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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

“If The House Is Not Yet Finished”: Urban Renewal
and Postwar African American Poetry

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lyn Hejinian, Chair

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Spring 2014

Abstract

“If The House Is Not Yet Finished”: Urban Renewal and Postwar African American Poetry

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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In my dissertation, I investigate the epic writings of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden to tell the stories of black working class life and culture in postwar New York City, Chicago, and Detroit. I suggest that these writers’ modernist epics offer a counter-poetics to the “clean” modernism of urban renewal and, implicitly, lay bare the racial exclusionism foundational to not only urban renewal’s specific policies of segregation and displacement but also to its aesthetic claims to architectural avant-gardism and newness. This was a time of urban renewal-slum clearance programs that displaced and disrupted black communities—more specifically, a time when race, modernism, and geography all collided in urban renewal—and I argue that we can see both urban renewal and the poetic responses to it in terms of aesthetic modernism.

In my first chapter, “Alternative Geographies of Community in Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred*,” I claim that Hughes’s poem about the struggle for home and belonging in postwar Harlem invokes the importance of black self-determination and action through the democratic movements of bebop jazz and montage. In my second chapter, “Building ‘Social Width’ in Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” I read Brooks’s epic as a poetic formalization of the negotiation of private and public space and, in particular, of the voices which speak for and shape a community. In my third chapter, “Racial Grief and Racial Mourning in Robert Hayden’s ‘Middle Passage’ and ‘Elegies for Paradise Valley,’” I argue that the epic becomes impossible for Hayden because of the way blacks are displaced from their history, beginning with the rending racial grief of the Middle Passage; “Elegies for Paradise Valley” revisits the experience of racial grief and racial melancholia is one affective avenue his poem offers.

For Marty Jon



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Introduction: Re-visioning Race, Space, and Community in Postwar African American Poetry

The plantation, the prison, the sharecropper's cabin, and the ghetto have been visible and obvious manifestations of white supremacist uses of space. Perhaps less visible and obvious, but no less racist, have been the spaces that have produced unfair gains and unjust enrichments for whites: the segregated neighborhood and the segregated school. For black people in the United States, struggles against oppressions of race have by necessity also been struggles over space. African American battles for resources, rights, and recognition have not only *taken place*, in the figurative term that historians use to describe how events happen, but they have also required blacks literally to *take places*.¹

—George Lipsitz

To me, there's no difference in the North and the South. Down South they don't care how close I get as long as I don't get too big; and up North they don't care how big I get, as long as I don't get too close. Yep, we have the same problems up North; 'course up North we're more clever with it. Take my hometown, Chicago. When Negroes move into one large area, and it looks like we might control the votes, they don't say anything to us – they have a slum clearance.²

—Dick Gregory

...because there were those who feared alarming fists of snow on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of statistics...³

—Robert Hayden

Traditional surveys of 20th-century African American poetry focus on two key literary and cultural movements: the high modernism of the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the black aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. While these movements and their literary legacies are indeed important, I investigate and see as equally important the black mid-century modernism during the 1940s-1960s, a period of massive postwar urban redevelopment and urban renewal. Urban renewal, it turns out, was a coded word for slum clearance. In my dissertation, I focus on three African American poets, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden and their understudied mid-century poetry, to examine, formally as well as historically, how they attempted to use modernist epic writing to represent the everyday stories and lives of black women and men who helped to create and then lived in the postwar black urban communities of New York's Harlem, Chicago's Bronzeville, and Detroit's Paradise Valley. My dissertation looks at the different ways that the experience of diaspora gets forced onto black urban populations in mid-century America as a result of urban renewal-slum clearance.

I focus on place and communities in the postwar period because I am interested in how communities and individuals survived and structured themselves amid the tensions over race and housing at this particular moment. The postwar period is also most certainly the Cold War period, but I choose the former term because it underscores the sense of destruction that permeated locally and globally at this historical moment with the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the destruction of European cities, and much else. What is it to be a citizen in a world that has undergone barbaric destruction, both suffered from it and perpetrated

it? What ways of organizing and community formation happen on the ground in the face of such destruction? There is a trend in critical literature to use transnational or global approaches to the Cold War and my intervention is to work on the local—at the level of the social and geographical—and community during this period.

This postwar period was a critical context in a number of ways. There were new tides of migration, requiring resettlement into a new urban order and way of life, and imaginations of new urban black selves and communities. The Second Great Migration made African Americans a majority northern and urban population for the first time. At the start of World War II more than 80 percent of African Americans lived in the South and largely subsisted as sharecropping farmers. This would change startlingly through the war and after, as approximately seven hundred thousand black Southerners moved—northward, westward, to the cities—to work in the booming wartime manufacturing industries; millions more left the region in the two decades following the war. In the 1940s and 1950s, rapidly growing and increasingly crowded African American populations in major cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York found themselves navigating the complex transition from Southern rural life to Northern urban life. The process of moving, resettling, and making a new home was in itself a tremendous experience, raising issues of inclusion, belonging, and rootedness. In addition, these issues were severely impacted by racial discrimination and segregation in housing, as blacks were met with white mob violence upon arrival and soon were confined to what became the “black belts” of major cities. As Arnold Hirsch and Thomas Sugrue remind us, African Americans who arrived in cities (or had been ‘arrived’ for some time) and were looking to settle into communities were confronted with virulent racism and mob violence.

Indeed, in the postwar US, when it came to race and housing the story of violence and destruction continued. As George Lipsitz writes, “From the 1930s to 1970s, urban renewal demolished some sixteen hundred black neighborhoods in cities in the North and South... Federally assisted urban renewal projects demolished 20 percent of the central city housing units occupied by African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. People of color made up more than 60 percent of the population displaced by urban renewal. Ninety percent of the low-income housing units that were destroyed by urban renewal were never replaced.”⁴

The dominant and totalizing story of race, space, and representation in the postwar city is one of urban crisis, the marginalization of black culture, and the formation of the blighted “black ghetto.”⁵ The start of the Cold War Era and the “Age of Anxiety” brought with it an ever-urgent, politically catalyzed move to conform, consolidate, and characterize America into scenes of white nuclear families of middle-class strivers and enthusiastic consumers who were happily ensconced in white “sewn suburbs,” as Brooks writes. The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement witnessed the struggle for equal rights, full citizenship, and fair representation and access for black Americans which stood as a critique of the exclusions and containments central to this hegemonic postwar representation of the “American way of life.” All this made representation and the politics of representation central.⁶ It is within such contexts that I examine these poets’ emboldened gestures within the postwar period to both recall and formally reconstruct African American life. Black writers writing in this context, then, wrote black experimental poetry, with an awareness of the racial and cultural implications of their work.

There was an overwhelming need to make sense of this experience of passage, resettlement, and subsequent displacement in the 1940s-1960s. Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden were writing about New York City, Chicago, and Detroit amid this shifting, dynamized social landscape. They make sense of new urban experiences by depicting the particularities rather than

abstractions, the puzzle pieces that cohere into the larger whole and comprise the experiences of the dailiness of their everyday lives. I argue that, as black mid-century modernists, Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden experiment with, and push the limits and possibilities of, narrative, characterization, and vernacular language in the modernist epic or poetic sequence in order to revive and represent the everyday stories of black city life.⁷ In particular, I show how the poetics of community manifested via the epic form. They compose multi-voiced, multi-patterned, and multi-layered episodic poems to sustain and make widely legible portraits of burgeoning, variegated, and complex black urban communities, thus revising and expanding upon a form that, with the possible exception of H.D., has been considered the exclusive domain of white male modernists like T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound to reckon with epic history. In their poetry Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden explored ways of organizing and making community that reflected the spirit of the emerging Civil Rights Movement and its rallying of the masses of ordinary black people.

Their work responded, too, to the status of modernist epic writing as a major literary form of the time. With “high” modernism as a kind of orthodoxy, Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden sought to open the modernist epic to new black urban folk culture, even as mainstream white culture was moving to the suburbs. Their writing, thus, responded to urgent social conditions and pressing literary contexts. Indeed, there was something urgent about epic in an age of urban renewal. The epic opens up possibilities that are not available in other kinds of African American writing as well as other kinds of modernist writing. In particular, the epic has its roots in the oral poetic tradition, and Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden revive the epic’s focus on orality and native idiom, bringing modernist and vernacular styles together and reinforcing a new urban African American culture’s sense of itself. Unlike Williams’s preoccupation with the site-specificity of his local epic *Paterson*, these three poets write epics of communities rather than epics of place because of the instability and lack of assurances place affords for African Americans living in the postwar city. As Brooks writes in “After Mecca,” “Their country is a Nation on no map.”⁸ And, later, “but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth. /.../ Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.”⁹ Rather than place, then, the language, sound, speech acts, testimonials, and performance of the urban folk is central to these modernist epics. They imagine and locate collectivity in poetry at a time of great social action and upheaval.

The innovations that resulted reflect a major rethinking of the cultural function of poetry. Modernist epics by these black poets made a public and collective poetry that was not propaganda. By public and collective poetry, I mean poetry that uses vibrant language to communicate and thus create a shareable and shared world, a world of commonality, making a poetry of communities. They artfully rendered as yet unseen, intimate, daily scenes of black urban life to render black consciousness and community in local and particular terms.

I read Langston Hughes’s book-length epic *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Gwendolyn Brooks’s epic poem “In the Mecca,” and Robert Hayden’s sequence “Elegies for Paradise Valley” and in doing so I show that these poets employed versions of the epic or poetic sequence precisely because it was the proper medium for depicting cultural formations. Their poetic works, in particular, were concerned with affirming the centrality of black history, culture, and identity. How did these new formal representations shape and envision moments of social possibility and social change? How did they respond to the imperative of creating an expanded black social consciousness by representing black history, culture, and identity? And, amid all this, how were they in conversation with midcentury modernist design?

Midcentury modernist design and architecture forces viewers to see things in different ways, through clean lines, no ornamentation, and no traces of the past. The intended “universal functionality” of this design was anything but universal in practice and excluded many. The urban renewal-slum clearance that literally cleared the way for modernist architecture also worked to crowd black people into smaller and smaller communities as well as to scatter black communities again into a diaspora. Writing in this context, Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden make us rethink how we see race and space in their works. What different spatiality are they presenting and how does that effect notions of race and community? My focus is on what is overlooked, that is, the local and particular. I look at modern architecture and spatial form here alongside modern poetry and poetic form and read the interesting ways the aesthetics and politics of architecture and of their attempted epics intersect and engage one another. In particular, I argue that Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden reimagined their attempts at epic as spatial as a way to re-territorialize urban space. Viewing their poetry through the lens of spatiality allows me to look at the different layers of life that make up the world of the poem.

In my first chapter, “Alternative Geographies of Community in Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred*,” I claim that Hughes’s poem about the struggle for home and belonging in postwar Harlem invokes the importance of black self-determination and action through the democratic movements of bebop jazz and montage. In my second chapter, “Building ‘Social Width’ in Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca,’” I read Brooks’s epic as a poetic formalization of the negotiation of private and public space and, in particular, of the voices which speak for and shape a community. In my third chapter, “Mapping Mourning: Racial Grief and Racial Mourning in Robert Hayden’s ‘Elegies for Paradise Valley,’” I argue that the epic becomes impossible for Hayden because of the way blacks are displaced from their history, beginning with the rending racial grief of the Middle Passage; “Elegies for Paradise Valley” revisits the experience of racial grief, and racial melancholia is one affective avenue his poem offers.

The question that circulates among their individual works is what is the fate of the interior—of inner life—in the built environment? While Hughes looks at street life, Brooks looks at interiors, rooms, and corridors, and Hayden looks at negative space, ghostly and deathly spaces. They use the ‘builtness’ of their built environments to investigate questions of black interiority and black collectivity. Their black characters often find themselves on the outside of something while still having interiority. Their poetry allows these black urban figures to have different kinds of private and public parts to them, rather than just be wholly public figures—via the “riot-squad of statistics” and official reports—or wholly private figures, usurped of any public voice, individual or collective, at all. Indeed, Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden re-worked the form of the modernist epic and poetic sequence into a vehicle for vernacular culture that would represent developing black urban folk figures and communities—to establish through such prolonged poetic acts a dynamic body of community extant in verse, one that regulates and otherwise attends to itself through shared and circulating memories, trauma, stories, and songs. Their poems construct ‘a long view’ of black urban history and reconstruct a collective past that reclaims a people’s history that is a communal history and that is part of the history of American life in the modern city. I argue that these extended and formally experimental poetic works generate and contribute to an expanding and expanded black social consciousness that was essential to the start and later success of the Civil Rights Movement.

The mid-century writing of these African American poets locate particular moments of urban crisis in rapidly transforming postwar cities as crucial moments of intervention. Carlo

Rotella argues that the process of urban crisis “took place as much in the urban imaginations of Americans as it did in the streets of American cities.” He continues, “The constantly shifting and increasingly vehement national conversation about cities in the 1950s and 1960s called into question every form of urban order—not only the political, social, or architectural but also the representational.”¹⁰ It is this context in which Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden experimented with the epic form to build and/or imagine black urban spaces, communities, and architectures of social possibility and change, responding to the opportunities and challenges of the black inner city around them. Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden used these experiences of rupture and collapse as an opening to return to tell the extended story of these communities and re-imagine ordinary lives and commonplace stories that existed in and in spite of the overwhelming presence of cities.

Indeed, the collapsing of old stories enabled the construction of new stories of urban black selves. I argue that Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden are ever mindful that blackness has been constructed, contained, and delimited by others. As Stuart Hall writes, “The fact is ‘black’ has never been just there. . . . It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found.”¹¹ For them, now, in an expansive and self-determining spirit shared with the emerging Civil Rights Movement, urban blackness became a complex, manifold story yet to be told: “Blackness stern and blunt and beautiful, / organ-rich Blackness telling a terrible story,” as Brooks writes in “In the Mecca.” After the “racial realignment of the 1940s” resulting from the internal postwar migration,¹² there was a need to imagine a new racial story of the United States. Yet, according to Michael Denning, the writers of the time failed to do so, with the exception of William Faulkner. Denning points to a “Southernization” of US national culture with the popular success of Faulkner because of his ability to envision racial stories in the post-war period.

However, I show that there were other racial stories being envisioned in the post-war period, and not just in the context of the novel nor placed in the South by a white writer. Instead, they may be found in the context of the modernist epic or poetic sequence and placed in Northern cities like New York City, Chicago, and Detroit, where new racial stories were emerging on the ground. Blacks and whites were coming into contact in new ways and there was a recognized need to try to imagine racial stories.¹³ The new stories by the black writers I consider and others necessarily led to formal experimentation.

The nexus of form and tradition is a critical one in African American poetry. In considering African American poetic traditions, Elizabeth Alexander begins by asking, “how does a black poet fully receive, explore, and amalgamate his or her varied inheritances in order to address questions of form?” She continues, “The need for the African-American artist to heed the exhortation to ‘make it new,’ not for the sake of novelty but of necessity, to forge form, indeed, that responds to the complex formative nature of African-Americaness itself, has always been pressing.”¹⁴ For Alexander, black poets are ever expanding and building upon “a great tradition that has always invented new, adaptive forms for reflecting the complex and gorgeous facets of black life.”¹⁵ I argue, then, that these three poets’ modernist experimentations are part of an extended tradition of African American poetic innovation and synthesis and the cultural politics of poetic form that redefines American art, culture, and history. These three poets wrote in and about a complex moment of convergence in African American history and culture: Southern rural folk culture was being translated to the urban North, new communities and new modes of communities were being created, and black Americans were confronting new forms of discrimination and containment. Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden necessarily engaged with the

mandate of modernism to make it new in tandem with new urban folk culture.¹⁶ In doing so they established an African American late modernist tradition focused on a poetry of communities that followed World War II. As Robert Stepto writes, “An author’s place in a tradition depends on how he reveals that tradition. It is not simply a matter of when his works were published but also of how they illuminate—and in some cases honor—what has come before and anticipate what will follow. In Afro-American literature particularly, the idea of a tradition involves certain questions about the author’s posture not only among his fellow writers but also within a larger artistic continuum which, in its exquisite commingling of materials spoken, played, and written, is not the exclusive property or domain of the writer alone.”¹⁷

My dissertation therefore examines black modifications to the epic in response to white modernist epics as well as the need for black cultural forms. For these black poets, the epic had to be modified because they wrote poetry about postwar urban blacks and their communities, people whose history is fragmented and out of history. What could a black diasporic epic look like? Instead of triumphalism, certainly, there is melancholy. Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden reject as not proper—i.e., not properly theirs—the majoritarian heroic epic form and instead choose a minoritarian anti-heroic epic form. Brooks argues for this approach most eloquently, writing, “[D]o Blacks need another Martin, Malcolm, Medgar, Ida, Fannie Lou? Let’s go back to looking at [the] Littles. Their pictures overwhelm my Gallery. I re-emphasize: perhaps what we need is not another Individual to be roared up, royalized, routed – but lots of the Littles, understanding the strength of clean cooperation, responsibility...”¹⁸

Importantly, then, all three poets radicalize ordinary lives and particulars rather than work through epic themes and generalizations that are unchanging across time. By radicalizing particulars, these poets make the details about black lives and communities become more what they are rather than less what they are by striving for the universal. Each of their characters declares, I am here, you can’t escape me. Hughes helps us appreciate that the individual person he writes about is real so we should not overlook her or him; Brooks and Hayden show that even very flawed people are real. This emphasis on the local and particular underscores the value of smaller parts rather than wholes because the overlooking of parts makes a lesser whole.

Through such work Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden contributed in a major way to an epic tradition in modern American poetry that began with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman in the mid-nineteenth century and distinctly re-emerged in the twentieth century in the work of such major modernists as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and H.D. These epics responded to a felt need to take up the cultural materials of America. But the context as well as the substance of those materials was very different for black writers than for white. The black poets had to ground their histories in unstable beginning points and formations of black urban communities—times and moments when Harlem was no longer ‘capital of the Negro world,’ the Mecca was falling into neglect and ruin, and Paradise Valley was being cordoned off and razed. They did so in order to trace and establish a history of communal self-development that was being repressed in the postwar period for, instead, the dominant narrative of urban crisis and the blighted black inner city. Thus the past that Eliot, for instance, might want to recuperate into collective energies in the space of the epic was not the past that these black poets could, or wanted to, recuperate.

Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden were not simply responding to the pressure of modernist epic writing. Nor were they primarily interested in proving their ability as black poets to master the epic form. Rather, by using the epic and concerning themselves with local and particular black experiences, they made claims for the importance of ordinary black urban life to the life of

the culture and nation at large. This was at a time, after all, when the majority of urban black life was being pushed into and then constricted by black inner cities that would remain invisible to and neglected by the nation until they would explode in the late 1960s.

Chapter One: Alternative Geographies of Community in
Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*

1. Home in Harlem

I would rather have a kitchenette in Harlem than a mansion in Westchester.¹⁹
– Langston Hughes

When Langston Hughes was composing his modernist epic *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, he was also firmly making a home in Harlem. Hughes's biographer Arnold Rampersad marks the summer of 1948 as an important time of transition in Langston Hughes's life, when he moved and finally settled into a permanent home in Harlem after many years. Hughes had returned to Harlem in late 1941 after nearly two years recuperating from illness in California. Rampersad writes that, by 1948, a few years after Hughes's return "his days of studios, of borrowed beds and shared rooms, ended once and for all as he joined Toy and Emerson Harper at 20 East 127th Street."²⁰

Hughes's new and final home was a communal one — "Aunt Toy's house," as he discreetly told one and all" writes Rampersad—in which he had a comfortable two-room suite on the third floor.²¹ The house was run by Toy Harper, who organized the home and managed several roomers in order for them all to afford the property. Hughes rejoiced in their shared home life. He "had found the life that suited him just fine, a home where he was not only admired for his books but adored as a son, and fiercely so by Mrs. Harper."²² It was by all accounts a warm and filial space; the environment felt more like a home rather than a rooming house. As one former resident recalled, "Everybody in the house knew each other. There was a family atmosphere. Sometimes on special occasions Aunt Toy would have us down in the basement, usually the large kitchen, for a drink usually—not much food."²³ The poet enjoyed his home there for twenty years, until the end of his life.

As a part property owner now, Hughes was sensitive to the struggles of other blacks who were trying to find and make a home in postwar Harlem as well. "While his own dream of solid, professional success and a home had apparently come true," writes Rampersad, "the hopes that had brought black folk north by the millions remained either largely unrealized or so tainted by racism, poverty, crime, and vice that the dream had turned bitter for many. Their plight haunted him."²⁴ That unrealized dream of home, of ownership and opportunity, would become a major preoccupation for Hughes, framed prominently in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

Montage is book-length modernist epic and structured along six sections or movements, beginning with "Boogie Segue to Bop," "Dig and Be Dug," "Early Bright," "Vice Versa to Bach," "Dream Deferred," and ending with "Lenox Avenue Mural." There are 91 smaller poetic pieces or episodes total here, with each movement having multiple episodes: the first 17, the second 19, the third 16, the fourth 11, the fifth 22, and the last 6. In this chapter, I argue that Langston Hughes takes up the dream deferred of home ownership for black Americans with his modernist epic. The postwar moment in which Hughes writes this dream of home would become a battle over neighborhoods, under the heading of "urban renewal."

He creates a poem that speaks to a Harlem, segregation and white majority opinion notwithstanding, which is not one city or space but several. Hughes reveals many voices and scenes: from children playing in the street whose chanted rhymes reveal they know that "*What don't bug / them white kids / sure bugs me: / We knows everybody ain't free!*" ("Children's

Rhymes”) to a Harlem movie-goer who in the dark of the theater listens to “Harlem laughing in all the wrong places” and sees and parenthetically reflects to herself that “(*Hollywood / laughs at me, / black — / so I laugh / back*)” (“Movies”); from the dangerous thrill of black celebrities into whose laps “white girls fall / like pale plums from a tree” skirting “a high tension wall / wired for killing / which makes it more thrilling” (“Mellow”) to the titillation of underground cruising by “boys who try / might meet girls on the fly / as out of the gutter / girls who will / may meet boys / copping a thrill” (“Up-Beat”); from the fervor of a member of the flock of faithful who exclaims that poverty won’t get in the way of his testimony “I don’t need no piano, / neither organ / nor drum / for to praise my Lord!” to the anti-Semitism which makes “Some folks blame high prices on the Jews. / (Some folks blame too much on Jews)” (“Likewise”); and from the new middle class black Harlemiter “trying to uphold the race” who bemoans the way working class recent black migrants “talk too loud, / cuss too loud / look too black, / don’t get anywhere, / and sometimes it seems / you don’t even care” (“High to Low”) to the working class black Harlemiter who says to their uplifting brethren “How can you forget me, / fellow, say? / How can you low-rate me / this way?” (“Low to High”).

Critical work on Hughes’s *Montage* necessitates multiple lenses. Recent scholarship has found its center of gravity by considering the work primarily in the context of bebop and black musical and vernacular traditions.²⁵ Rising alongside this interest in black musical forms are notions of geography and African American modernism.²⁶ My aim is to build on these trends in reading Hughes’s *Montage* and deepen our appreciation of the poem’s geographic and modernist practices with a particular focus on the project of urban renewal in New York.

Race, geography and modernism all collide in urban renewal. Hughes writes an epic of community in a moment of modernization’s extreme imposition on the urban landscape, with slum clearance as part of the program of urban renewal which “montages” a neighborhood, removing connective space and long-cultivated continuities and replacing them with the mass standardization of “model neighborhood” building such as could be found in Stuyvesant Town, the all-white, middle-class housing project at the heart of Manhattan’s project of urban renewal. The modernist project of urban renewal constitutes the modern city without black American citizens and culture inside. Rather than a more diffusely gathered and benignly defined “long poem,” *Montage* as modernist epic—with the attendant cultural and social imperatives of the epic mode—becomes a way for Langston Hughes to put black citizens and culture back into and central to the modern city.²⁷ Put another way, I argue that *Montage*’s status as a modernist epic offers a counter-poetics to the “clean” modernism of urban renewal and, implicitly, lays bare the racial exclusionism foundational to not only Stuyvesant Town’s specific policies but also to urban renewal’s aesthetic claims to architectural avant-gardism and newness.²⁸

Hughes himself creates something new here. Understanding the destruction and dislocations resulting from urban renewal as montage-like conflict allows for the creation of a new concept, and that is active community. Through the course of his modernist epic, Hughes presses his readers to ask, what makes us a community? What is our communal reasoning and mode of self-making? What will be our binding thing? By asking his readers-listeners these questions, Hughes is asking them to “listen fluently” and invest in and commit to alternative geographies of community building.²⁹ Hughes’s poem is a modernist epic not only looking for its form but for its audience. He uses the epic mode to gather members of a tribe, “listeners who recognize in the poem social (in the broadest sense, which here includes political) as well as psychological, ethical, emotional, or aesthetic imperatives.”³⁰ That is why the question of commitment (becoming aware of everyone else who shares your conditions and preoccupations)

and community here is a question of hearing (Daddy ain't you heard? and versions thereof). To hear is to become this epic's audience, citizen-participants in this linguistic and social nexus.

Hughes enriches this nexus by taking up and inverting the language of deferral from a passive condition black Americans were kept in perpetuity by urban renewal programs to an active and activating state that can begin to respond to these questions. Deferred itself then becomes no longer the peripheral place or position in which black working class citizens are assigned to stand and remain for the sake of white middle class America. Deferred becomes a new station, between racial alignment and rallying commitment, a central stopping place in which Hughes himself keeps us until his audience, a "community in transition," gains hearing.

In this way, Hughes recovers community building for the black urban community of Harlem by making *Montage* a modernist epic of community in transition, which allows for the generation of other forms of life as alternative social and political categories to hegemonic modernist categories.

2. Urban Renewal, Stuyvesant Town and the Struggle for Housing in Postwar New York City

The struggles for suitable housing and home ownership in postwar New York City were fierce for both black and white Americans. The 1950 Census revealed that only eight-tenths of one percent of city housing was available for rent. It was the "worst shortage in the city's recorded history," where by one analysis the city needed some 430,000 housing units.³¹ Black New Yorkers, limited by the segregated Jim Crow landscape, were on the front lines and felt this crisis much more keenly.³² Indeed, Harlemites long confronted a lack of freedom in movement and settlement by virtue of being in Harlem's segregated and circumscribed landscape. "Next to the problem of securing a livelihood," the official report following the Harlem Riot of 1935 attested, "finding a suitable place to live constitutes the most serious problem of the Harlem Negro. ... [T]he Negro had to take what he found and spread out as far as he was permitted."³³

The "direction of the housing market in postwar New York was toward segregation," writes Martha Biondi.³⁴ It was, as Biondi puts it, the "resegregation of metropolitan America," against which civil rights workers mobilized and "promoted a counternarrative" that was "a vision of inclusive urbanization."³⁵ This resegregation was federally funded, leaving black Americans high and dry yet again as Americans, without full citizenship and equal protection. Through the Federal Housing Authority, the federal government "encouraged segregated housing developments" because "homogeneous neighborhoods were better investments."³⁶ African Americans were thus pushed into overcrowded black ghettos with nowhere else to go. Biondi emphasizes, "Ghetto dwellers were a captive market forced to pay the landlord's price."³⁷ While the population of black New Yorkers grew from nearly half a million to over a million between 1940 and 1950, Biondi writes, and "Black New Yorkers with high expectations, higher incomes, new clothes, pride, and determination demanded the right to live and work anywhere and to patronize downtown nightclubs and restaurants, complaints of police brutality 'poured in' to the NAACP. African Americans were laying siege to old ideas and boundaries, and police officers moved to the front lines of defending white supremacy."³⁸ However, black Americans, even those with rising fortunes, could not count on being able to claim part of the American pie and their citizenship rights being upheld. New housing developments were mainly for whites, often white World War II veterans and their families.

During World War II, development began on Met Life's Stuyvesant Town on Manhattan's Lower East Side in the Gas House District. It was the first urban redevelopment

project in US history and would be the inspiration for many more like it across the nation, in Chicago, Detroit and elsewhere. It was also the first public-private venture: that is, it was under the auspices of a private enterprise, here Met Life, but funded publically, here by the city of New York. It would be a segregated public-private housing project, leading the vanguard for more like it, with its own sidewalks, neighborhood square/center, and the like. Taking over publically available land, Stuyvesant Town was intended to clean up a “slum” or “blighted” area on the Lower East Side that was home to poor and working class white ethnic immigrants. Such slum clearance resulted in breaking up communal bonds and networks, here in the forced removal of 10,000 residents. There was nowhere for these former residents to go because resettlement was not part of the program. Slum clearance and construction began just after the end of World War II. White families were able to move into the segregated housing project in August 1947, and the project was fully completed and fully occupied by June 1949.

As Samuel Zipp writes, “Stuyvesant Town was set to intrude upon a complex social world, one characterized by sophisticated and cosmopolitan familial arrangements” and “cross-ethnic liaisons and improvisatory rearrangements of gender norms and family structure [that] reflected not only wartime upheaval, but also strategies of sociability for getting by that were peculiar to working-class neighborhoods.”³⁹ Social workers at the time wrote that Gas House District residents felt “a tenacious attachment to the neighborhood and a sense of belonging together, a feeling of solidarity which made them in fact a real community.”⁴⁰ These “informal interconnections” would be razed along with the buildings that housed them. This deliberate dismantling of community calls forth and fuels the imperative for alternative geographies of community in *Montage*.

Stuyvesant Town became an important symbol for postwar America. The project made headlines nationally and internationally. “Stuyvesant Town: Where Hard Heads Made Dream True,” splashed the *New York World-Telegram* headline with the subheading which made no bones about the winning team, “Giant Housing Project Which Wiped Out Slum a Masterpiece Capital.”⁴¹ In the words of one radio personality, it was “the best known housing project in the nation” and, indeed, was projected as such the world over as it loomed large on tourist maps and figured prominently in books, magazines and newspapers around the globe. As Zipp argues, Stuyvesant Town grabbed headlines and became larger than life not simply because it was newly available housing in a housing crunch or because of its size. “It represented one of the first tangible rewards of the war effort,” Zipp writes, “a political, economic, social, and aesthetic symbol of what the United States was fighting for in the war. And it was also a step forward out of war and into peace, out of old troubles and into new prosperity.”⁴²

The modernist project of urban renewal broadly and the case of Stuyvesant Town more particularly attempted to re-vision and rebuild the modern city as a white middle class space, constituting itself without blackness inside. Resistance to Stuyvesant Town as a segregated white-only housing project was met with the vague language of “deferral” of integration from private enterprise and city planners. “Negroes and whites don’t mix. Perhaps they will in a hundred years, but not now. If we brought them into this development, it would be to the detriment of the city, too, because it would depress all the surrounding property,” Metropolitan Chair Frederick H. Ecker wrote in the *New York Post* in May 1943. Blacks and whites did not mix in this orderly vision of new Manhattan.

According to Ecker, the company envisioned that the project would take the “blighted” and “rundown city” area and “restore residential values that lie in the land” as they saw it.⁴³ Met Life’s very deliberate intention was that it would be a “suburb in the city.” On April 18, 1943,

Mayor La Guardia, with Ecker by his side, took to the airwaves to make a public radio announcement about the new project. Met Life's press release declared the segregated housing project, "a step in the direction of the new Manhattan ... one in which wholesomeness of residential environment will combine with existing convenience to 'anchor' families, especially those with children, to this borough."⁴⁴ Left behind in this "rhetoric of inevitable progress" were working class and non-white communities. "Time moves on," declared one title in a promotional booklet given to Stuyvesant Towners, "and a city grows."⁴⁵ Life in Stuyvesant Town was very orderly, cookie cutter and controlled from on high: each apartment unit was exactly the same layout; families were exactly the same layout, according to the nuclear style; the community was strictly policed, where even a stray light left on in a unit when a resident was out would be turned off; and residents received pamphlets about their behavior with their monthly rent bill.

Just as Stuyvesant Town spearheaded urban renewal in New York City and across the nation, so too was the resistance to urban renewal born at Stuyvesant Town, initially by local black American civil rights organizations in Harlem. Later they were joined by residents within the project itself many of whom were white veterans of the war. "[A]fter the new tenants moved in," writes Zipp, "they engaged in a series of struggles with Met Life and among themselves over desegregation and the larger shape of mass, urban, middle-class housing."⁴⁶

Race was its biggest struggle. Jane Jacobs's famous critique of Stuyvesant Town and subsequent projects like it was that their modernist "orthodox planning theory [was] deeply committed to the ideal of the supposedly cozy, inward-turned city neighborhoods."⁴⁷ Their calculations and mass intervention created projects that were "dropped down into a neighborhood" and were "isolated, mentally and physically, from the city around it."⁴⁸ Ultimately, Jacobs argued, it resulted in "the city neighborhood as an island, turned inward on itself."⁴⁹ And "if the project was a walled town," Zipp writes, "it was guarded most closely along lines of color. Indeed, race was the hole in the heart of Met Life's benevolent intervention."⁵⁰ The fight to desegregate the project lasted from 1943 when it was first announced to 1952 when the first black family moved in. It was "the longest lasting and the most heated of all the issues that dogged Stuyvesant Town's early years."⁵¹

To Adam Clayton Powell Jr., New York City Council's first black representative, Robert Moses wrote in August 1943, "I make no apologies for being a middle-of-the-road fellow who believes in reaching limited objectives and not in preaching the instant realization of the millennium. I am convinced that sure and steady progress is only made in this way."⁵² This statement is another clear example of the language of deferment around the integration of Stuyvesant Town. Robert Moses's language of incremental progress keeps things at a tepid near-status quo, whereas his alarmist language around change—"the instant realization of the millennium"—is intended to keep any social reform at bay. Progress, not realization, he says, which constitutes further deferment for black Americans who have waited countless years for their full participatory citizenship. This indeterminate language was, and continued to be, the framing of integration for Stuyvesant Town.

In 1944, in response to protests over the project's white exclusivity, Met Life and Robert Moses announced plans for Riverton, which in their view gave blacks equal protection under the 14th Amendment in an "equal or substantially equal facility." It would be "model housing for colored folks" and that same year construction began on Riverton Houses, "affordable, middle-income development 'for Negroes' in Harlem."⁵³ Response was quick. One housing reformer wrote, "There would now be one project for whites and one for Negroes—on the Southern pattern," while New York City's locally and nationally circulated black newspaper the

Amsterdam News wrote, “The pulse-beat of the average Harlemiter is geared to a belief that the Riverton proposal is merely a discriminatory ‘sop’ tossed in their direction.”⁵⁴

Liberal politicians and activists calling for government intervention in the deepening housing quagmire were alarmed to see that government involvement was “solidifying racial segregation, rather than destroying the ghetto.” A piece in the *New York Times* argued, “There are ample indications that such projects unless open to all citizens equally will become another oppressive instrument for removing minorities from their homes and creating enforced ghettos.”⁵⁵ A candidate running for Harlem City Council put it even more forcefully, the decision “implied that the slums are the places where the Negro shall dwell, though they are compelled to pay taxes to keep up modern housing developments constructed by private industry.”⁵⁶ The federal Housing Act of 1949, which sustained housing segregation, would provide another half a billion dollars for urban redevelopment nationwide.⁵⁷

In June 1947, black veterans sued for residency in *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town*. In this case the New York State Supreme Court ruled that “Housing is not a civil right” and upheld Stuyvesant Town’s segregation. In 1949, the New York State Court of Appeals ruled that Stuyvesant Town was a private enterprise, and it was free to engage in racial discrimination.⁵⁸ Biondi writes, “[T]he decision helped to create the fiction that de facto housing segregation in the North originated outside the law and reflected market forces rather than purposeful racially exclusionary acts of public policy.”⁵⁹ In June 1950 New York City Council members Earl Brown and Stanley Isaacs introduced a bill that made discrimination in housing a misdemeanor. In response, Met Life “made a sudden surprising announcement” that “it would lease ‘some’ apartments to qualified ‘Negro families.’”⁶⁰ Zipp writes, “There had been no basic change in policy, the management said. The company still reserved the right to select tenants as it saw fit. Demanding a change in company policy, not merely an informal promise, Brown and Isaacs pushed forward with their bill.”⁶¹ The bill passed and was signed into law by the new Mayor Vincent Impellitteri on March 1951. Hughes’s modernist epic was published that same year.

After the bill passed there was nominal integration of the project but well into the 1970s there were still few black families living in Stuyvesant Town. Deferral had taken root. After the Brown-Isaacs bill passed in 1951, Met Life did not have a leg to stand on and was forced to accept applications from black New Yorkers. The first black residents moved in 1952 when Met Life finally conceded to growing resistance from black American civil rights groups who had made the desegregation of the project a part of the Double V campaign to defeat racism and fascism abroad and at home as well as by residents themselves, many of them left-wing activists, who held Stuyvesant Town as “an affront to national ideals.”⁶² It was only nominal integration, though, and by the later 1950s and into the 1960s it was still “commonly understood” as de facto segregated. Even so, the campaign to desegregate Stuyvesant Town was “an important episode in the northern civil rights movement.”⁶³ Zipp continues, “It was initiated by black organizations in Harlem and their liberal allies as part of the wartime and postwar civil rights ferment in the North that predated the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.”⁶⁴

Housing remained a civil rights issue for activists despite negative legal rulings. In effect, they fought against what they viewed as resegregation of the metropolis. New fair housing organizations emerged from these struggles. The New York State Committee against Discrimination in Housing (NYSCDH) was founded in 1949. One leader of NYSCDH declared, “We may find ourselves projecting into the North, the kind of Jim-Crow public housing which has been a betrayal of freedom and equality in the South.”⁶⁵

What this story does not tell is the frustration and actions of the masses of black working class Harlemites in the face of the worst housing crisis in New York City's history until that time. These are the stories that Hughes is deeply invested in and explores because, as he asserted, "Is life among the better classes any cleaner or any more worthy of a poet's consideration?"⁶⁶ As Langston Hughes's character Jesse B. Semple ("Simple"), from his weekly *Chicago Defender* column, puts it, white Harlem storeowners "take my money over the counter, then go on downtown to Stuyvesant Town where I can't live, or out to them pretty suburbs, and leave me in Harlem holding the bag. I ain't no fool. When the riot (of 1943) broke out I went looking for justice."⁶⁷ A lack of economic self-determination is part of the frustration expressed by Simple but more emphatic is the sense of departure to white-only federally funded housing ("Stuyvesant Town where I can't live") or suburban white flight ("out to them pretty suburbs") while blacks were left behind ("leave me in Harlem holding the bag"). The riot, as Hughes has Simple describe it, was an opportunity to go "looking for justice" rather than conforming to the hegemonic "correctness" of the status quo. If Stuyvesant Town as standardized white mass middle-class living was a "symbol of the postwar world to come," it was a world for white Americans and black Americans (and others) were "left holding the bag." If Stuyvesant Town was a step forward, Hughes would use the modernist epic to make us keenly feel the historical and sociological pressures on black Americans still in a station of deferral.

3. *Montage of a Dream Deferred* as a Modernist Epic of Harlem Community

The Negro in Western civilization has been exposed to overwhelming historical and sociological pressures that are bound to be reflected in the verse he has written and inspired. The fact that he has used poetry as a form of expression has brought him into contact with literary trends and influences. How one of these forces or the other has predominated and how the results may be weighed and appraised are among the questions to which the poetry itself contains answers.⁶⁸

—Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps

[T]here isn't any form around the house. Please advise.⁶⁹

—June Jordan

Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is an attempt at an epic (and not a long poem) precisely because it was the proper medium to depict the flux of black urban cultural formations at midcentury and to make the negotiations and struggles over those formations a part of the long black freedom struggle. He uses black expressive cultural forms, notably bebop jazz, in order to tell and shape an alternative narrative of the sequence of events. The epic form gives Hughes the freedom to explore the complex narratives of deferral and hope for blacks living in the city. In Hughes's poem *Montage* we see a different type of community growing that stands in contrast to the orderly, planned and segregated Stuyvesant Town. In doing so Hughes puts dynamic black voices back into a community narrative at a time when they were being systematically excluded. In this section, I first look at how the epic form allows Hughes the space and freedom to build a new image of black life within the city. The second part examines how Hughes uses the language and rhythm of bebop to capture the conflicts and explosive impulses that are part of reality for Harlemites.

Hughes is a part of a tradition of the modern verse epic, argued for by Michael Bernstein, which coheres by not cohering to established strictures of the epic mode. Indeed, the modern epic is a part of a larger epic tradition that is defined by its search for form. Bernstein writes, then, that “any single, rigid set of criteria defining the nature of an epic is bound to seem reductive” because for those poets attempting epics “the nature of an “epic” was a question, a problem to be explored through specific texts, rather than an established poetic form with a generally acknowledged set of conventions.”⁷⁰ With that in mind, Bernstein fleshes out a set of characteristics to give us a useful foothold for a form that has frustrated critics’ attempts at definition. Bernstein subsumes these under Wittgenstein’s concept of “family likeness,” so that no epic needs to have all of these characteristics and the presence of one does not make an epic. Bernstein argues that fundamentally “the epic is an Idea which specific texts incarnate more-or-less successfully, each in its own way and under the pressures of the contingent, historical circumstances of its composition.”⁷¹

Hughes saw the urgency to show how the “tale of the tribe” was changing for black Americans feeling the pressures of being dispossessed and displaced as citizens by urban renewal’s charge to remake American cities. The very contours of tribe and tale were changing beneath their feet. I will then draw upon Bernstein’s definition in a limited fashion because of the lack of assurances for and pressures on black life in the city at this historical moment: indeed, the city was being montaged by urban renewal. The charge for Hughes’s modernist epic was two-fold: to both call up and out the tribe and the tale amid the fragmentation and instability of black urban life.

Bernstein posits four criteria for the epic: narrative, narrative voice, epic audience and instruction. First, the epic narrates its audience’s heritage—historical, cultural or mythic—“providing models of exemplary conduct (both good and bad) by which its readers can regulate their lives and adjust their shared customs.” Second, the narrative voice of the epic does “not bear the trace of a single sensibility” but rather “function[s] as a spokesman for values generally acknowledged as significant for communal stability and social well-being.” It is “the voice of the community’s heritage ‘telling itself.’” Hughes makes his epic multiply-voiced rather than singly-voiced to reveal the fragmentation in the culture. Third, the epic is not addressed to the “purely private consciousness of its hearer apart from all considerations of his class, circumstances, or social bonds,” as is true for the lyric, but rather “the epic speaks primarily to members of a ‘tribe,’ to listeners who recognize in the poem, social (in the broadest sense, which here includes political) as well as psychological, ethical, emotional, or aesthetic imperatives.” The audience for the epic, then, “is not the *individual* in his absolute inwardness but the *citizen* as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus.” And, finally, the epic offers instruction to its audience with “lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival” and “an applicable technique, methodology, or behavior pattern by which that good can be concretely realized and imitated.”⁷² These strategies of survival and sociability were called into question by hegemonic structures of life in the modern city – that is, black working class strategies did not fit into the vision of modern life in the city imposed by Robert Moses and Met Life.

Hughes puts pressure on the conflicts of montage in his modernist epic to raise the creative-destructive impulses that will explode Jim Crow racial alignments and deferrals, which he will enable us to negotiate with the expressive strategies of bebop to create the concept of community and commitment and drive us, the audience-tribe of readers-listeners, forward. Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein theorizes montage, the technique which he is credited with creating. Montage is not a “linkage of pieces,” according to Eisenstein, it is

conflict, and from this conflict a new concept arises.⁷³ As Eisenstein writes, “[A] phalanx of montage pieces, of shots, should be compared to the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor: for, similarly, the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total [work].”⁷⁴ In particular I draw attention to “conflicts between an object and its dimension – and conflicts between an event and its duration.”⁷⁵ The conflicts here in this modernist epic are about Harlem’s dream deferred and its dimension, rigidly enforced by segregation, and duration, extended indefinitely by deferrals and enforced by modernization’s steady progress and homogenized time. These collisions create a new concept of deferral in Hughes’s own terms, which is deferred community and commitment, the dream deferred. Montage, then, is the way the form of this modernist epic does deferral, just as earlier we saw the way history bears deferral out.

Langston Hughes’s *Montage* is a modernist epic addressing the dispossessed blacks in Harlem at a significant stage in their political and cultural history, after the war and during urban renewal. Rather than “promot[e] a counternarrative” that was “a vision of inclusive urbanization,” like that advocated by black civil rights leaders and the black middle-class, Hughes provides a corollary to the standardization of white mass living with a vision of black mass living. Hughes wanted to point to the distinctiveness and complexity of urban black life. Responding to the black satirist’s George Schuyler’s in a letter to the *Nation*, Hughes wrote in 1926, “For Mr. Schuyler to say that ‘the Negro masses ... are no different from the white masses’ in America seems to me obviously absurd. Fundamentally, perhaps, all peoples are the same. But as long as the Negro remains a segregated group in this country he must reflect certain racial and environmental differences which are his own.”⁷⁶ Two months before, Hughes had written one of his most famous critical interventions in the essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” where he described “the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”⁷⁷

In this historical moment, jazz was the music of the masses of dispossessed Harlem and not of the middle class. Jazz was the distinctive sounds of community and the soundtrack to the “second Harlem.” Not the earlier Harlem of the Renaissance but dispossessed later Harlem. Ted Gioia periodizes the emergence of jazz as part of the second Harlem. Black proprietorship languished in the decades that followed the Renaissance and “Harlem was becoming a slum.” Jazz emerged during this second Harlem period during rent parties, an acceptable way of raising lodging funds.⁷⁸ In this way, rent parties indelibly linked jazz with housing. Jazz was a part of this “submerged Harlem,” which used alternative cultural strategies to secure attachments to place. Hughes locates us with jazz in this Harlem.

Hughes recognizes the importance of black expressive practices in order to narrate the emerging tale of the tribe of mid-century Harlem. Hughes witnessed the beginnings of be-bop jazz in the bars and jazz clubs of Harlem, hearing “the unmistakable sounds of cultural change” that “epitomized the new fragmentation of black cultural consciousness.”⁷⁹ It was a “new musical idiom, tortured in comparison to past harmonies, with faster harmonic and rhythmic changes than ever before... [where t]raditional lyrics had been replaced most spectacularly by a language of sound often without apparent sense, or ‘nonsense.’” Rampersad reveals, “In this new style Hughes saw the growing fissures in Afro-American culture, the myth of integration and American social harmony jarred by a message of deep discord.”⁸⁰

Hughes's modernist epic fleshes out the historical and cultural imperatives to the apparent nonsense of bebop. The story in *Montage* has multiple spokespeople who are voices for ordinary black people, creating an intersubjective dynamic that is anti-hierarchical and democratic. Writing from within Harlem, the black inner city seen as a space of "blight," Hughes uses multiple voices to speak to Harlem, returning again and again, in the manner of a jam session, to the theme of frustration.

Writ large, Hughes's modernist epic historically and geographically situates this discontent. There is no suturing of perspectives, difference and contradictions here and no community imposed from on high. It is a wide community. In retaining complexity, nuance and contradiction, Hughes is making a claim about the necessity of having a complex understanding of urban black life, the many threads of influence that are getting folded in by the time we arrive at the end.

4. Listening and Commitment in *Montage*

Hughes's modernist epic transitions us from individual alignment to communal commitment by teaching us a new way of reading and hearing with the repeated question "Ain't you heard?" As Karen Jackson Ford has pointed out, with the repeated phrase "Listen fluently" in Hughes's Simple stories, the question here in *Montage* moves us away from "habitual ways of 'reading' [and hearing] that will obstruct the proper reception of [the] composition" to more improvised and creative modes. That is, whenever we get into sedimenting, stultifying logics "Ain't you heard" explodes them and pulls the speaker and audience into an antiphonal relation that builds an intersubjective dynamic. The question "insist[s] that the writer[-speaker] and reader[-listener] accompany each other in a new literacy [and communication]." I take you to the last section of *Montage*, entitled "Lenox Avenue Mural," where Hughes, as the title indicates, gives you a street view of alternative geographies of community building. Hughes poetically "muralizes" life on Lenox Avenue, exploring the linguistic contours and social dimensions of life here, taking up one of Harlem's most famous streets, its Main Street in a sense, as a site for a black spatial imaginary.⁸¹ I examine the episodes "Harlem," "Good Morning," and "Island" for how they teach us how to read, hear and ultimately see.

In 1951, Hughes would publish his "precedent shattering opus" and "tour de force achievement," presenting Harlem as a "community in transition," one readying itself for change and transformation. According to Hughes's brief introductory note,

this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of a jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition.

In a long poem textured by bebop jazz like *Montage*, it is well-worth noting that by the time readers arrive at the closing section the rendered sounds of bebop are noticeably absent. This last section, entitled "Lenox Avenue Mural," is the only one without any, as Hughes describes it, "[j]azz seep[ing] into words—spelled out words" found elsewhere. It is a pregnant silence, akin to what the poet Mary Oliver describes as, "[a] seed of silence at the edge of the sound. Brief though it is, it is definite, and cannot be denied, and it feels very different..."⁸² It is,

for artist and audience, the pregnant pause before gaining the vision of sociality offered by “Lenox Avenue Mural.” The three episodes below will be meaningfully read and heard together to observe how a new perspective is gained.

Hughes uses silence to bring in, in the episode “Harlem,” a speaker who works to rouse her audience of listeners who share the “dream deferred” from depression to action. But rather than rallying us to order, she calls us to explosive disorder.

The episode reads:

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

The epic prepares its readers to become an engaged audience, the Harlem “citizen as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus.” The title of the episode is effectively where it starts; that is, the episode is not simply entitled and describing Harlem but addressed to it. The speaker begins directly and without much protocol: “Harlem / What happens to a dream deferred?” The bald question is undisguised and palpable, speaking to the frustrations that have been building thus far and that now have their time to rise in this moment of pause away from frenetic bebop expressions. The question (and the subsequent and persistent line of questioning) is a provocation which will build up an awareness of the multiple imperatives of this segregated space, including a new method for Harlem survival, which embraces the disorderly.

Indeed, the dismantling of community in the Gas House District to make way for Stuyvesant Town is tied to the imperative for alternative geographies of community in *Montage*. The speaker advocates earnestly and aggressively in a public, preacherly mode before an audience of readers-listeners-future respondents. Notably, the dream deferred is singular: it isn’t multiple dreams deferred but is a single larger collective dream deferred; and it isn’t just any dream deferred, it is Harlem’s (as later in this section, in a curb-side comment: “You talk like / they don’t kick / dreams around / Downtown. / / *I expect they do— / But I’m talking about / Harlem to you!*”)

The question itself is a problematic one, which obstructs the rise of any self-initiating action. Imagining what “happens to a dream deferred” leaves little room to imagine what a dream deferred might actively enact, rather than receive. The question, then, is followed by an indented inner space filled by a long and vivid response that is propelled by a sense of frustration

with the status quo that the question itself replicates. With textured sensory language, Hughes builds a strong connection between the dream deferred language and social condition here.

After that call, and while we await a response from the audience, which is deferred for now, the speaker guides us through various but ultimately unsatisfying visions of sociality, ways of associating and forming social groups. In particular, the speaker urges an abandonment of the passivity of alignment. The speaker exhorts her audience to action by using passive verbs along with vivid similes in constructions that multiply communicate and bring together the “social (in the broadest sense, which here includes political) as well as psychological, ethical, emotional, [and] aesthetic imperatives” of remaining inert.⁸³

She issues call after call that urges a response, and in particular a new course of action. Are we just going to sit and suffer, she seems to ask, in all the lines up until the last one where the verbs are passive, like “dry up,” “fester,” “stink,” “crust and sugar over,” which aren’t emergent and actively doing anything. With the dream of home openly stalled for black Americans segregated and displaced by urban renewal, the speaker asks, shall we, deprived of shelter, protection and care, wither up and gradually lose our vitality (“dry up / like a raisin in the sun?”) or become an increasing source of irritation that extends, like the dash in the line that reaches to the one after, to infect the rest of the city, causing the slum to spread and the city to decline, as planners feared (“Or fester like a sore— / And then run?”)? Will this dream deferred degenerate and become offensive to one’s sensibilities and entirely unappealing from first whiff (“stink like rotten meat?”) or does that dream deferred stay appealing but in a way that is impenetrable, unattainable and indulgent—you can’t sink into it and get past its exterior but it sure is tempting and sticks to you (“Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?”)? Or, as she asks firmly, emphatically, in the italicized last line, are we going to be angry?

There is a sense of call-and-response that notably lacks a response here. Instead the questions – Does it? Does it? — are rousing, like a pulpit sermon, advocating earnestly for listeners to bring about change. The contrast between the active, starting “Does” that propels the question forward is in tension with/contrast to the verbs “dry up,” “fester,” “stink,” “crust and sugar over,” and “sags,” which do not actively do anything. The lines themselves contain deferrals, with “Or fester like a sore— / And then run?” and “Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?” postponing the resolution of lines and creating a sense of agitation. This construction amplifies our awareness of the passivity of this social condition. The persistent questioning creates a sense of agitation and incipient change.

Harlem, the speaker seems to exhort, wake up, stop letting things “happen” to you! With things steadily “happen[ing] to” the dream deferred, deferral becomes a perpetual and peripheral place or position in which African American working class citizens are assigned to occupy for the sake of a vision of white middle class America. This passive linguistic construction and social condition is unacceptable and must change. Hughes calls up citizen-participants who will enable this powerful change. Let us no longer passively be put upon but actively and creatively burst forth without knowing the contours of our new vision. The final explosive words jettison the imposed and inadequate language of dream deferred in order to gain a new language built upon the connective and collective linguistic and social space. The speaker builds the language up by not saying what it is but what it isn’t.

Do we just wait, the speaker asks, or do we rise to fill in that future occasion? With this explicit call, the speaker begins to build and gather an audience, “members of a ‘tribe,’ to listeners who recognize in the poem, social (in the broadest sense, which here includes political) as well as psychological, ethical, emotional, or aesthetic imperatives.”⁸⁴ The speaker makes the

dream deferred an explosive and resistant, rather than inert, thing. Let us embrace our disorders and thrive. Let us not be “orderly” and “respectable” in social spaces, after decades of trying to as a way to improve urban black life. If the city government disinvests from black communities, Hughes seems to be saying, we, as an alternative space, as a city within a city, need to invest in it! Hughes is saying let us embrace our disorders. And, in embracing our disorders, let us disturb the order and regular functioning of this segregated space. Hughes uses the democratic energies of bebop until this point, in this moment of pause and discursive public reflection, to deepen the developing the intersubjective dynamic, “in which the individual and the community empower one another.” “Each presence enlivens the others,” as Daniel Belgrad writes about bebop, “creating a whole that is animated by a collective energy without which the individual expression would not itself exist.”⁸⁵

Indeed, a response is sought but it has to come from within and not issued from on high. The episode is priming us for self-instruction. How do we build ourselves into a community, at time when our Harlem neighborhood is being assailed? Hughes uses the expressive strategies of bebop and montage in the space of his modernist epic, “turning ‘segregation into congregation’ and fashioning ferocious attachments to place as a means of producing useful mechanisms of solidarity,”⁸⁶ as George Lipsitz writes.

The necessary response is deferred because it must be a collective response, a response in ensemble, from Harlem as a community and developed from the ground up as a black cultural formation. And that can’t happen until you build a shareable language with which to begin to respond. Hughes’s modernist epic is both a search for poetic form as well as a search for forms of Harlem life.

That new course of action urged earlier will be taken up by the aptly titled next episode, “Good Morning,” where Hughes presents the movement from passive alignment to rallying commitment in Harlem. This is the “transition” Hughes marks in his vision of post-war Harlem: from individual black figures caught in the racial “alignments” of urban renewal and Jim Crow segregation to a rallying social “commitment” and realization of community. To understand this negotiation from individual to community, I draw on Raymond Williams’s incisive language of “alignment” and “commitment.” “Born into a social situation,” Williams explains, “with all its specific perspectives, and into language, the [individual] begins by being aligned.” To be aligned, then, is to be initiated into and properly positioned in a social order without the dimensioning aspect of choice. It is a passive, flattening posture. To begin by being thus formed, one is brought into the perspectives and language of existing context and into relative relation with this surrounding world without the freedom of self-aware mediations, the clarifications and refinements of self and subjectivity. The language of alignment, being bodily brought into line and adjusted, is unidirectional and disfiguring.

Commitment, on the other hand, constitutes “becoming *conscious* of our own alignments” (emphasis added). This seemingly subtle move is transformative, as Williams elaborates, “because really to have understood the social pressures on our own thinking, or when we come to that wonderful although at first terrible realization that what we are thinking is what a lot of other people have thought, that what we are seeing is what a lot of other people have seen, that is an extraordinary experience.” Commitment transitions the individual from the passive, flattening posture of being aligned to the active, dimensioning presence of considering and confirming one’s own condition. It enables one to occupy fully the self and, in so doing, begin to negotiate the abundantly complex relations between this self and similar others. Indeed, it is a wonderful and terrible realization of community, “that what we are thinking is what a lot

of other people have thought, that what we are seeing is what a lot of other people have seen.” Commitment transitions us, in a sense, from the nebulous interiority of self to a taut awareness of skin and circumference and then, even further, to contact with and cognizance of proximal others. That move outward, toward sociality, and beyond what is standard or customary—that is, existing alignments—into the realm of extra-ordinary and extra-bodied—that is, emerging commitments—is a critical one in the context of postwar urban renewal.

Through his lingering appreciation and articulation of the migrating and diverse masses of black people gathering in Harlem, the speaker in “Good Morning” becomes a spokesperson for the tribe and critically narrates its black urban cultural formation. Hughes uses a speaker who claims the subject position of his own story through his use of “I”: “Good morning, daddy! / I was born here, he said.” And the speaker continues on with his story to tell the larger story of Harlem and its diverse community. Beginning with the frame of his own birth here in the space of Harlem authenticates him as someone who can speak of, for, and about Harlem; being in specific circumstances from birth his presence and voice are native to this place. He explicates the experience of race and racialized urban black life. The speaker asserts his subject-position in a burgeoning discourse of dream deferred that he actively shapes: he defines himself for himself and he occupies the subject-position from where what he has to say makes sense in his own building discourse. The frame of his birth keeps us in mind of birth as we, with him, watch Harlem grow. “Good Morning” is an opportunity for self-definition before an audience. Daddy can refer to lover, in a playful and flirtatious way, but it is also used in jazz slang as a form of address. This keeps us mindful of the motif of commitment and community.

The speaker greets us at the start of a new day, with the same teasing opening expression “Good morning, daddy!” used in the inaugural episode of *Montage*, “Dream Boogie.” The tenor and pacing of each episode is different, however. The speaker of the first episode, “Dream Boogie,” declaims “Good morning, daddy!” and presses ahead with commingling cynicism, verve and defiance to pose the volume’s defining question of commitment, “Ain’t you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?”

In “Good Morning,” however, the freighted question of hearing and sensibility yet awaits us at the episode’s end, at a measured distance that will lead to developing a shareable language with which to begin to respond. We begin slowly here, then, at a markedly different tempo and mode, gradually initiated and eased into the episode by an act of hearing as the speaker begins his beginning, “I was born here, he said.” “Here” functions as a homophone for h-e-a-r and a strengthening reminder of the act of hearing or listening, while establishing the needful and intimate identification of the speaker with Harlem. This is a nameless, undistinguished Harlem every-person, who was a “masterless” individual with “no special virtues, but who was afflicted—that is the phrase—with the magic of the necessary word.”⁸⁷ While the archetypal teller of the epic was unskilled, I argue that Hughes gives his teller the “special virtue” of creating his own subject-position from which to understand the new burgeoning discourse of dream deferred he builds, whose social and political strategies and practices he reveals in his telling, using the alternative strategies and practices of bebop and montage that are constitutive of Hughes’s modernist epic. So while the discourse of urban renewal was built from and made sense to those who stood to benefit, namely white middle class Americans who occupied its subject-position, the voices of blacks or poor were excluded, kept out of and not welcomed into the discourse of urban renewal.

Our speaker here is in antiphonal relation to the very first episode’s speaker, in a give-and-take that is constitutive of bebop. Hughes sets up this responsive alternation between the two

speakers so that the starting question of the collection “Good morning daddy! / Ain’t you heard...” then, is responded to by this closing section with “Good morning, daddy! / I was born here...” I was born here, this second speaker seems to say, and I was born hearing. While our current speaker then supplies the necessary word at this point in the text and that is, at this auspicious beginning, a confirmation of alignments, the earlier speaker also contributes to the textured, fomenting nature of this burgeoning, shareable language. Hughes clearly marks his investments in this modernist epic of community: his long poem has no single speaker or soloist; and while speaking or sounding out one’s voice is crucial, is in fact instrumental, hearing and responding is of equal importance.

In listening and responding, Hughes encourages crossing but not losing the boundaries and integrity of self. While the representation of a range of black voices and figures were of paramount importance to Hughes, representativeness—a melting down into “THE Negro”—was anathema to the poet. There is a discrete subject position for the speaker in “Good Morning.” Hughes maintains its integrity by mediating our reading and hearing of this speaker with “he said.” We as readers and listeners aren’t able to slip into this “I,” aren’t able to get quite that close, with the speaker or with Harlem, and are instead kept at conversational distance by the framing “he said.” Yet we are nonetheless there to listen.

Initiation into the racial alignments of Harlem “afflicts” the speaker’s language and perspective. There is a sense of vigilant watchfulness and binding observance. “I was born here, he said,” is immediately followed by “watched Harlem grow...” in the next poetic line. The speaker’s steady “I” and eye soon extends beyond himself and his own position, broadening its range of vision to take up others. His I/eye reaches into the next line, “until colored folks spread...” and the lines thereafter, energized by the quickening movement of spreading black bodies that patterns the lines.

The shifting momentum transforms his sense of vigilant watchfulness into an expectant one with “until.” The moment of until-ness is the hinging moment of deferral, which transitions us from alignment to extending commitment. The expansion of his perspective, becoming conscious of his own alignment, is related to the observation of other “colored folks” who are also now in Harlem and spreading. The gathering of “colored folks” is a diffuseness yet, not particularly concentrated or localized, the result of a first iteration of seeing outward by our speaker and the first instantiation of a discernible presence by the masses of black people.

The episode’s speaker continues on in growing affinity and appreciates the expressive behaviors of the masses of people who themselves spread outward “from river to river / across the middle of Manhattan / out of Penn Station.” They are in decided and decisive motion, moving their black bodies across the whole of Harlem to be bounded by a segregated geography and surrounded by dark others. They begin to understand the social pressures that the logics of Jim Crow have on their own thinking. From the diffuseness of “colored folks” they are forged and galvanized into the “dark tenth of a nation.”

This last phrase betrays Hughes’s own appreciation of and, indeed, belief in the masses of everyday people in the way that it obliquely invokes and inverts W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of the “talented tenth,” the educated African American elite who would be race leaders. Hughes is instead interested and invested in the spirited strength of the masses of ordinary black people, letting them converge in and fan across these lines so that they may build from within themselves their own eddying strength and edifying awakening.

As a result, their movements in the episode are thorough-going, with their efforts made emphatic by driving prepositions like “from, across, out of, up from, in” and “to” that start and

course through most lines. These colored folks come from everywhere and by every means “to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx / but most of all to Harlem / dusky sash across Manhattan.” Their actions constitute both a confirmation and migrating redefinition of existing racial alignments. It is what James Smethurst calls the “reconfiguration of the territory of race in the modern city of the Jim Crow era.”⁸⁸ The crucible of race at this time was intently focused on the areas of housing and education. As Thomas Sugrue elaborates, in the southern United States during this period, segregation was both residential and institutional. “Segregation was simple,” he writes, “Colored went to colored schools, whites went to white schools.”⁸⁹ In the North, he continues, matters were different: “northern school districts used geography, not skin color, to preserve racial homogeneity.”⁹⁰ The importance of neighborhoods, then, was tantamount. Of course, Sugrue continues, “[w]hat constituted a neighborhood was by no means a settled question.”⁹¹ Hughes envisions the creation of Harlem as a black neighborhood, bounded very much by geography but not muted by it.

Hughes’s speaker observes that Harlem has, by the animating presence of these richly diverse and converging black bodies, now deepened into a vivid “dusky sash across Manhattan.” Harlem becomes their belting thing, a uniting space that sustains a complex black urban community. Their “dusky sash across Manhattan” unfurls the sense of gathering commitment here, that what they are thinking is what a lot of other people have thought, that what they are seeing is what a lot of other people have seen. That is an extraordinary experience, a shared and shimmering symbol of distinction. It is again simultaneously “that wonderful although at first terrible realization” of a community, one united in the understanding that it is circumscribed yet not over-determined by race.

And, again, the watchful and surveying eye and necessary, witnessing words of the nameless speaker is essential to activating group identity, marking the transition from individual alignments to communal commitment and realization of community. Taking in the comprehensive view, running his eyes and voice across the fabric’s grain once more, the speaker attests:

I've seen them come dark
wondering
wide-eyed
dreaming
out of Penn Station—
but the trains are late.
The gates open—
but there're bars
at each gate.

Hughes uses the clashes or collisions figured in the dashes to represent “diametrically opposed understandings of space” taking place in Harlem, what Lipsitz calls “distinct spatial imaginaries rooted in the links between space and race.”⁹² In these lines, Hughes creates on the page and in the episode expressive strategies and practices to construct the discourse of dream deferred. “[D]ark” here syncs up to “NEW YORK” from a few lines earlier through the rhyme that returns us back to rhyme. It creates a cinching of the phrase “dark New York” that enacts and acts out in the episode the work of “dusky sash across Manhattan” outside of the episode. Further, this

repetition through variation builds greater meaning for that key phrase in the discourse of dream deferred.

Hughes presents the structuring racial formation of Harlem, where racial formation is defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”⁹³ “I’ve seen them come dark,” as a near oral (and aural) elision of “I’ve seen them become dark,” gives voice to the experience of racial formation here. Their shared social condition is now painfully, plainly borne out. Now the group is assembled into a “them.” Already racially aligned and marked elsewhere, they “come dark” and arrive openly wondering and wishing at this moment of potential and auspicious beginnings. Read as “become dark,” “come dark” is an act of racialization that notably defers the act of dreaming. With a dream-like series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring and spaced each on a succeeding line and indented into a sheltering space of inner sanctum, “wondering / wide-eyed / dreaming” never coalesces into anything after the line starts back again unindented and in the main body of the episode. Indeed, “out of Penn Station” is followed by successive deferrals. And it is at this threshold “out of Penn Station—” that Hughes inserts a dash, inserting a pause that we soon realize will be a seemingly endless, interminable deferral of dreams. Here in the northern urban climes, in the longed for land of hope, in the modern city of New York, in Harlem itself, dreams are deferred. The lines of arrival indicate promise (“out of Penn Station—” “The gates open—”) but each time they are dashed, literally and visually here in the episode, as each time the sense of arrival is radically circumscribed and prohibited by delayed trains and metal bars at each gate.

When we get back to that inner space achieved on the page by indentation, what is left is only the question: “What happens / to a dream deferred?” We move from a moment of wondering and visioning, perhaps on the cusp of creating and achieving a long cherished goal of freedom, mobility and possibility, to a question that points to a purpose that goes unsatisfied. Hughes’s speaker reveals the mechanism, the operation, the grammar and movement of deferral.

What happens to this momentum, to this mobility then? And it is at this point that the question that courses throughout this collection arises: “What happens / to a dream deferred?” To which there is no answer but the rising question of commitment, which we as readers are now better prepared to appreciate: “Daddy, ain't you heard?” It is again the question of committed citizenship.

The episode returns back to or unfolds to the vested question of “Ain’t you heard” in order to build up the shareable language of black expressive culture, building up the vocabularies by which to negotiate the differences between individuals, and then proceed to identify the stakes in the social situation of a segregated America at mid-century. Hughes actively forestalls the answering of this repeated question by raising and re-raising it because he was writing for a “community in transition.” As Arthur P. Davis writes in his review of *Montage* in 1952, “[t]he Harlem depicted [here] ... is still not free.” But, Davis continues, Harlem as “the modern city having caught the vision of total freedom and total integration will not be satisfied with anything less than the ideal. It is therefore a critical, a demanding, a sensitive, and utterly cynical city.” Readers and listeners remain in the station of this questioning; it is itself a part of the station of dreaming, and itself becoming a shared condition. The poet does not want us to move on and past, because he is trying to achieve an attentive readership and listenership. His poetic work generates and contributes to an expanded black civic and social consciousness that was essential to the start of the Civil Rights Movement and its rallying of the masses of ordinary black people. Hughes paints a long view of black urban history—“a narrative of its audience’s own cultural,

historical or mythic heritage”—and the struggle for civil rights. This episode in particular and his modernist epic more broadly takes the stories circulating when his collection emerged and extends them to construct ‘a long view’ of black urban history and to reconstruct a collective past that reclaims a people’s history that is a communal history and that is part of the history of American life in the modern city.

5. Toward a New Vision of Sociality in *Montage*

Hughes’s modernist epic thus teaches its audience members a new way of hearing that will get us to a new way of seeing. Hughes attempts to change the pattern for discourse on urban black life from urban renewal and Jim Crow segregation that served as a guide or justification for viewing blacks as passive figures to whom something was done in subsequent situations to one in which black figures were actors in complicated lives and histories. We will attain a new vision of sociality in Harlem that belongs to ordinary black people, “our dream deferred.” The dominant discourse of urban renewal used the language of order and disorder to mask and naturalize the rigidly enforced racial logics of Jim Crow segregation in postwar American culture. Our poet here presents a new method for Harlem survival that makes “segregation into congregation.”⁹⁴

By the time we reach the last episode and closing of the poem Hughes geographically maps out and locates the space of renewed Harlem citizenship.

“Island” begins:

Between two rivers,
North of the park,
Like darker rivers
The streets are dark.

Black and white,
Gold and brown—
Chocolate-custard
Pie of a town.

These stanzas are each in effect an island unto itself, as each stanza is one grammatical unit of a sentence, spread across a few lines down to one by the end. However, Hughes does not merely replicate the racial limits of a segregated Manhattan here to which black Americans are assigned to remain. Learning how to hear through the process of this modernist epic via bebop-influenced strategies of sociability has activated new ways of seeing and understanding. Hughes’s audience of Harlem residents, then, gain a new way of seeing that transforms their “segregation into congregation,” as Lipsitz writes, which “fashion[s] ferocious attachments to place as a means of producing useful mechanisms of solidarity,”⁹⁵ transforming them into dedicated Harlem citizens. Hughes offers us a vision of Harlem as a city within a city from the perspective of commitment rather than alignment. Audience members become Harlem citizens first and foremost and their city is as American as pie. He presents Harlem as a city within a city that sees and seizes it for the masses of black people (“Like darker rivers / The streets are dark”). Rather than “promot[e] a counternarrative that was “a vision of inclusive urbanization,” like that advocated by black civil rights leaders and the black middle-class, Hughes provides a corollary to the standardization of white mass living with a vision of black mass living. Hughes “has produced a powerful black

spatial imaginary, a socially-shared understanding of the importance of public space and its power to shape opportunities and life chances,”⁹⁶ from the perspective of those most dispossessed, the most disorderly, the least respectable in the politics of respectability. It is as Simple says to Boyd in “A Toast to Harlem,”

“I love Harlem.”

“What is it you love about Harlem?”

“It’s so full of Negroes,” said Simple. “I feel like I got protection.”

“From what?”

“From white folks,” said Simple. “Furthermore, I like Harlem because it belongs to me.”

“Harlem does not belong to you. You don’t own the houses in Harlem. They belong to white folks.”

“I might not own ‘em,” said Simple, “but I live in ‘em. It would take an atom bomb to get me out.”

“Or a depression,” I said.

“I would not move for no depression. No, I would not go back down South, not even to Baltimore. I am in Harlem to stay! You say the houses ain’t mine. Well, the sidewalk is—and don’t nobody push me off. The cops don’t even say, ‘Move on,’ hardly no more. They learned something from them Harlem riots.”⁹⁷

But it is not just a black spatial imaginary, as the second stanza reveals, but an American spatial imaginary, produced by the logics of segregation that are as American as pie. The view is sticky, thick and sweet, all mixed up, not easily separating into component “parts.” That is, Harlem did not become black Harlem all by itself. It was put there and bounded by a white crust and baked into this American as pie town.

The last few lines bring us to conclusion. They read:

Dream within a dream,
Our dream deferred.

Good morning, daddy!

Ain’t you heard?

Hughes is emphasizing the embedded-ness of the dream through “within.” That is, that the fate of blacks is completely wrapped in fate of America as an idea. The 20th century problem of the colorline is the problem of the discourse of racial separatism, of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, that *positions* black Americans as a problem before they do or say anything. Hughes ends by reminding us of the importance of hearing in order to understand and gain perspective, intra-racially and inter-racially.

Chapter Two: Building “Social Width” in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “In the Mecca”

What “awaits” The Black Community? It is a wide community. The community is seen in its True Strength...when Union, obviously, is absolutely necessary...I go on believing that the Weak among us will, finally, perceive the impressiveness of our numbers, perceive the quality and legitimacy of our essence, and take sufficient, indicated steps toward definition, clarification, connection.⁹⁸

—Gwendolyn Brooks

The Mecca was an apartment building on Chicago’s South Side. Built in 1891, it was designed by architects Willoughby J. Edbrooke and Franklin Pierce Burnham, initially as a hotel for visitors to the World’s Columbian Exposition (See Figure 1). Fifty years later, in 1941, the building was obtained by the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) with “the understanding that it was to be demolished,” in the words of Arnold Hirsch.⁹⁹ According to Hirsch, demolition would have required the 1,000 to 1,500 black residents of the Mecca to be evicted.¹⁰⁰ Hirsch writes, “Only the feeling that ‘rioting would be inevitable if this demolition were carried out’ saved the building,” albeit only temporarily.¹⁰¹ After over a decade of heated legal debate, IIT was finally able to demolish the building in 1952, as a part of the larger city-wide and nation-wide push for urban renewal or “slum clearance.” In its place rose IIT’s Crown Hall, a modernist building designed by Mies van der Rohe to house IIT’s College of Architecture. According to IIT today, the building is “Mies’s masterpiece” which is “recognized as one of the most significant buildings of the 20th century” and, in their parlance, “Mies’s ‘home of ideas and adventures.’”¹⁰² In 2001, Crown Hall became a National Historic Landmark and, five years later, it underwent an extensive renovation.¹⁰³

The Mecca building stood four stories high and originally had 98 apartments to accommodate approximately 500 residents. It was located on the South Side of Chicago, four miles south of downtown on 34th Street between State Street and Dearborn Streets and one block east of the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. It “stretched 234 feet along State Street and 266 feet west along Thirty-fourth Street to Dearborn.”¹⁰⁴ The Mecca was a U-shaped building with an exterior courtyard nestled in the base of the U and two interior atria, one located in each of the two arms. The U-shaped courtyard opened south onto 34th Street. The open courtyard was a “miniature park” measuring 66 feet x 152 feet. The building had eight entrances in total: two on State Street, two on Dearborn Street, three on the courtyard, and one in the rear alley. The Chicago Tribune on September 12, 1891 wrote that the anticipated community would be akin to a “fair-sized village. Ninety-eight cottages would cover each lot in two five acre blocks, and with twelve stores [the Mecca] would outrank many a rising suburb.”

The Mecca once was a prime location: cable cars passed by on State Street and the recently completed elevated train was just a block away on 33rd Street. White residency from the fair was just a shot in the pan, though, and after the fair was over there was also a severe nationwide economic depression. The building “failed to establish a solidly middle-class tenant population” and the building was foreclosed on the first owners during the turn of the century depression.¹⁰⁵

In 1900, according to the US census, the Mecca had 107 units that were occupied by 365 people. The building housed mostly blue- and white-collar workers, with few middle class professionals whom the building had originally been intended to house.¹⁰⁶ Some families took in boarders to make rent. No one had live-in servants. In 1900, the Mecca neighborhood was “not



Figure 1: The Mecca, from an 1893 advertisement. View of the U-shaped building with the exterior courtyard.

nearly as uniform” racially.¹⁰⁷ The black population was growing at the time. However, rather than grow spatially, racial exclusion forced them into concentrated black settlements. In Mecca’s neighborhood on the South Side, blacks lived in the so-called Black Belt, “a narrow strip of land along the railroad and industrial land just west of the Mecca, from the downtown southward.”¹⁰⁸ At that time, they lived in many houses in the area in modest homes and “pursued many of the same occupations as their white neighbors in the Mecca.”¹⁰⁹

By 1910, the racial disparity between the Mecca community and the neighborhood in which it sat increased. The Mecca remained a white populated space while the neighborhood around it—the homes and apartments—grew in its black population. In the 1910s, Chicago’s black population went from 44,103 to 109,458, more than doubling in size. The black population in the neighborhood around Mecca certainly grew as well. In the late 1910s, one block north of Mecca became black Chicago’s shopping and business district. Particularly near 35th and State Streets, there were many commercial buildings constructed by African Americans. These “housed banks, real estate and insurance offices, retail stores, fraternal lodges, and newspaper offices.”¹¹⁰

In the 1910s and 1920s, this area offered dynamic nightlife with many famous jazz clubs and musicians. There was the Pekin Theater at 27th and State, which opened in 1905, and led the way for other clubs to open like the De Luxe, the Dreamland Café, the Elite Club, all of which were from one to three blocks away from Mecca.¹¹¹ In 1920, the new black residents of Mecca had much the same types of jobs as the white residents who had once lived there.¹¹² The 1920 census reported that there were 148 occupied units, with a total of 510 residents. Like their

earlier white counterparts, black families took boarders to pay the rent. Daniel Bluestone writes, “Mecca households were now large and complex.”¹¹³ That is, households were multi-generational, extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins) style, with boarders.

The reception they got in Chicago, however, was far from enthused. Bluestone writes, “Real estate interests and many white Chicagoans greeted African-American residential expansion with alarm and hostility, ranging from threats and broken windows to house bombings. Racial violence encouraged a more concentrated settlement among blacks than had previously existed. It also created both economic and social pressure for the conversion of white-occupied residential buildings within and adjacent to the already established Black Belt neighborhood.”¹¹⁴

The Mecca was part of that conversion. There are conflicting accounts as to when the first black residents moved into the Mecca. One *Life* magazine article from November 19, 1951, entitled “The Mecca. Chicago’s Showiest Apartment Has Given Up All But the Ghost” reports that the first black tenants moved in by 1912.¹¹⁵ A *Harper’s Magazine* article from December 1950 by John Bartlow Martin that Brooks quotes from as an epigraph recounts a tenant at the time saying that in 1917 “white people hadn’t been gone so long.”¹¹⁶ Both these sources and other local newspaper stories are in agreement on one count: that by World War II the Mecca’s residents were all black.¹¹⁷

The need for black housing at this time was paramount. Indeed, the lengthy but ultimately unsuccessful struggle to preserve the Mecca as a viable alternative for black housing spoke to the severity of Jim Crow segregation and the resulting housing crisis for blacks in Chicago during and after the war. As Hirsch writes, after the war “Chicago’s black community was virtually unable to locate new housing” and “had to fight tenaciously simply to hold on to its current dilapidated stock.” Mecca became a flashpoint. “The most notable incident,” continues Hirsch, “and one that poignantly illustrates the desperation of the age, involved the Mecca building at 34th and State streets.”¹¹⁸ These pressing postwar material, economic, and political contexts dramatically changed visions of life for many black Chicagoans, both at that time and for years to come. “Something is happening to lives and spirits that will never show up in the great housing shortage of the late ‘40s,” reads a clipping from the Chicago Sun-Times. “Something is happening to the children which might not show up in our social records until 1970.”¹¹⁹

Gwendolyn Brooks herself had observed life ‘in the Mecca,’ when she worked as a secretary in the 1930s to a “spiritual advisor” in the building.¹²⁰ At the age of 19, it was her first job and the experience left quite an impression. According to one interview,

She found herself working in an unusual office, opening letters, laying aside the coins and bills that fell out of them, and answering them. The answers were brief:

My Dear Mrs. Jones:

I am sure your husband still loves you.

You must have faith and continue using

the love potion. Thank you for your order.¹²¹

Brooks recalls, “The office was a kind of church... The ‘Rev.,’ the man who ran the office, received tons of mail from people who wanted holy thunderbolts, love charms, and magic potions. We made the charms and brewed the potions ourselves. I got \$8 a week and I hated it. When the Rev. offered to make me assistant pastor, I quit.”¹²²

“In the Mecca,” writes the poet in her autobiography, “were murders, loves, lonelinesses, hates, jealousies. Hope occurred, and charity, sainthood, glory, shame, despair, fear, altruism. Theft, material and moral. ‘Mental cruelty.’”¹²³ Years later, Brooks would circle back to life inside the Mecca. In 1962, she would write her editor at Harper and Row, Elizabeth Lawrence, “This is my problem. I’m writing now a book-length poem—2,000 lines at least, thick with story and music and sound-and-fury and I hope idea and sense—based on life ‘in the Mecca.’ (I can’t give up the thing; it has a grip on me.) I don’t want to do anything else—of an extended nature—just now.”¹²⁴

That book-length poem would be published in 1968 as the collection entitled *In the Mecca*. The collection is structured in two sections, the epic poem “In the Mecca” which is then followed by the sequence “After Mecca.” In Brooks’s epic we meet the Mecca residents and learn fragments of the stories of their daily lives and struggles. Irregularly structured with 807 lines shaped into 56 stanzas of uneven length—from one line to fifty-three—and in multi-form verse, the narrative is built around the disappearance and tragic murder of a young girl, Pepita Smith, and the search her mother, Mrs. Sallie Smith, and her eight other young siblings undertake to find their missing family member.¹²⁵ These diverse characters journey through the Mecca’s spaces: they transit its public spaces and open doors into its private spaces. Pepita is ultimately found at the poem’s end under the cot of one of the building’s residents, Jamaican Edward, amid dust and roaches.

In her epic, Brooks observes conditions of life rather than idealizes them. Her characters run the gamut from remarkable to repugnant. As she wrote for the inside jacket material for the book, “I was to be a Watchful Eye; a Tuned Ear; a Super-Reporter.” Brooks writes in her autobiography, “What high hopes I had for ‘In the Mecca!’ What strict personal expectations. In my sheaf of plans: . . . It is to be Leisurely and massive. A long wandering tale. It is to have Characters that grow and surprise. Rich humor, horror. Mastery of ‘style.’ Subtle wit. Social width.”¹²⁶

In her plans, Brooks sees her project in distinctly spatial—space-taking and space-making—terms: leisurely and massive, long and wandering. But it is the words that she ends on here – “social width” – that bring together two of the primary aspects of the poem in close and curious relation. That is, the social and spatial elements. Indeed, these social and spatial elements were foregrounded in the foundation of the Mecca in Chicago at the turn of the century.

The Mecca was situated amid a set of spatial aesthetics particular to its time. On the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World, the World’s Columbian Exposition entertained over 27 million people on elaborate fairgrounds expressly built for this occasion and “celebrated American technological, scientific, and social achievements.”¹²⁷ Designed by lead architect and planner Daniel Burnham, the “White City,” as it was called, was neoclassical in design, espousing the Beaux Arts aesthetic of symmetry, balance and splendor that used “classical forms to showcase the ideal of democracy and its links to ancient Greek and Roman civilization.”¹²⁸ According to one observer, “In the midst of a very real city, full of the faults which Chicago so preeminently displays, we saw a great many features of what an ideal city might be, a great many visions which perhaps one day will become solid facts.”¹²⁹ This vision of the ideal city was part and parcel of a growing belief at the time about the “ability of the urban landscape to shape progress and foster civic order and harmony, the guiding principles of the emerging City Beautiful movement in urban planning” which flourished at the turn of the century.¹³⁰ In particular, it “represented the civic leaders’ desire to control urban growth and create a planned environment in which beauty and harmony prevailed.”¹³¹ These desires were

directly tied to controlling and making invisible poor and nonwhite urban residents. Needless to say that vision of the ideal city left many people out.

According to Robin Bachin, “The fair symbolized the emerging faith in the ability of the physical structure and design of cities to shape their civic and social cohesion.”¹³² It was part of the hope of “creating a more orderly and harmonious city,” one that revealed “the promise of America’s urban future.”¹³³ Bachin continues, in a number of different areas in Chicago, the Black Belt included, “community leaders looked to the physical design of the city to shape new public spheres of civic interaction.”¹³⁴ A new sense of civic culture, Bachin notes, was emerging at the turn of the century, one indelibly linked to urban planning. Burnham’s view of the city, which dominated at the time, was “a belief in elite cultural uplift” where urban reform was top-down.¹³⁵ It was an “elite urban vision.”¹³⁶ Alternative views of the city by social reformers, labor leaders and African American civic leaders existed which emphasized “citizen activism and cross-class alliances.”¹³⁷ “This contestation in the process of planning and building the city,” Bachin notes, “points to the multiple ways urban residents imagined their place in the city and created public spheres of social interaction to foster civic engagement.”¹³⁸ This primacy of the public sphere and its relationship to civic engagement—that is, “how interactions in urban space expand and redefine the meanings and practices of citizenship”¹³⁹—is one that I see foregrounded in the work of Brooks. I examine the relationship between the two by focusing on the creation of space and spatial relations in the poem.

Burnham and his partner Edward Bennett would later draft the Plan of Chicago in 1909, which expanded this seed vision of order and harmony to encompass the entire city. And while it had many fans, reformers again raised the issue of equal civic opportunity and equal citizenship. For one reformer, housing was the rock on which this hegemonic vision foundered: “Too much emphasis cannot be laid upon the fact that a sense of citizenship can neither be aroused nor maintained among people who cannot be decently housed.”¹⁴⁰ Bachin argues, “The Burnham Plan focused on the social values of beauty, order, and dignity that would stimulate ‘devoted action for the public good.’ Yet the issues of how that public good was defined, by whom, and in whose interest were not addressed by artistic designs for urban planning.”¹⁴¹ Reformers, labor leaders and social workers contested Burnham’s top-down “corporatist model of planning and reform” that sought to “impose disciplinary order on cities.”¹⁴² Bachin writes, “They called for a municipal government that was responsive to needs for improved housing, better sanitation, and affordable transportation. Rather than a plan that focused simply on redesigning the physical environment to renew civic culture, they called for a political system that promoted greater public access to and involvement in the public arena.”¹⁴³

I define social width, then, as a way to lay claim to the status and welfare of the black residents of Mecca as members of society and as participants of civic culture. With the term “social width,” Brooks transforms what in official reports amounts to slum clearance as an unimportant and unpleasant black mass into a larger sociality whose civic activity and engagement radiates outward and extends. My argument in this chapter is that Brooks’s poem takes the confining individual interiorities of her characters and pushes them outward, making the formerly private, internal, and individual newly public, external, and collective. By ‘pushing,’ I mean urging on and pressing for the advancement of ordinary black people into the public sphere, for a voice if not voices in civic life.

The entrapping interiority of Mecca is what is problematic. For a community that has, because of staunch Jim Crow segregation, lived in conditions that grow ever more overcrowded, inward and insular, this interiority becomes pathological and constricting. If interiority can be

understood, as Diana Fuss argues, “as a built structure, as ‘imagination merely made,’” Brooks sees a way to undo that built structure by urging the formerly private into the realm of the public.¹⁴⁴ By revealing it to public light and air, Brooks gives community greater life and breath.

The poem does so by expanding on the unique spatial elements of the Mecca building itself, in particular the built-in tension between private and public found in the Mecca’s individual apartments, unusual inner atria, and balcony spaces. Brooks’s poem presses against this line between private and public and makes it yield, making it productive. Brooks is keenly writing against political isolation and disenfranchisement. What she wants is connection and enfranchisement, urging the move from social width to social action. Rather than drawing figures more and more inward, Brooks’s poem advances characters toward greater space, particularly collective space in the public sphere. My goal here is to show how Brooks is using this poem to rethink inner and outer spaces for black life in Chicago.

To that end, I will work to see these objects – both the poem and the building – in new ways and reveal how these new ways, in turn, change the ‘idea and sense,’ in Brooks’s words, of black life in the Mecca. This move outward is a way to rethink formations of black community, organizing, and social action during a period of massive black urban deracination, both during the forties and fifties when Mecca was slated to be demolished as a part of urban renewal as well as during the turbulent sixties when Brooks’s poetry collection finally emerged. By catalyzing and building a broad and burgeoning sense of a black community with “social width,” Brooks is invested in finding alternatives for ordinary black Americans to extend their civic activity and political influence. As the epigraph to this chapter notes, Brooks exhorted ordinary black folks to “perceive the impressiveness of our numbers, perceive the quality and legitimacy of our essence and take sufficient, indicated steps toward definition, clarification, connection.” Gaining social width is the start to moving to social action.

While social width is the goal, then, minor architectures are the vehicle. By reshaping the poem, minor architectures allow for the emergence of social width and recognition in the public sphere. I use Jill Stoner’s concept of “minor architectures” and apply that term to provide a new reading of Brooks’s poem “In the Mecca.” To understand the complex and fluid exchange between social and spatial elements in Brooks’s poem, I draw on Stoner’s revisioning language of “minor architectures,” which “refram[es] the definition of architecture from *the making of buildings with materials of nature to the making of spaces within the already built.*”¹⁴⁵ With this new and pluralistic term, Stoner pushes against the hegemony of major architecture, which is too often the product of collusion between political and economic power. Minor architectures, on the other hand, provide a way (and indeed a drive) to effect change from within. My adapted definition of minor architectures is three-fold: 1) literal architecture, meaning interior domestic spaces in the Mecca (e.g., a kitchen) or shared communal spaces (e.g., the balcony); 2) poetic architecture, meaning technical devices in the poem like a sudden word (e.g., “Now” or “But”) or short line (e.g., “A material collapse / that is Construction.”); and 3) social architecture, meaning little structures of power that exist in the Mecca (e.g., the failure of repairs in the building or the man who murders Pepita). “Though appearing to reside comfortably within the language of the majority,” Stoner explains, “buildings may provide a medium within which a *minor* architecture might be situated. In this context, a minor architecture will operate both upon architecture’s grammatical constructions of (virtual) power and within its physical, material form.”¹⁴⁶ Most captivatingly, Stoner argues, that “[i]n their deceptively simple spatial strategies and in their many guises as intensely complex theoretical constructions, minor architectures will alter and dematerialize the constructed world.”¹⁴⁷ Indeed, they themselves *build* a way out. This

is imperative in the case of the ill-fated Mecca and its residents. For my particular reading, I am interested in the dynamic minor architectures of crisis in the Mecca that become vehicles for change.

My chapter utilizes several different but related discourses, taking an architectural concept to think about the relationship of Brooks's poem to space and community. My argument proceeds by examining literary representations of lived moments in Mecca's architecture. In the space of her poem, Brooks repurposes the building with minor architectures at the level of literal architecture and, in particular, repurposes the space of the balcony. The logic of my argument proceeds as such: Brooks uses the fact of architectural features materially in her poem to think through the crises in the Mecca and, in turn, I look at the ways she builds the poem itself to make it into space. In doing so, she takes the next step, from spatiality as urban space to spatiality as a poetic rendering. When finding moments of minor architectures, one sees the way the poem is built into a space. And this is then the Mecca, Brooks's Mecca, a Mecca that exists long after the Mecca apartments were demolished.

To take into account the fullness of the notion of minor architectures—because of “their deceptively simple spatial strategies” and “their many guises”—from which emerges the possibility of social width, we need to examine various sections of the poem and see how sections interact with one another. For my purposes here, I will look at two sections: one involving Mrs. Sallie and her kitchen, with the minor architectures of domestic crisis, and the other involving Alfred and the balcony, with the minor architectures of domestic collapse. In both, it is urgent to act. I am interested in elements that reshape the poem, spatially rendering crisis. Here, Brooks engineers minor architectures on the multiple levels that I have described above.

In her collection, Brooks is concerned about the dynamics of public life in black Chicago. Brooks uses minor architectures to challenge divisions between public and private and build space for a broad black public and, later in “After Mecca,” for wide-ranging black public action. That is, she is urging the move from social capaciousness to social action. Brooks builds an epic, a form that deals with public life and culture, public space and history, in order to build the public. These transformed and transformative spaces appear in “In the Mecca” as the marginal spaces of the kitchen and balcony; in “After Mecca” sermons, murals, and gangs extend social space into conduits for public action.

As Stoner writes, “Opportunities for minor architectures emerge when the soul of a society is understood as more than a singularity, when—though a major soul constructs—minor souls await opportunities to de(con)struct. Minor architectures are, in fact, opportunistic events in response to latent but powerful desires to undo structures of power... Minor architectures operate in that mercurial, indeterminate state that is the passage... from closed system to open space.”¹⁴⁸ That move from closed system to open space, from interiority to exteriority, from private to public is one in which I am keenly interested and one which I see borne out in the poem.

Brooks engineers the emergence of minor architectures—at the levels of literal architecture, poetic architecture, and social architecture—around the figure of Mrs. Sallie, showing her character's efforts to transform an inward oriented voice into an outward oriented expressivity. Regardless of the success of her plans, Mrs. Sallie is a person who intends to do something. As the first page of the poem finds her, she “hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest; / ascends the sick and influential stair. The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd / with the last sourings of the master's Feast. / She plans...” And, later, Mrs. Sallie fantasizes about a change in

her position as a domestic servant, daydreaming about a life in which she changes places with her white employer (“And that would be my baby be my baby. . . . / And I would be my lady I my lady. . . .”). It is only one line after this wistful reflection, however, that Mrs. Sallie sounds the alarm of the central crisis of the poem, “SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE / SEES NO PEPITA. ‘WHERE PEPITA BE?’”

We follow her arrival home and it is her presence as a mother and community member (and the absence of her daughter) that is the through thread in the poem. Thus, as we move into the Mecca for the first time, we follow her pattern and steps and in that way we meet different figures. Brooks telegraphs Mrs. Sallie’s movement at the level of the line, showing that the verse reforms the narrative and furthers it. That is, in the verse, Mrs. Sallie crosses thresholds for us and this is spatialized across a line and between two lines: “And Mrs. Sallie” is flush to the right-hand margin on the page as we meet St. Julia Jones and Prophet Williams, and then “And Mrs. / Sallie” goes even further in the verse, spilling over into the next line, as we are about to meet Alfred. And so, in the narrative, Mrs. Sallie constantly negotiates thresholds.

Brooks is making both spatial moves as well as narrative moves that question dominant social and structural paradigms, and these are two parts of the same project. With the significant indentations, the lines push into the interior spaces of Mecca where Mrs. Sallie is able to see and speak with St. Julia, Prophet Williams, and Alfred. The repetition and spatialization of the phrase “And Mrs. Sallie” and the variation when she finally arrives home “Now Mrs. Sallie” gives us a sense of the step like nature of her movement. Indeed, “And Mrs. Sallie” becomes “And Mrs.” and we have the feeling that she is stepping across a threshold and reappearing, in the next line, in a different space. By allowing for the shifts between interior and exterior, Mrs. Sallie herself configures and negotiates thresholds, a potential figure with which to consider the movement from closed system to open space.

Mrs. Sallie is the figure whose walking and, later, searching makes us aware of a larger sociality. Her efforts help dematerialize the logics of closed system—socially—and replace it with the logics of open space and sociality. Mrs. Sallie’s walk opens up onto others just as later Mrs. Sallie’s kitchen opens up onto the world. As we will see later with the figure of Alfred, we start with an intense interiority with Mrs. Sallie, which then gets opened up into something shareable.

As Brooks sees her project in space-taking and space-making terms, Mrs. Sallie is a figure whose movements make it “long and wandering.” Mrs. Sallie’s rambling is part of the way that she is able to make the poem leisurely and massive. The stanza stays with the notion of change and the desire to undo structures of power, that is minor architectures at the level of social and power structures. It begins:

Now Mrs. Sallie
Confers her bird-hat to her kitchen table,
and sees her kitchen. It is bad, is bad,
her eyes say, and My soft antagonist,
her eyes say, and My headlong tax and mote,
her eyes say, and My maniac default,
my least light.

The lines beat down on Mrs. Sallie here as her kitchen beats down on her. The “Now” here places her finally and firmly in her own domestic setting where she surveys and takes in the

scene. The “Now” here echoes the line with which the poem began: “Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise.” That “Now” was orienting, directional within an already built structure. It promised something grounded in the lived experience of Mecca. The “Now” here appears in relation to a disappointed promise as we follow Mrs. Sallie’s experience in her home from the moment she crosses the threshold. We soon realize in the subsequent lines that her kitchen is a synecdoche for her private life and is a site of pain and frustration. As minor architectures are “opportunistic events in response to latent but powerful desires to undo structures of power,” it is this pain and frustration that give rise to a desire to change the existing setup, personally and, by extension, politically. “Now” here permeates with a sense of disappointment on arrival, as we learn in the verse that follows.

We first get a sense of the existing “architecture’s grammatical constructions of (virtual) power,” as Stoner puts it, with the way the lines that follow repeat and antagonize, softly and steadily (“It is bad, is bad, / her eyes say, and My soft antagonist, / her eyes say, and My headlong tax and mote, / her eyes say, and My maniac default, / my least light.”) And yet each iteration implants bitter feelings in Mrs. Sallie, causing her to feel hostile and irritated, communicated by her eyes. It is Mrs. Sallie’s “least light,” very un-illuminating and not worthy of note. It is notable, though, that the spine of the stanza here, if one looks at the lines straight down, is made up of three vertebra so to speak of “her eyes say” and ending with “my least light.” It is a deceptively simple spatial strategy, but it achieves its effect. This long unfolding response will help her to act in opposition.

The stanza continues:

“But all my lights are little!”
Her denunciation
slaps savagely not only this sick kitchen but
her Lord’s annulment of the main event.
“I want to decorate!” But what is that? A
pomade atop a sewage. An offense.
First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!
And music, mode, and mixed philosophy
may follow fitly on propriety
to tame the whiskey of our discontent!

Mrs. Sallie’s hostility and anger have been sufficiently provoked here, and they do not get reined in simply to the limits of her kitchen space. “But” here (and later) has enormous propulsive energy; we move from the depressed moment of “my least light” then to “But...” Indeed, this instance of “But,” and the later one a few lines down, are minor architectures at the level of the poem that are utterly essential for resistance and unfolding of new possibility. Mrs. Sallie is no longer just reflecting to herself in free indirect discourse as earlier in the stanza and on the confines of her kitchen. No, indeed, Mrs. Sallie begins to attack the very structure of inequality that has beset her. She announces, exasperatedly, ““But all my lights are little!”” And we see that this statement amounts to a “denunciation.” Brooks has Mrs. Sallie say this part aloud for all to hear, as the quotation marks indicate, whereas the earlier reflections were kept to herself and to the body of the poem, in free indirect discourse. This announcement is issued forcefully—look at that exclamation point—and audibly. Denunciation denotes a public condemnation. Her condemnation attacks not just this “sick kitchen,” which is the immediate focus of her

frustration, but also “her Lord’s annulment of the main event.” That “main event” could be seen as the central staging of her own life.

Her jeremiad continues with declared aspirations: “‘I want to decorate!’ But what is that? A / pomade atop a sewage. An offense.” We are at that “indeterminate state” as anything done here merely becomes farcical—a pomade atop a sewage—and not constitutive. Mrs. Sallie’s expressed wish cannot jive with the existing state of affairs, so a different order must happen; as the poem says, decorating squalor is “[a]n offense.” The change is being urged now, both grammatically and materially. Indeed, there is something very mocking about the final line above. Its alliterative neatness (music/mode/mixed/may) and rhyming identification (philosophy/propriety/whiskey) is too perfect, too ideal, especially following the earlier line where everything is likened to trash and decorations upon trash.¹⁴⁹ In the tight turnaround to this line, the poem is performing a placation of the convulsive content and grammar of the line but the change is too quick, too fit and sprightly and ultimately it is seen as rejected in the last part of the stanza.

And the stanza continues with a question that opens it up and allows minor architectures at the level of social structures to develop and “operate in that mercurial, indeterminate state that is the passage...from closed system to open space.”¹⁵⁰

“What can I do?”
But World (a sheep)
wants to be Told.
If you ask a question, you
can't stop there.
You must keep going.
You can't stop there: World will
waive; will be
facetious, angry. You can't stop there.
You have to keep on going.”

That initial question is freighted with a sense of hopelessness. “‘What can I do?’” is an unadorned question with no clear investments in any specific direction. There is no clear vision of the response ending in a terminus, a telos. Because an answer is not rigorously fixed from the outset, it allows the figure of Mrs. Sallie to talk and act in a way that is not planned or controlled. In its grammar, the question has the potential to allow a response to be adaptable to the developing needs of a situation, permitting or designed to permit spontaneous and unguided responses. The question mutates, transforming hopelessness into determination.

That passage happens when we move from a consideration of the kitchen to considerations of the larger world. Mrs. Sallie asks herself a question regarding action, “‘What can I do?’” What can I bring about and effect with a home and hearth that is so unpromising, that is made barely habitable by those who own it but refuse to do any repairs? The response from the poem pulls in greater context. Here, we make the move from personal and private to social and shared. This stanza is embodying the extension from interior to exterior, the gaining of social width.

Again “But” is an important word here, instantiating minor architectures at the level of the poem. We start from a depressed question of “‘What can I do?’” to then “But” a second time. “But” is the sound of keeping going. The word jets away from the question that is inert and has

us in a holding pattern. “But” presses against the question with force in order to drive and impel movement forward. “But” activates alternatives and initiates more poetry, as thought, analysis, critique, and understanding. The sentence that follows reads: “But World (a sheep) / wants to be Told.” The “World” here is Mrs. Sallie’s world, and it is her world which needs a telling, and that is what the poem is urging her to do, saying, in other words, “But if you tell it. . . .” Brooks’s poem is itself a telling, a much needed witnessing of the world of the Mecca (“Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise”), and Mrs. Sallie is a member of this world (“Now Mrs. Sallie”) who is being urged now to action.

The lines of verse that follow advance the opportunity to move outward, setting up, in its urging and repetition, a blueprint for action. Just as “World (a sheep) / wants to be Told,” so do these lines tell it. The capitalization of the word “Told” alert us to the importance of what is to be “Told.” The next line begins with the promissory “If”: one is compelled to move forward, “If you ask a question, you / can’t stop there.” Indeed “If” cannot just dangle – we are pressed to read on. That closing phrase, “you can’t stop there,” is repeated three times in five grammatical sentences. It is paired with “You must keep going.” “Can’t stop” / “keep going” are closely related but they are also uniquely and importantly different. “Can’t stop” is a double negative; “keep going” is a double positive. This repetition begins to have an effect on the shape of the poem. The first time “you can’t stop there” is used the sentence does stop; the grammatical sentence ends with a period after “there.” However, the second time “you can’t stop there” is used, the effect of the urging to “keep going” is felt as “there” is followed by a colon, allowing for unobstructed passage to (and into) the word “World.”

The goal is outward movement, the extension of black public voice, and assertion of social width. The minor architectures at the level of the verse here, like the use of the line break, caesura, enjambment, and stanza shape, make that possible. They generate a sense of shock that is the charge and surprise needed to propel the verse and its meaningfulness forward. In their persistent commands (“If you ask a question, you / can’t stop there. / You must keep going. / You can’t stop there. . . . / . . . / . . . You can’t stop there. / You have to keep on going.”) the lines stimulate and encourage the impulse for change. Both the persistent asking and the poetic shape of that asking, then, make space within the already built space of this kitchen. They ‘antagonize’ the soft antagonist of her kitchen, the major architecture that is hemming her in.

This major architecture emerged from Mecca’s neighborhood, its surrounding context. Armour Mission, Institute and Flats were located at 33rd and Federal Streets and were Mecca’s next door neighbors. So close, in fact, that in pictures of Mecca one can often see the Armour. As Bluestone writes, Armour had an ostensibly “ecumenical and racially inclusive vision.”¹⁵¹ He continues, “The mission was established to be ‘broad and wholly non-sectarian, without any restrictions whatsoever as to race, creed, and color.’ Armour Institute was an integrated school since its founding in the 1890s.”¹⁵² However the way that they responded to the changing neighborhood belied these visions and aims.

Indeed, between 1917 and 1919, most of Armour Flats was torn down as a response to the expanding Black Belt. Bluestone argues that “[i]n demolishing the Armour Flats, the officials eliminated vestiges of the middle-class residential landscape that had provided the context for construction of the Mecca.”¹⁵³ Without this context, the future of Mecca became uncertain.

For the next couple of decades, Armour officials struggled to relocate the campus. The strategy was to stay put, buy up surrounding property and clear it, including the Mecca. The Armour Institute based its plans on slum clearance programs from the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, a number of South Side clearance projects were proposed. Bluestone writes, “These land-

clearance programs provided some institutions with an alternative to suburbanization; they might choose to stay in their historic locations, buffered from neighborhoods in decline by cleared land and renewed neighborhoods.”¹⁵⁴

There continued to be growing concern about the physical and racial landscapes of the neighborhood. Armour President Henry Townley Heald wrote in 1940 that Armour was “beset [by the] increasing deterioration of its neighborhood.”¹⁵⁵ Bluestone writes, “These concerns intensified when Armour merged with the Lewis Institute to form the Illinois Institute of Technology [IIT] in 1940. The next year the institute went public with plans for a new campus, with modern buildings on a site cleared of its Black Belt identity.”¹⁵⁶ In 1941, Alfred Eustice gave the deed for Mecca to this newly formed IIT (See Figure 2).

Conditions in Mecca grew steadily worse. By the early 1940s, Mecca had more than one thousand residents. The density of Mecca’s living was a result of years of economic depression, the great migration of blacks during the war years and limited housing for them and other African Americans due to white hostility, violent and otherwise. This density was cause for its considerable notoriety as well as the unflagging contention over the building. Bluestone writes,

The sheer density and visibility of the people who resided there had made the place an object of cultural interest in the 1920s. As the institute pursued its campus plans, that same density and visibility came to symbolize all that the board deplored about its location. By the same token, the fact that so many people called the Mecca home presented a problem for the institute’s clearance plans. The board hoped that the mere act of purchase would let it tidily clear a monument of neighborhood “blight” from one of its approaches. It soon became clear that local residents had not, in fact, moved farther south and that it would require more than a ‘moderate wind storm’ to clear the site.¹⁵⁷

The institute, then, took over Mecca with the goal to demolish it—to clean up the blight, by the officials’ parlance, as soon as possible. Their first attempt at demolition was unsuccessful. Initially, officials were going to wait until the tenants’ leases expired in September 1942 and try to vacate the building that way. However, events conspired against that clean, quick and easy plan. Chicago’s Fire Prevention Bureau sued IIT over installing a fire sprinkler system in Mecca so that the building would be up to code. But the cost—\$26,000—was more than IIT was willing to invest in a building they wanted torn down. They were pinning their hopes on the leases ending or the court ordering them to demolish the building because it was a hazard. Then in 1942 the war worsened the housing crisis and resistance to demolition became charged, as “the proposed demolition took on a very different meaning.”¹⁵⁸ When leases started to expire and there was the push to vacate the building, the resistance was strong and broad with a coalition constituted by the Metropolitan Housing Council, Chicago Urban League, Chicago Welfare Administration, local politicians, in addition to residents themselves.

IIT’s President Heald protested, “As long as it (Mecca) stands, it is a distinct handicap to our efforts to clean up our campus area and, even though it produces an income, I really believe it is worth more to us torn down than in its present state.”¹⁵⁹ Because of the broad and strong coalition protesting, though, demolition was delayed. Two years after IIT had obtained Mecca with designs to destroy it, the push for preservation went to the Illinois State Legislature with a bill up for consideration that would prevent demolition. That bill was spearheaded by State Senator Christopher Wimbish, a black graduate of Northwestern Law, who was dogged and

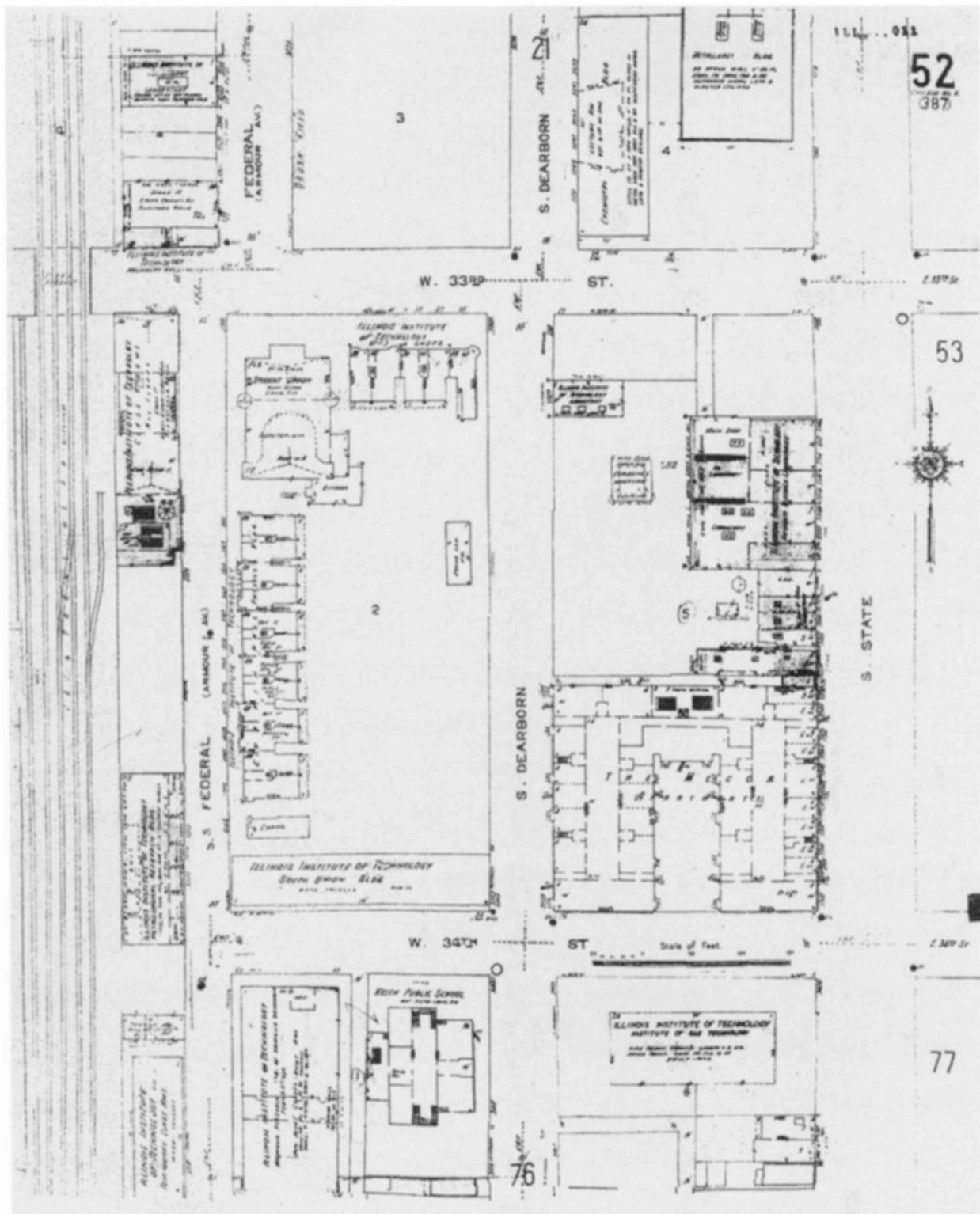


Figure 2: A Sanborn fire insurance map from 1949 of the Mecca and the Illinois Institute of Technology.

tireless in his commitment to this cause. The bill fighting the demolition passed by a landslide. Bluestone writes, “The legislative debate featured impassioned appeals to patriotism. Advocates of the bill pointed out that more than forty residents of the Mecca were fighting abroad ‘for democracy they did not enjoy at home’ and yet the institute proposed to tear down the roof over the heads of their families.”¹⁶⁰ Despite the strength of support, Illinois Governor Dwight Green vetoed the bill as unconstitutional.

Wimbish was persistent and the battle was pushed to the Chicago Municipal Court. Senator Wimbish represented the tenants and argued the case in clear and strong terms. He argued that it was about “property rights vs. human rights” and that the residents were being “hemmed in by an American ghetto system.”¹⁶¹ And this is decades before the uprisings of the 1960s amid which Brooks was writing. The judge on the case prevented the evictions and forced IIT to adhere to standard building safety codes. To which IIT unsavorily responded. Bluestone writes, “The institute hired a watchman rather than install sprinklers. It also sent a letter to tenants demanding that they move out, stating, ‘ALL PERSONS WHO CONTINUE TO REMAIN IN THE BUILDING DO SO ON THEIR OWN RESPONSIBILITY AND AT THEIR OWN RISK.’”¹⁶²

At a 1946 forum on Chicago housing, President Heald unabashedly held this hard line, arguing emphatically, “Blight is a deadly disease which attacks and destroys cities and devours the property and investments in them.”¹⁶³ He made it sound like IIT had its back against the wall with, in his words, “only two choices – run away from the blight or to stand and fight. I submit that this is everybody’s choice – and that behind the principle of ‘Stand and Fight’ is where we must all be counted.”¹⁶⁴ The irony of the language “stand and fight” in order to “be counted” was lost on him – the “we” and “all” that Heald’s mind pictured were white, middle-class figures not black, working class figures. This imperative to be counted is figured in Mrs. Sallie’s counting of her children and the way that Pepita is unaccounted for until the very end, and then only in death.

That vision of white middle class housing shaped the Mecca’s history from the start. While intended temporarily to house visitors to Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition, the Mecca was intended ultimately to offer white middle class housing along the lines of a suburb-in-the-city. As a result, the designers built with maximal use in mind. This was something of a trend at the time. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, when the Mecca apartment building was built, discusses Bluestone, Chicago’s apartment buildings dramatically changed the urban landscape and experience. Bluestone elaborates, “These early apartment houses formed something of a hinge between the skyscraper and the single-family house, adopting skyscraper models for accommodating people at high density while navigating strong ideological commitments to the single-family residence. By their hybrid nature, they confounded the order that some observers believed appropriate to turn-of-the-century urban social life.”¹⁶⁵

The Mecca was one of the largest nineteenth-century apartment houses and it became the first residential building in Chicago to use the atrium. Bluestone writes, it “differed from other urban structures in its unusually cosmopolitan combination of social and spatial elements.”¹⁶⁶ Bluestone argues that many urban planners were not keen on what they considered to be the “openness intrinsic” to the Mecca’s design.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, residential arcades, like the Mecca, were used in utopian plans in the early 19th century as a “vision of collective housing.”¹⁶⁸ The Mecca’s unusual design straddled the fault line and tension between public and private, closed and open. Bluestone writes, “Unlike Chicago courtyard apartments constructed later, the Mecca turned both outward toward its exterior courtyard and, most unusually, inward toward extraordinary atria.” Each wing was built around “an enormous interior skylit atrium,” measuring



Figure 3: The Mecca, a 1951 photo taken before demolition. View of the interior atrium with the promenade balcony rail.

33 feet by 170 feet. The atria were unique spaces that encouraged a gathering sense of public inside the building. “[T]he Mecca’s atria,” Bluestone writes, “made a spectacle of the comings and goings of residents, of the concourse of daily human life. In the atria, on the balconies, at the interior doors and windows, the massing of people in the Mecca clearly manifested itself.”

Bluestone argues that, “Nevertheless, the public space of the atria helped give the Mecca a sense of place and a comprehensible identity that few other ‘private’ buildings enjoyed. The public permeability of the domestic realm that had made the design problematic in its conception now contributed to its fame, or notoriety, in Chicago culture.”¹⁶⁹ This is how the social life of Mecca became known, through the public space of the atria. Brooks uses this public space to spatialize her epic, so that the story of the community is built around and within this public space.

The atria had been a source of blues and jazz songs about the

cultural stories, production and invention for a while, as the Mecca attest.¹⁷⁰

The shared balcony space that wrapped around each floor became a sort of semipublic space, the mediating space between public and private (See Figure 3). Bluestone continues, “With their ‘promenade balconies,’ the atria developed as public places where people would see and be seen... Thus the Mecca design contained two rich but contradictory tendencies. One tendency, captured in the exterior courtyard and separate entrances, responded to entrenched fear over the compromise of single-family living and familial privacy; the other tendency, represented in the skylit atria, cultivated the possibilities of a gregarious and cosmopolitan gathering... under a single roof.”¹⁷¹ This unique balcony space is key to the work of the poem. Here, in an at once interior and also semi-public place, we can discern the opportunity for and processes of minor architectures at the levels of literal architecture, poetic architecture, and social architecture, moving from closed system to open space. In particular, the balcony scene near the closing of “In the Mecca” featuring Alfred, the English teacher and failed poet figure in the building, is an opportunity for minor architectures to deconstruct existing structures— affectively, socially, materially—in the space of the poem and let “steadily / an essential sanity, black and electric, / buil[d].”¹⁷²

The stanza reads:

I hate it.
Yet, murmurs Alfred—
who is lean at the balcony, leaning—
something, something in Mecca
continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,
like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
with wind whistling through them. And steadily
an essential sanity, black and electric,
builds to a reportage and redemption.
A hot estrangement.
A material collapse
that is Construction.

The stanza here limns the poem's spatial strategies for the emergence of minor architectures, at multiple levels, situated inside, and from there it dematerializes the architectonic landscape line upon line—where the poetic lines become analogous to the building's story upon story—and the existing logics and grammar of major structure. With the strong affective condition of hate, it begins with a sense of absolute interiority. The line itself is singly-felt and sealed off. It is this explicitly articulated resistance and opposition to the defining structures surrounding him that is a hinging moment, indicated by “Yet” in the following line. The pull of “yet” helps us turn a corner and gives us more affective, spatial and relational possibilities that are more than just straight, succinct and inert aversion. “Yet” expands the earlier affective enclosure and sealed off interiority into the larger and public space of the atrium.

The long dash after “murmurs Alfred—” is followed in the next line by another phrase and long dash, “who is lean at the balcony, leaning—.” The placement of the dashes spatially mimics the material placement and physical work of the balcony. The leaning here applies pressure on that initial and enclosing interiority, pushing against its absoluteness. Lean in body and leaning in action, his condition and his action are identified with each other. By leaning on the balcony-lines, Alfred is inclining toward the public potential of the inner atria by putting pressure on these dashes that typographically would seem to isolate him. The leaning figure of Alfred moves the poem forward; as D.H. Melhem writes, “In leaning toward Mecca, Alfred inclines toward a new ethos for an entire social order.”¹⁷³ But it is important to note that Alfred is inside Mecca when leaning in, by leaning in he is leaning toward emergent minor architectures that will build a way out. This character and the building become articulated together: who Alfred is, how Alfred is. He is lean, 'rail' thin, leaning on the railing.

The stanza disassembles the dominant structures of power by actively dematerializing the existing architectonic landscape and logics and supplanting it with the logics of open space:

Substanceless; yet like mountains,
like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
with wind whistling through them.

The single, simple and yet monumentally abstract word “Substanceless” begins to do the work of disassembly that this long and fluid tercet continues. The following word “yet” again helps open

up the grammar and mark a change. We get a series of similes that simultaneously dematerializes the constructed world while rematerializing as a passage into the external, natural world of mountains, rivers and oceans, and ending with the substanceless “wind whistling through them.” Through the grammar of the line, then, we mark the passage from a closed space to an open space.

The next lines limn these building minor architectures:

And steadily
an essential sanity, black and electric,
builds to a reportage and redemption.
 A hot estrangement.
 A material collapse
that is Construction.

The word “steadily” alerts us to the critical social collapse and building that will quickly happen here, with its sense of direct and unfaltering movement. Despite the troubling conditions that we know to be true in the poem—a missing child, her helpless family, and Alfred’s “hate”—Brooks conjures forth an “essential sanity” that “builds.” And the thing that “builds” is explicitly described as “black,” locating this imaginative construction in the residents’ capacities. The now commingling private-public space takes on the features of a public subjectivity that is raced and galvanizing. Using the language of architectural construction and demolition, Brooks suggests that the radical instability of life in the Mecca itself has the generative potential embodied in the concept of minor architectures working at the levels of literal architecture, poetic architecture and social architecture. Indeed, the emergence of minor architectures from within is made visually and strikingly apparent with the embedded lines, “A hot estrangement. / A material collapse.” The “hot estrangement” that the crisis and loss of Pepita has brought out and brought to a head makes us realize that this is a community that “has fallen prey to its own problems.”¹⁷⁴ The Mecca is no utopia, yet the continuous negotiation of private and public that the residents undertake becomes a form of “redemption” for a site that has been literally condemned. We are offered, in the end, paradoxically, “A material collapse / That is Construction.”

I would like here to return to the broader context of “In the Mecca” and to its status as a modern epic. I would suggest that the modern epic is a poetic formalization of the negotiation of private and public and, in particular, of the voices that speak for and shape a community. The public, collective epic is often understood in contrast to a private, interior lyric. Yet the closing of “In the Mecca,” with Alfred’s intense interiority and the revisioning of that interiority into something shareable and shared, presents epic as a site, too, for minor architectures. Epic’s minor architectures here afford a black public voice even where community is on the verge of demolition and collapse.

That demolition and collapse was brought to a head and ultimately achieved through the efforts of IIT, “a key partner in the massive postwar South Side urban-renewal program.”¹⁷⁵ They were one of two key players that helped found the South Side Planning Board, a non-profit organization which, according to Bluestone, “advocat[ed] a new vision for the area.”¹⁷⁶ The Mecca was one of its major stumbling blocks on so many levels. Bluestone writes, “it became obvious that the Mecca represented more than a social and political challenge. The building stood in stark contrast to the palette of modern architecture envisioned as a key to a new urbanism and a changed neighborhood.”¹⁷⁷ In 1938, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe became chair of

IIT's Department of Architecture and "boosted the vision of a new architecture for the area."¹⁷⁸ The break with history that Mies advocated reminds the reader of one of the opening and especially haunting epigraphs to Brooks's poem "What once was can never be..." Bluestone writes, "Mies's plan called for demolition of the Romanesque-style Armour Mission and Armour Institute. In their place, Mies, who eventually designed twenty-two buildings for the institute, proposed strikingly modern-styled buildings in brick, glass, and welded steel. Clean, abstract lines and carefully proportioned spaces resonated with the broader agenda of 'cleaning up' the neighborhood."¹⁷⁹ The new design was, according to Bluestone, the "institute's effort to establish a unified stylistic and urban form" with an emphasis on "order and harmony."¹⁸⁰ The design for the area "adopted a dominant low-rise, low-density form that sprawled across a landscaped site."¹⁸¹ Compare that to the "social width" that Brooks was intent on for *her* Mecca. The Mecca had to be demolished, not preserved, because it did not fit into the planners' "rigid ideal of campus symmetry."¹⁸²

Bluestone writes:

After the war the institute started construction of its modern campus. In February 1950 the board noted an easing of South Side housing and renewed its push to demolish the Mecca. President Heald again insisted that the building was unsafe. Mecca tenants responded with mass protests. Again Senator Wimbish advised them of possible legal and administrative remedies (See Figure 4). Lillian Davis, a Mecca tenant, argued that it was "unconstitutional" to evict rent-paying tenants: "It's a law of life that a person has to have a place to live." Ward alderman filed proposals to bar issuance of wrecking permits until tenants had been legally evicted and a program initiated to alleviate their hardships. These proposals went to the City Council's Committee on Housing, which failed to take action. Despite the echoes of earlier arguments, the dynamics of the preservation campaign had changed. Tenants did not argue against demolition so much as insist upon expedited assistance in locating alternative space in private or public housing. The institute had sapped the energy of the preservation movement by continually lowering rents and filling the building with poorer and poorer people while refusing to put money into maintenance and repairs. The exterior courtyard deteriorated into an unkempt dirt patch and graffiti covered interior walls. When the courts permitted relocations and evictions to proceed, squatters quickly moved into the Mecca apartments, furthering the building's reputation as "a prime example of the worst slum tenements."¹⁸³

The context for this was the myth of "a fall from grace" that was constructed around the building. Bluestone highlights John Bartlow Martin's article in Harper's Magazine in 1950, "The Strangest Place in Chicago," as a prime example of this. Bluestone reveals, "In the early 1950's these renewed efforts to demolish the Mecca were framed by a distorted historical narrative. A Mecca myth arose that embodied a classical story of a fall from grace."¹⁸⁴ The myth was that this showplace was built at the turn of the century, as a place for the wealthy and well-to-do. Eventually, the rich folks moved on and, eventually, poor black people moved in, which caused the deterioration and downfall of Mecca. In sum, "In the view of the institute and other South Side Planners, the Mecca's fall from grace crystallized and rendered inescapable the logic of urban renewal and the need for inaugurating a new 'golden age.'"¹⁸⁵ Brooks's poem challenges



Figure 4: A 1950 photo showing Mecca residents attending a protest meeting.

this myth, as she writes in her first lines, “Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise.” And, just a line later, “Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall.”

The myth denied the fact that the Mecca “had remained a largely working-class place throughout its entire history.”¹⁸⁶ This myth, which Martin advanced in his Harper’s piece, took over much of the commentary responding to Mecca’s demolition, from locally broadcast radio stations to the nationally circulating *Life* magazine. It took about 18 months to vacate the building. In January 1952, Mecca was demolished. One resident, Jesse Meals, who had been a resident of the Mecca for 31 years, was interviewed by *Newsweek* magazine and said, “You watch, a lot of people who lived here, they gonna die from grief.”¹⁸⁷ The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported it with the headline, “Fabulous S. Side Slum Reaches End of Road.”¹⁸⁸ After the building was demolished, Bluestone writes, “In what soon became a tradition in the culture of Chicago architecture, some people salvaged architectural bits of the Mecca. The distinctive foliated balcony panels that had lined the Mecca’s atria proved popular among collectors of local architectural fragments. This method preserved forms and memories of the building while leaving the economic and social program of urban-renewal advocates largely unfettered.”¹⁸⁹

The efforts at demolition “failed to appreciate the tenants’ efforts to preserve housing and to define a neighborly domestic realm in a market hedged by racism, violence, and a domestic

ideology that spun on the axis of single-family housing.”¹⁹⁰ Bluestone continues, “In fact, the intensity of the institute’s efforts to demolish the Mecca turned upon the visible massing, around the atria, at the windows, in the courtyards, of an African-American cultural presence. The cultural vitality evoked in the “Mecca Flat Blues” and the strength of the Mecca preservation campaign usefully underscore the value of an architecture and an urbanism that could embrace rather than jettison the possibility of human density and public life in the city.”¹⁹¹ It is with this aspiration that Brooks wrote this poem on black public life.

The preservation struggle of “the Mecca campaign emphasized housing and neighborhood. In place of an aesthetic model for preservation efforts, the Mecca’s story recovers a series of alternative priorities.”¹⁹² Brooks resuscitates these alternative priorities in the space of her poem. In doing so, she creates a countervailing story of the Mecca to Martin’s *Harper’s* article and the myth of Mecca’s downfall and collapse. Her epic is different from that myth because Brooks’s work was grounded in the lived experience of the city and community. Her poem keenly attends to literal, poetic, and social architectures and the ways they shape senses of community and of self.

Chapter Three: Mapping Mourning: Racial Grief and Racial Melancholia in Robert Hayden's "Elegies for Paradise Valley"

We need the poet who "lives in life," mixes with mud, rolls in rot, claws the scoundrels, bleeds and bloodies, and, gasping in the field, writes there, his wounds like faucets above his page, at once besmutching and ennobling it. We need, also, the poet who finds life always interesting, sometimes appalling, sometimes appealing, but consistently amenable to a clarifying enchantment via the powers of Art. His reverence for the word *Art* is what chiefly distinguishes him from Poet I. Poet II, moreover, may postpone composition until he is off the field, rid of the fray's insignia, and has had a bath.

Poet II is Robert Hayden, one of a growing group of Negro poets believing that matter is not enough, believing that there should be a marriage between matter and manner... He reaches richly, then molds and resolves with confidence and precision. And life is right there, in the finished piece. It has not been lost in the refining process... In that straightforward but achieved simplicity we are given a household, a race, a world.¹⁹³

—Gwendolyn Brooks

What was once a swinging town – a place where free spirits and sporting folks from New York, Chicago, Cleveland and nearby states could come together on the weekends – is only a memory.¹⁹⁴

—Toni Jones, *Detroit Free Press*, January 7, 1973

"It's true that Afro-American history has been traduced," the poet Robert Hayden relates in an interview. "And it's true that as a people we have been stereotyped and caricatured in literature almost beyond recognition."¹⁹⁵ Hayden's words cinch together two central and closely related preoccupations for the poet—black American historiographical representation and black American literary representation.

In this chapter, I argue that Hayden's intense preoccupation with the nexus of history and literature constellates into his career-long quest to write a black epic. He explicitly attempts this epic with his poem "Middle Passage." Yet the epic becomes impossible for Hayden, precisely because he was keenly aware of how blacks get displaced from their own history and put into someone else's. They are in constant exile from the self-consistent world of epic. What I mean by epic is a poetic form defined by wholeness and harmony, which is a culture's celebrated conception of its own history, its way of telling its story to itself. In the larger context of black diaspora, we are left with elegies instead of epics. What I mean by elegy is a poetic form defined by its mournful lament for the dead or for a tragic event or situation that is death-like. I draw on this contrast between epic and elegy as a way to process Hayden's experience as well as the tension between black historiographical and literary representation.

The poem "Middle Passage" reads as a partial witnessing record of the 1839 voyage of Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* and the brutal experience of recently enslaved Africans who rebel against the slave-trading captain and crew who sought to rob them of their freedom and sell them into bondage.¹⁹⁶ Because the historical record is incomplete, we never hear from the slaves in the poem. Hayden lays bare that the voices of the enslaved are missing in slavery's history. He underscores that it is not a historical accident that enslaved voices are not there, pointing up the

fact that this history—though not the poem—has been written by those in power. What we have are necessarily historical stubs, then, incorporated and imaginative recreations of short pieces written and recorded by the whites in power, while the black voices have been effaced. While this silence is powerful, I argue that this attempted epic falls under the weight of the one-sided telling of history. His initial project could not sustain the epic drive, pointing instead to a fragmented historical record and destroyed past.

What initially inspired Hayden, in 1941, to begin an African American epic was a charging call in a long, book-length historical poem about the Civil War, *John Brown's Body* (1928) by Stephen Vincent Benét. Hayden explains that he intended to compose a poetic answer to Benét's call for "the black spear" epic that would tell the story of blacks in the Civil War:

There's a passage in which [Benét] says, "O black-skinned epic, epic with the long black spear, I cannot sing you now, having too white heart." And he goes on to say that someday a poet will rise to sing of the black spear. I dared to hope that I might be that poet. And when I met Mr. Benét, several years after reading his book, I told him I also intended to write a poem on slavery and the Civil War, but this time from the black man's point of view. He was enthusiastic and encouraged me to do so. But I didn't begin seriously trying to write the poem, or really the series of poems, until a year or two later.¹⁹⁷

Hayden started by attempting an epic and ended up writing a "series of poems." Indeed, the "black spear" epic would give rise to the history sequence closing *A Ballad of Remembrance*. Hayden published *A Ballad of Remembrance* with a closing section that is a sequence of history poems on slavery and the Civil War featuring central black figures—"Middle Passage," "O Daedalus, fly away home," "The ballad of Nat Turner," and "Frederick Douglass." *A Ballad of Remembrance* was published in London by Paul Breman to inaugurate his "Heritage" series. The irresolution of the sequence, versus the completion of the epic, was its own form of resolve against the failures of decisiveness in African American historiographical and literary representation.

Hayden continued to be in vexed dialogue with the epic as he 'returned home' in the mid-century to the place where he grew up and to which he had a profound attachment, Detroit's Paradise Valley, located on the Lower East Side of the city. In an interview, Hayden reveals, "In the 1950s I seemed to look back on my childhood, my early environment... For some reason, I don't know why, I seemed to have a need to recall my past and to rid myself of the pain of so much of it... Whatever the reason, I began a series of poems about my life in the slums of Detroit at this time. By then I had enough detachment, I'd gained enough psychic or emotional distance to write these memory poems."¹⁹⁸

African Americans and other non-whites were being violently deprived of home and community during programs of urban renewal in the postwar United States. Indeed, in the mid-century moment in which Hayden originally began writing "Elegies for Paradise Valley," home was being destroyed for many in Paradise Valley for the purposes of urban renewal.¹⁹⁹ Today there stands a "Paradise Valley marker" that identifies part of downtown Detroit as a registered Michigan Historical Site. Under the heading "PARADISE VALLEY" reads the description: "Formerly the intersection of Adams Avenue and St. Antoine Street, this site was once a part of Paradise Valley, Detroit's African American business and entertainment district. From the 1930s into the 1950s Paradise Valley bustled around the clock. Nightspots like 606 Horseshoe Lounge, Club Plantation, and Club 666 featured entertainers such as Duke Ellington, Dinah Washington,

the Ink Spots, and Sarah Vaughan. Blacks who performed elsewhere in Michigan were excluded from white hotels and stayed in the valley. Beginning in the 1940s, urban renewal projects, the construction of freeways, and new development devastated African American neighborhoods, including Paradise Valley. The valley's last three structures, located along St. Antoine Street, were demolished in 2001" (See Figures 5 and 6).²⁰⁰

The valley was a popular destination from the 1940s to 1960s. As the founder of the Detroit Black Writer's Guild, Peggy Moore shares that it "dazzled and attracted more weekend visitors to [its] door step than did Greek Town or China Town during the same period."²⁰¹ According to Moore, segregation did not quash the economic vitality of the place and "businesses flourished." "On St. Antoine Street," she writes, "there was Watson's [s] Realty Co., Donald F. White Architect, Long's Cut-Rate Drug Store, Law Offices of Lewis-Rowlette-Brown; Bidy's Chicken Shack; Wilson's Modern Laundry; Wayne County Better Homes; Pekin Restaurant; Biltmore Hotel; Modern Barber Shop; The Pryor Hotel, and many others."²⁰²

Paradise Valley "included nearly all the black businesses in the densely populated black section of Detroit."²⁰³ It was located in the "Black Bottom," the area which housed most black residents and "whose boundaries extended from Hastings to Brush and from Gratiot to Vernor Highway."²⁰⁴ The valley contained the entire business district, which had "black owned shops, music stores, grocery stores, bowling alleys, hotels, bars and lucrative policy offices (the precursor to playing the 'numbers')."²⁰⁵

When Paradise Valley was razed to build a freeway, many who felt they had a place there mourned the loss. In 1973, Jesse Faithful, the proprietor of Valley Foods Restaurant which still stood at 1719 St. Antoine Street at the time, recalled, "Duke Ellington's band would always stop by Bidy's [Restaurant] for a nickel sandwich when they were in town. I don't know how I ever made a sandwich for a nickel. This place is empty now, but at one time I had eight waitresses and four cooks. The expressway (Chrysler) took that away"²⁰⁶

In his sequence of elegies, Hayden recollects this former life of Paradise Valley, recreating a condensed and an intensified sequential history of black communal life in the city. The elegy is for Paradise Valley itself. Hayden writes,

For ghetto life as I knew it was full of contrasts. Violence and ugliness and cruelty. We kids were exposed to the grim realities, to coin a phrase, in spite of all our elders could do to protect us. But there was beauty, there was gentleness too. There was a vividness of life, an intensity of being... And there were people who retained a—"sheltering" is the word to describe it—a sheltering spiritual beauty and dignity—my mother and my foster father among them—despite sordid and disheartening circumstances. I love the memory of those people.²⁰⁷

Instead of epics of community, then, we are left with elegies of community at this site of racial grief. Emotion seems to be central to this project. These poems carry the burden of Hayden's melancholy. As poet-narrator, Hayden in his melancholia invites in the spirits of those departed from Paradise Valley, even including the hostile gaze of a white police officer and other long gone participants in this mixed and complicated space. I am interested in the ways in which "Elegies for Paradise Valley" is haunted by, to use a phrase of Anne Cheng's, "the intricacy and the afterlife,"²⁰⁸ of what Hayden calls the "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores" in "Middle Passage."



Figure 5: Opened in 1941, the Paradise Theater hosted many jazz performances by Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington, among others.

I will begin with Cheng’s concept of “racial melancholia” and add to it Jonathan Flatley’s sense of melancholia as a site of negativity, creativity, and collectivity. I then apply this fuller term to provide a new reading of Hayden’s poetics. My goal will be to show that Hayden’s poem “Middle Passage” began as an epic attempt that could not cohere because it gives birth to a rending racial grief emerging from a key site of racial formation and loss on the slave ship. Hayden revisits the experience of racial grief in “Elegies for Paradise Valley” and racial melancholia is one affective avenue his poem offers.

“Elegies for Paradise Valley” are brief, dense, and freighted with images of death and grief in postwar black urban life. By engaging with a site of racial grief, these elegies come to share with Hayden’s slavery poems the larger context and deeper history of black diaspora, of which the twentieth-century project of urban renewal, with its violent displacement of black communities, is a part. How, formally and affectively, then, are Hayden’s elegies able to succeed where Hayden’s epic drive failed?

To answer this question, I draw on Cheng’s incisive conceptualization of “racial melancholia,” where “racial melancholia serves not as a description of the feeling of a group of people but as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation.”²⁰⁹ Melancholia, according to Freud’s well-known formulation, is “unsuccessful” grieving where the subject does not accept a substitute for the lost object. Cheng contends that, “[m]ore accurately, melancholia alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss,²¹⁰ one which results in a “spectral drama, whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other.”²¹¹



Figure 6: The 606 Horseshoe Bar was a popular Paradise Valley establishment.

Cheng uses racial melancholia as a framework for understanding racialization in America, which “may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others.”²¹² Melancholia lies at the heart of American history and nation-building, which reads as a process of racial formation and racialized exclusions. Simply put, African Americans and other non-whites exist as ghostly, racial others sustaining the white American nation.

Flatley takes this notion of melancholia as a theoretical model of identity and develops it further as a theoretical model of engagement, claiming melancholia as a site of negativity that also has a creative and collective function. Flatley

argues that “such dwelling on loss need not produce depression, that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating grief that results in the loss of interest in other persons, one’s own actions, and often life itself.”²¹³ He continues, “In fact, some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world.”²¹⁴ These, Flatley terms, are “non- or antidepressive melancholias.”²¹⁵

Indeed, he considers melancholia itself as a potentially active and productive process, a verb, to “melancholize.” Flatley writes, “[M]elancholizing is something one *does*: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge.”²¹⁶ For the authors Flatley considers, melancholizing produces “the knowledge of the historical origins of their melancholias, and thus at the same time of the others with whom these melancholias might be shared. This knowledge, an ‘affective map’...is what, for them and for their readers, makes possible the conversion of a depressive melancholia into a way to be interested in the world.”²¹⁷ It is this knowledge—of the origins of loss and of a community of fellow melancholics to share it with—that turns melancholia from a model of loss and subsequent disengagement to a model of loss and subsequent engagement. It is through this lens that Hayden’s elegies can be compellingly read.

If melancholia is “the place where modernity touches down in our lives in the most intimate ways,” as Flatley argues, drawing on Walter Benjamin, then returning to that melancholia returns us to “the site in which the social origins of our emotional lives can be mapped out and from which we can see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces.”²¹⁸ It is for this reason that Hayden writes in the melancholic vein about Paradise Valley, destroyed by the forces of modernity in the form of urban renewal. As he evocatively writes and repeats in *Elegy V*, “Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell.” By returning to this site of loss in his elegies and examining the affective attachments to this loss and with each other, Hayden demonstrates how racial melancholia can be a theoretical model of identity and engagement.

Indeed, Hayden's poetic melancholia is a long, active, and creative melancholizing process that takes us from "Middle Passage" to "Elegies for Paradise Valley," and produces its own kind of knowledge for the poet and his readers, one which recognizes that the losses in both moments participate in a larger historical process that devalues black life and culture and which cleaves to the importance of collective understanding and consciousness in the face of these dehumanizing forces. Compelled by the specter of death and the social and political imperative to grieve, the movement from the poem "Middle Passage" to "Elegies for Paradise Valley," from the genre of epic to that of elegy, then, is its own affective map for Hayden, making melancholia a way to be interested in the world and in each other.

Through the elegy, I argue, Hayden is able to engage imaginatively with black death and racial grief that began with the experience of the Middle Passage. "Middle Passage" narrates the atrocities of the slave ship, a key site of racial formation, defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed,"²¹⁹ where blacks were stripped of their history and thereby their humanity ("Voyage through death..."). "Elegies for Paradise Valley" picks up on the continuing threat of death in black diasporic life, one that Hayden experienced in his own life.

Robert Hayden was born in Detroit in 1913 prior to the first substantial wave of the Great Migration. White residents of Detroit fled from areas where African Americans were settling, creating racially uniform sections across the city. At the start of World War II, African Americans comprised less than 10 percent of Detroit's population; by 1960, that figure had grown to nearly 30 percent.²²⁰ Once racially diverse residential areas transformed into isolated, nearly all-black urban pockets. Within subsequent decades, Hayden's Paradise Valley transformed from a varied community of Italians, Jews, Germans, and African Americans living in close proximity to one another to a densely concentrated neighborhood of African Americans. And, while African Americans had already taken residence during the mid-nineteenth century in the "Black Bottom" on the East Side, by the 1920s they were primarily concentrated in Paradise Valley.²²¹ Heightened by the spectacle of "white flight," Paradise Valley, an area that was already well populated, became even more densely populated, yet now marked by racial homogeneity.

In their comprehensive study of these urban developments, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, Joe Darden, Richard Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas periodize modern Detroit's development. The "Era of City Building" in Detroit, they write,

coincides with the creation of the assembly line and mass production... The Motor City grew in the wake of an expanding auto industry, outward from the river—north, west, south—into the landed interior. Development was unevenly distributed across an inner city where housing was old and the poor were concentrated, a middle city where land use was mixed and in transition, and in an outer city where the urban gentry lived in large homes clustered around schools and parks, according to a city plan. The era of city building was dominated by the spatial logic of industrial expansion.²²²

The "Era of Suburbanization" which followed, they continue,

can be dated from 1951, the year the central city's population peaked... The United States experienced unparalleled economic growth during the early postwar

years, and the logic of industrial expansion stayed the same, but now it extended beyond the city limits. The Big Three built 20 new auto plants in the Detroit area during the decade following World War II—all beyond the boundaries of the central city. Complementary industries, commercial development, and residential subdivisions followed, like metal shavings drawn to a magnet. But this time it was the suburbs that boomed, not the central city... The federal government underwrote suburban growth by financing a massive freeway system and by providing mortgage loans, insurance, and tax deductions for new home buyers.²²³

The industry most prominent in Detroit and responsible for shaping it for much of the twentieth century is the automobile industry, making it “Motor City.” According to Darden et al., “by 1910 Detroit’s auto predominance was so well-established that it would stand unchallenged for nearly three-quarters of a century.”²²⁴ Their study underscores this point:

Although the city of Detroit first developed and grew as a center of trade and commerce, the automobile assembly line and burgeoning automobile industry turned Detroit into a modern metropolis. Detroit and its jobs attracted immigrants from all over the United States as well as the world. The manufacturing sector was the irresistible lighthouse that drew the Irish, Poles, Italians, Finns, Hungarians, and blacks (See Figure 7).²²⁵

Just a mere ten years later, in 1920, the state of Michigan was the undisputed “center of the auto industry.”²²⁶ Here were found “steel mills, foundries, and engine plants nourishing the assembly line.”²²⁷ After World War I, foreign immigration decreased to Detroit and domestic immigration increased, particularly in the form of “thousands of rural southern black and white farmers and agricultural workers to serve in Detroit’s assembly lines.”²²⁸ Following the next world war, the city once again changed demographically as urban renewal and commercial decentralization hit the city and “more and more manufacturing firms, commercial establishments, and middle-class residents (especially white families of northern European ancestry) moved to the suburbs.”²²⁹ Just as importantly, black southerners continued to migrate to the city and now in even greater numbers.

Hayden looks back at this mid-century moment of urban renewal in his poetry. Published in 1978, *American Journal* is a slim volume of 13 poems that are steeped in death and that consider various forms of difference and exclusion. “Elegies for Paradise Valley” is the third poem. It follows “A Letter from Phillis Wheatley,” in which the writer-speaker Wheatley refers to her “latest Elegies” (“I read / my latest Elegies to them.”), and “Paul Laurence Dunbar,” which begins with the stanza “We lay red roses on his grave, / speak sorrowfully of him / as if he were but newly dead.” In “Elegies for Paradise Valley,” Hayden, the poet-narrator, opens the first of eight elegies with the encroaching sense of death and loss. He uses the elegy not to merely mark a personal sense of loss or sorrow for something that has passed, however. In his poem, he allows to converge a community history and a personal history in which drugs, gossip, homosexuality, and judgment become a prison of the soul. Rather than see this poem as a confessional, let us see the poem as elegiac in a broader, cultural sense, as mourning and lamentation for the complex community that Paradise Valley once was. Indeed, this is an elegy to community.

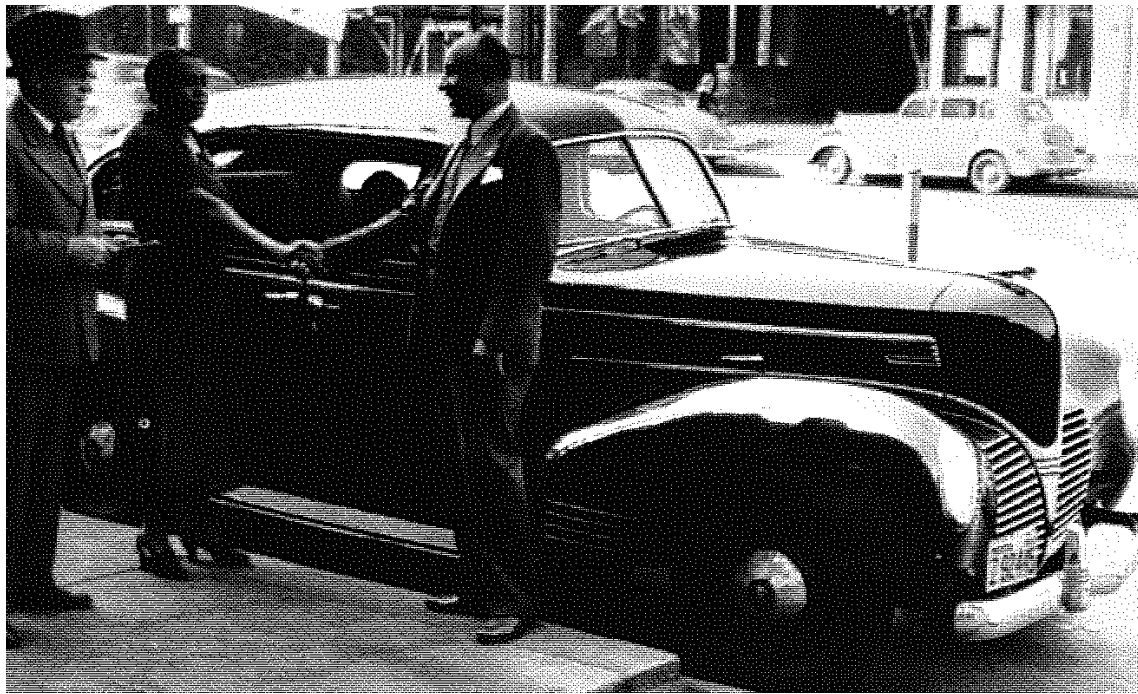


Figure 7: Thomas Doyle of Detroit was among one of the first black automobile dealers in the country.

The poet-narrator begins:

My shared bedroom's window
opened on alley stench.
A junkie died in maggots there.
I saw his body shoved into a van.
I saw the hatred for our kind
glistening like tears
in the policemen's eyes.

The register of the word “shared” is ambiguous here. How is the poet-narrator’s bedroom window “shared?” The speaker’s most personal space does not just belong to him. He does not make explicit whom he shares it with, but, as we will see later, the young boy’s room is shared with the memories and dreams of others outside—a junkie, the police officer and still others who will soon fill his room and this poem. Since this is an elegy, the word “shared” makes us aware of possible visitations from departed spirits. These figures are, as we shall see, “suspended, racialized ‘ghosts,’”²³⁰ bearing American racial melancholia. Crucially, too, “shared” sensitizes us to the notion that Hayden will be telling us his experiences and asking us to partake in the emotional complex that he will set before us with these elegies written as reflections from the catastrophic culture of diaspora.

Part of that culture is a culture of death and violence. As the above stanza reveals, that voyage through death of the Middle Passage does not end on these “shores” of Paradise Valley. Here is revealed, as Abdul JanMohamed writes, the “circulation of the threat of death that permeates the capillary structures of the subjectivity formed within the ambience of the culture

of death.”²³¹ That circulation of the threat of death is so culturally pervasive that the smell and sight of a junkie’s body becomes occasion to mark the loss of home. Indeed, Hayden seems to have more of an affinity to and affiliation with the junkie than with any of the other figures in his elegies. But while the drugs the junkie used are an escape and detachment from the world, the melancholia Hayden applies will become an opening up and engagement with the world. With “shared bedroom,” then, we get the sense that a broader black cultural sphere is being drawn here. The “alley stench” echoes the stench on the boat in the poem “Middle Passage” (“A charnel stench, effluvium of living death”). Then, in the elegies that follow, the narrator’s people reappear—his Uncle Crip, Ma, Auntie, and others.

There is a fragmentariness and precariousness to these elegies. What we get are shards, and a sense of shattered lives. The disintegration of protective social structures—the jarring closeness of violent death to an open bedroom window—for the poet-narrator, his community, and their neighborhood makes this powerfully evident. The opening of the poem is quite literally an opening: the narrator’s room is open to the outside, an alley. A young narrator is witnessing all of this outside activity, with the repetition of “I saw ... / I saw ...” Yet, Hayden conjoins death with this condition of openness, evocative of another state of false freedom—that of being chained and enslaved on the open seas—which underscores that openness and statelessness is a condition of bondage that gets repeated across African American history. Here, Hayden writes, there is the possibility of physical and psychic entrapment and entombment as he himself “saw [a] body shoved into a van. / I saw the hatred of our kind.” This creation of “our kind” is an entrapment—an antagonistic, conspicuous and unwelcome notion of a circumscribed group of people.

Hayden is a complex poetic conjurer. He offers a series of precise images and a strong sense of the importance of ocularity. It is this moment of seeing/not seeing by the narrator and the police officer that embodies the precise complex of black grief and white racial melancholia. Rather than speak abstractly about the physical and psychic threats in his neighborhood, Hayden gives us a glimpse of the layers of death, grief, and melancholia happening in the alley through his bedroom window. The use of “I saw” the first time witnesses the body being “shoved into a van,” a complicated loss of the racialized object. This is followed by the second “I saw,” which extends into a discovery of racial exclusion: “the hatred of our kind / glistening like tears / in the policeman’s eyes.” The police officer’s hatred is provoked by being confronted with what he does not want to see: the racial other, once invisible, is now demanding attention. His hatred is further provoked and verging on tears by the fact that his racial consciousness and social position cannot exist without this unassimilable other, initiating a “complex process of racial rejection and desire.”²³² In figuring the policeman’s hate as “tears,” a bodily emission, Hayden seems to recapitulate the model of melancholia as a physical incorporation of the other—as if the other has been made internal to the policeman’s body. This first elegy ends on an early ideological lesson in racial melancholia for this young subject; that is, that “racial melancholia affects both dominant white culture and racial others; indeed, racial melancholia describes the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion.”²³³ Indeed, that sense of reciprocal presupposition and interaction is trackable in the poem’s insistence on vision and visibility (“I saw...I saw...the policeman’s eyes”).

This sense of melancholia and the dynamics of difference and exclusion extend to the next elegy. The poet-narrator begins by considering what does *not* find a place in Paradise Valley, revealing that there was

No place for Pestalozzi's
fiorelli. No time of starched
and ironed innocence. Godfearing
elders, even Godless grifters, tried
as best they could to shelter
us. Rats fighting in their walls.

What remains is a starkly embattled space for young lives. Here, in this elegy, Hayden explores the condition and subjectivity of the melancholic object—the “social subject who has been made into an ‘object,’ a ‘loss,’ an ‘invisibility,’ or a ‘phantom.’”²³⁴ This compressed elegy begins in an expression of sheer negativity (“No place...No time”), which then expands into identification, affirmation, and self-denigration, conveying the complexity of what racial melancholy might be for the raced subject. Paradise Valley, he writes, does not have the luxury of “place” and “time” in the sense that other communities might use and occupy them. The reference to Johann H. Pestalozzi offers one example. Pestalozzi was the Swiss educational reformer who, at the turn of the 19th century, experimented with various pedagogical methods of education, particularly of poor children, in ways that emphasized and underscored the importance of each child’s individual identity. In “Paradise Valley,” however, there is no time or possibility to address the needs of children in a thoughtful, progressive program: this is “no place” for Pestalozzi’s theories; and, in that vein, “no time of starched / and ironed innocence” of youthful selves pressed into school uniforms. Yet, amid this lack, a young Hayden affirms that he and other children of Paradise Valley are tended to after a fashion. In what is very much a child’s view, we see two disparate groups of the “Godfearing elders” and “Godless grifters”—the “established” and the “marginal” members in the community—heroically come together to shelter the children in their midst. There is, notably, the shrinking and diminutive invocation of “us” here by the narrator, that smaller grouping of children within the larger grouping of “our kind.”

The final image of “[r]ats fighting in their walls” underscores the deteriorating conditions abounding in this Detroit ghetto. Rats were so prevalent in the dense squalor of the Lower East Side that it was disparagingly known as the “rat belt.” At the beginning of World War II, 10 percent of Paradise Valley residents were homeowners in conditions where an alarming 60 percent of the homes were substandard.²³⁵ These, according to federal housing officials, included “dwelling units without a toilet or bath, running water, heating, and lighting; buildings that needed major repairs; and low-rent apartments that were overcrowded.”²³⁶

In the third elegy, Paradise Valley becomes “peopled” in the mind of the reader as Hayden begins the process of describing the social dynamics he was aware of as he was growing up. Recalling a family funeral, he writes:

Waxwork Uncle Henry
(murdered Uncle Crip)
lay among floral pieces
in the front room where
the Christmas tree had stood.

Mister Hong of the
Chinese Lantern (there
Auntie as waitress queened it

nights) brought freesias, wept
beside the coffin.

Hayden brings us closer to a larger as well as more specific sociality, to his kinfolk with whom the experience of racial melancholia might be shared through the cultural rituals “of death, of loving” that attend a death in the family and community. In this way he makes a potentially isolating and depressive melancholia into a non- or antidepressive melancholia. The death of an uncle, Uncle Crip, becomes an occasion for the community to commingle. Here, there is an aestheticization of Crip’s death, part of aesthetic and affective strategies of dealing with complicated loss. There is a sense of artifice about these elegies as well, with “Waxwork Uncle Henry” and the “wax bouquets” of the next elegy found in the offices of the spirit guide Madam Artelia, even Madam Artelia herself, with her appearance and performance. These descriptions underscore that these representations of the past are waxy and half-fake because they are gone and memories are inadequate. We are left with melancholia and loss. We do not know the exact details of Crip’s death, as would befit a child’s view of the situation, but violence precipitates and shadows this moment of death. But this is no sheltered life of youth, as the earlier elegy revealed, and a young Hayden knows that his uncle has been murdered. Properly arrayed “Waxwork Uncle Henry” is parenthetically known as “(murdered Uncle Crip).” As the elegy progresses we see demonstrated that melancholia is not just loss but an entangled relationship with loss, as different community members and neighbors attend the funeral and Uncle Crip himself is figured in ghostly presence in the lines. The gathering of community members, too, shows that melancholia is an entangled relationship with each other.

As the somber spectacle of death enters the poet-narrator’s family circle, the custom and ritual of presentation is different from the day-to-day. At this point in the poem, there is a tension between the known and real and the remembered; a deliberate glossing and softening takes place in the front room: a funeral display where Hayden sees the proper, Christian named “[w]axwork Uncle Henry” as opposed to the later, parenthetically mentioned “murdered Uncle Crip” that Hayden knew and mourned; the display is complete with “floral pieces / in the front room where / the Christmas tree had stood” and there is a replacement of the old with what is presentable and, more precisely, “decent.” The idea of presentation—the compelling drive toward respectability and socially accepted behavior and norms—is part of the pressures of propriety and judgment that Hayden struggled with and which parts of his community imposed. There is a need to amend, to direct energies in ways that could be broadly recognized as dignified and worthy living and away from anything which could besmirch that, in part reflecting the need for respectability in the face of racial judgment and perceived difference.

For a young Hayden, this moment of personal loss is keenly felt and continues the work of affective formation found in the previous elegy. It is during this loss that the particular social dynamics and affective structures of Hayden’s Paradise Valley community are revealed. Hayden writes of “Mister Hong of the / Chinese Lantern” appearing at the funeral in grief for the dead. For those unfamiliar with the racial and ethnic make-up of Paradise Valley prior to the Great Depression, his presence as a non-black might surprise those anticipating only African American figures. Other racial and ethnic groups, the poet shows here and elsewhere, live and make up the community. At the Chinese Lantern restaurant of Mr. Hong, for example, Hayden’s aunt “as waitress queened it / Nights.” Figured as a restaurant owner here, Mr. Hong would have experienced other losses as well, especially after World War II. Former restaurant owner James Cookie, for example, shared his painful memories, “Cookie’s Place was quite prominent at one

time. We had been in business for 26 years. Our place was open 24-hours and we would gross \$1,000 every night. We were never held up once in all those years. When we left in 1963, we were just about the last ones to go. Now I hate to go over there because it brings back memories.”²³⁷ Losses such as this add to and intensify the melancholic preoccupation with the loss of Crip here.

The melancholic preoccupation with the loss of Uncle Crip defines the way that the lines unfold and open up. The elegy continues and ends:

Beautiful, our neighbors
Murmured; he would be proud.
Is it mahogany?
Mahogany—I’d heard
the victrola voice of

dead Bert Williams
talk-sing that word as macabre
music played, chilling
me. Uncle Crip
had laughed and laughed.

Certain words—here “mahogany”—take the poet-narrator to other places of memory; in this case, Hayden remembers being initiated to that word by a Bert Williams song. Hayden flits the song in and enriches this site of memory further with the kind of performances that once took place in the valley. As Peggy Moore remembers, “No Negro musician worth the *salt in his bread* would ever think of coming to Detroit City without visiting the ‘Valley.’ And it was there that you would find giants like Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Lionel Hampton, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, McKinney’s Cotton Pickers, Louis Armstrong, and all the other Hep Cats...”²³⁸ The song Hayden remembers is likely the hit song and one of the best-selling at the time, “The Moon Shines on the Moonshine,” recorded in 1919 and dealing with Prohibition, another moment of judgment and exclusion. The opening stanza of the song reads:

The Mahogany is dusty,
All the pipes are very rusty,
And the good, old-fashioned musty,
Doesn't musty anymore.

This is a playful song about the illicit behavior of alcohol distilling, making “moonshine” while the moon shines. More word play abounds as the song closes:

So, mister, if you please,
Don't let nobody sneeze,
Up where the moon shines
On the moonshine, so still-ily
How sad and still-ily!

According to a *Detroit Free Press* article, “[t]he valley burgeoned in the early 30’s along and around Adams and St. Antoine shortly before, after—and some because of—the legalization of whiskey in 1933.” “The Valley was open 24 hours a day,” continues the article, “as were its restaurants, gambling houses and the after hour clubs where the best whiskey in town, legal and illegal flowed steadily for 25 cents an ounce.”²³⁹ When black musicians performed elsewhere in Detroit, at “the Greystone Ballroom or the Michigan Theater or any of a dozen other big white-only nightclubs or gathering places...they were only welcome there during show time.”²⁴⁰ Instead of staying at the downtown hotels where they were not welcome, these black performers stayed in the black hotels in the valley, which included, the *Dewey*, the *Biltmore*, and the *Norwood*, “best known for its shows staged on a revolving floor in the Hotel’s Club Plantation.”²⁴¹

Bert Williams was a popular black Vaudeville performer who regularly played minstrel parts in blackface. While a widely successful and very popular stage actor, Williams always remained on the social periphery because of the racist treatment and segregation of his time. Hayden takes us back to that moment by recalling the old way of playing music on the phonograph: “victrola voice of / dead Bert Williams / talk-sing that word as macabre / music played...” Interestingly, this memory comes together through the space of Detroit on another level. It was in Detroit, on February 27, 1922, that Williams, sick with neuritis and pneumonia, collapsed while performing. The audience thought it part of his comic performance and they responded with laughter. Williams reportedly commented, “That’s a nice way to die—they was laughing when I made my last exit.”²⁴² He returned to his home in New York but his health faded fast and on March 2 he died at 47, leaving the public shocked. Hayden taps into the tragicomic aspects from Williams’s story and teases it out here with Uncle Crip, who is presented as a crude waxwork figure of Uncle Henry, a false memory to the original. The poet closes with Uncle Crip as he “laughed and laughed.”

The death of Uncle Crip becomes a “local site” where Hayden can “direct the complex swirl of emotions.”²⁴³ Flatley explains, “Through the articulation of a subjective experience of loss with a collective one, the affective map facilitates the transformation of depressive disengagement into an (at least splenetic and at best actually hopeful) interest in the social and political histories and processes that lie at the origins of one’s losses” which “opens up the space for...an antidepressive melancholia.”²⁴⁴ In Hayden’s case, new space is opened up by “show[ing] one how one’s situation is experienced collectively by a community, a heretofore unarticulated community of melancholics.”²⁴⁵ Melancholia through affective mapping becomes a positive because it shows that one is not alone and shares an experience. Here, Hayden is joined by a mourning Mister Hong, a parenthetical queening Auntie, and murmuring neighbors. What Hayden is showing us here with this diversity is that “[w]hat brings this world together...is not any kind of essential racial identity but a set of emotional experiences.”²⁴⁶ Rather than racially essentialized subjects, “we become the subjects that we are by the structuring of our affective attachments.”²⁴⁷ The knowledge that is produced there is that this is a broader circle of mourning. It is not one individual’s but that of a plural community. This collective ritual of mourning becomes an opening up, a mechanism for Hayden to become interested in and reflect on the world (“Is it mahogany? / Mahogany—I’d heard / the victrola voice of / dead Bert Williams / talk-sing that word...”)

Indeed, the death of Uncle Crip surfaces the abiding need of residents to reach beyond the immediateness of individual circumscribed lives and perhaps be guided, in a sense, beyond the tangible and material. In the figure of Madam Artelia, a psychic medium the poet-narrator visits

with this mother and aunt, there is an amalgamation of the diverse racial, spiritual, and cultural qualities of the community. Addressing her within his verse, Hayden wonders what she can evoke “from the spirit place of your ghostly home / of the oh-oriental wonders there— / of the fate, luck, surprises, gifts / awaiting us out here?” In such a place “there,” a home of “oh-oriental wonders,” emphasizing the other that is taken as wondrous and spiritual here, there remain none of the human absolutes and impermeable boundaries between social groups. And, in hopefully imagining that beyond, the poet-narrator wonders what stands “awaiting us out here” and is interested in his world.

The elegy starts off with a question, which conjures forth images in response. It brings in more visitations from ghosts through the figure of Madam Artelia who leads a séance to receive spirit communications from Uncle Crip and conveys them to Hayden’s aunt and mother. Hayden then moves to a description of her that is striking in its simultaneous contrasts and coherence of traditions:

... Oh, Madam,
part Seminole and confidante
 (“Born with a veil over my face”)
of all our dead, how clearly you
materialize before the eye

of memory—your AfroIndian features,
Gypsy dress, your silver crucifix
and manycolored beads. I see
again your waitingroom, with its wax
bouquets, its plaster Jesus of the Sacred Heart.

She is an indeterminate and mixed figure. Madam Artelia is, indeed, a fantastically realized mixture of all: She is described as part Seminole and, within the same line to convey a well-coursed rhythm, confidante as well. Hayden follows this with her parenthetical, haunting mention of being “[b]orn with a veil over my face” that adds to the mystery and elusiveness of her character. This veil, in particular, masks the fundamentally defining quality of her face. As a psychic medium, she retains distinctiveness while, in a restrictive and singular sense, not being overly definitive, enabling her to attend all mourners and help them approach their dead. The veil, then, does not encumber her sight, the reader soon understands, but enhances her perceptions beyond the typical.

Madam Artelia is figured as this bridging figure who connects “the spirit place your ghostly home” to the here of Paradise Valley. As such she is a figure of openness and possibility who exists in contrast to the isolation and closure of death. She is a “guide” who is summoned to speak by others. She leads and directs others on a journey. There is a sense of the assuredness of the spirit place—“ghostly home”—and more of the unexpected and unknown in the here and now—“of the fate, luck, surprises, gifts / awaiting us out here?” Importantly, she is a mixed figure: “Oh, Madam, / part Seminole and confidante / (‘Born with a veil over my face’) / of all our dead, how clearly you / materialize before the eye.” She is part native and also part black, though this is not made explicit at first. She is described as a “confidante” and then in parentheses in the next line (“Born with a veil over my face.’)” This phrase conjures W.E.B Du Bois’s troubling formulation of “double consciousness” for black Americans. He famously

writes that “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”²⁴⁸ Her distinctiveness and also indistinctiveness lend her character an ambiguity that serves a purpose. This bridging by Madam Artelia functions on more than one register—she is a bridging figure between the ghostly world and the living world; she is also a figure who, while born with a veil, is able to make her double-consciousness something that enhances her awareness of a common experience and consciousness, and she uses this consciousness to serve community—“confidante / ... / of all our dead.” Indeed, her double-consciousness becomes a gift of second sight. She is a figure who enables others to “excee[d] and expan[d] the personal or subjective out to the historical and collective.”²⁴⁹

And it is through her that the young poet-narrator is able to gain discerning sight: “how clearly you / materialize before the eye of memory” and “I see / again your waitingroom.” So much so that the poet-narrator is transported into the past as present and presence with the lines:

I watch blue smoke of incense curl
 from a Buddha’s lap as I wait with Ma
 and Auntie among your nervous clients.
 You greet us, smiling, lay your hand
 in blessing on my head, then lead

the others into a candlelit room
 I may not enter. She went into a trance,
 Auntie said afterward, and spirits
 talked, changing her voice to suit
 their own. And Crip came.

Happy yes I am happy here,
 he told us; dying’s not death. Do not grieve.
 Remembering, Auntie began to cry
 and poured herself a glass of gin.
 Didn’t sound a bit like Crip, Ma snapped.

Madam Artelia’s presence is a collectivizing presence—she gathers both the living and the dead in her waiting and candlelit rooms. In the poem, she brings about a feeling of collectivity. Madam Artelia also, as was Freud’s and Du Bois’s aim according to Flatley, “make[s] cognitively accessible the experiences of depression and despair in their local, subjective, emotional sense, to allow for a self-analysis of one’s own emotional life so that one may begin to exert some agency in relation to it... In this work, too, the flexibility of double consciousness and the veil permit the articulation of different registers of existence, connecting the subjective and the collective, the emotional and the political, and the present and the past.”²⁵⁰

All this is commentary on the peculiar state of otherness that, as an artist, Hayden intends to reveal and speak about—the existence of, in Hayden’s words, those “heroic and ‘baroque’ people... [the] outsiders, pariahs, losers.”²⁵¹ In much of Hayden’s work, this intended purpose and the experience of the spiritual complement each other, intimately working toward the same end of, as he put it, “affirm[ing] the humane, the universal, the potentially divine in the human

creature.”²⁵² On the level of the spiritual, there prevails, in the poet-narrator’s mind, the possibility for such transcendence from the mundane qualities of life to illumination.

Here, Hayden deepens that entangled relationship with loss and each other, showing the “spectral drama whereby the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other.”²⁵³ In this case, Auntie experiences that with the ghostly emptiness of her husband Crip (“Happy yes I am happy here, / he told us... / ... / Didn’t sound a bit like Crip, Ma snapped”). Through the central and collectivizing figure of Madam Artelia, Hayden taps into melancholia here to tap further into the “social origins of our emotional lives...from which we can see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces.”²⁵⁴

Madam Artelia helps in the process of melancholizing, in which Auntie and Ma are engaged. Flatley writes, “[M]elancholizing is something one *does*: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge.”²⁵⁵ For the authors Flatley considers, melancholizing produces “the knowledge of the historical origins of their melancholias, and thus at the same time of the others with whom these melancholias might be shared. This knowledge, an ‘affective map’...is what, for them and for their readers, makes possible the conversion of a depressive melancholia into a way to be interested in the world.”²⁵⁶ The melancholizing in this elegy, the midway point in the sequence, puts us in a position to gain knowledge of the collective nature of this melancholia and keeps us interested in the world which will be demonstrated in Elegy V, with the questions about the missing figures in the community.

Elegy V, the next elegy, underscores my argument about the movement of the larger poem. Here, Hayden repeatedly asks, in various forms, Where is so-and-so? This repeated questioning is how Hayden invites in these ghosts and is able to turn a potentially isolating condition like melancholia into “a mode of vital connection.”²⁵⁷ This dynamic connectivity and collectivity was once present in Paradise Valley, as former black residents attest. Peggy Moore describes the vibrant social life of the space:

On weekends, especially during the summer months, taxis ran almost non-stop between the train and bus stations transporting travelers and visitors into the city. Some to visit friends and family, and others who came just to relax and have a *good time*... At night, cocktail lounges, dance halls, showbars, and restaurants all came alive with dazzling lights, swing bands, sultry singers, dancers doing the *Black Bottom*, *Jitterbub*, or *Hulley Gulley*, and jazz and blues artist[s] all on center stage (See Figure 8).

Here Hayden is working on raising a collective consciousness despite the rupture and fragmentation resulting from urban renewal:

And Belle the classy dresser, where is she,
who changed her frocks three times a day?
Where’s Nora, with her laugh, her comic flair,
stagestruck Nora waiting for her chance?
Where’s fast Iola, who so loved to dance
she left her sickbed one last time to whirl
in silver at The Palace till she fell?

Where's mad Miss Alice, who ate from garbage cans?
Where's snuffdipping Lucy, who played us 'chunes'
on her guitar? Where's Hattie? Where's Melissabelle?
Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell.

Where's Jim, Watusi prince and Good Old Boy,
who with a joke went off to fight in France?
Where's Tump the defeated artist, for meals or booze
daubing with quarrelsome reds, disconsolate blues?
Where's Les the huntsman? Tough Kid Chocolate, where
is he? Where's dapper Jess? Where's Stomp the shell-
shocked, clowning for us in parodies of war?
Where's taunted Christopher, sad queen of night?
And Ray, who cursing crossed the color line?
Where's gentle Brother Davis? Where's dopefiend Mel?
Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell.

The poet-narrator acutely resurrects a portion of his childhood community. By naming members and their activity in life ("fast Iola, who so loved to dance / she left her sickbed one last time to whirl / in silver at The Palace till she fell"), he keenly evokes some quality of their memory and spirit. Yet, despite the former vitality that the reader comes to appreciate, these figures are relegated to "vanished rooms" and "dead streets." Dead streets are in sharp contrast to the once vibrant, action-filled, and people-filled streets. As one resident remembered his street, "This whole street used to be some kind of night club or bar. If you came to Detroit from another town and the cab driver asked where you wanted to go, every black person would say Paradise Valley."²⁵⁸

In an urban ghetto like Paradise Valley, all space is occupied, in one form or another. It is possible for such communities to be restricted, revealed and forgotten with disregard and impunity. But, characteristic of the poet, even in this starkly revealed scene and restricted space there is often a commingling: of life and death, celebration and spectacle, joy and misery. In a manner not unlike Madam Artelia, he lets these voices speak through him. And, most keenly, the poet-narrator closes the stanza by turning the reader's gaze to the spaces of rooms and streets so that they might, in a very visible way, speak for their shared history. By pointing to these figures and spaces that are often wholly neglected and abandoned, Hayden's work is distinctly part of his desire to affirm.

In his recalling of the long-passed community, Hayden extends this spiritual communion by naming and calling out those that preceded. And the reader finds another mixture, this time of the sacred and profane, the ugly and the beautiful that is negotiated from (and in) their living. These are difficult, beautiful, glamorous, and heart-wrenching stories that we catch in glimpses. Hayden is a poet of the sacred and the profane. Hayden points to vanished rooms and dead streets ("Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell") and thus locates the problem here in urban renewal and its consequences.

It is just that problem that prevents the poet from locating any of these figures, and he is instead left with asking after them. By asking the question "where is" over and over again, Hayden shows the lack of assurance offered to these figures because of the historical context of urban renewal. There is no answer because there is no place to put these people, no place to



Figure 8: The dancers from Club 666, Mattye Gaither, Frankie Wyche, and Maybelle Moore.

linger and settle into an answer and establish oneself, and so the questions continue to be asked and we continue to seek answers. He unsettles our sense of place yet while doing so, in the serial asking of “where is,” he is also at the same time “peopling” this place with ghostly others, making place more anchored by the presence or absence of people and collectivity rather than institutions and buildings. The locating question thus dis- and relocates place.

Rather than let this become a depressive exercise, however, Hayden makes it into a moment of common consciousness. Articulating “this common consciousness facilitates the recognition by readers of the collective nature of existence in the ‘shades of the

prison house’ allowing for at least the beginning of an escape from the ‘death and isolation.’”²⁵⁹ “Elegies for Paradise Valley” in this moment is writing against death, isolation, and fragmentation. Rather than being torn asunder by urban renewal, the “where is” and “where’s” weave these figures together as a group—no longer “our kind” and distinctly and diversely peopled—in a striking tableau that renders a moment of history in literature. Notably, these figures do not speak themselves but bear witness with their absence. Instead, Hayden calls on the witnessing of rooms and streets. In so doing he “exceeds and expands the personal or subjective out to the historical and collective.”²⁶⁰

The word “let” of the final lines of each stanza effectively activates the searching/questioning function of the word “where.” The process of melancholizing has led us to this moment. “Let” is a catalyst, giving an opportunity for this witnessing to happen. It is both introducing an action and acting as a warning, saying in effect, just let these streets and rooms begin to talk and they will tell you a story... The word “let” also frees those unheard and invisible stories from confinement to adjust the hegemonic story of the postwar city, giving unrestrained expression to a broader mix of stories and emotions.

The sixth elegy begins:

Of death. Of loving too:
 Oh sweet sweet jellyroll:
 so the sinful hymned it while
 the churchfolk loured.

Hayden’s elegies are writing out of and against death, isolation, and fragmentation, as he opens this elegy with the line, “Of death. Of loving too.” He opens the eighth and final with a variation on that line, “Of death, of loving...” that shows even more connectivity through the grammar of the line—the uniting of the two separate sentences, two distinct statements and ideas become

merged into one line and one statement and idea. Here, melancholizing has brought us to a place not of death and isolation but death and love. Interestingly, the poet starts off with the preposition, “Of,” repeated twice. And then the next line continues the alliteration with “Oh.” There is a simple, identificatory start here that gives a sense of continuity, fluidity, and connection. That is further enhanced by the use of colons here to increase continuity and flow. Here, the “sinners,” the ordinary people and anti-heroes, are out dancing. As the former proprietor of a local pool hall painted the scene, “It used to look like a carnival on the weekends. You could go from club to club and after three in the morning, you’d have the thrill of listening to a jam session.”²⁶¹ Dancing to the “sweet sweet jellyroll” brings together in one space again if not in one action both the “sinners” (“so the sinful hymned it...”) and the “saints” (“while / the churchfolk loured.”) of Elegy II and who will reappear at the close in Elegy VIII.

The elegy continues most personally:

I scrounged for crumbs:
I yearned to touch the choirlady’s hair,
I wanted Uncle Crip

to kiss me, but he danced
with me instead;
we Balled-the-Jack
to Jellyroll

Morton’s brimstone
piano on the phonograph,
laughing, shaking the gasolier
a later stillness dimmed.

The young poet-narrator in the process of affective formation and testing emblemizes this yearning for connection. The three verbs of this opening stanza give and strengthen that sense, underscored by the repeated “I” statements. Hayden does not get his wish fulfilled but he is able to dance and share that intimacy.

This intense desire for connection is put more broadly in the next elegy, Elegy VII. What Hayden is keen on doing in that elegy in particular, but all the elegies more broadly, is stitch together a common consciousness around the affective experience of second-class citizenship and poverty. Recognizing the dynamic conditions of community, Hayden in this elegy underscores the equal potentials for expansion and continuity as well as regression and conflict. He, in many ways, deliberately identifies and explores the contrasts and contradictions within his community of people and place. In the penultimate elegy, the reader witnesses the occasions of tension and harmony that develop between already marginalized groups. The poet-narrator elaborates upon these dynamics with the example of gypsies as the other:

Our parents warned us: Gypsies
kidnap you. And we must never play
with Gypsy children: Gypsies
all got lice in their hair.

Their queen was dark as Cleopatra
in the Negro History Book. Their king's
sinister arrogance flashed fire
like the diamonds on his dirty hands.

Quite suddenly he was dead,
his tribe clamoring in grief.
They take on bad as Colored Folks,
Uncle Crip allowed. Die like us too.

Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies:
pornographers of gaudy otherness:
aliens among the alien: thieves,
carriers of sickness: like us like us.

The figure of the gypsy is another compelling emblem keenly applied by Hayden, symbolic of the various critical crossings occurring here. In the beginning the poet-narrator writes of the judgment the gypsies endure, the lessons passed from parent to child (“Our parents warned us: Gypsies / kidnap you. And we must never play / with Gypsy children: Gypsies / all got lice in their hair.”) to illustrate the tendency for groups, regardless of socioeconomic position, to distinguish an “other” for themselves and create hierarchies and walls that perpetuate misunderstandings.

Yet, effectively structured along colons that figuratively allow for greater movement, the verse progresses by degrees toward a greater sense of commonalities and understanding between the two stigmatized groups, African Americans and gypsies. Both are visually, rhetorically, and otherwise positioned and identified as foreign and diseased; indeed, “[t]heir queen was dark as Cleopatra / in the Negro History Book” and, in the end, there are “like us like us.” The “us” used here begins to conceptually open up to include those beyond African Americans. In the sense of grief, suffering, and finally death, particularly, Uncle Crip concludes in the poem that “[t]hey take on bad as Colored Folks, /...Die like us too.” The shared desperation and despair of grief, then, is an anti-depressive melancholia, existing as a traversable bridge where a connection is made that makes death non-isolating and a moment of “us.” This final outcome, despite the fact that they yet stand apart as distinct entities “Colored Folks” versus “Gypsies,” warrants understanding. And, it is this final note of traversed social boundaries that “Elegies for Paradise Valley” ultimately strives for.

Despite this hopeful note, beginning with the 1930s and 1940s, the matter of poverty and isolation in the urban struggle for equality, survival and space was set in startling relief, becoming even more acute. The neighborhood setting became one of the most “hotly contested arenas of Detroit life.”²⁶² The city’s homebuilding industry was hard hit during the Great Depression and the Second World War that followed as labor and materials were directed to wartime productions and needs.²⁶³ During the wartime housing shortage, the steadily increasing African American population looked for homes wherever they were available, often beyond black ghettos. Hostilities soon became apparent as whites violently tried to prevent African Americans from areas like the Northeast Side and African Americans collectively defended themselves and fought back.²⁶⁴ Wartime racial tensions were evident across the country with race riots in Harlem; Mexican and African American zoot-suiters under attack by whites in Los

Angeles and Chicago; and, in these tensions, Detroit was not unique. Representative of the volatile atmosphere, a 1942 headline of *Life* magazine declared, “Detroit is Dynamite. It can either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S.”²⁶⁵

Hayden returns to the personal with the eighth and final elegy, writing:

Of death, of loving,
of sin and hellfire too.
Unsaved, old Christians
gossiped; pitched

from the gamblingtable—
Lord have mercy on
his wicked soul—
face foremost into hell

We’d dance there, Uncle
Crip and I
for though I spoke
my pieces well in Sunday School,

I knew myself (precocious
in the ways of guilt
and secret pain)
the devil’s own rag babydoll.

Here he attends again to the all the faces and dimensions of community, gathering it all up as part of the greater totality—“Of death, of loving, / of sin and hellfire too.” Any sort of redemption that is possible is not coming from religious orthodoxy, figured here as narrow-minded and gossiping “Unsaved, old Christians.” Rather it comes from a broader and gentler human spirituality. He paints a gambling scene that might have taken place in the valley. As one resident put it, there was gambling “all over the place.” He shared, “One man had a club upstairs over the Turf Bar and it was open 24 hours a day. They played poker and black jack.”²⁶⁶ Hayden channels this voice and the range of voices into the lines, as in interjecting line “— / Lord have mercy on / his wicked soul—”

In closing, I would like to return to the broader context of these poems and the larger questions and implications about African American history and literature and their gaps, absences, and questions of genre. Hayden provides us an itinerary of Detroit’s Paradise Valley that gets at the origins of racial melancholia where modernity touches African Americans and other non-whites in Paradise Valley; that is, through the elegy and a melancholic preoccupation with loss, Hayden is able to write about the experience and impacts of urban renewal in a way that gets past the official reports and impersonal statistics. This itinerary also describes and structures affective attachments, drawing together a larger sociality of melancholics that breaks the isolation of melancholia and registers a way to be interested in the world. Hayden uses the elegy and melancholia, instead of epic, then, to invite ghosts instead of heroes. It is a way to accept ordinary people, the non-heroic, and also to accept himself. It is how he is able to embrace

abjection, his own as well as others, and find a place for himself as a poet who is not heroic – a poet as anti-hero.

¹ George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” Landscape Journal 26.1 (2007): 17.

² Dick Gregory, From the Back of the Bus, (New York: Avon Books, 1966) 64.

³ Robert Hayden, “Homage to the Empress of the Blues,” in Collected Poems, ed. Frederick Glaysher, (New York: Liveright, 1985) 32.

⁴ Lipsitz, 18.

⁵ Otherness and outsider status was a looming threat for many in the Cold War Era—Communists, blacks, and gays and lesbians, among others.

⁶ See Gayatri Spivak’s influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

⁷ The foremost aspect of the modern epic is its comprehensiveness, Joseph Conte reminds us in his essay “Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem.” “[I]nto the late twentieth century,” he writes, “the epic form still demands a complete portrait of the culture (not an excerpt), or a whole system of belief (not a single idea)” (35). As Conte explains, the sequential or serial form in poetry “represents a radical alternative to the epic model. The series describes the complicated and often desultory manner in which one thing follows another. Its modular form—in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination—distinguishes it from the thematic development or narrative progression that characterize other types of the long poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method. The epic is capable of creating a world through the gravitational attraction that melds diverse materials into a unified whole. But the series describes an expanding and heterodox universe whose centrifugal force encourages dispersal. The epic goal has always been encompassment, summation; but the series is an ongoing process of accumulation. In contrast to the epic demand for completion, the series remains essentially and deliberately incomplete” (36).

⁸ Gwendolyn Brooks, Blacks, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 447.

⁹ Brooks, Blacks, 454-6.

¹⁰ Carlo Rotella, October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 7.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, eds. Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindborg, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 116.

¹² Michael Denning, The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century, (New York: Verso, 1997) 35.

¹³ This need is reflected in the magazine culture, popular literature and bestsellers at the time. Indeed, a compelling “timeline” of such cross-racial curiosity and apprehension might start in 1943 with the popular *Negro Digest* series “If I Were A Negro,” where prominent whites imagined themselves as African Americans, and end in 1960 with the publication of John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me, where Griffin, a white man, darkens his skin in the 1950s and tries to experience what it is to be black. For a cogent discussion of “If I Were a Negro,” see C.K. Doreski’s Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric in the Public Sphere. Also on this timeline would be such works as Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro.” Mailer documented the phenomenon of young whites from the 1920s to 1940s who so strongly

identified with jazz music that they proceeded to adopt black culture—dress, language, music—and went to great lengths to only associate with black people. This group was influential to the later Beat Generation of the 1950s.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior*, (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), 81-2.

¹⁵ Alexander, 81-2.

¹⁶ See Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

¹⁷ Robert B. Stepto, "I Thought I Knew These People: Richard Wright and the Afro-American Literary Tradition," in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, eds. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 195.

¹⁸ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part Two*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1996) 142-3.

¹⁹ As quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1914-1967, I Dream a World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 146.

²⁰ Rampersad, 146.

²¹ Rampersad, 146.

²² Rampersad, 148.

²³ As quoted in Rampersad, 147.

²⁴ Rampersad, 151. After Hughes's death from cancer on May 22, 1967, his house in Harlem with the Harpers was given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission. East 127th Street itself was renamed "Langston Hughes Place." For a poet troubled by the serial ways blacks Americans were dispossessed in New York City, holding a place of such permanence is bittersweet.

²⁵ Among others, see Meta DuEwa Jones, John Lowney and Robert O'Brien Hokanson.

²⁶ Along with a central focus on bebop, for instance, John Lowney evinces an interest in Hughes's language of geography, mentioning at the start of his piece the "geography of broken promises" in Hughes's work with "Dream within a dream / Our dream deferred" (99). Lowney later writes that the poet "maps a complex geography of rapidly changing Harlem cultural life" in *Montage* with "various public images of Harlem" and "a geography of proper names (of people, places, events, and so forth)" (117). He closes by arguing that Hughes transforms the expressive "nonsense" of bebop "into a language of utopian possibility" (Lowney 127). In another example, Robert O'Brien Hokanson adds to his mix a consideration of Hughes's "distinct version of African American modernism," which he claims Hughes achieves by "bring[ing] the dynamics of jazz and the black vernacular tradition to the broad canvas of the long poem—the form that became the ultimate measure of poetic achievement for a generation of modernist poets" (131). In his closing, Hokanson argues that Hughes's poem "differs from some more "traditional" modernist long poems (such as *The Wasteland*, Pound's *Cantos*, or William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*) in the particular structure it adopts and in the governing aesthetic principles of that structure" as well as the "the more self-consciously intellectual writing of such African American modernists as [Ralph] Ellison and [Melvin] Tolson" due to a more "popular grounding" in jazz and black vernacular (131-2).

²⁷ In her article, "Amiri Baraka's Wise Why's Y's: Lineages of the Afro-Modernist Epic," Kathy Lou Schultz claims for Baraka's poem the status of "Afro-Modernist epic" that is "part of a tradition that includes Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965), and Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961), as well as Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Anniad" from

Annie Allen (1949)” (26). My interest in Hughes’s work as an attempt at modernist epic is distinct from Schultz’s. My concern lies in the important and immediate social and literary contexts in post-war America, while Schultz draws on “the contexts of Classical epic traditions, early twentieth-century American modernist long poems, and the griot traditions of West Africa” (25) for Baraka’s poem in order to claim for it a “diasporic worldview” (28). In addition, Raymond Patterson begins to limn a long literary history of African American epics in “African American Epic Poetry: The Long Foreshadowing.”

²⁸ See also Anne Cheng’s provocative scholarship reevaluating race and the “clean” modernist surface through the figure of Josephine Baker. Cheng’s work is an important resuscitation of race and ethnicity as a part of modernism.

²⁹ Langston Hughes, “Wooing the Muse” in *The Early Simple Stories*, ed. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 50.

³⁰ Michael Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 14.

³¹ Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 113.

³² The denial of property and ownership was one aspect that fueled the riots of 1935 and 1943.

³³ *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935*, (New York: Arno Press, 1936) 63.

³⁴ Martha Biondi, *To Stand and to Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 113.

³⁵ Biondi, 112.

³⁶ Biondi, 113.

³⁷ Biondi, 114.

³⁸ Biondi, 60.

³⁹ Zipp, 94.

⁴⁰ As quoted in Zipp, 97.

⁴¹ As quoted in Zipp, 101.

⁴² Zipp, 102.

⁴³ As quoted in Zipp, 74.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Zipp, 82-3.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Zipp, 91.

⁴⁶ Zipp, 77.

⁴⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 114-5.

⁴⁸ Zipp, 362.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, 115.

⁵⁰ Zipp, 118.

⁵¹ Zipp, 120.

⁵² As quoted in Zipp, 398.

⁵³ Biondi, 123.

⁵⁴ As quoted in Zipp, 121.

⁵⁵ As quoted in Biondi, 129.

⁵⁶ As quoted in Biondi, 129.

⁵⁷ Biondi, 129.

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- ⁵⁸ Biondi, 129.
- ⁵⁹ Biondi, 129.
- ⁶⁰ Zipp, 122.
- ⁶¹ Zipp, 122.
- ⁶² Zipp, 119.
- ⁶³ Zipp, 119.
- ⁶⁴ Zipp, 119.
- ⁶⁵ As quoted in Biondi, 131.
- ⁶⁶ Langston Hughes, "These Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics" in Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs, ed. R. Baxter Miller, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 36.
- ⁶⁷ Langston Hughes, "Ways and Means," in The Early Simple Stories, ed. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 128.
- ⁶⁸ Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, "Preface to *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*," in Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs, ed. R. Baxter Miller, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 486.
- ⁶⁹ June Jordan, "Memoranda toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine" in Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan, eds. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles, (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005) 303.
- ⁷⁰ Bernstein, 11.
- ⁷¹ Bernstein, 14-5.
- ⁷² Bernstein, 14.
- ⁷³ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in The Eisenstein Reader, ed. Richard Taylor, (London: British Film Institute, 1998) 38.
- ⁷⁴ Eisenstein, 38.
- ⁷⁵ Eisenstein, 39.
- ⁷⁶ As quoted in "Introduction," Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs, ed. R. Baxter Miller, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 4.
- ⁷⁷ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs, ed. R. Baxter Miller, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 32.
- ⁷⁸ Ted Gioia, The History of Jazz, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 94-5.
- ⁷⁹ Rampersad, 151. For more on the history of bebop, see Scott DeVaux's seminal work, The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History.
- ⁸⁰ Rampersad, 151.
- ⁸¹ George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," Landscape Journal 26.1 (2007): 17. Lipsitz writes, "African American artists and intellectuals have drawn fully on this spatial imaginary in a broad range of cultural expressions, from migration narratives that Farah Jasmine Griffin identifies as the core trope within black literature, music and art; to the celebration of the city street in the imagery and iconography of hip hop' and in the sites appropriated for graffiti writing, mural art, and break dancing."
- ⁸² Mary Oliver, A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry, (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1994) 24.
- ⁸³ Bernstein, 14.

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- ⁸⁴ Bernstein, 14.
- ⁸⁵ Daniel Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 191.
- ⁸⁶ Lipsitz, 11.
- ⁸⁷ Bernstein, 18.
- ⁸⁸ James Smethurst, The African American Roots of Modernism: from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011) 99.
- ⁸⁹ Thomas Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North, (New York: Random House, 2008) 185.
- ⁹⁰ Sugrue, 184.
- ⁹¹ Sugrue, 185.
- ⁹² Lipsitz, 11.
- ⁹³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s (New York: Routledge, 1994) 55.
- ⁹⁴ Lipsitz, 11.
- ⁹⁵ Lipsitz, 11.
- ⁹⁶ Lipsitz, 17.
- ⁹⁷ Langston Hughes, “A Toast to Harlem” in The Early Simple Stories, ed. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 39.
- ⁹⁸ Brooks, Report from Part Two, 142-3.
- ⁹⁹ Arnold R. Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 21-2.
- ¹⁰⁰ Why the wide difference in numbers? Five hundred people are a lot of people. And, indeed, this isn’t the only imprecise population tally of the residents of the Mecca: in John Bartlow Martin’s infamous *Harper’s Magazine* article conflicting estimates abound. For examples, see John Bartlow Martin, “The Strangest Place in Chicago,” *Harper’s Magazine* (Dec. 1950): 89. Brooks herself draws attention to this imprecision by quoting from Martin’s piece in one of her opening epigraphs. Something is lurking there in this neglect. It is communicating, in essence, that this is just a mass of black people.
- ¹⁰¹ Hirsch, 22.
- ¹⁰² *College of Architecture*. Illinois Institute of Technology, n.d. Web. 23 December 2013. <<http://www.iit.edu/arch/about/>>.
- ¹⁰³ *Crown Hall*. Illinois Institute of Technology, n.d. Web. 23 December 2013. <http://www.iit.edu/arch/crown_hall/>.
- ¹⁰⁴ Daniel Bluestone, “Chicago’s Mecca Flat Blues,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 57.4 (1998): 383. Even a casual reader will notice that I rely primarily on the work of Bluestone for much of the history of the Mecca. He remains one of the most important sources, and often the only source, on the Mecca’s rich and complex history to date.
- ¹⁰⁵ Bluestone, 391.
- ¹⁰⁶ Bluestone details the residents: “The Mecca accommodated carpenters, electricians, house painters, dry-goods, railroad, and grocery clerks, as well as clerks in insurance and other business offices, traveling salesmen, egg inspectors, day laborers, several bartenders, waiters, cooks, tailors, bookkeepers, a typesetter, machinists, a butcher, a packing-house foreman, an architect, a physician, an optician, a musician, locomotive engineers and firemen, railroad and elevator conductors, music teachers, a watchman, a postal clerk, a glass cutter, a freight checker, janitors,

a real estate agent, a coachman, a teamster, a decorator, a retired capitalist, and a frog dealer” (391).

¹⁰⁷ Bluestone, 391.

¹⁰⁸ Bluestone, 391.

¹⁰⁹ Bluestone, 391.

¹¹⁰ Bluestone, 392.

¹¹¹ Bluestone, 392.

¹¹² Bluestone writes, “There were porters, foundry molders, machinists, upholsterers, tanners, tailors, mattress, mantle, shade, dress, and cigar makers, butchers, bakers, cooks, laundresses, janitors, maids, bellboys, hairdressers, manicurists, day laborers, switchmen, steelworkers, musicians, chauffeurs, postal clerks, shipping clerks, and peddlers” (391).

¹¹³ Bluestone, 391.

¹¹⁴ Bluestone, 391.

¹¹⁵ As quoted in Bluestone, 402, footnote 33.

¹¹⁶ As quoted in Bluestone, 402, footnote 33.

¹¹⁷ Regardless, the movement from white to black residents happened before the race riots of July 1919 on Chicago’s South Side, during what would be called the Red Summer with race riots in over three dozen cities nationwide.

¹¹⁸ Hirsch, 20.

¹¹⁹ As quoted in Hirsch, 1.

¹²⁰ George E. Kent, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990) 213.

¹²¹ Frank London Brown, “Chicago’s Great Lady of Poetry,” *Negro Digest* 11.2 (1961): 55.

¹²² Brown, 55-6.

¹²³ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One*, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) 190.

¹²⁴ Kent, 155.

¹²⁵ While murders did take place in the Mecca, there is nothing to indicate that the death of young Pepita Smith is based on any particular event. However, regardless of whether Brooks is grounding the Pepita narrative thread in historical fact or in imagination, she is using this story to provide connections to historical, cultural and social spaces.

¹²⁶ Brooks, 190.

¹²⁷ Robin F. Bachin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 1.

¹²⁸ Bachin, 1.

¹²⁹ As quoted in Bachin, 1.

¹³⁰ Bachin, 2.

¹³¹ Bachin, 2.

¹³² Bachin, 6.

¹³³ Bachin, 17-19.

¹³⁴ Bachin, 6.

¹³⁵ Bachin, 8.

¹³⁶ Bachin, 16.

¹³⁷ Bachin, 8.

¹³⁸ Bachin, 9.

¹³⁹ Bachin, 10.

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- ¹⁴⁰ As quoted in Bachin, 198.
- ¹⁴¹ Bachin, 199.
- ¹⁴² Bachin, 200-1.
- ¹⁴³ Bachin, 200.
- ¹⁴⁴ Diana Fuss, The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 5.
- ¹⁴⁵ Jill Stoner, Toward a Minor Architecture, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012) 16.
- ¹⁴⁶ Stoner, 2.
- ¹⁴⁷ Stoner, 2.
- ¹⁴⁸ Stoner, 6-7.
- ¹⁴⁹ Notably, the phrase “the whiskey of our discontent” echoes “the winter of our discontent,” drawn from the opening line of William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* which later appeared in 1961 as the title of John Steinbeck’s final novel. Steinbeck’s novel, in particular, deals with a once aristocratic protagonist who tries to regain his wealth and status by abandoning his honesty and integrity.
- ¹⁵⁰ Stoner, 7.
- ¹⁵¹ Bluestone, 392.
- ¹⁵² Bluestone, 392.
- ¹⁵³ Bluestone, 392.
- ¹⁵⁴ Bluestone, 393.
- ¹⁵⁵ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁵⁶ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁵⁷ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁵⁸ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁵⁹ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁶⁰ Bluestone, 394.
- ¹⁶¹ Bluestone, 395.
- ¹⁶² Bluestone, 395.
- ¹⁶³ As quoted in Bluestone, 395.
- ¹⁶⁴ As quoted in Bluestone, 395.
- ¹⁶⁵ Bluestone, 382.
- ¹⁶⁶ Bluestone, 382.
- ¹⁶⁷ Bluestone, 382.
- ¹⁶⁸ Bluestone, 387.
- ¹⁶⁹ Bluestone, 392.
- ¹⁷⁰ Showing that the inner life of Mecca has long been in cultural conversation with the exterior life, Mecca inspired a local blues song entitled the “Mecca Flat Blues,” and many musicians recorded their own version of the song. In one collaboration Bluestone describes, between pianist and composer James “Jimmy” Blythe and jazz singer Priscilla Stewart, the performers “gave dramatic personae to the ‘Mecca Flat Man’ and the ‘Mecca Flat Woman,’ who led sensual and adulterous lives, causing no end of heartbreak to their partners. Local ‘extemporizing troubadours’ continually added episodes to the ‘Mecca Flat Blues,’ charting the ‘trials, tribulations, and tragedies’ of the residents. One observer speculated that if collected and printed the verses would ‘make a book’” (392).
- ¹⁷¹ Bluestone, 384-5.

¹⁷² Interestingly, Alfred is described in the poem as associated with architecture: “No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith. / But he (who might have been an architect) / can speak of Mecca... / ... / No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith. / But he (who might have been a poet-king) / can speak superbly of the line of Leopold. / The line of Leopold is thick with blackness...”

¹⁷³ D.H. Melhem, Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987) 173.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Alexander, “Introduction,” The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks, (New York: Library of America, 2005) xxiii.

¹⁷⁵ Bluestone, 395.

¹⁷⁶ Bluestone, 395.

¹⁷⁷ Bluestone, 396.

¹⁷⁸ Bluestone, 396.

¹⁷⁹ Bluestone, 396.

¹⁸⁰ Bluestone, 396.

¹⁸¹ Bluestone, 396.

¹⁸² Bluestone, 396.

¹⁸³ Bluestone, 397-8.

¹⁸⁴ Bluestone, 398.

¹⁸⁵ Bluestone, 399.

¹⁸⁶ Bluestone, 399.

¹⁸⁷ As quoted in Bluestone, 399.

¹⁸⁸ Bluestone, 399.

¹⁸⁹ Bluestone, 399.

¹⁹⁰ Bluestone, 401.

¹⁹¹ Bluestone, 401-2.

¹⁹² Bluestone, 382.

¹⁹³ Gwendolyn Brooks, “Review of *Selected Poems*,” Negro Digest 15.4 (1966): 51.

¹⁹⁴ Toni Jones, “The Great Black Strip,” Detroit Free Press, 7 January 1973, reprinted in Paradise Valley Days: A Photo Album Poetry Book of Black Detroit, 1930’s to 1950’s (Detroit: Black Writer’s Guild, Inc., 1998) 21.

¹⁹⁵ Robert Hayden, “The Poet and His Art: A Conversation,” in Collected Prose, ed. Frederick Glaysher, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984) 179.

¹⁹⁶ The story of the slave revolt aboard *La Amistad* was famously dramatized in the Hollywood movie “Amistad” (1997) directed by Steven Spielberg.

¹⁹⁷ Hayden, “The Poet and His Art: A Conversation,” 162-3.

¹⁹⁸ Hayden, “The Poet and His Art: A Conversation,” 139.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 49.

²⁰⁰ “Paradise Valley Marker,” Historic Sites in Detroit’s Racial History, n.p., n.d., Web, 11 April 2014. <<http://detroit1701.org/Paradise%20Valley%20Marker.html>>.

²⁰¹ Peggy A. Moore, “Paradise Valley,” in Paradise Valley Days: A Photo Album Poetry Book of Black Detroit, 1930’s to 1950’s (Detroit: Black Writer’s Guild, Inc., 1998) vi.

²⁰² Moore, vi.

²⁰³ Jones, 17.

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- ²⁰⁴ Jones, 17. Also, “Black Bottom” was the name given the area by the French, for its rich soil, and not for its later black residents. See Mark Binelli, Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis (New York: Picador, 2012) 20.
- ²⁰⁵ Jones, 17.
- ²⁰⁶ Jones, 19.
- ²⁰⁷ Hayden, “The Poet and His Art: A Conversation,” 141
- ²⁰⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, The Melancholy of Race (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) x.
- ²⁰⁹ Cheng, xi.
- ²¹⁰ Cheng, 8.
- ²¹¹ Cheng, 10.
- ²¹² Cheng, 10.
- ²¹³ Jonathan Flatley, Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 1.
- ²¹⁴ Flatley, 1.
- ²¹⁵ Flatley, 1.
- ²¹⁶ Flatley, 2.
- ²¹⁷ Flatley, 2.
- ²¹⁸ Flatley, 3.
- ²¹⁹ Omi and Winant, 55.
- ²²⁰ Sugrue, 23.
- ²²¹ Sugrue, 23.
- ²²² Joe T. Darden, Richard C. Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas, Detroit: Race and Uneven Development (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) 63.
- ²²³ Darden et al., 63-4.
- ²²⁴ Darden et al., 14.
- ²²⁵ Darden et al., 3.
- ²²⁶ Darden et al., 15.
- ²²⁷ Darden et al., 15.
- ²²⁸ Darden et al., 3.
- ²²⁹ Darden et al., 4.
- ²³⁰ Cheng, 13.
- ²³¹ Abdul JanMohamed, The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 8.
- ²³² Cheng, xi.
- ²³³ Cheng, xi.
- ²³⁴ Cheng, 14.
- ²³⁵ Sugrue, 38.
- ²³⁶ Sugrue, 37.
- ²³⁷ As quoted in Jones, 20.
- ²³⁸ Moore, vi.
- ²³⁹ Jones, 17.
- ²⁴⁰ Jones, 17.
- ²⁴¹ Jones, 17.
- ²⁴² As quoted in Tim Brooks, Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919 (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 141.

²⁴³ Flatley, 111.

²⁴⁴ Flatley, 106. Importantly, in his discussion of aesthetics and melancholia Flatley does not make his aesthetic practice into something “cathartic, compensatory, nor redemptive” (5) as is often the case in such discussions.

²⁴⁵ Flatley, 4.

²⁴⁶ Flatley, 122.

²⁴⁷ Flatley, 4.

²⁴⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) 2. The rest of that quote continues, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

²⁴⁹ Flatley, 123.

²⁵⁰ Flatley, 122.

²⁵¹ Robert Hayden, “A ‘Romantic Realist’” in Collected Prose, ed. Frederick Glaysher, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984) 117.

²⁵² Hayden, “A ‘Romantic Realist,’” 120.

²⁵³ Flatley, 10.

²⁵⁴ Flatley, 3.

²⁵⁵ Flatley, 2.

²⁵⁶ Flatley, 2.

²⁵⁷ Flatley, 4.

²⁵⁸ As quoted in Jones, 19.

²⁵⁹ Flatley, 122.

²⁶⁰ Flatley, 123.

²⁶¹ As quoted in Jones, 18.

²⁶² Sugrue, 29.

²⁶³ Sugrue, 41.

²⁶⁴ Sugrue, 29.

²⁶⁵ Sugrue, 29.

²⁶⁶ As quoted in Jones, 18.

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