shopkeepers around the city used the streets in an effort to be heard, "whether this meant to be respected and followed, to have their services engaged or their business patronized," the streets became a "riot of texts, [and] a forest of signs" with the intent of conveying advertisements, messages, and attracting various clientele throughout the city (Sante 55). This desire to use the street as a space to be heard also directly influenced the production of a new kind of literature at the turn of the twentieth century. The kinds of "primal encounters" this marketplace facilitated captured and reflected various literary and artistic artifacts from around the world. New York City, for example, with its influx of immigrants, quickly became an overcrowded metropolis, one in which artists, writers, and intellectuals from around the world came into contact with each other to create "remarkable new forms" of artistic production (Williams).

The ghetto pastoral, a product of this diverse contact, heralded "a new kind of city novel", one influenced by the naturalism of writers such as Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Frank Norris, but with a significant difference (Denning 250). This significant difference stemmed, in part, from the writers themselves: first or second-generation immigrants who sought to describe and capture urban, ghetto space in order to "write out from under the literary lineages that dominated narratives of the 'people'"(251). Chapter two will discuss in more detail how the ghetto pastoral, speaks back to the imperialist rhetoric of practitioners of the Chicago School of Sociology that position the ghetto as "primitive," and its inhabitants in need of civilizing and modernizing (Cappetti 15). The desire to "modernize" and "civilize" the American ghetto emerged as a response to the rapidly expanding early twentieth century American metropolis, and in an attempt to alleviate the "chaos" that accompanied this expansion, urban sociologists

sought to define and explain the ecological workings of ghetto space as a means to, according to Louis Wirth, "restrict and keep under control" the social dysfunction particular to deviant behaviors (Duneier 45). In doing so, the majority of these sociological studies focused not on individuals "but groups, social establishments and neighborhoods" (Vogel 10).

As the twentieth century progresses, the street's reputation—as a modern and dynamic space of contact—begins to change. Instead of celebrating the chaos of the street, its dangers become the dominant signifier. Whether this shift is out of "nostalgia for an outmoded past" or a "pernicious glorification of everything dangerous" it is in the name of safety the society proceeds to "dismantle the various institutions that promote" this kind of interclass, interracial communication and contact (Delany 122). While Haussmann's nineteenth century boulevard operated as a means to bring the poor out of their "ravaged neighborhoods" to discover what the "rest of the city" was like, late twentieth century Los Angeles operated as the antithesis of this idea and focused instead on containing the various "untouchables" who now have the capacity to wander (Davis 180). It is the rhetoric of safe streets and safety more generally that often motivates urban renewal projects and city planners to isolate, restrict, and segregate people, practices, and places that might interfere with the middle-class consumer's notion of safety. While urban renewal projects, such as the 1980s Forty-Second Street Development Project in New York City, use the rhetoric of safety and security, it is important to emphasize that this approach is ultimately less about personal safety, a word that again requires critical context and analysis, and more about cultivating a "degree of personal insulation, in residential, work, consumption and travel environments" from those deemed undesirable and "Other" (Davis 180).

This desire to secure the city from "undesirables" and "Others" has severely curtailed equal access to public spaces, including the city street, to such an extent that the line between

public and private has blurred[29]. With rising homeless populations in Los Angeles in particular, the city has established "pseduo-public spaces" for upscale areas of the city that, in the name of security and safety, are "full of invisible signs warning off the underclass 'Other' (180). The "barrel-shaped bus bench", for example, makes it impossible for homeless to sleep on them, sprinklers in Skid Row Park ensure that the public space cannot be used for overnight camping, and, as part of the downtown redevelopment, public toilets on Skid Row were bulldozed (363). Quasi-public toilets, located in private spaces such as museums, restaurants and office buildings, are available to tourists and white-collar workers, the demographic the city wants to draw back to the downtown (363). This deliberate "socio-spatial strategy" not only reinforces the segregation of Others in to various ghettos, but also operates as a method for making the street outside the all but cordoned off downtown area "unlivable as possible for the homeless and poor" (362). While it is not technically illegal to sleep on the streets according to city code, it is illegal to "erect any sort of protective shelter" (Davis 365). In response, police "periodically sweep" through the area "tearing down shelters, confiscating possessions, and arresting resisters" (365). Thus, while access to the public street is granted to the homeless it is, in this case, contingent on using the space in a particular, and acceptable manner—a vague and ambiguous enough term that it can be flexibly used to accommodate a variety of circumstances that may arise. Late twentieth century

[29] It should also be noted that the public/private binary is blurred socially as well. State seizure practices such as eminent domain, welfare and other social services, operate as methods of surveillance by which the private is made public. "An individual's acceptance of government benefits" argues Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body*, "is deemed to constitute a waiver of privacy … day to day decisions of family life remain vulnerable to state regulation" (227). Reformist impulses at the turn of the century periodically dropped by tenement dwellings to assess living conditions. Interestingly, reformers and social workers alike would also focus on aesthetics during these visits and "abhorred [the] aesthetic of proud display and cheap abundance" that characterized many tenement rooms, and prohibited the habit of taking on boarders to help cover the cost of rent because the idea of communal living harbored, among other issues, "association with communism" (Wright 127). Regardless of the rationale driving reformist impulses, the private dwellings of ghetto inhabitants were subject to public scrutiny as a means to help civilize and, in the case of immigrants, assimilate them to American culture. This patronizing process continues to be associated with the ghetto into the late twentieth century when welfare policies and reform function as a similar means to blur the line between public and private.

urbanity in the United States, then, focuses on the (re)segregation of the city as a means to limit the kind of productive contact that characterized the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that had the potential to unite the masses.

Yet, in the face of such violence, isolation, and exclusion the street is often reimagined as a space of power, agency, and resistance, and can extend beyond the field of literary reimagining. West African vendors at 125th street and Lenox Avenue[30] in Harlem in the 1990s, for example, resisted attempts by city officials to regulate, control, and shut down their "informal economy" of selling various wares on the street (Stoller 18). Ignoring city and state requirements to have vendor licenses—a process that is not only expensive and subjects the vendor to frequent inspection but also gives the state the power to regulate "one's right to perform a particular activity or to live and work in a given locality"—subverts and evades the authority of the state (101). By incorporating lookouts, transferring cash from a sale immediately to another location for safekeeping, or using attaché cases to sell fake Rolexes and other high-end watches, the vendors not only evade the disciplining order of city officials, but also "successfully coloniz[e] the sidewalks" of city space (90). Similarly, when faced with the Mayor Dinkin's orders to clean out and remove the illegal 125th street market, vendors banded together and shut down 125th street for the day, making this busy thoroughfare impossible for everyday use and forcing the mayor to back down out of fear of potential violence between police and

[30] Interestingly, Lenox Avenue and 125th street have been unofficially, or officially, depending on who you ask, changed to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Blvd respectively. While the Department of City Planning lists X and King as the official names for these streets, the postal service maintains Lenox and 125th as the "standardized address" (Pollack). The post office, however, will still recognize what it terms as various local "aliases" for streets. Furthermore, within the Harlem community, it is especially interesting to note that many West African immigrants, both recently arrived and those that have been here longer, use the 125th and Lenox designations (Belhumeur). Hence, the use of the ostensibly inaccurate street names by Stoller, which I have reproduced here as well. Regardless, the very notion of renaming streets and customizing them for individual reference and also use illustrates an element of resistance to the disciplining attempts of city officials to manage and control urban space.

vendors[31] (129). In co-opting the space of the street for an "informal economy" these vendors not only resist city officials attempts to control and manage the chaos of urban space by regulating the kinds of commerce allowed on public streets, but also remake the intended use of sidewalk space for their own purposes, and in doing so, resist urban methods of containment and control. Furthermore, while participation in an informal economy may make the vendors "seem mere pawns in the scheme of global economics, national politics, and local confrontation … they are quietly redefining the boundaries of urban economic and social practices" through their appropriation and use of city streets[32] (Stoller 9).

Street literature participates in a similar appropriation by reimagining the street as a space of play and an arena of confrontation rather than a space that merely contains, isolates, and segregates. Hebert Simmons's *Corner Boy* (1957), for example, celebrates the possibilities of the

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[31] Part of the driving force behind shutting down this market came from African American business owners—who already had a tense relationship with the West African traders who preferred to keep to themselves and didn't "contribute to community life,"—who were irritated by the disorganization and crowds associated with the markets and that took place directly outside of their businesses. Of course, when the 125th street market was official relocated to 116th and Lenox avenue, the business owners realized that they benefitted from the crowds and increased foot traffic the markets brought in, especially with regards to tourists.

[32] Urban environmental artist Tyree Guyton offers another example of how appropriating the city street showcases the paradoxical possibilities that can emerge from a street that is at once "public, private, [and] communal" through his art installation The Heidelberg Project. In 1986, Guyton claimed his neighborhood "street began to speak to [him]" and inspired him to develop a playful, "creative response to the ongoing blight and decay in the [Detroit] neighborhood in which he grew up": a once thriving working-class community that became, the in the wake of, among other issues, urban renewal projects and deindustrialization, a "community characterized by violence, racism, abandonment, despair and poverty" (The HP). In reclaiming "this negative space" of the "worn-out" street as his foundation and inspiration, Guyton "transformed the street into a massive art environment"; he uses "vacant houses and lots … the street, sidewalks and trees" all as part of his "mammoth installation" (The HP). Colorful, circular dots decorate the street and sidewalk, shoes, discarded toys, and various cardboard cutouts of television sets, taxicabs, and dozens of clocks with spinning hands decorate the houses, yards, and fences of the neighborhood. Despite the fact that that the city demolished several houses in 1991 and 1999, even though there was a "blacklog of thousands of abandoned structures" (Che 33) scattered throughout the city, Guyton, remains resilient and refuses to accept a narrative of blight and despair as the dominant characteristics of the street and his segregated neighborhood. As the third most visited cultural site in Detroit, his art not only encourages viewers to think critically about "problems such as blight, abandonment, homelessness, drugs, racism, and child abuse" (Che 33), but also the possibilities that can emerge from within a neighborhood ignored and all but forgotten by city leaders. This project, he writes, is all about "transforming the quality of life in a neighborhood through human interaction and affinity", illustrating, once again, how facilitating opportunities for contact has the power to transform and return a sense of vibrant and dynamic possibility to city streets.

streets of a black ghetto in an unnamed American city from the perspective of a young and wealthy drug dealer. In the novel, Welch Street—which "[comes] to life" every night—consists of "blocks of night clubs and taverns [that] neon-lighted a message of pleasure and spoke their charms, with blaring music and the shuffle of stimulated voices. Women of the night went to their stations at the bar stools. Caldonia's crowd offered five, ten, fifteen. Welch Street was a nauseated volcano erupting people" (19). While this description of Welch Street, with its emphasis on the various "neon-lighted" temptations of alcohol and prostitution, has the potential of being read as the various means by which "black despair" (Murray 41) is assuaged, the characters in the novel are positioned as choosing to consume these pleasures as a means to pursue and celebrate desire, pleasure, and play. By reimagining the street as space that is "continuously negotiated and renegotiated," the narrative posits the possibility of the "dynamics of confrontation" rather than the "mechanics of withdrawal, escape, and relief" (57). Playing with the possibilities that exist within this space does not deny the existence of the oppressive circumstances governing many of these neighborhoods, of course, but functions instead as way to open up alternative methods for conceptualizing, imagining, and discussing ghetto space.

The ways in which street lit narratives do this, of course, varies. As the subsequent chapters will explore, authors such as Mike Gold and Sister Souljah depend on a more didactic tone to warn and educate readers about the dangers and the injustices of the ghetto street. The act of strolling city streets becomes, for authors such as Chester Himes and Anzia Yezierska, a method by which the streets, and by extension the city, are made to suit the purposes, needs, pleasures, and desires of the character; it is an act that centers the agency of a the individual as a method of resistance to and evasion of systems of power embedded in the architectural layout of city space. But perhaps most interesting is the turn to the absurd as a philosophy and aesthetic

suitable for revolting against the racist and oppressive circumstances that create and maintain 20th century American ghettos. While I will discuss this in more detail in chapter three, for authors such as Chester Himes philosophies of the absurd are especially suited for not only characterizing the drama, danger, and violence of the ghetto street, but also for exploring the possibilities of agency and rebellion, possibilities not often attributed to this particular space, that exist in such highly controlled and oppressive environments, and as such operate as controversial rhetorics that explore how this manifests. The tension between literature and sociology most clearly delineates this controversy and is of key interest for this project.

The Rhetorics of Literature vs Sociology

In her analysis of the relationship between early twentieth century Chicago urban literature and Chicago School of Sociology, Carla Cappetti argues sociology's main goal in the first few decades of the twentieth century was to gather "knowledge of the group for the purpose of social control" (31). For urban sociologists, the chaos of a rapidly expanding metropolis made this goal particularly relevant and important. And their methodologies, derived from an urbanist discourse that depended on the principles of a rationalized, planned, and definitive approach to the city, is best symbolized by turn of the century technological innovation of the skyscraper. After all, from the top of a skyscraper one can "see the city;" from this vantage point, the city's complexity appears readable, and the bustling, chaotic crowds on the street appear momentarily immobilized, making it possible to impose a sense of order that can be replicated at the ground level (de Certeau 92). It is from this bird's eye view that the urban sociologist attempts to create a map of the city that can then be used to create a narrative of the city, one that uses different categories and explanations to various sections of the city. The ghettos, for example, exist on the margins of this metaphorical map because, according to Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth and Robert

Park of the Chicago School of Sociology, ghettos naturally attract those who exist on the margins of society, or the "naturally deviant" (Cappetti 44).

Once one descends from the skyscraper and walks the streets below, however, the determinism of the urban sociologist perspective breaks down: the "opaque mobility" of the pedestrian alters, transforms, and moves about the methods of control that appeared stable and immobile from above (Brown 92). Thus, it is from the pedestrian perspective of the city that the individual can assert authority and agency in the face of these disciplining forces. And it is from this particular perspective—that of the local, the insider, the pedestrian—that multi-ethnic street literature, in particular, narrates the city and the space of the street. These literary representations of the street are unique in that they not only account for the social and historical influences of the street, but also emphasize the influence of the spatial. Thus, this particular attention to the street aligns with what geographer Edward Soja refers to as a socio-spatial dialectic: an understanding that spatiality is at once a "social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life" (7). It is because the literary represents the street as both an outcome and medium for social life that it is able to account for and return a particular dynamism and vibrancy to the city street; one that positions the street as interpretive and alterable, rather than the stable and fixed representation particular to urban sociology. Importantly, in focusing on the literary, I am not interested in accounting for or determining the literary value or merit of a text based on disciplinary or canonical standards[33]--standards that tend to focus on questions of form, aesthetic, or style. Instead, I am more interested in what a literary representation—broadly defined as incorporating some aspect of a storytelling perspective—of urban space offers that an urban

[33] Contrary to James Baldwin, for example, protest novels, pulp, and heavily didactic fiction make up a significant portion of this archive and are considered literary for the purposes of this archive.

sociological perspective[34]--broadly defined as describing and explaining the cause of various social phenomena through empirical investigation—does not.

To a certain extent, investigating the nuances of the interdisciplinarity of this relationship is not new. Literary critics Carla Cappetti and David Alworth, for example, have argued for recognizing the interdependency of the two disciplines. For Cappetti, this interdependency allows her to reclaim the value and merit of fictional texts deemed too overtly sociological to be considered literary. Cappetti, for example, argues that Chicago urban literature of the first half of the twentieth century both used and spoke back to sociological attempts to position the urban slum as marginal and the "natural environment for the naturally deviant" (44). It was by reading sociological narratives that authors such as Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, and J.T. Farrell understood urban geography, immigration, and a sociological understanding of deviancy. Yet, instead of furthering this narrative, these authors transcended the "post-Darwinian biological and social determinism" particular to naturalist writers before them and early twentieth century sociology and produced characters that were not "helpless victims of heredity and the environment" but were instead "active historical and existential subject[s]" (106). Because early twentieth century Chicago urban sociologists also pulled from literary texts, such as autobiographies, memoirs, and journals, Cappetti argues the fundamental "epistemological and disciplinary distinctions" between literature and sociology were blurred (19). As a result of this line of argument, Cappetti underscores the complexity and nuance of the individual subject that

[34] Louis Wirth, for example, argues "the sociological approach to the city thus acquires an essential unity and coherence enabling the empirical investigator not merely to focus more distinctly upon the problems and processes that properly fall in his province but also to treat his subject matter in a more integrated and systematic fashion" (95).

literature, specifically the novel, facilitates[35]. In doing so, Cappetti not only makes a subtle case for the literary possibilities attributed to these pulp texts, but also emphasizes the productive, reciprocal relationship between early twentieth century Chicago urban literature and sociology.

For Alworth, emphasizing the connection between the two disciplines is less about asserting the value of forgotten or maligned literary texts and more about collapsing, to a certain extent, the distinction between the disciplines at all. Approaching literature "not only [as] a primary source, but also a conceptual source" allows, he argues, for a theorizing and understanding of the social, comparative to the discipline of sociology itself (24). By analyzing the sites or settings in literary works one can "scrutinize an assemblage of humans and nonhumans in the story world with an eye on how the interaction of such figures simultaneously models and theorizes social experience" (19). Working from a methodology directly inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, Alworth's reading of the novel as an "acute instrument of sociological thought" disregards, to a certain extent, any investigations into what the literary, as a from unto itself, contributes to representations of social space. Collapsing the disciplines into a hybrid of the two—a "radically literary sociology,"—risks overlooking the implicit and explicit racism that influences urban sociology and contributes to the fraught relationship between sociology and multi-ethnic street literature in particular.

While I will address street lit's disdain for sociological narratives in more detail in chapter three, it is important to note for now that part of this distrust, and, blatant dislike, for sociology in street lit has to do, in part, with what Albert Murray describes as sociology's reinforcement of "the cultural folklore of white supremacy and black degradation (37). He cites

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[35] In his analysis of naturalism and its continued influence on urban fiction, James Giles argues something similar as well: twentieth century naturalism is distinct from the late nineteenth century of naturalist authors like Stephen Crane in its ability to humanize the "inhabitants of America's urban ghettos" (190).

the 1965 Moynihan Report as an example that illustrates "the stuff of which the folklore of white supremacy is made, and providing such stuff is the role that the social science technicians and theorists all too often play in the extension of black degradation through the systematic oversimplification of black tribulations" (31). Because the street operates as a racialized space—after all, it is designed, argues architect J. Yolande Daniels, to "harbor the 'dark,'"—in the cultural, political and social imagination (215), sociology's impulse to overgeneralize and oversimplify produces a profound disdain for sociological diagnosis for many street lit authors, but especially middle of the twentieth century black street lit. Author Nathan Heard, for example, overtly critiques sociological methods in his novel *Howard Street*. Set in the ghetto of Newark, New Jersey, one of the novel's characters is described as having taken "freshman sociology at Rutgers and he knew the reasons behind everyone's vice … he knew it was because they were stymied by the complexity of the white power structure and because they were also stupid" (54). As a result of this tongue-in-cheek commentary, Heard's novel challenges the value of sociology as a discipline that can productively account for the ghetto space in particular while simultaneously positioning the literary form as a method more suited to capturing the nuances and complexities, of ghetto space.

Of course, exploring what it is that the literary offers that sociology does not, I am aware of the lengthy and complex relationship between sociology and American literature, especially texts written by black Americans. And while I am not interested in replicating the dichotomy James Baldwin asserts exist between literature and sociology, his insistence that "literature and sociology are not one and the same [and] it is impossible to discuss them as if they were" is an essential theoretical perspective moving forward (31). For Baldwin, sociological objectives simplify and deny the complexity of the human experience because it is a discipline that seeks to

categorize human beings into various racial, classed, and sexual categories. Any text, such as the protest novel, that aligns too closely with these objectives cannot, in his estimation, be considered literature. The failure of the protest novel in particular he argues, "lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended" (33). As such, sociology's desire to explain, rather than embrace, the ambiguity and paradox of the human condition—including, for example, how choice manifests in seemingly oppressive circumstances—makes it an especially poor method for not only capturing the human condition and experience, but also for capturing the dynamism of the city street. And it is literature's affiliation with ambiguity and paradox that makes it especially suited for rethinking the productive potential of space. That said, before I address in more detail what it is that the literary offers in particular, I want to broadly discuss the disciplinary goals of urban sociology and how that has contributed to the tension between literature and sociology over the course of the twentieth century; a tension that has been the subject of numerous academic debates and conversation over the course of the twentieth century.[36]

Broadly speaking, urban sociology, particularly ethnographic studies, seeks to provide an accurate and factual representation of an object of study in order to construct a social explanation for its various idiosyncrasies. Of course, sociological narratives can blur the line of these somewhat rigid disciplinary distinctions[37], but it is the general adherence to explaining and

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[36] See, for example, David Alworth, Carla Cappetti, Roderick Ferguson, Bruno Latour, Sean McCann, and Shane Vogel, among others.

[37] See Alice Goffman's *On the Run*—a study whose methodology has been accused of not adhering to ethical ethnographic practices which includes fabricated or dramatizing certain events for effect and becoming a participant in the lives of her subjects (driving the getaway car in the hunt for a subject's murderer, for example). Zora Neale Hurston's autoethnographic work also plays with disciplinary (anthropological ethnography vs literary) boundaries in compelling and intriguing ways.

rationalizing the social and historical reasons for a particular object of study that distinguishes it from the street literature I examine. More specifically, in his discussion of Actor-Network-Theory, Bruno Latour critiques contemporary sociology, what he terms the sociology of the social, for this very adherence: "when sociologists of the social pronounce the words 'society', 'power', 'structure' and 'context', they often jump straight ahead to connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing interactions … to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings" (22). It is because of this desire to "impose a sense of order" and insist on teaching or explaining to subjects "what they are" that sociology is limited in its representations of the street. The mobilization of "gigantic forces" often means adhering to a traditional or academically sanctioned way of knowing and making sense of the world. This includes a spatial perspective that assumes that various spaces, especially the street, operates as a stable backdrop upon which various societal classifications and hierarchies play out, which prevents the possibility of conceptualizing space as a dynamic product of the various raced, classed, and gendered perspectives governing society, and is something that can be altered, transformed, or manipulated (McKittrick).

Published at the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work *The Philadelphia Negro* is one of the earliest examples of a statistically based sociological study, and one dependent on a traditional understanding of space. On page one, Du Bois asserts that he wanted to "ascertain something of the geographical distribution" of the "more than forty thousand people of Negro blood now living in the city of Philadelphia" (1). With its emphasis on

the geography of the city, Du Bois and later urban sociologists can certainly be read as a participating in constructing a narrative of the street. Yet, his explicit desire to produce a "safe guide for all efforts toward the solution of the many Negro problems of a great American city" (1), indicates an important distinction between the goals of urban sociology and the street literature that makes up my archive. The chapter entitled, "The Environment of the Negro," for example, analyzes the segregation efforts of the city to contain Black bodies "into narrow courts and alleys", and accounts for and explains the circumstances that, in Du Bois's mind, produces the "wards with the best [and worst] Negro populations" (302). And it is this insistence to identify and distinguish a "submerged tenth" from the "talented tenth" and the "respectable working class" from the "poor" that illustrates Du Bois's and, broadly speaking, sociology's impetus to categorize and define[38]. By linking social influence to particular urban spaces, such as the street, Du Bois's text suggests those who inhabit the street are explicitly defined by their affiliation with the space: "The criminals and gamblers," he asserts, "are to be found at such centres as Seventh and Lombard streets, Seventeenth and Lombard, Twelfth and Kater, Eighteenth and Naudain etc" (311). And yet, it is this sociological "method of mapping" (Vogel 139), that stabilizes the dynamic potential of the street, a potential the literary seizes upon and seeks to destabilize.

As I mentioned previously, in addition to the social and/or historical perspective sociology often takes to the street, the literature I examine incorporates a third perspective: the spatial. In doing so, literary representations of the street are capable of engaging the space of the

[38] Of course, it should also be noted that Du Bois's attempt to assert this kind of difference amongst different classes of black Americans was done as a means to not only challenge the homogeneity that often characterized black Americans in white society but also clearly articulate his distance from the "thugs, and whoremongers and gamblers of Seventh and Lombard streets" (310). "Nothing more exasperates the better class of Negroes," he writes, "than this tendency to ignore utterly their existence" (310).

street as more than an "empty void" or backdrop for the various escapades of the novel's characters. Traditionally, urban sociological narratives position space, and in this particular case the space of the street, as "a kind of fixed background, a physically formed environment that, to be sure, has some influence on our lives but remains external to the social world" (Soja 2). Because the literary resists this notion and instead incorporates a more dynamic and influential understanding of space, authors can produce a deeper engagement and exploration with the idea that space, particularly the city street, is "always filled with politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives" (19). By incorporating a spatial, social and historical perspective street lit uses "three dynamically interactive and equivalent lenses" to better understand, theorize, and represent the street (18). For Soja, this perspective is not only essential for any social justice project, but can also "open up new sources of insight and innovative practical and theoretical applications" (4) for a variety of disciplines including literature. For the purposes of my project, then, it is the combination of a critical spatial perspective with the literary that creates openings for "envisioning an interpretive, alterable world, rather than a transparent and knowable world," one dependent on a fixed understanding of space and the various hierarchies embedded within it (McKittrick xiii).

And it is through these alterable and interpretative representations of the street that subversive forms of agency can emerge. Rhetorics of choice, in particular, emerge as a subversive and seemingly paradoxical—given the oppressive environment in which these narratives are set—expression of agency[39]. That said, I recognize that in arguing for the importance of reading how performances of choice manifest in these novels, I risk aligning my

[39] In addition to the novels I discuss as part of this dissertation, see the following texts for examples of narratives that explicitly engage this rhetoric: *Howard Street* by Nathan Heard, *The Scene* by Clarence Cooper Jr., *Pimp: The Story of my Life* by Iceberg Slim, *Oreo* by Fran Ross, *City of Night* by John Rechy, *Burn* by Black Artemis, *Let That Be the Reason* by Vickie Stringer, *Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie, and *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi.

work with socially conservative ideologies that often manifest through violent political policies of past presidents such as Ronald Regan and Bill Clinton—Clinton's welfare reform law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, in particular, stigmatized and penalized black women through the very rhetoric of choice and "personal responsibility." And yet, as Ta-Neshi Coates notes rhetoric of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and pulling-oneself-up by their metaphorical bootstraps plays well in "black barbershops, churches, and backyard barbecues" (19). While this kind of rhetoric is interpreted by many academics and radical liberals—many of them white—as attacking and blaming the disenfranchised for what are, in reality, the faults of an unjust and corrupt system, Coates suggests that with this kind of rhetoric "much of Black America" hears instead "the possibility of changing their communities without having to wait on the consciences and attention span of policy makers who might not have their interests at heart" (19). Self-reliance and by extension choice, then, are, in a sense, co-opted and manifest in this literature as rhetorics that help facilitate reimaginings that imbue oppressive spaces—like the street—with possibilities for agency and choice.

Of course, this argument regarding the possibility of choice is by no means new, though, arguably, reading for these arguments in literary texts still remains somewhat radical[40]. Writers

[40] The prevalence of neoliberalism as an ideology of critique compounds the controversy of reading for choice in these texts. Jane Elliott, for example, argues neoliberal governance and rhetoric dominates a subject into suffering agency—a reality in which the oppressive conditions surrounding a performance or negotiation of "leads to limit-case decisions and deeds that would be otherwise unthinkable" (89). Furthermore, because legitimate subjecthood, as recognized by the neoliberal state, is predicated on embodying and performing the status of "citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' (Brown 694), the ideal neoliberal citizen reflects and supports the free market rhetoric of and supposedly egalitarian ideologies of neoliberalism by not only taking care of themselves, but also assuming responsibility for the choices they make (Brown 695). This rhetoric results "new privileged and stigmatized forms of humanity… as a discourse to justify inequality for some as fair or natural" (Melamed 14). The "privileged forms of humanity," therefore, represent a position of legitimate subjecthood derived from their capacity to autonomously choose, while the "stigmatized forms of humanity" are marginalized as a result of their dependence on the state. While I don't disagree with any of these claims, ignoring or overlooking the ways in which choice and agency manifest in these texts, even though their circumstances suggest otherwise, at best limits our capacity to fully engage with these cultural products and at worst risks furthering this narrative of victimization Murray, Himes, Reid-Pharr and others suggest.

from Franz Fanon to Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison to James Baldwin, for example, tend to be cited and referenced more for their arguments on race and oppression than for how these arguments connect to and derive from existentialist philosophies of choice and free will. Their interrogation of the possibilities existentialism and the rhetoric of choice offers, however, is substantial and significant. As I will argue in more detail in chapter three, the presence of existentialist and absurdist philosophies in street lit are, in large part, an expression of a desire to reject narratives of victimization. And this desire to reject victimization stems in part from the rationalizations perpetuated by the discipline of sociology. Albert Murray argues that sociological studies are especially problematic because they depart from the assumption that, as a result of the historical legacy of slavery, black Americans are perpetual victims. This perpetual victimhood, he asserts, situates black Americans as "inferior to other Americans" —a rationalization that ultimately furthers the "folklore of white supremacy" because it positions black Americans so "far outside the mainstream of American culture" they are dehumanized and stripped of any sort of agency (36, 59). Existentialist philosophy—through its very emphasis on choice—confronts the impulse to pacify, obscure and deny the "ugly dimensions of human nature" by attributing responsibility, and by extension agency, to the individual (58).

Crucially, rejecting a narrative of victimization does not mean a rejection of the reality of the larger systemic and institutionalized modes of racism, discrimination and oppression that permeate the United States socially, culturally, politically, and economically. Instead, the rejection of victimization and the celebration of choice in these novels challenges the sociological impulse whose disciplinary methods and procedures results in the repeated generalization and stereotyping of entire groups. Street lit's emphasis on choice dramatizes what Robert Reid-Pharr describes as the "radical potentialities embedded within the very practices of

choice" (8). If, as Reid-Pharr asserts, traditional approaches to Black American narratives, whether it be fictional, historical, or sociological, often depend on positioning the Black American as "not *American* at all but instead as a presumably African captive, waiting for rescue or liberation," then an emphasis on choice certainly affords radical potentialities that include rejecting narratives of victimization in favor of having "the ability to choose, to move if you will, even if not within conditions of their own making" (19, 7). This emphasis on the possibility of choice existing even in "conditions not of their own making" suggests choice can exist on the city streets of these novels even as the violence, poverty, and inequality the space magnifies oppresses and limits the possibilities available to its characters. Thus, this emphasis on the possibility choice is by no means a liberatory or revolutionary rhetoric, but it does return a sense of control over narratives emerging from this space.

Ultimately, this project argues that street literature uses rhetorics of choice and movement—in particular walking the city street—as a means to perform the possibility of agency within the oppressive realities the street exudes. While the street may oppress and curtail the life chances of many of the characters, this seemingly knowable reality is transformed and critiqued in many of these narratives to account for possibilities that can emerge out of hopelessness, meaninglessness and despair. As a space that is both real and imagined, the streets in these narratives have a "strategic flexibility in dealing with multiple forms of oppression and inequality" (Soja 11), one that includes thematics of resistance, desperation, pleasure, and possibility. Much of street literature, for example, often deliberately reworks urban sociological narratives that position ghetto space as naturally characterized by blight, despair, and apathy by accounting for the agency, self-determination, and possibility that exists simultaneously within and amongst the despair and blight, a representation that transforms the possibilities inherent to

the street. Thus, the emphasis on the street in these novels not only accounts for urban processes that use the built environment to create a "persistent geography of dependent development, cultural domination, and efficient economic exploitation" (Soja 18, 40), but also street literature's use of the city street to stage dramatic storylines and encounters as a means to gain "greater control over the forces shaping urban space" and, as Henri Lefebvre argues, fight for their right to the city (qtd in Soja 96). The specific nuances of how this argument will be made will unfold through the following chapters.

My first chapter will continue the historicization of the street I've started here and attempt to account for the variety of texts included in the street literature archive I've assembled for this project. In order to provide the historical, social and spatial context required to fully engage the arguments made in later chapters, I explicitly interrogate the relationship between the material history of the street and its literary identity. In particular, I examine the range of street literature responses—from Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* and Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*, to Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* and Odie Hawkins's *Ghetto Sketches*—to three key moments that significantly shape the materiality, composition, and structure of the ghetto street: the construction and maintenance of immigrant ghettoes in the first few decades of the twentieth century; the sustained segregation of American cities, achieved primarily through government programs such as the Public Works Association and the US Housing Authority; and the urban renewal efforts of the 1950s and 1960s that permanently and dramatically altered the urban landscape.

My second chapter explores the first half of the twentieth century with particular attention to the first couple of decades and the impact of modernist thinking on the development of street literature. I examine how the ghetto pastoral, and in particular Anzia Yezierska's 1925

novel *Bread Givers,* participates in the Modernist movement. The desire to "modernize" and "civilize" the American ghetto emerges at this historical moment as a response to the rapidly expanding early twentieth century American metropolis, and in an attempt to alleviate the "chaos" that accompanied this expansion, urban sociologists sought to define and explain the ecological workings of ghetto space. In doing so, the majority of these sociological studies focused not on individuals "but groups, social establishments and neighborhoods" (Vogel 10). I argue *Bread Givers* speaks back to the imperialist rhetoric of practitioners of the Chicago School of Sociology that position the ghetto as "primitive," and its inhabitants in need of civilizing and modernizing (Cappetti 15) through the text's insistence on movement and the protagonist's ability to wander the city freely. I suggest this freedom of movement facilitates performances of choice that, in this case, disrupts and breaks away from the disciplining discourses that claim to determine who has access to and what constitutes twentieth century expressions of modernity. Furthermore, I read the protagonist's movement through the city as a deliberate rewriting of the *flâneur*—a figure and privilege of movement traditionally associated with white, European bourgeois men—as a means to assert her affiliation with modernity while simultaneously attributing a sense of vitality and possibility to the city street.

My third chapter continues this preoccupation with wandering and choice and adds an explicit engagement with how existentialist and absurdist theories emerge in mid-twentieth century black American street lit. Partially as a response to the disastrous effects of urban renewal projects in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the street becomes the ideal space for dramatizing and engaging the absurd and its attendant philosophies. The prevalence of the absurd at this historical moment is significant as it represents a break with traditional representations of black Americans in cultural products in which a character, as with Richard

Wright's Bigger Thomas, is positioned as victim. In order to "break through the barrier" that labeled him a "protest writer", for example, Chester Himes argues that the absurd enables black American authors to craft "another image," one that emphasizes that black Americans are "more than just victims" (36). Therefore, this chapter argues Himes's absurd street functions as a "defense mechanism" (*My Life of Absurdity* 30) against narratives that position inhabitants as victims trapped within the city's ghettos and instead explores how movement generates agency even in highly oppressive circumstances. I read Chester Himes's 1963 novel *Run Man Run* as working within and manipulating key characteristics of the hardboiled detective genre further functions as a means to critique not only the racist underpinnings of the genre, but also to reclaim the city—a space that so often relegates, both literary and figuratively, people of color to its margins

I conclude with a brief discussion of Sister Souljah's iconic novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* and connect themes of choice and movement to the didactic tone characteristics of much of black ghetto fiction. I also provide a brief description of twenty-first century iterations of street lit as a means to gesture to where and how the literary category continues to develop. Interestingly, twenty-first century urbanism in the United States and around the world is marked by a tangible concern in returning a sense of vibrancy to city streets and reclaiming this space for the pedestrian. While the history of urban renewal reveals that processes of urban revitalization often target the removal and further marginalization of those who currently make use of a space largely ignored or forgotten by the dominant culture and who are, more often than not, deemed Other in some capacity, this interest on the part of urban planners reflects a respect and recognition of the possibilities the space of the street affords that, as my project will demonstrate, authors of twentieth century street lit, have been articulating for more than a century.

Charting a Literary History of the Twentieth Century Street

From Mexico City to Indianapolis, and Paris to Berlin, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's street art series "Stop Telling Women to Smile" boldly reclaims the street for women who have been victims of street harassment. For Fazlalizadeh reclaiming the street means more than simply adding art to city streets and sidewalks. For this particular series, she explicitly chooses to draw defiant portraits of women who have encountered street harassment on the very streets where she chooses to display her art. Because of this, the portraits—affixed with wheatpaste and lined up one after the other in such a lengthy succession that they can, at times, stretch an entire city block—challenge the harassers who continue to freely walk those streets. Phrases such as "I am not here for you," "harassing women does not prove your masculinity" and "do the work to unlearn your sexism" challenge the many passersby as the phrases hover beneath the steadfast stares of the women.

In Detroit, urban environmental artist Tyree Guyton responded to the "ongoing blight and decay in the neighborhood in which he grew up" by transforming his neighborhood street "into a massive art environment" (The HP): Colorful, circular dots decorate the street and sidewalk, shoes, discarded toys, and various cardboard cutouts of television sets, taxicabs, and dozens of clocks with spinning hands decorate the abandoned houses, empty, overgrown yards, and decrepit fences of the neighborhood. As the third most visited cultural site in Detroit, his art is celebrated by residents and visitors alike. This project, he writes, is all about "transforming the quality of life in a neighborhood through human interaction and affinity"; a process that simultaneously transforms and returns a sense of vibrant and dynamic possibility to his neighborhood streets.

In Seattle, local bus drive Nathan Vass writes of his experiences driving the 7/49 combination—a route that stretches the length of the city—from North Seattle to Rainier Valley[1] and captures the dramatic socioeconomic differences and subsequent segregation embedded in the geographical layout of a city that is celebrated for its progressive reputation. The nonfiction vignettes in *The Lines That Make Us* coalesce around the dynamic potential of the city street: a space Vass sees as a "rotating pulse, of endless ongoing life" that generates and tells "a thousand stories, elated, pathetic, tragic, energized" (68).

In New York, Brandon Stanton takes pictures of individuals he encounters while walking the streets of New York City. His photography project seeks to "create an exhaustive catalogue of the city's inhabitants" and create a platform to tell the city's stories through the experiences of its inhabitants. Now an explosively popular social-media account, "Humans of New York" continues to walk the city streets of New York and provide a worldwide audience with "daily glimpses into the lives of strangers on the streets of New York City." Each post celebrates this kind of unregulated contact the city streets provide as the photos center an individual in the midst of an urban environment—public transportation stations, city parks and streets—and a brief caption that provides a snapshot into their lives.

As these examples clearly illustrate, the street is a ubiquitous, dynamic, and flexible space in our cultural imagination. And while there are countless other examples of artists, musicians, photographers, fashion designers, and entertainers making use of the street as a central component of their work, I begin with descriptions of the four popular culture examples above because each piece not only showcases the nuance and complexity of the chaos, vibrancy,

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[1] In 2010, Columbia City was designated as the most diverse zip code in the United States. According to the Seattle Times, the neighborhood boasted 59 different languages—"Chinese to Somali, Spanish to Vietnamese, Tagalog to Khmer."

and possibility that the public space of the street inspires, but in so doing also seeks to reclaim this space from competing narratives and uses. What is being reclaimed varies from project to project, of course: in choosing to draw the faces of local women who have experienced harassment on the streets where she plans display the posters, for example, Fazlalizadeh's project reclaims the ability to walk the street free of sexual objectification and harassment. Guyton's project, on the other hand, remains resilient in the face of city officials who demolished several of his art houses in 1991 and 1999—even though there was a "blacklog of thousands of abandoned structures" (Che 33) scattered throughout the city—citing safety concerns. Guyton continues to remake his neighborhood with colorful dots, whimsical colors, and repurposed, discarded items as a means to refuses the narrative that his neighborhood is defined by blight and despair. These cultural artifacts seek to not only imbue the city street with complexity and vibrancy but also, in the process, reclaim it from narratives that oppress or limit this complexity—an approach that can be traced back to early twentieth century street literature. As I have suggested previously, texts that fall within this literary category do more than simply use the city or urban space for its setting and instead incorporate the city and its streets as character in their own right—a process which allows for a more dynamic representation of and engagement with the nuances of this space.

Take, for example, Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* An iconic text, *Jews Without Money* was popular and successful enough upon its 1930 publication that it, in many ways, heralded the creation of the ghetto pastoral—a twentieth century iteration of urban fiction that offers new methods by which the street and ghetto space are explored and represented and for this reason includes, as Michael Denning suggests, some of "the most powerful works in American literature" (231). In this novel, the East Side streets of New York City, much like the

streets in the range of examples above, are spaces of ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox. And part of this contradiction emerges from Gold's celebration of the beauty particular to his city's violent and oppressive streets. Gold's streets, for example, harbor a "crazy mingling of races and religions", facilitate "eternal war", and offer comfort for the protagonist, Mikey, and his sister when, on especially hot summer nights, they lay their "bedding on the sidewalk before our tenement" and "[sleep] in the street" (42, 141). While the idea of sleeping in the street might seem oppressive or downright immoral to some[2], Mikey reflects on this memory with nostalgia. It is through snippets such as these that Gold's narrative asserts the radical, vibrant potential that derives from engaging the "contradictory possibilities" of the city street (Daniels 216)—contradictory possibilities that include the possibility that, as urbanist William Whyte points out, while "it is often assumed that children play in the streets for lack of playgrounds … many children play in the street because they like to" (103). Through this characterization of the street as a space of fear and refuge, of violence and community, Gold celebrates, critiques, and reimagines the creative possibilities of the twentieth century urban street in the United States (174). Because street literature embraces contradiction and ambiguity it is often in tension with culturally dominant narratives of the city, ones that derive, in part, from urban planning and design, and are later implemented by city officials. But it a result of this tension, I argue, that

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[2] By the end of the nineteenth century, increases in immigration, advances in technology, industry, and entertainment, and the fast-paced nature of urban living contributed to a dominant cultural narrative that imagined the city, particularly its streets, as spaces of excitement, immorality, temptation, and corruption, a space where private "desire[s] and destructive passion[s]" were pursued[2] (McCann 129). It was this potential for immorality that led housing reformers at the turn of the century to associate the street with uncivilized behavior to such an extent that the street habit—the "bustling activity on front stoops, sidewalks, and back alleys"—became a target for reform and critique (Wright 125). But, as I mentioned previously, because the viewpoint of many housing reformers focused only on the vice, unpredictability, and licentiousness associated with the street, they disregarded or were unable to recognize how the streets, stoops, and sidewalks contributed to and maintained important familial, communal, and other social networks.

street literature offers an especially compelling lens for engaging the materiality, composition, and structure of the American city.

Because the historical and literary identity of the street are deeply intertwined, this first chapter seeks to account for the socio-spatial aspects of this identity by charting a literary history of the twentieth century street. I recognize it is ambitious to account for this rich and complex history within the framework of a single chapter, but I do so because in many respects this project demands a grounding in this extensive history before developing the ideas further with more specific detail in subsequent chapters. To help structure and focus this undertaking, I examine the range of street literature responses to three historical moments that significantly shape the materiality, composition, and structure of the ghetto street: the construction and maintenance of immigrant ghettoes in the first few decades of the twentieth century; the sustained segregation of American cities, achieved primarily through government programs such as the Public Works Association and the US Housing Authority; and the urban renewal efforts of the 1950s and 1960s that permanently and dramatically altered the urban landscape. I focus on the streets particular to four cities, New York, Chicago, Oakland, and Los Angeles to compare and contrast how certain street narratives take up the space of the street in the wake of these historical realities. While much of this chapter discusses the city street and urban space broadly, I focus on these cities in particular because they serve as compelling examples that illustrate the complexities and nuances of individual cities, complexities that can be overlooked or disregarded when discussing the effects of these historical moments more broadly. Of course, this framing does not attempt to account for the many intricacies of the city's entire history or provide a complete history of these urban spaces by any means. Instead, the brief case studies to follow

focus on the effects of a particular historical moment and the literary response to the effects of this historical and material reality.

Similarly, because this chapter functions as an historical overview of street literature, my engagement with the literature itself is also brief and does not seek to thoroughly investigate the nuances of the many texts I reference. The purpose for this is twofold: first, the parameters I have established for what constitutes "street lit" are exceptionally broad—and broader than most any other definition of street lit currently circulating[3]—thus, it is important I account for the various means by which United States literature takes up the street. While the subsequent chapters provide a more in-depth and sustained engagement with important, yet overlooked, texts—*Bread Givers* (1925) by Anzia Yezierska and *Run Man Run* (1960) by Chester Himes—this chapter explores how the particular historical moments in which the streets underwent significant change impacts the literary identity of the street. To illustrate this, I pull from canonical texts and obscure texts a like as a means to showcase the range of texts that share in the impulse to reclaim the street. Second, many of the texts briefly mentioned here will resurface in subsequent chapters for brief moments of comparison with the central text. While the genre, aesthetics, and content vary considerably within the literary category of "street lit", what links these texts is their sustained engagement with the street as a means to push back against and subvert dominant discourses that seek contain, control, and marginalize those living in the

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[3] As I indicated in the introduction, scholarly work on "street lit" tends to focus on the "black experience" novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines and/or the explosion of texts written in the wake of Sister Souljah's 1999 bestseller *The Coldest Winter Ever*—a variation on the broader category I am establishing here that is also often described as "black ghetto fiction" or "hip-hop lit". See the scholarly work of Justin Gifford, Kinohi Nishikawa, Gwendolyn Pough, Bonnie Andryeyev, Vanessa Morris, and Keenan Norris for further discussion. Many of the texts I have categorized as "street lit" are also often more broadly engaged as "urban lit"—see the scholarly work of writers such James Giles, Liam Kennedy, Carla Cappetti, Jon Thompson, and Paula Rabinowtiz for further discussion. While street lit is certainly a part of urban lit, texts I have designated as such do more than simply use the city or urban space for its setting and instead incorporate the city and its streets as character in their own right—a process which allows for a more dynamic representation of and engagement with the nuances of this space.

ghettos and slums of cities across the United States in the twentieth century. The texts I explore in this and subsequent chapters subvert and resist these discourses specifically through thematics of moving and wandering as a means to emphasize the possibility of choice—a rhetoric that offers a deliberate rejection of determinist ideology used to rationalize and maintain ghettos throughout the twentieth century.

This chapter begins with the literary representation of and response to early twentieth century ghettos because urban space at the turn of the century in the United States was undergoing rapid expansion and change. Influenced by both a peak in immigration rates, and the aftermath of World War I, technological and artistic innovation flourished in this "newly expanding and overcrowded modern city" (Williams 46). Among other technological innovations, the *way* individuals used the streets and moved around the city changed dramatically: this included a shift from pushcarts and walking as dominant modes of transportation during the nineteenth century to choosing between "several kinds of streetcars, elevated trains, subways, as well as horse drawn and motorized cabs, long-distance railroad trains, ferryboats, steamships, and within a few years, air-shuttle services to shore points on Long Island and in New Jersey" (Sante 54). And while America's ability to sell, as Ann Douglas argues in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, the process of modernization itself and, as a result, establish itself at the forefront of a "new imperialism" that maintained global dominance and influence through technological innovation, it was a result of the many recently arrived immigrants, and the contact across race, class, and ethnic differences that happened on the streets of these cities, that contributed to innovations with regards to literary form and style (Williams 45). And while these innovations were exciting and producing "remarkable new forms"--a process I will discuss in more detail in chapter two—the majority of these recently

arrived “major innovators,” (46) lived in the rapidly expanding and overcrowded ghettos of these modern cities, the topic to which I now turn.

Literary Representations of the Multi-Ethnic Ghetto

This first section traces the development of immigrant neighborhoods from enclaves to ghettos, and the evolution of ghetto space from containing a more multi-ethnic population in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, to containing a population that, by the 1940s, is predominately black. A brief historical overview of the twentieth century development of the iconic neighborhoods of Harlem, New York, and Bronzeville, Chicago illustrate this historical phenomenon. I have selected excerpts from Mike Gold, Marita Bonner, and Rudolph Fisher because their texts not only productively illustrate how street lit plays with the social, political, and economic impacts this material change has for residents, but also showcase how the deliberate choice to use the literary form allows authors the freedom to assert rhetorics of possibility and agency in response to urban sociology’s naturalist-inflected narratives that suggested ghetto inhabitants were biologically drawn to the deviancy of the ghetto street.

The development of immigrant neighborhoods from enclaves to ghettos begins in the nineteenth century, but it is within the first few decades of the twentieth century that we can see the reinforcement of housing segregation in major cities throughout the United States. Initially, the influx of immigrants in the last few decades of the nineteenth century was not seen as a threat to white Americans because the “ruling white Protestant elite” believed their rule was “aggressive and disciplined enough to assimilate and ‘Americanize’ all outsiders” (Douglas 305). But, by the 1920s, as the immigrant population from eastern and southern Europe increased, growing white nativism began to take hold to such an extent that for social scientists of the period, “race designated and included not just color but ethnicity, nationality, and even by

implication, class and language" (305). Partially in response to "the pressures of the fiercely asserted hegemony of whiteness and of Anglo-American assimilation" (Sollors 39), recently arrived immigrants began collecting "ominously in vast city enclaves fast becoming 'ghettoes'" (Douglas 305). This move from "enclave" to "ghetto," of course, reflects more than a change in word choice. As I discussed in the introduction, the connotation of "ghetto" suggests the absence of agency and imposes a sense of racial and ethnic discrimination that enclave, with its connotation of choice and preference, does not. Thus, this shift from enclave to ghetto reflects not only the power of the social to not only control and shape urban space, but also the ability to control the ability to move and live freely in and around the city as well.

For Chicago School of Sociology practitioners Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth, the ghetto was a "contagious, degenerative, an unintelligible fragment" that functioned as "the natural environment for the naturally deviant" and as such must be contained and controlled from beyond its borders (Cappetti 36, 44). While Park theorized that the numerous multi-ethnic ghettos spread throughout the United States were the product of a "natural phenomenon," and that the segregation of the nation's cities was a result of "competition, domination, invasion and succession" (Duneier 35), much of early twentieth century street literature troubles this naturalist and determinist language. Mary Antin's 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land,* for example, chronicles her experience escaping from the religious oppression against Jews in Eastern Europe to spiritual and intellectual freedom in the United States. Even though she finds herself living in the slums of New York, the text emphasizes and celebrates her access to education and the various attainable freedoms associated with the United States. That said, Antin's text is an interesting one as its political implications[4] make her acutely aware of the perfect balance she

[4] Werner Sollors writes that the ethnoautobiography at this time was a vehicle for political commentary on the assimilatory capabilities of one's particular ethnic group. Thus, "ethnic authors tended to flash their

must strike in both celebrating the freedom and possibility of the United States and accounting for its inherent inequalities. She describes Dover Street, for example, as simultaneously "my fairest garden of girlhood" and "a prison … a battlefield of sordid strife" (195). The juxtaposition of a garden amidst an urban battlefield illustrates this tension between the determinist language governing the ghettos and slums of early twentieth century cities in the United States and the educational and spiritual freedoms her new country now claims to offer[5]. Thus, Antin is careful to avoid directly critiquing the living situation she faces in America, but also does not suggest this is a space she and her family are naturally drawn to: "In Dover Street", she writes, "I was shackled with a hundred chains of disadvantage, but with one free hand I planted little seeds, right there in the mud of shame, that blossomed into the honeyed rose of widest freedom" (195). The image of a rose rising from the mud or cracked concrete of a decaying urban environment is a familiar one[6], but her characterization of the Dover Street neighborhood as wrought with "chains" still suggests a forced living situation, one premised on government supported means of segregation and control, rather than a space that is freely and naturally chosen by the inhabitants. This tension between choice and determinism animates much of early twentieth street literature particularly during this shift in the sociopolitical imagination from enclave to ghetto.

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accomplishments, identifying their achievement and upward mobility with the respective ethnic group as a whole and with America, instead of revealing their individual perversions, nightmares, fears, or human failings" (44). Mike Gold, however, critiques Antin's patriotic devotion to the United States and its ideals of personal responsibility and hard work, by arguing that in doing so she explains "away all the horror and injustice man has established" (Sollors 74).

[5] Writing almost a century later Louis Chude-Sokei's essay "G is for Ghetto" offers a similar observation regarding the immigrant's understanding and perception of the ghetto: "While for many of our black neighbors [the ghetto] was a sign of America's failure, for our immigrant families it was merely the first stage of a promise." Refusing to see that possibility, he writes, would mean the abandonment of "the sometimes-unrealistic hopes that fueled our migration and take seriously the suggestion that 'race' had something to do with our possibilities."

[6] For a popular reference point see, for example, Tupac Shakur's 1989 lyrics for "The Rose that Grew from Concrete"

The presence of determinist rhetoric in much of early twentieth street literature, however, is also a result of writers working within a tradition of urban fiction in which naturalism was the preferred and dominant aesthetic for representing urban space. Because increases in immigration and lack of affordable housing led to overcrowded ghettos that were "a frightening new entity for the middle class," once could argue, as James Giles does, that the development of naturalism in late nineteenth century United States literature was, "in part, a literary reaction to the rise of the city" (Giles 3). Slumming novels, city mysteries, urban guidebooks, and the naturalist fiction of iconic authors such as Stephen Crane and Frank Norris directly contributed to a characterization of urban space, particularly areas dominated by immigrants and people of color, as dangerous, chaotic, and teeming with sinful temptations, crime, prostitution, and squalor. Much of the naturalist and slumming fiction of this period situates the urban criminal, ostensibly a ghetto resident, as existing beyond the bounds of mainstream society to such an extent that the characters are, "exotic specimens" whose grotesque and squalid existence removes any sense of humanity or identification on the part of the reader (Giles 33). In order to achieve this distance, the novels begin from the premise of the outsider looking in, whether from the perspective of the "tour-guide narrator" or the "narrator as explorer," and one that more often than not intended to shock the ostensibly middle class reader with the kind of depravity and squalor the "exotic world of the slums" contains (Giles 34). This late nineteenth century style of representing urban space, one dependent on voyeuristic representations of the life of the "other," faces a challenge by the second decade of the twentieth century with the advent of what Michael Denning terms the "ghetto pastoral,"; a genre that, while not an origin point[7], is a significant literary manifestation for twentieth century street lit.

[7] Because I see street literature as inherently dynamic and various in its manifestation, I hesitate to attribute any single origin point. While the ghetto pastoral is extremely significant and sets the stage for the street lit that comes

This "new kind of city novel," as Michael Denning boldly declares, emerges as a literary response to the social and historical circumstances that created and maintained immigrant ghettos at the turn of the century. With the specific intention of correcting representations of "how the other half lives" as found in the turn of the century naturalism of authors such as Crane and Norris, the genre explicitly situates itself as "tales of how our half lives" (Denning 230). It is from this "insider" perspective that ghetto pastoral authors such as Marita Bonner, Mike Gold, Claude McKay, Henry Roth[8], H. T. Tsiang and Anzia Yezierska attempt to "write out from under the literary lineages that dominated narratives of the 'people,'" and avoid an entirely naturalist aesthetic, offering instead a hybrid aesthetic that maintains elements of naturalism tempered by the idealism of the pastoral (251). And, while not overtly affiliated with the social realism of the its particular historical moment, the ghetto pastoral's move away from a purely naturalist approach marks a distinct moment in literary representations of the street. While turn of the century naturalism emphasized environmental determinism, the ghetto pastoral both emphasizes the influence of the street and space more generally in affecting the life chances of the characters, and, significantly, emphasizes the possibility of agency within the oppressive circumstances of ghetto space—a (re)imagination in direct contrast to other narratives of urban space that focus on deviancy and despair. Mike Gold's coming-of-age novel *Jews Without*

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after it, establishing the ghetto pastoral as the origin point risks eliding texts like J.E. Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* or Mary Antin's *Promised Land* both of which—but especially Bruce's *Black Sleuth*—are significant contributions to the evolution of the literary category of street lit.

[8] In *Call it Sleep*, for example, Henry Roth's protagonist, David, describes his neighborhood street as "A row of frame houses half in thin shade, a pitted gutter, a yawning ashcan, flotsam on the shore, his street" (20). Despite the fact that his affiliation with this particular space defines his identity and puts him at risk of violence from "freckled" kids who insist "only sheenies live in dat block," David claims affiliation with and feels "secure in the street" (250). It is here, amongst the flotsam and squalor, that Roth's protagonist finds comfort, familiarity, and ownership and it is this sense of pride and strength deriving from minor characterizations such as this that challenges the hopelessness, squalor, and deviancy particular to much of naturalist fiction.

Money is an important text to examine because the novel both implicitly and explicitly[9] speaks to this sociopolitical objective throughout. While he wrote with the intent to "inform the privileged reader of the sufferings" of his characters *Jews Without Money* does not meant to instill a victim narrative in which the characters were resigned to their life circumstances and therefore noble in their suffering (Giles 186). For example, after a beating from his mother, Mikey reflects to himself, "Vain beating; the East Side street could not be banished with a leather strap. It was my world; it was my mother's world too. We *had* to live in it, and learn what it chose to teach us" (19). While the emphasis on "had" certainly suggests Gold is playing with determinist language here, the seeming lack of choice that "had" connotes is complicated by the importance and even the possibility of learning from what East Side street offers. While this sentence certainly does not entirely connote a sense of complete agency or freedom, the act of learning does suggest the possibility for growth and, as a result, change which complicates a completely naturalist approach to urban space in which its determinist language creates a tragic and inescapable reality in which the reader mourns the fortunes of the decrepit characters.

While I read the development of the ghetto pastoral as not only challenging the dominance of the naturalist aesthetic for representing urban space, but also using the literary to directly confront and refute the often naturalist-inflected approach of urban social science narratives, James Giles disagrees and suggests the protean nature of naturalism allows it to remain a privileged and dominant aesthetic for narratives of urban space throughout the twentieth century. Giles argues *Jews Without Money,* for example, offers a "politically conscious

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[9] In a parenthetical aside, for example, Gold calls out writers of urban fiction and moralist reformers who targeted tenement dwellers and claimed to represent and know what life was like in the ghetto streets, but whose writing revealed their lack of knowledge on the subject. He writes, "(Bedbugs are what people mean when they say: Poverty. There are enough pleasant superficial liars writing in America. I will write a truthful book of Poverty; I will mention bedbugs)" (71).

naturalist" style that depicts the "novel's characters as being overwhelmed by external social forces" while simultaneously assuring "the freedom of his readers to initiate saving social change and reform" (68). While I agree with this to a certain extent, I disagree with Giles' insistence on reading this style as purely naturalist. This insistence on a naturalist aesthetic is limiting because it risks presupposing and anticipating themes of environmental determinism in urban fiction when, in fact, many of these authors are working within the expectations of urban fiction with subtle, but important differences. For example, while Mikey's father, Herman, repeatedly refer to himself as "a man in a trap" and laments the bad luck and curses that befall his home, Mikey's mother, Katie, repeatedly stands up to an abusive boss, a negligent landlord, and even, on a few occasions her husband. In fact, she deliberately rejects any attempt to move out of the ghetto "trap" to Brooklyn, a neighborhood early twentieth century urban sociologists would have termed an "area of second immigrant settlement"—a more assimilated neighborhood, with better access to resources and living conditions. When Herman takes the family to see the potential house, a house that has "a first-class kitchen range free! Electric lights! [and] a modern water closet!", Katie refuses to enter and chooses instead to remain "on the porch like a beggar" (220). Despite Herman's exultations that he refuses "to be an East Side beggar all [his] life," the house, in the end, is not purchased (221). Not only are Katie's acts of defiance in tension with Herman's lamentations of being trapped, but her behavior also refutes urban sociological claims that, given the resources and the possibility, the "keener and more ambitious" immigrants would leave the ghetto (Duneier 36). In effect, Katie's choice to stay within the impoverished ghetto, allows her to assert control over her own narrative, one that, for her, means rejecting the narrative of upward mobility and assimilation deemed essential benchmarks for achieving the American dream.

Katie's refusal also highlights how the Chicago School of Sociology's naturalist understanding of the city, "in which immigrants assimilated freely if they wanted to—that for each group, their time would come," did not account for the racial violence immigrants and people of color faced if they tried to move out of the ghetto (Duneier 47). When asked why she refuses to leave the East Side for better living conditions, Katie claims she "will be lonesome" and "will miss the neighbors on Chrystie Street", illustrating the sense of community and safety the segregated space of the ghetto can, to a certain extent, provide (221). While Mikey and his father operate within the expectations of traditional urban fiction characters, Katie's subtle moments of resistance and refusal highlight the importance of recognizing a different aesthetic for this kind of street literature, one that is in tension with the naturalism particular to urban sociological narratives and the disciplining function they perform. To ignore this shift in literary representations of the street, or to disregard it and read it as a "protean form of naturalism" overlooks a vibrant and nuanced component of the history of the street, and one that creates space for the possibility of agency even within oppressive circumstances.

While the multi-ethnic ghettos of the early twentieth century were composed of a range of immigrant nationalities and ethnicities[10], there was still a clear dividing line between black residents and those who were considered white. In fact, for black Americans race restrictive covenants began to emerge with more regularity in the 1920s and were used to "control blacks in urban space"; a process which contributed directly to maintaining the black ghetto in the decades to come[11] (Duneier 29). The ghetto pastoral uniquely captures this historical reality as its

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[10] Mike Gold's ghetto street in *Jews Without Money*, for example, is composed of, "Negroes, Chinese, Gypsies, Turks, Germans, Irish, Jews—and there was even an American on our street" (Gold 178).

[11] Mitchell Duneier notes that while the Chinese were actually the first racial group to be "forcibly segregated by race and ethnicity, early social scientists essentially ignored the group when searching for a conceptual apparatus to understand the black experience" (45). Consequently, culturally and socially, even from the beginning, "ghetto" came to be affiliated with black Americans despite the fact that other groups were experiencing similar treatment.

representation of the city focuses on revealing "an intricate geography of ethnicity and race" in which the streets both facilitate and reveal the "shifting hostilities and alliances among ethnic communities" (Denning 246). Marita Bonner's *Frye Street & Environs* (1926)—a collection of essays, plays, and short stories focused on the black working class and often neglected in favor of her more successful contemporaries Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen—exemplifies the tensions in these multi-ethnic neighborhoods and in so doing challenges the myth of opportunity attributed to Northern cities for black migrants that pervaded the cultural imagination at this historical moment (Flynn xiii). It is in challenging this myth and focusing on the lives and pursuits of not only the black working-class, but the black working-class within a multi-ethnic neighborhood that makes *Frye Street* an especially compelling and significant text for engaging the nuances of this particular historical moment.

For example, in the short story "Nothing New," the babbling and gurgling of the nicely flowing "muddy water" of Frye' Street's composition becomes more rigidly segregated when the specter of miscegenation arises and leads to the "umix[ing]" of Frye Street to such an extent that "it flowed apart" (76). When Denny, a black student, and Pauline, a white student, fall in love and the "news seeped through the school," the multi-ethnic harmony of the neighborhood begins to breakdown. Shouts of "Let that white woman alone" and "stay on your side" echo in the classroom and hallways of the school as Denny fights Allen, a white student intent on protecting Pauline's honor from the "nigger rushing after her" (75). The assertion that Denny needs to stay on his side, despite the fact that they share a neighborhood illustrates the rigid segregation that existed within the ghettos themselves. Furthermore, the fact that the unmixing of Frye Street is, as the title implies, "nothing new" suggests the short story is premised less on a rare and unforeseen event—making it worthy of a story—and is instead a reflection of a kind of social

realism that make it clear that while black residents share ghetto space with immigrants, they do not share access to the same social, political and economic opportunities.

Despite the multi-ethnic composition of the ghetto street in the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, by the 1920s and 1930s, the segregation of black Americans into explicitly racialized ghettos becomes more apparent, especially in New York City and Chicago. I focus on New York's Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville in particular for two reasons: 1) New York City and Chicago are focal points for the production of much of street literature and as a result Harlem and Bronzeville will appear repeatedly throughout this chapter and the project as a whole; 2) These spaces are not only iconic in terms of literary and artistic renaissances in the first half of the twentieth century, but also occupy unique positions in the establishment of black ghettos throughout the twentieth century. And while certainly a product of overt government segregation, Harlem in particular was a truly unique space for black American in the 1920s. Before Harlem was accessible to black Americans, black neighborhoods were dispersed throughout much of lower Manhattan, were often "only a few blocks in length … and generally interspersed with residences of white working-class families," (Osofksy 127). However, in part a result of the efforts of Phillip A. Payton Jr. and the Afro-American Realty Company in the first decade of the twentieth century, and black churches in the second decade, Harlem gradually transformed from "one of the most exclusive sections of the city" inhabited by white, wealthy families, to the "Negro capital of the world" (McKay 16); between 1920-1930, 118,792 white people left the neighborhood and 87,417 blacks arrived to resettle Harlem (111). Of course, white property owners attempted to maintain control of the neighborhood through race restrictive covenants and inflammatory and racially charged language in magazines and advertisements that advocated for resistance to the "invasion" of "black hordes," but in the end,

the financial losses were so great that white owners were faced with "maintaining a "White Only" policy and inevitably losing everything, or "renting to Negroes at higher prices and surviving" (Osofsky 110).

Because of this historical reality, Harlem and its streets came to embody an almost mythical space for "blacks to be themselves as they saw fit" (Corbould 881). As such, the establishment of Harlem as a black neighborhood was a powerful move and, due to its insularity, functioned, to some extent, as a "safeguard against white violence" (Douglas 315). But while Harlem may have felt like a black haven, it was a space not only "intimately connected to the rest of NYC: most of its residents worked elsewhere and its businesses were owned by outsiders" but it was also a space that was "monitored constantly by white policemen; and its residents were not all African American" (881). The paradoxes of this reality are especially well documented and explored in texts from the Harlem Renaissance. Texts such as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Nella Larsen's *Passing (1928),* Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Rudolph Fisher's short story "City of Refuge" (1925) offer especially vivid examples that explore the intersections of race, class, and gender as they unfold on Harlem streets[12]. The street is a central aspect of these texts, in part, because it operates as a space that facilitates, dramatizes,

[12] It is important to note that the three novels listed here engage the street differently. Where Larsen focuses more on the intersections of class, race, and privilege, McKay and Van Vechten celebrate and emphasize the pursuit of physical desire and pleasure—an approach to the street that challenges the racial uplift rhetoric of Du Bois's talented tenth. For Du Bois, writes Shane Vogel, those who celebrated Harlem's streets in this way challenged the "moral disposition of the city's population" and their pursuits—from drink to music and dance to sex—must therefore be contained to certain sections of the neighborhood in order to prevent these groups from "contaminating the more respectable members of the race" (141). In his analysis of McKay's *Home to Harlem*, Louis Chude-Sokei praises McKay's resistance to Du Bois' rhetoric arguing: "because chastity and domesticity was deemed a prerequisite for assimilation, freedom, or equality in the US, McKay's exploration of 'free love' among the urban folk was more than simply sensationalism. It was a political protest that was unrecognizable as such in its time" (242).

and procures contact across different communities. And it is through scenes of contact on city streets that the texts complicate the mythical homogenization of blackness in Harlem[13].

While not often classified as part of the ghetto pastoral, Fisher's "City of Refuge" makes for an especially compelling text to engage during this particular historical moment because it offers an "allegorical cityscape" (Denning 231) that dramatizes the cultural power of the racial transformation of the Harlem street. The story opens with the protagonist King Solomon Gillis, a migrant from North Carolina, emerging from the underground train station and taking in the racial homogeneity of the space: "Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down 135th Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones… here and there a white face drifting along, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was Negro Harlem" (1). Unlike Mike Gold's streets which reflect the tensions of a more multi-ethnic neighborhood, Fisher's streets, at least initially, celebrate the racial homogeneity that defines this particular space and allows Harlem to operate as a sort of racial haven from a violent white world. And yet, similar to Bonner's attempt to map the interracial tensions of Chicago onto Frye street, Fisher deconstructs the utopic mythology of Harlem by using the streets to reveal the reality of life in Northern cities for blacks. In particular, intra-racial tension, overcrowding, and unequal distribution of city resources complicate Gillis's experience of Harlem's utopic possibilities. For example, Uggam, an established black city dweller, scams King Solomon because he is,

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[13] By 1930, for example, nearly a quarter of Harlem's population was born in the Caribbean (Corbould 878) and one of the most visible figures from that population was Marcus Garvey—a man whose "black nationalist vision" was characterized more by his ability perform and charm followers and bystanders alike by "appropriating the street and public space generally" through "spectacular parades and pageants and mammoth mass meetings" than by detailing the specifics of how his plan to "redeem" Africa was to unfold (876). While not a focus of this project, Garvey's use of and presence on Harlem's streets reveal the centrality of this space in both a cultural and sociopolitical context. As a man of West Indian descent, Garvey's accent was a source of both ridicule and admiration. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, "denounced Garvey as an 'illiterate foreigner'" (876), and Wallace Thurman suggested West Indian accents were one reason for the "intraracial prejudice" particular to Harlem (876).

according to Uggam, “a baby jess in from the land o’cotton and so dumb he thinks ante bellum’s an old woman (6). Uggam also encourages Solomon to attack and fight back against any Caribbean “monkey chasers” because “they’s too damn many of ’em here” (5). Through these scenes, Fisher dramatizes the historical reality that many established, northern blacks were especially frustrated with the thousands of black migrants coming up from the South as the overcrowding and uptick in racial violence increased exponentially in the wake of their arrival. Nativist sentiments amongst black Americans were also especially high as they sought the power and recognition of claiming American citizenship over black immigrants from the Caribbean. In fact, 1920s Harlem was especially ethnically diverse as twenty-five percent of the population were immigrants, primarily from the Caribbean (Osofksy 131). By drawing attention to the diversity of Harlem, Fisher’s story directly critiques urban sociological narratives that assume homogeneity as a result of geographical affiliation (Soja 99).

As Harlem continued to attract a predominantly black population, white landlords in Harlem often “lost interest in caring for their property and permitted it to run down” (140). High rent prices and low salaries forced tenants to rent out as much space as possible in individual apartments and homes, which led to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. As such, while Harlem often operated as a place of refuge for many black people, it was by no means a utopic space. That said, it was unique compared to other black neighborhoods around the country. While Harlem gave New York’s black residents the chance to expand and develop the neighborhood into a sort of racial haven, black residents in Chicago did not have access to a similar geography (Douglas 314). Instead, the limited available housing spread throughout the city meant black neighborhoods inevitably began to expand into white neighborhoods, “multiplying white resistance as they did so” (315). Racial violence from bombings of black

property and rentals to "roving white vigilante gangs" exponentially increased and culminated in the 1919 race riots, the "worst race riots to hit a riot-torn nation," which left 23 black and 15 white people dead with hundreds more seriously injured (Douglas 315).

While Harlem's black population increased by sixty-seven percent during the Great Migration, Chicago's population increased by one hundred and forty-eight percent (Douglas 314). As a result, overcrowding in Chicago's South Side led to the development of the Bronzeville ghetto. In fact it was in their infamous study of the Bronzeville neighborhood, that Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis*: *A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* breaks "with the major assumption of the Chicago School " that "the distribution of racial and ethnic groups was "a natural phenomenon" and instead assert that by the 1940s "restrictive covenants had artificially brought about the black ghetto …[which] marked blacks as 'fundamentally different' in that its residents did not enjoy the same trajectory as immigrants" (Duneier 74). Thus, it is racism and not natural separation, they argue, that prevents blacks from being "finally absorbed in the general population" and as such the ghettos that isolate black populations from the rest of the city continue to grow "larger and larger, unable either to expand freely or to scatter" (17). The combination of racist restrictions and the steady dispersal of immigrants from the ethnic enclaves of first settlement into "more desirable areas of second settlement" where they or their children eventually "merge with the general population" (Drake 10), mixed neighborhoods became steadily more racially homogenous. By 1930, two-thirds of all blacks in Chicago "lived in areas at least 90% black, one-fifth in tracts that were exclusively black" (Cohen 34).

It should be noted that while the ghetto street at this historical moment is in the process of transforming from the babbling, muddy brook of Marita Bonner's *Frye Street* to one dominated

by black Americans, not everyone living within the ghettos of Harlem and Bronzeville were black. Neighborhoods still contained some ethnic and racial diversity[14], but the dominant inhabitants tended, predominantly, to be those who passed for black Americans. This kind of racial containment was achieved through a variety of methods. Racial violence was the most overt form: between 1917-1921, for example, there were fifty-eight firebombings against black homes on the border of white areas (Rothstein 144). Race restrictive covenants, a method in which white property owners would privately agree that they would not sell, lease, or rent their property to blacks, drew lines around white neighborhoods that were effective at keeping "the residents of black neighborhoods from flowing into adjoining communities" (Duneier 29). This practice, though seemingly instigated by individual homeowners, had the support and backing of national institutions and organizations[15] and while deemed unconstitutional in 1968, the language still exists to this day in many neighborhood bylaws and deeds[16] (30). Prior to the Great Depression, racist segregation within factory work also contributed to the development of black ghettos in Chicago. While the majority of ethnic factory workers tended to live in neighborhoods closest to the factories, blacks had to commute, which created an even further sense of isolation since despite interethnic tensions, ethnic workers would still come into contact with each other outside of work (Cohen 33). Factory and industrial leaders benefited from maintaining these segregated neighborhoods because it prevented unity across racial lines, a unity that could lead to

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[14] In Harlem, for example, Puerto Ricans moved into the East Harlem apartments and rooms vacated by second-generation Italian and Jews who "were responding to the same conditions of prosperity that promoted mobility in all the immigrant nieghborhoods of Manhattan" (Osofsky 130). By 1930, for example, the majority of the 45,000 Puerto Ricans that lived in New York lived in East Harlem (130).

[15] See, for example, the Federal Housing Administration's practices for developing public housing in the middle decades of the twentieth century (Rothstein 93).

[16] The University of Washington's Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project (https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/covenants.htm) reveals an interactive map that not only illustrates the racial and ethnic segregation that permeates the city through the twenty-first century, but also includes a list of deeds for various Seattle neighborhoods illustrating these restrictions that while not legally enforceable still exist in the titles and deeds to many homes and requires explicit action on the part of the homeowner to remove.

the development of unions and successful strikes (Cohen 20). It was the combination of these and other various racial containment strategies that directly contributed to the formation of Chicago's Bronzeville ghetto.

It was not until Drake and Cayton's monumental sociological study that Bronzeville was regularly referred to as a ghetto, a term that accounted for the deliberate segregation the city imposed. As with Harlem, Bronzeville "created a refuge for blacks in a racist world" and it was only when "the exploitative and nonvoluntary dimensions of the segregated black community" were invoked that residents used the word ghetto to characterize and define their living situation (Duneier 69). *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945)—Gwendolyn Brooks' book of poetry that chronicles urban life for black working-class families—explores this tension between Bronzeville as a space of refuge and community and a space of state enforced segregation and control. From the risks of crossing the racial boundary and getting a "taste of pink and white honey," a taste that leads to accusations of rape and the incarceration of Sammy in the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" to the protagonist of "a Song in the Front Yard," who wants to explore Bronzeville's backyards, alleys, and streets "where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows" (10). The fact that desire and play can be found despite the "hungry weeds" that grow over abandoned and dilapidated homes suggests possibility and life still exist within Bronzeville, even as its borders become tighter and the word ghetto appears more often in the vocabulary of both artists and residents. Significantly, the deliberate maintenance, by various local and national institutions, of the Bronzeville ghetto, was not restricted to Chicago. Throughout the country, as the walls around immigrant ghettos began to crumble, the ghetto walls for black Americans were only getting stronger.

The Black Ghetto and the Literary Imagination

By the 1930s and 1940s, the (re)segregation of people of color, particularly black Americans, into government funded ghettos becomes even more pronounced. This is due, in large part, to federally funded projects and institutions such as the Public Works Association, the U.S. Housing Authority, and the Federal Housing Administration. In the 1960s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark directly implicated the federal government as their research showed "that through federal agencies and their influence on private lenders, the government legitimated redlining policies that channeled mortgage funds away from black neighborhoods" (Duneier 134). This section continues to account for the historical racial segregation of America's cities through federal and local government projects and institutions, while also examining in more detail the street literature that emerges out of and in response to these historical, social, and spatial circumstances. I have selected Ann Petry's *The Street* and Odie Hawkins's *Ghetto Sketches* because they offer concrete examples of how literature from this period develops a critical spatial awareness that represents the space of the street as "simultaneously … a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life" (Soja 7) and explores the exacerbated sense of Otherness particular to the ghetto street as a result of government funded segregation. It is this particular iteration of street literature, for example, that Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias—marginalized spaces that are both real and imagined—emerges as a means of exploring the subversive agency and potential particular to the city street. In selecting these two texts I also hope to draw attention to the fact that more canonical works of literature like Petry's *The Street* share themes and arguments with the more obscure work of writers like Odie Hawkins[17].

[17] While this project is not explicitly concerned with the politics of the canon and questions of "high" vs "low" art, in pairing these two texts to illustrate the historical reality of the street at this particular moment I seek to challenge

The various federal, state, and local governmental policies that "explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States" (Rothstein viii), directly contradicts the logic of early twentieth century urban sociology, which, in its efforts to understand the rapid development of ghettos emphasized natural preference rather than explicit racism on the part of government programs and facilities. It is important, therefore, to provide a brief historical overview of numerous policies and strategies, from race restrictive covenants to zoning laws, that directly contributed to the development of the ghetto and the maintenance of racial segregation in cities across the United States. As with the development of the Harlem and Bronzeville neighborhoods in the first few decades of the twentieth century, upticks in racial violence emerge in response to increasing numbers of black migrants arriving in urban centers. And in order to prevent black families from moving out of these overcrowded spaces into white neighborhoods, race restrictive covenants and racial violence policed the borders of the physically invisible walls of the black ghettos. Firebombings in cities across the country, for example, maintained the border between white and black neighborhoods, emphasizing that while there were no literal walls holding black Americans into the ghetto, strict boundaries were enforced with deadly violence (Rothstein 144). And while the 1968 Fair Housing Act "made violence to prevent neighborhood integration a federal crime," black Americans attempting to leave the ghetto continued to face this kind of racial violence into the 1980s and, arguably, beyond (Rothstein 147).

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arguments that suggest texts like *Ghetto Sketches,* which focus on what W.E.B. Du Bois would consider the "submerged tenth" (302), exploit and exacerbate racial stereotypes—an argument that follows street literature, especially that written by black Americans, from the Harlem Renaissance and through to the black ghetto fiction of the contemporary moment. Instead, a shared emphasis on and fascination with street in these two very different texts speaks to a commonality that transcends methods of categorization and evaluation.

City zoning practices also directly contributed to the maintenance of segregated neighborhoods. City leadership prevented "industrial or environmentally unsafe businesses" from building next to white neighborhoods, which often meant these businesses would develop next to black neighborhoods instead. The St. Louis planning commission, for example, often zoned for black neighborhoods in areas also zoned for industrial or toxic waste use, and "permitted taverns, liquor stores, nightclubs, and houses of prostitution," while prohibiting them "as zoning violations in neighborhoods where whites lived" (50). Furthermore, in 1948 St. Louis city planners and commissioners "explained they were designating a U-shaped industrial zone to create a buffer between African Americans inside the U and whites outside" (50). Despite a 1917 Supreme Court case, Buchanan V. Warley, that banned these kinds of zoning practices, urban designers clearly found ways around the ruling. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. of the American City Planning Institute, for example, rationalized his racially motivated segregation by arguing, "[If] you try to force the mingling of people who are not yet ready to mingle and don't want to mingle, a development cannot succeed economically" (qtd in Rothstein 51). Citing economic success, rather than racial antagonism, as the impetus for his racial zoning practices, Olmsted's rationale is a familiar and often repeated line of argument amongst urban designers. This sort of explicit planning not only functions as a means of state sanctioned support for keeping black families in certain neighborhoods, but also deliberately reduces the possibility of contact across difference and fundamentally harms the vibrancy and health of a city, a topic I will address in more detail in the next section.

Race restrictive covenants, a less overtly violent method, also directly contributed to the maintenance of black ghettos in the first half of the twentieth century and were used explicitly, to "control blacks in urban space" (Duneier 29). It was not until the 1948 Supreme Court case

Shelly v. Kraemer that these covenants were deemed unconstitutional; a ruling that enabled black Americans to contest restrictions on houses, but a ruling that did not necessarily put a stop to neighborhood covenants that, until legally challenged, remained in effect. In addition to race restrictive covenants and, later, redlining and blockbusting practices that worked to keep black Americans isolated and contained in ghettos, government backed programs such as the Public Works Association (PWA), and, later, the US Housing Authority, directly contributed to the segregation of neighborhoods into white or black by "designat[ing] many integrated neighborhoods as either white or black and then us[ing] public housing to make the designation come true—by installing whites-only projects in mixed neighborhoods deemed 'white' and blacks-only projects in those it deemed 'colored'" (Rothstein 21). While government agencies and city planners are not solely responsible for facilitating this segregation, it is important to recognize that practices such as these certainly reinforced and enhanced urban segregation. Demolishing multi-ethnic neighborhoods and transforming them into white-only or black-only housing projects illustrates the deliberate maintenance of racialized ghettos in the United States by the federal government and undercuts the earlier sociological narratives that depended on the rhetoric of biology and natural affiliation. Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street* offers a productive example of how street lit can push back against oppressive conditions of the physical street by constructing a literary identity in which the street is reclaimed and repurposed—a process that, ultimately, pushes against the segregation and injustice the street symbolizes.

Set in Harlem in the 1940s, Petry's novel tells the story of Lutie Johnson: a single mother trying to make ends meet after her marriage falls apart. Over the course of the novel, Lutie's attempts to survive and create a stable life for herself and her son is complicated and interrupted by repeated instances of sexual harassment from numerous figures including the building's super

and the various men who take notice as she walks down the street. The novel, is, as literary critic Lindon Barrett summarizes, a story "in which the insistent, yet often surreptitious, cultural violence permeating the American landscape is ultimately rendered graphic and immediate" explicitly through its portrayal of the ghetto streets (205). As with Mike Gold and Mary Antin's street, this street is composed of "dirt and dust and grime", and scraps of paper, from "old envelopes and newspapers"; "the heavy waxed paper that loaves of bread had been wrapped in," blow around a walker's ankles, and is, significantly, in stark contrast to the white, wealthier neighborhood where "the streets were clean and well-swept … a safe, secure, clean world" (2, 408). Petry's street, as Barrett argues, is a space of silence and absence, and it is the isolation of the street that "ensures and symbolizes the exclusion of all those who live in the street from the profit of American presence" (209). More specifically, the segregated and impoverished street in this novel represents the absence of the American assurance of the economic benefits of a capitalist society and also functions as the space in which mainstream American society profits from "the expenditure and refuse of the street. The street remains the haunting, impoverished, and converse silence of the American assurance" that it is an exceptional country (207). Thus, the hopelessness and despair that emanates from Petry's novel derives, in part, from the oppression of the street, a space that city planners use to "set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other" (Petry 206).

While many scholars, including Barrett, read the despair and futility that characterizes the Harlem ghetto in this novel as indicative of adherence to naturalism, I read the interactions between Lutie and the street as more indicative of a shift in street lit towards narratives of agency and resistance in the face of oppressive and seemingly determinist environments. Even though it

adversely affects Lutie and her family throughout the novel, the street operates as a space that facilitates acts of subversive resistance. Lutie, for example, constantly dreams of moving out of the tiny Harlem apartment she shares with her son, but recognizes the social reality:

> If you were black and you lived in New York and you could only pay so much rent, why, you had to live in a house like this one. And while you were out working to pay the rent on this stinking, rotten place, why, the street outside played nursemaid to your kid. The street did more than that. It became both mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother. (407)

This passage is productive for engaging the street at this particular historical moment for a number of reasons. First, this depiction of 1940s Harlem captures the shift from the enclave with its refuge-like characteristics in the first few decades of the twentieth century to a neighborhood that entraps and restricts the movement of its protagonists. Second, the use of the pronoun "you" underscores how this particular street, while specifically located within Harlem and, more broadly, New York City, represents the shared circumstances of working-class and poor black Americans living in urban space across the country. Most importantly, however, the agency the street possesses throughout the novel, but especially in this passage emphasizes a spatial critique, one that accounts for the role space plays in perpetuating oppression and injustice. While it is tempting to read the street's role as mother, father, and nursemaid as following in the urban literature tradition of environmental determinism, the street's agency actually reflects Edward Soja's theory of a socio-spatial dialectic. Imbuing the street with the ability to act, as Petry does here, illustrates how space actively partakes in "generating and sustaining inequality, injustice economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination" (4).

The street, then, is not an "empty void" or a stage in which the drama plays out, but is, to a certain extent, a character in its own right. Conceptualizing space in this way positions the street as something that can be resisted and can give those "most negatively affected by the urban condition to take greater control over the social production of urbanized space" (6). After all, Lutie swears that "she would fight against [the street]" and any determining power it might possess, attributing a sense of agency and power in seemingly hopeless circumstances (Petry 56). While the novel does not fully imagine the possibilities that might arise from conceptualizing the street as a space of revolution and resistance, it does, however, mark a shift in the way space, particularly the ghetto street, operates in the cultural imagination.

By the 1960s, three quarters of blacks lived in cities and as such the term ghetto quickly became associated with black Americans, surpassing the usage of the term in connection with Jewish ghettos during World War II (Duneier 96). It is at this historical moment that sociologist Kenneth Clark asserted the ghetto symbolized the "institutionalization of powerlessness," and rejected any notion that ghettos were semi-voluntary or offered a space of refuge (qtd in Duneier 114). The literary response to this historical reality, however, complicates the notion that residents are entirely powerlessness. As with Petry's *The Street*, Odie Hawkins's 1972 black experience novel *Ghetto Sketches* explores the Otherness associated with the ghetto, but the novel is distinct in that it also articulates the communal power that can arise from this space. Impressively, the novel accomplishes this without discounting the manufactured isolation of ghetto space from mainstream society, an isolation that aligns, to a certain extent, with Clark's notion of powerlessness. The text, composed of thirteen various sketches of life in an unnamed ghetto in what could be any American city, does not have a clearly delineated plot. Instead, the street is a through-line for each of these sketches as it operates as a space that brings together the

various diverging lifestyles of the residents. Thus, while the ghetto in Hawkins's novel is certainly represented as a space of Otherness, it is not necessarily without refuge-like characteristics for its inhabitants.

It is when Cynthia Moore, a young, white social worker, walks hesitantly, like a "proverbial babe in the woods," into the ghetto that the novel most dramatically complicates and plays with the sense of Otherness often attributed to this space. The juxtaposition of white—and therefore exceedingly naïve—Cynthia Moore walking into the wild "woods" of the dark ghetto mockingly plays with mainstream perceptions of the ghetto as a space of untold danger and fear, while simultaneously critiquing the notion that white social workers from the "square world" should have access to this Othered space. For example, as "Miss Moore" walks down the street, one resident, Big Momma, whose "eyes wander casually up and down the street, taking in everything for its real worth" checks out this "black rimmed, eye-glass-wearing, ash blonde, blue-eyed, shoulder strapped Social Worker" and, with her "left eyebrow raised skeptically," cautiously points "Miss Moore" in the right direction (51, 99). The skepticism with which both Big Momma and "Miss Moore" approach each other dramatizes the sense of Otherness particular to ghetto space. While the description of Moore as a babe in the woods, walking with hesitant footsteps, suggests nervousness as she wanders through this Othered space, Big Momma's desire to check, double-check, and surveil Miss Moore's movements through the neighborhood suggests a similar distrust of the white Other that has entered Big Momma's world. When two drug addicts later steal Miss Moore's purse, a sense of communal solidarity emerges as those on the street refuse to help her, hoping that Miss Moore's isolation will encourage her to leave "the block as quickly as possible" (110). Big Momma, for example, does not offer any assistance to the young social worker and instead "looks down at Miss Moore coldly, spits out a stream of

snuff juice" and simply recommends she buy a new purse (110). The mocking and satirical tone throughout this scene, of course, also suggests a deliberate play with stereotypical renderings of ghetto space, a play that, in part, emphasizes the sense of refuge that can still exist even within a space designed to contain and institutionally paralyze its inhabitants.

Big Momma's role is especially provocative, as her behavior suggests she is a sentry of sorts to the ostensibly public space of the ghetto. While the ghetto is not contained through physical barriers such as locked borders, or official guards, Big Momma's watchful eye suggests a certain amount of power can be distilled from controlling access to marginalized space and maintaining boundaries against outsiders, further underscoring the notion that ghetto space can still operate, to a certain extent, as a refuge. In this sense, the ghetto of *Ghetto Sketches* is at once open and closed, isolated and penetrable, and, as a result of Big Momma's surveillance, the ghetto street is positioned in this novel as "different from what is usually conceived of as more freely accessible public space" (Soja 161). As a result of such characterizations, Hawkins's representation of the ghetto street also directly invokes Michel Foucault's theories on heterotopology, a critical approach to space and spatial thinking that is especially useful for conceptualizing the ghetto street at this particular historical moment.

A product of modern development, deviant heterotopias are spaces of "otherness" in which "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 5). In contrast to utopias, which are, according to Foucault, "fundamentally unreal places," heterotopias are both real and imagined in that they both reflect back, contain, represent, and invert "all other places … in all their lived similarities and juxtapositions" (158). Heterotopias function as an exertion of power that helps facilitate the illusion of utopic space as a result of the projections and containment heterotopias exert. While Foucault references rest

homes, psychiatric hospitals, and prisons as examples of spaces that contain those whose behavior and actions places them outside the norm, the ghetto street also functions as a deviant heterotopia, especially in the literary imagination[18] (6). It should be noted that early twentieth century American ghettos are certainly heterotopic in their representations as well, but as a result of de facto segregation and urban renewal projects of the mid-to-late twentieth century, the racialized ghettos of the second half of the twentieth century aptly represent Foucault's notion of deviant heterotopias.

Conceptualizing the ghetto street as a deviant heterotopia is productive because, as architect J. Yolande Daniels argues, it is through creative inscription that "the black [can] subvert (although not allude), the primacy of the Western gaze," a gaze exemplified and maintained through the spectacle affiliated with the heterotopic ghetto street (Daniels 217). When Miss Moore comes "sobbing, stumble[ing] across the street" after her purse is stolen, for example, Big Momma's rejection of Miss Moore suggests a subversion of the clinical and categorizing gaze of urban sociology, a discipline that, as Albert Murray argues, has a reputation that "whether consciously or not proceeds on assumptions equivalent to those which underlie the rationalizations of intentional white supremacy and black subjugation" (26). By the end of the chapter, Miss Moore appears defeated as she "staggers down the street, leaving the block as quickly as possible, stockings torn, glasses cracked, hair messed up, muttering savagely to herself" while Big Momma's day proceeds as usual: she "continue[s] gossiping about people, places, and thangs" (110). Miss Moore's defeat and Big Momma's authoritative position suggests a metaphorical undermining, no matter how fleeting, of the authority and power implicit

[18] "Black experience" authors such as Donald Goines, Odie Hawkins, and Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck), as well as the ghetto fiction of authors such as Sister Souljah, Omar Tyree, and Teri Woods are productive examples that illustrate this spatial critique.

to the sociology gaze that, as far back as the Chicago School of Sociology, attempts to diagnose the circumstances of the ghetto and its inhabitants.

Ultimately, the heterotopic constructions of ghetto space in mid-twentieth street lit in particular emphasizes that "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault, qtd in Soja 148). Doing so challenges Robert Park's assertion that ghettos are "the great power of natural forces" (Duneier 35) and instead asserts that they are the product of deliberate manifestations of the state, urban planning, and architecture. As such, urban renewal projects, and city planning in the late twentieth century reinforce and continue to contain black Americans in heterotopias as a method for control. The "localization of poverty" that derives from this containment, a localization that "is accomplished through architecture," argues Daniels, results in "the black city [being] continually uprooted and razed in the guise of the latest urban renewal project to improve the normative quality of life" (216). It is to the impact and influence of such urban renewal projects on the black ghetto that I now turn.

Urban Renewal and the Literary Rejection of the "Obsolete" Street

In addition to the various local, state, and federal government policies that reshaped the ghetto in the first half of the twentieth century, urban renewal and redevelopment projects beginning in the 1950s and 1960s also directly contributed to the (re) segregation of America's cities. In the wake of deindustrialization, suburbs began to grow in wealth, population, and, subsequently, power, and politicians and city leaders feared the collapse of urban centers. The "central-city vitality" that had dominated America's landscape since the nineteenth century was in decline as the effects of deindustrialization, the growth of the suburbs, and the subsequent decentralization of city space led to blight, decay, and increased poverty (Self 26). Faced with this deterioration, urban renewal projects swept the nation. While city leaders couched urban

renewal projects in the language of repair and restoration, in reality, urban renewal meant redeveloping downtown in order to draw white, middle-class consumer money back to the city, a process that required marketing the central city as modern, safe, and attractive. Redevelopment, then, meant bulldozing and removing, instead of renewing and rebuilding, the homes of working-class and poor communities that had populated the area when the industrial city was at its peak. This final section will explore how the goals and rhetoric of redevelopment not only led to the destruction and isolation of numerous communities, primarily working-class communities of color, but also tightly controlled access to what was once, ostensibly, public space. The paradox and contradiction particular to the city street becomes amplified as access to certain streets is prohibited or heavily surveilled depending primarily on one's race, class, and sexual orientation. West Oakland and Los Angeles serves as the primary examples of the effects of redevelopment on poor, communities of color, while *Down These Mean Streets* Piri Thomas and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler illustrate how communities marginalized and isolated by the failure of urban renewal refuse the narrative of obsolescence and decay attributed to their neighborhoods.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, even as urban renewal projects begin to take shape, the street, especially in the cultural imagination, operates as a space of modern potential, revolutionary possibility, and urban beauty. This is due, in part, to the fact that the "distinctive sign of nineteenth century urbanism" was, according to Marshall Berman, the boulevard. This kind of city-street "belonged to the people" and functioned as a "medium for bringing explosive material and human forces together," forces that led to the productive uprisings and revolutions from Paris to St. Petersburg throughout the nineteenth century and up until World War II (165). We can see this, for example, in 1920s Harlem, when soap-box speakers—including the iconic Marcus Garvey—used the vitality and vibrancy of street space to create a kind of university

where "the practice of lecturing and listening on the streets was a means of bringing into public discourse topics and opinions that had little currency in the wider public sphere" (Corbould 873). And, as I have previously discussed, this use-value emerges in street lit too: texts such as H.T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* and Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* both emphasize the centrality of the street for speaking back to institutional power.[19] By midcentury, however, as developers complete freeway and mass transit projects and urban renewal maintains its intensity in constantly transforming and, theoretically, modernizing city space, the street begins to lose its vibrant potential in the cultural imagination.

By the middle of the twentieth century, deindustrialization, freeway construction, and support from government agencies such as the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration for low-interest home mortgages in the suburbs contributed to the general decline of urban America. The central-city vitality particular to the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on boulevards and pedestrian access to and use of the city, drastically begins to shift as early as 1929 when the "hallmark of twentieth century urbanism," becomes the highway, a space "systematically designed and organized to ensure that collisions and confrontations" will no longer occur (Berman 165). Urban renewal efforts beginning in 1930s New York City, for example, heavily critiqued the many side streets that traversed the city, a characteristic of nineteenth century urbanity, as they were no longer conducive to the increased vehicle traffic on city roads. In fact, in support of Robert Moses's urban innovations in New York City, architectural critic Siegfried Giedion argued the city street should no longer be "permitted to

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[19] In *And China Has Hands* the two protagonists Wong Wan-Lee and Pearl Chang take to the streets to march and strike against poor wages and long hours because "picketing is a revolution in a small way," and, crucially, is an act dependent on having access to and use of the street (165). *Jews Without Money* also emphasizes the value of the modern street when Mikey, despondent at the prospects of his working-class life, encounters "A man on an East Side soap-box" whose communist preaching of a workers' revolution "brought hope to [Mikey], a lonely, suicidal boy" (309).

persist" as "there is no longer any place" for it in the modern American city (306). For Giedion, the Triborough Bridge (now the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Bridge), the Grand Central Parkway, and the West Side Highway were expressions of "the new form of the city," one that supported the technological and industrial innovations of the modern moment and destroyed "the framework of the nineteenth century city" (qtd in Berman 306). Significantly, this vision was not limited to New York City. By the 1950s and 1960s, out of a desire to modernize and innovate the city, urban renewal programs, many of them underwritten by the federal government, were underway to help modernize and economically revitalize cities across the country.

Unsurprisingly, resources for revitalizing cities were not distributed equally. The FHA and VA, for example, primarily focused on underwriting "the purchase of new homes, not the restoration of older ones" (Self 140). As such**,** while the goals of urban renewal implied a rehabilitation or revitalization of older neighborhoods, in reality "renewal often meant redevelopment: denuding neighborhoods of low-income housing and small businesses for the benefit of industry and middle-class homes[20]" (139-140). We can trace the effects of this process across the country from the Cross Bronx Expressway in New York that "depopulated, economically depleted and emotionally shattered" a thriving neighborhood of "60,000 working- and lower-middle-class people" (Berman 292), to the I-10 overpass, known colloquially as "the monster", that tore through the vibrant, historically black neighborhood of Tremé in New Orleans, clearing 155 homes, 200 oak trees, and over eighty business (Kaplan-Levenson). And while cities throughout the country illustrate how the street, in the wake of these material changes to city space, loses the explosive potential that characterized its earlier manifestations and instead comes to symbolize "everything dingy, disorderly, sluggish, stagnant, worn-out,

[20] Any federal housing projects that were constructed, argues Mitchell Duneier "were nearly always constructed in historically black neighborhoods, thus furthering rather than eroding segregation" (135)

obsolete—everything that the dynamism and progress of modernity were supposed to leave behind" (317), the construction of three major freeways and a rapid transit system in the California Bay Area, serves as an especially compelling example of how, despite the rhetoric of obsolescence, the street still operates as a central and useful space for artistic cultural production, community building, and political resistance. The decimation of thriving black neighborhoods in West Oakland is especially suited for revealing how the repeated rhetoric that emphasized America's cities were in decline, obsolete, and chaotic[21], primarily functioned as a means of validating and rationalizing the urban renewal programs that, according to historian Robert O. Self, "were more than tinged with white privilege and [reveal] an underlying antiblack reading of urban America" (176).

Oakland's focus on renewing and revitalizing its deteriorating downtown came at the expense and isolation of West Oakland, which in 1950 was the center of black American life in the East Bay since "nearly 90 percent of the city's black population resided in 22 percent of its census tracts concentrated in West and North Oakland" (Self 51). West Oakland residents were initially optimistic about urban renewal promises as housing segregation and city officials' refusal to build public housing[22] created overcrowded living conditions, and homes in need of repair[23]. But urban renewal quickly revealed itself to be more aligned with redevelopment, which

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21 This is not to say that blight didn't exist in Oakland. In the 1950s, urban renewal was still considered "a gilded promise, not a catastrophe" and as a result, many residents were initially in favor of renewal plans if they focused on rehabilitating houses (Self 177). Too often, however, urban renewal meant the demolition of homes and the relocation of the primarily black residents into neighborhoods already suffering from overcrowding and lack of appropriate housing (143).

22 Postwar housing in Oakland, especially West Oakland was a major concern for activists in midcentury Oakland. Yet, calls for public housing were met with stiff resistance especially by real estate boards who "opposed state intervention in the buying, selling, and renting of residential space that lowered, rather than raised property values and rents" (Self 73).

23 Procuring a loan to support home repairs was extraordinarily difficult if not impossible for these residents as the designation of African American and mixed-race neighborhoods as 'highrisk' for loans inclined banks not to make capital available for home repair" (Self 142).

meant bulldozers and demolition of housing, rather than renewing existing housing, and "symbolized what became widely known nationwide as 'negro removal'" (140). Redevelopment of downtown Oakland was at the forefront of the agenda as the process was to be about "economical revival not as a means to solve social problems" (143). Thus, rather than revitalize older homes, Oakland's plans for a more attractive and economically strong downtown meant condemning large swaths of property, seizing property through eminent domain, and then "redevelop[ing] vast stretches of the city's principal black neighborhood" (138) in order to bring the middle class consumer's money back to downtown. The construction of major highways and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), which were designed to serve suburban commuters, downtown Oakland, and San Francisco, made this goal a reality and essentially reengineered the spatial layout of West Oakland, wreaking havoc and destruction for the black neighborhoods in its path and isolating them from "multiple centers of power and economic activity in the Bay Area" (159, 195). The three major interstate highways, for example, "divided West Oakland into odd, incompatible units, [and] isolated neighborhoods from downtown," a process which only served to further the containment strategies of the city's de facto segregation (150).

In the wake of these redevelopment projects, many prominent and thriving businesses were forced to close as the "incompatible units" of West Oakland made it difficult, if not impossible, for residents to access and patronize the various businesses lining the street.[24] BART in particular decimated the heart of a "thriving commercial and entertainment district" on Seventh Street (152). Before the city's decree to "clean out West Oakland" came through, West Oakland was "a beautiful place" according to newspaper reporter Tom Nash (qtd in Self 157).

[24] The Grove-Shafter freeway in particular, for example, created a "huge physical barrier in what had once been a walking corridor" (Self 158), preventing the productive forms of contact and expressions of agency that can occur the simply by walking along crowded city streets.

Seventh Street in particular was "vibrant" and populated with restaurants, "'meat markets, grocery stores, liquor stores, furniture stores'" (qtd in Self 157). Once the city designated it as space for the above-ground line of BART, residents and business owners were kicked out, the community was bulldozed, and remained vacant for ten years as bureaucratic entanglements delayed BART construction (157). Despite city planners' claims that BART would "[knit] the region together" and give residents the ability to move freely around the entire Bay area, BART isolated West Oakland socially and economically (194). With the construction of three new highways and BART, West Oakland's marginality was not just an abstract, symbolic concept, but a spatial materiality as money and transportation literally bypassed the city.

Yet, many West Oakland residents did not accept the narrative of obsolescence and marginality that came to characterize their neighborhoods and streets in the wake of urban renewal. Instead, community activists focused on revitalizing, securing, and investing in their neighborhoods as a way to fight for justice and equality centered on the "the social and spatial arrangements of the ghetto" (193). For example, in response to the isolation, segregation, and unequal employment opportunities BART imposed, a collection of grassroots organizers operating under the acronym JOBART (Justice on Bay Area Rapid Transit) "sought to preserve West Oakland as a viable neighborhood … rather than a liminal space on the margins of metropolitan life" (195). Community organizers like JOBART, not only refused the rhetoric of obsolescence, but also, as a group " whose political consciousness had been forged in the 'ghetto' or 'community' where, working among considerable poverty and disillusionment, civil rights employment remedies seemed abstract at best and class-biased at worst" (194), took to the streets to further their agenda and renew the possibilities inherent to a space deemed sluggish and worn-out. On Job Sunday, in June 1966, for example, hundreds of marchers took to Telegraph

avenue in order to protest and draw attention to "four hard-core Jim Crow unions" and BART planning and design which "'collaborated with and condoned discriminatory practices" (197).

The rise of the street tough Black Panthers further illustrates the central role the city street played in facilitating challenges to civic and federal institutions that contributed to or underwrote the decline of working-class, urban black neighborhoods in the middle of the twentieth century. Oriented around street culture, the rhetoric of self-determination and Black Nationalism, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale wanted to "reawaken" the ghetto to its full potential and made the ghetto streets essential to their mission and distribution of their message. The Panthers used the streets to demonstrate communal strength and attract more followers, hold police accountably by tracking police cars as they drove through the neighborhood, and provide space for intellectual and political debate. The street corridor that stretched from West Oakland through to South Berkeley, for example, "formed one of the most vibrant political landscapes" of the period as street-corner rap sessions, street lecturers, and reading groups formed in and around the space of the street (224). The Panthers' rhetoric of self-determination at this particular historical moment also emphasizes, once again, a desire to assert agency and control over not only ghetto space but the narratives that describe and characterize the space and its inhabitants as well. In using the street, especially, in the case of the Black Panthers, the ghetto street, as a means to generate a sense of communal visibility and demand political and economic power, the Panthers and other grassroots activists such as JOBART reclaim the "stagnant" street and revitalize its political possibilities and potential.

A similar revival of the radical potential of the "stagnant" street can be found in street literature around the country at this time as well[25]. In the aftermath of what city planners termed

[25] For an example of street lit that explicitly rejects a narrative of obsolescence in the streets of Oakland see Tommy Orange's 2018 novel *There, There*.

the, “reengineering” of urban space, many residents of isolated, bulldozed, and/or segregated neighborhoods wrote new narratives of the city, ones that specifically drew attention to the possibilities and potential that continued to exist within the confines of the marginalized ghetto. Significantly, these revivals do not attempt to trivialize or romanticize the danger, poverty, and violence that do exist within this space. Piri Thomas’s 1967 memoir *Down These Mean Streets* recounts his experience growing up in Spanish Harlem and the temptation to fall into the habits of the street: a “deadly consolation of drugs, street fighting, and armed robbery” that ultimately results in his arrest and imprisonment for shooting a police officer (paratext). In the afterword, he writes explicitly, “it was my hope that exposure of such conditions in the ghetto would have led to their improvement”; instead, the “same old Mean Streets” are worse (337). Significantly, while the lack of institutional and systemic support to revitalize the ghetto streets portrayed in his memoir leads to crumbling infrastructure and violence, the ability of individuals to reclaim this space for their own use pulses within the text as well. For example, early in the novel, “the streets of Harlem make an unreal scene of frightened silence at 2 a.m.” and for a young Thomas the “crazy noises” the street reflects back terrify him as “the clatter of a garbage-can lid knocked off by a hungry cat, [and] a broad moaning in pain…” compel him to run home (4). And while much of the fear and danger of this street scene rests in Thomas’s imagination, a more physical danger exists too: After convincing Dopey, a “lop-sided looking kid who was always drooling at the mouth” to drink “dirty street water,” Thomas and his friends quickly learn “the gutter was more dangerous than we knew” as Dopey eventually succumbs to the poison of the street gutter bacteria (15). Thus, the danger the streets pose in this scene clearly aligns with the dominant cultural narrative that of the city street is dirty, unnecessary, and antimodern. Yet, Thomas’s

novel offers a more nuanced view of this street precisely because it tempers the dangerous reality with the elements of community, pleasure, and play.

This nuanced approach to the street not only allows the neighborhood to derive a sense of agency, power, and possibility from the street, but also returns a sense of agency to the street itself. For Thomas, the streets, while violent, frightening, and potentially deadly, are also part of his "bright *mundo": "*...with its thousands of lights, hundreds of millions of colors/ Mingling with noises, swinging street sounds of cars and curses/Sounds of joys and sobs that make music./ If anyone listens real close, he can hear its heart beat" (ix). Contrary to urban discourse that claims the city street is "stagnant" and "worn out," then, Thomas's argument that one needs to listen "real close" to find the heartbeat of the street suggests a vibrant vitality, one that is not immediately noticeable and can be overlooked, especially by those considered outsiders. By identifying the beating heart of the street, the novel refutes any notion of stagnancy and instead revitalizes the street in its ability to shape and be shaped by social life. It is in this manner that Thomas, and other street lit authors like him, can celebrate the streets while also accounting for the way space, rather than existing as an "empty void", is filled with "politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives and challenging us to engage in struggles over geography" (Soja 19).

One of the key "struggles over geography" that characterizes the latter half of the twentieth century is the regulation of and control over who has access to public spaces, including city streets and sidewalks. Because of this regulation, the productive, chaotic contact on the streets that were so generative for the emergence of the ghetto pastoral and other "remarkable new forms" (Williams 46) at the turn of the century begins to disappear. In an effort to reverse the approaches of those such as Siegfried Giedion, Robert Moses, and midcentury urban renewal

efforts that prioritized advances in transportation[26] over healthy and diverse cities , Jane Jacob's magnum opus *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) challenges their disregard for and asserts that a city's streets and sidewalks are a a city's "most vital organs," and the cultivation and protection of these spaces must be at the center of urban planning and design because the safest streets are those used "heavily and constantly used by people of every race and background" (29, 33). Like the boulevard from the nineteenth century, the twentieth-century street, in Jacobs's estimation, flourishes when the collisions, confrontations, and contact that happen on a city street are protected and encouraged.[27] Yet, by the concluding decades of the twentieth century, the urban renewal efforts and redesign of the 1950s and 1960s had resulted in cities that are not only segregated by race and background, but also by culture: the business district is separated from the entertainment district, which is then separated from neighborhoods where people live. This kind of alienation and isolation makes it so that at certain times of the day, certain areas of the city are populated while others are empty, which increases the potential for crime and violence. Neighborhoods that are integrated, and have the resources one needs within walking distance, creates a sense of kinship and familiarity that facilitates productive contact necessary for the growth and health of a city.

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[26] Mike Davis argues that urban renewal in Los Angeles, for example, focused on "convert[ing] once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers and transform[ing] public parks into temporary receptacles for the homeless and wretched" (180).

[27] It should be noted that while this idea is productive for the health and vitality of the city and its streets, Jacobs does not directly address how, as a result of this call for diversity, certain bodies will be safer than others as they use these city streets. For example, in *America is in the Heart,* author Carlos Bulosan describes how the public streets of Stockton, California "were not free to my people: we were stopped each time these vigilant patrolmen saw us … we were suspect each time we were seen with a white woman" (121). In this case, instead of creating a sense of communal safety, diverse mixing on city streets can lead to insecurity and physical violence for people of color. To be fair, Jacobs's description of the safest streets implies city officials support the kind of mixing, usage, and access to public streets she describes. But, because urban planning operates with the intent to order and control the chaos of city space, any discussion of safe streets should recognize that the experience of security and safety will always, to a certain extent, be contingent upon one's race, class, sexuality, and gender.

Because of the reduced possibility for contact across different communities, by the end of the twentieth century, the city street becomes reified in the cultural imagination as a space of isolation, danger, violence, and upticks in rhetorics of safety and security surrounding urban space and city streets increases. While safety in cities is certainly not a new concept, the concluding decades of the twentieth century saw an emphasis on not only prioritizing safe—and what Mike Davis refers to as "disciplined" (356)—contact on city streets, but also remaking the city with safety and security in mind. It is out of rhetorics such as these, argues Samuel Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, that the city increases support for the development of any "social form (or, indeed, architectural form) that shies us away from contact and contact-like situations" because the kind of interclass contact that the city streets once facilitated is now seen as "the source of pretty much everything dangerous, unsafe, or undesirable" (164). It is at this historical moment that city centers, once hubs for working class and industrial jobs, now became "hubs for finance and upscale shopping" in an attempt to bring the middle class consumer's money back to the city (Harvey 69). In New York, this resulted in the 42nd street development project that, in an effort to draw middle-class families back to the city center, removed all "visible signs of sex"—from porn houses and movie theaters to the individuals hanging out on street corners—and resulted in a "a major shift in the discourses of sexuality, sex and gay" that this particular urban space had cultivated (Delany 95, 145). In Los Angeles—a city Mike Davis conceives of as a "master narrative" in remaking the built environment of the city with safety and security in mind—city planners[28] manipulated the architecture of the city to

[28] To be clear, while city planners often bear the brunt of critique, it's important to note, as Mike Davis with Los Angeles, that the late twentieth century saw an "unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort" (180). Therefore, while urban design is not the sole discipline or city unit responsible for facilitating this kind of control over public space, it is important to recognize that it does work in tandem with the disciplining arm of the state to achieve such results.

"police social boundaries" and prevent, as much as possible, diverse contact for middle class consumers, who in the name of "safety" demand "increased spatial and social isolation" from "'unsavory' groups and individuals, even crowds in general" (181). He cites the increase in expansive and sprawling "megastructures and supermalls" as especially illustrative because these structures allow consumers to roam from store to store without having to navigate the chaos and unpredictability of the city street (356).

Los Angeles, in particular, makes for an especially compelling case study of a city rebuilt with safety and security in mind. One of the ways in which this unfolds, argues Davis, is by narrowing access to the city street and other public space where contact and mixing may occur. Like New York's redevelopment of Times Square, Los Angeles sought to remake its downtown core with middle-class and wealthy families in mind. To emphasize the security of the "new Downtown, virtually all the traditional pedestrian links to the old center" were removed (Davis 360). Los Angeles' urban renewal projects from the middle decades of the twentieth century — which resulted in the construction of the Harbor Freeway—already cut off "the new financial core from the poor immigrant neighborhoods that surround it on every side" (360). Thus, the further decimation of the city street came about by removing all pedestrian links—a process which all but guarantees not only control over who access the newly renovated downtown, but also makes it clear who is wanted and allowed in such a space. By preventing, or at the very least, controlling the "democratic admixture" of crowds, renovations to downtown Los Angeles make "heterogeneity virtually impossible" and intensifies tensions among polarized and, subsequently, ostracized groups of people (183). As cities around the country participate in this "national movement toward 'defensible' urban centers," Davis criticizes contemporary urban theory for remaining silent in the face of what is essentially "the militarization of city life" at the

level of the street. Instead, he argues, various cultural products—in particular the science fiction genre and movies and books premised on various impending apocalypses—offer not only critique but also reveal the possibilities of working within, around, and against this "hardening of the urban landscape" (356).

To that end, I conclude this section and chapter with a discussion of Octavia Butler's 1993 dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower* because the novel deftly illustrates how freedom of movement reclaims the city streets and disrupts the systems of containment at work in an urban reality in which the "hardening of the urban landscape" and the subsequent fear of contact on city streets generates a spatial materiality like that of Davis's description of late twentieth century Los Angeles: a "'fortress city brutally divided between 'fortified cells' of affluent society and 'places of terror' where the police battle the criminalized poor" (Davis 70). The fact that the novel works within the dystopian genre also makes for an especially compelling example of the dynamism and flexibility of the literary category I am designating as "street lit." The dystopian elements in particular serve to productively dramatize the consequences of, among other issues, the (re)segregation of cities in the United States.

Set in 2024, Butler's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, lives with her family in a walled neighborhood, a space cut off from the street poor: "squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general" who are "desperate or crazy or both" (10). In the novel, cities across the country have fallen into chaos: firemen will put out fires only if an individual will pay for it, water and food are expensive, and contact with strangers is limited as much as possible. The Olaminas live in their enclosed neighborhood as a means of protection against and to limit contact with strangers whose motivations and behaviors are unpredictable and dangerous. This kind of spatial control creates an atmosphere of paranoia: out on the street, "people are expected to fear and hate

everyone, but their own kind", which includes both neighborhood communities and racial identities (36). While a dystopian novel, this kind of paranoia arguably characterizes twentieth century cities in the United States, especially in the era in which the fear of the Other results in urban renewal projects that segregate and isolate "undesirable[29]" populations. Urbanist William Whyte suggests that it is "out of an almost obsessive fear" of coming into contact with "undesirables" that public spaces are "made defensive" against these populations (156). Yet, these defensive methods—from "private police to state-of-the-art electronic surveillance systems" (Davis 355)—often, argues Whyte, make the situation worse. Walls, in particular, he notes are meant to "keep out bad people" but in reality they have the opposite effect because they provide privacy for, in the case of Bryant Park in New York City, drug dealers and other criminal activity (159). As Jacobs and others have similarly argued, Whyte also emphasizes the need to keep public spaces open to the "hustle and bustle" of the city street as it is actually more effective in keeping an area safe for public use.

For street lit and *Parable* in particular, walls and physical barriers function less as a means of protecting the activity of "bad people" —although, arguably, there is certainly some of that[30]—and more of a method by which certain populations are contained and isolated from easy

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[29] The term "undesirables" has many connotations. Mike Davis seems to use it with a racial and economic connotation in mind. He cites the defensive measures of city officials in Los Angeles to keep the "undesirable" homeless populations off of city benches and out of city parks and notes that neighborhoods with predominantly black and Latino populations have "been sealed off by the police with barricades and checkpoints" (355). William Whyte, on the other hand, seems to characterize "undesirables" as those who perpetuate crime. His examples of policies that aim to keep out "undesirables" revolve around instances in which the "undesirable population was drug dealers (159). Thus, while not a precise term, it is useful in that it can account for a range of populations based on the sociocultural and sociopolitical issues affecting the built environment of a particular city in a given historical moment.

[30] See: *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos, *The Man with the Golden Arm* by Nelson Algren, *Native Son* by Richard Wright, *Corner Boy* by Herbert Simmons, *The Scene* by Clarence Cooper Jr., *City of Night* by John Rechy, and, of course, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* by Iceberg Slim, and most hardboiled detective fiction, especially *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett. Of course, "bad people" is a subjective term and many of these texts also play with and challenge, to varying degrees, that association. Ultimately, these novels serve as examples of the kinds of street lit that use walls, side streets, and darkened alleys to facilitate certain elements of criminality—a term also, arguably, played with in these novels.

access to the rest of the city. When they appear in street literature, then, walls and physical barriers tend to symbolize, both literally and metaphorically, the inability to live, move about, and wander freely through city space. While the wall surrounding Lauren's neighborhood is meant to protect them from the "street people" that lurk outside, the first 150 pages of the novel revolve around Lauren's concern about the inefficiency of the wall, the sense of isolation and entrapment it imposes: "In L.A. some walled communities bigger and stronger than this one just aren't there anymore," she tells a neighborhood friend, "Nothing left but ruins, rats, and squatters. What happened to them can happen to us. We'll die in here unless we get busy now and work out ways to survive" (56). The possibility of dying behind a barricade that is meant to provide safety and security underscores arguments made by urbanists like Jacobs and Whyte that the possibility for safety and security increases when individuals can not only interact freely with each other, but also watch out for each other. When Lauren's father disappears and the neighborhood wall is finally breached, Lauren's survival depends on adhering to this theory of urban space and reclaiming the public street as a space in which freedom of movement, and the possibility of coming into contact with a variety of individuals actually enhances the space's sense of possibility and productivity.

After spending the first half of the novel focused on containment and an inability to move freely and safely throughout the city, the second half emphasizes movement as a means of survival. In this instance, Lauren and her crew are not just reclaiming city streets but transforming the entire freeway system: "we became part of a broad river of people walking west on the freeway" (176), she writes, as they begin their journey traversing the entire length of California on foot. Not only are the pedestrians reclaiming space designed specifically for car, but also the comparison to these pedestrians as a "broad river" evokes the eroding power of

water in which rivers have the capacity to cut through landscape and make new paths. Unlike the construction of the freeways in which families and lives were displaced and uprooted in advance of a new path, the new paths being created by this "broad river" of pedestrians centers the power and agency of the walker—a form of movement that in its very essence can evade disciplining by systems of power.[31] Significantly, Lauren notes that this broad river is also made up of "a heterogeneous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move with babies on backs or perched atop loads in carts, wagons, or bicycle baskets" (177). As a result of the diverse perspectives that characterize her mobile community, Lauren and her companions are able to survive and resist the rampant and animalistic greed, violence, and suffering that characterize those cut off from one another. The diverse and variable contact that the space now facilitates suggests the act of taking over the freeways symbolizes an act of resistance against "the controlling forces of homogenization"—forces that depend on regulating and isolating difference as a means of social control—and an act of resistance against the very structure that, in many ways, helps facilitate this sense of segregation (Soja 99).

In categorizing *Parable* as street lit it is significant that much of the novel takes place in and amongst the freeways—a space that is, arguably, more "road" than "street." As I have mentioned previously, it is during the historical moment in which these freeways are constructed that poor and working-class communities are razed and the city street is, as Jane Jacobs so poetically puts it, "casually disemboweled" in terms of its significance (354). Freeways and roads become symbols of the future and the street becomes a pot-holed relic of the past. And yet, in *Parable* this dichotomy is flipped as the freeways are reclaimed and in so doing, arguably,

[31] In subsequent chapters I will discuss in detail how Michel de Certeau conceptualizes walking as a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (98) that returns a sense of productive chaos and unpredictability to the order and control urban planners, geographers, and designers try to impose. We can see the beginnings of this at work here with *Parable*.

become more like city streets in all that they offer. Lauren's description of their movement through this space is even reminiscent of directions one would give while driving: "We walked down to the freeway—the 118—and turned west. We would take the 118 to the 23 and the 23 to U.S. 101. The 101 would take us up the coast toward Oregon (176). The explicit connotation of the "118 to the 23 and the 23 to U.S. 101" evokes the kinds of directions that make sense when traveling by car precisely because of the magnitude and length of the freeways allows for this kind of broad generalizations and was meant explicitly to circumvent the tight and frequent turns characteristic of traveling on smaller city streets. In drawing this comparison, the text elevates the act of walking supplants the primacy of the automobile and in so doing returns a sense of agency and primacy to the pedestrian—a status lost amidst the innovations of the first half of the twentieth century.

It should be noted that the connection between the space of the street and subsequent possibilities for freedom, agency, and survival is not, by any means, a romanticized view of the city street. Part of what makes street lit effective in its representations of the city street is its ability to simultaneously affirm the sense of freedom and agency while also being a space of oppression and danger. This holds true for *Parable* as well. Lauren's decision to leave her neighborhood and travel north on foot is not a decision that happens easily or freely. While she spends the first half of the novel encouraging people to start considering the possibility that they cannot stay hunkered up behind their wall forever, she ultimately decides to leave because her neighborhood is attacked and her family murdered. Once they set foot outside of the wall, the street is not a place of peace: "people get killed on freeways all the time," she laments (178) and explicitly notes that her physical strength and educational training can serve her well in most environments, but she's "stupid out [on the streets]" (181). While the tension between book

smarts and street smarts is not a new concept, it is part of a particular ethos of street narratives. Instead they find themselves relying on the knowledge and experience of Zahra—raised on the streets until she was sold into marriage by her mother. “It’s bad out here,” Zahra confirms, “but most people make it if they’re careful. People weaker than us make it—if they’re careful” (183). It is this paradoxical relationship to the street one in which the street is both liberating and oppressive that the street emerges as more than just a background or setting for the novel and becomes an active space that is as much a product of social life as it is a shaping force (Soja 7). While this does not diminish the potentially oppressive and violent experiences, situating the street as a space that simultaneously is created and has the capacity to create suggests it is not an empty space that can be used by disciplining powers solely for the purpose of containment and control, but can instead be used to resist these forces by the very populations being contained and controlled. For *Parable*, the street is simultaneously a place of violence, unpredictability, and oppression, but it is also a space in which they are able to move freely and use it as their ticket out.

The agency derived from the ability to move and wander freely on the city streets remains an essential component for performances and thematics of choice in street literature. In the novels that follow I take a more detailed look at how exactly the texts are not only responding to changes in the material environment during their particular historical moment, but also how choice and the ability to wander freely through the city is impacted by these various realities.

Wandering the Early Twentieth Century Street in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*

In 1925, urban sociologist Ernest Burgess theorized a model that sought to explain and organize the rapidly expanding cities across the United States. This model of concentric circles divided the city into five different zones and revolutionized the discipline's approach to understanding the layout of cities—influencing future sociologists from William Julius Wilson to Ali Madanipour, and critical geographers from Edward Soja to David Harvey (LeGates 150). The zones radiate outward from the central business district with commuter zones and single-family dwellings on the outskirts of the city center. These single-family homes exist in areas labeled on the map as "bright light area[s]" and "restricted residential district[s]" and are explicitly contrasted against the "area of deterioration" just outside the central business district (Burgess 153). While the outer circles lack any sort of explicit ethnic or racial markers, it is closer to the city center that the "area of deterioration" becomes associated not only with vice, but also the "Black Belt," "Chinatown," the "Slum," the "Ghetto," "Little Sicily," the "Underworld" and, the "rooming house district," or the "purgatory of 'lost souls'" (153). According to the map, these "'bad lands' with their submerged regions of poverty, degradation, and disease, and their underworlds of crime and vice" congregate in the area of the city closest to the center and, as the map implies, are affiliated with racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods (153).

While Burgess's explicit correlation between race, space, and degradation is not a novel approach,[1] the act of mapping these associations is a modern approach that certainly works to reify their validity in the sociological and larger cultural imagination, trapping, if not physically

[1] W.E.B du Bois, for example, created a map of black neighborhoods in Philadelphia in order to, in part, distinguish the qualities and characteristics of the "submerged tenth" and the "talented tenth". See the introduction for more information on this.

then socially, those living within the defined zones. That said, Burgess concedes that "neither Chicago nor any other city fits perfectly into this scheme"; he argues that the mobility and waves of "succession" that characterize movement in the city suggest this map is constantly in flux (153). Yet, despite this emphasis on mobility, the area of deterioration, remains, he argues, a space of "decay, of stationary or declining population" (155). This, of course, suggests that while there are no physical borders or walls that prevent those living within the area of deterioration from moving freely about the city,[2] certain bodies are theorized, from the outset, to be more mobile. In fact, Burgess expects certain groups of immigrants to overflow—due to the "tidal wave" of newly arriving immigrants—from the area of deterioration into areas of "second settlement" (153). Immigrants who are established and, ostensibly, more assimilated to American society move out to these "areas of second settlement." Yet, as Burgess's map of Chicago indicates, racial and ethnic markers directly influence the possibility of assimilation. For example, Burgess labels the "area of second settlement" as "Deutschland," revealing that it is whiteness—more than an overflow from the "tidal wave" of newly arrived immigrants— that operates as a prerequisite for mobility beyond the area of deterioration in Burgess's theorized city (153).

Therefore, while Burgess's theories were/are largely influential and significant for sociology's attempts to understand the early twentieth century American city, it is the reification of theories that link space, race, and degenerate behavior in the cultural imagination—and the subsequent generalizations and explanations applied to those living within these spaces—that captures the core, fundamental tension between street literature and urban sociology. It also

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[2] And in fact, he expects certain groups of immigrants to overflow—due to the "tidal wave" of recently arriving immigrants—into areas of "second settlement" (153). These areas are inhabited predominantly by assimilated immigrants and, on the map of Chicago in particular, are described only as "Deutschland," revealing, of course, the centrality of race (more specifically whiteness), in order to move beyond the area of deterioration (153).

explains street literature's vested interest in asserting nuance, complexity, and mobility to these "areas of deterioration" and the inhabitants that reside within its seemingly immovable borders.

The increased popularity of ethnic writing in the early twentieth century not only illustrates the desire to assert this claim of modern complexity, but also reveals the profound effect—both for literary production and for the composition of the city itself—that increasing immigration rates in US cities has for this particular historical moment. In 1907 alone, over one million immigrants arrived in the United States and by 1920, "about half the nation's population was first-or second-generation immigrant and in the big cities the proportion was still higher" (Douglas 304). Despite nativist sentiments[3] that attempted to block immigration from southern and eastern Europe, African American migration from the southern United States to northern cities and Mexican immigration to the United States continued to increase during the first few decades of the twentieth century. In this "newly expanding and overcrowded modern city" (Williams 44), contact on the street between people of "different registers, dialects, languages, consciousness and cultures" (Thompson 21) made for an "intense and visually and linguistically exciting process … from which remarkable new forms emerged" (Williams 46). These "remarkable new forms" included narrative experimentation with linearity, aesthetics and themes of alienation, isolation, and distrust of technological innovation, creating the literary and cultural

[3]I want to briefly note here, that at the turn of the century, nativist sentiment was especially strong. Ernest Burgess, for example, viewed the increasing immigration rates as an "invasion of the city" (155) and lawmakers passed the National Origins Act of 1924 that barred millions of immigrants from entry by citing "racial exclusion laws and quotas" (Keresztesi 63). The National Origins Act in particular "limited immigration to 2 percent of each nationality as reflected in the 1890 census" and excluded Japanese and Chinese immigrations entirely (63). Driving these xenophobic laws and quotas of course were nativist theories and beliefs intent on defining what it means to be "American." See Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* for more on how claiming an American identity transformed from an identity that could be attained through citizenship and political participation to one based entirely on a cultural inheritance still intimately connected to the "essential contours of racial identity"—namely, whiteness (13). Sonnet Retman notes, too, that "though African Americans and Native Americans were included within the imaginary purview of the nation's original peoples, they were still denied he material prerogatives of proper citizenship" (14).

conditions for a "truly impressive" production of "ethnic prose (Sollors 39). In this "truly impressive" amount of ethnic prose, the street becomes a central and ideal space for exploring the effects, limitations, and possibilities of the "dynamic and progressive modernity" particular to the United States in the early twentieth century (Williams 44).

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* is an example of one of these "remarkable new forms" in tension with the dominant discourses of the political, cultural, and historical moment that tried to understand, conceptualize, and explain, the racial, spatial, and social aspects of what it meant to be modern. While not as iconic as Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*, *Bread Givers* is one of the earliest examples of the ghetto pastoral and was "widely read and debated" in the immediate wake of its 1925 publication (Denning 232). Additionally, as with Gold's text, *Bread Givers* is "in some sense autobiographical," though marketed as fiction and tells the story of a Jewish American woman living in tenement housing in New York City's Lower East Side (v). In celebrating America for its grandeur and the possibilities of choice, *Bread Givers* fits within the themes of much of multi-ethnic literature of the period. Ethnoautobiographies, for example, often demonstrate the assimilationist capabilities of their respective groups by flashing their accomplishments, identifying their achievement and potential for upward mobility with the respective ethnic group as a whole and with America (Sollors 44).

Yezierska, to a certain extent, works within this expectation: throughout the narrative, the protagonist and narrator, Sara Smolinsky, recounts tensions within her family as her mother, Shena, and religiously orthodox father, Reb, attempt to maintain the traditional values of the country they left behind (the "Old World") through their daughters who are entranced with the wonder and freedom available to them in America (the "New World"). The novel focuses on Sara's life events between the ages of ten and thirty as she leaves Hester Street to pursue her

dream to become a schoolteacher. Throughout the narrative, Yezierska emphasizes the importance of hard work and continually describes Sara as having a "fierce determination" (32); she celebrates America as a "new golden country, where milk and honey flows free in the streets" (7); and uses Sara's love for education and desire to "learn everything in the school from the beginning to the end" as a sign of her dedication and commitment to the American dream (162). Of course, Yezierska's emphasis on individual choice also risks fulfilling the "expected and idealized Horatio Alger, rags-to-riches" approach that contributes to the mythology of the accessibility and attainability of the modern American Dream: if one simply works hard enough, anything is possible (Keresztesi 71). In stark contrast to the goals outlined at the beginning of the novel, however, the narrative concludes with Sara married to a school principal, confronting the realization that she is now where "[she] had started twenty years ago when [she] began [her] fight for freedom": she cannot outrun the "shadow of the burden" that is her duty to her father—and the Old World he symbolizes—as his ailing health and isolation requires her to invite him to live with her and her husband (295). Therefore, while Yezierska certainly works within assimilationist expectations for ethnic writing at the time, her novel is also distinct in that her use of choice operates as a rhetoric that simultaneously signals her belonging to and critique of these American mythologies. This narrative, then, of a "willful daughter, convinced of her own right to make choices" (Harris xii), emphasizes not only the possibility of choice that America offers, but also hints at the "individual perversions, nightmares, fears, [and] human failings" characteristic of the "free standing individualism" of American authors "who were not ethnically marked" (Sollors 42).

As such, this chapter argues that Yezierska uses the rhetoric of choice as a means to subvert the expectation that, as a Jewish, immigrant woman, her novel can somehow speak for

the life experiences of her entire ethnic group.[4] Yezierska's use of choice operates as a rhetorical move that signifies a deliberate rejection of dominant discourses that 1) theorize generalizations about entire ethnic and racial groups that end up positioning those that live in the ghetto as primitive and, therefore, pre-modern and 2) contain and control immigrant populations on the premise of determinism—an emphasis on choice, after all, explicitly refutes any claims to the biological as explanations for degenerate, group-affiliated or primitive behavior.[5] As a means to further reject the disciplinary move to contain, marginalize, and isolate particular groups within "areas of deterioration" (Burgess 153) Yezierska also emphasizes Sara's ability to move and wander about the city. While Sara is not a *flâneur* in the traditional, European nineteenth century use of the term (i.e. white, male, and bourgeois), I read Sara's movement throughout the city as closely aligning with aspects of *flânerie* and as such unlocks the "adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity" particular to the modern urban wanderer (Parsons 41). *Flânerie* in the ghetto pastoral, then, suggests "an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity" (Parsons 41) and in doing so, explicitly reject the disciplinary attempts of sociologists like Ernest Burgess to theorize and physically map ghettos—and their

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[4] It should be noted that exploring individualism was not limited to the ghetto pastoral. Certain ethnoautobiographies at the time also played with and subverted the expectations of group representation. For example, in addition to correcting stereotypical representations of Jews, speaking to her group's assimilatory capabilities, and celebrating the beauty of the "American Dream," Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* was also critically recognized for balancing "both the individual and ethnic aspects of the autobiography" (Sollors 74). That said, Mike Gold despised Antin's book for her overly enthusiastic celebration of America that did not adequately critique social inequalities: Antin, argues Gold, is a "bright slum parvenu who wrote that exuberant book of gratitude … America's slums could never dim the faith of Mary Antin in the spirit of '76 for she and her type have climbed up into a place in the bourgeois sun and they are grateful—so grateful for their deliverance" (74). As such, one could argue that in addition to operating in separate genres (fiction vs autobiography), the ghetto pastoral often *claims* to more accurately reflect the realities of life in the slums and ghettos of the early twentieth century United States and perhaps, to a certain extent, isn't as burdened by the politics governing the ethnoautobiography.

[5] It should be noted that while determinist and imperialist-inflected theories of ghetto space characterized the dominant methodology, not all sociological theory of this particular historical moment agreed with that approach. W.I. Thomas, for example, departs from the biological, social, and economic determinism that characterized much of early twentieth century urban sociology and asserts that especially for those who have recently immigrated from other countries to the United States, "personality, and even the whole life of an individual, are the products of choice" (Cappetti 76).

residents—within static categories and as existing beyond and outside of the bounds of modernity. Therefore, reading Yezierska's Sara as embodying characteristics of a female *flâneur*—or as some have argued a *flâneuse*[6]--reveals not only the importance of freedom of movement through city space but also returns a sense of modern potential and dynamism to the pedestrian's experience of the city street.

I begin by discussing how the philosophies of modernity impact the spatial layout of the city and the ability to move within and through its various borders and fragments. This is significant for street literature because its embodiment of the ethos of the city situates it within the metropolitan center of empire—thereby benefitting from and, to some extent, furthering the imperialist and civilizing goals of the modern city. That said, its general estrangement from dominant cultural thought and discourse suggests a complex negotiation with the "dominant cultural logic" governing who and what constitutes the modern in the first few decades of the twentieth century. I then briefly discuss the tension between "modernism" and "ethnic modernism." While the insistence on this distinction risks affirming essentialist discourses, it is useful for the purposes of my argument because the separation not only mimics the physical spatial separation that also segregated many authors of ethnic modernism from the primarily male and white authors of "high modernism", but also draws attention to how, as a result of this figurative and literal separation, ethnic modernist authors made it part of their modernist project to push back against discourses that sought to contain and control them—both figuratively and

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[6] Janet Wolff, for example, argues that women's lack of freedom to move about the nineteenth century city in particular makes it impossible to conceive of a flâneuse. Griselda Pollock likewise argues "there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure" (Parsons 5). Furthermore, the 1990 concise version of the OED dropped the feminine gender construction of the French word (17). Yet, scholars such as Parsons and Lauren Elkin suggest there are possibilities for reading how this term, on that is "at once too vague and too exclusive," might adapt and evolve to make room for the flâneuse after all. Regardless, street lit's unabashed use of the urban wanderer—beyond the traditional use of the figure—reveals how laying claim to the space of the street allows for the performance and expression of individuality and agency.

literally. In doing so they established not only their own agency within the modern experience, but also laid the groundwork for establishment of the literary genre of multi-ethnic American literature. Finally, I turn to *Bread Givers* as an example of how movement through city space—in explicit rejection of dominant discourses that seek to contain Othered bodies—facilitates performances of choice and freedom that, in this case, disrupt and break away from the disciplining discourses that claim to determine who has access to and what constitutes twentieth century expressions of modernity. As "an icon of the architextual aesthetics of the modern urban novel" (Parsons 4), the *flâneur* is a symbol and reflection of nineteenth and twentieth century modernity, and thus offers an especially intriguing figure to read for in *Bread Givers* because it is through movement that Sarah's exploration with and performance of choice is best articulated.

The Modern City

In his seminal work *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman describes modernity as "a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils" that in all of its complexity and intensity has the possibility to "unite all mankind" (15). Yet, crucially, modernity's ability to unite is "a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity" that in the end "pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" (15). Arguably, it is the chaotic, dynamic, bustling city that best captures and reflects this maelstrom. And while this project is concerned with major cities in the United States in the 20th century, it is important to note that around the world the city has become an iconic reflection and symbol of what it means to be modern. And while deciding who and what participates in and belongs to modernity or the modern world is contingent upon a particular perspective—a point I will discuss in more detail momentarily—cities around the world, if one looks closely, offer a nuanced and varied

perspective on this supposedly universal experience of modernity. For example, while cities across the United States –from Los Angeles to Denver to Raleigh—today are (re)prioritizing street culture[7] and (re)claiming the city street for the pedestrian,[8], cities like Bangkok and Karachi are targeting and in some cases eliminating their own street culture[9] in an attempt to modernize—and what some Thai in particular worry will amount to an "ordered and sterile" urban environment, destroying what is "uniquely Thai about Bangkok"(*The Guardian*). Of course, as I have mentioned previously, this appreciation for the city street and the development of street culture in the United States often results in the primarily white gentrification of city centers around the country.

While the "distinctive rhythms and timbres" of modernity vary from century to century and city to city (Berman 18), it is important to note that as a philosophical concept, Western modernity—with its emphasis and, arguably, enforcement of a universal notion of the modern—emphasizes this kind of paradoxical unity through the ideologies put forth by Enlightenment thinkers: ones in which the tenets of the enlightened, modern citizen—individuality, liberty, democracy, tolerance—are, in reality, the purview only of those deemed the subjects of modernity: white, upper-class, men. The enslavement, restriction, and marginality of those

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[7] In November 2018, Los Angeles voted to make it legal for vendors to sell food and trinkets on LA sidewalks. Until the vote, the tens of thousands of vendors that decorate LA's landscape—a "centuries-old tradition that creates vibrant streetscapes, power's the region's economy" and is dominated by women—operated outside of the law resulting in harassment, fines and the confiscation of their goods (Chandler).

[8] Denver is investing 1.2 billion dollars in updating and installing more sidewalks and Raleigh began the "Walk your City" movement in 2012 which describes and maps destinations in terms of walking time. See "The Pedestrian Strikes Back" by Richard Conniff for more.

[9] In April 2017 Thai officials announced they would remove the hundreds of thousands of street food vendors lining city streets and sidewalks in the interest of "cleanliness, safety and order" (Dunlop). In Karachi, the vendors and the "informal structures" they sell their various trinkets out of that spill out into city streets and parks are being bulldozed. The city's mayor, Waseem Akhtar, argues it is because "we need open places. We need gardens, trees, public areas, benches"—a plan that will "catapult Karachi … into modernity" (Ahmad*).*

existing beyond this supposed universal standard are, therefore, seen[10] as Other. Immanuel Kant's reliance on the empirical to not only provide "racialized and sexualized metaphysical insight," but also to theorize that, based on these racial and gendered differences[11], these Othered groups are beyond the bounds of who is considered the subject of modernity—thus, making its tenets of self-possession and self-determination inapplicable[12]--reveals the racism and sexism governing the claims to reason and rationality purported by the Enlightenment (Cervenak 44). For the twentieth century American city, this aspect of modernity emerges spatially[13] through race restrictive covenants, redlining, and the restricted neighborhood choices that spatially controlled various Othered groups—in particular Jews, Chinese, Italians, and African Americans (Duneier 45)—as a means of separating, according to Louis Wirth, their deviancy and "internal social dysfunctions" from the civilized, majority culture (45). By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the marginalization inflicted on Black Americans was so extreme that sociologist Kenneth Clark argued that the black ghetto represented the "institutionalization of powerlessness" and was a reflection of the imperialism within a country's own borders: Harlem,

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[10] And, it should be noted, spatially situated as well as Sylvia Wynter's description of demonic grounds suggests. Katherine McKittrick writes "those who occupy the spaces of Otherness are always already encountering space and therefore articulate how genre or modes of humanness are intimately connected to where we/they are ontologically as well as geographically" (133).

[11] In section 3, of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant writes that the fairer sex, because she is moved by her desires and "entertained by trivialities" and is unable to adhere to reason and the principled, is, by nature, beyond the purview of enlightenment. Sarah Cervenak extends this further and argues Kant's claims suggest women, by their very nature, are not only beyond the bounds of enlightenment but are also resistant to its very philosophies and approaches (46).

[12] Alexander Weheliye argues it is largely through discourses of modernity that race in particular becomes a tool used to differentiate and "discipline humanity into fully humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye 3). This also reveals the reasoning for street lit's preoccupation with not only discourses of choice, but also the impulse to humanize those forced to the margins of society—the shape of which continue to evolve but ultimately share a common origin point with the Enlightenment.

[13] Sylvia Wynter offers the heuristic of demonic grounds for accounting for ways in which "subaltern lives are not marginal/other to regulatory classificatory systems, but instead integral to them" (McKittrick xxv). This approach—one that emphasizes integration rather than Man vs Other—does not work to "replace or override or remain subordinate to the vantage point of "man" but instead parallels his constitutions and his master narratives of humanness (xxv).

he argues, is a "philanthropic, economic, business and industrial colony of New York City" (qtd in Duneier 115). Thus, the spatial layout of the city and the control over who has access to which parts—and subsequent economic, political and social affects—reveals how philosophies of modernity dating back to the Enlightenment directly impact and influence the spatiality of cities in the United States at the turn of the century and beyond.

While this chapter does not focus on deconstructing the limitations, omissions, and pitfalls of the philosophies and ideologies particular to Enlightenment depictions of modernity[14], it is important to recognize that the belief in and enforcement of a singular notion of modernity—and the civilizing[15] ethos it projects—continues to influence not only the spatial layout of twentieth century cities in the United States, but also the movement of bodies through this space. As the iconic and "distinctive form of civilisation", the city encompasses a "sense of possibility, of meeting and of movement" (Williams 1, 6). Sarah Jane Cervenak argues in *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* that for Enlightenment thinkers,

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[14] Even though modernity itself is not the explicit focus of this project, I want to emphasize the centrality and impact this line of thinking has on shaping street lit's engagement with questions of the modern and modernity. While there are many scholars I could mention here, the work of Sylvia Wynter, Alexander Weheliye, Sarah Cervenak, Katherine McKittrick, Monika Kaup, Paul Gilroy, and David Scott, in particular, have been essential for this project. As Wynter's work argues, for example, the universalized notion of Man that emerges out of Enlightenment thinking becomes a "meta-narrative that traps the West's 'Others' within an ordained logic of cultural, political, and economic marginality" (Edwards 13). And, in *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye asks us to consider, plainly, "what different modalities of human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?" (8).

[15] It should be noted that part of this civilizing ethos derives from the "linear, teleological paradigm" that governs Western notions of modernity that requires that a "premodern" civilization's modernity must adhere to a specific definition of/performance of progress—one that replaces "traditional doctrines, social institutions, and everyday practices with their 'modern' counterparts" (Kaup 7). It is Western modernity's insistence that their singular conception of what constitutes the modern and, by extension, the human is universal that obscures the possibility of acknowledging and holding multiple forms and experiences of modernity. It is an awareness of alternative modernities, argues Monika Kaup, rather than the enforcement of a singular modernity that allows us to think constructively about the "impure, hybrid coexistence of the premodern and the modern" (7). For street lit, often the desire to be and perform one's claim to modernity often amounts to this "hybrid coexistence" of what Western modernity deems "premodern" and the modern.

especially Kant, wandering aimlessly—as the *flâneur* so characteristically does—is the opposite of Enlightenment goals of rationality, reason, and, unsurprisingly, linearity. Kant's philosophies, she argues, situate wandering as the purview of the "purportedly unprincipled, adventurous movements of racialized and feminized bodies" (49). Despite Kant's objections, Cervenak suggests the "anti-Enlightenment movement" of wandering is, paradoxically, "both reason's condition and absolute threat" (50). For *Bread Givers* to suggest that wandering in a feminized body results in liberty, individualism, and a sense of self-determination, then, is, arguably, a challenge to Enlightenment thinking and its purported claim to rationality and reason. As such, this inclination to wander illustrates a subversive form of rebellion that the space of the city street makes possible.

Sociologists at the turn of the century relied upon these tenets of Enlightenment as they sought to scientifically study and make readable all parts of the city, including the seemingly "unintelligible fragment" of the city slum (Cappetti 36). One of the ways urban sociology sought to rationalize and make readable the many fragments of the city was, according to sociologists such as Lewis Mumford, Ernest Burgess, Robert Park, and Louis Wirth, by categorizing and organizing the city's inhabitants into "formally organized groups" (Mumford 79). This categorization process helped, in part, to explain the breakdown of demographics for particular neighborhoods, and therefore make the city readable, and the "processes of its growth and change intelligible" (Cappetti 36). Doing so, they argued, required bringing order to chaos and establishing a "semiological relationship among the parts" (36). This disciplinary approach seemed to work for much of the city, but when faced with the particular density, chaos, and poverty of the ghettos, the paradigm broke down: where the city was a "harmonious space," the ghetto was "contagious, degenerative and an unintelligible fragment" (36). It was, as Mumford

wrote in his seminal work *The Culture of Cities,* the "crystallization of chaos" (26). This chaos, sociologists argued, derived from the "maladjustment" of the ghetto's inhabitants—primarily immigrants and rural migrants[16]—to "modernity", an abstraction so often "synonymous with 'city'" (Cappetti 74), and a connotation that reinforces the Othering process of Enlightenment thinking that also suggests self-possession and self-determination are not the purview of those deemed Other.

As such, the immigrants and migrants who inhabited these spaces were often represented and discussed in sociological texts as "'primitives,' 'exotics,' and ultimately 'others' to be civilized, modernized and urbanized"[17] (Cappetti 15). The ghetto and slum soon became characterized as a space for the "naturally deviant," reducing those that lived within its borders as being drawn to their "natural environment," given their disposition and character (44). Significantly, this emphasis on "natural forces" suggested difference was biological rather than cultural, which made it possible for social scientists to ignore the sociopolitical and sociocultural aspects underlying these so called "natural forces." Park in particular came to "understand the city as the spatial embodiment of human nature and to claim that the slum embodied the most 'innate' and 'primitive' traits of that nature" (Cappetti 45). Thus, while imperial rhetoric often situated the Other as existing halfway around the world in various colonized countries, urban sociology employed rhetorics of settler colonialism by positioning urban ghettos and slums within the borders of the United States as symbols and containers for the Other against which

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16 Ann Douglas argues that, at first, the sudden increase in immigrant populations was not perceived as a threat because the "ruling white Protestant elite" believed their rule was "aggressive and disciplined enough to assimilate and 'Americanize' all outsiders" (305). This approach, of course, began to shift as "some of the newer immigrants were visibly different from America's older white population, and they were no longer dispersing themselves across the nation but collecting ominously in vast city enclaves fast becoming 'ghettoes'" (305).

17 Albert Murray argues that by the middle of the twentieth century little had changed in this approach and that for black Americans (and especially those living in ghettos or predominately black neighborhoods) urban sociology that theorized these spaces was used as a means to reinforce "white supremacy and Negro degradation" and occurred as a result of "systematic oversimplifications" of the experiences of those living in these spaces (31).

whiteness "defined moral measure and proper civilization" (Ngo 17). Early twentieth century slumming novels and dialect stories, with their caricatures of and exaggerated dialects particular to the ethnic working class, reinforced this association (Denning 231).

For example, while John Dos Passos' iconic *Manhattan Transfer* is not exactly a slumming novel[18], it does incorporate the slums and ghettos—and the various dialects and registers affiliated with that space in the cultural imagination—that populate Manhattan in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Working within modernist aesthetics, the novel situates the city—a rolling, boiling, swarming mass of innovation, people, and ideas at the center of the modern experience—as a character unto itself. Via its city streets, the novel provides us quick glimpses into the lives of an eclectic mix of characters—from wealthy socialites to recently arrived immigrants to street con men—in order to create a collage of a merciless and vicious city that simultaneously brims with life, oppression, and possibility. Throughout the novel, the streets are populated with hundreds of different dialects, accents, and languages; the cacophony of sound within the "crazy epileptic town" (Dos Passos 649) is not always celebrated or welcomed. Characters use racial and ethnic slurs against those they come into contact with on the streets and wealthy businessmen describe the immigrant ghettos—characterized by the "low Irish and foreigners, the scum of the universe"—as smelling of "stables and the sidewalks were littered with scraps of garbage and crawling children" (Dos Passos 523). The primitivizing description of stables—a term that connotes the rural and therefore the pre-modern—and the implication that children are left unattended to crawl amongst the garbage in the gutter illustrates how the successful projection of an innovative and modern United States required the

[18] Though Michael Denning does argue that despite Dos Passos' activism and his "radical modernism", some of his work verged on reinforcing these caricatures and stereotypes (163, 230).

segregation of populations deemed "Other." [19] This applied, of course, to citizens and immigrants alike, but especially for the immigrants arriving in unprecedented numbers at the turn of the century until their assimilation[20]—part of which required the modernizing process of "replacing traditional doctrines, social institutions, and everyday practices with their 'modern' counterparts" (Kaup 7)—was not only considered complete, but was also considered acceptable[21].

The rise of ethnic modernism, therefore, emerges, in part, as a response to the cultural exclusion from participating in and belonging to the advances that characterized twentieth century modernity. Amongst the rapid technological and social innovations happening around the country—including "modern print technologies, records, sound movies, radio …and the continuing processes of urbanization, industrialization, secularization, and migration" (Sollors 10)—the United States also a saw surge in the sociocultural themes particular to twentieth century modernity: ethnic identification, racialization, and a general sense of alienation (12). While the quantity of ethnic writing may have increased in the decades from 1910-1950, it is important to note that the marginalization of this literature continued—and, arguably, continues to exist to this day—because of the explicit racialization of the author's work based on their

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[19] Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* offers another example of how segregation manifests in urban space in the early part of the twentieth century in the U.S. when Jake delights in the "chocolate-brown and walnut-brown girls" that can only be found on "Fifth Avenue, Lenox Avenue and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street" (8). See too Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* where neighborhoods are identified based on ethnic and racial make-up of its inhabitants: "Dat's a sheeney block" on character tells her friend (250) and when the protagonist David heads to Fifth Avenue with his Yiddish speaking Aunt, he notices his "aunt's loud voice and Yiddish speech … seemed out of place here" (147).

[20] It should be noted that part of successful assimilation requires believing, at least to a certain extent in the "clichéd story of American class ascension—the bootstrap myth" (Retman 5). As Sonnet Retman argues in her analysis of the exploitation of folk in the 1930s as "an anxious product of commercial modernity—not an antidote to it", the successful class ascension story "depends upon impersonation, a performative making of the self into the upwardly mobile, white, and male rugged individual" (6, 5). With its emphasis on whiteness, the very nature of this myth not only racialized processes of assimilation, but also discouraged any sort of interracial working-class alliances.

[21] Despite the "utopian notion of what the country might become", Werner Sollors notes that the United States was "not yet claiming diversity in the spirit of multicultural pride that was to prevail later" (13). Instead, the "age of racial definitions of US citizenship, racist immigration restrictions and eugenicist thought" defined (and still arguably do) the realities of the United States even as ethnic writers "invoked America as an idea" (13).

ethnic or racial identity. In fact, the assertion that a decidedly "ethnic modernism" came into existence during this period underscores a hierarchy that aligns with philosophes and theories of modernity: the distinction between high and low, non-ethnic and ethnic modernisms reifies the racial, sexual, and economic hierarchies implicit within Western conceptions of modernity.

The notion of "peripheral modernisms" and their relationship to and divergence from "American high modernism" (Sollors 64), has been the subject of numerous academic interventions. Many scholars [22]have studied the impacts and effects of black modernisms, and "ethnic modernisms" more broadly as a means to assert the complexity and nuance of modernist styles and approaches often marginalized or blatantly ignored in favor of the "literary high modernism" of Anglo-American and British writers. Werner Sollors in particular argues for using "ethnic modernism," a literary tradition that broadly encapsulates the literary production of ethnic and minority writers in the first half of the twentieth century, as a method for stimulating literary critical engagement and recognition. This need derives from the fact that the work of ethnic and minority authors is considered regionalist "or otherwise to the modernist project" and the fact that literary high modernism grew out of a "racially biased and often xenophobic historical context that therefore necessitated a politically conservative and often prejudiced definition of modernism in America" (Keresztesi xiv). This is paradoxical, of course, because the very foundation of what it meant to be "modern and of the new" was enmeshed and directly

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[22] Houston Baker, for example, insists that any "failure" on the part of the Harlem Renaissance to "provide *vital, original, effective*, or "modern" art" is a result of examining modernism through British, Anglo-American, and Irish creative optics (xiii). The modernism put forth by African American intellectuals in the first few decades of the twentieth century was not about the "stress and anxiety" regarding the influx of new technologies or changes to civilization "but rather an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist, and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males" (4). Louis Chude-Sokei also interrogates the homogeneity—in particular the "false face of national solidarity"—particular to black modernist studies and representations and suggests a better understanding of black modernism and its roots in "cross-cultural, intra-racial encounters, not the least of which featured the necessary performance of an African American identity in a cultural context where Caribbean specificity was explicitly marginalized, at times violently opposed, and often burlesqued" can be explored through Bert Williams whose performances force "us to … restore the dialectical complexities of a black modernism in Harlem" (9).

associated with the rapid increases in immigration of this time period. In fact, Raymond Williams is so bold to claim that immigration in and of itself was "the most important general element of the innovations in form" that accompanied the development of an American modernism (45).

We can see this "most important general element" in the contrasting and at times overlapping representations of and engagement with the modern across high and ethnic modernism. High modernist themes, such as living within a merciless and relentless city, the alienation, isolation, and anxiety as a result of mass culture, print advertising and technological advancement, for example, were not necessarily of key interest to ethnic modernist writers, especially within the ghetto pastoral[23]. "Ethnic modernism" often focused instead on celebrating—rather than opposing—the "American world of modernity[24]" including the benefits of advances in public transportation and other innovations in "technology in the world of labor," the development of a strong sense of community, and the regular contact with a variety of racial and ethnic groups (Sollors 60, 62). This fascination served to dramatize "the features of modernity against the background of a pre-modern community," from which the author's family often recently immigrated (62). Because neighborliness and community were "working-class responses to the alienation and isolation put forth by other forms of modernism" (42), the ghetto pastoral's preoccupation with the street—a space where contact and interactions with a variety of

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[23] While "ethnic modernist writers" often used aesthetics "closely analogues to canonical modernist works"(Keresztesi x), and while, as Michael Denning has argued, the experimental aesthetics of modernism laid the groundwork for the more mainstream acceptance of the genre hybrids and content of the working class, "African American, immigrant, and other ethnic writers may have been less frequently inclined to endorse the modernist strategy of opposing modernity" (Sollors 64).

[24] Sollors' use of the term modernity here primarily aligns with the technological innovations that characterized the twentieth century, but the emphasis on choice and individual expression found in the ghetto pastoral suggests the tenets of the Enlightenment that ushered in Western notions of modernity—freedom, democracy, the rights of the individual and self-possession—were also of key interest and embedded within many, if not all, texts within the ghetto pastoral.

people is part of daily life—facilitates its modernist project of speaking back to discourses that seek to isolate and contain various ethnic and racial groups within the margins of the city.

The Choice to Wander

The streets of early twentieth century New York City in particular were a marketplace of signs and symbols in which "virtually every kind of inexpensive article was offered for sale on the streets" (Sante 61), and "a heavy concentration of wheeled and pedestrian traffic" attempted to travel down refuse covered streets (46). It is this heavy concentration of traffic, whether wheeled or on foot, that forces a sense of community and interaction. As such, while themes of alienation and isolation in the vast metropolis common in "high modernist" texts certainly exist in ghetto pastoral modernisms, significantly, those are not the only perspectives of the city these texts take. Instead, the city more often emerges as "the site of new kinds of human solidarity" and one that emphasizes "the vitality, the variety, the liberating diversity and mobility of the city**"** (43). Anzia Yezierska, for example, titles the first part of *Bread Givers*, "Hester Street" as a way to spatially situate her modernity. And while the community facilitated by this close contact on the streets is characterized by the chaos of the "hollering noises of bargaining and selling," from the "pushcart peddlers yelling their goods" to the "women pushing and shoving each other with their market baskets" and the "noisy playing of children in the gutter," Sara Smolinksy describes the chaos as the "music of the whole Hester Street" that "melted over her like a new beautiful song" (22). Throughout the novel, Sara experiences Hester Street as a space of comfort and familiarity, and at the same time, a space of oppressive and unrelenting poverty. Yet, it is the relationships of the street, ones particular to the metropolis, that "force certain productive kinds of strangeness and distance" (Williams 46) and generate the new and experimental art forms

particular to ethnic modernism, asserting the power of mobility in the face of containment and stagnancy.

It is the popularity of and fascination with the street in the ghetto pastoral that reveals an intense preoccupation with movement in, through, and around the city. And while transportation innovations at the turn of the century—from the streetcar to the automobile—contributed to the rapid pace of movement that comes to characterize the modern period, street lit has a vested interest in the subtle politics associated with walking and wandering the city streets[25] on foot. As a result of the explosive increase in technological innovations in the first few decades of the twentieth century, wandering the city on foot becomes associated with the anti-modern. At the turn of the century, French urban architect Le Corbusier, for example, sought to make the modern European city "coherently planned and rationally perceived" (Parsons 11) and as a result designed straight streets that while "boring to walk in," are efficient for "trams, buses, and motors" to move through and about the city quickly (11). Pedestrians, he argued, should simply avoid the streets prioritized for vehicular movement, and walk instead in the various parks and gardens that crisscross the urban landscape (11). But, this isolation from the rest of the city ultimately resulted in the detachment of the urban inhabitant from the city and from each other. In the United States, Frederick Law Olmsted had a similar vision for using certain sections of the city to bring pedestrians together. In particular, this "father of Central Park," envisioned using public parks spaces where different classes and ethnicities could mix and intermingle in a shared space (Davis 357). As with Le Corbusier's intentions, however, this attempt to manufacture and

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[25] At one point in *Manhattan Transfer*, Ellen Thatcher's "sharp French heels" sink into the "curving automobile road" (598). While she is able to remove her heel and keep walking with no effort, the violence associated with her heel momentarily stabbing the soft, melting asphalt—a space explicitly described as belonging to and for the automobile—reveals a tension between a city once built and ordered around the pedestrian and a city redesigned in service of the dominance of the car. See chapter three for a more detailed discussion of the effects these changes have on the city and pedestrian by the middle of the twentieth century.

control when and where inhabitants come into contact and interact with each other ultimately results in preventing "human movement over the city map and human contact with the street surface," thus "threatening human autonomy" and limiting the creative potential that comes from organic and spontaneous contact the city's streets facilitate (13).

The urban wanderer,[26] therefore, becomes a familiar and essential paradigm for understanding the nineteenth and twentieth century city. Most often affiliated with the commodity culture of nineteenth century European cities, the *flâneur* as a literary representation of city dwellers was arguably made most famous in Baudelaire's poetry and later theorized in the works of Walter Benjamin. In the early decades of the twentieth century the *flâneur* offered a model for understanding the modern city and the increasingly fragmentary experiences that, as *Manhattan Transfer* claims, are a result, at least in part, of the rapid advances in technology and innovation. While Baudelaire does not explicitly use the term, the cast of urban observers that characterize his poetry serves to give shape to aspects of this iconic urban nomad. He implies, for example, that the freedom to wander the city streets observing the comings and goings of its inhabitants was "predominantly the privileges of the man of means … [and] was necessarily the bourgeois male" (Parsons 4). That said, contemporary theory, argues Deborah Parsons, continues to resist a definitive definition that might serve to contain and characterize this elusive and fluid figure. He has become an "increasingly expansive figure who represents a variety of 'wanderings' in terms of ambulation, nationality, gender, race, class, and sexuality" (4). By the dawn of the twentieth century, the *flâneur* of the late nineteenth century—a "gentleman of

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[26] As I have mentioned previously, I recognize both Benjamin and Baudelaire (among others) use of the term "wanderer" (or more precisely flâneur) to define and describe a very particular form of movement through the city. I, however, am deliberately using the term more liberally in order to broaden the scope of not only who might be considered an urban wanderer but also to open up how walking in any form—whether that be with a definitive purpose or, as is the case with the flâneur, as a means to wander to absorb and observe the goings on, and everything beyond and in between—can be a source of empowerment and subversive rebellion.

leisure" who is fascinated by and can "empathize with the crowd" (Parsons 34)—undergoes further transformation and becomes, in the wake of rapid industrialization and commercialization, removed from the street (Benjamin 172). As the Le Corbusier-inspired renovations to the urban landscape impede pedestrian access to the street—and in doing so, destroy the arcades Benjamin adored so dearly—the bourgeois *flâneur* leaves the now inhospitable street and observes his city from the windows and balconies above the street—he is no longer moves physically within the city space. Thus, the *flâneur* becomes, in Benjamin's mind, a figure removed from that kind of chaotic contact and instead attempts to observe the city as a whole, a "totalizing, panoramic, and authoritative viewpoint" that attempts to understand and make familiar the increasing fragmentary experience of modernity (Parsons 36).

With this shift, Benjamin asserts that a different character from the cast of Baudelaire's urban observers best expresses "modern urban consciousness" in the later stages of modernity. As the "vagrant counterpart" of the bourgeois *flâneur*, the rag-picker is able to move about the city and observe and interact with the people, objects, and refuse on the street (36). The rag-picker is less the "detached voyeur" the bourgeois *flâneur* has become and more an active participant with the city in "what is almost a symbiotic relationship" (Parsons 36). The rag-picker moves through the city as "a scavenger, collecting, rereading, and rewriting its history … feeding off the city that he creates from its own fragments[27]" (Parsons 3, 36). Therefore, while the discussions and readings of the *flâneur* in literature are often contained to the nineteenth

[27]Aleksander Hemon's memoir *The Book of My Lives* captures this sentiment especially well. A refugee from Bosnia in the early 1990s, Hemon describes his wanderings around Chicago—his newly adopted city he tries to come to terms with as he longs for the familiarity and connection of Sarajevo, which was currently besieged—as that of a "low-wage immigrant flâneur" (120). While he began his life in Chicago as a "tormented flânuer … longing for Sarajevo" and its streets, it was the very act of walking through the neighborhoods of Chicago that he realizes his "immigrant interior had begun to merge with the American exterior" (127). It is this act of walking and wandering the city that allows him to see "Chicago through the eyes of Sarajevo and the two cities now created a complicated internal landscape in which stories could be generated" (127).

century, it is the "post-Benjamin flâneur"—this rag-picker of sorts—that is a useful and influential "metaphor for urban observations walking" throughout the twentieth century[28] (Parsons 41). This is especially true for street literature where characters are often not the bourgeois figure of privilege, free of responsibilities and thus able to spend the day roaming the city streets. Instead, authors such as Dos Passos and Yezierska have adapted the traditional aspects of the *flâneur* to reflect the intricacies of the urban wanderer in the United States and how the city streets affect and are used differently by different raced, classed, and gendered perspectives. In doing so, the ghetto pastoral rescues, in a sense, the centrality of the street and uses the space to return a sense of autonomy and agency to its inhabitants[29].

Walking or strolling down the street—specifically without an escort—becomes a popular motif for many women authors and female characters especially as more women—from a range of social and economic classes—began to explore the city and its streets[30] and "[enter] the city with fresh eyes, observing it from within" (Parsons 6). It is with this "social influx of women as empirical observers into the city street," argues Parsons, "that aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege is challenged" (6). While Ellen Thatcher's movement through the city in *Manhattan Transfer* is focused more on achieving her materialistic

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[28] That said, I will still use the term flâneur/flâneuse to refer to this archetypal figure as it reveals the deliberate working within and reworking of a particularly classed, gendered, and raced perspective of what it means to be modern.

[29] There is a distinctive scene in Mario Suárez's "Life is But a Tango," for example, where boxer Simón Esperanti's movement through the city encapsulates and celebrates the modern experience. Every time he goes "for a stroll in downtown Manhattan" he walks with an "air of distinction," and acts as an "ambassador without portfolio representing the land of tango and filet mignon" (91). His encounters with friends at Café Antillas, "with the gesticulating Cubans and the beer-loving Mexicans" suggest it is at street level that one connects with friends and comes into contact with and uncovers the nuances of individuality particular to the modern experience.

[30] Virginia Woolf's essay on "Street Haunting," for example, argues that for a woman to wander the streets on her own is an act that allows one to leave behind the identity symbolized by the domesticity of the home and become no longer "quite ourselves." On the street, away from the domestic objects that "express" and "enforce" certain identities, women can "shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers."

and financial desires and less about the pleasure of wandering through the city streets, her engagement with the city—through love, desperation, hate, and fascination—occurs most profoundly at the level of the pedestrian. That said, strolling, roaming, wandering, straying are also terms that, when applied to women in particular, connote a woman who has "violated sexual conventions" in some capacity, whether through the more common assumption of prostitution[31] or, as Rebeca Solnit posits, the simple act of walking itself since "women's travel is inevitably sexual or that their sexuality is transgressive when it travels" (234). While the bourgeois *flâneur*'s power comes from being unremarkable and unnoticed, for example, Ellen's wandering must make a concerted effort to "keep her hips from swaying so much" as she walks passed "two sailors [who] were sprawling on a bench in the sun; one of them popped his lips as she passed, she could feel their seagreedy eyes cling stickily to her neck, her tights, her ankles" (599). While Ellen Thatcher does not explicitly confront the sexual objectification in this scene, her decision to continue to walk despite the harassment of popping lips and eyes that—in their attempt to draw her in—stick to her body as if to contain and construct her movement, reveal a rejection of discourses that spectacularize[32] her movement and seek to discipline and contain[33] the chaos her

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[31] Rebecca Solnit recounts how a woman's desire to go out walking in London in the nineteenth century became grounds "evidence of sexual activity" (239). In 1859, for example, "a young working-class New Yorker named Lizzie Schauer was arrested as a prostitute because she was out alone after dark and had stopped to ask directions of two men" (239). The combination of walking the streets alone at night and pausing to speak to two men was enough evidence to convict her of prostitution and deftly illustrates the intensity with which cities sought to contain movement of certain populations for purposes of social control.

[32] There is a copious amount of scholarship on spectacle and its connotations for a variety of Othered bodies and experiences. J. Yolande Daniel's analysis of the relationship between the spatial and spectacle is especially compelling for this project. She writes of the "spatial and categorical marginalization" of blackness in Amer-European civilization and argues "it is through spectacle that the African diaspora and diasporic (i.e. colonial) controlled space has come to take shape" (197). Space occupied largely by blackness (she cites the black ghetto and the projects in particular) becomes "the site for the latent spectacle" in dominant society (215). See, too, Garnette Cadogan's nonfiction essay "Walking While Black" for an example of one of many pieces that reveals the dangers and complications of walking the street while black.

[33] As Shane Vogel argues, the very act of strolling "challenges sociology's clear distinction between moral regions and regions of proper socialization" because strolling is about relationality and it is the relationships created by the stroller that ultimately critiques the "realism and 'objectivity' of sociology" and its maps (151, 150). Though it

body and movements symbolize for them. Thus, if the classic *flâneur* can be summed up as "a particular kind of man, watching the world go by," a flâneuse, then, is "a liberated woman determined to go where she isn't supposed to" (Elkin 141).

The majority of the scholarship that exists on Yezierska[34] elaborates on this idea further as the majority of her female protagonists are "determined to go where [they aren't] supposed to." In fact, her narratives consistently reflect a feminist ideology that speaks to the experiences of Jewish immigrant women in particular and a desire to subvert and escape the patriarchal dominance and tensions often symbolized by the Old World[35] and the male characters that try to contain women to the domestic sphere. Edith Weinthal, for example, argues that *Bread Givers* critiques the "traditional Jewish cultural norm of valuing women in the domestic sphere alone" simply by having Sara explore the city's streets—a decidedly public sphere—and embrace the modern potential of the city (11). Thus, in reading Sara as a *flâneuse* of sorts, we can see how Yezierska—like many street lit authors before and after her—uses the city street to assert their participation within the "American world of modernity" (Denning 231). After all, it is in America, Sara's father laments "where women are let free like men" (205). Sara's rejection of her father's insistence that she stay home until she is married emboldens her to realize she "must go on and on. And [she] must go on—alone" (208). The repetition of "go on" and the emphasis on doing this "alone" reveals Sara's capacity and desire to move freely about the city as a means

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should be noted that Vogel views strolling as "a walk without aim, yet it is not aimless", which the European models of flâneurie celebrate and are a bit different from Ellen Thatcher's movements described above.

[34] In many respects, Yezierska's metaphorical wanderings, or as Lisa Muir describes it, her transgression of "cultural and religious boundaries working to circumscribe her," models the kind of freedom and agency she writes into her characters (642).

[35] And a term that, according to modernist discourses, connotes pre-modern traditions and beliefs in need of the civilizing effects of Enlightenment rationality, reason, and secularism.

of expressing her independence and autonomy even as various discourses surrounding her class, nationality, and gender intersect and seek to constrain and contain her movements.

Yet, like many scholars who have worked on *Bread Givers*, the consensus seems to be that despite the moments where Sara seems to find possibility or joy in her various independent endeavors—from leaving the domestic realm to attend college to wandering the city streets to choosing her husband for love rather than what her father demands—the novel is ultimately, as Gay Wilentz suggests, "a Jewish lament rather than a happily ever after" (35). Whether this is because she is "suspended between maternal and paternal cultural perceptions, forever attempting to forge a new identity" (Weinthal 13) or because she cannot escape the colonizing power symbolized the various male figures in her life (Muir 636), the dominant reading of her work—and *Bread Givers* in particular—is that a closer examination of the ostensibly happy ending of the novel in which she marries a man she chose for herself, reveals a darker narrative about the inability to escape oppressive patriarchal dominance, even in the United States where women "where women are let free like men" (Yezierska 205).

While I agree with these readings, a detailed examination of how Sara chooses to move through the city and her ability to attain a sense of individuality from this choice is key. For while the city becomes a "place of total isolation and loneliness" that destroys Sara's spirits (Weinthal 12), a closer examination of the text reveals that Sara finds possibility in the silence that accompanies this isolation; it is when she is alone, wandering the streets at night that Sara attains a kind of freedom accessible only through a mindless wandering in the city. For example, after her sister's husband kicks her out of his house and "out in the street like dirt!" Sara wanders the city streets alone: "All night long I walked the streets, drunk with my dreams. I didn't know how the hours flew, how or where my feet carried me, until I saw the man turning out the lights

of the street lamps. Was it already morning?… I wasn't a bit tired, but I was starving hungry" (156). Instead of operating as a space of potential danger, violence, or sexual exploitation, Sara's ability to walk the night streets "drunk" on her dreams reveals the deliberate reworking of the pedestrian experience of the city street and a desire to situate Sara within the modern experience of *flanerie*: the seemingly endless labyrinth of city streets allow Sara's feet to carry her in any direction while simultaneously symbolizing the multidirectional possibilities of her dreams. The description of her "starving hunger" reveals this most clearly as it operates on two levels. On the one level, she is physically hungry and devours "a cup of coffee with two rolls" from an opening bakery (156). On another level, however, this starving hunger also reveals an awakening of an insatiable appetite for the kind of freedom, possibility, and choice her aimless wandering on the city's streets provides. As she eats her breakfast rolls, Sara realizes her evening stroll was the first time she "had been alone since I was born. This was the first time I ate by myself, with silence and stillness for my company" (156). The emphasis on silence and stillness as "company" suggests the isolation she experiences is actually empowering and associated with a kind of freedom and independence from the domestic sphere—where a desire to lay in bed after "coming home from the shop, bones cracking from tiredness" is met with incessant questions, requests and accusations of acting like a "princess" (156). By having Sara derive independence and self-determination as she wanders the city streets, Yezierska transforms the possibilities of the city street, and by extension the larger narratives surrounding ghetto space in particular.

For the ghetto pastoral, subverting and breaking away from this dominant sociological narrative is a key focus. And one of the ways it does this is by reconceptualizing the street as less a container for harboring the primitive and degenerate and more a space that can be used to reveal "unjust geographies of political power" (Soja 37). Significantly, though, these "unjust

geographies,",while oppressive, "can also be enabling, creating the foundations for resistance and potential emancipation" (Soja 37). As I mentioned in chapter one, street literature takes a variety of approaches to this concept—from swearing to fight the oppression of the street like Lutie Johnson does in *The Street* or protecting the street from outsiders and social services as Big Momma does in *Ghetto Sketches*. For *Bread Givers*, it is in the moments of flânerie that Sara momentarily subverts the dominating and oppressive narratives that define and control her sense of mobility. For example, as Sara wanders the various streets that crisscross the city, she reflects, "wherever I went, in the street, in the subway, by day and by night, I had always before my eyes a vision of myself in college" (184). While Sara's emphasis on her "vision" and goals for the future read as a successful tale of upward mobility appropriate for an immigrant narrative of the period, her description of using the streets, both "by day and by night" to move throughout the city in pursuit of her goals suggests "subtle movements of escape and evasion" (Buchanan 100) from discourses that, as a result of her gender and ethnic identity, seek to immobilize her and contain her within a particular location.

This movement through the city remains a key aspect of the novel as it is after she graduates from college, that Sara's sense of freedom, possibility, and confidence derives, in part, from being able to walk down Fifth Avenue in New York for the "first time in [her] life" (238). While there were not, of course, any physical barriers preventing her from accessing this particular street before, Fifth Avenue, with its "wonderful shop windows" was often out of bounds for her economic group. Burgess, for example, theorizes that the "number and intensity of stimulations" that result from moving around the various regions of the city "tends inevitably to confuse and to demoralize a person" so it is better that they stay within a consistency "of the type that is natural in the social control of the primary group" (156). In walking along Fifth

Avenue, then, Sara rejects theories that seek to identify and control her movements based on the "primary group" to which she socially, economically, and ethnically belongs. In doing so, her movement illustrates, as Michel de Certeau has theorized, how simple "pedestrian movements," such as walking, have the capacity to at once work within and therefore "actualize[e] the possibilities" the spatial order organizes while simultaneously "mov[ing] them about and invent[ing]others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform, or abandon spatial elements" (98). This emphasis on Sara's movement through the streets, therefore, works to disrupt the maps of the city that urban sociologists use to justify and explain the "primitive" nature of ghetto inhabitants. As she crisscrosses from street to street, Sara's pedestrian movement has the potential to create "within the planned city a 'metaphorical' or mobile city" (110). This metaphorical city, constantly shifting as a result of the daily movements of pedestrians, has the potential shake a city built "according to all the rules of architecture" with a "force that defies all calculation" (110).

Because the street can be used as a means to evade these dominant discourses, many scenes of choice in the novel take place on the street. Towards the beginning of the novel, for example, ten-year-old Sara, "without waiting for Mother to say yes," chooses to run out onto Hester Street to frantically sell herring (20). With a "voice like dynamite," Sara shouts and yells "with all the burning fire" of her heart and sells all of her herring (23). As she counts her earnings, the "hollering noises of bargaining and selling" transition from an oppressive and unrelenting chaos to "a new beautiful song" that melts over her as she makes her way home (23). While the misery of the street only become beautiful once she has participated and benefitted from capitalist system, the more significant aspect of this scene illustrates Sara's ability to surmount the "smartness" of those who chide and poke fun at a child trying to successfully sell

wares on the side of the street (24). In co-opting the space of the street to make enough to feed her family, a space that not only symbolizes but also directly contributes to the segregation and oppression[36] of Sara and her family, the novel works within systems that seek to oppress in order to find methods of resistance and evasion.

Of course, it is not just Yezierska's use of choice in this novel that makes her novel compelling, but also her subtle manipulation of this dominant discourse as a means to critique modern American rhetoric and to do this through the lens of the modern city[37]. Within the first few pages, in fact, the rhetoric of "milk and honey" flowing through the streets that inspired the Smolinsky family to immigrate is almost immediately qualified as we first meet ten-year-old Sara going "out early every morning, while it was yet dark, and hunt through ash cans for unburned pieces of coal, and search through empty lots for pieces of wood" (7). While the contrast between the fantasy of a golden country brimming with food, opportunity, and resources and the reality of the struggle of immigrant life is well documented in literature[38], this scene illustrates how the desire to be modern—culturally, technologically, and economically—was often especially wrought with contradiction and paradox, and this includes the rhetoric of having the freedom of choice. The fact that Sara must dig through discarded trash and ash for scraps in order to survive certainly critiques the promise and accessibility of the American Dream. And, despite the validity of this critique, Yezierska uses choice as a way to generate a sense of agency

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[36] Edward Soja writes "seen from a critical spatial perspective, underdevelopment processes actively involve the creation of discriminatory urban and regional built environments and a restrictive political organization of space that fix in place a persistent geography of dependent development, cultural domination, and efficient economic exploitation" (40).

[37] In fact, by using Sara's wanderings and empirical observations of the city as a means to critique American Dream rhetoric interrupts the "specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege" that has dominated the literary tradition of writing about the city (Parsons 6)

[38] Just a few examples: Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*, Rudolph Fisher's "City of Refuge," Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote; Or, When Parrots Breast-Feed*, H.T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* and Ann Petry's *The Street*.

for Sara: a few sentences later, Sara "refuses to do it anymore" (7). Despite the poverty oppressing her family, the emphasis on Sara's capacity to choose and resist even small determinations, like the need to dig through ash to find coal, is significant as it resists the notion that her scavenging is noble or representative of "virtuous striving,"—a characteristic of a "middle-class idealization of poverty" (Sante 61). In pushing back against this romanticized view of poverty, Yezierska evades the familiar Horatio Alger myth and redirects the focus to individual choices and subsequent agency of this particular character.

The characters in this novel also often find themselves at the mercy of the landlord who demands the rent "every month of your life, whether you're working or not working, whether you're sick or dying, you got to squeeze out so much blood to give the leech for black walls that walk away, alive with bedbugs and roaches and mice" (27). In addition to having limited choice within a capitalist system that demands payment for property with minimal flexibility, it is the description of "black walls" alive with "bedbugs, roaches, and mice" that suggest the Smolinsky's and their neighbors are—due to poverty and segregated urban space[39]—unable to freely choose a safe and sanitary housing situation. Beyond being forced into a certain spatial location, "poor people," claims Hannah Hayyeh, the Smolinksy's neighbor, are also unable to "help themselves" since "it's the landlords who don't want to fix or paint the houses and yet keep raising the rent" (27). The emphasis on landlords as agents and renters as helpless products

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[39] In "Urbanism as a Way of Life", Louis Wirth suggests that variations in city life gave "rise to the spatial segregation of individuals according to color, ethnic heritage, economic and social status, tastes and preferences" (92). Of course, this kind of naturalist approach to segregation is complicated by later sociologists such as St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton who, in their analysis of racial segregation in particular, broke with the Chicago School of Sociology and asserted that "the distribution of racial and ethnic groups was not "a natural phenomenon" and instead asserted that "restrictive covenants had artificially brought about the black ghetto" (Duneier 74). Furthermore, historian Gwendolyn Wright notes that the increases in immigration between 1870-1890 directly contributed to the highly segregated ghettos whose overcrowding led to the kind of unsanitary characteristics Yezierska describes, but rather than acknowledge it is due to enforced segregation, the dominant opinion asserted that poor housing conditions revealed "evidence of every failing of character, the cause of every social problem and the surest path to improvement" (117). Assimilation, therefore, rather than addressing systemic inequality became the answer.

of circumstance certainly complicates a reading of choice in this narrative[40]. And yet, despite scenes like this, the novel continues to refuse a purely naturalist aesthetic that repeatedly emphasizes the oppressive and unrelenting aspects of the characters' life circumstances. Instead, Yezierska weaves in moments of seemingly paradoxical agency and empowerment as a means of her asserting her engagement with modernity.

*Bread Givers'*s refusal of a purely naturalist aesthetic reveals the hybrid aesthetic central to the ghetto pastoral: this aesthetic contains "elements of naturalism tempered by the idealism of the pastoral" (251). By rejecting the pessimistic naturalism of earlier iterations of urban literature that proceeded from the "philosophy that sets man in a mechanical world and conceives of him as being victimized by that world," Yezierska not only speaks back to the dialect stories that often "turned out caricatures of Jews like sausage meat for the popular weekly and monthly magazines (Denning 250, 232), but also renders Sara a modern, "active and existential historical subject" (Cappetti 106). This tempered naturalism allows for experimentation with the possibilities of choice and agency without diminishing the oppressive circumstances governing the characters' lives. Even the more passive characters, like Sara's sister Bessie, who "cannot help" that she doesn't have "the courage to live for [herself]," or Mashah who curses the "bitter luck of her poverty," are critiqued for this determinist thinking and contrasted against Sara's agency (50). In response to her sisters' fatalistic impulses, Sara insists that claiming to not have any choice in the matter is still the act of choosing to give in to that way of thinking: "Even in my fury I saw the hopelessness of trying to take Mashah's part when she hadn't the grit to stand up for herself" (151). In emphasizing Sara's "fury," Yezierska dramatizes the capacity to act and

[40] In fact, Jane Elliott describes this kind of paradoxical choice is not in fact an expression of agency but "suffering agency" one in which "individual action and domination coexist" (86). For Elliott, this combination is an essential component of neoliberal governance in the second half of the twentieth century.

contrasts that with the choice to not act in Masha's inability to "stand up" for herself. While Mashah's life circumstances make it difficult for her to generate the kind of "grit" necessary to do this, Sara's ability to resist the oppressive patriarchal demands of her father and the men in her neighborhood illustrates the paradox at the heart of the novel: having the freedom to choose is empowering and can be momentarily liberating, but exercising that freedom to choose in highly oppressive circumstances is not always easy or entirely possible.

This emphasis on choice and the individual in the urban environment in the United States becomes a familiar and popular thematic as the twentieth century progresses. More specifically, as technological innovations allowed for the rapid spread of mass culture and media and "the isolation which once separated races and people," began to decline,[41] choice became a significant component of what it meant to be modern (Park 203). In the American imagination and popular culture, cities and urban space came to symbolize, chaos, crime, vice, and "urban freedoms[42]" that were predicated, in part, on moving away from the habits and traditions of the past and towards an emphasis on individualism and choice—a characteristics affiliated with early twentieth century notions of what it meant to be modern moment (Mumford 491). In addition to this movement towards choice, the metropolis, with its capacity to facilitate strangeness and distance between people, encourages and nurtures a sense of freedom and individualism. Yet, sustaining this individualism is, as Georg Simmel argues, one of the "deepest problems of modern life" because while the city facilitates this sense of freedom and individualism it also,

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[41] At the same time, Park notes that these "seeming evils of the metropolis could also be forces of progress" (McCann 128). In addition to being a breeding ground for crime and vice, the city made room for the "rational organization which we call civilization" (Park 203).

[42] We can see this cultural influence/fear in the familiar tales of the girl goes to the sister and is corrupted by the many temptations lurking within. See for example, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie,* Stephen Crane's *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*, and even Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* in which Melanctha is lured by urban temptations: the story indicates that she became a women as "she began to search in the streets and in dark corners to discover men and to learn their natures and their various ways of working" (73).

somewhat paradoxically, dramatizes how difficult it is for the "individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (51). This is evident in *Bread Givers* as Sara's pursuit of a sense of individuality certainly functions as a means to emphasize participation in the struggles of modern life. At the same time, the novel's development of Reb's persistent desire to cling to tradition and reject the importance of cultivating a sense of individuality through choice dramatizes the difficulties of fulfilling and sustaining such individuality in the face of the "historical weight" of one's background and heritage and the "external culture" of narratives that make generalizations based on spatial, ethnic, or racial markers.

Yezierska's attention to the impact this "historical weight" has for Reb is significant as it demonstrates the tension between immigrants of the "Old World" with their "resistance to change, repression of individual wishes, and, ultimately, power to uphold immobility" (Cappetti 77) and the modern rhetoric of choice, individuality, and mobility that drives the narrative's protagonist. While Sara's back and forth with her father throughout the novel suggests, on the one hand, a sort of tired patience with Reb's desire to cling to tradition, his inability to evolve positions him as not only the antithesis of what it means to be modern, but also the story's villain who threatens to crush Sara's individualized dreams and ambitions, and with it, her claim to modernity. At the end of the novel, Sara sadly observes her father as "this lonely old man" whose "fatalistic adherence to his traditions" has left him "tragically isolate[d]" in a "world where all is changed, [and] he alone remained unchanged" (296). Reb's "fatalistic adherence" suggests his character is a symbolic manifestation of the determinist narratives Yezierska writes against. And while not necessarily a caricature, the novel uses Reb's inability to embrace the

modern reality of being a "subject as well as the object of modernization"—a reality that depends on the notion of choosing to harness the "power to change the world" that is simultaneously changing him (Berman 16)—to critique the theories that suggest those who live in the "areas of deterioration" remain statically tied to their traditions and reject the possibilities of modernity.

In asserting Sara's claim to modernity, the novel also explores part of the popularity of choice and individuality as reflective of the modern spirit was often predicated primarily on the purchasing power of the consumer. Lizabeth Cohen argues that for those "marginalized from mainstream politics and the labor movement," choice, particularly consumer choice became a "legitimate and effective agent of protest" that had "profound economic and political consequences for the nation" (*A Consumer's Republic* 53, 20). In particular, she cites the numerous protests and boycotts organized by black Americans in the early to mid-twentieth century in order to have the right to choose where they lived, worked, shopped, and ate (89). Thus, the freedom to choose where and how to consume was/is linked to the performance of "democratic citizenship" and as such, for those denied access to "traditional avenues of power" the ability to seize "upon the citizen consumer role as a new way of upholding the public interest" was a viable option (*A Consumer's Republic* 98, 13). While the purchasing power of the Smolinsky's is still somewhat limited, there are moments in the text where the power to choose what to purchase is a small performance of dignity and agency[43].

[43] Interestingly, Rebecca Solnit cites that one of the reasons women could not be considered flâneurs was because "they were, as either commodities or consumers, incapable of being sufficiently detached from the commerce of city life" (237). Thus, for Yezierska to emphasize choice not only through Sarah's exercise of economic choice but also her ability to choose how and where to move in the city completely rewrites the nineteenth centuries expectations for wandering the city and in so doing retakes the city streets.

The last section of the novel, "The New World," opens with Sara, now a college graduate with a promising career as a schoolteacher, relishing the power of having the freedom to choose what she wants to buy. As she passes "shop after shop," she realizes she "didn't have to buy the first thing in sight" because it was convenient, inexpensive, or practical. Instead, she gleefully expresses to herself, "I could choose now what I wanted. Oh, that pink ball gown! Grand! But not for me. Furs? That's too rich yet. A pearl necklace? Maybe for born ladies" (238). Despite her rejection of these elaborate outfits, it is the repetition of the question and answer structure that emphasizes that while she may not be suited for a pearl necklace, she could choose to purchase it if she so desired. The fact that Sara wanders the downtown streets mentally weighing her options illustrates the joy and power she derives from being able to perform the act of choosing. Furthermore, as tries on a blue suit in a "beautiful fitting room lined with mirrors" she takes delight in realizing that, for the first time, "from all angles I could see myself" (239). In addition to admiring her physical appearance, the emphasis on multiple angles and her ability to truly see herself because of this once again speaks to Yezierska's emphasis on the importance of bringing a sense of complexity and individuality to the characters in these spaces. The fact that Sara derives this particular joy and clarity while exercising her power of being about to choose the "best, not the cheapest outfit" (239) underscores the centrality of choice in attaining such complexity.

Of course, this kind of agency, derived from her purchasing power, situates her within the limits of a capitalist society, one dependent on exploiting and maintaining inequalities. Yet, what makes *Bread Givers* such a fascinating text is its preoccupation with this very paradox. Yezierska's interrogation of the paradoxes that govern the possibilities and performances of choice for the characters in this novel firmly locates her novel and the world in which her

characters live as part of the modern experience. In *All that's Solid Melts into Air,* Marshall Berman argues "to be modern is to live a life full of paradox and contradiction" (13). For *Bread Givers,* choice is a discourse that manifests as a peculiar paradox of modernity. For Sara, exercising her power to choose transforms her circumstances and promises her mobility and movement outside of Hester Street. In doing so, however, she cannot escape the guilt she feels at leaving her family. The fact that the novel does not conclude with a happy ending in which Sara has successfully assimilated into a middle-class lifestyle, suggests that it is less a claim about the possibilities of upward mobility and the assimilatory capabilities of her ethnic group, and more of a wrestling with the pain and joy of the modern world. Sara's decision to return to Hester Street to take care of her ailing father limits her "breathing spell of happiness" and weighs her down with the familiar "old burden" of her father's opinions (295). Despite this, however, the novel resists a fatalistic tone—one that would suggest choice itself is an unattainable myth—in the concluding pages of the novel.

Instead, choice remains at the forefront of the confrontation: Sara at no point laments that she has no other options and is a victim to her circumstances as others around her have claimed. Wracked with guilt at the thought of abandoning her father, Sara at first chastises and berates herself: "You—with your always guilty conscience! Why can't you be happy when you're lucky enough to have a little respite of happiness?" (283). The emphasis on "your always guilty conscience" at once positions Sara as unable to resist the pull of her father, symbolized here by the guilty conscience, but at the same time this also emphasizes her own agency. The emphasis on "you" in this scene positions Sara as in charge of the guilty conscience that drives her, unwillingly, to return to her father and care for him. Furthermore, while she chastises herself for thinking she could run away or escape this "shadow of the burden" that follows her, she is not,

significantly, crushed or defeated and instead confronts this figure that "threatens to destroy" (Berman 328) everything she has worked for. In fact, in weighing her options, Sara reminds herself that her fathers' tyranny "tried to crush" her as a child (296). Her emphasis on "tried" powerfully reveals that his oppressive influence does not determine her future or choices. Thus, it is the paradox of having the capacity to choose and be in charge of one's life, even amongst and within the most oppressive circumstances, that deftly illustrates Sara's participation within a modern experience. Because she is at once in charge of and submissive to her conscience and the prospect of her father coming to live with her, Sara is faced with the reality of the modern experience: one that at once "exploits and torments us, brings our energies and imaginations to life, drives us to grasp and confront the world that modernization makes, and to strive to make it our own" (Berman 348).

The centrality of the paradox of choice and the emphasis on movement is not limited to early twentieth century street literature and the ghetto pastoral. As street literature develops over the course of the twentieth century, this emphasis on choice remains a tool marginalized voices manipulate and adapt as a means of subverting and/or negotiating within systems that dominate and oppress. In particular, the paradoxical absurdities of ghetto life become key methods for interrogation. Thus, paradox, choice, and, as I will argue in the next chapter, absurdism, operate as rhetorical devices that street literature uses to "bring forth [the city's] abundance of life and beauty that are buried but not dead" (Berman 340) and return a sense of vitality and possibility to city streets.

The Absurd Street: Chester Himes's *Run Man Run*

In 1965, sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the assistant secretary for policy planning for the United States government, compiled a report addressing why so many black families in the United States were trapped in what he described as a cycle of pathology and degradation. While Moynihan's intentions had been "to muster support for an all-out government assault on the structural and social problems that held black families down", the argument was initially interpreted and, thus, circulated[1] in the sociopolitical imagination as an indictment and failure of the black family; an indictment that, in the end, resulted in less of a deconstruction of systemic and institutional racism and more of a cultural narrative that the black family should be left to "fend for itself" (Coates 228). The now infamous report, entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," specifically indicts the matriarchal structure of the black family, which, "because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole" (29). This "weakness of the family structure" is the "principal source," he argues, of "most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (30).

While critics of this report often (rightly) focus on Moynihan's racist and sexist arguments regarding the black family[2], his report also reveals the increasing racialization of the city street in the social, cultural, and political imagination of the United States as it explicitly indicts the urban ghetto as contributing to the "crumbling" of the black family (preface). And, as

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[1] Coates, of course, is not defending Moynihan. Part of the reason it gets interpreted as such is because the report, he notes, is full of bombastic language and lacks any sort of specifics in terms of how the pathology and degradation he spends so much time discussing can be remedied. While Moynihan had "lots of ideas about what government could do" to address this supposed pathology, the recommendations would have, according to Moynihan, "got in the way of the attention-arousing argument that a crisis was coming" and focusing on the family would be the easiest metric of success or failure (Coates 227).

[2] Black feminist critics, in particular, critique Moynihan's positioning as racist, sexist, and ignorant of the impacts of the legacies of slavery. Hortense Spillers' seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" critiques and deconstructs the validity and persuasiveness of Moynihan's argument.

crime rates around the country dramatically increased between 1963 and 1993, the association between the street, the black family—in particular black men—and crime was further reinforced (Coates 232). Echoing the arguments made by earlier sociologists like Robert Park—who argued the degradation and pathology particular to slums and ghettos was a product of natural, biological tendencies rather than the "social effects of natural forces" (Duneier 59)—Moynihan argues it is the urban ghetto, now a predominantly black space[3], that breeds the "aberrant" pathologies particular to the black family. By the 1990s this association is so ingrained that the dominant cultural narrative employed rhetoric that cast "inner-city children" as instigating a new crime wave that would shake America to its core as these bourgeoning "super-predators" stalked the city streets in search of victims[4] (Coates 255). Thus, starting in the second half of the twentieth century, as cities are more and more frequently deserted by white families for the suburbs [5] and left to predominately poor, black families—a demographic theorized and now firmly established as pathological—that the city street becomes, in the social, cultural, and political imagination of the United States, associated with blackness, violence, and danger.

The urban renewal projects that characterized much of the mid-twentieth century directly furthered this (re)segregation of America's cities. Rather than renewing with the intent of restoring and improving the communities that were already there, for example, urban renewal projects meant redistributing property and people—in the case of Oakland California, primarily

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[3] A product of various federal agencies that facilitated the reintroduction of segregated housing. A point I discuss in more detail in chapter 1 and a point, I should make clear, Moynihan recognizes as well, however minimal.

[4] It is important to note that this kind of rhetoric directly contributed to the prison industrial context as incarceration was posited by John J. DiIulio Jr as a "highly cost-effective" solution (257). "By the end of the twentieth century", writes Coates "prison was a more common experience for young black men than college graduation or military service" (257).

[5] As I have mentioned in previous chapters (and will discuss in more detail later in this chapter), black writers and theorists have also argued that the isolation from whiteness serves as a kind of haven from the unpredictable violence associated with whiteness. In their research on Chicago's predominately black neighborhood of Bronzeville, sociologists Cayton and Drake point out that Bronzeville only came to feel like a ghetto when living within its parameters felt non-voluntary. The racial homogeneity was not what felt constricting or limiting.

black Americans—to other areas of the city, far removed from the now "revitalized" downtown centers[6]. Furthermore, the "modern vision" of the postwar approach to urban renewal was driven by the abandonment, and, often, the outright destruction, of the city street as "money and energy were rechanneled to the new highways and to the vast system of industrial parks, shopping centers and dormitory suburbs that the highways were opening up" (Berman 317). The postwar housing boom in areas surrounding major cities in the United States coupled with the Federal Housing Association decision to underwrite loans and mortgage guarantees to white families—and not black families—meant that whites were leaving the cities in larger and larger numbers (Rothstein 42). More specifically, the freeways that made this accessibility possible not only tore through neighborhoods, but also bypassed businesses that lined the city streets below, which condemned the modernity particular to the urban boulevard "as obsolete and blown to pieces by the modernity of the interstate highway[7]" (Berman 294). In the wake of such an approach[8], many of the neighborhoods became, as Marshall Berman describes of the Bronx in particular, a "place to get out of" (291). In the wake of this, the "sublime ruins" and their abandoned and decaying streets became an "international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares:

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[6] While redevelopment projects in the 21st century aren't as synonymous with the concept of "Negro Removal" as the urban renewal projects in the middle decades of the twentieth century were, the revitalization and gentrification of inner city areas has had a similar effect as "those with strong community roots are forced to relocate in response to mounting market pressures and government action" (Hyra 3). Significantly, though, this new round of urban renewal does benefit "certain segments of black America" as this process is no longer "entirely race specific," for black people "but involves an intersection of race and class" (4).

[7] All of this, of course, came at the expense of primarily working-class neighborhoods through which expressways and rapid transit systems like BART tore through or eliminated all together any sense of community that existed and isolating businesses that lined the once intact city streets. Seventh Street in West Oakland, for example, was the "heart of a thriving commercial and entertainment district … that served the nearby black neighborhoods" (152), and the development of New York City's Cross-Bronx Expressway "pounded and blasted and smashed" the Bronx transforming an "ordinary nice neighborhood" into "sublime, spectacular ruins" (293).

[8] Planners and designers in support of this "modern movement" marched, as Marshall Berman describes, to "Le Corbusier's battle cry, 'We must kill the street'" (317).

drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, [and] neighborhoods transformed into garbage-and brick-strewn wilderness" (291).

Importantly, this racial (re)segregation of America's cities in the middle of the twentieth century is not exclusively the product of individual choices or preferences[9], nor the product of a single law but, as Richard Rothstein suggests, "scores of racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs" (Rothstein xii). From the FHA who justified their restrictive covenant policies by citing the decline in white-owned property values if a black American lived "in or near such a neighborhood" to the public housing built by the Public Works Association (later the US Housing Authority) that repeatedly tore down integrated neighborhoods[10] to build whites-only neighborhoods (Rothstein 22), urban renewal projects and plans were instrumental in establishing methods for racial segregation for the post-Jim Crow era. The Moynihan report, coupled with these government programs that worked to systemically isolate people of color from the white population, profoundly illustrates how intersecting components of race and space operate in both policy and the popular imagination as a means to both contain and establish generalizations about entire groups of people. It is no surprise, therefore, that street literature, as another narrative form that takes as its focus this intersection of race and space, begins to confront this disciplinary move[11] with a particular vengeance in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

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[9] Richard Rothstein and Robert Self both take issue with the term "white flight" as that oversimplifies the role of the government in facilitating and underwriting this process.

[10] Rothstein cites, for example, Techwood Homes in 1935 Atlanta and a central neighborhood in Cleveland that housed "African Americans along with Italian and Eastern European immigrants" until the PWA "imposed segregation" on this community (22). Segregation on racial lines was so extreme that often public housing for whites "remained vacant while waiting lists for black public housing was overflowing" (33).

[11] I want to clarify that in generalizing the entire discipline of sociology as unproductive when it comes to generating narratives of and about the street risks, of course, overlooking the important and productive work of

Thus, despite the decline of the United States street in the larger sociocultural imagination[12], and in direct rejection of particular sociological narratives and approaches like that of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, street literature continues to maintain and develop the possibility of this space. In particular, it is the black experience novels made famous by authors like Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim), Donald Goines[13], and Chester Himes, that explicitly work within and exploit the thematics of pathology and degradation—especially as it is attributed to the black male—so common in sociological narrative as a means to reject the notion of "Negroes as victims … that slavery and oppression have made Negroes inferior to other Americans" (Reid-

some. In particular, it is worth noting that Drake and Clayton—whose pioneering study of the Chicago ghetto in *Black Metropolis*—broke from the dominant theory produced by the Chicago School that "the distribution of racial and ethnic groups was "a natural phenomenon" (Duneier 74). Instead, they asserted that "restrictive covenants had artificially brought about the black ghetto" and as a result functioned to mark "blacks as 'fundamentally different' in that its residents did not enjoy the same trajectory as immigrants" (74).

[12] This rejection of the productive possibilities the mid-late twentieth century street holds is a popular one across disciplines. Critic Marshall Berman, for example argues that in the wake of the metaphorical and literal destruction of the city street, artists and writers of this particular historical moment—from Camus and Beckett to Ellison and the "radical imitatives of Davis, Mingus, and Monk in jazz" (309)—"drew no energy or inspiration from the modern environment around them" (309). While the many "previous modernisms" before this period incorporate a fascination and oftentimes a critique of the shared environment in which they exist, the environment, especially the city, he argues, is "simply not there" (309). Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* he argues, contains "brilliant realizations of spiritual and political life as it had been lived in the cities of the recent past" but the "life of the postwar cities and societies" is left unimagined or unengaged (309).

[13] While Beck and Goines are not the focus of this chapter their seminal work and influence on the genre is essential to recognize and note. For example, the street in Beck's narratives, impacted by suburbanization, highway construction and urban renewal polices, is less a place of chaotic and productive contact that results in a music that melts over one "like a new beautiful song" (Yezierska 22) and more a space predominantly characterized by vice, poverty, and neglect—a particularly toxic cocktail that leads Beck to assert he "had started to rot inside from street poisoning" (23). The poisonous quality of the street was due in large part to the urban renewal polices that began in earnest in the 1950s and 1960s. Vibrant neighborhoods that had been established in the first few decades of the twentieth century were "written off as slums and bulldozed to make room for segregated housing projects and interstate highways" (*Street Poison* 125). The pimps and prostitutes that fill the pages of Beck's work reveal a historical reality in which urban renewal administrators encouraged prostitution in areas they wanted to redevelop as "the increase of vice devalued properties and further justified arguments that such neighborhoods needed to be torn down" (131). This process resulted the creation of what historian Arnold Hirsch called the "second ghetto" and structural changes that were so significant the "character of black urban America [was] fundamentally altered" in its wake (125). At one point, Slim drives outside of the city with a white prostitute and describes leaving the "black concentration camp" behind and entering a white world that had streets as "quiet as maybe the Cathedral in Rheims" (128). His deliberate invocation of the ghetto as a concentration camp not only reveals the containment and (re)segregation strategies of urban planners at this historical moment, but also illustrates Mitchell Duneier's argument that it is in the wake of World War II that black Americans begin to associate the spatial layout of the cities with the abhorrent racism of Hitler and the Nazis.

Pharr 36). Yet, this subtle but important political work is often overlooked, disregarded,[14] or heavily critiqued for its use of stereotypical renderings that only contribute to and further develop, according to some critics and scholars[15], a cultural belief in black pathology. It is in its rejection of victimization, however, that street literature is able to explore not only the effects of urban decline, but also imagine possibilities for critiques and methods of survival within this space.[16] In doing so, I argue street lit attends to not only the "ugly dimensions of human nature" that stereotypical renderings exploit, but also the vitality, resilience, and ability to play with the possibilities that exist amidst frustration, despair, and oppression (Murray 58). One of the ways street literature accomplishes this is by thinking and writing the ghetto street—and its associations with pathology and degradation—as, fundamentally, absurd.

This chapter, therefore, argues that by the middle decades of the twentieth century, street literature uses the space of the street to stage, confront, and critique the absurdity of systemic and institutionalized racism in the United States. And it is through the absurdist renderings—both aesthetically and philosophically—of the "sublime ruins" of neighborhood streets that have been "destroyed" or altered in the name of progress and urban renewal that street lit authors explore, reclaim, and renew the limitations, possibilities, and vibrancy of the city street. In particular, I argue that the absurd street in Chester Himes's *Run Man Run* functions as a "defense

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[14] In his analysis of the construction and remaking of postwar Oakland, Robert Self argues specifically that "it is too often overlooked that black Americans too imagined the city and its possibilities, reacted to urban decline and decay, and fashioned politics and social movements with the ambition of making their neighborhoods and cities better places to live" (13). Street lit, which at this moment is a predominantly black genre, is often collateral damage for this line of thinking. And the effects of this carry over into the twenty-first century when the accusations that contemporary street literature is nothing more than "smut" abound (Chiles).

[15] Stephen F. Milliken, for example, claims that Chester Himes left the "high ambitions of his earlier work to limit himself almost entirely to describing black criminals, black crime, black poverty, and black violence" (qtd in Abbott 128). Several decades later Nick Chiles describes black ghetto fiction (a later evolution of the "black experience" version of street lit), as "smut" and a product of the "sexualization and degradation of black fiction."

[16] Chester Himes, for example, writes of the Harlem represented in so many of his novels: "I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books" (*My Life of Absurdity* 126).

mechanism" (*My Life of Absurdity* 30) against narratives that position inhabitants as victims trapped within the city's ghettos and instead explores the possibilities for agency within a highly oppressive system and space. More specifically, I argue Himes uses the act of walking as a means by which the individual can perform choice and find the ability "to move … even if not within conditions of [his] own making" (Reid-Pharr 7). This emphasis on finding the ability to move even with oppressive circumstances functions to reject narratives of the street that position inhabitants as stagnant and trapped by their own reliance on and belief in narratives of victimization. Examining the ability to move about a city and reject imperialist systems of containment reflects a broader conception of the freedom to choose and how the act of doing so can lead to expressions of embodied agency not often theorized or discussed (7).

While *Run Man Run* is not explicitly a detective novel in the traditional sense—a fact I will describe in more detail momentarily—I begin with an overview of the hardboiled tradition and the aesthetics of noir as a means to discuss how Himes's manipulation of its key aspects reveals an explicit critique of not only the racist underpinnings of the genre, but also a reclaiming of city space in literature that for so often relegated people of color to the margins—literally and figuratively. Because of this, I frame my discussion of hardboiled fiction with a brief description of Himes's black literary forebears—Pauline Hopkins and J.E. Bruce—as a means to draw attention not only to those who inspired and laid the groundwork for Himes, but also to illustrate how the genre of detective fiction was, in many respects, defined from the outset by this tension between white/black, good/evil, lightness/darkness. I then transition into a discussion of how Himes's incorporation of the absurd into the parameters of such an iconic urban genre as hardboiled detective fiction not only reveals these tensions, but also generates within them the

possibility for agency and choice. I conclude by reading scenes of movement—in particular walking and running—as an example of how choice and agency manifest in this novel.

Walking, as I discussed in chapter two, can be a subversive and rebellious act that subtly works to reject the controlling proclivities of city officials. In fact, in 1960s Los Angeles, city planners and traffic engineers cited the pedestrian as "the largest single obstacle to free traffic movement"[17] (Solnit 254). By the middle decades of the twentieth century, urban renewal projects had altered the centrality of the city street to such an extent that the majority of American cities were comprised of "no-walking zones" and downtowns were turned into "places that are easy to get to but not worth arriving at" (Speck 4). And, as car culture inspired the remaking of the city[18], "walking as a cultural activity, as a pleasure, as travel, as a way of getting around [fades]"(Solnit 250) and with it, the dynamic and vibrant potential of the city street[19]. For Himes, however, the emphasis on the street as experienced by the pedestrian reveals how walking the streets—a mode of transportation that within both urban and suburban designs "disdain walkers" and is, therefore, a "sign of powerlessness or low status"(Solnit 253)—is co-opted as a form of subversive rebellion and a rejection of such an association.

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[17] Even in New York, a city famous for its walkability, urban design with pedestrians in mind was not at the forefront of the city's late twentieth century planning. Rebecca Solnit notes how in 1997—during Giuliani's mayoral reign over the city in which he "decided that pedestrians were interfering with traffic"—"almost twice as many people are killed by cars as are murdered by strangers"(254).

[18] This includes everything from the urban sprawl of Los Angeles to the freeways that cut through vibrant sections of numerous cities throughout the United States, to the immense amount of space dedicated to constructing parking lots and parking garages in and around major urban centers and shopping malls.

[19] Building on the midcentury work of Jane Jacobs, twenty-first century urban planner Jeff Speck argues it is the walkability of a city's streets and sidewalks that directly contributes to the "urban vitality" of a city and any change that affects the ease with which moves about the city fundamentally alters the dynamism and vibrancy of city streets (4).

Noir Streets and Hardboiled Detectives

Run Man Run tells the tale of Jimmy, a black porter who witnesses Matt Walker, a white detective, murder two other black porters in a fit of rage. Realizing Jimmy is the only witness to the murders, Walker chases Jimmy through the basement of the kitchenette building, trapping him in a janitor's sleeping quarters, and then, when other members of the police force arrive, tries to have Jimmy committed for insanity for his accusations. When Jimmy is eventually released, Walker hunts him and convinces everyone from the captain of the police force to Jimmy's girlfriend, Linda Lou, that Jimmy has gone insane. As Walker chases Jimmy in, around, and throughout the city, Jimmy is successful in this evasion. That is, until he decides he does not want to spend the rest of his life running and purchases a gun to confront the murderous detective. In a failed showdown on the streets of Harlem, Walker shoots Jimmy, though not fatally, and escapes only to be confronted in the concluding pages by fellow detective and brother-in-law Beck who, in a moment of narrative ambiguity ostensibly shoots and kills Walker.

In crafting this tale of a murderous detective lurking through the shadowy streets of Manhattan, Himes participates in a rich and vibrant lineage of black detective fiction. While Justin Gifford credits Himes with the "invention of black crime fiction[20]," (*Pimping Fictions* 25), the use of the detective genre to interrogate and critique its racist and imperialist[21] ideological

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[20] To be fair, Gifford makes this claim in part because he reads Himes as manipulating the hard-boiled detective novel in a very specific manner as he reverse the "containment of criminal bodies" particularly evident in Chandler's fiction to "focusing instead on the criminal's resistance to surveillance and control" (26). Therefore, I don't believe he is explicitly disregarding the literary contributions of authors like Bruce and Hopkins. That said, while their work doesn't necessarily fit within that frame, their manipulation of the detective genre certainly paved the way in many respects for Himes's later manipulations, so crediting Himes with inventing it is, I would argue, a tad misleading. It is also worth mentioning that Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies* is an iconic text in this tradition as well and many critics still consider it to be the first detective novel written by a black American, despite the claims for Hopkins and Bruce (Soitos 93). Fisher, in particular, was "one of the few black writers to place his stories and novels entirely in Harlem", until, of course, Chester Himes's Harlem detective series that started in the late 1950s.

[21] Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a classic example of the kind of traditional detective fiction that reinforced the imperialist goals of the country. In particular, it was Holmes's emphasis on empiricism. By reworking "an ideology of empiricism in popular form" Doyle—through the construction of Holmes and his various

underpinnings has a longer history that arguably can be traced back to J.E. Bruce and even, to a certain extent, Pauline Hopkins's 1900 vignette "Talma Gordon.[22]" In his genealogy of black detective fiction, Stephen F. Soitos argues black detective fiction writers from Bruce and Rudolph Fisher to Ishmael Reed and Clarence Major, alter and manipulate the conventions of white-authored detective fiction as a means to inject discussions of race, gender, and class into a genre heavily influenced by popular culture, and "present African American social and political viewpoints and worldviews" to a wider audience (27). It is worth emphasizing here that authors of black detective fiction are not merely adapting to Euro-American standards or expectations of what constitutes detective fiction. Soitos's careful word choice of "manipulation" suggests that these black detective writers actually change the boundaries and expectations of what this particular genre can do and achieve. These writers manipulate the "conventional detective structure and characterization" by altering, among other attributes, the detective persona and using the "doubling aspects of masks, mistaken identities, and disguises revised by black consciousness" to succeed in their investigations[23] (33). The altered detective persona is

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plotlines—"helped produce a comforting and reassuring image of society untroubled by sexual, economic or social pressures" (Thompson 75). The emphasis on empiricism also strengthened the notion that one can identify who does not belong based solely on appearance on behavior. It is only when the detective figure becomes an outsider that there is a "basis for an exploration of social and moral problems" (45).

[22] Hopkins' 1902 serialized vignette *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Caste Prejudice* explores similar themes and incorporates a male and female black detective. Stephen F. Soitos argues the text represents one of the earliest examples of black American authors signifying on detective conventions as a means to bring conversations about the politics of race into popular and mainstream conversation. While "Talma Gordon" doesn't incorporate an official detective figure, I would argue it is an essential link in this literary genealogy as it reveals how passing tropes are not only a foundational characteristic for early twentieth century black detective fiction in particular, but also reveal their inherently noir sensibilities.

[23] Of course, this line of argumentation suggests that texts that do not employ the four tropes he traces across the authors he has selected, are not part of this black detective fiction tradition and/or only certain future manipulations are deemed permissible. For example, Soitos excludes authors like George Schuyler who, he argues in a footnote, has not been chosen as an object of examination because the detective stories he wrote contained "negative depictions of aspects of African American and African culture" and the stories that take place in Harlem "add nothing to the depiction of that community or its culture" (237). For street literature—and the detective fiction that sits snugly within this archive—it is a slippery slope for what constitutes harming or adding "nothing to the depiction of that community." Therefore, I find Soitos's framing useful for setting up a discussion of Himes and contextualizing and historicizing the genre he is working within, but the tropes Soitos focuses on here are not, I would argue, the only possibilities of manipulation for black detective fiction and street literature more broadly.

achieved not only by making the detective black, but also by using "their blackness as an integral ingredient for the success of the investigation" (28).

Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* (1907), for example, focuses on the protagonist Sadipe Okukenu who does not adopt the detective persona until the second half of the text, but whose storyline clearly shifts midway as an attempt to work within a genre often used to further imperialist goals[24] and the racist prejudices of an American reading public as a means to "structure a sophisticated social critique of Euro-American value systems and civilizations" (Soitos 79). Part "African-abroad plot" (ix), part detective story, *The Black Sleuth* chronicles Sadipe's adventures around the world as he pursues his education, joins an international detective agency, and becomes a successful and brilliant mastermind and sleuth—an experience that Bruce suggests will "help him protect his people from the designs of colonialists and imperialists when he returns to Africa" (xix).

Integral to Bruce's critique is his decision to make the detective figure—"popular culture's most accepted model of intellectual superiority"— African, and in so doing undermine racist ideologies of white superiority; throughout the text Sadipe's sleuthing abilities portray him as "more rational than and hence superior to any white in the book" (Soitos 78). In this serialized text from the turn of the century, Bruce incorporates disguise and masking as a means to both critique and reveal the depth of racial prejudice. Because "his black face disarmed all suspicion to his true character" those he is pursuing would never suspect Sadipe is a detective (Soitos 67).

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[24] As Jon Thompson writes in *Fiction, Crime, and Empire*, Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic protagonist Sherlock Holmes celebrated and emphasized an empirical approach to solving mysteries. An approach that directly contributed to endorsing and furthering the goals of imperial 19th century Britain, his stories create not only a mythological figure but a mythological figure of English society that was not troubled by class conflict, racism, or sexism precisely because it could not be accounted for empirically and therefore these problems were elided in Doyle's stories. By reworking "an ideology of empiricism in popular form [Doyle] helped produce a comforting and reassuring image of society untroubled by sexual, economic or social pressures" (75).

His ability to use his blackness as a mask that allows him to conceal himself within a particular stereotype—in this case, the fact that a "Negro waiter" is "something of a novelty in England… [and] was much in demand by the guests"(65)—in order to apprehend a thief reveals Bruce's manipulation of "conventional detective structure and characterization" for his critique of racist injustices in the United States and abroad (Soitos 37).

Other tropes, such as passing also become key areas of manipulation, especially for early black detective writing. Hopkins's "Talma Gordon", for example, uses a version of the murder mystery plot to interrogate racial prejudices and the shock and intrigue of racial passing at the turn of the century—a theme that aligns itself easily within the distrust and negativity particular to the aesthetics of noir and one that influenced authors from Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher to Chester Himes and Walter Mosley. While there is a classic murder mystery at the heart of the short story, it is not, by any means, meant to be the most shocking and intriguing aspect of the tale. Instead, the climax arguably occurs when the racial heritage of Talma and Jeanette is revealed (Ammons 53). Despite Talma's appearance as a "fairylike blonde in floating white draperies," the story reveals their now deceased mother hid her racial heritage from their white father Captain Gordon and it was, of course, only revealed after she delivered a third child that was "dark as a mulatto, with the characteristic features of the Negro" (Ammons 65). For Hopkins, passing becomes the "primary metaphor for the evil of slave society and racial prejudice" (Soitos 60). Thus, by embedding the politics of passing into the story, Hopkins reveals how the detective and mystery genre is especially amenable for black writers at the turn of the century (and arguably beyond) because it allows one to link "racism to horror and detection" and reveal the "psychology and social pathology of racism" (Rabinowitz 91). The fact

that the story ends with the narrator revealing that Talma Gordon is now his wife suggests a moral didacticism to rise above such pathology.

The emphasis on masking and the politics of passing align closely with the ideologies of noir and the hardboiled narrative in which the "surface masks hidden, profound, secret, truths" (97). It makes sense, then, that the aesthetics and ideology of noir[25]--a writing style now infamously attached to the hardboiled narrative—implicitly entangles racial fantasies and stereotypes with "fantasies of gendered violence and socioeconomic transgressions" (Breu 34). The negative cultural fantasies play out in scenes of social and psychological rebellion, whether that is by weaving in a "new negativity" to familiar genres like the city mystery and urban guidebooks or by emphasizing a "transgressive version of male identity" (Breu 34). And it is the "white-guy heroism" within these nuances of negativity that populates the pages of white hardboiled detective fiction that reveals how the "images of blinding whiteness" typical in American literature function "as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is a companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing"(Morrison 33). Even the detective stories by Bruce and Hopkins while not often characterized as participating in the noir or hardboiled tradition certainly critique the notion of empiricism that is dominant in traditional detective fiction of that period. Thus, noir is at once an especially useful aesthetic for critiquing and revealing the implicit racism embedded within everyday racist ideologies and practices while simultaneously

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[25] Noir is perhaps most iconic in its affiliation with the hardboiled detective genre, but it also has a history and complexity unto itself. While noir is not a focus of this project, it's worth noting James Naremore's contextualization of noir and argument that it should be "examined as a discursive construct" because in many respects it is an "ideological concept with a history all its own, it can be used to describe a period, a movement, or a recurrent style. Like all critical terminology, it tends to be reductive, and it sometimes works on behalf of unstated agendas" (6). With that in mind, when referencing noir in this chapter I am referring more to its stylistic components and its impact on hardboiled detective fiction and later street literature.

deeply implicated in furthering racial stereotypes in which darkness is equated with deviancy, danger, and violence (Daniels 203).

While I will discuss in more detail below how Himes's manipulations of the genre participates in this literary and historical lineage, it is important to briefly examine how the ideologies and aesthetics characteristic of the classic hardboiled narrative—with its "white male view" made famous by authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler—furthered the racialization of the city street in the cultural imagination. This framing also functions to not only contextualize the specificities of Himes's brilliant manipulations, but also trace how the genre more broadly—with its emphasis on the street, crime, violence, and, most importantly, agency over narratives of predetermination—influences the predominantly black street literature that dominates throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Hardboiled detective fiction, characterized by the now iconic private eye detectives with their "prophylactic toughness" and seductive femme fatales who "allegorize all the forms of connection—economic, national, sexual or racial—that the hardboiled male disavows" (Breu 70)—attempts to collapse the boundary between the criminal and the hero through its often explicit critique of the city and all who reside within it as corrupt (Thompson, 2). Like the ghetto pastoral at the turn of the twentieth century, hardboiled detective fiction is significant in this archive for exploring the contradictory nature of the urban environment, one in which the "efficacy of human effort" is in tension with the "ultimate futility" of an "increasingly dominant and determinative social reality" (Thompson 137) where the city's "overwhelming, technical, economic and spatial" forces continue to oppress and seek to control those within its borders (Gifford 16). Unlike the ghetto pastoral, however, it is, in part, the hard and gritty negativity particular to the noir ideology that pervades hardboiled detective fiction that enables the

protagonists to temper the futility and determinacy of naturalism with "full-blooded individualism" (Thompson 137) and position themselves as "urban truth tellers" (Andryeyev 37) capable of revealing the implicit corruption throughout society and particularly within urban space[26]. In white-authored hardboiled detective fiction this corruption, however, is discussed almost exclusively from a white male point of view and focuses particularly on situating corruption as a product of the actions and ideologies of various politicians and city officials. Various inequalities as they relate to race and gender, for example, are rarely explicitly engaged, if at all.[27] Instead, race emerges as a subtext and often as an anxiety derived from "the new racialized boundaries in metropolitan America" and the "imminent threat" this reality imposed on the "whiteness of noir's landscape" (Andryeyev 38).

More than simply "using the city as a setting or the protagonist as a hard-boiled male," it is the possessive relationship between the hardboiled protagonist and his city that begins to illustrate this racial anxiety particular to noir and hardboiled detective fiction (4). The possessive nature between the hardboiled detective and his city reveals the desire to maintain "the white, working-class male's right to urban space and culture" (Andryeyev 39). This "white utopic psychosis," in which "dominant societal flaws" are positioned as "issuing from 'darkness' rather than from flawed 'reason'", directly contributes to the racialization of the city street by the middle part of the twentieth century (216). In "The Simple Art of Murder", for example,

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[26] Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, for example, makes snide asides throughout *The Maltese Falcon* suggesting an undercurrent of corruption that only he, an outcast and loner can see. For example, he reassures Brigid O'Shaughnessy that he will investigate her sister's alleged elopement with Floyd Thursby quietly and without involving the police. "Most things in San Francisco," he gruffly tells her, "can be bought, or taken" (55).

[27] Explicit discussion of urban racial politics, including issues such as white flight, urban decay, blockbusting, and segregation, were often strenuously avoided (Andryeyev 40) and women were sexual objects to be conquered. "The ritual repudiation of the femme fatale in the hard-boiled text," argues Christopher Breu, "allows the male protagonist to maintain his fantasies of autonomy and individualist opposition to the dominant order" (70). Thus, the hardboiled male's ability to lay bare the corrupt, superficial, and manipulative aspects of the women he encounters illustrates how these "truths" are dependent on the white male perspective that anchors the genre in the 1930s and 1940s.

Raymond Chandler describes the classic hard-boiled American detective as a man who "is himself not mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid" and must go down "these mean streets"—streets that were "dark with something more than night"—in order to maintain his status as a "man of honor" ("The Simple Art of Murder" 18). The historical and cultural context for Chandler's "dark" mean streets reveals a parallel to "the developing African American neighborhood of Watts," and Chandler's desire to remain untarnished by these streets "highlights that his moral decency is connected to his racial visage" (Gifford 21). Furthermore, the Central Avenue that figures prominently in Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* and in his early short stories "Noon Street Nemesis" and "Try the Girl" becomes the street to which black Americans are confined as Los Angeles residential segregation in the 1920s prevented black Americans and Asian Americans from moving beyond this particular street (22). Thus, the "mean streets" that symbolize crime and violence are not only racialized in Chandler's novels and the hardboiled genre more broadly, but also are protected and claimed as private public space thereby participating in the spatial discourses of empire[28] that play out on the city streets within the nation's borders.

Despite the fact that at the height of the noir period[29] the racial demographics of cities in the United States were changing rapidly, there is a "curious absence of racial minorities in the

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[28] Kenneth Clark, for example, writes that the urban ghetto—in particular Harlem—operates as an "industrial colony of New York City" and works to control and make dependent the inhabitants of this space (qtd in Duneier 115.

[29] The particularities of what constitutes the noir era, and, by extension, neo-noir is, like any periodizing attempt full of differing opinions. Bonnie Andryeyev and Christopher Breu suggests 1920-1960—in the wake of The Great Migration and immigration waves from the turn of the century and corporate capitalism was fully in place—as the height of a noir sensibility. Stanley Orr, on the other hand, suggests that we think of noir as a period defined by certain end dates is limiting as it evolves through the decades and "entertains a recuperative relationship with its primary "'host genres'" (2). A "noir logic", he argues, pervades everything from "late-Victorian fictions of adventure and mystery"—when confidence in British imperialism begins to wane and the "anxieties of metropolitan decay and colonial dissolution" grip the cultural consciousness—to the "postmodern parody" of noir particular to the twenty-first century (4).

urban settings the genre is known for" (Andryeyev 39). That said, it is worth clarifying that "racial minorities" do exist in the classic hardboiled detective fiction of the period, but they are certainly not the protagonist nor given the kind of complexity that makes them significant to or memorable in the novel. Categorically arguing that hardboiled fiction written by white authors is devoid of characters of color is to overlook how the genre is not just preoccupied with the changing racial landscape but also how it directly participates in furthering the goals of imperialism. As an "energizing myth of empire", adventure and detective stories implicitly, and in the case of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes often explicitly, further the goals of cultural imperialism (Martin Green qtd in Thompson 68). In the wake of World War II, it is through culture, more than land acquisition that governments are able to control and exert influence over distant lands and people (Said). For example, in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* the "black bird" at the center of the story—a "foot-high jeweled" figurine traced back to Suleiman the Magnificent, made by "Turkish slaves in the castle of St. Angelo," and the "cream of the cream of the East" (124) as far as treasure goes—exoticizes the Far East as a place of wild treasure and adventure, which works to simultaneously reinforce imperialist ideologies as it positions the Far East in need of the "stabilizing influence of the West" (Thompson 69).

Yet, the incorporation of distant and exoticized lands is not the most dominant reflection of furthering imperialist goals. By the early decades of the twentieth century, concern over the "increasing breadth and breach of national borders" was a dominant topic of interest and the racial subtext within the pages of hardboiled detective fiction reveals this obsession (Ngo 35). Because the metropolis is a "result of the political forces of power and representation," its symbolic place in street lit, and hardboiled fiction in particular, dramatizes the fact that "dominant societal flaws" are attributed to and "given spectacular form" in the shape of the

Other (Daniels 216). Hammett's description of Joel Cairo, a henchman for one of the crime lords in pursuit of the black bird, focuses entirely on his dark features. In contrast to the sharp yellow of Spade, Cairo's eyes have an opaqueness that "made them seem flat, two-dimensional" and the hotel manager who had last seen him notes "I got nothing against him but his looks" (Hammett 182). The emphasis on his looks, as opposed to anything else, illustrates how hardboiled detective fiction contributes to furthering the imperialist goal of having citizens within its borders recognize and further the rhetoric "that some racial others are always already strangers to the national polity" (Ngo 22).

Hard-boiled fiction—a genre whose "most radical and critical elements[30]" come from the "negativity it inherits from noir" (Breu 38)—captures the chaos and violence of these diverse and rapidly growing cities that sociologists like Robert Park feared in the early decades of the twentieth century. As cities around the United States began to feel the impact of the increases in migrating and immigrating peoples, imperialist rhetoric—where "whiteness defined moral measure and proper civilization, with the Orient, the primitive, and racial admixture as outposts"(Ngo 45)—was latent within a genre that took place primarily within the city. Given these changes happening within the city, Sean McCann notes that Park feared that the American city would become a place, not where civilization reigned, but where the "decay of tradition gave free reign to the most destructive passions and dangerous impulses[31]" (McCann 131). Hard-

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[30] The classic or traditional detective story, of which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle epitomizes, tends to offer consoling images of society. As Jon Thompson argues, for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series in particular, the empirical approach to solving mysteries creates a "world in which crime is intriguing, individual, and eminently soluble" and not an "ugly social problem" (77). In these mysteries, the criminal or problematic issue is discovered and then removed. Holmes's detective methods do not inquire "into the underlying causes of things" (66). Hard-boiled detective fiction, however, is more modernist in its approach in that it is interested in uncovering a "hidden truth, a concealed clue to existence … a great deal of modernist writing is organized around the desire to translate the incoherent into the coherent" (111). As such, hard-boiled detective fiction draws our attention to the inherent corruption at the foundation of society and suggests it can never be escaped.

[31] Implicit within this description, of course, is the danger of pursuing passions and interests that cross racial lines.

boiled detective fiction not only exploits but also finds creative potential in pursuing these "destructive passions and dangerous impulses," which are most clearly conveyed through the text's representation of masculinity.

Christopher Breu terms this transgressive male identity particular to noir aesthetics a "hard-boiled masculinity" because it is an iconic and essential aesthetic for hard-boiled detective fiction. Distinct from the classic detective who was upper class and "spoke and acted with aristocratic grace," the hard-boiled detective was "a man of the streets … who spoke and acted with American vernacular crudeness" (Soitos 21). Modeled out of a solidarity with the nineteenth century working class ideal of the "autonomous artisan-laborer" and as such a "modernist and class-inflected rejection of the Victorian conception of middle-class white manliness," the hard-boiled detective is driven by a "rigorously individualist stance" and rebels "against all forms of authority and social connection" (Breu 2). The Victorian conception of masculinity that hard-boiled masculinity rejected "emphasized physical restraint and conscious sexual renunciation," and positioned the white middle-class man as "the intellectual and moral centers of the joint projects of evolution and civilization" (6). As the "cultural ideology of what constituted a valorized male identity" began to shift at the turn of the century, a "more violent conception of masculinity," one associated with a working-class masculinity in its emphasis on physical strength and finesse, and the desire to prove one's manhood "on the playing field, in the bar, in the bedroom" and, most significantly for this project, in the streets became predominant (6). Hammett's Sam Spade's masculinity is best illustrated via the animalistic descriptions sprinkled throughout the narrative. Spade makes "growling animal noise[s]" and "grins wolfishly" when thinking about or flirting with the femme fatale Brigid O'Shaughnessy (10, 39) and his "yellow-grey eyes were hard and implacable" (40). Thus, hard-boiled detective fiction,

argues Breu, contributed to this cultural display of masculinity even as it was at the same time shaped by it (7).

In addition to implicit anxieties about the changing racial makeup of the urban environment, hardboiled detective fiction is infamous for explicitly borrowing "in ambiguous and disavowed ways from the iconography of black masculinity that was explicitly repudiated by earlier conceptions of manhood" (7). The classic hardboiled detective is a "white male loner" who is simultaneously crippled and tantalized by "perceived threats to his whiteness, his gender, [and] his sexuality" (Abbott 11). And it is through this perception of threat that this fiction produces a conception of manhood reliant on "a phantasmatic double in the unrestrained sexual 'masculinity' of the black rapist or savage" (Breu 6). Pete Anglich, an "under-cover man" for the narcotics squad, in Raymond Chandler's "Pick-Up on Noon Street," best illustrates the expectation for the racial borrowing that occurs in this iconic, hard-boiled masculinity. Our first encounter with him focuses predominately on descriptions of his appearance and that of his spatial location. He has "heavy shadows under his eyes" and takes a swig of "cheap rye whiskey" as soon as he wakes up in a cheap motel with a "dim, dirty bathroom" and a shower that produces water that is "warmish, but not hot" (1). He has "thick, dark stubble on his broad chin" "short, curly, black hair," a "thick nose" and a "very broad" body and a husky voice because, archetypal tough guy that he is, the scar from a bullet on his windpipe "had done something to his vocal chords" (1). He is, from the moment we meet him represented as the classic hard-boiled male with a "tough, shell-like exterior" and characterized by his "detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions" (Breu 1). This amorality—emphasized most clearly in this section by his alcoholism—serves to, as Manthia Diawara argues, situate the white characters in noir, including women, bad guys, and detectives,

as "'Black' by virtue of occupying indeterminate and monstrous spaces that Whiteness traditionally reserves for Blackness in our culture" (525). Anglich's immediate proximity to an "all Negro quarter" (Chandler 1) less than four blocks down the street from his motel further underscores the subtext that it his proximity to blackness that contributes to the tough-guy and rebellious ethos the narrative constructs.

Chandler's borrowing of Victorian era "racial iconography" and exploitation of the "deviant black" in the cultural imagination becomes even more explicit when his description of Anglich's husky voice is clarified to be a "smooth huskiness, like the voice of a blue singer" (1). While the narrative implies Anglich is white[32], the physical descriptions of Anglich alone, from the husky voice of a blues singer to the detailed description of his nose and dark features, reveals borrowing from the "iconography of black masculinity" that Victorian masculinity explicitly repudiated. This is further emphasized when Anglich overpowers and murders "the Smiler"—a black man who robs Anglich in his hotel room in the first scene. Afterwards, as Anglich leaves the hotel the visibly terrified black hotel clerk plays along as Anglich convinces him that "you never will see me-to know me-will you, Doe?"(1). Within the first few pages, Anglich overpowers two black characters and in doing so emphasizes white racial superiority—and paints a "graphic picture of the role that black characters play in the construction of white-guy heroism" (Gifford 19)—even as it simultaneously borrows from the racial iconography of the Victorian period to assert Anglich's masculinity.

The emphasis on white superiority particular to American crime and detective fiction directly contributes to the racial policing of urban boundaries shown most clearly by the agency and mobility attributed to these protagonists to move about and use the city as they see fit

[32] Among other implications, Smiler explicitly identifies him as a white when, while robbing Anglich in the first scene, mocks him and says: "Okey, white boy. Just go on dryin' yourself off after your shower" (1).

(Gifford 17). At the end of the opening scene in "Pick-up on Noon Street," for example, Anglich walks out onto the street and "stood a moment looking toward the hard white glare of Central Avenue" (1). After a pause, he "walked the other way" towards Noon Street, a "very dark, very quiet" street, and a space he explicitly identifies as "all a Negro quarter" (1). His decision to walk in this "all Negro quarter" reveals not only the seemingly normalized segregation in the story's representation of the city, but also, in the wake of the murder of Smiler and the manipulation of the hotel clerk, symbolizes Anglich's ability as a white man to control the "very dark" streets and its residents as he walks and, in a sense, patrols the space. The fact that he refers to the space as a "quarter" rather than a neighborhood further reveals the containment strategies of the built environment as it connotes that those living within its boundaries do so as a result of race-based residential restriction and lack the sense of community that the word neighborhood implies.

Chester Himes's choice to work within such a genre, therefore, reveals many deliberate and pointed critiques, including exposing the impulse of the genre to equate darkness with blackness, rejecting narratives of white superiority[33], and expanding the genre's usual preoccupations to focus instead on "Black rage, class conflict among Black people, and the specificity of Black culture in the texts" (Diawara 526). As Hilton Als argues, Himes's male characters "really were noir—in fact and in sensibility. Unapologetic and testosterone drive, they weren't hard-done-by; they were in love with having been done wrong. Turned on by their own

[33] In an explicit rejection of this tradition, black noir texts use whiteness to signify danger, isolation, and even death. Paula Rabinowitz cites the "snow-covered, wind-blown tundra, frozen and icy, the whiteness of its winter setting" harshly isolating the protagonist of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (94). While the white noir detective "lurks the black night streets of steamy (or more often rainy and foggy) cities," she argues, "the black noir figure is alone in a bleached landscape devoid of color, his body in constant contrast" (95). As I will discuss later, Himes's Harlem is also covered in snow, but the "constant contrast" between his skin and the landscape is more complex. While Harlem is plagued with unplowed, snow-covered streets, blackness, significantly, is more pronounced than the blinding whiteness of the snow.

bravado, they claimed entitlement and viewed sex as a struggle for power—the only form of intimacy that engaged them" (Als). While there are elements of all of the above in *Run Man Run*, one of the most powerful critiques emerges as he injects the absurd into a genre that values the rational mind's ability to see through a corrupt facade to uncover truth. It is through this engagement with the absurd that Himes is able to not only represent the horrors and violence of racism, but also reclaim the ability to move through city space, whose material reality operates on the basis of racial segregation, containment and control[34].

The Absurd Street

While scholarly work tends to focus on Himes's manipulation of the "noir logic" (Orr) as seen through the incorporation of black detectives, and a race consciousness into the hard-boiled genre[35], it is the combination of noir with the absurd that fully reveals his brilliance. In *Run Man Run*, Himes uses the basic genre characteristics of the hardboiled plot and "pushes them to absurdist heights" as a means to not only "confront the abuse of black men in the genre and the larger social containment of black men" particular to the hardboiled tradition, but also as a means to assert the kind of self-empowerment that comes from recognizing and channeling the absurdity of American racism (Abbott 19). In many respects, it makes sense to pair noir sensibilities—with its negative cultural fantasies imbued with racist projections and themes of desire, vengeance, and corruption—with the philosophies and aesthetics of the absurd, especially when detailing and deconstructing issues of race in the United States. Other iconic black authors

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[34] As I mentioned in chapter two, part of this containment and control derived from the power of maps to freeze and hold in place various populations. Yet, it is much more of a symbolic hold in many ways and what street literature—and *Run Man Run* in particular—reveals is that boundaries between "discrete neighborhoods whose cartographies delineated racial boundaries … were indeed traversable by neighborhood inhabitants" (Ngo 3).

[35] See the work of scholars such as Christopher Breu, Justin Gifford, Sean McCann, Stephen F. Soitos who have detailed how Himes's manipulation of the genre has manifested—from incorporating a double-conscious narrative style that "employs a narrator who reports on the perspective of the detective and the criminal he chases" (Gifford 18) to using the genre's well known themes of corruption and distrust of the law to "dramatize the intimate relations between racism and American democracy" (McCann 254).

from this period, including Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright experimented with existentialist philosophies and the absurdity of racism as well. Ellison, for examples, writes in his introduction to *Invisible Man* how American racism, with its preoccupation with the "mystique of race and color … render[s] absurd [the] democratic ideals" it so deeply cherishes (xiii). Thus, Himes's interest in transforming the "observed reality" of systemic racism and oppression to "its utmost logical absurdity" reveals a powerful method by which one represents and engages the issue of race in the United States (Soitos 134) precisely because it is predicated on constantly confronting the irrationality and meaninglessness of the universe.

An essential component of the absurd, as with existentialism, is the power to choose and, in assuming responsibility for those choices, derive a sense of agency. It is this concern with "ontological question[s] of agency … in an antiblack world" that makes existentialism and the absurd popular with black American authors in particular in the middle decades of the twentieth century (Gordon 11). Existentialist philosopher Lewis Gordon suggests that while Existentialism as a movement is "fundamentally a European historical phenomenon" the philosophies themselves—with their questions "premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation"—allow for productive insight into struggles that involve "negotiating the relationship between institutions and situated human beings" (10, 7). For authors of color, and especially now for street lit when its authorship is predominately black, existential philosophies can account for how agency emerges in oppressive environments and generates, according to Gordon, "effective radical politics with existential humanistic commitments" (xi). This is an especially productive lens through which we can read black existentialist fiction as the narratives reveal varying methods for "understand[ing] human possibilities in the midst of dehumanizing realities" (44). Literary authors from Wright and

Ellison to Baldwin and Frantz Fanon have “openly admitted existential identity as philosophers of existence” (19), and while Himes may have not “openly admitted” his existentialist proclivities, his preoccupation with drawing attention to the absurdities of white supremacy and a racist governing order positions him within this rich tradition.

In taking seriously the idea that “current generations of Americans are indeed agents and not simply products of history,” critic Robert Reid-Pharr supports this philosophical approach by arguing for the necessity of rethinking how we conceptualize choice and agency in our study of American history and culture (7). He analyzes the literary works of Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright as a means to illustrate his existentialist-inspired argument that reading how choice manifests in the construction of identity—racial, gendered, sexual—can open up new pathways for examining how agency and freedom are possible. Significantly, while the freedom and possibility of choice is the bedrock of the American capitalist venture, it is not often applied, he argues, to sociocultural conversations surrounding the “Black American community” (3). Fundamentally, he argues, this is a product of “the belief that enslaved Africans and their ancestors were deprived of choice” and is a “central element within the mythic structure that underwrites Black American identity,” but indeed, he argues, this history has actually been “precisely the struggle to choose" (8). While *Run Man Run* is not necessarily concerned with questions of choice as they pertain to racial or sexual identity, Himes’s incorporation of absurdist philosophies reveal a subversive and provocative demonstration of choice—one captured most clearly through scenes of movement and in the choice to embrace the irrationality of, in this case, an inherently racist, white supremacist society—as a means to generate a sense of agency.

Himes's absurdist rendering of Detective Walker[36], deftly deconstructs the racist underpinnings of the infamous and iconic representation of hardboiled masculinity. Unlike most detective fiction, Himes equates the detective and the criminal as one in the same in *Run Man Run*. While Walker pursues Jimmy as if he was a criminal, in actuality, the crimes in this novel have all been committed by detective Walker himself—an absurdly evil character who, at the sight of a black porter finishing his shift, is "suddenly sure" though "he couldn't have said why" that his car has been stolen by the black porter (8). While his actions are unequivocally grounded in racism, Himes's physical description of Walker also reveals his deliberate manipulation and, to a certain extent, parody of the hard-boiled masculinity found in the novels of Hammett and Chandler. In particular, throughout *Run Man Run* the color red is associated with Walker: his white skin turned "blood-red in the icy wind" his "pale blue eyes" frequently take on "a reddish tinge [that] glowed like live coals" and "bright red spots" appear on his cheekbones (7, 13, 115). This color is significant as it is in stark contrast to the yellow eyes of Hammett's Sam Spade, for example, whose eyes are regularly depicted as having "burned yellowy" (89). The frequent description of Spade's eyes as appearing yellow or having "points of yellow light dance in his eyes" (93) symbolizes brightness and the hard-boiled detective's ability to see through the darkness to uncover the truth. For Himes to use red, a color at once symbolic of lust, violence, and evil, reveals not only an inability to see clearly, but also a deliberate manipulation of the racist iconography that inspires hard-boiled masculinity. Megan Abbott, for example, argues that Himes's emphasis on Walker's redness is a play on the ways in which Raymond Chandler highlights whiteness in his representations of hard-boiled masculinity: the "blush or redness on

[36] The focus on Walker's whiteness within the first few pages of the novel is significant as well since the whiteness of the detective in the hardboiled fiction made famous by Chandler and Hammett is not commented on. Instead, the otherness of characters like Smiler and Joel Cairo is described in detail.

white skin when pressure is applied," argues Abbott, "can serve as a visual assertion of whiteness, signifying precisely what is momentarily absent: whiteness" (156). The demonic connotations of Walker's glowing red eyes and a piece of hair that "hung down like a curled horn" (Himes 13) suggests an equivalence between "whiteness and evil that signifies powerfully on hardboiled fictions' comparable equivalence of blackness with degeneration or depravity" (Abbott 156).

While I agree with this reading, the demonic depictions of Walker throughout also reveal a larger criticism on Himes's part: racism and the racial hatred that governs, constructs, and maintains racist social institutions is, at its foundation, fundamentally absurd. Much of the critical work that has been done on Himes speaks to the absurdity underlying his detective fiction, especially his Harlem detective series with Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones,[37] but the specifics of how this aesthetic and philosophy contribute to his larger critiques and arguments is largely underdeveloped.[38] The absurdist elements[39] of *Run Man Run* reject any strain of rationality particular to the detective story and explicitly indicts racism for, as Himes writes in his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity*, introducing "absurdity into the human condition" (30). This absurdity includes the extreme and irrational intensity of Walker's racism. Periodic descriptions of Walker as having "opaque, hypnotic eyes" as if he was in a trance coupled with

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[37] Because of the extreme absurdity of his Harlem detective series, Michael Denning argues *Run Man Run* is not part of Himes's absurdist oeuvre: "it is not in the least comic and is very different from the Grave Digger/Coffin Ed series. It becomes a sort of belated version of *Native Son* and, without the naturalistic detail, is largely unsuccessful" (165). Stephen F. Soitos also argues that for many critics, Himes's emphasis on an absurdist humor offered a "'complexity' that makes the humor 'extremely difficult to grasp'" (143). Of course, it is the complexity of this style—especially with regards to dramatizing provocative and controversial aspects of racial politics—that makes it an especially rich cultural product.

[38] See, for example, the work of Meghan Abbott, Christopher Breu, Justin Gifford, and Sean McCann.

[39] It is important to note that the absurd is not always comic in a lighthearted sense. While the theater of the absurd emphasizes nonsense and ridiculousness, at the heart of the absurd is often a dark sense of humor about often covering up a sense of despair (Cornwall 19). I see Himes working within multiple connotations of the word—the nonsense aspects and the philosophical ponderings itself.

the repeated excuses that he merely "didn't stop to think" or "wasn't thinking" when the D.A. inquires about the holes in his story preceding his "discovery" of the murdered porters (Himes 25, 58-60) reveal the "open abandonment of rational devices and absurdist thought" (Cornwall 24). Importantly, Walker's positioning as a product of an absurd reality does not function to justify or excuse his murderous behavior and rage, but instead reveals the larger systemic problems: Jimmy is menaced not simply by one deranged individual[40], but "the national psychosis of racism, fully exposed" (Milliken qtd in Abbott 159). The porters' disbelief and inability to rationalize Walker's murderous rage–Fat Sam, for example, "never realized that the thought of Negroes could send a white man out of his head. He wouldn't have believed it" (Himes 16)—further dramatizes the absurdity of a racist world.

While the lack of order and rationality can drive one to feelings of despair, hopelessness, and even suicide, philosophers of the absurd are interested in theorizing the kind of freedom and agency that can emerge once a belief in any sort of divine or rationalizing order is abolished. Thus, the philosophies of the absurd offer an especially productive lens through which we can read *Run Man Run* precisely because they reveal how the beliefs and systems used to construct meaning—in this case a system predicated on white supremacy and black inferiority—are fundamentally irrational. For Albert Camus, when the absurd man fully confronts and "contemplates his torment," the idols used to explain, rationalize, and govern an inherently irrational universe are silenced, and in the wake of this he can derive the ability to act and, in a sense, "be the master of his days" by making choices that become "his fate, created by him"

[40] This aligns with the goals of Hammett and Chandler's hardboiled fiction in a particularly profound way as their work also rejects the empirical themes of the traditional detective novel in which social problems which lurked beneath the surface couldn't be empirically evaluated and thus were not a problem. Instead, the target of intrigue was regularly positioned a "foreigner" in some capacity whose eventual capture and removal returns a state of normalcy and stability to the afflicted area (Thompson).

(123). In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asserts that one of the most fundamental questions of absurdist philosophy is "judging whether life is or is not worth living" and for Camus this question becomes most salient when one realizes the absurdity of life: that life has no meaning, that the universe is not ordered and controlled by a rational order, but is in fact completely irrational. Choosing to confront this absurdity "restores and magnifies … freedom of action", and while it does not permit or authorize all actions, confronting the absurd does "confer an equivalence on the consequences" of those actions (57). The absurdist elements in *Run Man Run*, therefore, are not necessarily politically liberating, but it is this emphasis on equivalence that allows Jimmy to revolt against the illusory order dominant society has constructed—an order predicated on white supremacy and the subsequent racialized violence we see play out in a text like *Run Man Run.*

Part of this revolt in *Run Man Run* emerges through Jimmy's rejection of victimhood and being at the mercy of Walker's irrational rage that asserts the possibility of agency and, in so doing, a rejection of dominant sociological narratives that posit black Americans as victims—a theory grounded in the notion that "slavery and oppression have made Negroes inferior to other Americans and hence less American" (Murray 36). Albert Murray cites the blues as an example of an art form that tries to make "human existence meaningful" and as such offers a profound illustration of existentialist theories that push back on narratives of victimization by centering human agency and the possibility of choice. Like existentialism, the blues are all about "extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself, he is confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence by playing with the possibilities that are also there" (58). In *Run Man Run,* Himes's engagement with the possibilities afforded by playing out

the absurd in this narrative also work to make life meaningful because it examines and engages the possibility and "the complexity of asserting agency in oppressive environments" (Gordon 19). After realizing he "couldn't keep running all [his] mother-raping life," (192), for example, Jimmy decides to buy a gun and fight back against Walker—a choice that emphasizes the agency Jimmy derives from creating his fate rather than being a victim or a product of his circumstances. After purchasing the gun, Jimmy "suddenly felt secure …he'd wait until the son of a bitch drew the pistol with the silencer, then he'd kill him. He wasn't apprehensive or excited. He wasn't scared of what might happen to him afterward. He looked at it objectively, as though it concerned someone else" (158). Jimmy's lack of an affective response and concern for the future suggests he no longer believes in "the meaning of life" a belief that "implies a scale of values, or preferences" but a belief in the absurdity of life (Camus 60). And it is from this belief that Jimmy is able to confront, in particular, the absurdity of racism and racial containment practices of the city—of which Walker represents—and through that generate a freedom to act that until this point had been more constrained because he believed in the supposedly rational order governing society and life[41].

Jimmy's showdown with Walker at the end of the novel dramatizes Camus's philosophical depictions of the process of confronting the absurd. While Jimmy's confrontation of Walker can be read, as Justin Gifford does, as a failed confrontation and a symbol of the frustration, rage, and futility of pursuing individualized armed resistance against systems of

[41] In an attempt to try to convince Jimmy to believe in the rationality and just nature of the system, Jimmy's girlfriend Linda Lou reminds Jimmy of all of his accomplishments that the district attorney now knows: "He knows you graduated with honors … he says there's hardly a white student in Harvard who wouldn't envy your clean record. He even knows that you chose to come to New York and enroll in law school at Columbia University rather than try to force your way in to the white university at Chapel Hill and cause your family a lot of grief and worry … don't you think for a minute that anyone believes you're crazy … they want to help you" (77). Jimmy wants to believe her but finds himself continually questioning and feels "crushed" at the isolation.

racial containment, the fact that Jimmy, "with one last desperate effort" is only able to fire "at the pavement" (Himes 177) and misses Walker completely is significant. Killing Walker would suggest the absurdity of racial violence and hatred would dissipate with the removal of the offending person. Instead, Walker walks away from the injured Jimmy, forcing a continued confrontation with the racist systems that rationalize and give order to an inherently irrational world. While not liberating in the traditional sense, then, it is "that revolt [that] gives life its value" and just as one "must imagine Sisyphus happy" in his acceptance of a fate "created by him" Jimmy's survival at the end of the novel indicates a similar kind of happiness for the point of this entire confrontation and engagement with the absurd, after all, is "to live" (Camus 55, 123). Thus, incorporating the absurd into his narratives not only enables Himes to dramatize the absurdity of racism, but also, with its philosophical emphasis on preserving life, maintaining confrontation, and generating the ability to act, the absurd becomes a means by which Himes can break with the tradition of protest writing[42] that showed "the Negro as an oppressed, downtrodden people" (*My Life of Absurdity* 178). Instead, the contradictions particular to the absurd generated the possibility for something else: "I knew the life of an American black needed another image than just the victim of racism," he writes in his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity*, "we were more than just victims … we were unique individuals, funny but not clowns, solemn but not serious, hurt but not suffering … we had a tremendous love of life, a love of sex, a love of ourselves" (36).

[42] Baldwin's iconic essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" shares a similar critique of novels that depend on victimization when depicting the oppression of black people. In fact, he argues that the style and content of protest novels aligns more easily with sociology than literature. While protest novels claim to seek and represent the truth, its dependence on victimization and sentimentality oversimplifies the complexities of human beings and instead relies on the categories as "explained by Science" to validate them (29).

In rejecting a narrative of victimization and suffering, Himes participates in a long line of street literature texts[43] that use the street as a space in which agency and choice can play out. As with *Bread Givers*, *Run Man Run* explores this possibility particularly through movement and the choices one makes as they work within and revolt against systems that seek to dominate, contain, and control to create their own path. Because, the city in this novel operates, in many respects, as a character unto itself, the vivid and geographically specific depiction in *Run Man Run* suggests a (re)appropriation of a space that is constantly in tension with other cultural narratives—sociological, political, and economical, among others. "The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real," writes Himes, "I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books" (*My Life of Absurdity* 126). Gifford's analysis of *Run Man Run* supports this intent as he argues the novel functions as a critique of urban racial containment practices and a direct "challenge to the ideologies of white violence embodied in the work of Chandler and detective literature more broadly" (26). In his reading, the street, not the white detective, is the "ultimate danger to urban blacks" (36). Because it symbolizes the urban ghetto, a space "created by white bureaucrats" to contain black bodies in the postwar decades, the street is "ultimately the black protagonist's nemesis" (36). In suggesting that Jimmy is "overwhelmed by the city streets" (153), however, Gifford overlooks the ways in which the street manifests as a space that is at once a "social product (or outcome)" of the racial containment practices of urban designers and a "shaping force (or medium) in social life" (Soja 7). While the street in *Run Man Run* is oppressive and seeks to contain and trap Jimmy, the novel's emphasis on Jimmy's paradoxical ability to construct a path through the city reveals how

[43] In addition to the texts I have already discussed in this project, see Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*, John Rechy's *City of Night*, Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and Gil Scott Heron's *The Vulture* for more examples of this phenomenon.

a space such as the street can be reimagined to create narratives about how agency is performed and returns a sense of possibility to the decaying vitality of the city street.

While Jimmy's movements through the city seem to be opposite of the contemplative and liberating strolling found in *Bread Givers,* in many respects it is Jimmy's ability to strategically piece together a path through the city that enables him to survive and allude the disciplining and murderous forces of Walker. For example, Jimmy cuts diagonally across midtown streets, explicitly seeks crowded sidewalks (including ones that do not provide the most direct route), hops on and off buses in order to find ones that are full of people, uses the "pedestrian traffic" lining the sidewalks as a shield to "keep someone between himself and Walker, in the line of fire, all the time" and briefly considers at one point, jumping from roof to roof and using the "parapets to duck behind" as a means of evading Walker (177). Jimmy's strategic use of the streets in these scenes create what French philosopher Michel de Certeau argues is an urban text unto itself—one made up of the movements unique to each individual walking[44] through the city. The everyday act of walking[45] city streets, he argues, is "a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (98). The "topographical system" walkers appropriate as a result of their "crossing, drifting away, or improvisation" while walking "privilege, transform, or abandon spatial elements" that city officials such as city planners,

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[44] Manhattan exists in the history books of city planning as a "mecca" (Speck 58) in terms of walkability (Speck 58). For Himes to set his story within this city further reveals not only the centrality of walking but also the agency one can derive from it.

[45] Interestingly, Jeff Speck argues that in the 21st century millennials—whom he dubs the "Walking Generation"—favor "communities with street life" or a kind of "pedestrian culture that can only come with walkability" (17). He cites the company that manufactures Merrell and Patagonia footwear—Wolverine World Wide—as having a hard time keeping "new creative workers" from leaving their headquarters in Grand Rapids Michigan precisely because the city lacked a "lack of street life" (17). When they launched a new division they located in Portland, Oregon for the same reason. Walkability of cities in the 21st century is a central component of a high quality of life and is "the first step in attracting new residents and jobs" (35) and is, thus, now a space city planners want to preserve rather than destroy in the name of progress. While more than forty years removed from Himes's novel, the return to the dynamism and vitality of the city street is an important shift to note.

urbanists, and cartographers create in order to bring a sense of order and control to the chaos and unpredictability of urban space (98). Jimmy's decision to cut diagonally across a busy street reveals a transgression of the intended use of that space and as such a "subtle movement of escape and evasion" from the disciplining forces of power (Buchanan 100).

This type of movement is a significant because the various "public spheres"—or spaces in which institutionalized methods of power and surveillance get distributed—that make up the built environment have the effect, as Manthia Diawara argues, of "coloniz[ing]the Black world, permitting only the reproduction of such Black subjects as whores, lawbreakers, and falsifiers who have to be policed" (531). But it is in spaces like the street, barrooms, and churches—spaces simultaneously within and outside of public spheres of surveillance—that offer "a way out for black people" within oppressive systems (532). The street, in particular, operates more often as a "free space for Black people to engender themselves" (532) in part because, as Katherine McKittrick argues, the physical geography of space while "seemingly static, is an alterable terrain" (xvii). It is this alterability in the face of seemingly static "colonialist and repressive structures"—including the manifestation of an "antiwandering ethos" against those whose bodies exist beyond the bounds of Enlightenment influenced normativity (Cervenak 6)—that enables Jimmy to manipulate and use the streets to evade not only Walker's physical pursuit, but also, and, perhaps most importantly, his surveillance. This move suggests a subversion of systems and methods of containment and captivity that characterize the mid-twentieth century urban environment.

Significantly, because he is working from an alternative perspective of a Foucauldian understanding of power, de Certeau's theories on the everyday habits of consumers, such as walking, are not couched in nor looking for methods of resistance against the forces that govern

society. Instead, the fascination with how one can move within these systems and momentarily evade these forces is significant for *Run Man Run* since the racialized systems of containment that govern the representation of Manhattan in the novel are not destroyed or overcome. Rather, the emphasis on Jimmy's movement throughout the novel suggests somewhat paradoxically that despite the symbolic use of the street to contain and manage black bodies in urban space, the street is also a haven and a space that can be used to temporarily escape and evade these systems of containment.

This paradox of the street as both a symbol of containment and a method of evasion plays out most clearly in the novel's representation of Harlem. Historically, the establishment of Harlem as the Black "capital of the world" (McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*) came about, as I mention in more detail in chapter one, for a variety of social, political, and historical reasons in the early part of the twentieth century. In particular, the destruction of several city blocks dominated by black Americans, and their subsequent dislocation, in the wake of the construction of Pennsylvania Station, for example, and the speculative collapse of real estate in Harlem's development for upper class white families (Osofsky 93), gradually transformed Harlem from "one of the most exclusive sections of the city" inhabited by white, wealthy families, to a predominately black neighborhood to such an extent that by 1920, "2/3 of Manhattan's black population lived in Harlem" (Osofsky 111). Deterioration of the neighborhood came about, in part, as a result of poor salaries that could not cover the skyrocketing rents[46] that emerged "in response to the unprecedented demand created by heavy Negro migration and settlement within a restricted geographical area" (136). Some landlords, upon renting to black tenants, also "lost

[46] Interestingly, by the start of the 21st century, Harlem has started to go through what Derek Hyra terms a "second renaissance" in terms of its gentrification process that has led to higher rents and redevelopment of Harlem that benefits middle and upper-income African Americans making the current urban renewal process "not entirely race specific, but involves an intersection of race and class" (4).

interest in caring for their property and permitted it to run down"(140). It is within this overcrowded and resource-strapped haven, however, that Jimmy, with Walker in close pursuit, feels "tense but he wasn't scared" (Himes 176). Jimmy could "walk leisurely up Broadway" because he was on "his home ground" and there was "safety in numbers" (176, 152).

This safety stems in large part from his ability to blend in with the crowd more easily than when he is in downtown. In her reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*—all texts she reads as participating within the noir tradition—Paula Rabinowitz argues that black noir texts often play with whiteness by covering the city in snow and ice: "Where the white noir hero lurks the black night streets of steamy (or more often rainy and foggy) cities, the black noir figure is alone in a bleached landscape devoid of color, his body in constant contrast" to the snow covered landscape that surrounds him (95). *Run Man Run* certainly participates in this tradition[47] with references to the semi-permanency of snow in Harlem because unlike the "snow removers out on Fifth Avenue …[who] were shoveling piles of snow from the sidewalks into waiting trucks … the crosstown streets in Harlem which did not serve through traffic or bus lines were seldom cleaned of snow all winter" (64). The lack of snow removal in this part of the city speaks to the difficulty of escaping the oppressive manifestation of whiteness on city streets. Yet, unlike the texts Rabinowitz cites, in which snowdrifts and snow-covered streets set the scene for murder and existential exhaustion, the snow does not hamper Jimmy's movements, nor dominate his perception of the urban landscape. Instead, the text explicitly celebrates movement through spaces dominated by blackness. It is in Harlem, for example, that Jimmy can reject the hypervisibility of his body in

[47] Abbott also cites the "over-the-top whiteness" in the scenes where Walker murders the three porters: Fat Sam in particular dies "amid the congealed, bilious, overwhelmingly white food made for white consumption" and murdered by a white man who at this point is still nameless. In a sense, she argues, the murder of Fat Sam is "murder by whiteness" (157).

"constant contrast" to whiteness and blend in with the crowds of pedestrians and stores lining the streets.

Jimmy's movement through Harlem illustrates this rejection most clearly. As Jimmy strolls through Harlem in search of a pistol with which he will kill Walker, he observes and describes the various features and attributes particular to the neighborhood, anchored by the various streets that surround them: he stops at shoeshine parlor on the corner of Seventh and 125th street and observes how Frank's Restaurant across the street employed "mostly white, old-timers left over from the time it was a Jim Crow place catering strictly to a white trade" (151). He decides he does not "like their condescension" so he keeps walking and passes "the solid front of grocery stores, drugstores, shoe stores, hat stores, butcher shops, notion stores" and more (151). As he walks the streets he realizes he is "surrounded by black people who talked his language and thought his thoughts; he was served by black people in businesses catering to black people; he was presented with the literature of black people …no wonder so many Negro people desired their own neighborhood" (152). The ability to feel "personally safe and secure on the street" amongst strangers is the "bedrock attribute of a successful city district" (Jacobs 30) and a vibrant "street life" that can "only come from walkability" (Speck 17) supports this further. Significantly, while Jimmy moves easily through the neighborhood's streets, Brock's attempt to drive through the snow-covered streets results in his car "skid[ding] from side to side over weeks' accumulation of snow", thereby impairing his ability to successfully move and navigate through this neighborhood (64). Thus, the sense of ownership, security, vibrancy, community, and possibility that characterizes his walk and thoughts about the space creates a sense of vibrancy and possibility to a space regularly disregarded and shamed as a space of degeneracy and neglect by those living beyond its borders.

The comfort and power Jimmy derives from Harlem as he walks the neighborhood's streets also challenges the narrative of Harlem that exists in the social imagination of the novel's characters[48]. As Brock turns "west on 113th street" and drives down the "slum street" he is "assailed with a feeling of disgust" (64). Walker, too, laments the "dark cloud moving over Manhattan" as a result of the "Puerto Ricans taking over" South of 145th street (111). But then quickly thinks to himself that "it wasn't his problem; he'd leave it to the city planners, to Commissioner Moses and his men" (111). The characterization of Harlem as slum, and the deliberate invocation of the role of city planners in addressing this "problem," reveals how the "totalizing eye" of city officials seek to "immobilize [a city's] opaque mobility" (de Certeau). This immobilization of Harlem is at once physical—the urban renewal projects of Robert Moses altered the physical landscape to such an extent that communities affected by the freeway construction that tore through neighborhoods now found themselves isolated, making mobility around the city more difficult—and metaphorical because while physical barriers did not segregate the city, other city projects such as construction of public housing in areas of the city that were already overcrowded and predominantly black, racial zoning laws that continued despite a 1917 supreme court ruling that found these practices unconstitutional, was a result of explicit public policy aimed at segregating America's cities (Rothstein).

Sociological maps and theories that sought to understand and make sense of the city also reinforced this immobility by suggesting that the ghetto was the "natural environment for the naturally deviant[49]" (Cappetti 36). When deviancy is linked with identifiable features, such as

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[48] In *Black Metropolis*, Cayton and Drake reveal that only when referring to "the exploitative and nonvoluntary dimensions of the segregated black community" did community members refer to the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago as the ghetto. This paradox, therefore, extends beyond this particular novel and representation of Harlem.

[49] Shane Vogel's analysis of Harlem's Cabaret scene suggests art and performance emerging from these spaces could "manipulate practices of mapping and movement to critique uplift ideology and offer the underworld as a space of performed political possibility" (133).

race, movement beyond the bounds of this "natural environment" is seen as threatening and a disruption of one aspect of the "clear text of the planned and readable city" (de Certeau 93). Walker's distaste for the "dark cloud" encroaching South of 145th street and Brock's description of a "clean and peaceful and orderly city" that exists south of 110th street (64)—a street designated in the sociopolitical imagination as the symbolic "frontier between the white world and the Negro group" (McKay 25)—reveal the conflation of race with geographical space and how the noir ethos, with its "anxieties of metropolitan decay" (Orr 4), conflate this decay with blackness. Thus, for Himes to emphasize Jimmy's movements throughout the narrative is to assert a rejection of the containment[50] a readable city generates and slips in a "migrational or metaphorical city" that is constructed not out of generalizations but out of the "swarming mass" of footsteps that reveal "an innumerable collection of singularities" and whose paths and urban texts will "vary according to the time, the path taken, and the walker" (de Certeau 99). It is this dynamic, unpredictable, and individualized movement that is celebrated throughout the text as a means to momentarily evade disciplining forces that structure urban space.

Once Jimmy gets Walker to Harlem and as he starts to make his way to his apartment building, the "pedestrian traffic" Jimmy had been using as a shield suddenly begins to thin "in the block between 148th and 149th Streets" he finds Walker has disappeared (177). With the "street momentarily empty in all directions" Jimmy realizes he has become "a perfect target" (177). Because the safest and most dynamic streets are those that are used "fairly continuously" since the walkers that move about on the sidewalks "both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in

[50]"Architecture," writes J. Yolande Daniels, "largely fails the inhabitants of the black city; it is something to be surpassed" (218). Himes's emphasis on movement illustrates this desire to surpass, escape, or at the very least evade the oppressiveness of the built environment of the city.

sufficient numbers" (Jacobs 35), the sudden danger Jimmy feels as a result of the emptiness between 148th and 149th streets is significant as it is the second time the novel indicts the risks attributed to abandoned and isolated streets. Towards the beginning of the novel, when Jimmy is initially trying to escape from the diner after seeing Walker murder the two porters, he despairingly looks around for "human eyes to witness his plight and tell his story" but finds only darkness, closed-off "high stone buildings" and the "dangerous, indifferent, and cynical" city staring back at him (Himes 33). Thus, without an active pedestrian community that use and move about the network of streets and sidewalks that connect a neighborhood, the street lacks a dynamic vitality that not only builds a sense of community, but also generates a certain level of protection.

As Jimmy panics at the isolation he now faces on the street, he decides to make a run for it and hide out in the bar on the corner where "colored people crowded about the circular bar" (177). He "ducked instinctively" as he runs down the street, but in that instance a bullet "aimed for his heart" comes out of nowhere and "hit him high in the left shoulder and spun him about" as the "second bullet him in the back" (177). Jimmy collapses on the ground and "with one last desperate effort he jerked his pistol free and fired it at the pavement" (177). Admittedly, the desperation with which Jimmy literally fires at the street can be read as a symbol of the frustration, rage, and, as I mentioned earlier, Gifford's reading of the futility of pursuing individualized armed resistance against systems of racial containment. That said, this particular scene does not justify a reading of the novel that indicts the street in its entirety as a symbol of these various systems of racial containment. The sound of Jimmy's "one futile shot," for example, brings people "running from all directions" (178). As a result of the crowds of people surrounding Jimmy's body, Walker, "aiming at the head of the grotesquely stumbling figure,"

misses his shot and Jimmy survives (178). The fact that the novel explicitly cites Jimmy's gunshot as the reason the numerous individuals respond and flood the streets suggests it was not, in many respects, futile at all. Instead, the rapid movements of the crowds and the momentary co-optation of the street illustrate a sense of hope and possibility attributed to the simultaneous oppression associated with the street. That said, despite the many "effective eyes" that come to his rescue they do not, unfortunately, result in the capture of Walker who, in effect, calmly strolls away from the scene.

Detective Walker poses an especially complex engagement with this idea because, as evidenced by his name, his movements, despite belonging to a disciplinary force that theoretically and in many cases physically seeks to control and contain particular bodies as a means to bring order to chaos, participates in the evasion of that which he symbolizes. There is, however, a significant and subtle exception to Walker's movement throughout the city: despite the active agency his last name connotes, when Walker is on foot he is always in pursuit of and constantly following Jimmy. As a result, the novel does not trace his movements as it does with Jimmy; Walker simply appears at certain locations or is pictured tracing the paths Jimmy has already created. For example, when Jimmy decides to lure Walker back to Harlem so he can kill him in the safety of his neighborhood, Himes describes Walker as following Jimmy "a few paces behind" and when Walker disappears moments before shooting Jimmy the reader, like Jimmy, is similarly unaware of where he is and realizes he is close only when he shoots and "the bullet aimed for his heart hit him high" (173, 177). The majority of the scenes that involve Walker moving through the city are also contingent upon him driving. This is significant because a vehicle—as opposed to a pedestrian—is much more constrained by the readable text the planned and designed roads allow. His drive up to Harlem focuses specifically on the streets he traverses:

"He kept up Broadway to Columbus Circle and took Central Park West to 110th Street and followed Convent Avenue up to 145th Street" (111). The fact that he "follows" Convent Avenue suggests a participation within and an acceptance of the intended use of this particular road and is in explicit contrast against scenes in which Jimmy takes, leaps, crosses, and saunters—verbs that connote a sense of agency—down the various streets he walks. As such, it is Jimmy, the pedestrian, who is repeatedly positioned as the figure who creates new paths and shortcuts as a means of escaping Walker's predatorial surveillance.

That said, in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Walker leaves Harlem and "saunter[s] calmly across the northbound traffic lane, skirt[s] the dividing parkway, and crosse[s] the traffic lane on the other side of Broadway" (178). The explicit description of Walker creating a path in a space meant for cars suggest he too traverses the city on foot, and in so doing invents and moves about the spatial order—allowing him to participate in the escape and evasion of the disciplining forces that govern and structure society. The fact that Walker is given this agency at the end of the novel suggests that, despite the fact that he embodies the racist hatred that leads to these systems of containment in the built environment, the enforcement of this containment cannot be attributed to a single person. Unlike the classic detective story in which the detective removes the offending, often foreign-born, person or object thereby returning peace and stability to the imperial city, Himes's novel—and in alignment with the tradition of hard-boiled fiction—implicates the larger constructs of society. When Luke accuses Walker of being from the South as a result of his racist aggression, Walker appears surprised by his rage: "'that's the hell of it'", he remarks, "'I never had nothing against colored people. I don't know what made me think like that—suspecting you porters. I guess I must have just picked it up'" (22). The suggestion that he "picked up" the racist aggression functions as less of an excuse or explanation in the novel and

more of an indictment of the systemic nature of racism in the United States. Therefore, the fact that Walker manipulates the intended design of the spatial order in this final scene to assist him in his literal escape from the crime scene suggests the racial hatred that sends him "into a frenzy of rage" makes him a "raving madman" (16) who is "not quite human" (114) does not disappear simply because he commits suicide at the end of the novel. Instead, his movement in this final scene reveals a critique of the larger systemic and institutional processes that lead to systems of containment.

In the introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison makes a passing reference to the "pseudoscientific" theories popular in the sociology discipline that allows for and privileges the ability of "whites [to feign] moral blindness" in the face of systemic racism (xv). In rejecting these theories and assertions—ones that carried a significant amount of weight and influence in terms of policy-making and distribution of resources—Ellison suggests that a power derives from recognizing the absurdity of the inherent violence and cruelty that structures American society: "What else was there to sustain our will to persevere," he writes, "but laughter? And could it be that there was a subtle triumph in such laughter that I had missed, but one which still was more affirmative than raw anger?" (*Invisible Man* xv). While the work of Himes and later black street lit authors such as Robert Beck, Donald Goines, Clarence Cooper Jr., and Nathan Heard certainly contain an anger that one can only be described as passionate and raw, this anger is often redirected by converting the "deepest experience of tragedy" (xvi) into farce revealing not only profound critiques of a racist, sexist, and unjust system, but also a way in which the

possibility of choice within an oppressive system emerges as a means of asserting and claiming humanity, autonomy, and individuality[51] (xvi).

Himes's absurdist noir—what Manthia Diawara describes as "black rage" from a black point of view—is perhaps one of the strongest examples of this approach and continues to characterize street literature throughout the twentieth century. The birth of rap and hip-hop in the 1970s continued to participate in this hypermasculine, hypersexual performance as a means by which characters who are "trapped by systems" can perform "acts which enable them to remove obstacles from their ways and to reinvent themselves" (Diawara 533). By the end of the century, the "black experience" novels of iconic authors like Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) and Donald Goines had been replaced in popularity by black ghetto street lit—a new iteration of street lit, authored primarily by black women. Whahida Clark, Sister Souljah, Vickie Stringer, and Terri Woods—some of the biggest names in the genre—continue to develop and manipulate an absurdist noir aesthetic as a means to restore the dynamic possibilities of the city street as urban renewal practices continue to try and decenter the vibrant possibilities of the city street.

[51] Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*—and his work more broadly—also emphasizes the importance of laughter as a means of survival and resistance in the face of oppression. Laughter, writes Alexie "was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons" (21).

"The City is Always the Battleground[1]": New Directions for Writing the Street

In 1999, Sister Souljah—self-proclaimed "raptivist" (Hunt)—wrote and published her bestselling novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* and with it ignited another evolution in the development of street literature. This particular iteration of street lit—often referred to as ghetto fiction or hip-hop lit—is written and read predominately, though by no means exclusively, by black women and teens[2]. And this shift in the main demographic is significant. Explicitly articulated in the Reader's Guide that accompanies the Pocket Star edition of *The Coldest Winter Ever (*hereafter *TCWE*), Souljah argues for the need to write the street and affiliated female characters as "free from cultural domination or projections of how others [think] we are. To get it right finally" (438). This intent to speak back to projections and cultural domination is, of course, reminiscent of Michael Denning's conception of the ghetto pastoral: a "new kind of city novel" that, in its desire to rewrite the slumming novels of the nineteenth century and the naturalism that dominated urban fiction at the turn of the century tells "tales of how *our* half lives"— ones "indebted to but significantly different from earlier forms" (230). While not necessarily a "new kind of city novel," Souljah's desire to "get it right finally," suggests a powerful intervention in literary representations of the street. Therefore, I want to conclude this dissertation with a brief discussion of one of the new directions I see as an especially compelling and rich area of study for twenty-first century street lit: black ghetto fiction.

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[1] Badger, Emily. Quoctrung Bui and Robert Gebeloff "The Neighborhood is Mostly Black. The Home Buyers are Mostly White." *The New York Times.* 28 April 2019.

[2] I want to emphasize, however, that women authors are not, by any means, the only ones writing the street in this manner: Omar Tyree, Shannon Holmes, and K'Wan are popular figures as well. In fact, Omar Tyree claims that he self-published Flyy Girl in 1992 and with that initiated the explosion of what would become black ghetto fiction (Norris 6). A timeline that puts him seven years ahead of Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever,* which, in large part because it was a *New York Times* bestseller, receives recognition for igniting the new street lit craze.

Texts within the black ghetto fiction genre build upon the iterations that came before primarily by representing the street as a dynamic space that is capable of simultaneously containing and liberating its users. Broadly speaking, this newest iteration also tends to highlight the drug game, the pursuit of material possessions, is saturated with sex and violence, and aligns itself with hip-hop culture. Considered a classic of this iteration of street lit[3], Souljah's novel bills itself as a cautionary tale that chronicles the "real ghetto experience" of Winter Santiaga (paratext). As with *Bread Givers* and *Run Man Run, TCWE* centers the street and its capacity to facilitate movement and the possibility of choice within and against intersecting systems of oppression. With the incarceration of her drug lord father and the absence of her drug-addicted mother, Winter's experiences throughout the narrative are predicated on her desire for and accumulation of the various material and sexual pleasures she chooses as she weaves her way through and around the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Despite her novel's iconic status, however, Sister Souljah pointedly and repeatedly rejects her affiliation with the category of "street lit": the descriptor, she implies, qualifies her work. She tells *The Root* magazine in 2011, "I think that when European authors or Euro-American authors write about urban, suburban or rural areas, it's just called literature. So I call my work literature, and anyone who reads my books knows that it's literature" (Ofori-Atta). Her explicit rejection of the category reveals not only the lingering influence of the modernist period in which, I argue, street lit texts—such as *Bread Givers*—were in tension with what was

[3] So much so that the scholarly work that does exist on the contemporary iteration of street lit works predominately with this text. For scholarly literary work see Keenan Norris's work comparing and contrast Toni Morrison's *Sula* to *The Coldest Winter Ever* or Stephane Dunn's work on black feminism and *The Coldest Winter Ever*. There are also numerous studies in the field of Education that examine TCWE as a test case for incorporating more black urban fiction into high schools to get black teenagers to read (see the numerous articles in *The English Journal* and *English Education* to begin with). Additionally, Vanessa Irvin Morris's critical work on the genre reveals that out of the street lit genre, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is the one most often taught in college classrooms (57).

perceived as literary or "high modernist" pieces of art[4], but is also indicative of the explicit racial affiliation contemporary street lit carries with it. Despite her novel's iconic status as representative of twenty-first century street lit, her desire for her work to be categorized as "just literature" recalls the work of critics such as Kenneth Warren, Werner Sollors, and Roderick Ferguson whose various scholarly endeavors (broadly speaking) analyze the impact of racial or ethnic identifying markers on literary categories that—as Warren, in particular, argues—impinges the narrative's dynamism and creativity[5].

While the sociopolitical complexity of literary categorization is not the focus of this project, I point this out simply because it also reveals an important subtext underlying this particular historical moment: the reification of "street lit" as a genre read and produced predominately by black women. While the "black experience" texts I've discussed previously certainly play a role in this shifting connotation of "street lit", texts by Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, Nathan Heard and others are still routinely conceptualized within the framework of the "black experience" genre—one that explicitly (and even exploitatively[6]) affiliates and aligns itself with race. By the final decades of the twentieth century, street lit is, for all intents and purposes—and, significantly, even without any sort of racially identifying

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[4] Another familiar critique leveled at contemporary black ghetto fiction is the poorly written, unedited versions that circulated primarily in the first few decades of the twenty-first century when authors were self-publishing and selling them out of their cars and on neighborhood sidewalks and streets.

[5] For creative texts that explicitly engage this question see *Erasure* by Percival Everett, *Native Speaker* by Chang Rae-Lee, *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty, *Pym* by Mat Johnson.

[6] While Justin Gifford's work on this genre has critiqued the exploitative dimensions of Holloway House, Kinohi Nishikawa's new book *Street Players*: *Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground* shines a new light on this familiar critique by suggesting not only did Holloway House exploit its authors but it also exaggerated its role in bringing to fruition a new genre of street lit: Almost all scholarly work on black pulp fiction, he argues, accepts Bentley Morris's argument—one of the founders of Holloway House—that prior to the late 1960s there "was no venue for a talented young black author, period" (48). This assertion positions Holloway House as the generator of massively popular and successful genre of black pulp fiction and disregards how the success of this genre stemmed in large part not only from the heretofore untapped black reading public largely ignored by mainstream publishers, but also how Holloway House capitalized on, exploited, and as Nishikawa argues, appropriated black street culture—a performance in which black men "make the inhospitable circumstances of ghetto life actually work for them" (50).

marker—becomes synonymous with blackness, and, in many cases, black women. Because of this, street lit becomes interchangeable with a variety of other classificatory names for the genre including ones that more explicitly invoke race such as "black ghetto fiction", or others that do not, such as "ghetto fiction" or "hip-hop lit."

While black ghetto fiction certainly fits within the street lit lineage this project delineates, I want to suggest that it also offers new directions for thinking about how we write, imagine, and engage the street. To be clear this possibility for new directions does not mean an entirely new approach, or category. Instead, because twenty-first century black ghetto fiction tends to center women as protagonists confidently navigating the dangerous games of the street, these narratives offer a new lens through which we can approach street lit. In particular, because the street is a space that has been "habitually conceived as a male space in which women are either repressed or disobedient marginal presences" (Parsons 1) the street is, arguably, a more dangerous space, both literally and metaphorically, for women to inhabit. Furthermore, in centering women and their relationship to the street, black ghetto fiction also allows for the reclamation of a rich history that—in part because the street is often conceived of as a space dominated by men—has resulted in projects and novels that have, as with Marita Bonner's *Frye Street* or Fran Ross's *Oreo*, faded into obscurity[7]. Of course, in suggesting this, I also do not intend to discount or overlook the numerous women authors who have written about both the city and the street. On

[7] Fran Ross's 1974 satirical, "hilarious badass novel" *Oreo*, is another example of a text that takes as its main premise the ability to wander both in terms of narrative form—wordplay, puns, multimodal compositions including menus, charts, mathematical formulations, and nonlinear storytelling—and, as demonstrated in the section of the book entitled "Part Two: Meandering," physical, kinesthetic wandering as well. While the novel wanders on many levels—from its biting social commentary about race and ethnicity to feminism and a claim to "challenge patriarchy and to contest the phallic power of the male" (223)—the young, black female protagonist's reclamation of the streets of 1970s New York is especially powerful. In this section, Christine—nicknamed Oreo due to her "rich brown color and her wide smile full of sugar-white baby teeth" and a mishearing of Christine's grandmother calling her Oriole (39)—wanders the streets of New York City in an Theseusian-inspired quest for her absent father. With a "booklet of New York maps," and a cane she confiscated from a pickpocket in the "subway concourse at Thirtieth Street", (93), Oreo confidently traverses the streets of New York City in search of her father.

the contrary, this project has emphasized many of those women—from Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska to Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks. And yet, women authors, historically, have not dominated street lit to the same extent as the women authors of black ghetto fiction are currently. As such, there is a sense of urgency in recognizing and attending to the new directions their texts outline for literatures of the street.

While there are numerous texts within the black ghetto fiction iteration of street lit I could discuss[8], I have chosen to conclude this project by briefly discussing *TCWE* precisely because its immense popularity at the time of its publication jumpstarted this new wave of street lit and is now considered an iconic example of black ghetto fiction. More specifically, this novel exemplifies how black ghetto fiction prioritizes engaging with and speaking back to dominant narratives that limit the ability of female characters to move through, take back, and master the street. In this particular novel, asserting access to and dominance over the street reveals not only how intersecting modes of oppression manifest in the built environment of the city for women, but also the way in which the street assists in subverting and pushing back against these intersecting modes of oppression. Because the ability to wander and move about freely has historically been denied to black women in particular, scenes of movement, or at the very least, scenes in which the ability to move freely are fought for and contested, is an act of resistance that offers, as critic Sarah Jane Cervenak suggests, "new pathways for the enactment of black female philosophical desire" (2). While another project is better suited to pursuing this new direction for

[8] And, it should be noted, successful marketing of this genre depends on dramatizing the significance and centrality of each author. Vickie Stringer's bio on Amazon.com, for example, describes her as the "Queen of Hip-Hop Literature" and Omar Tyree implies in the forward of Keenan Norris's edited collection of essays *Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape* that his book Flyy Girl ignited what is now the street lit craze, but he is overlooked as a central figure in this because his "hard 'urban' edge" was not as popular the street lit of Terri Woods, Vickie Stringer, and eventually Sister Souljah—who he argues incorrectly receives "the bulk of the credit" for the sudden uptick in authors writing the street (8,11)

black ghetto fiction in more detail, an example from *TCWE* offers a productive illustration of how the nuances of the street, gender, and the possibility for agency manifest.

When Winter's drug kingpin father, for example, moves the family from the Brooklyn projects to the suburbs of Long Island (15), Winter refuses the isolation and containment the suburbs impose and devises methods of getting back to the projects where "all [her] great adventures were" and whose streets she knew "like the curves of her own body" (15). In likening the dangerous streets of Brooklyn to her body, Winter not only appropriates the street as her own, but also implies a specifically sexual reclamation of the street that centers her own agency and desires. Furthermore, in crowning herself the "princess of [its] alleyways, backstaircases, and whatnot" (15), Winter, much like Jimmy in *Run Man Run* finds freedom of movement within the confines of an urban environment—one that seeks to isolate and contain on the basis of race—via the unplanned shortcuts that rebelliously and chaotically crisscross the city. By "wandering away from planned pathways", Winter not only challenges urban planning and design's attempts to regulate movement based on race, but also enables Winter to subvert and manipulate the urban environment—a space, Parsons reminds us is predominately affiliated with and "constructed by and around masculine culture" (15). When Winter's father later chastises her for wandering off and reminds her "you're my daughter. You just can't wander off and go anywhere, unprotected" (35), Winter asserts her ownership of the street proclaiming "those are my streets, Daddy!" (38). This rhetorical move establishes her agency in the face of patriarchal authority and in so doing begins to deconstruct the masculine culture of the street. The fact that Winter's father deliberately seeks to inhibit her ability to "wander" and then justifies this through the rhetoric of safety and protection[9] reveals how women's ability to reclaim the street counters

[9] A similar pattern unfolds in *Bread Givers* as well. Sarah's father cannot accept that his daughter will be living alone in the city free to roam and wander as she pleases. He refers to her as a "Wild-head!" and chastises her for

not only patriarchal influence and authority but also the culture of fear that prevents women from fully accessing and using urban space. It is because of this that I see black ghetto fiction as articulating a lens through which we can read for how mobility, agency, and complexity in representing women's relationship to the street and urban space emerges within the broader category of "street lit."

As we think about the new directions black ghetto fiction might offer, it is also important to emphasize the necessity of the continued growth of critical work surrounding the genre as well. Street lit's explosive popularity in the first decade of the twenty-first century has resulted in a burgeoning field of scholarship, but many of the fields most prominent critics continue to overlook and limit the productive and radical potential of this literary category by framing and grounding their analyses of black ghetto fiction with clear cut definitions and/or origin points for what they read as a distinct genre. Marc Hill, Biany Pérez, and Decoteau J. Irby, for example, seek to differentiate street lit from the broader categories of urban fiction by identifying its "hip-hop aesthetics, independent production, and authorship" as indicative of an entirely "new genre of literature" (76). While I will discuss in more detail momentarily how the affiliation with hip-hop, in particular, is not radically new for narratives of the street, this impulse to read twenty-first century street lit as a new origin point within urban literature overlooks how these themes particular to the city and urban space overlap and build on each other. And, importantly, this move prevents the possibility of charting an archival lineage of the ever changing historical and sociopolitical context of the street. Two prominent literary critics in particular—Justin Gifford and Kristina Graaff—offer examples of critical approaches to street lit that impede this kind of necessary scholarly dynamism.

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planning to work in the city "without asking, without consulting your father" and then is astonished that she plans to live alone: "a daughter of mine, only seventeen years old, not home at night?" (136).

In his study of black crime fiction, for example, Gifford reads the rise of black female authorship as the "most significant transformation of the genre of black crime fiction since Holloway House published *Pimp: The Story of My Life* in 1967" (154). And, Graaff, as with Hill, Pérez, and Irby, situates the black ghetto fiction of authors such as Sister Souljah, Terri Woods, and Vickie Stringer as a "new form of black popular fiction" particular to the first decade of the twenty-first century and particular to "the nation's inner-urban areas" (113). While she acknowledges that the street literature of the twenty-first century follows in the tradition of the "black experience" novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, she suggests that black ghetto fiction's alignment with "Hip-Hop culture" marks it as distinct in this tradition (114). For Graaff, "Hip-Hop culture" amounts to the fact that street lit shares "language styles", the "narrative location of 'the hood', and focuses on topics such as "black mass incarceration, police violence, and postindustrial inner-urban decay" (114). While I do not disagree with their impulse to read black ghetto fiction as "indebted to but significantly different" (Denning 230) from texts that have come before it, I do disagree with the specifics of Graaff and Gifford's reasoning.

Graaff's argument regarding street lit and "hip-hop culture", for example, is a familiar one for early critical work on street lit. While hip-hop culture has had a tremendous and perhaps even more explicit influence on the black ghetto fiction iteration of street lit than others, her insistence on conceptualizing the work of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines—what she terms "pulp" or "ghetto realistic fiction"—as a genre distinct from black ghetto fiction—what she terms as "street lit" (113)—impedes her ability to see how these two approaches to the street overlap and build on a much richer history and lineage than she gives them credit for[10]. In the

[10] Not to mention that the themes she identifies as being a part of "hip hop culture"—especially black mass incarceration and inner-urban decay—are evident in the "pulp" and "ghetto realistic fiction" of not only Slim and Goines, but also Nathan Heard, Clarence Cooper Jr., Odie Hawkins and more.

case of the influence of hip-hop culture in particular, her argument risks eliding or, at the very least, overlooking the fact that not only is Iceberg Slim considered the grandfather of hip hop and rap—with dozens of celebrities adopting monikers in homage to him[11]--but also that the ethos of rap and hip hop culture extends back beyond the 1970s and can be found in the elements of noir that can be traced back to the street lit of the early part of the twentieth century.

Because of this, the hip-hop ethos Graaff reads as differentiating black ghetto fiction from that of the "black experience" novels of Slim and Goines is indicative less of a "new form of black popular fiction" (Graaff 113) and is rather a familiar aesthetic that prioritizes performative acts of rebellion against oppressive systems that shift with the passing of time. More specifically, as Manthia Diawara argues, the structural stylistics and thematics of black noir—from the emphasis on corruption within urban spaces to positioning lawbreakers as "not simply bad guys, and identification with them is possible" to describing "Black rage from a Black point of view" (531)—inform the thematics of rap music at the end of the twentieth century. Both noir and rap, then, share a drive to tell the stories of "Black men and women trapped by systems, and the performative acts which enable them to remove obstacles from their ways and to reinvent themselves" (533). Of course, I want to be mindful that in suggesting we look to black ghetto fiction for new directions in the ways in which women are writing the street, I too am not constructing—as I argue Graaff has done—an artificial separation from iterations that have come before. As I mentioned earlier and have demonstrated throughout this project, women have absolutely been writing the street before black ghetto fiction. But, because black ghetto fiction is a genre within street lit that is dominated by women, I am suggesting that we

[11] In his biography of Iceberg Slim, Justin Gifford writes that Beck's representation of the street and life as a pimp "inspired the most powerful artistic response to America's new police state: gangsta rap" (217). Ice-T and Ice Cube, for example, "both name themselves after Iceberg Slim, and they styled their antiestablishment messages and hardcore confessionals of violent street life after Beck's street fiction" (217).

look to black ghetto fiction of the twenty-first century as a critical lens for tracing how women in both in the current and previous centuries write the street. Justin Gifford shares my impulse to recognize the significance of the gender shift in a history of street lit, and while I agree with his impulse to read this shift as a "transformation" of the genre, it is his "revisionist" language and approach that I find limiting.

More specifically, Gifford reads the black ghetto fiction—or what he terms contemporary street literature—as rewriting the "representations of pimps, players, revolutionaries, and writers" as a means to "give voice and agency to female characters" (154). This reading of women authors as "revisionist," he argues, begins to account for the "misogynist gender dynamics" found in earlier versions of street lit[12] (156). This, to a certain extent, has merit. Vickie Stringer's novel *Let That Be the Reason* (2001), for example, tells the story of Pamela who, order to provide for her son, begins work as a call girl. Her eventual success in the industry allows her to start her own business as a Madam where she also sells and traffics drugs. The character depth and power ascribed to Pamela as she navigates the sex and drug work particular to the streets certainty reflects a desire to rewrite and add more complexity and empowerment to the female characters that populate the pages of earlier and decidedly misogynist iterations of street lit. Yet, while revisionist aspects certainly characterize the black ghetto fiction of the twenty-first century, it is important to challenge the impulse to read this genre in its entirety as

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[12] While the specifics of gender dynamics and this literary category has not been a focus of this project (which, again, is why I am suggesting that we look to black ghetto fiction for new directions for the study of this literary category), I do want to underscore Gifford's assertion regarding misogyny found in the black experience novels. *Run Man Run*, for example, the female characters who appear in the novel operate only within the context of sex, desire, lust, and betrayal. Eva, for example, is a prostitute Detective Walker visits who he rapes "brutally, taking her as though in a raging fury, gritting his teeth and mouthing obscenities while making love, as though any instant he might choke her to death" (113). While Eva accuses him of raping her, the novel undercuts the clarity of this as she also accuses him of hating her when "you make love to me" (114). This narrative ambiguity is especially significant because it reveals the acceptance and conflation of sexual violence with desire in these particular novels.

merely rewriting or flipping the power dynamic in the narratives that came before. To do so not only suggests a lack of originality, but also, and perhaps more importantly, reduces the dynamic potential of the city street. To read instead for how black ghetto fiction is indicative of challenging and stretching the boundaries of what constitutes street lit—and not simply mapping over the existing structures and approaches by telling the story from a different gendered perspective—preserves the dynamic and vibrant potential of the city street and sustains the continued nuance and complexity of "street lit". Thus, in focusing on the potential of black ghetto fiction to offer new directions for the continued study of "street lit", I am suggesting that the rise and dominance of women authors in this genre offer a particular vantage point and lens through which we can examine how the street continues to be used and reclaimed for the purposes of expressions of choice and agency via the subversive movement within and against institutionalized and intersecting structures of oppression.

This emphasis on black ghetto fiction as a new iteration that offers a productive lens for continued study of street lit underscores a key tenet of this dissertation: the importance of conceptualizing street lit as less of a self-contained genre and instead a much more expansive literary category that can account for the myriad of ways in which the street can be reclaimed. A a result of this flexibility, street lit is able to account for narratives and forms that other disciplines that seek to tell the story of the street—such as the sociological narrative—are unable to thoroughly do. As such, rather than offering a clear-definition of what constitutes street lit, I have proposed an implicit, "functional description" (Delany 244) of street lit by gathering a literary archive that spans decades, genres and forms. Thus, a functional description of street lit reveals that the narratives within this archive share a similar drive to account for, preserve, and

explore the unpredictable, chaotic, and paradoxical nature of the street: a space that is at once liberating and oppressive, stunning and unpleasant, peaceful and violent.

Furthermore, this project has sought to establish not only an expansive new literary category for conceptualizing urban space, but also an answer to how street literature reclaims the street. Part of this reclamation project, I have argued, unfolds through the category's ability to imbue the street with rhetorics grounded in the absurd and characterized through performances of choice, and subversive and evasive movement in the face of oppressive narratives and systems that seek to contain, isolate, and control those who move within this space. These oppressive narratives and systems often physically manifest through urban planning and design, the subsequent architecture that defines urban space, and manifests theoretically and ideologically through the urban social scientific accounts that seek to explain and rationalize the workings of urban space. The rationalizations that govern this process, of course, contextualize, evaluate and design the city and its streets according to a particular dominant narrative—one that historically has been positioned as "white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed (McKittrick xiii). Thus, for twentieth century multi-ethnic literatures of the street, the street manifests as a battleground of sorts between literary representations that challenge and stretch the limits of this vantage point, and the rationalistic arguments of the state intent on maintaining order as defined through this particular lens. In asserting that possibilities for choice, agency, and movement exist within the impoverished streets and neighborhoods in which these novels are set the texts assert a complex portrait of humanity—one characterized by a "web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness" (32) that James Baldwin insists only literature can provide—and confront the narratives of degradation and pathology that "insist that political powerlessness and economic exclusion can lead only to cultural deprivation" and, ultimately, entrapment (Murray 59).

And yet, it is important to remember that street lit does more than simply confront these narratives. It is through dynamic literary representations of the street that rhetorics of choice, and agency emerge as a means to subvert, evade, and reject these notions of entrapment and powerlessness. Further, this emphasis on movement destabilizes dominant cultural narratives that, for the purposes of readability and control, seek to socially, economically, politically, and spatially map a city. This destabilization on the part of the literary is essential given that the city and the social, political, cultural, and economic complexities regarding urban space are constantly evolving—a reality that the impulse to map cannot easily account for. Street lit's adaptability to the ever changing sociospatial realities of the city enables it to engage and account for the intermixing and colliding of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual differences that the city streets productively and vibrantly facilitate. Because of the constantly evolving nature of the city and the sociopolitical issues entangled within, the street will always be a battleground for access and competing narratives in our larger cultural imagination. And because the street remains a space of tension between these competing narratives it continues to exist as a vibrant, dynamic, malleable space in which subversion, evasion, rebellion and revolutions, both metaphorically and literally[13], can and do take place.

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[13] Our current cultural and political moment, for example, is defined in large part by the rhetoric of "taking back the streets": from Black Lives Matter protests in the United States to Brexit protests in the United Kingdom, Women's Marches around the world to protests against Omar al-Bashir in the Sudan, the street is a powerful symbol and metaphor for the people to speak back to power and rebelling against policy, law, and the basic forces of government. An especially compelling example from India underscores this reality: In January, in the state of Kerala in India, somewhere between 3.5 and 5 million women lined up along the National Highway 66 to stretch the length of the state—a distance of 385 miles—to create a powerful "women's wall" a means to advocate for and create awareness around gender equality[13] (Thiagarajan). Images of the women lining the street with their fists raised, demanding and chanting for rights illustrates the powerful vehicle of the street for generating and supporting what is, in this case in particular, an "impending cultural revolution" (Thiagarajan). The idea of "taking back the street" is contingent, of course, on a dynamism that the space of the street affords and underscores its availability for strategic manipulation.

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