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# American Ethni/Cities: Critical Geography, Subject Formation, and the Urban Representations of Abraham Cahan, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin

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AMERICAN ETHNI/CITIES: CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY, SUBJECT FORMATION,  
AND THE URBAN REPRESENTATIONS OF ABRAHAM CAHAN, RICHARD  
WRIGHT, AND JAMES BALDWIN

By

Joshua S. Stone

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

December 2010

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American Ethni/Cities: Critical Geography,  
Subject Formation, and the Urban  
Representations of Abraham Cahan, Richard  
Wright, and James Baldwin.

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By drawing upon aspects of critical geography to explore three writers' representations of urban space and subject formation, *American Ethni/Cities* develops and advocates for a new methodological approach to the study of literature. Predicated on theories devised by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Gil Valentine and other geographically-minded thinkers, this spatially conscious literary practice has the potential to enhance one's understanding of literary texts, power dynamics, identity construction, and the spaces one inhabits. Each of the chapters comprising this study aims to demonstrate what this interdisciplinary partnership between geography and literature can reveal. By focusing on Cahan's representation of Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Wright's depiction of black migrants adjusting to life in the industrial North, and Baldwin's exploration of masculinity as a socio-spatial construct, each respective case-study draws attention to the relationship between spatial production and subject formation. The overarching hope of *American Ethni/Cities* is that others will find this inter-disciplinary partnership productive and will subsequently make it their own, thereby producing even greater understandings of how power works in the spaces we read about, create, and inhabit in our own daily lives.

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## Chapter 1: *Setting the Foundation for a Geographically Informed Literary Practice*

At its core, *American Ethni/Cities* is a dissertation about space which seeks to promote a new methodological approach to the study of literature predicated upon recent cultural and critical turns in the field of geography. As such, it springs forth from a firm conviction that the dialogues we create between theory and literature help us contemplate the world more fully and more effectively. As literary scholars, we often employ a vast array of theoretical approaches to our investigations of poetry, fiction, essays, and memoirs. Because this dissertation outwardly acknowledges the value of these diverse partnerships, its fundamental contention is that there is a deafening silence and a continuously missed opportunity created by the relative absence of critical geography in the arena of literary studies.

Like postcolonial theory, poststructuralism, feminism, and Marxism, critical geography has the potential to enhance our understanding of the literature we read, as well as shed light on the ways in which we understand the world we inhabit. Drawing upon the theories of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Kevin Lynch, and Gil Valentine—just to name a few—*American Ethni/Cities* attempts to demonstrate what a geographically informed literary practice may begin to look like and offer a few examples of how it can be used methodologically to enrich one's understanding of power dynamics, a given text, and the ways in which the spaces we inhabit influence our daily lives.

Each of the following chapters functions as a case study, pairing particular aspects of geographical theory with the work of a particular author in order to deepen the

interdisciplinary conversation and demonstrate—at least in part—the value of incorporating critical geography into the study of literature. Rather than mandating what aspects of critical geography should be used by others interested in developing this disciplinary partnership more fully or claiming to have exhausted the possibilities that a spatially conscious literary practice can yield, this dissertation aims to breathe life into what will hopefully become a more robust and productive dialogue between the two areas of inquiry aforementioned, thereby promoting a new methodological approach for the way we study literature and, in turn, contemplate the world we inhabit.

Chosen for their complex and vivid treatments of urban space in particular, as well as for their respective focuses on the processes of subject formation shared by members of a specific identity group, the authors examined in each of the following chapters provide plenty of material with which we can begin to flesh out a geographically informed literary practice. Furthermore, by standing in as representative voices of the respective identity groups which each author examines, Abraham Cahan, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin all act as what Gayatri Spivak calls “native informants,” offering us a first-hand look at how the spaces their characters inhabit inform how they perceive themselves, as well as how they relate to the other people, places, and things with whom and which they interact (4).

Chapter one, “Cahan’s New York and the Spatial Construction of Jewish America,” focuses on the fiction of Abraham Cahan, a key figure in the nineteenth and early twentieth century transformation of Manhattan’s Lower East Side into the country’s most famous and most influential Jewish American neighborhood. Known primarily for his association with *The Forward*—the Yiddish daily newspaper he founded and edited



until his death in 1948—Cahan also published fiction written in English which deftly depicts the struggles and triumphs of Jewish immigrants adapting to their new lives in New York. Heralded by William Dean Howells as “a new star of realism,” Cahan offers a vivid picture of the tenements, sweatshops, and urban conditions which underscore the shared experience of thousands of eastern and southern European Jews who fled Czarist oppression for the prospect of a better life in the United States (Howells 18). Throughout his stories, Cahan creates a series of rich urban representations that portray the details of immigrant life on the Lower East Side and shed light on the relationship between American capitalism and spatial production. As a political refugee, a one-time anarchist turned socialist, and a loyal comrade of the labor movement emerging out of the Lower East Side, Cahan crafts stories that demonstrate his understanding of the ways economic forces impact geographical development and influence American subject formation, especially in regards to how these processes affected the population which he not only belonged to, but strove to lead.

Committed to helping his fellow immigrants adapt to American life in healthy ways, as well as to reforming the predatory practices which he feels capitalism promotes, Cahan turned to journalism and fiction as a means to reconcile what for many may seem like an irreconcilable dilemma. In *Yekl: A Tale of the Jewish Ghetto* (his first short story published in English), and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (his epic portrayal of one man’s success in the garment industry and subsequent spiritual demise), Cahan creates a host of highly controversial characters that demonstrate what can happen when immigrants succumb to the capitalistic temptations of wealth, materialism, and power. Analyzing Cahan’s fiction through a geographical lens, chapter one traces the unlikely and

unprecedented socio-economic ascent of the Jewish-American population living in New York City around the dawn of the twentieth century, detailing both the costs and benefits that surfaced along the way. By examining the cultural transformation of the Lower East Side itself, outlining the spatial infrastructure of the all-important garment trade, exploring the political and environmental underpinnings of one of this country's most successful and influential labor movements, and honing in on the urban practices which aided and impeded Jewish-American acculturation, "Cahan's New York and the Spatial Construction of Jewish America" not only reveals how aspects of geography can be used to more fully interrogate Cahan's fiction, but also demonstrates how that partnership sheds light on the inherent dynamism of urban space itself, elucidating how power functions spatially, and how it can both serve and oppress individuals in a variety of different ways.

Applying a geographical lens to Wright's *American Hunger* and *Native Son*, chapter two investigates how the "Great Migration" of blacks from the southern regions of the United States to the urban centers of the North impacted African American subject formation. Drawing heavily upon Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey's shared contention that "capitalism has survived in the twentieth century by one and only one means—'by occupying space, by producing space' (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 31)—this exploration of Wright's work examines the relationship between capitalism, urban production, and the ongoing discursive construction of race. Confirming Harvey's claim that "capitalism has . . . always thrived on the production of difference" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 123), Wright's urban representations reveal how those differences are constituted through uneven geographical development, segregations, and other spatially-oriented

technologies of racial oppression. Additionally, this study also draws upon Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation and Kevin Lynch's notion of cognitive mapping to examine how the ongoing processes of spatial production influence the psychic lives of Wright's characters—including his autobiographical self in *American Hunger*. In short, "Richard Wright's Metromarxism" employs various aspects of geographical and contemporary theory to more closely examine the author's powerful critique of American capitalism, the "spatial fixes" it relies on for its survival, and the reification of racial difference which, as a result of these processes, continues to take place in cities throughout the entire country (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 269).<sup>1</sup>

As the final and most abstract chapter of *American Ethni/Cities*, "James Baldwin and the Urban Production of American Masculinity" offers yet another example of how a geographically informed literary practice can enhance our understanding of American literature, only this time by focusing on the author's critique of gender and sexuality. Taking into account Baldwin's propensity for dealing with the ways in which a variety of discursive constructions overlap and impact one another, chapter three explores how both popular and culturally specific formulations of manhood intersect with the discursive and spatial production of race, nationality, religion, and class. Fervently concerned with the ways in which ideological norms interfere with our ability to access reality and love one another, as well as ourselves, Baldwin delivers a scathing critique of American masculinity that is predicated on the ways people produce heteronormative spaces at home, at church, and throughout the city as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "metromarxism" is taken from Andy Merrifield's book by the same name. For more information on the term, see chapter two. Likewise, Harvey coined the term "spatial-fix" and uses it throughout *Spaces of Capital*. A definition of this term also appears in chapter two.

The section of the dissertation focusing on Baldwin uses a geographical lens to analyze *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, two of Baldwin's earliest, most groundbreaking and most insightful novels. First, by examining the domestic, parochial, and metropolitan spaces that John Grimes inhabits, the chapter explores how the spatial practices enacted by many of Harlem's black residents—in response to the urban forms of oppression detailed in chapter two and the long-standing legacy of racism in the country as a whole—give rise to a rendition of black phallic masculinity that perpetuates racial self-hatred, misogyny, and extreme homophobia. Furthermore, by following Baldwin's critique of Harlem and black masculinity in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* into the other neighborhoods that he depicts and explores in *Another Country*, this particular case study—like the preceding two chapters—also examines the relationship between urban production and American capitalism, only this time honing in on how that relationship has amplified the repressive components of a virile ideal inherited from Europe, thereby creating a host of forcefully heteronormative spaces that compel men to express their manhood in increasingly self-destructive and “paralytically infantile” ways (Baldwin, “Here Be Dragons,” 208). Tracing the problematic experiences of Rufus, Vivaldo, Eric, Richard, and Cass, the latter half of “James Baldwin and the Spatial Construction of American Masculinity” demonstrates how each character's search for self includes a critical confrontation with the ideological norms of gender and sexuality that are perpetually reinforced through the everyday practices that generate the spaces they inhabit. Applying a geographically informed literary practice to Baldwin's work reveals that the forces and processes impeding self-actualization are given legitimacy and power through the spaces we individually and collectively produce.

Even though I have chosen to use Wright's work for my focus on race and Baldwin's fiction for my investigation of gender and sexuality, the truth is that I could have made an equally compelling argument for the benefits of a geographically informed literary practice had I reversed the pairings; Wright obviously deals with sexuality and masculinity, as does Baldwin with race. However, the attention Baldwin pays to the construction of masculinity in relation to homosexuality and whiteness makes his texts better for the kind of investigation I attempt to carry out in chapter three. Likewise, as one who actually made the migration from the agricultural South to the industrial North, Wright experienced, first-hand, the transition and adaptation I want to examine in my exploration of space and race. *American Ethni/Cities* explicitly contends that critical geography can be used to enhance one's understanding of almost any author's treatment of almost any theme. My decision to pair particular authors with specific thematic concerns by no means suggests that these combinations are any more valid or insightful than any other. My hope is that the chapters comprising this dissertation will encourage others to employ critical geography to more effectively investigate the authors, issues, and themes which interest and concern them most.

Given the vast array of methodological techniques currently transforming the study of space and geography, and due to the fact that each of the following case studies employs a variety of these approaches in their respective examinations of American literature—some common, and others not—I have chosen to weave the theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation into each of the forthcoming chapters (as opposed to accounting for them more fully in this introduction). Yet despite the theoretical specificities shaping each chapter's geographical analysis of literature, there are a few

common threads and underlying premises that inform all three studies, and therefore, unify *American Ethni/Cities* as a coherent exercise.

First and foremost, as its underlying thesis, *American Ethni/Cities* argues that by treating “setting” merely as the time and place in which a plot unfolds, readers fail to adequately acknowledge and explore the various ways in which particular spaces influence subject formation and shape the central conflicts which drive any narrative forward. Furthermore, this widespread inability to properly read space in the novels we study stems from the reality that we have been conditioned to view the spaces we inhabit as simple, passive, and neutral containers that benignly house the various activities and interactions that make up our everyday lives. According to Lefebvre, however:

space is neither a mere frame, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology; it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. To picture space as a frame or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than to preserve what has been put in it, this is probably the initial error. But is it error, or is it ideology? The latter, more than likely. (Lefebvre 93-94)

By arguing that “space is social morphology,” Lefebvre encourages his readers to acknowledge that spaces are constantly being produced by the social relations and spatial practices that they allegedly contain. Additionally, he proposes that spaces are not only generated by these everyday practices, but that they also function as a means of production, facilitating processes that reproduce the social relations which constitute the status quo and provide the subject with the “function and structure” of his/her “lived experience.” “This pre-existence of space,” Lefebvre continues, “conditions the subject’s

presence, action, and discourse, his competence and performance” (Lefebvre 57). Space “serves as a tool of thought and of action,” he contends, as well as “a means of . . . domination, of power” (Lefebvre 26).

In his attempt to craft a “unitary theory” of space capable of accounting for these processes, Lefebvre provides this dissertation with much of the material that constitutes its theoretical base (Lefebvre 15). But in order to fully grasp what makes geographical theory more useful now for literary studies than ever before, it is worth briefly tracing some of the critical and cultural turns that have transformed the discipline over the last half century and made it increasingly relevant and productive for scholars working in a variety of different arenas.

In *Thinking Geographically: Space, Theory, and Contemporary Human Geography*, Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley, and Fuller explain that their discipline's mid-twentieth century “cultural turn” stemmed from “a unifying concern . . . that culture needed to be understood in very different ways than it had been in ‘traditional’ cultural geography” (xii).<sup>2</sup> The collaborating authors challenge the old “static view” of geography and point out:

the ‘new’ cultural geography conceived of culture as a *process*—the shifting and unstable system of meanings through which people make sense of a world of material objects. Rooted in cultural history and literary theory, this is a conceptualization that focuses on the role of language and text in creating meaning, simultaneously exploring how this meaning is embodied and embedded in the material and social world (Hall, 1996; McEwan, 2001). Culture is thus recast as the principal means through which society and space are constructed,

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to the 1980s, the ‘traditional’ approach to culture in the field of geography held that culture was “something manifest in material artefacts,” and that “studying cultural artefacts and their place in the landscape could reveal ‘ways of life’ (Hubbard et al. 59).

providing people with their sense of identity at the same time that it maps out power-laden social and spatial hierarchies. (Hubbard et al. 59)

Initially employing these new methods to address issues of ‘race’ and racism in the UK, human geographer Peter Jackson catapulted the discipline into its ‘cultural turn’ when he “expose[d] the flaws in more ‘traditional’ studies of the geography of race which . . . concentrated upon mapping and describing patterns of ethnic segregation through positivist choice and constraint models” (Hubbard et al. 60). In his landmark essay, “The Idea of ‘Race’ and the Geography of Racism,” Jackson charges that ‘traditional’ explanations of racial segregation neglect “to acknowledge the social and political dimensions of racism” (qtd. in Hubbard et al. 60). Instead he contends that “racism is structured through ideological practices aimed at maintaining a dominant (white) hegemony” (Hubbard et al. 60). After arguing that geographers should open their conceptual frameworks and start analyzing the influences of “representational practices (ie., racist language, imagery and symbolism as well as racist practice)” *in addition to* their analyses of material practices, Jackson then suggests that geographers should also “consider how these stereotyped representations [are] then mapped onto space” (qtd. in Hubbard et al. 60).

Although Jackson is widely credited as being one of the forerunners of this ‘new’ cultural geography—even more so after the publication of *Maps of Meaning* (1989),<sup>3</sup> in which he uses the social and cultural theories of “Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz,

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<sup>3</sup> In *Maps of Meaning*, Jackson devotes an entire chapter to gender and sexuality in which he foregrounds much of his subsequent work on the geography of masculinity, a critical approach that informs this chapter’s reading of Baldwin’s work.



Stuart Hall, and Antonio Gramsci to explore the ways in which culture sustains (spatialized) power relations”—he, unlike other geographers now considering culture as a process, refuses to affirm the primacy of culture over material-based influences in determining the ways “society and space are constructed” (Hubbard et al. 61). Along with Linda McDowell, Chris Philo, and Neil Smith, Jackson expresses concern over what he perceives as the dematerialization and desocialization of geographical studies; ironically, a trend that stemmed from the ‘cultural turn’ in the discipline that Jackson helped launch (Hubbard et al. 60). As a result, in *Maps of Meaning* Jackson bridges the gap between representational and materialist approaches to geography through what he calls a “geographical cultural materialism” (Mitchell 197): a critical approach to the analysis of space and place that seeks to combine key components of traditional, economic, and cultural geography.

The advent of ‘critical’ geography (as opposed to ‘cultural’ geography) emerged alongside, and in some ways in response to, the ‘cultural turn’ previously described.

“Though diverse in its epistemology, ontology and methodology,” write Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley, and Fuller:

and hence lacking a distinctive theoretical identity, critical geography nonetheless brings together those working with different approaches (e.g., Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, post-structural) through a shared commitment to expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places. In other words, critical geographers are united in general terms by their *ideological* stance and their desire to engender a more just world. This interest in studying and changing the social, cultural, economic or political relations that create unequal, uneven, unjust and exploitative geographies is manifest in engagements with questions of moral philosophy, social and environmental justice. (62)

For all intents and purposes, one can really date the dawn of “critical geography” all the way back to the 1960s when Henri Lefebvre published *The Production of Space* and posited that in addition to “being a product, . . . space is a medium” (Shields 212). Focusing on urban space in particular, Lefebvre employed a Marxist methodology to expose how capitalist forces create spaces that facilitate the accumulation of wealth for those in power, foster uneven geographical development, perpetuate pre-existing social hierarchies, and secure the system as a whole by mobilizing a surplus of available labor.

Despite sharing the “commitment to expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places,” Lefebvre’s work belongs to what Hubbard and company call the “radical geography practiced in the late 1960s and 1970s” (Hubbard et al. 63). The distinction they make between ‘radical geography’ and ‘critical geography’ stems from the “shift in emphasis from an examination of the role of capital in shaping society to a broader focus on the multiple axes of power and difference that create social and economic divides” (Hubbard et al. 63). Work falling under the label of ‘critical geography’ tends to more fully complement “structural and materialist accounts” with “positions more sensitive to human agency and questions of culture” (Hubbard et al. 63). Furthermore, ‘critical geographers’ have also modified the discipline by adding their “focus on those groups on the margins of contemporary society” to a study of geography that tended to hone in on the “geographies experienced and created by the majority” (Hubbard et al. 63). Nevertheless, Lefebvre clearly spawned the ‘cultural’ and ‘critical turns’ aforementioned by being the first to formulate a dynamic investigation of space that encourages interdisciplinary analyses and is fueled by a commitment to eradicating injustice.

Lefebvre's critics rightfully contend that his "patriarchal approach to the household, [and] his gender-blindness and celebration of heterosexuality limit the usefulness of his theories" (Shields 211). According to Shields, "Lefebvre did not foresee the emerging politics of multiculturalism and ethnicity" (Shields 211), and as a result, major holes in his theory leave many feeling quite skeptical about the usefulness of his methodology. Still others, most notably his former student Manuel Castells, criticize Lefebvre for assigning "the city an autonomy and significance that it simply did not possess" (Hubbard, "Manuel Castells," 73). Collectively, these critiques expose Lefebvre as one who succumbed to the modernist pitfall of seeking to construct a 'meta-narrative' or 'grand-theory' that proposes "to reveal universal truths" and adequately account for "the totality of social life" (Hubbard, "Manuel Castells," 74). Yet despite these shortcomings—and one may even argue *because* of them—Lefebvre not only paved the way for the cultural and critical approaches to spatial analysis aforementioned, but also helped carve out territory for the postmodern geographers currently broadening the scope of the discipline.

The increased application of social and critical theory to a wide range of spatial analyses inevitably led to the emergence of 'postmodern geographies.' Although the phrase predictably eludes definition, 'postmodern geography' refers to a new facet of contemporary human geography influenced by post-structural and postmodern thinking. Although postmodernism, like 'critical geography,' is another term which encapsulates a number of varying sensibilities and critical approaches to understanding the world, self-proclaimed postmodern theorists across disciplinary lines tend to concur "that there is no one form of knowledge that is necessarily superior or dominant to another" (Hubbard,

“Manuel Castells,” 75). Postmodern geographers in particular, most importantly Edward Soja, Michael Dear, and Alan Scott, employ emerging postmodern ideas to argue and demonstrate that “cities were changing in ways that could not be adequately explained by modernist theories such as Marxism and humanism” (Hubbard, “Manuel Castells,” 76).

Highly charged debates over the alleged primacy of cultural, economic, and/or social factors in the production of space continue to unfold between geographers arguing from a host of theoretically specific perspectives. Rather than producing intellectual inertia, however, these discussions continue to thrust the discipline into new and uncharted territory, more often than not yielding fresh insights and new ways of thinking about how the spaces we inhabit shape individual identities as well as our collective sense of reality.

*American Ethi/Cities* strives to profit from these ongoing debates by drawing upon the fresh ideas they yield to elucidate how power functions spatially in literature. The overarching hope of this entire project, however, is that by using this material to formulate a new orientation to literary criticism, we will not only enhance our ability to apprehend how spaces function in the texts we read, but in doing so, may equip ourselves with the skills and strategies we need to understand more adeptly how the spaces we occupy and create function in our own daily lives.

Although each of the following chapters focuses on a particular constituent of identity, they all aim to examine the active roles that spaces play in various forms of subject formation, regardless of whether the concentration is on race, ethnicity, gender, or

sexuality. While the title may seem a bit misleading—given the fact that in addition to its concern with the discursive constructions of various ethnicities, this study also focuses on the spatial production of race, gender, and sexuality—as a unified whole, *American Ethni/Cities* really targets the ways urban spaces in particular manufacture the wide variety of differences that constitute identity for individuals throughout the nation. Concurring with Liz Bondi’s argument that “class, gender, sexual, and racial identities are politically as well as existentially necessary fictions” (Bondi 184), *American Ethni/Cities* seeks to expose how the ongoing production of our cities participates in the composition of those fictions by influencing the ways people throughout the United States of America tend to understand—as Baldwin puts it— “what they assume themselves to be” (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 86).

Lastly, while the project as a whole refuses to fully embrace the Marxian premise that “in the final analysis” “it’s the economy, stupid!” each of its respective chapters is based on the underlying contention that capitalism “builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image” (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 59). Elaborating on this postulation, Harvey argues:

It constructs a distinctive geographical landscape, a produced space of transport and communications, of infrastructures and territorial organizations, that facilitates capital accumulation during one phase of its history only to have to be torn down and reconfigured to make way for further accumulation at a later stage. (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 59)

“Urbanization” in particular, he continues, “concentrates productive forces as well as labor power in space,” and as such, emerges as one of the most reliable “spatial fixes” capitalism has resorted to in order to ensure its own survival. Combining aspects of

critical geography with Robert Park's claim that "in making the city man has remade himself" (qtd. in Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 159), *American Ethni/Cities* strives to examine how the ongoing production of space influences identity formation for individuals and groups who live and reside in a variety of different urban locations.

With Foucault's now famous assertion that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 22), contemporary theory seemed to officially shift its emphasis and orientation towards spatial concerns. But although Foucault and many other theorists seem enthusiastic about turning their attention towards spatial issues (and I'm thinking here about Bourdieu, Debord, Benjamin, Simmel, and Said, just to name a few), literary scholars have been much less willing to follow suit. Yes, literary critics have made use of spatial theory, but not in ways that have fundamentally shaken our shared proclivity to treat settings in the novels we read as mere backdrops to plot and action. By drawing upon the theoretical contributions of Lefebvre, Harvey, and a host of other geographers revolutionizing their discipline, *American Ethni/Cities* attempts to lay the foundation for a geographically informed literary practice that will not only radically change the ways scholars read settings, but will in turn equip those who are interested with the skills and strategies they need to more effectively understand how spaces function in their own daily lives. Once again, this dissertation sees itself as only the beginning of what will hopefully evolve into a productive disciplinary partnership between geography and literature.

## Chapter 2: Cahan's New York and the Spatial Construction of Jewish America

Fresh off of the boat and cleared to enter the country by immigration officials at Castle Garden, an eighteen year-old David Levinsky leads his fellow passenger, “a young Yiddish speaking tailor named Gitelson,” across “Battery Park and under the Elevated railway to State Street” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 87). Recalling his initial impressions of lower Manhattan, the Lithuanian born Levinsky reports: “A train hurtling and panting along overhead produced a bewildering, a daunting effect on me. The active life of the great strange city made me feel like one abandoned in the midst of a jungle” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 90).

“The active life of the great strange city”—in this instance personified by the “hurtling and panting” train passing by overhead—is an underappreciated and frequently misunderstood phenomenon that subtly yet ubiquitously shapes the characters, the conflict, and the action of Abraham Cahan’s 1917 novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Both a fictionalized biography of an immigrant cloak-manufacturer and an expansive history of early Jewish American acculturation, Cahan’s greatest work of fiction skillfully exposes the intricacies of the mutually constitutive subject-space relationship which evolves between a city and its inhabitants. The “active life of the city,” as Cahan phrases it, not only refers to the abundance of activity surrounding Levinsky—to the overwhelming busyness per se—but more importantly, to a conception of space itself as a dynamic, transformative, and productive phenomenon.

The process of symbiotic production which occurs between denizen and city begins as soon as Levinsky sets foot on American soil. Psychologically, the city penetrates Levinsky the moment he penetrates the city. Moving on foot in a northeastern direction from the island's southernmost point, through the gates of Castle Garden and across Battery Park, Cahan's protagonist soon finds himself enveloped by the great American metropolis, surrounded on all sides by the material and movement of the country's most elite capitalist machine. As one of the period's great literary realists, Cahan's brilliance stems from his ability to pair honest and detailed physical descriptions of the urban environment with psychological and visceral representations of his characters' responses to that environment. When he writes that the "train hurtling and panting along overhead produced a bewildering, a daunting effect on" Levinsky, the novelist immediately draws attention to the process whereby the city itself assaults the immigrant's psyche in ways that he cannot possibly understand, let alone manage.

Cahan's vivid portrayal of Levinsky's adaptation to New York City corresponds directly with critical geographer Henri Lefebvre's assertion that the spaces which we occupy are "social morphology," which is to say that they are "to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and [that they are] just as intimately bound up with function and structure" (Lefebvre 94). Situations like Levinsky's, in which dramatic personal changes coincide with geographic relocation, end up illustrating Lefebvre's theories perfectly, demonstrating the various ways in which subjects and spaces simultaneously transform one another. As a representation of one of the many Eastern European Jews who migrated to New York following the 1881 assassination of the Russian Czar, Levinsky embarks on a dramatic quest to reinvent himself that myopically



reflects the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between the nation's financial capital and one of its most influential immigrant populations.

By chronicling the lives and times of Jews on the Lower East Side of Manhattan circa 1900, Cahan's "ghetto fiction" in general—consisting of several short stories, a novella, and the one long novel aforementioned—provides us with a perfect opportunity to investigate the various ways in which people and places shape one another's existences. Using Critical Geography to inform our reading of Cahan's work will enable us to more effectively examine how Eastern European Jews helped to reinvent New York City while New York City helped give rise to something cohesive enough to call a Jewish American identity.

Cahan's depiction of Levinsky's American arrival functions as a particularly effective overture for the rest of the novel—as well as for this particular study—because it dramatizes the earliest stages of a subject-forming process whereby the spaces people occupy (and are prohibited from occupying) influence their behavior, desires, and understanding of self, as well as how they relate to the society at large. As Levinsky delves more deeply into the interior of the city, he becomes increasingly affected by it. What is at first a "bewildering, daunting effect," eventually becomes a much more pervasive phenomenon which influences his sense of self, shapes his desires, and facilitates his transformation from a young Talmudic scholar into a business-savvy garment mogul. As a representation of Levinsky's first encounter with America, this particular passage initiates the subject-forming process that will play itself out as the narrative unfolds. Throughout Levinsky's gradual adaptation to the urban environment,

the city's "active life" continues to penetrate his psyche, progressively creating more lasting and more substantial social and psychological effects.

This chapter will examine Cahan's various representations of Manhattan's Lower East Side through a Lefebvrian lens. This multi-faceted approach to Cahan's settings will consider, respectively, some of the major factors which helped produce the Lower East Side around the turn of the twentieth century; how the Jewish ghetto functions as a means of production; and finally, what the space produced, specifically in regards to the creation of Jewish American subjectivity.

But before embarking on this tri-pronged investigation into Cahan's Lower East Side, I will briefly report on the man himself and explain why his fiction works ideally for a project of this kind.

*Abraham Cahan: Journalist, Author, Activist, and Guide*

Born in Podberezy, Lithuania (a small village outside of Vilna), on July 6, 1860, Cahan was already a twenty-two year old "revolutionary refugee" by the time he fled Czarist Russia and successfully arrived in Philadelphia in 1882. For the next sixty-nine years, he would don many different hats, cultivating successful careers as a journalist, author of fiction, literary critic, political activist, educator, and spiritual advisor. While his crowning achievement lies undoubtedly within the pages of the *Jewish Daily Forward*—"the great Yiddish-language newspaper he helped to found in 1897 as first

editor, and which he edited continuously from 1907 until his death” (Stein iii)—Cahan’s efforts within all of the fields aforementioned collectively cement his stature, not only as one of the country’s most influential early twentieth century personalities, but as the premier liaison between a rapidly growing population of Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European Jews and the mainstream of American society.<sup>4</sup>

As both “a political exile and [an] intellectual,” Cahan’s presence aboard one of the first boats to carry Jewish refugees to America was, in the words of Jules Chametzky, “almost a paradigm of his later career: in general sharing the fate of the masses, but always with a sense of difference, specialness, the obligation to lead” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 4). Throughout his adult life, Cahan balanced his identification with the masses with an awareness of his own intellectual distinction, thereby allowing him to assume a leadership role which would prove invaluable to millions of Jewish immigrants intent on making a home for themselves in their new land.

In addition to his identification with the general populace and his intellectual prowess, Cahan’s effective leadership also stemmed from his ability to reconcile his own leftist political convictions with his desire to lead Eastern European Jews through their successful American acculturation. Over the years, doctrinaire socialists and ardent assimilationists would each criticize him for pandering to the interests of the other; yet despite their respective charges, Cahan held strong to his belief that social reform and immigrant assimilation could actually complement one another. As with journalism,

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to focusing on current events, *The Jewish Daily Forward* played a pivotal role as an early supporter of Jewish American writers, publishing original material by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Sholem Asch, just to name a few.

Cahan saw fiction as an ideal medium for helping to confirm, preserve, and nurture this marriage.

Cahan's early success speaking in Yiddish to New York audiences about socialism led directly to the emergence of a radical Yiddish press in New York City.<sup>5</sup> Driven by the idealistic and largely anarchistic political convictions that he had brought with him from overseas, he quickly established himself, not only as an impassioned advocate of civic activism and labor reform, but as a rising, young journalist publishing in Russian, English, and Yiddish simultaneously. Cahan used his growing reputation to help lift the Yiddish daily, titled the *Togeblat* (Daily Sheet), off of the ground in 1885, but as "an anti-socialist, anti-anarchist and religiously conservative vehicle," it was not the kind of publication with which Cahan had ever identified (Marovitz 36). One year later, he and a friend waged an unsuccessful attempt to create their own socialist weekly titled, *Di naye tsayt* (the New Era). Despite its short life, the project gave Cahan the opportunity to experiment with writing in a simple Yiddish vernacular; this was a journalistic innovation that would soon pave the way for his future success as the founder and managing editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward*.

Cahan's early career as an author and a journalist was shaped in large part by fairly dramatic shifts in the way he perceived the world, both politically and culturally. A

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<sup>5</sup> The Yiddish language's tendency to take on elements of surrounding languages continued in America, and as American Yiddish proceeded to incorporate more and more English phrases, it subsequently helped the immigrant population learn more about the American idiom, American attitudes, and the daily practices that were endemic throughout American culture. The public outpouring of approval for Cahan's early speeches only confirmed what he had thought; Yiddish not only had the capacity to reach wider audiences and facilitate cultural adaptation, but hearing it in public contexts also provided this population with the kind of linguistic validation that they needed in order to feel at home.

self-proclaimed anarchist upon his arrival, he was surprised to find himself thoroughly engrossed in the contentious New York gubernatorial race of 1882—eventually won by Grover Cleveland. While his fellow “anarchists and even the socialists argued that there was no more freedom in America than Russia,” Cahan’s first-hand observations of the American democratic process at work—explicit corruption notwithstanding—proved to him that “that was all talk” (Cahan, *The Education*, 282).

Within four months of his American arrival, Cahan’s emerging realizations concerning the American political system forced him to rethink his agenda. While he continued to identify himself as “more of an anarchist than a socialist,” he began to take a deeper interest in the political process, eventually joining Henry George’s mayoral campaign team in 1886 (Cahan, *The Education*, 314). Contrary to what many of his critics would allege, Cahan was fully aware that his active support of George contradicted his anarchistic opposition to elections of all kinds. Years later he wrote: “I perceived the contradiction in my own action, [yet] I yielded to my feelings” (Cahan, *The Education*, 314). His willingness to follow those feelings not only helped him become more politically savvy as a labor leader but also equipped him with the necessary nuances needed to produce incisive journalism, craft fiery and inspirational speeches, and write great literature. According to Chametzky, Cahan’s early involvement in American politics forced him to convert “to the socialist-inspired idea that the workers would have to enter the field of political as well as economic struggle” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 11). Along with his talent as both a lecturer and a print journalist, his participation in American politics helped propel him “into one of the most self-assured, spirited and aggressive leaders of the movement” (Marovitz 22). Melech Epstein soon dubbed him

“the most dominant figure in Jewish labor” (Epstein 147), and Irving Howe later called him “the most lucid intelligence in the early Jewish labor movement” (Howe 112).

Although Cahan’s involvement on George’s campaign further tempered “his initial skepticism over politics as an avenue toward genuine reform in America” (Marovitz 22), Chametzky rightly points out that his interests had “in fact been tending more and more towards cultural rather than specifically political matters” anyway (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 21). Pragmatically, Cahan recognized how deeply implanted capitalism was in the American consciousness and therefore grew increasingly cynical about the realistic chances for socialism to take hold as a political institution and effectively “bring forth a more equitable society” (Marovitz 21). Furthermore, as time continued to pass, he became increasingly aware that his fellow immigrants “were more eager to assimilate and acculturate with the rest of American society than to promote a socialist ethic” (Marovitz 24). In conjunction with Cahan’s growing doubts about socialism as a viable political structure in America, his dawning realizations regarding the immigrants’ shared desire for acculturation may have curbed his idealistic pursuit of a socialist revolution in the United States, but they did not impede his quest for social justice. Unlike his critics, Cahan did not view his newfound prioritization of cultural matters as any kind of political concession but instead argued that “socialism was as much a matter of learning how to live within a new community as a concern with ideology and polemics” (Marovitz 27).

By the early 1890s, at least six years before he would even help create the very first issue of *The Forward*, Cahan had already developed a much clearer sense of his own life’s work. Finding a cultural context for socialist activity enabled him to channel his

efforts towards facilitating immigrant assimilation without compromising his own heartfelt convictions regarding economic fairness and social justice. Publishing articles on Lower East Side life in both English and Yiddish not only allowed him to disseminate his ideas amongst speakers of each language but also permitted him to attack the obstacles impeding immigrant assimilation and social reform from diverging angles.<sup>6</sup>

Writing in English in particular allowed Cahan to share his socialist ideas and realistic portraits of Lower East Side life with people outside of New York's Jewish quarters, thereby enabling him to conjoin his political activism with his desire to demystify the Eastern European Jew in the eyes of the American majority. "As a socialist intellectual," argues Chametzky, Cahan "was committed to raising the consciousness of all aspects of reality in himself, his comrades, [and] his followers. Mystification and obscurantism were almost by definition in the service of oppression" (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 34). In order to facilitate the East-European Jew's successful assimilation into American society, Cahan wrote a host of articles about the harsh conditions within the Jewish ghetto and the aspirations of the people living there. By the early 1890s, his success as a Jewish journalist publishing in English established him as the man to turn to for information regarding immigrant life lived within Manhattan's mysterious Tenth Ward. Urban sociologists like Robert Park and W.I. Thomas, avant-guard journalists like Hutchins Hapgood and Lincolns Steffens, and even the Dean of American Letters himself, William Dean Howells, all actively sought Cahan's counsel in their respective efforts to learn more about Jewish life in the ghetto.

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<sup>6</sup> Cahan published journalism in English primarily in *The New York World*.

At least in part, Cahan's English journalism helped him meet his goal of combating public ignorance and introducing the Lower East Side Jews to the American masses.

While Cahan often published articles in English in order to meet the goals aforementioned, he simultaneously wrote didactically in Yiddish, striving to teach his Jewish readers how to live their lives more skillfully in the United States of America. Cahan channeled much of his energy towards guiding the new immigrant ignorant about American culture through his/her early stages of adaptation. As Sanford Marovitz suggests, Cahan's creation of a "*Bintl Briv*" ("A Bundle of Letters") demonstrates his "intense desire to assist his people in finding a true home for themselves in America" (Marovitz 56). As the precursor to "Ann Landers" and "Dear Abby," a "Bintl briv" encouraged readers to address personal concerns and questions to the editor himself. Readers would send their "hopes, fears, worries, and dreams" to the *Forward's* esteemed editor and then wait for his response to appear in the paper. As "a compassionate adviser, rebbe, wise man, elder, parent, or confidant," Cahan provided his readers with the moral and practical guidance they craved in their times of private confusion (Marovitz 56).<sup>7</sup>

As Chametzky points out, the Yiddish press was absolutely instrumental in preserving a sense of immigrant community and interpreting "the new experience of America to them" (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 24). As the most widely read Yiddish paper in circulation, Cahan's *Forward* led the way in each case, both bolstering a Jewish ethnic identity within the United States at the same that it taught that community how to live more skillfully as Americans. Cahan's willingness to write in a simple vernacular

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on Cahan's influential column, see *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward* published by Schocken in 1990.



about the banalities of daily life made it possible for anyone literate in the language to benefit from his services. “The essential paradox,” argues Chametzky, “is that the press increased and deepened the group consciousness of European Jewry in America at the same time that it Americanized them” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 25). This dual result was precisely what Cahan had hoped to achieve. He recognized the need to establish a vibrant Yiddish culture in New York in order to provide the newcomers with the kind of cultural infrastructure that would help them improve socio-economically and retain their own self-worth.

Yet, despite recognizing how essential the Yiddish press would be in helping to build a cultural infrastructure, Cahan also understood its limitations. If the Eastern European Jew was ever going to assimilate into American society, he/she would need to learn English and adopt a series of mainstream cultural practices. For the time-being, however, the healthy establishment of a Yiddish culture in New York was absolutely critical for dislocated immigrants who needed to find their emotional, spiritual, and economic bearings. As such, this meant creating a high-quality daily published in Yiddish. But as Marovitz rightly argues, “Cahan understood that success in reaching his aim would inevitably diminish and finally destroy *Yiddishkayt*, the traditional culture of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewry that was supporting him and the *Forward* in the New World” (Marovitz 27). Cahan’s commitment to the acculturation of his people therefore required sacrifice, for if the Yiddish language and culture were destined to

disappear once the Eastern European Jewish population effectively assimilated, then Cahan's newspaper and countless publications were bound to vanish as well.<sup>8</sup>

Cahan's foresight regarding the ethereal existence of Yiddish in America may have been one of the factors that influenced him to begin writing fiction in English. Yet, when we view his stories in light of his overarching desire to spread social justice and abet immigrant Americanization, we find that he was more dedicated to attacking the same issues from yet another angle than he was committed to preserving his own legacy as a writer.

Along with his evolving political perspective, Cahan's sense of art and culture started to change as well. By the late 1880s, writes Chametzky, Cahan's "conception of art was being shaped by his reading of Howells and James" (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 36), two accomplished American writers who Cahan was surprised to find out were not being widely read even in their own country. The American public's late nineteenth century preference for romantic writers over realists like Twain, DeForest, Howells, and James, clearly demonstrated to Cahan how invested the upper "class" was in preserving the illusions of its own "genteel tradition" (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 33). Like the "capitalist critics" who Cahan argues are invested in avoiding the socio-economic truths which might aggravate their upper class readers, the romanticists strove to evade the "conflict and complexity" intrinsic to the country's modernization. Instead of striving to expose the truth, which obviously would have encouraged critical

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<sup>8</sup> As of 2010, *The Forward* is still in publication in both English and Yiddish. While the paper has done its part in keeping Yiddish alive, most still recognize Yiddish as a dying language, not only due to American assimilation, but because of the Holocaust and the extermination of many Yiddish-speaking Jews.

reflection, socio-economic reform, and possibly even sacrifice, the romantic writers aimed to provide their readers with an avenue for escape.

In the conclusion of one of his most famous essays—simply titled “Realism”—Cahan argues that the true value in any work of art rests in its ability to evoke what he calls the “thrill of truth” (qtd. in Marovitz 65). For Cahan, this theoretical conception essentially fused his ideas about art—and his own fiction in particular—with his overarching quest to raise consciousness, combat social injustice, and facilitate the successful acculturation of Eastern European Jews into American society.

More so than any other profession, writing fiction in English about Jewish life in New York City enabled Cahan to integrate the seemingly contrary elements of what he deemed to be his unified task. By creating character-based narratives that center on the trials and tribulations endured by so many Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Cahan gave his Jewish readers a distanced portrayal of themselves, thereby invoking a practice of self-reflection that could help them more skillfully navigate the strange and difficult terrain of urban America. Furthermore, Cahan’s representations of life on the Lower East Side also spoke directly to an Anglo-American readership that had seen the Eastern European Jewish population through the mystifying portrayals of “Jewtown” created by Jacob Riis years before.<sup>9</sup> Committed to scripting a form of literary realism closely akin to that created by Russian masters like Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, Cahan produced

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<sup>9</sup> In *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jacob Riis reports on the Jewish resident’s propensity for frugality and thrift as an essentialist characteristic, stating that it is both their “cardinal virtue” and “foul disgrace.” He continues on to claim that “Money is their God. Life itself is of little value compared with even the leanest bank account.” By grounding his criticism in ontological claims that he cannot prove, let alone support, Riis feeds the racism and anti-Semitism rising throughout the nation during this era.

stark, honest, and humanistic representations which showcased the best and worst of what one would find in the Jewish ghetto around the turn of the century. As we shall see shortly, Cahan's faithful depictions of early Jewish-American existence gel on all fronts with his overarching project of instigating socio-economic reform while simultaneously abetting immigrant acculturation into American society.

Within his first few decades of living in the United States, Cahan was able to identify the city itself as the common thread linking his ideas about social justice with those regarding immigrant assimilation. A self-identified "urbanophile" (Marovitz 17), Cahan confesses to being "strongly drawn to the life of the city. My heart beat to its rhythms," he reports, "and as the heart feels so thinks the head" (Cahan, *The Education*, 226). Yet despite his growing affinity for America's urban culture, Cahan also remained wary about to how New York City's uneven geographical development was promoting exploitation. While the escalation of poverty throughout the city grew in large part from the mass arrival of destitute immigrants coming in from various regions of Europe, the lack of state policies needed to control exploitive landlords and labor bosses was exacerbating rather than alleviating the ballooning crisis. As David Harvey points out, "Capitalism has, in short, always thrived on the production of difference" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 123) in order to facilitate economic growth, enhance capital accumulation, and disrupt working class solidarity. Throughout Cahan's stories, the city itself emerges as the primary mechanism for ensuring that those necessary differences survive. As was the case for many of the other minority groups struggling to establish themselves in New York City, Eastern European Jews found themselves residentially and

occupationally segregated from the general population.<sup>10</sup> Like Karen Brodtkin, who traces the racial transformation of Eastern European Jews in America in her book, *How Jews Became White Folks*, Cahan recognized that occupational segregation and unwritten real estate agreements restricting Jewish immigrants to overcrowded and overpriced tenement apartments participated in the production of the group's early ethnoracial assignment, thereby temporarily inhibiting their chances for social advancement.

Cahan's Realistic fiction deftly supports Brodtkin's claim that "the history of Jews in the United States is a history of racial change" (Brodtkin 1). By dramatizing the dynamic relationship between his characters and New York's Lower East Side, Cahan not only serves his contemporaries in the ways previously mentioned, but he also represents the actual urban processes that initially assigned Eastern European Jews to the "not-white side of the American racial binary, and then to its white side" (Brodtkin 22).<sup>11</sup> Although still drawn to its "rhythms" by the time he began to seriously write fiction in English, Cahan's affinity for urban America had become more of a sophisticated ambivalence which outwardly acknowledged the city's latent potential for bringing forth social change, as well as its current role in supporting preexisting forms of domination. Any close examination of Cahan's urban representations reveals how completely attuned his literary endeavors are with his overarching life's work to combat social injustice, raise

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<sup>10</sup> Jewish immigrants often wanted to live close to synagogues with practices similar to those from their countries of origin. For example, Sephardic Jews from southern Europe tended to cluster around Allen Street in the Lower East Side. Aside from societies of countrymen, extended family connections also affected choices of where to live.

<sup>11</sup> Namely by offering his Jewish readers an outside look at himself, his mainstream readers a humanistic introduction to the Lower East Side and its population, and to everyone in general he exposed some of the unjust conditions plaguing the people of the Lower East Side.

consciousness, and guide his fellow immigrants through the early stages of their acculturation.

As a culturally grounded socialist whose primary task was to provide a clear view of how society works, Cahan saw the Romantic writers and their publishers as his adversaries. Like the capitalist critics who praised their work, Cahan believed that the Romantic writers were committed to a form of literary escapism which aimed to conceal the disturbing social conditions which, if adequately represented, would have disrupted the comfort zones of their primarily upper-middle-class readers. According to Chametzky, “It seemed inescapable to Cahan that literary Realism and socialism must work towards the same end” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 37). Unlike the Romantic writers and capitalist critics on the opposite end of his politicized literary spectrum, Cahan believed that sincere socialists and literary Realists shared the vision of representing the world truthfully so “as to necessarily attack the present system based on inequality and injustice” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 37). Cahan’s polyvalent understanding of the city as a tool of domination; as a resource that could aid socio-economic improvement; and as a dynamic, ever-changing entity is absolutely pivotal to the quality of his Realism and to the effectiveness of his socialism. With his understanding of the artist’s social responsibility firmly in place, Cahan set out to fulfill his literary ambitions, eventually creating a host of short stories, a novella, and the epic tale of David Levinsky which collectively helped him establish a fictional domain for his vocation, thereby providing us with a ripe starting-point for the onset of a spatially informed literary practice.

*The City as Product: Brief Histories of a Place and a People about to Converge*

In his 1896 review of *Yekl: a Tale of the New York Ghetto*, William Dean Howells introduced Cahan to a mainstream American readership by hailing the young writer as “a New Star of Realism” on the front page of the fiction section in the *New York World* (Howells, “New York”). As Sanford Marovitz points out, “Howells himself was continually on the alert for the ‘picturesque’ when wandering through unfamiliar neighborhoods, especially those of the lower classes, because he perceived dramatic possibilities there” (Marovitz 82).<sup>12</sup> With *Yekl*, Cahan gave Howells precisely what he had been looking for: an unmistakably urban tale replete with realistic characters who struggle to create a better life for themselves amidst the impoverished conditions which pervade Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

Collectively, Cahan’s urban aesthetic, “realistic character development and representation of circumstance” all coalesce into a skillfully crafted drama about life in the Jewish ghetto (Marovitz 72). His depictions of dilapidated living quarters, overcrowded sweat-shops, and heavily congested street-corners all team to effectively convey how the environment impacts, and in fact complicates, the already difficult process of East European Jewish acculturation into the United States of America. In essence, Cahan’s characters, complete with their conflicts and desires, seem to spring forth from the Lower East Side itself, thereby exemplifying how space provides us with

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<sup>12</sup> Howells’ interest in the “picturesque” is most explicit in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), a novel set in New York which deals with class and migration issues, though not specifically with Jews.

the “function and structure” of our own existences. His meticulous attention to detail and understanding of the city as an amorphous structuring structure helps expose readers to the harsh conditions and socio-economic inequities afflicting the residents of the city’s hidden ghettos.

Spawned by Cahan’s refined, journalistic perspective, his intimate familiarity with Manhattan’s Tenth Ward, and his heartfelt sensitivity to all types of social injustice, *Yekl* contains a number of dramatic descriptions which vividly depict everyday life on the Lower East Side. These intensely graphic passages, soon to become Cahan’s signature trademark as a literary Realist, deliver the Lower East Side to his readers as a *product*; that is to say as something that “is fashioned, shaped, and invested by social activities during a finite historical period” (Lefebvre 73).

Adequately treating urban space as a *product* means outwardly acknowledging that any given space is always in a state of transformation. The “social activities” taking place during any given moment in time unfold only because they are permitted—and often encouraged—to do so by the space itself. Furthermore, these “social activities” are precisely what constitute the space in the first place. Therein lays the fundamental paradox of space: space is at once the pre-condition *and* the byproduct of the “social activities” it contains. Throughout *Yekl*, Cahan creates a number of scenes which deftly depict this reality, introducing characters and conflicts that simultaneously spring forth from the Lower East Side just as they *fashion, shape*, and essentially *create* it. For example, when Cahan describes his beleaguered protagonist traversing the streets of the Jewish ghetto, he demonstrates how the subjects and objects within that space are actually creating the environment itself. The environmental conditions in the ghetto



appear to give birth to the action taking place, yet the activities which spring forth from those conditions end up reproducing the conditions of their own generation.

Stepping forth from his tenement-house dwelling, Jake, the story's central protagonist:

had to pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled humanity; past garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles, and lining the streets in malicious suggestion of rows of trees; underneath tiers and tiers of fire escapes, barricaded and festooned with mattresses, pillows, and featherbeds not yet gathered in for the night. The pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea and pierced with a discordant and, as it were, plaintive buzz. Supper had been dispatched in a hurry, and the teeming populations of the cyclopic tenement houses were out in full force "for fresh air," as even these people will say in mental quotation marks. (Cahan, *Yekl*, 13)

Seemingly against his own better judgment, Jake plods through the over-crowded and polluted streets toward "Joe Peltner's dancing academy," understandably in search of some kind of pleasant distraction from the oppressive conditions which Cahan so graphically describes. In spite of his desire to save his earnings so that he can send for his wife and child, Jake finds himself drawn to the academy, where he proceeds to squander the financial and moral capital that he has only recently promised himself he would retain. From the oppressiveness of the opening sweat-shop scene, to the "swarms of bedraggled humanity" that jam up the streets themselves, to the temptations offered by Peltner's dance hall, Cahan crafts *Yekl* to demonstrate how life on the Lower East Side is characterized by hardships and high hopes. Thrust into a strange new world, immigrants like Jake struggle to reconcile their old-world selves with their new-world lives. As ground zero for so many East European Jews trying to assimilate into the mainstream culture, Cahan's Lower East Side is always influencing that process in one way or

another, occasionally impeding socio-economic betterment and at other times abetting socio-economic success.

In the passage quoted above, Cahan depicts a space evolving in accord with the actions taking place within it. The conditions we see, hear, smell, and even feel clearly make Jake hunger for some kind of relief, while also infusing him with a sense of excitement, empowerment, and independence.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the ghetto all come together in this scene to create an active yet melancholic space that engenders compassion for the people living amidst these conditions. As part of his ethical plan to abet immigrant assimilation, Cahan strove to demystify the Jew in the eyes of the American public. Representing the ghetto as a *product* which is “fashioned, shaped, and invested by social activities” enables him to foster empathy within his general readership for those living on the Lower East Side (Lefebvre 73). His ability to describe the neighborhood with such proficiency makes it possible for those unfamiliar with the Jewish slums to see the scene, not solely as a physical location, but more importantly, as a way of life characterized by cultural dislocation, rich traditions, rampant poverty, and extreme social congestion. Even if they could not relate to life on the Lower East Side, Cahan gave American readers a way of empathizing with the people who live and work there.

Cahan’s many representations of the Jewish ghetto suggest that he, like Lefebvre, sees space as “neither a subject nor an object, but rather a social reality—that is to say a set of relations and forms” (Lefebvre 116). In the passage quoted above, the mattresses crowding the fire escapes demonstrate how the tiny tenement apartments often doubled as

work-place and domicile; the “teeming populations” “out in full force” show how the streets served a much-needed social function by providing the masses with a place to assemble; and the “garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents” reveal both the excess of waste and the lack of any way to properly dispose of it. Collectively, Cahan’s images make the poverty plaguing the ghetto absolutely palpable and the social existence of the people who live there both understandable and real.

Cahan’s task of humanizing the Eastern European Jew in the eyes of mainstream America was by no means an easy one, in part, because the Lower East Side itself was so contained and easily avoided by anyone who didn’t live there. The mystification of a group of people always stems from ignorance, and in this case (as in many like it), the isolation and segregated state of the Jewish quarter helped to keep its inhabitants apart from, and thus peculiar to, the rest of the city’s denizens. Although census reports estimate that Jews constituted only two million of “the 23 million European immigrants who came to work in U.S. cities in the waves of migration after 1880” (Brodkin 27), their segregated status and extreme concentration within a few square blocks of Manhattan’s Tenth Ward made them highly identifiable, and therefore an easy target to blame for the escalation in poverty and other “attendant urban problems” that coincided with the “growth of great cities” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 31).

In addition to the drastic upsurge of anti-Semitism throughout the country—which Brodkin points out was “part of a broader pattern of late-nineteenth century racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants, as well as against Asian immigrants, not to mention African Americans, native Americans, and Mexicans”—Cahan had to contend with the damage created by Jacob Riis, whose two very popular

books, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *The Children of the Poor* (1892), introduced the American public to a disparaging conception of the Eastern European Jew as a socially inferior, innately tight-fisted Other (Brodkin 26). Cahan knew that in order to help enhance the Jewish immigrant's ability to assimilate, he would need to offer mainstream America an alternative image of the Lower East Side, one that simultaneously retained the truth about the neighborhood's impoverished conditions, yet also depicted the core humanity of the people who lived there. By representing the neighborhood through the "social activities" that "fashioned, shaped, and invested" it, he devised and delivered that necessary alternative, oftentimes to the chagrin of the people he aimed to serve.

But if representing the Lower East Side as a product was going to allow Cahan to foster higher levels of empathy within an increasingly diverse American readership, he would need to do more than simply describe the "social activities" constituting the neighborhood during this "finite historical period." According to Lefebvre:

[any] space is always, now and formerly, a *present* space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality. Thus production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas. (Lefebvre 37)

Cahan fully recognized his need to account for the "production process" of the Lower East Side if his product was going to successfully help demystify and humanize the Eastern European Jewish immigrant in the eyes of the American public. In *Yekl*, Cahan follows up on the paragraph previously quoted with another vivid description of Jake plodding along the streets of the ghetto, only now he links the present activity unfolding in the neighborhood with the "production process" that created it. As we have already

seen, a present space is constituted by the “social activities” which fashion it.

Nevertheless, those “social activities” are not only sanctioned by the space which they help to produce, but are formed by a host of historical and cultural factors as well.

As Jake nears Joe Peltner’s dancing academy, he turns onto Suffolk Street, which the narrator describes as being:

in the very thick of the battle for breath. For it lies in the heart of that part of the East Side which has within the last two or three decades become the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world. It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth—a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe. (Cahan, *Yekl*, 13)

As with the novella’s previous paragraph, this vivid representation of the neighborhood also describes the “social activities” which constitute the present space. But unlike the earlier passage, this one nods towards the “production process” that underscores the present moment.

Unlike the term product, which presupposes some kind of finished result, production process refers to the formative elements, events, and developments which culminate in that result. Therefore, if Lefebvre is correct, then any proper examination of a “present space” requires looking into the various factors which participate in producing it. Similarly, in his attempt to demystify the Lower East Side Jew, Cahan turns towards the Lower East Side itself, graphically describing the “social activities” which create it. Cahan knew what Lefebvre knew: in order to understand any group of people in a “finite historical period,” one needs to know something about the history of the space that we see those people producing.

By simply mentioning that Suffolk Street “lies in that part of the East Side which has within the last two or three decades become the ghetto of the American metropolis,” Cahan subtly points out that there are a conglomeration of factors that has contributed to the neighborhood’s current state. Furthermore, in asserting that the neighborhood has not only become the “Ghetto of the American metropolis” but “indeed the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world,” he insists that we view that history within a global context, thereby widening our perspective for how we can go about identifying the “production process” which has given shape to the present set of social activities currently under way. In linking this history of the Lower East Side to the “streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe,” Cahan reiterates the importance of maintaining that global perspective if one is to properly account for the production of the Lower East Side and gain insight into the lives of its inhabitants.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre speaks directly to the difficulty of constructing what he calls “a history of a space” (113). Yet, despite that difficulty—or, quite possibly, because of it—he reminds us of the need to commence with the work:

It is never easy to get back from the object (product or work) to the activity that produced and/or created it. It is the only way, however, to illuminate the object’s nature, or, if you will, the object’s relationship to nature, and reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning. (Lefebvre 113)

In this passage, Lefebvre regrettably uses the term “object” to refer to a given space as a product, thereby causing some confusion, seeing as though he repeatedly reminds us that treating space as an object is a grave mistake. However, his analysis remains useful because it speaks directly to a crucial methodological aspect of this spatially-conscious

literary practice which we are seeking to create. Both Lefebvre and Cahan understand that in order to gain insight into the lives of people who live in a given space, one must effectively identify the formative elements and retrace the formative processes that collectively create that space (or set of relations) in the first place.

By cataloguing the diverse origins of New York's Lower East Side immigrants, listing various reasons for their emigration, describing their different occupations and trades, and highlighting differences in their moral constitutions, Cahan begins to "reconstitute the process of" the Lower East Side's "genesis." "Hardly a block but shelters Jews from every nook and corner of Russia, Poland, Galicia,<sup>13</sup> Hungary, [and] Roumania," he continues:

Lithuanian Jews, Volhynian Jews, south Russian Jews, Bessarabian Jews; Jews crowded out of the 'pale of Jewish settlement';<sup>14</sup> Russified Jews expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kieff, or Saratoff; Jewish runaways from justice; Jewish refugees from crying political and economical injustice; people torn from a hard-gained foothold in life and from deep-rooted attachments by the caprice of intolerance or the wiles of demagoguery—innocent scapegoats of a guilty government for its outraged populace to misspend its blind fury upon; students shut out of the Russian universities, and come to these shores in quest of learning; artisans, merchants, teachers, rabbis, artists, beggars—all come in search of fortune. Nor is there a tenement house but harbors in its bosom specimens of all the whimsical metamorphoses wrought upon the children of Israel of the great modern exodus by the vicissitudes of life in this their Promised Land of today. You find there Jews born to plenty, whom the new conditions have delivered up to the clutches of penury; Jews reared in the straits of need, who have here risen to prosperity; good people morally degraded in the struggle for success amid an unwonted environment; moral outcasts lifted from the mire, purified, and imbued

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<sup>13</sup> Galicia refers to a region that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

<sup>14</sup> Originally established by Czar Catherine II in 1791 to rid Moscow of Jewish business competition and to protect the Russian masses from the influence of Jews, "The Pale of Settlement" became the only area in which Russian Jews were permitted to live. The "Pale" made up only 4% of imperial Russia, but housed 90% of the Jews living under Russian rule. Within this area Jews paid double taxes but were forbidden to lease land, run taverns, or receive higher education. Living conditions within the Pale were poor, as one might expect.

with self-respect; educated men and women with their intellectual polish tarnished in the inclement weather of adversity; ignorant sons of toil grown enlightened—in fine, people with all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, inclinations, and speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pell-mell into one social caldron—a human hodgepodge with its component parts changed but not yet fused into one homogenous whole. (Cahan, *Yekl*, 14)

I quote this passage at length quite simply because of its fundamental importance to the success of Cahan's historical project. The passage not only highlights the rich diversity existing throughout the Lower East Side, but it also provides crucial information regarding the reasons for the group's mass arrival, the hopes and desires which so many shared, and the cultural influences which instilled the Jewish ghetto with its authenticity and vitality. In short, each detail provided helps the reader "reconstitute the process of its [the Lower East Side's] genesis" (Lefebvre 113). Although Cahan may be most well known in the world of fiction for his explicit depictions of the Lower East Side as a *present* space, his representations actually join "production process" with "product," thereby stressing the inseparability of the two.

In trying to piece together a history of the "social reality" which Cahan describes, one must follow his lead and turn back towards the events and processes which preceded the formation of New York's Lower East Side as the center of Jewish American life from 1881 to 1924. Furthermore, after investigating the occurrences that made Manhattan's Tenth Ward the primary location for Eastern European Jewish settlement, I will briefly touch upon the details of shtetl life that characterized the immigrants' Eastern European existence prior to arriving in the United States of America.

As a city on the precipice of becoming the world's most elite capitolis, New York was already changing dramatically by the early to mid nineteenth century,



specifically in regards to the growth of its economy, the ethnic backgrounds of its ballooning population, as well as within the complexity and efficiency of its infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Yet while New York’s urban makeover was propelling the city towards the twentieth century, the Jews of Eastern Europe were improvising a way to blend their three-thousand-year-old tradition with the newly discovered ideas and practices characteristic of European modernism. When the two collided after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the Jews of Eastern Europe and the city of New York itself immediately started to transform one another.

As Chametzky points out, throughout the United States, the late nineteenth century was a period of:

great social and economic change, contradiction, [and] distress. The face of America had begun to assume an unmistakably modern form; the end of the frontier and the agrarian dream, a triumphant technology and mechanization, powerful corporate capitalism in arrogant dominion at home and abroad, above all the growth of great cities and attendant urban problems. (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 31)

Technological advancements in steel production, oil refinement, incandescent lighting, and telephonic communications all contributed to the country’s late nineteenth century industrial conversion. As factories began to spring up in unprecedented numbers, the demand for workers followed suit, thereby forcing the United States government to open its borders and welcome in immigrants from all over Europe—therein lies the “spatial fix” mentioned earlier. Between 1870 and 1890 alone, over six million immigrants

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<sup>15</sup> I use the term “capitopolis” throughout the dissertation to refer to a metropolis designed and relied upon to power the growth and expansion of capital.

entered the United States with the hope of building new lives for themselves, helping to make the country the “leading producer of iron and steel in the world, and the leading manufacturing nation” overall (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 31). With industrialization and mass immigration came tremendous urbanization. U.S. cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston experienced extraordinary population growth and struggled to handle the attendant problem of widespread poverty. Two key texts, Robert Hunter’s *Poverty* (1904) and John Spargo’s *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (1906) both “estimated that the poor in America in 1904 numbered at least ten million out of a population of 82 million” (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 32). New York City in particular epitomized the country’s modernist makeover, housing these conditions in their most extreme manifestations. And when Eastern European Jews eventually arrived in New York expecting to find their “promised land,” they immediately settled into what Cahan would shortly thereafter call “the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world.”

While the Lower East Side did not become a predominantly Jewish neighborhood until the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the area was already undergoing a significant transformation by the 1830s, which eventually paved the way for mass Eastern European Jewish settlement. According to Ronald Sanders:

the sector immediately to the northeast of City Hall, standing between the city and what subsequently became the Lower East Side, turned into New York’s worst slum shortly after it was developed in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The neighborhood occupying what is now Chatham Square was founded as a suburb for the well-to-do, but it was built on the site of the filled-in Collect Pond, and the streets and houses soon began to sag as the fill subsided. By the 1830s the rich had fled. (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 3)

The houses evacuated by the wealthy were quickly filled by Irish immigrants who had come to the United States in search of work opportunities made available by the “opening of the Erie Canal in 1825” (Sanders 3). Lower Manhattan had emerged as one of the nation’s most vital ports, and as such, many Irish immigrants pursued job opportunities along its increasingly busy docks. This being the case, they logically settled in the nearby neighborhood recently abandoned by New York’s upper-class citizens. The area continued to swell with Irish immigrants following the potato famine of the 1840s, and although the “expanding neighborhood sought respectability,” the shortage of sustainable jobs relative to the amount of immigrants settling in the district soon made it a “deteriorating repository for all those who had been left behind” (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 3).

Following a series of failed revolutions throughout Central Europe in 1848, a large population of Germans, like the Irish before them, decided to migrate to the United States. Unlike the working-class Irish, however, who tended to pursue jobs in “relatively humble occupations,” most of the German immigrants came from middle-class backgrounds (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 4). Less interested in working along the piers, they settled slightly uptown from the Irish, “east of the Bowery from Grand Street northward, eventually reaching 14<sup>th</sup> Street” (Sanders 4). As Sanders points out, this area—soon known as Dutchtown—

took on a stolidly German middle-class character, with the cleanest streets and best-scrubbed exteriors in New York, and a somewhat more ornate urban architecture than Americans had hitherto gone in for. On a deeper level, the German community of New York was the first minority group in the city to have a fully developed high culture of its own, with a German language theater and press, abundant public lecture programs and a distinctly European penchant for an intellectual approach to politics. (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 4)

The Jewish population in New York prior to the mid 1800s was constituted primarily of Sephardic Jews who had come into the country from either Britain or the West Indies. While the mass migration of Germans extending throughout the 1870s included a large number of Ashkenazi Jews, they, like the English speaking Sephardim, tended to live amidst the Christian majorities who spoke their same language (either English in the case of the Sephardim or German, as was the case for the newly arrived Ashkenazi population).

Despite sharing residential space with the German community, the German Jews carved out a distinctly Jewish commercial quarter just south of Dutchtown. “The manufacture and sale of garments and textiles,” writes Sanders, “had already become something of a Jewish specialty in Central and Eastern Europe” and as such, was ready to reach new heights on Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 4). The importation of the first Singer sewing machines into Eastern Europe during the early 1870s assured those who were able to afford one a comfortable living. Many parents throughout eastern Russia and western Poland, reports Cahan, “apprenticed their sons to learn the ‘golden’ skill of sewing” (Cahan, *The Education*, 60), a skill that became invaluable to the formation of an Eastern European Jewish culture in the United States, as it afforded newly arrived immigrants the chance to find work with established Jewish employers. While many of the German “merchants and suppliers worked out of business establishments that were separate from their homes . . . the people who cut and sewed the material usually worked in their own” domiciles (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 5). Textile suppliers, clothing manufacturers, and retail entrepreneurs all set up their

operations in the area between the Irish quarter to the south and Dutchtown to the north. When the mass migration of Eastern European Jews into New York City occurred, many were already semi-skilled in the garment trade and therefore sought work from German designers. The emergence of the New York garment industry, led on all sides by German Jews, created an enclave of Jewish workers and employers on Manhattan's Lower East Side that greatly influenced the residential patterns of the Eastern European Jewish refugees steadily pouring into the city. By the late 1880s, the "few square blocks surrounding the intersection of Canal and Essex Streets with East Broadway" had already become the Eastern European Jewish neighborhood to this day still synonymous with the phrase, the Lower East Side (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 5).

During the 1870s, while still under the reign of the Russian Czar Alexander II, tensions began to rise between the younger generation of Jewish progressives and their more traditional elders. As Western ideals continued to penetrate the social barriers dividing this "nation" from its surrounding cultures, young Jewish intellectuals began to embrace socialism as a system which could simultaneously help them break free from their subjugated status as second-hand citizens while providing them with a rubric for transforming the unjust Russian society which had continued to plague their own people for nearly half of a century.<sup>16</sup> Members of the older generation tended to view the secularization of their offspring as a major threat to their survival as a distinct Jewish community. Many Eastern European Jews took tremendous pride in knowing that they had defied the odds and managed to preserve both their traditions and their joint

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<sup>16</sup> The mass movement of Jews from shtetls, or small Jewish villages, into cities, gave rise to an early form of Jewish proletarianism which linked Jews with a much more inclusive and secular workers movement.

commitment to God under the most improbable and nefarious of conditions. As Irving Howe reports, between 1825 and 1855, under Czar Nicolas' rule:

Over six hundred anti-Jewish decrees were enacted, ranging from expulsions from villages in which Jews had traditionally resided to a heavy censorship of Yiddish and Hebrew books; from meddling with the curriculums of Jewish schools to a conscription that tore Jewish children away from parents, often at ages between twelve and eighteen, for periods up to twenty-five years. . . The acknowledged aim of Nicholas' measures was the destruction of the Jewish community as a social and religious body. (Howe 6-7)

Ironically, their socially imposed designation as a distinct people, at least in part, helped these Jews preserve their traditions by temporarily shielding them from the influences of European modernism. Throughout the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881), however, as many of these anti-Semitic policies were temporarily lifted, young Jews gained greater contact with the markets and universities dispersed throughout the Russian empire, and subsequently became increasingly exposed to the pre-Marxian socialist and anarchist thought which was beginning to spawn revolutions across the continent.

The remarkable accomplishment of *Yiddishkeit*—the improvisational Jewish way of living that evolved within the Central and Eastern European shtetls—was that it actually thrived on these tensions and created a culture capable of nurturing these often times diametrically opposed convictions. According to Howe, time has proven that “the energies of collective resurgence holding the Jews together were more important than the vocabularies of political sectarianism driving them apart” (Howe 16). The challenge to preserve their own culture in the face of impending European and American influence ironically became the foundation upon which *Yiddishkeit* would flourish. “The culture of *Yiddishkeit*,” writes Howe:

at once deep-rooted and precarious, brilliant and short-breathed—had always to accept dilemma as the ground of its existence. It had always to accept the burden of being at home neither entirely with its past nor entirely with the surrounding nations. Out of its marginality it made a premise for humaneness. (Howe 18)

By finding sustenance in contradiction, *Yiddishkeit* equipped eastern European Jews with an ethic that enabled them to persevere for years in the United States as a distinct community before gradually assimilating more fully into the mainstream culture.

*Yiddishkeit* may not have readied them for the trying urban conditions that they would have to bear, but by flourishing in uncertainty, instability, and paradox, their shared culture fostered adaptability and endurance, two critical qualities that—at least in part—helped bring about the group’s future success. Furthermore, since spaces are shaped by social activities, it is vital for anyone interested in the history of the Lower East Side to understand something about the culture which produced it.

While Howe rightly credits “the energies of collective resurgence” with effectively “holding the Jews together” in spite of their emerging political differences, one should not underestimate the impact that the assassination of one Czar and subsequent ascension of another had in reinvigorating the bonds between oppositional Jewish factions. On Sunday, March 1, 1881, while traveling to a riding academy from the Winter Palace, Alexander II’s caravan was attacked by a series of bombs which ended up killing the Russian ruler along with a number of his escorts. Shortly after executing a number of anarchists who allegedly claimed responsibility for the assassination, the new Czar roused a brutal attack against Jews in Elisavetgrad, thereby igniting a series of pogroms which, combined with a variety of new repressive political decrees, aimed to thwart what clearly had become a very real revolutionary threat. Most of the Jews who

had already renounced their religious traditions did so in exchange for a subversive political identity and therefore found themselves as vulnerable as the religious to the spreading violence. “Though not as bestial as Nicholas,” writes Howe, “Alexander III pursued a steady anti-Jewish policy. Neither stability nor peace, well-being nor equality, was possible for the Jews of Russia” (Howe 7). This realization, shared by secular and religious Jews alike, gave rise to one of the largest migrations in all of modern history, an exodus of religious and political refugees who would soon arrive in the United States, collide with the radical modernization of New York, and in so doing, help create the Lower East Side *product* deftly rendered by Cahan in fiction.

Living within a Christian majority, the German Jews who had arrived in New York prior to 1881 tended to practice their Judaism more discretely, adopting social behaviors shared by their Christian neighbors and relegating the Jewish aspects of their identity to the time spent in synagogue. By contrast, “official doctrine and popular legend” forced Eastern European Jews living under Czarist rule to come to terms with “their role as pariahs, the stiff-necked enemies of Christ” (Howe 6). While they never accepted that designation as just, they created a culturally based insular community (*Yiddishkeit*) in order to ensure their collective survival. Upon settling within Manhattan’s Tenth Ward, Eastern European Jews created a unique neighborhood fashioned in large part by the cultural, political, and often-times religious practices which had characterized their European shtetl lives for generations. It is important to point out that Judaism was not merely a set of ritual practices for these people, but more broadly, a way of living one’s life within a world that functioned differently from their own. The



Lower East Side of Manhattan, south of Dutchtown and just northeast of the Irish slums, soon became the prime location for the development of that culture.

Back in Europe, during the mid to late 1800s, many Eastern European Jews had begun to move from their small villages into larger cities like Kiev, Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna. Still forced to live apart from the Christian majority, these newly urbanized Jews began to forge the first significant Jewish proletariat. As revolutionary movements began to gain steam throughout Russia's territories, droves of Jewish intellectuals decided to take part. The upheaval following Alexander II's assassination forced many to relocate to the United States before they could take on any significant leadership positions, but the capitalist center of New York City provided them with the perfect environment for developing and putting to practice their newfound socialist ideals.

By the turn of the century, Manhattan's Lower East Side was the city's hotbed for political action. The myriad of socialist meetings, lectures, and street protests all occurring in the Jewish neighborhood stemmed directly from the socio-political struggles so many of the immigrants faced overseas. Like the various aspects of the garment trade, the plethora of synagogues spread out throughout the neighborhood, and the shtetl cuisine which infused the streets with its distinct aroma, the activity of the Jewish labor movement was absolutely instrumental in transforming the Lower East Side into what we find in the pages of Cahan's fiction.

As I pointed out earlier, understanding the neighborhood as a *product* requires that one make sense of the "social activities" which fashion, shape, and invest it in the first place. As such, doing so demands that we fuse product with production process,

thereby contextualizing any particular activity which we see taking place in Cahan's fiction with the history from which it stems. Most of Cahan's stories, whether short or long, move back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, offering up scenes, situations, and characters that collectively succeed in creating an informative "history of space;" that is to say, a history of the Lower East Side as it existed between 1881 and 1924.

Cahan's many representations of the Lower East Side reiterate Lefebvre's assertion that "the form of social space is encounter, assembly, simultaneity" (Lefebvre 101). Throughout the pages of his short stories, novella, and one long novel, the Jewish ghetto springs to life as the conflicts, sensibilities, and cultural practices of East European Jewry collide with the radical modernization of the West. In their confluence, the two worlds become one brand-new space; an original product created by two unlikely progenitors. The religious traditions and political inclinations sparring within Eastern European Yiddishkeit continued to evolve on the American continent during the early twentieth century, by necessity coping with the new and unfamiliar influences of American capitalism: a rapidly evolving economic system that was expanding most drastically in cities like New York.

"For about thirty or forty years," writes Howe:

the immigrant Jews were able to sustain a coherent and self-sufficient culture. It was different from the one they had left behind, despite major links of continuity, and it struggled fiercely to keep itself different from the one they found in America, despite the pressure for assimilation. (Howe 169)

Viewed as "a mere moment in history," this thirty to forty year stretch marks at once a time of Jewish differentiation—when immigrants, shortly after arriving in the States,

began to forge a form of Judaism that was different from anything which had existed before—and an era of prognostication, which foretells the future of what Jewish life was to become in the United States of America.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the “social activities” of Eastern European Jews in New York City, politically and socially shaped by life under Czarist rule, also helped to transform the neighborhood, the city, and even the nation as a whole. Their shared “working class and anti-capitalist outlook on the world” equipped many Lower East Side Jews with the knowledge, the drive, and the experience needed to assume meaningful leadership positions in the American labor movement (Brodkin 105). Leading the way as an advocate for his people, Cahan not only paid witness to it all, but, with great skill, recreated the “encounter, assembly, and simultaneity” of this dynamic neighborhood for all of us to experience.

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With stories such as “The Imported Bridegroom,” “A Providential Match,” and, of course, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan guides his reader back and forth across the Atlantic, deftly depicting Jewish existence on both continents in order to reconstitute the process of the Lower East Side’s genesis. By retracing the history of both the neighborhood as well as its inhabitants, Cahan effectively blends “production process” with “product,” thereby thoroughly accounting for the “social activities” which recreated Manhattan’s Tenth Ward. Furthermore, by depicting the Lower East Side as a dynamic “product,” Cahan delivers a humanizing representation of Manhattan’s Eastern European Jewish population to mainstream American readers. But in addition to introducing

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<sup>17</sup> To many Eastern European Jews, this form of Judaism represented an abandonment of religious tradition. This is why the more religious resisted emigration to the United States of America.

mainstream American readers to the Jews of New York, Cahan also wanted to introduce New York to the Jews now living there. In order to meet that call, however, he needed to expand his representations of the Lower East Side from a product and a production process to a means of production, and in his quest to educate his Yiddish speaking readers about the ways in which their new home functioned, this is precisely what he did.

### *The Lower East Side as a Means of Production*

Over the past half century, social scientists and historians have struggled to come up with an adequate way of accounting for the Eastern European Jew's socio-economic success in the United States of America. After all, within only a few generations, a Yiddish-speaking population predominantly restricted to a few ghettoized neighborhoods branched out from those locations and successfully assimilated into the mainstream thoroughfares of American life, assuming professions, acquiring higher education, and amassing wealth at an unprecedented rate. Generally speaking, those who take pride in that history tend to subscribe to the theory that the "Jews were smart and that our success was due to our own efforts and abilities, [efforts and abilities that were themselves] reinforced by a culture that valued sticking together, hard work, education, and deferred gratification" (Brodkin 26). In *How Jews Became White Folks*, however, Karen Brodtkin admits, that although she is "willing to affirm all those abilities and ideals and their contribution to Jews' upward mobility," she knows that they ultimately fail to fully "account for Jewish success" (Brodtkin 26). "Jewish success," she then proceeds to

argue, “is a product not only of ability but also of the removal of powerful social barriers to its realization” (Brodkin 26).

According to Brodtkin, between the 1880s and 1930s, Eastern European Jews in the United States were relegated to a type of not-quite-white racial status. “The history of Jews in the United States is a history of racial change,” she contends, and the “ethnoracial assignment” of the Eastern European Jew as non-white, pre-WWII, was constituted in large part by a litany of “social barriers” which were themselves spatially derived<sup>18</sup> (Brodtkin 3). Rather astutely, Brodtkin goes on to identify how, on the one hand, urban space was strategically used by “those with national power” to establish the Jew’s racial inferiority, and on the other, was utilized by Jews themselves to overcome the “powerful social barriers” which hindered their socio-economic ascent. For example, Brodtkin cites how residential segregation reinforces racial divides, how urban renewal facilitated the Jewish ascent into the middle class, and how tight living quarters fostered “a culture of reciprocity” from which the most influential labor unions eventually evolved (Brodtkin 27).

During the fifty year period which Brodtkin examines, Jews were indeed effectively relegated to the darker side of America’s racial divide. As we saw earlier, the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews into the United States coincided with a rise in racism throughout the country that emerged in response to a rapidly expanding poverty

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<sup>18</sup> Brodtkin differentiates between “ethnoracial assignment” and “ethnoracial identity,” declaring that the former “is about popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified” (Brodtkin 3). Ethnoracial identity on the other hand, though constructed by oneself, is inevitably created “within the context of ethnoracial assignment.”

crisis. According to Brodtkin, many American citizens felt that the “23 million European immigrants who came to work in U.S. cities in the waves of migration after 1880 were too many and too concentrated to absorb” (Brodtkin 27). By the 1890s, she goes on to report, “immigrants and their children made up more than 70 percent of the population of most of the country’s largest cities” (Brodtkin 27). The relegation of Eastern European Jews to the darker side of America’s racial spectrum, she contends, stemmed primarily from the general population’s desire to equate poverty with racial inferiority, thereby allowing them to assign blame for the expanding social crises to immigrants. Ironically, in blaming newcomers for the country’s economic woes, many mainstream Americans ended up criticizing the very system—that is to say, the “spatial fix”—from which they directly benefited.

While Brodtkin’s explanation makes perfect sense, the narrative she tells only discloses part of the total story. Yes, ethnically marking certain populations as inferior helped rising middle-class citizens avoid taking responsibility for the ballooning socio-economic crisis facing the nation. However, creating a scapegoat out of the Eastern European Jewish population was actually less important for the bourgeoisie than disrupting the organizational capacities of a growing working class. By restricting racially, ethnically, and religiously homogenous groups to particular neighborhoods, those in power were able to use urban space to emphasize otherwise negligible differences, thereby fragmenting a working class which—if not for these measures—would have been more cohesive and therefore, more of a threat to those seeking to consolidate power and polarize the accumulation of capital. Furthermore, in Brodtkin’s version of things, Eastern European Jews only began to overcome the “social barriers”

associated with their racialization after World War II, at which time the government instituted “the biggest and best affirmative action program in the history of our nation” (Brodkin 27). While the post-war policies which she refers to surely helped males of European descent better themselves and their families throughout the 1940s, many Eastern European Jews living in New York had already begun to see profound lifestyle improvements as early as 1900. The main point to be taken from this discussion is that the racialization of the Eastern European Jew did not result so much from an inability on the part of the American public to adequately account for the growing poverty crisis, but from a strategically executed urban plan to fragment the working class and enhance the accumulation of capital.<sup>19</sup>

To understand my point more clearly, one must recognize that the growth of American cities was not so much a result of mass immigration as much as it was a catalyst for the active recruitment of those immigrants. The country’s industrial makeover hinged upon the successful creation of productive urban environments, a reality which chapter two will further confirm by looking at the recruitment of Southern black migrants to the same metropolitan areas. In order to facilitate the greatest degree of economic growth, the nation needed to generate and concentrate massive amounts of available labor. Not only did that growth depend upon a sufficient number of bodies to

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<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the “racial change” which Brodkin highlights began to unfold as soon as the Jews started to move away from Manhattan’s Lower East Side, settling into neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and in other areas of New York City that put them in greater contact with mainstream Americans. While governmental policies implemented after 1945 clearly helped to change the public’s racial perception of Jews, they only did so by encouraging interaction between previously segregated peoples. As we know from detailed migration records, the dispersion of Eastern Europeans enhanced assimilation by allowing Jews to more fully enter mainstream American life. In significant numbers, however—albeit, less so than the number of people who entered religiously desegregated neighborhoods after WWII—Jews were leaving the Lower East Side during the earliest years of the twentieth century and were therefore chipping away at the group’s racial assignment.

perform the necessary work, but it actually needed a surplus of potential laborers in order to keep wages down so as to guarantee adequate profit margins for those investing in the process.

Creating a labor force big enough to satisfy the nation's productive needs required siphoning millions of deprived immigrants into inexpensive neighborhoods; for Jews fleeing Czarist Russia, Manhattan's Tenth Ward obviously became that place for all of the reasons aforementioned. By subdividing urban regions into ethnically based residential and occupational districts, the cities themselves could be used to emphasize and promote all kinds of racial, ethnic, and religious differences; these differences then could help disrupt worker unionization, trigger the formation of niche markets (in order to benefit from the immigrant's vital role as a consumer), and relegate particular areas of specialization to various groups within the overall work force. In other words, the city could be utilized as a means of production capable of controlling, consolidating, and reproducing a labor force at the same time as it could continue to facilitate the consumption, production, and exchange of commercial goods. In the upcoming chapter on Richard Wright's urban representations, we will see how the same logic led to similar procedures that deliberately quartered blacks into clearly demarcated ghettos as well. It should come as no surprise that in New York City the neighborhood assigned to Jews stands on the complete opposite end of the island from the neighborhood assigned to blacks—Harlem.

If David Harvey is correct in stating that "Capitalism has, in short, always thrived on the production of difference" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 123), then the most effective means of producing those differences has undoubtedly been through the production of



urban space itself. So, while Brodtkin rightly points out that Eastern European Jews were relegated to a “not-quite-white racial status,” and while she skillfully details how their racial designation was socially and spatially constructed (at least in part, through certain residential and occupational restrictions), she fails to effectively identify the actual logic underscoring the city’s structural design and the motive behind its production. The racialization of the Eastern European Jew was not simply a social construction accidentally created by ignorance and racism but the result of a calculated use of space designed to serve capitalism’s fundamental needs.

Although Brodtkin’s theories about Eastern European Jewish success in America consider urban space in ways rarely seen before, she—like those who continue to cling to romanticized notions of the group’s aptitude and skill—still fails to recognize how space functions as a means of production. By neglecting to examine the various ways in which urban space serves capitalism, those hoping to account for the Eastern European Jew’s success in America prohibit themselves from effectively targeting the actual mechanisms responsible for holding the group back in one moment in time and for enabling its socio-economic ascent in another.

For years, critical geographers like Lefebvre, Harvey, and Merrifield have been studying the various ways in which the ongoing production of urban space serves capitalism’s fundamental need for perpetual growth. While all of these scholars agree that creating differences among workers is absolutely critical for the survival of capitalism, they also concur that it still stands as only one of the many ways which capitalism uses space as a means of production capable of sustaining itself.

In *Spaces of Capital*, Harvey gets to the core of the relationship between urban space and capitalism when he asserts that space is not only a product but also “a means of production for capital” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital* 79). Elucidating Lefebvre’s now-famous axiom that “capitalism has survived in the twentieth century by one and only one means—‘by occupying space, by producing space’” (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 31)—Harvey goes on to attest that the ongoing existence of capitalism depends wholeheartedly on its ability to create a “built environment as a resource system to facilitate capitalist production, exchange and consumption” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 82). Urban spaces in particular epitomize the creation of this man-made “resource system” because they simultaneously concentrate “productive forces” and “labor power in space” (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 25), promote exchange and consumption, remain open at all times to their own physical transformation, and most importantly, help to reproduce what Lefebvre calls the “tripartite ordering of things” (Lefebvre 32 ).

According to Lefebvre, this three-headed system supporting the capitalist edifice includes:

(1) *biological reproduction* (the family); (2) the *reproduction of labor power* (the working class *per se*); and (3) the *reproduction of the social relations of production* – that is, of those relations which are constitutive of capitalism and which are increasingly (and increasingly effectively) sought and imposed as such. (Lefebvre 32).

All three tenants of Lefebvre’s “tripartite” system relate to one another directly, although each component requires specific mechanisms and processes for its reproductive success. In order for a capitalist system to grow, it needs to reproduce its labor force, and of course doing so requires the continued reproduction of working-class families

themselves. The third element, however, is a bit more complex than the first two, namely because it requires reproducing inequities between various aspects of the overall population in order to retain the social imbalances that enable the capitalist economy to function. As Lefebvre points out, these relations “are increasingly (and increasingly effectively) sought and imposed” to sustain the capitalist system. Though it may seem somewhat conspiratorial or even half-baked to say that the system is designed to reproduce inequality—especially in a country that prides itself on offering equal opportunities to all—an investigation into the functionality of various urban environments confirms how cities themselves continue to foster and preserve the socio-economic imbalances needed to uphold a capitalist economy.

For the sake of clarification, Lefebvre defines the “social relations of production” as “the division of labor and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions” (Lefebvre 32). By stating that the “division of labor” and the hierarchy of “social functions” “are increasingly sought and imposed,” Lefebvre suggests that there is some kind of empowered subject pulling all of the strings and controlling society’s social infrastructure. While he does hold the state largely accountable, he also retreats into a kind of vague abstraction from time to time, referring repeatedly to “social and political forces” rather than any concrete subject. The critical point embedded in Lefebvre’s lofty discussion of the issue, however, is that space is engendered by political power. If those wielding the greatest degree of power have the most money, then it should not come as any surprise that cities themselves tend to facilitate unequal geographical development in order to further consolidate power and the polarization of wealth.

Throughout his representations of early Eastern European Jewish experience in New York, Cahan demonstrates that many of the newly arrived paradoxically benefitted from working within an urban means of production initially designed to limit their upward mobility (and hence reproduce the pre-existing relations of production).<sup>20</sup> According to Lefebvre, the inherent “paradox” of urban space is “that the political power which holds sway over ‘men,’ though it dominates the space occupied by its subjects, does not control the causes and reasons that intersect within that space” (Lefebvre 413). The early life of the Eastern European Jewish community on Manhattan’s Lower East Side precisely exemplifies Lefebvre’s assertion, as its social improvement occurred in spite of an urban design installed to hold it back. Siphoned into the “few square blocks surrounding the intersection of Canal and Essex Streets with East Broadway” (Sanders, *The Lower East Side*, 1), the masses of impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants were never supposed to ascend the country’s socio-economic ladder in as little time as they did. In fact, they were brought into the country to ensure that the city would extend and maintain its surplus army of available labor. Elevated rent fees, deliberately segregated neighborhoods, onslaughts of targeted bigotry, and low wages—all Lower East Side realities deftly depicted in Cahan’s fiction—were all set in place to hinder upward mobility, not to enhance it. With *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan traces this confounding history of early Jewish American experience, demonstrating with clarity and detail how the production of the Lower East Side fueled the economic

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<sup>20</sup> Note that these culturally specific opportunities were not available to other migrants and immigrants who came to the city, because the skill sets that they brought with them did not coincide with the particular industries growing in that particular time and place.

improvement and successful acculturation of the population at one moment in time, only to ensure its cultural and geographic dissolution in another.

*The Rise of David Levinsky and the Urban Geography of Jewish America*

Since its initial publication in 1917, *The Rise of David Levinsky* has been treated consistently by readers and critics as an epic novel about one East European Jew's emotionally volatile climb to financial prominence in the American garment industry. While readings of this kind rightly emphasize Levinsky's unprecedented success and spiraling identity crisis, they fail to adequately acknowledge the active role that the city plays in both of these areas; that is, as a man-made environment that directly influences Levinsky's socio-economic mobility—in different ways throughout his career—as well as a “set of social relations” that underscores his mounting isolation from New York's Jewish population. Furthermore, Levinsky's evolving relationship with the city also underpins the all-important parallel Cahan draws between his protagonist and the immigrant population itself. Despite the fact that Levinsky's story is both unique and extreme—especially given the amount of money he accumulates and the severity of his alienation from his Jewish past and present—it contains patterns, conflicts, compromises, and concerns consistent with early Jewish American experience more broadly, albeit, to varying degrees.

Levinsky's controversial adaptation to American life and unprecedented success in the garment industry is fundamentally predicated on his relationship to the Lower East

Side and his ability to develop an expanding cognitive map for himself that accounts for how he relates to the people, places, objects, and processes with whom and which he comes into contact. Like many of the immigrants living in Manhattan's Tenth Ward, Levinsky relies on the neighborhood to help him find his bearings in the new world, embark on a quest to forge a new identity for himself, and negotiate the warring tensions between his traditional Jewish past and his fast-paced, American present. Creating a spatial representation in one's own mind that accounts for how a person relates to the rest of the city, nation, and world is critical for anyone attempting to forge a cohesive identity for oneself.

Thanks in large part to Kevin Lynch's urban studies classic *The Image of the City*, scholars now commonly refer to this process as "cognitive mapping." In the upcoming section on Levinsky's journey into self, Lynch's theory of "cognitive mapping" will help elucidate how geography factors into the perpetually evolving processes of cultural adaptation, collective identity formation, and the development of personal subjectivity. By dramatizing the incremental expansion of Levinsky's cognitive map, Cahan demonstrates how the transformation of the ghetto itself into the center of Yiddish life in America laid the cornerstone for many immigrants in their respective attempts to create new and better lives for their families and Jewish American identities for themselves. For Levinsky, his manufacturing career enables him to gradually branch out from the confines of the ghetto into the mainstream thoroughfares of the city itself, and eventually into a host of regions spread out across the country. As a result of his broadening geographical experience and the expansion of his own cognitive map, Levinsky proceeds to drift further and further from the Lower East Side, both literally and figuratively. As

such, his journey represents the broader story of Eastern European Jewish acculturation and adaptation to the United States of America, highlighting the importance of the Yiddish ghetto as a primer for the group's success and prophesying the geographical dispersion that would lead to its seemingly inevitable dissolution.

Throughout the narrative, Cahan links Levinsky's ongoing despair directly to his inability to forge genuine connections with members of his own community: a flaw which undoubtedly relates to the rigor and nature of his professional life, and more specifically, to the unpopular business practices which he employs for personal gain. The separation that Levinsky wedges between himself and his fellow immigrants becomes most explicit when viewed in relation to his incessantly fruitless search for a spouse, a perpetually futile endeavor that steadily deepens his own feelings of frustration and isolation. While Cahan leaves his protagonist's problematic sexual life open to a number of psychological interpretations—especially given the absence of his father and the premature death of his mother—one must assume that his lack of marital success stems, at least in part, from his problematic relationship with the Lower East Side's Jewish community, as he only ever courts women belonging to the very population he routinely exploits.

In order to properly investigate the source of Levinsky's alienation, one must first understand something about the spaces he inhabits throughout the novel—namely, the Jewish Ghetto itself: the center of the cultural community from which he has emerged, yet from which he progressively grows to feel increasingly disconnected. Continuing with the postulation posed earlier in the chapter—that is, that one should conceive of space as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon constitutive of and constituted by a

complex amalgamation of social relations—an exploration into Levinsky’s journey requires accounting for all of the activities, institutions, and relationships that jointly constitute the Lower East Side and establish it as a communal entity inherently at odds with the protagonist’s methods of financial pursuit.

Additionally, Levinsky’s personal experiences in the new world provide the reader with the means to retrace the elaborate construction of a coherent Yiddish culture in New York: a construction that—though short-lived—was absolutely critical to the successful adaptation of millions of Eastern European Jews and to the subsequent identity formation of their offspring. By using Levinsky as a navigational tool, Cahan walks the reader through the lives of various characters and through a host of unfolding activities that collectively constitute Yiddish New York at the turn of the twentieth century, and thereby shape not only Levinsky’s personal life, but the development of Jewish America itself.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on how *The Rise of David Levinsky* treats urban space as a dynamic phenomenon that is critical to any sound understanding of the East European Jew’s American assimilation, as well as that population’s formation of a collective identity. I will commence by returning to the concept of the city as a means of production in order to demonstrate how urban spaces in the novel facilitate “networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy [that] fashion space and are determined by it” (Lefebvre 85). As Harvey states, “Accumulation is the engine which powers growth under the capitalist mode of production” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 237). Therefore, since the city functions as a means of that mode of production—insofar as “The accumulation of capital has always been a profoundly geographical affair” (Harvey,



*Spaces of Capital*, 369)—we will identify how Cahan’s representation of New York at the turn of the twentieth century reveals the possibilities for capitalist accumulation “inherent in geographical expansion, spatial reorganization, and uneven geographical development” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 369). The final segment of the chapter will examine how the particular spatial practices employed by New York’s East European Jews enabled them to function within the urban processes aforementioned, thereby enabling the group to formulate a “coherent and self-sufficient culture” (Howe 169). By tracing Levinsky’s early adjustment to New York and following the steps he takes en route to becoming a mogul in the garment industry, we will also see how his evolving relationship to the spaces he inhabits influences the ongoing transformation of his own identity, a process in its specificity that actually mirrors the collective experience of the Jewish-American population as a whole.

As the “engine which powers growth under the capitalist mode of production,” accumulation is by its very nature “highly dynamic and inevitably expansionary” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 237). Citing both Hegel and Marx, Harvey points out that capitalism as a socio-economic system inevitably creates internal contradictions which it must continuously strive to reconcile. The most glaring of these contradictions occurs with the “increasing accumulation of wealth at one pole and the formation of a ‘penurious rabble’ trapped in the depths of misery and despair at the other” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 370). This widening gap between rich and poor “sets the stage for social instability and class war,” thereby creating a need for what Harvey calls a “spatial fix” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 269). While Hegel leaves the question open as to whether imperialism and colonization can ameliorate the problem, Marx is much more decisive;

stating quite clearly that nothing short of a proletarian revolution will suffice. Regardless of their respective conclusions, both men recognize that capitalism relies on space itself to fuel accumulation and postpone inevitably emerging social crises.

Before resorting to imperial endeavors as a way of redirecting their exploitive practices, capitalistic societies usually attempt to resolve their respective conflicts internally, and in the late nineteenth century—for the United States of America—that meant creating great cities. In order to do so, the nation actively recruited immigrants from abroad and migrants from the south into a host of urban environments scattered throughout the industrial north and mid-western regions of the country.<sup>21</sup> By increasing the supply of labor power and by augmenting the country's consumer base, the newly-arrived stimulated the nation's economy immediately. Furthermore, since a capitalist economy needs to grow in order to survive, those on the wealthy end of the spectrum need to generate more wealth to invest. The problem is that the easiest way for one to generate that wealth is to exploit low-end wage earners and increase the amount of commodities released into the market. Importing millions of impoverished immigrants and directing them into deprived neighborhoods satisfies both needs, at least temporarily. Naturally, the needy will take on almost any available employment opportunities in order to survive and support their families. Furthermore, if the society in question has more workers than it has jobs, then it creates a surplus of available labor making it possible for employers to keep wages low (and subsequently their own profit margins high). On the other hand, population growth means more consumers in the market-place, therefore

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<sup>21</sup> This process of populating urban environments for the sake of industrial growth actually began with the recruitment of young people from farms spread across New England, but the demand for a surplus army of available workers forced the nation to adopt the measures aforementioned.

making it possible to “absorb the increasing quantities of commodities produced” (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 239).

Throughout *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan depicts the country’s internal attempt at a “spatial fix” capable of satisfying its expansionary needs. In returning to the scene which opens this chapter, we see Levinsky disembark from a ship at Castle Garden with a number of fellow immigrants moments after completing their trans-Atlantic voyage. The year is 1885, and four years have passed since Alexander II’s assassination set in motion the exodus of Jews from Russia and Poland. As Levinsky steps off of the boat and into the American city for the first time, Cahan introduces the reader to a typical occurrence in lower Manhattan during the late nineteenth century, with swarms of penniless immigrants pouring through the gates of Castle Garden, rapidly adding to the city’s poverty-stricken masses. As Cahan introduces David Levinsky to New York, he simultaneously presents the reader with an image of the city in the process of reinventing itself. David is just one of many at this point, whose recent arrival in the country adds to the “relative surplus population” so critical to the nation’s economic development (Marx 332).

Once past the immigration officers, Levinsky reaches Battery Park where he is “pounced down upon by two evil-looking men, representatives of boarding-houses for immigrants. They pulled us so roughly,” he reports, “and their general appearance and manner were so uninviting that we struggled and protested until they let us go—not without some parting curses” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 89). While the presence of these “representatives” may have provided some of the bewildered with much needed direction, Levinsky’s description of them clearly conveys a sense of their predatory, self-

interested intentions. Immediately, Cahan reveals the presence of an overly aggressive contingent of the city's population eager to exploit the vulnerable. Taking into account his *realist* intentions, Cahan creates a genuine depiction of the kinds of people awaiting the incoming ferries. However, these two "evil-looking representatives" represent more than the "boarding-houses" they work for; in addition, they epitomize much of what Levinsky will encounter as he becomes increasingly familiar with the pace and cold-hearted competitiveness of American life. In short, Levinsky's entrance into the city immediately subjects him to the aggressive nature of American capitalism.

Wasting no time to reiterate that reality, Cahan has Levinsky and his cohort Gitleson break free from the "representatives" only to be "accosted" on "State Street" by a "cloak contractor." His "presence in the neighborhood of Castle Garden," Levinsky contends, "was anything but a matter of chance" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 91). The Yiddish-speaking entrepreneur immediately recognizes Gitleson as a tailor: an identification Levinsky admits "scarcely surprised" him. "In my native place," he acknowledges, "it seemed to be a matter of course that one could tell a tailor by his general appearance and walk. Besides, had I not divined the occupation of my fellow-passenger the moment I saw him on deck?" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 91). Not yet aware that the contractor "came there quite often, in fact, his purpose being to angle for cheap labor among the newly arrived immigrants," Levinsky and Gitleson follow his lead, encouraged by seeing a man—"unmistakably one of our people"—"literally aglow with diamonds and self-satisfaction" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 90). It is not until two years later, when by chance Levinsky runs into Gitleson for the first time since their joint arrival, that he learns "The cloak-contractor who picked him [Gitleson] up near Castle Garden had turned out to be a skinflint and a

slave-driver. He had started him on five dollars a week,” Levinsky reports, “for work that market price of which was twenty or thirty” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 147).

The crucial concept to remember here is that space is not merely a place or a thing, but rather, as Lefebvre proposes, “a set of relations between things” (Lefebvre 83). As Levinsky and Gitleson enter the United States, they are immediately catapulted into the pell-mell of the nation’s most active economic machine, New York’s financial district. Their presence alone, as two poor immigrants, contributes to the very production of the city itself as they add to the overall “‘reserve army’ of [the] unemployed” and to the ballooning population of potential consumers (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 297). Equipped with the cloak-making skills that the contractor seeks, Gitleson naively goes off with the man to work for well-below standard wages, thereby boosting his employer’s profit margin at Gitleson’s own expense. Moreover, once the contractor learns of Levinsky’s Talmudic background and lack of any employable skills, he points him in the direction of “Park Row. ‘Just keep walking until you see a lot of Jewish people,’” he commands, “It isn’t far from here” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 92).

Now separated from the only one he knows in America, Levinsky is essentially delivered right down into the Jewish ghetto where he will add to the already teeming population of the underprivileged and unemployed. According to Harvey:

Marx shows that the necessary consequence of the real processes at work under capitalism is the reproduction of ‘the capital-relation on a progressive scale, more capitalists at this pole, more wage-workers at that’. Furthermore these processes also produce a ‘relative surplus population,’ a ‘reserve army’ of [the] unemployed. (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 297)

Through his account of Levinsky's first day in America, Cahan demonstrates how these two unsuspecting immigrants get inserted into this dynamic space, thereby adding to the progressively expanding capital-relation which Marx describes. As a skilled worker immediately exploited by the opportunistic cloak-contractor, Gitleson becomes one of the city's growing number of "wage-workers" whose labor helps to fund his boss's economic ascent and fuel the expansion of production more generally. Levinsky, on the other hand, coldly discarded by the prospective employer and directed towards the Jewish slums, walks off into the distance without a job, thereby adding himself to the all-important 'surplus population' of available labor.

As Levinsky recalls:

Ten minutes' walk brought me to the heart of the Jewish East Side. The streets swarmed with Yiddish-speaking immigrants. The sign-boards were in English and Yiddish, some of them in Russian. The scurry and hustle of the people were not merely overwhelmingly greater, both in volume and intensity, than in my native town. It was of another sort. The swing and step of the pedestrians, the voices and manner of the street peddlers, and a hundred and one other things seemed to testify to far more self-confidence and energy, to larger ambitions and wider scopes, than did the appearance of the crowds in my birthplace. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 93)

Levinsky's memories of his first encounter with New York's Jewish ghetto convey a sense of his own initial shock, as well as a vivid picture of the activity producing the space at that particular moment in 1885. Encouraged by seeing "streets swarmed" with the "swing and step of the [Yiddish-speaking] pedestrians," he seems drawn to the environment, energized by the prospect of creating a new life for himself in a land commensurate with his largest "ambitions." The presence of so many Eastern European Jews in the streets provides him with a certain degree of familiarity while it

simultaneously indicates to the reader that the formation of the Lower East Side as the primary location for Jewish settlement is well underway. The signs written in English, Yiddish, and Russian reinforce both of these concepts; although a mere casual stroll into the depths of the ghetto soon transforms Levinsky's early excitement into debilitating despair.

Levinsky's rude awakening occurs just moments after his initial elation:

I went wandering over the Ghetto. . . [but] [i]nstead of stumbling upon nuggets of gold, I found signs of poverty. In one place, I came across a poor family who—as I learned upon inquiry—had been dispossessed for non-payment of rent. A mother and her two little boys were watching their pile of furniture and other household goods on the sidewalk while passers-by were dropping coins into a saucer placed on one of the chairs to enable the family to move into new quarters. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 95)

In a mere instant, Levinsky's new surroundings destroy his romantic image of the “the American street as a thoroughfare strewn with nuggets of the precious metal” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 95). Epitomized by the recently evicted “poor family” which he passes along his walk, the neighborhood itself exudes widespread deprivation and personal struggle, twin realities he now knows he too will have to endure if he ever hopes to make a home for himself in this new and strange city. “Dispossessed for non-payment of rent,” the family collecting charity on the street represents a common occurrence on the Lower East Side during the late nineteenth century, due in large part to the elevated rent prices previously discussed. Fully aware of and sensitive to the cruelties stemming from housing situations of this kind, Cahan uses this powerful, tragic image in order to demonstrate how the city itself functions as a spatial mechanism designed to “reproduce the conditions of its own existence.”

As we have already seen, elevated rent prices constituted only one of the spatial measures employed to limit capital accumulation for wage-workers and enhance profit-margins for investors. While many workers earned enough to secure housing for themselves and their families, there were obviously many others who did not. For the landlords controlling the neighborhood, however, this posed little concern: just as the “reserve army of available labor” made it possible for employers to pay under-market-level wages, so too did the growing population of those in need of housing enable exploitive landlords to elevate rent prices. In turn, the Jewish residents of the Lower East Side enacted a set of spatial practices to help them overcome these challenges: namely boarding strategies and organized rent strikes. For now, however, the most important point is that the same environment which only moments before inspired hope in Levinsky, now makes him think that America seems like “the most cruel place on earth” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 97).

Over the course of the next two years, Levinsky struggles as a peddler, trying simultaneously to shed his “greenness,” meet his basic needs for subsistence, and save enough money to earn a college degree. Needless to say, his efforts—first as a basket peddler and later as a push-cart peddler—fail to produce the income he had hoped to amass, thereby hurling him deeper and deeper into the depths of poverty and despair. In rich detail, Cahan describes this tumultuous and depraved period in his protagonist’s life, covering Levinsky’s development of “certain unlovable traits” (specifically in regards to his business practices), his descent into “debauchery and self-disgust” (namely relating to his frequent solicitation of prostitutes), and his desperate tactic of sleeping “in the cheapest lodging-houses on the Bowery and not infrequently in some express-wagon”



(Cahan, *The Rise*, 140-1). Geographically, Levinsky's financial opportunities are limited to the ghetto itself, and his failure to generate adequate income selling used furniture and household products to poor consumers goes hand-in-hand with his inability to imagine an identity for himself free from the poverty and public humiliation he endures as a racially marked immigrant. Homeless, hungry, and psychologically scarred by the realities that come with being restricted to the ghetto, Levinsky continues to toil amidst a host of harsh urban conditions that add to his mounting discontent and make it seemingly impossible for him to improve socio-economically. While he channels his scholarly talents towards learning English and "becoming" more American—with the hope, ostensibly, that learning these skills will help free him from his cultural incarceration—he simultaneously distances himself from his Talmudic upbringing, exchanging the moral behaviors he had formerly pledged to uphold for a host of "unlovable traits" which he admits "were unavoidably developing in my own self under these influences" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 110).

The "influences" which Levinsky acknowledges were causing him to degenerate morally stem from the urban environment he inhabits. Rampant police corruption, the blatant buying and selling of votes on Election Day, the "uncouth language" uttered by his fellow business-men in the streets, petty crime, casual deception, and widespread destitution jointly have an important impact on his ongoing development. Because of his apparent disappointment over the negative effects that the ghetto is evidently having on his personality, Levinsky begins to develop a sharp sense of deep-seated guilt. He realizes that his attempts to adapt to his new country and to earn a basic living are driving him further and further away from his traditional Jewish past. Lamenting his current situation, he confesses, "My former self was addressing me across the sea in this strange,

uninviting, big town where I was compelled to peddle shoe-black or oil-cloth and to compete with a yelling idiot” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 109). The pressures merely to subsist in the Lower East Side compel him to shed his “greenness” and conform to a way of life that runs contrary to the lifestyle he has embraced until this point. Therefore, Cahan’s vivid description of the ghetto itself plays a major role in helping the reader understand his protagonist’s identity crisis. Together with the uncouth practices that he witnesses surrounding him, the environmental conditions restricting him to Manhattan’s Tenth Ward stifle his ability to earn money and, more importantly, interfere with his attempt to map out an identity for himself unencumbered by the limitations that come with existing exclusively within the confines of the neighborhood.

Less than two-years removed from his native Antomir, Levinsky already identifies a shift in his own identity: a psychic fissure of sorts which is exemplified by the disappointing gaze coming from his “former self.” It is also quite telling that Cahan uses the verb “compelled” in this sentence to account for Levinsky’s peddling activities. Coming from an environment where wives typically worked to support their husbands’ Talmudic studies and where the community supported his own, Levinsky now lacks any such assistance. In New York he struggles tirelessly to unload a few petty products simply in order to pay for food and a place to sleep. His state of desperation forces him to associate with a number of undesirable characters and to resort to what he sees as their unethical practices. Seemingly without any alternative, Levinsky immerses himself into the street-culture he apparently despises, picking up a series of shrewd habits that may prove financially advantageous to an aspiring businessman, but nevertheless run contrary to his native values and scholarly aspirations. During one particular visit to a “peddler-

supply store,” Levinsky receives important advice from the proprietor. “If you want to make a decent living,” he says, “you must put all other thoughts out of your mind and think of nothing but business” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 105). The vendor’s sobering wisdom foretells much of what we proceed to see in Levinsky’s subsequent career as a cloak-manufacturer, and his decision to internalize that message has catastrophic implications for his spiritual and emotional health.

In crafting the novel’s primary setting throughout Levinsky’s first few years in America, Cahan clearly exposes the non-neutrality of the Lower East Side, both as an urban mechanism which impedes Levinsky’s upward mobility, as well as a productive phenomenon that heavily impacts the transformation of his personal identity. Increasingly aware of the effects that his new environment is having on his internal constitution and moral behavior, Levinsky develops a consuming sense of guilt, epitomized by the image of his “former self” gazing back at him from across the ocean that we saw earlier. Rather than claim responsibility for the choices he makes, he blames his drastic secularization on the “inflexibility” of Judaism itself. While there is some truth to what he says, especially when viewed in light of the deliberate choices made by orthodox Jews to retain their traditions over assimilating into the American mainstream, Levinsky stresses the “inflexibility” of his faith in order to soften the remorse he feels as he surrenders himself more completely to the temptations and demands of the American metropolis. “If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York,” he says:

and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of your new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces. The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. A whole book could be written on the

influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, I should let a barber shave my sprouting beard. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 105)

Like Levinsky in this scene, Cahan understands the difficulty one would inevitably face in trying to retain a traditional Judaic way of living while struggling to adapt to life in modern-day New York. In fact, that troubling need to reconcile one's former life with one's current desire to "get ahead" in America is one that plagues the vast majority of Cahan's characters from his earlier stories. As a secular Jew himself, more committed to social reform than to living a traditionally religious existence, Cahan personally bypassed much of the difficulty associated with the spiritual sacrifices he often writes about. But as an Eastern European Jewish artist dedicated to the socio-economic improvement of his people, he remains extremely sensitive to their struggle.

The point to stress regarding Levinsky's comments is that they prove he acknowledges that the American city is reshaping his own identity, even if he mistakenly chooses to view the outcome as inevitable. He may not use the same language, opting to speak specifically about the new foods he eats and the new clothing he dons in order to fit in, but the fact remains the same; all of the seemingly innocuous activities he describes are underscored and shaped by the new spaces he now occupies. His newfound behaviors and habits are, for all intents and purposes, spatial practices: that is, activities and behaviors fashioned by the American spaces he now inhabits.

Levinsky's emphasis on the "inflexibility" of his faith and on the unavoidable urban pressures he faces to accumulate wealth comprise the basis of his ongoing justification for abandoning his scholarly pursuits in favor of a career in the garment

trade. In the beginning of his narrative, as well as in the conclusion, he reveals his dissatisfaction with his “present station,” his nostalgia for his European past, and his belief that “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 3, 523). Besides drawing attention to the devastating effects of his ongoing identity crisis, Levinsky’s book-end confessions reiterate to the reader the narrator’s own sense that his life took an unfortunate turn when he entered the business world. But rather than face the fact that his chronic unhappiness stems from the vanity-driven choices he has made along the way, Levinsky attempts to paint himself simply as a “victim of circumstances,” attributing the ebbs and flows of his career path to external events outside of his control (Cahan, *The Rise*, 523). As an exercise in self-deception, Levinsky’s autobiography seems only to foment his despair, leaving him at the end of the novel in a rather pathetic state of self-pity with no positive turn in sight. His refusal to accept responsibility for his own actions becomes increasingly evident in moments like the one’s mentioned above, when he blames the death of his mother, the “inflexibility of his faith,” and the demands of the American market-place for his emotional and spiritual despair.

Although Levinsky refuses to acknowledge the relationship between his unethical business practices and his current loneliness, he never hesitates to take credit for his accomplishments, regardless of whether they relate to Talmudic scholarship, the speed with which he learned English, his warped sense of his own sex-appeal, or the innovative and resilient strategies he employs to make himself a multi-millionaire in the clothing business. In the end, however, he still views himself as “a victim of circumstances”

rather than as a man now forced to live with the repercussions of his own decisions and behaviors (Cahan, *The Rise*, 523). He readily feeds his ego by celebrating his various accomplishments but refuses to claim responsibility for isolating himself from members of his own community.

Levinsky's unwillingness to acknowledge the relationship between his personal decisions and current despair should force one to question his reliability as a narrator, but not the magnitude of the city's influence on his gradual adaptation to American life or his ongoing formation as a subject. As a realist rather than a naturalist, Cahan rejects any kind of environmental determinism, even though he sensitively depicts the power and influence any given space can have on the individual, especially a space shaped by capitalism. Understanding the line that Cahan draws between spatial influence and personal agency requires thinking of late nineteenth-century New York as an urban mechanism that Levinsky must work with in order to make his dreams become a reality.

In his excellent study simply titled *Abraham Cahan*, Sanford E. Marovitz rebuts a number of well-respected critics who all essentially reiterate Ronald Sanders' claim that, "the source of the trouble [in *The Rise of David Levinsky*] is America itself" (Sanders, "Up the Road to Materialism," 18). For Marovitz, Levinsky's "failure as a man of compassion and emotional attachment" stems directly from "the molding of. . . [his] personality and character in his early years" abroad (Marovitz 159-60), not from the corrupting forces of an American market-place that compels the young immigrant to abandon his native values, language, and faith. Like the critics he contests, Marovitz sees Levinsky as "a great egoist, basically indifferent to, or manipulative of, others" (Chametzky, *From the Ghetto*, 136). However, he contends that these "unattractive traits

are evident during his [Levinsky's] Russian years," and therefore cannot be attributed to American culture, American capitalism, or the American city.

Approaching the question from the perspective of a critical geographer actually confirms the accuracy of both competing arguments by demonstrating how the American city provides Levinsky with a new framework for expressing or acting out on his already established "unattractive traits." Marovitz rightly points out that Levinsky exhibits certain predilections as a boy that ultimately foretell his emotional failures as an adult; namely his vanity, competitiveness, and egoistic sense of superiority. But unlike in Antomir, where Levinsky believes one's greatness is measured by one's proficiency in Talmudic studies, Manhattan's Lower East Side unequivocally informs him that people in America gauge power and excellence by how much wealth one accrues. Acknowledging the extreme impact of his geographical relocation means recognizing the extent to which the very *structure* of his life has changed. Still committed to asserting his own superiority, the new spaces he inhabits make it clear to Levinsky that he must adopt a new set of methods.

Shortly after he embarks on his career as a cloak-manufacturer, Levinsky returns to a synagogue on the Lower East Side in hopes of finding Mr. Even, a kind Talmudist who helped him find a place to live when he wandered into the Yiddish ghetto for the first time. Towards the end of their brief conversation, Mr. Even speaks explicitly about the new structure that the American metropolis imposes on the East European immigrant:

Oh, it is not the old home. Over there people go to the same synagogue all their lives, while here one is constantly on the move. They call it a city. Pshaw! It is a market-place, a bazaar, an inn, not a city! People are together for a day and then, behold! they have flown apart. Where to? Nobody knows. I don't know

what has become of you and you don't know what has become of me. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 214)

In describing the city as “a market-place” and as a “bazaar,” Mr. Even voices his frustration over the American commodification of all aspects of daily life. As an observant Jew who values prayer, meditative practices, and the metaphysical world more broadly, he struggles with the widespread restlessness and constant race for material upgrades that New York seems to foster in its growing population of Eastern European residents. Critical of his fellow Jewish immigrants, Mr. Even sees them as being pathologically unsatisfied, “constantly on the move” to improve their lots in life, and incessantly negligent of pausing for a moment to actually live it and nurture the better parts of their humanity. The stability that characterized life in the old country has been replaced by chronic instability in the new, and the ceaseless motion he perceives reflects the inability of people in America to find contentment in the lives they already lead. As such, the sacred in life gives way to the material, thereby converting a city into a “market-place” where human relationships become disposable commodities, purchased and exchanged to facilitate the constant pursuit of something better. Although Levinsky still lives in the Lower East Side ghetto at this point, his decision to find Mr. Even proves to be both ironic and foretelling once we realize that he has returned to the synagogue—the sacred place of worship—not to give thanks or repayment to his former benefactor, but to obtain additional funds that will help him come up with the down payment he needs to start a business. Well before becoming the preeminent cloak-manufacturer who will take advantage of his Jewish workers whenever possible, Levinsky reveals his proclivity to exploit his spiritual community for personal and financial gain. Making his



way in the world of business not only compels Levinsky to abandon aspects of his own identity but leads him to exploit members of his own community, a practice he vehemently denies to the very end.

Prior to the episode referred to above, and just as Levinsky's desperation reaches its most wretched state, he happens to bump into Gitleson on Grand Street for the first time since the two separated sixteen months before. "Dressed in the height of the summer fashion" and on his way to meet a lady in a dance-hall across the street, Gitleson immediately impresses Levinsky, making him realize that America has been much more kind to the talented tailor than to himself (Cahan, *The Rise*, 147). After learning about Levinsky's "cheerless story," Gitleson encourages his friend to learn a trade: preferably "machine-operating in a cloak-shop, which paid even better than tailoring and was far easier to learn" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 149). Excited by the opportunity to help his beleaguered cohort, Gitleson offers to pay the necessary tuition fee and introduce Levinsky to an operator who will teach him the trade. Within a few minutes, Levinsky accepts Gitleson's offer and—as a wage-laborer—enters the garment business: the single-most important industry to the production of the Lower East Side and to the Americanization of the Eastern European Jewish population.

Based on both the U.S. census of 1890 and the Baron de Hirsh Fund poll taken at roughly the same time, Irving Howe reports that well over "half the Jews employed in American industry were clothing workers" (Howe 80). On the one hand, needle trades attracted Jewish immigrants because—as we have seen—many of them already had some experience as tailors working overseas, and therefore, did not need any knowledge of English to work for the majority of employers who were "at first mainly German but by

the turn of the century increasingly east European” (Howe 82). Furthermore, the proximity of German employers to a neighborhood capable of housing massive numbers of incoming immigrants made the Lower East Side an ideal location for Eastern European Jewish settlement. From the very beginning, the garment industry influenced Jewish residential patterns in New York, and as their numbers continued to swell—making the Lower East Side the most densely populated ghetto in the entire country—they concurrently helped the industry grow, providing manufacturers and contractors with the labor needed to enter more and more product into the market. Most importantly, the spatial outlay of the entire industry made the various jobs associated with it ideal for immigrant Jews seeking employment close to home.

From the importation of raw materials on the docks mere blocks to the west, to the final sales of finished products in the city’s busiest markets on Grand Street and Hester Street, nearly every elemental stage of the garment industry occurred within a stone’s throw of the Lower East Side. Contractors purchased their “bundles” of material in wholesale shops down on Canal Street (also within walking distance of the Jewish neighborhood), and then transported the goods to make-shift, sweat-shop factories usually carved out of private residences in many of the ghetto’s tenement buildings. “Tailors, machine-operators, pressers, and finisher girls” could all walk to their places of employment, and by setting up shop at home, manufacturing-bosses were able to operate with little overhead (Cahan, *The Rise*, 151).

The consolidation of all aspects of the garment industry in lower Manhattan allowed many Eastern European Jews to live and work within their own neighborhood. As such, they were able to fashion a culturally unique space critical to the formation of a

supportive community and a collective identity. As a result of their ballooning numbers, their familiarity with the trade, and the spatial dynamics of the industry itself, Eastern European Jews gradually replaced their German “co-religionists” as the leaders in all aspects of garment manufacturing (Cahan, *The Rise*, 201). Their growing success industry-wide allowed them to invest in the neighborhood itself, creating additional synagogues, dance-halls, a robust Yiddish theater, an intellectual lecture circuit, new cafeterias, more Yiddish-language publishing houses, religious and secular schools, and a host of *landsmanshaft*.<sup>22</sup>

As one of the leading Eastern European Jews to crack German dominance in the trade, Levinsky speaks from first-hand experience, describing the industry’s evolution of as such:

The German manufacturers were the pioneers of the industry in America. It was a new industry, in fact, scarcely twenty years old. Formerly, and as late as the ‘70’s, women’s cloaks and jackets were little known in the United States. Shawls were worn by the masses. What few cloaks were seen on women of means and fashion were imported from Germany. But the demand grew. So, gradually, some German-American merchants and an American shawl firm bethought themselves of manufacturing these garments at home. The industry progressed, the new-born great Russian immigration, a child of the massacres of 1881 and 1882—bringing the needed army of tailors for it. There was big money in the cloak business and it would have been unnatural if some of these tailors had not, sooner or later, begun to think of going into business on their own hook. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 201-2)

Levinsky’s historical account of the expanding clothing industry highlights both the growing demand for more fashionable garments and the fortunate immigration of Jews

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<sup>22</sup> A *landsmanshaft* was a society of immigrants from the same town or region in the old country. These federations served a number of functions in the States, helping its members financially, providing them with a familiar community, and securing burial-plots.

able to perform the necessary labor. The drastic expansion of the garment industry during the final two decades of the nineteenth century was indicative of the growing markets and the expanding economy transforming American life throughout the city and the nation as a whole. Tracing Levinsky's ascent from an alienated wage-laborer to a top-earning manufacturer encourages us to hone in on the expansionary processes of capital accumulation at work, even if only in reference to one of the nation's many expanding industries. So while Cahan uses one immigrant's tale to tell the story of East European immigrant Jews in the United States, by contextualizing that story within the city's (and nation's) economic expansion, he simultaneously imparts a narrative about the geographical dimensions of capitalism itself, carefully showing how a "rapid rate of population growth" can temporarily fuel the "expansion of accumulation," provisionally rendering "capital export and an expansion of foreign trade unnecessary" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 242). Furthermore, as Levinsky's business develops, he branches out from the ghetto and becomes not only an example of the Jewish immigrant freed from the confines of the Lower East Side, but a personification of capitalist growth itself, expanding his business as much as possible through the increased exploitation of impoverished workers.

Returning to Levinsky at the onset of his career in the garment industry, we find him disgusted with the prospect of working as a laborer. "As a peddler I seemed to have belonged to the world of business," he declares, "to the same class as the rich, the refined, while now, behold! I was a workman, a laborer, one of the masses. I pitied myself for a degraded wretch" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 152). Despite his inability to turn a profit peddling, Levinsky associates his former occupation with independence, and is therefore willing to

bend the truth, conveniently forget the suffering he endured, and absurdly align his peddling-self with “the rich, the refined.” The truth be told, Levinsky despises the very concept of working for someone else, viewing it as a blatant concession of his own superiority. Receiving “thirty per cent of what Joe [his boss] received for” his work causes Levinsky to resent his position even further (Cahan, *The Rise*, 152). Being “one of the masses” insults his ego, and in order to distinguish himself in America, he embarks on a career as a “boss:” a cloak-manufacturer who will resort to a host of exploitive practices in order to inflate his own bottom-line. Notice: he does not object to the exploitation of workers or to the polarization of wealth that it produces; he simply objects to being on the wrong side of that relationship.

Levinsky’s career as a manufacturer begins when he convinces a talented designer named Ansel Chaikin and his “domineering” wife to join him in building “the firm of Chaikin and Levinsky” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 193). “Chaikin was the heart and the actual master of the establishment” that employed Levinsky after he left his first job as a machine-operator (Cahan, *The Rise*, 188), and Levinsky foresees Chaikin having a similar impact on the business he hopes to create. “He was a Russian, like myself,” reports Levinsky, “an ignorant tailor. . . . but a born artist in his line. It was largely to his skill that the firm, which was doing exceedingly well, owed the beginning of its success” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 188).

Levinsky pitches his proposal to the couple in their apartment on “East 110<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park: by the late 1800s, the new quarter of the more prosperous Russian Jews” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 191). It is worth noting that the location of the Chaikin’s residence stands as one of the earliest examples of Eastern European Jewish

dispersal from the Lower East Side. The residential movement of Jews to that particular neighborhood marks the socio-economic ascent of the general immigrant population, and like Chaikin, many of the Jews who relocated to the Upper East Side were able to do so due to their success in the garment industry. It is “ridiculous,” Levinsky says to Mrs. Chaikin, that your husband “should work for others, make other people rich instead of trying to do something for himself. I have some plans by which the two of us—Mr. Chaikin taking charge of the manufacturing and I of the business outside—would do wonders. We would simply do wonders” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 193).

After a few early, potentially catastrophic pitfalls acquiring the necessary capital and securing his first few contracts with various merchants, the firm of Chaikin and Levinsky takes off, expanding from a humble, Division Street shop into one of the premier cloak-manufacturing corporations in the entire country. In due time, the two partners go their separate ways, but not before Chaikin’s talent has helped launch Levinsky’s name within the trade. As a crafty businessman capable of underselling his competitors, Levinsky lands a number of orders with large department stores that gradually fuel his corporate expansion and enable him to interact with people and businesses outside of the ghetto.

In explaining to potential buyers how he can “afford to sell a garment for less than what was its cost of production in the best-known cloak-houses” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 271), Levinsky discloses the key to his entire operation: his ability to employ “cheap labor. Three of my men were excellent tailors,” he informs the reader:

They could have easily procured employment in some of the largest factories, where they would have been paid at least twice as much as I paid them. . . . The

important thing, the insurmountable obstacle which kept these three skilled tailors away from the big cloak-shops, was the fact that one had to work on Saturdays there, while in my place one could work on Sunday instead of Saturday.

My pressers were of the same class as my tailors. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 270-1)

Levinsky's "prime advantage over the princes of the trade" rests in his ability and willingness to exploit the religious interests of his employees (Cahan, *The Rise*, 271). Abiding by a business calendar-week consistent with Christian religious practices, the vast majority of cloak-manufacturers suspended work on Sundays. For Jews who observed the Sabbath on Saturday, this meant either missing a productive day of work each week or sacrificing their religious commitments. By providing his Jewish workers with the opportunity to generate income six days a week *and* observe the Sabbath, Levinsky offers them a proposition many feel is too good to relinquish. As a result, the leverage he holds over the faithful makes it possible for him to pay them less and skirt union restrictions on employable hours. "Officially mine had become a union shop," he confesses, "yet my men continued to work on non-union terms. They made considerably more money by working for non-union wages than they would in the places that were under stringent union supervision. They could work any number of hours in my shop, and that was what my piece-workers wanted" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 272).<sup>23</sup> Shameless in downplaying his own exploitive practices, Levinsky presses on, building a fortune on the

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<sup>23</sup> Despite the existence of "blue laws" which mandated that employers observe a series of ethical commercial practices—one being that their businesses remained closed on Sundays—Levinsky was able to offer his workers the kind of schedule that allowed them to observe the Jewish Sabbath. No doubt, the low profile of Levinsky's factory enabled him to avoid pressure from the government and from the unions, at least for awhile.

backs of community-members intent on retaining the same three-thousand-year-old heritage he so readily abandons.

Geographically speaking, the expansion of Levinsky's business mirrors the patterns inherent to evolutionary capitalism described by both Marx and Harvey. According to both men, the accumulation of capital inevitably leads to an extension and an intensification of the capital-relation, "more capitalists at this pole, more wage-workers at that" (qtd. in Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 297). The ensuing social crises that stem from this process force the system itself to adopt some kind of "spatial fix" or geographical reordering in order to facilitate ongoing growth and thwart civil unrest; this much we have seen. Quoting Marx, Harvey reiterates that "'An increasing population' . . . is a 'necessary condition' if 'accumulation is to be a steady continuous process'" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 304). Therefore, the nation's wide-scale admission of Eastern European Jews into its working population should be viewed as one type of "spatial fix." The problem for the capitalist, however, is that this "necessary condition" of an "increasing population" inevitably creates a "concentration of the proletariat in factories and towns," thereby making workers increasingly "aware of their common interests. On this basis," he continues, "they begin to build institutions, such as unions, to articulate their claims" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 374).

Consistent with Harvey's analysis, the Lower East Side's growing concentration of proletarian Jews responsible for supplying the expanding garment industry with its much-needed labor soon began to organize around their "common interests." As Irving Howe points out in *The World of Our Fathers*:



The garment industries formed an ideal setting for superexploitation: seasonal in setting; capricious in product; requiring labor both disciplined and, for the most part, semiskilled; encouraging the sudden rise of new manufacturers and contractors with only a petty capital investment; and peculiarly open to such social evils as homework, child labor, the contract system, and various refinements of cutthroat competition. (80)

By 1890, the Cloak-maker's Union had already established itself as the Jewish proletariat's most powerful and organized response to the conditions listed above.

Although its strength and influence would peak and fizzle periodically throughout the next fifteen to twenty years—eventually reaching the height of its power during WWI—Cahan spends a lot of time in the novel demonstrating how the Cloak-maker's union got its start and depicting its profound influence on Lower East Side culture and U.S. labor reform more broadly. According to Howe, “an intensively exploited” Jewish proletariat was “inclined every few years to outbursts of extreme discontent,” but poor leadership and the “overwhelming” “imperative of daily need” made it difficult for workers to sustain a long-standing cohesive movement (Howe 289). Yet despite its sporadic troubles, the Jewish labor movement proved to be a defining force in the Jewish ghetto and an obstinate thorn in Levinsky's side.

Recounting one early period of labor-related conflict during the late 1880s, Levinsky reports:

My business was making headway when the Cloak and Suit Makers' Union sprang into life again, with the usual rush and commotion, but with unusual portents of strength and stability. It seemed as if this time it had come to stay. My budding little establishment was too small, in fact, to be in immediate danger. It was one of a scattered number of insignificant places which the union found it difficult to control. Still, cheap labor being my chief excuse for being, the organization caused me no end of worry. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 271)

Ironically fortunate because of the current *insignificance* of his business, Levinsky effectively evades this particular surge in union activity, bolstering his profits by continuing to employ non-union workers at below-market wages. When the cloak-manufacturers eventually decide to lock out their union men in response to their incessant “picketing activities,” Levinsky benefits further, taking on “some of the work of a well-known firm which found it much more difficult to procure non-union labor than” he did (Cahan, *The Rise*, 273).

Eventually “the manufacturers yielded completely,” writes Levinsky, “acceding to every demand of the union” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 285). Ironically, however—again, because of his low profile and the willingness of his workers to “trick the organization” if it meant preserving the Jewish Sabbath—Levinsky’s business actually profits from the union’s victory. “I continued to curse the union,” he admits, “but at the bottom of my heart I wished it well, for the vigor with which it enforced its increased wage scale in all larger factories gave me greater advantages than ever. . . . The lockout and the absolute triumph of the union was practically the making of me” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 285). Although Levinsky’s particular situation allows him to skirt union pressure and ironically benefit from his adversary’s success, Cahan’s depiction of organized labor still demonstrates the profound influence that Jewish proletarianism had on the formation of a collective Jewish American identity and on American labor reform nationwide. Howe, too, also writes compellingly about the subject:

To be a fighter, to act in concert with other workers, to bring to one’s tongue such inspiring words as “respect” and “dignity”—all this testified to the forging of collective selfhood. Almost every ideological segment of the immigrant community stressed the goal of achieving “a normal life,” and part of

that “normal life” would consist in a readiness to demand from the world what other people never hesitated to demand. (Howe 306)

Insofar as the labor movement unifies Cahan’s Jewish characters on the Lower East Side, it simultaneously deepens Levinsky’s state of social isolation, an effect most glaringly portrayed in his unsuccessful courtship of the socialist-leaning Miss Tevkin. With each succeeding flare-up of union activity, the class war between Levinsky and the Jewish masses intensifies. He curses the “leaders of the Jewish socialists . . . [and] the Jewish labor movement”—condemning them forcefully as “repulsive hypocrites”—and he reads reports in the “socialist Yiddish daily” which accuse him of “bribing corrupt politicians” to help him “suppress the strike by means of police clubs. I was charged with bringing disgrace upon the Jewish people,” he bemoans, an allegation he only softly denies (Cahan, *The Rise*, 380).

Cahan’s representation of union activity in the novel becomes more frequent as Levinsky’s business continues to expand (eventually to territories as far west as Nebraska and as far south as Louisiana), thereby allowing the author to highlight the relationship between capital accumulation, the geographical expansion of markets, and the concentration of the proletariat in a given space. When the story ends, Levinsky has already moved his business three times, shifting from a petty shop on Division Street (located within the ghetto), to a larger space on Broadway (set just outside of the ghetto), and eventually to an extravagant four-story factory on Fifth Avenue near Twenty-third Street (situated further north in the city’s cosmopolitan center). With each subsequent maneuver, Levinsky’s business explodes financially, in the end making him “worth more than two million dollars” and “one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit

trade in the United States” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 3). As an impoverished ghetto with a working-class population swelling in proportion with Levinsky’s wealth, the Lower East Side continued to balloon as a hot-bed of political action and proletarian resistance, with the unions reaching the height of their influence just as Cahan was finishing his final version of the novel in 1917. Throughout *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan’s emphasis on the relationship between capital accumulation and proletarian activism helps to showcase the geographical dimensions of American capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century. These geographical processes, so carefully wrought out by the novel’s author, are inherently intertwined with the immigrant population’s ongoing reinvention of itself.

Along those lines, each step forward for Levinsky’s business grants the proprietor further access to people and places throughout the nation, thereby enabling him to expand his cognitive map and craft an identity for himself that is no longer restricted by his social incarceration on the Lower East Side. Intent on finalizing a series of profitable contracts with entrepreneurs scattered across the country, Levinsky travels to Boston, Chicago and a host of other cities, forging a number of working relationships with people, whom years before, he would have never even dreamed of meeting. Increasingly proficient in English and triumphant in business, Levinsky continues to see himself as more and more of an American with each new trip he takes and each new deal he procures.

Although very few Jewish immigrants would ever experience the degree of upward and outward mobility enjoyed by Levinsky, it warrants mentioning that the trajectory of Eastern European Jewish assimilation parallels the geographic pattern set forth by Cahan’s protagonist; that is to say, while most of the newcomers would never live to see all of the places and meet the kinds of people that Levinsky sees and meets,

their socio-economic climb nevertheless mirrors his as both are predicated on a geographic migration out from the ghetto—a migration, I may add, that is (at least in part) enabled by the expansion and ballooning success of the garment industry. Most of the Jews moving to neighborhoods in uptown Manhattan, Brooklyn, or the Bronx economically benefitted—if not directly, then certainly indirectly—from the increased amount of wealth the garment trade generated and circulated throughout the Lower East Side.

Late in the novel, Cahan creates a variety of scenes that coherently align secondary and tertiary stages of Jewish American acculturation with the group's expanded urban mobility, geographical relocation, and accumulation of wealth. First, while on a "Lexington Avenue car going up-town," Levinsky bumps into Lucy Chaikin, the now grown-up daughter of his previous business partner (Cahan, *The Rise*, 353). Upon conversing with the young woman, Levinsky learns that the Chaikins currently reside "at One Hundred and Second Street near Madison Avenue, about a block and a half from the Park" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 355). Six years have passed since he has last seen Lucy's parents, and as he thinks back upon his former relationship with the family, he cannot help but marvel at how much the woman standing before him has changed. "The American children of the Ghetto are American not only in their language, tastes, and ambitions," he reports, "but in outward appearance as well. Their bearing, gestures, the play of their features, and something in the very expression of their Semitic faces proclaim the land of their birth. All this was true of Lucy. She was fascinatingly American, and I told her so" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 355).

Lucy's "fascinatingly American" transformation serves as an ideal representation of what was happening within Jewish families that, by the turn of the century, began to migrate out from the once restrictive ghetto in substantial numbers. Economic prosperity naturally paved the way for relocation, and the collective dispersal of Jewish masses to the neighborhoods aforementioned had a dramatic effect on the ways in which those individuals proceeded to conceive of themselves in relation to the other people and processes with whom and which they shared the city. By having Levinsky encounter Lucy on a *street car, uptown*, Cahan draws a number of important elements together in one, single moment, effectively depicting how broadened urban mobility and domestic dispersal were drastically enhancing the ongoing acculturation of many immigrant Jews.

Throughout Book XII of the novel, Cahan expounds on the relationship between geography, economics, cognitive mapping, and cultural adaptation as Levinsky travels all the way up to the Catskill Mountains to join his fiancé and the rest of her family at one of the many retreat destinations that had already become popular amongst New York Jews by the early 1900s. Recognizing that by travelling on Saturday morning he has violated the Sabbath and therefore runs the risk of insulting his future father-in-law, Levinsky opts for a one night stay at the Rigi Kulm House, allegedly in order to postpone his arrival in Tannersville to the following day. When Levinsky reports that the Rigi Kulm House "contained a considerable number of single young people," however, he unintentionally reveals that his libido and deep-seated desire to sabotage his engagement have more to do with his decision than his concern for Mr. Kaplan (Cahan, *The Rise*, 404). As the narrative proceeds, Cahan confirms these suspicions as Levinsky ends up avoiding the Kaplan family altogether, opting instead to court the poised and charismatic, young Miss

Tevkin. But in addition to exposing even more about the internal conflicts that haunt Levinsky, Cahan's inclusion of the Catskill Mountain episode takes the reader to yet another phase of the population's ongoing process of Americanization.

By the early 1900s, the New York Jews had already established the Catskill Mountains as the premier destination for those with the financial means to temporarily escape from the city and demonstrate how far they had come both culturally and financially.<sup>24</sup> The Rigi Kulm House, reports Levinsky, was one of the many "hotels or boarding-houses in the village, and all of them except one were occupied by our people" (Cahan, *The Rise*, 403). "The bulk of the boarders," he continues:

was made up of families of cloak-manufacturers, shirt-manufacturers, ladies'-waist-manufacturers, cigar-manufacturers, clothiers, furriers, jewelers, leather-goods men, real-estate men, physicians, dentists, lawyers—in most cases people who had blossomed out into nabobs in the course of the last few years. The crowd was ablaze with diamonds, painted cheeks, and bright colored silks. It was a babel of blatant self-consciousness, a miniature of the parvenu smugness that had spread like wild-fire over the country after a period of need and low spirits. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 404)

As Levinsky's description reveals, many of the patrons in attendance belong to Jewish families that had recently made significant amounts of money in a variety of professions, some in the garment industry and others in an array of fields that required further education, and had therefore—until recently—seemed completely out of reach. The catalogue of occupations which Cahan provides stands in stark contrast to the street and pushcart peddling options available to Levinsky just years before, and the acquisition of

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<sup>24</sup> Phil Brown, professor of sociology at Brown University and co-founder of the Catskills Institute, writes extensively about the Jewish Catskill experience in *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (1998). He is also the editor of *In the Catskills: A Century of Jewish Experience in "The Mountains"* (2004), published by Columbia University Press.

these jobs indicates that many Jews had taken substantial strides in their struggle to transcend the socio-economic barriers that Brodtkin points out had impeded their upward mobility and participation in the mainstream life of the country. The startling exhibition of wealth, fashion, and success on display in the Catskills represents a pattern of behavior enacted by many Jews who, blatantly self-conscious about their ongoing status as Others, felt compelled to proclaim their newly acquired American identities through materialistic means.<sup>25</sup> Likening their performance to the Babylonian's construction of the Tower of Babel, Cahan subtly conveys his displeasure with many of his Jewish brethren for attempting to make a name for themselves through a mass demonstration of wealth and power.

In addition to its function as a stage upon which one could exhibit his/her recently acquired wealth and American subjectivity, the Catskill Mountain resort also provided its urban patrons with the opportunity to tap into the bucolic, American pastoral; thereby enabling them to expand their respective cognitive maps and experience the mythic and majestic landscapes that underscore so much of what is commonly heralded as the collective American identity. In short, the group's financial success helped them create a number of mountain resorts which allowed them to experience the American countryside, even despite their ongoing marginalization from the general population. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan explicitly links the group's economic ascent, expanding geographic experience, and ongoing identity formation when he describes the weekend's extravagant and climactic, Saturday-evening ball: a culminating event that aptly

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<sup>25</sup> The creation of Jewish resorts in the Catskills was one indication of the group's socio-economic advancement. It is worth pointing out, however, that the unwillingness of mainstream American resorts to accept Jewish patrons underscored the creation of Jewish vacation retreats in the Catskills.



concludes with “a few hundred diners” rising in unison to pay “tribute to the Stars and Stripes” by singing, applauding, and cheering to the orchestra’s rendition of the “Star-spangled Banner” (Cahan, *The Rise*, 423-4).

Yet despite this celebratory moment of patriotism and relief coming from a population of immigrants, who—Levinsky points out—seem to be “saying: ‘We are not persecuted under this flag. At last we have found a home’”—Cahan’s displeasure still looms over the scene, especially in regards to the smug exhibition of wealth and materialism that accompanies each person’s performance of his/her newly acquired American identity (Cahan, *The Rise*, 424). The ambivalence in Cahan’s representations of the Catskill Mountain retreat and the ongoing process of acculturation itself becomes even more explicit when Levinsky seats himself “in a rocking-chair on the front porch” of his bungalow and proceeds to gaze out at the mountains and the sky before him:

The sky was a blue so subtle and so noble that it seemed as though I had never seen such a sky before. “This is just the kind of place for God to live in,” I mused. Whereupon I decided that this was what was meant by the word heaven, whereas the blue overhanging the city was a “mere sky.” The village was full of blinding, scorching sunshine, yet the air was entrancingly refreshing. . . . Birds were embroidering the silence of the hour with a silvery whisper that spoke of rest and good-will. The slender brook to the left of me was droning like a bee. Everything was charged with peace and soothing mystery. A feeling of lassitude descended upon me. I was too lazy even to think, but the landscape was continually forcing images on my mind. (Cahan, *The Rise*, 405-6)

Levinsky’s meditative retreat into the landscape centers around the cognitive influence his immersion in nature has on his own mind. As such, he taps into the original American Dream in all of its purported purity and magic. Gazing out into what he calls an “enchanted spot” in the slope of the hillside, Levinsky finds himself inspired by the land

itself, realizing—if only for a fleeting moment—that he is only restricted by the limitations of his own imagination.

Contrary to what he has grown accustomed to in the highly commercialized, fiercely competitive, fast-paced city, this moment in the mountains whets Levinsky's imagination and lulls him into peaceful reflection. Conjuring images and ideas replicated eight years later by Fitzgerald, Cahan creates a dramatic encounter between subject and landscape that exposes the widening chasm between the origins of the ideal American dream and the reality of twentieth century American experience. Just like Nick Carraway who wanders down to the shoreline and imagines that “transitory *enchanted* moment” when the first European settlers were “compelled into an aesthetic contemplation” they “neither understood nor desired” (Fitzgerald 180), Levinsky hones in on an “*enchanted spot*” of his own that transports him back to an earlier epoch (Cahan, *The Rise*, 406).

Although this opportunity to rest and contemplate seems like a luxury achieved only through years of hard work and good fortune, the language Levinsky uses to describe his experience echoes the thoughts and desires of his younger self, thereby revealing that—like the bird above him that seems frozen in space—Levinsky appears to have made very little progress, especially in regards to his emotional and spiritual life. Inspired by the landscape to think about God and the life he [Levinsky] has created for himself in New York, Levinsky cannot help but compare the “peace” and “good-will” he finds himself enjoying in the Catskills to the preoccupations that consume his daily existence in the city. By simply comparing the “noble” blue sky above him to the “mere sky” “overhanging” the metropolis, he temporarily identifies the internal conflict between spiritual and material matters that not only haunts him personally, but also underscores

the novel's social critique of early twentieth-century America. Preoccupied by financial competition, excessive consumption, and crass materialism, Levinsky's urban existence, by comparison to this fleeting moment in the country, seems barren and restrictive.

Unfortunately, however, his momentary respite suddenly morphs into disappointment as the mammoth mountain looming before him begins to appear "seemingly quite low and commonplace." Through his protagonist's delusive perception of the landscape, Cahan reveals how even the seemingly pristine terrain, once capable of inspiring the imagination, has become co-opted and infected by American classism. Like Fitzgerald, who encourages the reader to contemplate how rows of "inessential houses" have replaced "the green breast of the new world" (Fitzgerald 180), Cahan draws our attention to the widening gap between the foundational ideals of European life in America and the ongoing production of this "new world," which—as Carraway proclaims—is "material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about" (Fitzgerald 161).

For Cahan, the Rigi Kulm House and its sister resorts provide New York Jews with an affordable way to temporarily escape from the city, extend their cognitive maps, proclaim their success, and relish in their freshly donned American selves. Yet despite marking the group's progress in each of these areas, the Catskill Mountain episode also reveals the costs of conformity, as many of Cahan's characters appear more grotesque in this scene than at any other point in the novel. With realistic precision and carefully wrought ambivalence, Cahan depicts this early twentieth century stage of Jewish American experience, using the Catskills themselves to reiterate how increased

geographic mobility and economic improvement coincide with an identity shift comprised of both serious costs and substantial benefits.

The story of Eastern European Jews in New York is a geographical narrative in more ways than one. On the one hand, their massive migration into Manhattan's Lower East Side, their reasons for leaving Eastern Europe in the first place, and the conditions they inherited when they arrived, all collectively comprise a compelling geographical tale; this much is fairly obvious. Additionally, however, when we begin to see space as "a set of relations between things" and subjects, and we realize that capitalism itself creates and depends upon the expansion of what Marx calls the "capital-relation," then New York City itself—especially during the nation's most drastic phase of economic expansion—becomes a dynamic terrain constitutive of and constituted by the increased economic polarization of its inhabitants. As such, Eastern European Jewish assimilation must also be read as a geographical affair, as the group's success in entering the American mainstream only results from its ability to use urban space to narrow—for itself—the widening gap between rich and poor. While the geography of the garment industry allowed Jewish immigrants to enter the country's work-force and mobilize a powerful labor movement on the Lower East Side, it also helped them create a distinctively Jewish neighborhood, itself an identity-constructing mechanism critical to their attainment of the "normal" existence they craved with such zeal. Although most Jewish immigrants lacked the ability to move beyond the parameters of the Lower East Side for many years—and as a result lacked the ability to imagine themselves in any other terms than within those provided by the environment itself—their forced isolation within Manhattan's Tenth Ward ironically equipped them with the means to forge a

collective identity in the new world; an incomparable advantage that Cahan knew would only be confirmed by its subsequent dissolution.

*The Lower East Side, Dispersal, and the Ongoing Identity Crisis of the American Jew*

In gradually forging a “collective selfhood” on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Jews from Russia, Austria, Galicia, Poland, and other Eastern European territories closed in on the “promised-land” of a normal life for years denied to their ancestors. As Levinsky guides the reader through the earliest years of this process, he introduces us to a number of newly-formed Jewish spaces and institutions that nourished that ongoing quest: synagogues, dance-halls, the Yiddish theater, various labor organizations, sweat-shops, Catskill vacation retreats, and other expanding Jewish neighborhoods: sites of residual Jewish settlement branching out into Brooklyn, the Bronx, Harlem, and the Upper West Side. The production of Jewish spaces in New York gave the rapidly growing immigrant population its much-needed foothold in its new home, thereby making it possible for them to reinvent themselves as a distinctively Jewish and a distinctively American community simultaneously.

But in poignantly disclosing the great paradox of Jewish American existence, Howe points out:

The dispersion of the immigrant Jews began the very day they started shaping themselves into a community. In the act of creating their own sub-culture lay the certainty of sharing a later dispersion. This did not mean ceasing to be a Jew or to identify with Jewish interests; it did not even mean ceasing to live

among Jews. It meant, simply, moving away. Moving away from immigrant neighborhoods in which Yiddish still prevailed; moving away from parents whose will to success could unnerve the most successful sons and daughters; moving to “another kind” of Jewish neighborhood, more pleasing in its physical look and allowing a larger area of personal space; and moving toward new social arrangements: the calm of a suburb, the comfort of affluence, the novelty of bohemia. (Howe 555)

Throughout *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan skillfully depicts this spatial contradiction so fundamental to the formation of a collective Jewish American identity. Flipping from one page to another, readers witness the simultaneity of communal formation on the Lower East Side, as well as the dispersive trends so eloquently described by Howe. In building his business, meeting with fellow Jews, and changing residences, Levinsky traverses the myriad of Jewish spaces and Jewish neighborhoods sprawling out all around New York City. As our private guide through this complex spatial process and history, Levinsky enables us to experience his experiences while witnessing the diverse directions children of the ghetto gradually take.

The relationship between New York City and Jewish American subject formation is a fascinating one, and one that we can only begin to crack if we take into account the inherent complexity of spatial production itself. For the Eastern European Jewish immigrant, as well as for his/her offspring, attaining a normal life in America meant shedding one’s perennial skin as a pariah and joining mainstream American life more fully; that is to say, through “productive labor, social integration, modern culture, [and] perhaps nationhood” (Howe 639). While the formation of a cohesive culture on the Lower East Side was responsible for making widespread geographical dispersion possible in the first place, each subsequent phase of “moving out” progressively deepened the

group's effective assimilation into the mainstream life of the nation. The benefits of being able to enter the country's "social and economic life," writes Howe, were "more favorable [for immigrant Jews] than any they had dreamed of" (Howe 641).

In his rise to financial success, Levinsky engages with the "social and economic life" of the nation on numerous levels, working and socializing with diverse Americans across the country—both Jew and Gentile—thereby revealing that the Jew in America can make of himself whatever he pleases. But if Levinsky's successful professional life highlights the prospective benefits of being a Jew in America, then his emotionally bereft personal life speaks to its cost. According to Howe, American society "allowed the Jews a life far more 'normal' than anything their most visionary programs had foreseen, and all that it asked—it did not even ask, it merely rendered easy and persuasive—was that the Jews surrender their collective self" (Howe 641).

The irony of the Jewish Lower East Side rests in the fact that its incredible success in fostering a cohesive identity and culture for immigrant Jews insured that identity and culture's eventual demise. Amidst widespread uneven geographical development designed to reproduce the conditions of the capitalist city's own existence—a process exemplified by Cahan's juxtaposition of brand new sky-scrapers towering over a continuously swelling slum—the Yiddish-speaking Jews of New York were able to create a spatial response on the Lower East Side that helped them unify as a people and collectively circumvent a host of deliberately wrought urban mechanisms intended to keep them down. By taking advantage of the possibilities inherent in the fortunate geography of the garment industry, by taking on boarders to combat inflated rental prices, in investing in real-estate during the height of the city's expansion, and by creating a vast

array of cultural institutions aimed to improve one another's quality of life, the Jews of the Lower East Side converted the ghetto they inherited into the engine of their joint success.

That success inevitably fueled their ongoing dispersion, eventually scattering members of the once cohesive group across the entire country. As the children of each succeeding generation continued to venture forth from the communities which reared them, their distance from the Lower East Side of the early 1900s continued to increase, and as such, so did the magnitude of their separation from the short-lived culture that made their American existences possible in the first place. According to Howe:

Insofar as they chose still to regard themselves as Jews, even if nonreligious Jews, they were left with a nagging problem in self-perception, a crisis of identity, as it came to be called, which seems beyond solution or removal, except perhaps through a full return to religious faith or a complete abandonment of Jewish identification. They had achieved a "normal life" in America and, for those with any taste for self-scrutiny, it was a life permanently beset by the question: who am I and why do I so declare myself? To live with this problem in a state of useful discontent was perhaps what it now meant to be a Jew. And in bearing the troubles of an unfixed identity, they had finally entered the American condition. (Howe 642)

Throughout *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahan dramatically details all of the developments and practices that went into producing the Lower East Side as the Jewish immigrants' catalyst for socio-economic improvement, geographical relocation, and the construction of "collective selfhood." In Levinsky himself, however, Cahan also skillfully foretells the price that their joint success would exact, albeit in an intensified fashion. The isolation which haunts Levinsky grows in proportion with his professional success in a Gentile world, thereby mirroring Howe's claim that the American-Jew's "problem in self-perception" is inextricably connected to his/her achievement of a



“normal life” in America. Acknowledging the prophetic nature of Levinsky’s internal crisis does not mean that all American Jews currently suffer from the same degree of emotional and spiritual turmoil as Cahan’s protagonist, but it should encourage us to think more intently about questions relating to Jewish American identity formation today. As we seek answers to those questions, Cahan points us back to a time and place where an innovative population of Eastern European refugees helped to reinvent the city of New York, and in-so-doing, reinvented themselves.

More well known for his efforts as the primary architect of *The Forward* than for his particular achievements in fiction, Abraham Cahan is not only one of the Lower East Side’s greatest historians—a feat he undoubtedly accomplishes with his realistic depictions of Yiddish New York in the *The Rise of David Levinsky* and other stories—but is also its most prolific engineer. As a journalist, lecturer, labor-leader, political advocate, spiritual advisor, and—last but not least—literary artist, he had a profound influence on the cultural production of the Lower East Side. His sophisticated understanding of urban production and urban life helped make him one of the most important and effective leaders of his time; his ability to encapsulate that knowledge in story, however, makes him an indispensable force in the annals of American literature—a writer of profound perception and purpose, and an indispensable witness to a brand new world.

### Chapter 3: Richard Wright's Metro-Marxism

When Richard Wright agreed to publish his autobiography as an official selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1944, he broke a promise to himself that he had made public only four years earlier in an address given at Columbia University.<sup>26</sup> In the speech now known as “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright reflects back on his own disappointment upon reading the reviews to his 1938 short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children*. Although critical responses to the book were overwhelmingly positive, Wright soon realized:

[he] had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. (Wright, *Native Son*, 454)

With *Native Son*, Wright clearly created the book that he had vowed to write: a novel which contextualizes the heinous crimes perpetuated by its protagonist within a milieu of the intense poverty and rampant racial discrimination that constituted reality for so many African Americans living in Chicago's Black Belt. The novel's brutality on all fronts thrusts the reader into a realm beyond good and evil, where one is forced to shed the comforts of moral judgment and confront the socio-economic and spatial conditions that

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<sup>26</sup> Wright signed the agreement in 1944, but *Black Boy* was not actually published until 1945. The speech was originally delivered on March 12, 1940, less than two weeks after the release of *Native Son* by Harper and Brothers, and was shortly thereafter printed by the same publishing house as a pamphlet titled “How Bigger Was Born.”

shaped urban life in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Although Wright focuses his Columbia University address on *Native Son*, his vow to produce the kinds of harshness and depth that would force his readers to “face” the realities of racial oppression “without the consolation of tears” clearly suggests a much more long-standing literary and moral commitment.

But with the publication of *Black Boy* in March of 1945, Richard Wright clearly went back on his word. By conceding to the Book-of-the-Month Club’s demand that he remove the second section of the manuscript from the text to be published, Wright produces a document that upholds the pretense of the northern city as the site of African American salvation.<sup>28</sup> Without its northern component, *Black Boy* not only reinforces the very mythology that Wright aims to dismantle, but it also provides its northern, white readers with a narrative that allows them to walk away feeling sanctimoniously good about themselves, as if they were indeed the saviors that the boy’s false sense of hope pins them up to be.

The title of the portion removed, “The Horror and the Glory,” exemplifies Wright’s ambivalent treatment of the northern city as a synchronic site of individualistic possibility and ceaseless subjugation. But to this day, Wright scholars continue to overlook the significance of this duality, opting instead to celebrate his cities as “liberating frontier[s]” that open up a variety of “avenues of transcendence” (Hakutani

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<sup>27</sup> *Native Son* sheds light on the kinds of personalities and behaviors that emerge from white people due to the construction of racial difference and spatial organization.

<sup>28</sup> Although he was troubled by the request that he eliminate the portion of the book set in the North, Wright foresaw the benefits in sales and public attention that would come from having the book published by the Club, and, as a result he eventually consented to the change.

and Butler 55). While many scholars correctly point out that African American authors tend to treat the city more positively than other American writers, these scholars frequently make the mistake of underemphasizing the detrimental aspects of urbanization and uneven geographical development that are depicted in the literature. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler, for example, point out that canonical fixtures like Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau each share a clear “anti-urban drive,” frequently associating the city with corruption, greed, and spiritual decay (55). Conversely, they argue, African American writers tend to share a much sharper affinity for the metropolis. For blacks familiar with the American countryside, images of slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and sharecropping override the ideals of self-sufficiency, transcendental enlightenment, and manifest destiny that the authors aforementioned tend to associate with pastoral landscapes. So if black authors were going to write about a location of possibility in American society, it only makes sense that that they would tend to favor the cities of the north rather than the historically and explicitly oppressive settings of the south.

Problems begin to arise, however, when critics attempt to fit Richard Wright into this overly reductive explanatory model. As Jerry W. Ward Jr. points out in an introduction he wrote for the posthumously published, reunited autobiography, Wright recognized that for the typical African American citizen “the Promised Land in America was nowhere” (Ward Jr. xii). *American Hunger* exposes this truth by painting a bleak picture of what actually awaited black migrants upon their northern arrival. Yet despite the emphasis that Wright places on the “dehumanizing influences of urban life,” critics continue to focus their attention on the liberating opportunities that Wright’s cities

supposedly avail (Hakutani and Butler 56). By asserting that Wright's city represents "a world of 'high idealism' which could help to liberate the narrator of *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*," and by downplaying the subjugating forces overtly present in the text's urban representations, Hakutani and Butler reductively align Wright with other African American authors who celebrate the urban as "a liberating frontier" (10). But Wright does not fit into the thematic container in which Hakutani, Butler, or Joyce Ann Joyce would like to place him. Although he would undoubtedly agree that the northern cities offer black migrants certain "possibilities of freedom and equality" previously unavailable to them in the South, Wright's urban representations throughout *American Hunger* clearly indicate that these locations do not warrant the degree of praise that critics tend to assign them (Hakutani and Butler 55).

What these men and women tend to overlook is that the city of *American Hunger* is the same city which Wright systematically indicts throughout *Native Son* (1940), *12,000,000 Black Voices* (1941), and *The Outsider* (1953). While the narrator of *American Hunger* differs in many ways from both Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon, he, like them, is clearly one of the migrants spoken for in Wright's sociological text. As such, we know that he lives amidst the same environmental conditions, suffers from the same socio-economic inequities, and more likely than not, would never have chosen to describe this environment as a "liberating frontier." Again, city-life surely offered African Americans certain opportunities previously unobtainable in the agrarian South, but the continued willingness on the part of critics to allow these particular features to completely overshadow Wright's elaborate and incisive urban critique is not only short-sighted, but—more importantly—seems to be the result and vehicle of a clear-cut

ideology intent on burying the reality of an ongoing, institutionalized strand of American racism.

Contrary to popular belief, *American Hunger* was not written to celebrate the northern city as the site of African American redemption. In fact, Wright's representations of urban America throughout his autobiography closely resemble the settings described in *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, and *12,000,000 Black Voices*. Rather than treat the text separately from Wright's other work, *American Hunger* (and the representations of urban space found throughout it) should be read as an intricate part of the writer's overarching project, which I will hereby refer to as his critical urbanism. By approaching this very sensitive material through various forms and genres (fiction, sociology, photographs, and of course through autobiography), Wright aimed to deliver his criticism to a wide-ranging audience. Collectively, Wright's fiction, autobiography, and sociological texts aim to expose the very processes of urban production, whereby the city itself is not only a product deliberately developed unequally, but also a vehicle for the propagation of racial oppression and white, hegemonic control.

Approximately twenty-seven years before Henri Lefebvre would even broach the subject of spatial non-neutrality in his groundbreaking text *The Production of Space*, Richard Wright was already demonstrating how the built environment was being used as a tool of domination and social control. The autobiography in particular is a crucial component of Wright's multi-headed urban critique as it pairs the expectations that southern black farmhands had regarding life in the North with the grim reality that actually awaited them once they arrived. If the book had been released to the public as Wright had originally intended, then it would have exposed the political conspiracy

orchestrated between government officials and private businessmen to secure a surplus of available labor. With unemployment statistics comfortably above 10% within the African American population, northern industrialists could keep wages down and increase profits for themselves. With the second section of the autobiography removed from the manuscript, however, Wright's critique of American racism remains incomplete, and the book itself ends up reinforcing the prevailing fallacy that the North was indeed the site of African American salvation.

Although *Black Boy* was first published in 1945, it wasn't until 1991 that the Library of America finally decided to release Wright's autobiography as he had originally intended, for the first time allowing audiences to read the author's honest account of how a different, more elusive breed of racism was operating in the North than that which was overtly practiced regularly in the South.<sup>29</sup> Between 1945 and 1991, *Black Boy* concluded with the protagonist still standing on Jim Crow soil, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the freedom train headed for Chicago. Although the text vehemently denounces the American South for its apartheid structures and abusive socio-economic conditions, it also tacitly advocates that the young man's northern fantasies be taken for reality. "I dreamed of going north," recalls Wright, "and writing books and novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed" (Wright, *Black Boy*, 168). This critical point stated by Wright, that his perception of the North was inaccurate—that it "had no relation whatever to what actually existed"—gets completely overshadowed by the ebullient sense of victory and

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<sup>29</sup> "The Horror and the Glory" was finally published as *American Hunger* in 1971, but would not appear alongside "Southern Night" (*Black Boy*) in one volume until 1991.

optimism that characterizes the 1945 version's finale. By concluding on the platform of a Memphis train-station, the text implies that Wright has *made it*; that he has successfully endured the abuse of Jim Crow and left for Chicago where he will inevitably<sup>30</sup> fulfill his destiny of becoming a professional writer. Complete with "The Horror and the Glory," however, the autobiography turns out to be not only a sharp condemnation of the American South, but more broadly, an incisive indictment of the entire nation, comprehensive in its exploration of varying forms of racism and far-reaching in its assignation of responsibility, thus prohibiting readers from being able to escape with "the consolation of tears."

Read alongside the opening pages of "The Horror and the Glory," the sense of triumph characterizing the Memphis train station scene precipitously crashes into despair. In the opening lines of the autobiography's second section, Wright alerts his reader to the fact that "My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies" (Wright, *Black Boy*, 261). Instantaneously, he realizes that the city of his dreams has little in common with "what actually existed." As he steps forth into the street, he becomes immediately overwhelmed by the constant motion of urbanization; an unfamiliar process, strikingly similar to "the active life of the great strange city" encountered by David Levinsky, in which the urban environment actually seems to be recreating itself. The "palls of gray smoke, [the] houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie" and the "flashes of steam . . . on the wide horizon," all reveal that this city is a place in a constant state of change, perpetually

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<sup>30</sup> I say "inevitably" because we read *Black Boy* with the foreknowledge of Wright's literary success.



transforming itself in accord with an agenda completely foreign to the newly arrived black migrant (Wright, *Black Boy*, 261).

After years of rigorous study and meticulous observation, Wright began to understand more clearly how the built environment was being organized and developed in order to maximize the accumulation of capital.<sup>31</sup> With his newfound understanding came the realization that urbanization was not only producing new kinds of residential, commercial, and social spaces for the sake of upper class financial gain, but most importantly, was simultaneously creating new kinds of American subjects. Specifically, Wright began to investigate how the city's ongoing production of itself was leading to the creation of new kinds of African American subjectivities, thereby initiating a discussion unlike any other which had ever preceded it; a conversation committed to understanding how the spaces we occupy help to produce the people we become.

In *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright proclaims:

Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city. . . we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were, that threw us into the scales of competition to weigh our mettle. (Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, 93)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Wright's study of Marxist theory and later urban ecology (the latter under the guidance of the University of Chicago Urban Sociologists) is well chronicled in Robert E. Washington's *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt* published by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC. in 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Unlike many of the Jews (investigated in chapter one) who had garment trade skills that helped them adapt to life in their new city, most black migrants lacked any equivalent mastery of a spatial practice that would help them adjust and put them on a path for socio-economic improvement. I address this distinction more fully in the conclusion.

When Wright says the black migrants were “utterly unprepared,” he is referring to more than simply the fact that they lacked the necessary skills and resources that would allow them to compete in the workplace. As his urban critique continues to unfold, he reveals that millions of African Americans were deliberately quartered into designated pockets of the city where their wages and expenses could best be controlled in order to prohibit any possible upward mobility, thereby preserving the much needed existence of a substantially large lower class. According to Wright, the migrant’s lack of preparation for daily life in the northern city has just as much to do with his inability to account for the spatial processes that deliberately oppress him as it does with the lack of skills which he would have needed in order to succeed in the northern economy. As Wright proclaims in *12,000,000 Black Voices*: “In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. The world moved by signs we knew. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you” (Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, 100). These “cold forces” signify the strange and evasive mechanisms which were effectively siphoning blacks into states of social inferiority. Housing conditions, unmanageably high rent prices, the oversupply of available labor, and stringent residential segregation policies were all exercised through the skillful manipulation and control of urban space. Yet because the assumption of spatial neutrality continued to dominate the ways people were inclined to think about the urban environment, these spatial practices continued to operate unimpaired, effectively creating a discourse of racial essentialism that directly supported the prevailing capitalist agenda. What Wright exposes so successfully throughout *American Hunger* is how the urban environment allows the technologies of oppression to operate unbeknownst to the untrained eye.

Shortly after describing his first few steps taken along Chicago's city streets, Wright recounts a few of his early experiences aboard the windy city's public transportation system. Shocked by the willingness of white passengers to simply share space with him, he wonders, are they even "conscious of my blackness?" (Wright, *Black Boy*, 262). But what Wright initially takes for a widespread, pervasive indifference amongst Northerners to racial differentiation, in time becomes something quite different. Together, the absence of "the old familiar signs—FOR COLORED and FOR WHITE" (Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, 99)—and the integration of public street cars contribute to the related illusions of spatial neutrality and racial equality. For all intents and purposes, the integration of public street cars and public bathroom facilities conditions the masses to remain complacent while the realities of residential segregation continue to intensify, thereby rewarding one group with the comforts and delights associated with upward mobility while the other remains condemned to a life of poverty, neglect, and degradation. At first, the nineteen year-old narrator feels reassured by the strange sense of racial tolerance exhibited by the white passengers who seem willing to share space with him. But what Wright soon realizes is that this veneer of widespread racial acceptance turns out to be nothing more than a derisive apathy which ultimately allows members of the public to complacently proceed on with their daily lives, tacitly condoning the kinds of exploitation and oppression that continue to plague the African American community. The appearance of racial equality created by the integration of public facilities masks the extensive inequities subtly reified through property management, rental policies, and the uneven geographical development of the city along racial lines.

Throughout his various urban representations, Wright explicitly exposes the non-neutrality of the city itself. Often touted as being the preeminent author to write about “the Great Migration,” Richard Wright, perhaps with more detail than any of his contemporaries, illustrates how the nation’s cities morphed to accommodate and control the millions of blacks who arrived between the years of 1890 and 1930. By design, Black Belts were (under)developed within each and every major northern metropolis. Buildings formerly occupied by upper and middle class whites were abandoned and turned over to real estate conglomerates that had the foresight to convert these individual residences into tenement houses, in some cases allowing them to quadruple their earnings.<sup>33</sup> Desperate for housing, newly arrived migrants had little choice but to pay inflated rent prices for overcrowded, neglected, and often times, rat-infested properties. Real estate companies conspired with one another to make sure that they would only rent to blacks within these clearly demarcated areas, thus allowing them to control supply and demand and in turn inflate their own profit margins. Although the North lacked the Jim Crow signs that overtly sanctioned segregation, the teaming of uneven geographical development with predatory real estate policies institutionalized a form of racism that in many cases continues to quarter blacks into the substratum of America’s prevailing socio-economic hierarchy.

In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton argue that the racial isolation of blacks in America is primarily a twentieth century phenomenon, pointing out that prior to 1900, in both the

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<sup>3333</sup> Gilbert Osofsky’s *Harlem: The Making of the Ghetto* (1962) and Alan Spear’s *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1880-1920* (1967) offer historical accounts of ghetto production in the twentieth century.

North and the South, “blacks and whites lived side by side,” though of course not equally (Massey and Denton 17). After foregrounding the production of African American ghettos in “the industrialization of America and the concomitant movement of blacks from farms to cities,” Massey and Denton make it clear that the “evolution of segregated, all-black neighborhoods . . . was not the result of impersonal market forces. . . [but of] a series of well-defined institutional practices, private behaviors, and public policies by which whites sought to contain growing urban black populations” (Massey and Denton 10). While they never explicitly refer to capitalism’s need for a surplus army of available labor or for the production of particular niche markets (concepts this chapter will address shortly), Massey and Denton do highlight personal prejudices, racial violence, the “utility [of black migrants] as strikebreakers” (28), the demand for labor created by “the outbreak of WWI” (28), “the formation of neighborhood improvement associations” (35), and the implementation of “restrictive covenants” (37) as critical factors and practices that are responsible for the production of black ghettos.<sup>34</sup>

Massey and Denton not only agree with Wright that the residential isolation of blacks in northern cities is attributable to the “deliberate decisions [of white Americans] to deny blacks access to urban housing markets and to reinforce their spatial segregation” (19), but also that “residential segregation is the institutional apparatus that supports other

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<sup>34</sup> As Massey and Denton point out, “neighborhood ‘improvement associations’” were “ostensibly chartered for the purpose of promoting neighborhood security and property values” (35). The “principle *raison d’être*,” however, “was the prevention of black entry and maintenance of the color line” (35). *American Apartheid* offers more explanation on the subject. Secondly, Massey and Denton also explain that “restrictive covenants” were “contractual agreements among property owners stating that they would not permit a black to own, occupy, or lease their property. Those signing the covenant bound themselves and their heirs to exclude blacks from the covered area for a specified period of time. . . . A typical covenant lasted twenty years and required the assent of 75% of the property owners to become enforceable” (36).

racially discriminatory processes and binds them together into a coherent and uniquely effective system of racial subordination” (8). Like *American Apartheid*, Wright’s work demonstrates that “racial segregation—and its characteristic institutional form, the black ghetto—are the key structural factors responsible for the perpetuation of black poverty in the United States” (Massey and Denton 9). The key difference between the two, however, is that Wright is much more explicit in identifying the macro-economic intent behind the production of black ghettos, whereas Massey and Denton tend to focus on personal prejudices and the profit gains motivating individual capitalists to segregate and exploit black residents.

Massey and Denton actually seem to take a phrase right out of Wright’s work when they state that the “shift of blacks from south to north and from farm to city radically transformed the form, nature, and substance of African American life in the United States” (18). In addition to exposing the intent underscoring structural aspects of urbanization, Wright pays particularly close attention to the social and psychological effects that these processes have on the individual and the collective consciousness of the society at large. As Robert Park, the highly esteemed sociologist and one time mentor to Wright, once wrote:

For the city and the urban environment represent man’s most consistent and, on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself. (Park 3)

Although Wright would agree that “in making the city man has remade himself,” his representations of urbanization and urban life indicate that the ruling class hegemony has

had a more clear “sense of the nature of” its “task” than Park is willing to admit. The theoretical differences between Park and Wright are significant, and I will return to them shortly, but for now it will suffice to say that both men make a clear link between urban development and subject formation. For Wright, beneath the illusion of spatial neutrality, the city plays a pivotal role in the social construction of race, the subsequent exploitation of particular groups of people, the shaping of individual consciousness, and the creation of specific behavior patterns; in short, for Wright, the city stands as a primary instrument in the processes that transform individuals into much sought after subjects. Although one may argue that Wright successfully conveys these principles in *Native Son* and *12,000,000 Black Voices*, the mediums of these two texts—the pulp novel and the sociological text, respectively—make the delivery of his spatial critique much less explicit and/or far-reaching than his complete autobiography would have. The extreme violence, graphic sexuality, and gripping suspense that characterize *Native Son* attract most people’s attention, and although Wright meticulously illustrates the spatial dynamics that facilitate the plot’s unfolding action, it should come as no surprise that the impact of these dynamics remains gravely overlooked. With *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright delivers his urban critique with just as much detail and force as he does with *American Hunger*. The primary difference is that the latter would have reached a much larger readership than the former, as autobiographies—especially those written by celebrities (which Wright surely was by 1945)—sold overwhelmingly better than sociological documents.

What I am suggesting is that “The Horror and the Glory” was deliberately omitted from Wright’s autobiography because of its subversive and truthful representations of

early twentieth century urban America. According to Michel Fabre in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, the Book-of-the-Month Club thought that *American Hunger* would be a more cohesive and unified read if it just concentrated on Wright's childhood and adolescence in Mississippi and Tennessee.<sup>35</sup> But Wright was not striving for cohesiveness and unification when he juxtaposed the northern section sharply against his struggle for survival in the Jim Crow South, because plain and simply, cohesiveness and unification did not characterize the migration experience. The radical break between "Southern Night" and "The Horror and the Glory" represents what Wright saw as imperative; that we read the overwhelming hope in northern salvation alongside the cold realities of exploitation, oppression, and despair that actually awaited Southern blacks upon their arrival. For Wright, each section needs to inform the other; "Southern Night" provides the reader with a sense of the shared consciousness, desperate hope, and lack of preparation common to millions of blacks who were eagerly rushing to the North, while "The Horror and the Glory" demonstrates how that hope was exploited and manipulated for socio-economic reasons that end up reinforcing racial injustice and preserving white, hegemony.

As a result, in 1945, the part of the autobiography that was set in the South was published under the title *Black Boy*<sup>36</sup> to public and critical acclaim. But despite the

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<sup>35</sup> A more thorough analysis of the negotiations around *Black Boy* can be found in Laurence Cossu-Beaumont et Claire Parfait, « Book History and African American Studies », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2009, mis en ligne le 23 juin 2009, Consulté le 02 octobre 2010. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/4280>

<sup>36</sup> When Wright agreed to publish his autobiography without the "The Horror and the Glory," he did so under the impression that Harper was going to pick up the excluded portion and eventually publish it on its own. With the hope that the two portions would one day be reunited into its original, intentional form, Wright decided to change the title of the segment to be published from *American Hunger* to *Black Boy*. For Wright, *American Hunger* represented both his experiences as a black youth and as a young man living



book's success, Wright continued to feel dissatisfied. Contrary to what the people at Harper had led him to believe, they never intended to publish the remaining section as a book on its own and only later justified their decision by saying that "The Horror and the Glory" was simply too brief. Wright managed to publish part of it as an article for *Atlantic Monthly*,<sup>37</sup> but the editors of that publication only selected the segments that deal explicitly with the Communist Party, thus ignoring much of the urban material that constitutes the most valuable aspect of Wright's social critique. Disturbed by the silencing of his urban analysis, Richard Wright immediately set forth to compose his introduction to Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake's landmark study, *Black Metropolis* (1945).<sup>38</sup> In this brilliant introduction he acknowledges many of his most important influences (namely the sociologists on staff at the University of Chicago) and stresses the urgency with which we must all begin to understand the relationship between urbanization, poverty, race, crime, and disease. Although he had already published *Native Son* and *12,000,000 Black Voices*, two texts that deal explicitly with racial injustice in the North, the stipulated removal of "The Horror and the Glory" from his autobiography must have reinforced his sense that the effects of uneven geographical development and African American exploitation continued to be widely misunderstood and, for many profiteering from what was going on, conveniently overlooked.

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south, as well as north, of the Mason-Dixon Line. *Black Boy* on the other hand, seemed more appropriate for a text that was going to conclude with the protagonist still in a stage of adolescence, unexposed to the realities of Northern city-life or the personal transition that such a move would require.

<sup>37</sup> The article was called "I Tried to be a Communist" and was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 174, No. 2 August 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Both texts deal explicitly with the organization of space, the ownership of property, and the results that these tendencies have on people.

The editors of the Book-of-the-Month Club may have actually believed, as Fabre suggests, that the two sections of *American Hunger* were disjointed to a fault, but it seems more likely that an editorial decision of such magnitude would have more to do with an opposition to content than with a seemingly innocuous aesthetic concern that in being acted upon effectively transformed the mission of the text. In addition to Wright's suggestion that we allow our understandings of black life both in the North and in the South to inform one another,<sup>39</sup> the abrupt juxtaposition in the narrative between the two sections actually functions formally to help dramatize the radical transition experienced by so many migrants upon their urban arrival. The train ride itself would have taken less than one day, yet the emotional and psychological transition inherent in a move from the rural to the urban involved what Wright describes as a traumatic move to "a new and terrifying plane of consciousness" (*12,000,000 Black Voices*, 99). In his original manuscript, Wright represents the quickness of the trip by separating the two sections with one blank page. The emotional zenith of "Southern Night" nearly crashes into the despair introduced in the opening lines of "The Horror and the Glory," thus creating an aesthetic for the reader that mirrors the physical and psychological transition experienced by Wright himself.

It is hard to believe that an editorial board of such distinction would fail to see the value in an aesthetic that so successfully places the reader in the mind and body of the migrant, especially when the content of the text itself possesses such subversive

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<sup>39</sup> Life in the South is partially shaped by images and fantasies of the north, while the north, as I will show in more detail shortly, is literally produced by the influx of millions of southern workers with southern mentalities.

potential.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the pages of *American Hunger*, Wright not only invites the reader in to experience this remarkable transition, but he also skillfully illustrates how severe forms of racism continue to thrive through uneven geographical development. By exposing these ongoing inequities, Wright began to tell a very different story of African American experience than the one that white America had grown accustomed to accept all too comfortably.

For roughly fifty years prior to the release of *Black Boy*, Booker T. Washington retained the title of being the preeminent African American autobiographer. In *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington tells of his own personal struggles and accomplishments, all the while encouraging blacks to accept a certain degree of social, civil, and political inequality in exchange for low-level economic opportunities and the chance to live non-violently alongside their white counterparts. Washington's map for African American success worked ideally alongside the northern capitalist agenda as the two both advocated that southern black farmhands migrate to the north to work in factories where they could undoubtedly create new, better lives for themselves amidst widespread racial tolerance and a very real opportunity to attain the American Dream.<sup>41</sup> In *American Hunger*, however, Wright discredits and dismantles that ideology.<sup>42</sup> By drawing attention to a host of socio-spatial mechanisms that reinforce racial difference and fuel further exploitation, Wright exposes the technologies of domination and the discretely embedded

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<sup>40</sup> It is subversive because it exposes the fallacy behind spatial neutrality and reveals how spatial organization and production, that is to say how uneven geographical development, supports and reifies preexisting power relations.

<sup>41</sup> They needed cheap labor to man the hundreds of new factories that they were opening in New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and of course Chicago.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Ellison reiterates this critique just five years later with *Invisible Man*.

power dynamics that were operating in (and through) Chicago and New York during the twenties, thirties, and forties. Washington's prescriptions earned him seats at the most prestigious social, political, and business tables in America. Morally and fiscally supported by men like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and C.P. Huntington, Washington continued to propagate his message, urging blacks to content themselves with segregation, social inequality, and the menial jobs made available to them. Wright's take on things was not nearly as palatable to those in power as his predecessor's, and instead of having his texts embraced by the northern white elite, he faced heavy censorship. The Book-of-the-Month Club's aesthetic justifications for removing "The Horror and the Glory" mask what could only have been their political concerns, as Wright's urban critique threatened to expose the parasitic socio-economic practices operating daily throughout the cities of the North.

Many readers familiar with *American Hunger* will contend that Wright's publishers primarily objected to his Communist material rather than his critical urbanism. After all, he had been an active member of the Communist Party, and by the time he started to write his autobiography, World War II was winding down, and American anxiety over the spread of Communism, both at home and abroad, was rapidly on the rise. But throughout "The Horror and the Glory," Wright's representations of the Party are anything but sympathetic. Most of his attention on this subject is spent attacking the Communists for their opportunism, lack of intellectual sophistication, and propensity for

preying on the most vulnerable and desperate members of American society.<sup>43</sup> Referring specifically to the African American Communists with whom he came into contact,

Wright argues:

a day's observation of their activities was sufficient to reveal all their thought processes. An hour's listening disclosed the fanatical intolerance of minds sealed against new ideas, new facts, new feelings, new attitudes, new hints at ways to live. They denounced books they had never read, people they had never known, ideas they could never understand, and doctrines whose names they could not pronounce. Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met Communism. (Wright, *Black Boy*, 296)

Wright clearly objects to the manipulative tactics and politics employed by the Communist Party and makes no attempt to conceal those feelings. Yet despite his dissatisfaction with Party practices, he embraced Marx's critique of capitalism and used it to construct his many representations of the city as both "a social product" and a "shaping force" (Soja 7). Like many of the most important postMarxist theorists, Wright read Marx voraciously and used his theories as a set of critical tools rather than as a prescriptive code that would hijack his intellectual perspective. Upon identifying how Marxist thought informs Wright's urban criticism, one will begin to see that Wright formulated what Andy Merrifield calls his very own breed of "metro-Marxism:" a complex, interdisciplinary social critique that accounts for the non-neutrality of the built

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<sup>43</sup> Although he does address his participation in the John Reed Clubs and his early involvement with the Communist Party, he does so to point out his own opportunism and provide clear cut testimony of what he felt each organization could provide for him in his quest to pursue his dream.

environment by linking its ongoing production directly to capitalist expansion.<sup>44</sup> As such, Wright's critical urbanism poses much more of a threat to ruling class hegemony than his treatment of the Communist Party ever would have.<sup>45</sup> By centering his critique on the built environment, he proceeds to deconstruct the myth of northern salvation and effectively expose the discretely camouflaged mechanisms of power and social control operating in and through urban spaces themselves.

Although my suspicions concerning the dubious publication history of *American Hunger* may lack concrete evidence, the ideological implications of the text's twenty-six year silencing remain utterly indisputable as the myth of a messianic North continued to grow without any substantial and convincing opposition. Twenty more years elapsed before "The Horror and the Glory" was ever reunited with "Southern Night" and published in one volume as Wright had originally intended. Furthermore, the publication in *Atlantic Monthly* of the section that deals only with communism suggests that Random House was not deterred by Wright's earlier exploration of communism. This fact adds weight to my suspicion.

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<sup>44</sup> I borrow the term "metro-Marxism" from Andy Merrifield who coined it in his book by the same name to represent the "stormy" relationship between Marxism and urbanism informing the work of a number of important geographical thinkers. Merrifield acknowledges that each of the theorists he examines encounters skepticism from Marxists and/or urbanists who question the validity of the other's methodology. For Merrifield, however, it is precisely the "heterodoxy" of an urbanism informed by Marxist theory that makes each of the thinkers he examines a "better urbanist . . . [and] also a more imaginative Marxist" (Merrifield, *Metromarxism*, 1). Richard Wright's approach to the capitalist city should be seen as an example of the "metromarxism" Merrifield examines.

<sup>45</sup> Wright's indictment of the Communist Party throughout the book would not invoke hegemonic concern, as it is just that, an indictment; a display of the Party's hypocrisy and opportunism. Given the fact that *Atlantic Monthly* was only interested in the scenes dealing directly with Party, it is even more unlikely that Wright's Communist material influenced the Club's editorial decision to remove the latter section of the book. Furthermore, Communism was a perfect tool for the ruling class in its attempt to control public thought and public behavior by evoking fear.

Regardless of whether the editorial board based its decision on an oversight or a desire to quiet a potentially subversive document, the end result still remains the same: Wright's autobiographical urban critique was effectively silenced for approximately forty-five years. The point worth stressing is that the silencing itself is indicative of a much larger and more pressing socio/cultural shortcoming whereby we fail to acknowledge the significance of the spaces we occupy as vastly influential conduits of power. In 1991, "Southern Night" and "The Horror and the Glory" were finally reunited in the Perennial Classics edition of *Black Boy*, and yet, Wright's urban critique has still not received the kind of critical attention that it demands.

As unfortunate as it was, the removal of "The Horror and the Glory" from Wright's autobiography represents only one indication of how neglected his critical urbanism has been. The remainder of this chapter will focus more fully on the roots of Wright's urban critique, pointing out significant details that mark his critical approach as being different from the sociologists with whom he is so often associated. After highlighting some of these pivotal differences, I will then implement the kind of spatially informed literary practice which I have been calling for, focusing specifically on the ways in which the city impacts the action, the characters, the plot, and the denouement of Wright's most influential novel, *Native Son*.

*Finance Capitalism, Urbanization, and the Repressive Forces of Urban Space*

Readers of Wright's work, regardless of whether they consider themselves his biggest fans or his most ardent critics, continue to overlook the most valuable insights latent in the author's urban critique. Specifically, for Wright's most adversarial readers, this oversight permits them to confidently charge the author with lacking artistic sophistication. In "Many Thousands Gone," for example, James Baldwin attacks his one-time benefactor for creating an inadequate protagonist in *Bigger Thomas*, arguing that he had created the "incarnation of a myth" rather than a representation of a real man. Baldwin continues to denounce both *Native Son* as a work of fiction and its central character by arguing:

It is remarkable that, though we follow him step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when this journey is ended as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him. Despite the details of slum life which we are given, I doubt that anyone who has thought about it, disengaging himself from sentimentality, can accept this most essential premise of the novel for a moment. (Baldwin, *Notes to a Native Son*, 35)

By reducing Wright's comprehensive examination of the city down into a few "details of slum life," Baldwin prohibits himself from ever being able to recognize, not only the social dynamics which Wright so skillfully examines, but also the most human elements of *Bigger's* persona. What Baldwin takes for *Bigger's* lack of personal depth is actually an abyss of psychological confusion and existentialist angst that has been comprehensively denied expression by a world which refuses to acknowledge his fundamental humanity. Baldwin's inability—or more likely, his unwillingness—to learn



anything about Bigger and the “social dynamic which we are to believe created him” actually go hand in hand with one another; and as such, only after thoroughly exploring Wright’s representations of urban space and urban production can one begin to see more clearly Bigger’s vulnerability, impressionability, and problematic sense of his own self-worth. On the surface, he may very well seem like a social type or a metonymic symbol, but after looking more closely at the environment which produces him, one finds that within Bigger’s apparent simplicity there is a complex individual who feels compelled to take on the only form which he believes his society will recognize. In order to most effectively elaborate on this formative relationship between space and subject in Wright’s work, one must first explore the author’s complicated account of urban space itself, and then proceed to investigate how various stages of urban development impact the individuals involved.

As mentioned earlier, Wright’s most adversarial critics are not the only one’s guilty of neglecting his critical urbanism.<sup>46</sup> Even those who have been most outspoken about his social and literary importance have failed to acknowledge the value of his spatial examinations, thereby suggesting that we as a culture still lack the proper sensibility to adeptly account for the significance of power as it functions in and through the spaces we occupy.

Critics who have chosen to focus on Wright’s critical urbanism often assume that his perspective simply mirrors the theories formulated by the social scientists with whom he collaborated throughout the mid 1930s at the University of Chicago. These men, led

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<sup>46</sup> Baldwin stands as the most famous and contentious of Wright’s critics, and as I emphasize throughout this dissertation, his criticism must be read in light of the personal issues he had with Wright.

by chief sociologist Robert E. Park, developed the theory of urban ecology which proposes that cities are like natural environments, organized and produced by organic forces closely akin to those associated with Darwinian evolution. Collectively, the members of the University of Chicago School of Sociology were some of the first scholars to persuasively argue for race as a social construct as opposed to a biological fact. Although the influence that these men had on Richard Wright has been well documented and repeatedly referred to, perhaps by no one with more consistency and import than Wright himself, that does not mean that he accepted all of their propositions wholeheartedly and uncritically. If we continue to assume that Wright's understanding of the city is simply synonymous with that of his mentors, then we will certainly inhibit ourselves from ever being able to realize some of his most important contributions.

In both *American Hunger* and his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright repeatedly makes it clear how much he values the guidance, insight, and inspiration that he received from the sociologists who mentored him. Because of these recurring references, Wright scholars tend to treat his urban representations as if they were simply fictional enactments of an inherited perspective. The University of Chicago Urban Sociologists clearly had a profound impact on Wright, and although Wright's treatment of the city surpasses the limited constructions proposed by these men, even a cursory examination of his relationship with the University of Chicago sheds light on Wright's concerns, what he learned, and ultimately, where he broke away from the conceptual frameworks formulated by his mentors.

In 1930, less than three years after he arrived in Chicago, a social worker named Mary Wirth saw something in Wright that made her think that he would benefit from

meeting her husband, Louis Wirth, the prominent University of Chicago urban sociologist. What she had hoped would lead to some kind of employment opportunity for the young man actually blossomed into a number of rich, collaborative relationships between Wright and various faculty members and graduate students that helped cultivate the young writer's intellect and provide him with "a quota of the inspiration" that he would need in order to write his most influential books (Wright, *Black Metropolis*, xviii). In addition to Wirth's *Urbanism as a Way of Life*, a text that would greatly influence Wright's understanding of what it now meant for him to be living within this new and "unreal city," the aspiring author would peruse the writings and findings of Park, Redfield, Burgess, Horace Cayton, and E. Franklin Frazier, as well. Their research helped open Wright's eyes to how extensively one's environment influences one's subjectivity. The tables and statistics compiled by these men began to relieve much of the confusion and shame that, as a result of his lack of understanding, had continued to mount throughout his entire life. As an outsider looking in on the University of Chicago, Wright learned from first-hand experience that even a mild awareness of these social, economic, and cultural forces could make all of the difference in terms of how one sees oneself, as well as how one makes sense of his/her own place in the world. With books like *Native Son*, *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), *12,000,000 Black Voices*, and *The Outsider*, Wright aimed to spread his newfound understanding of the relationship between the city and the individual in order to ameliorate the rampant anger and desperate frustration that he had known all too well and that he was well aware continued to debilitate too many.

In *American Hunger*, Wright alludes to the impact that the Chicago School had on his development when he confesses:

The most important discoveries came when I veered from fiction proper into the field of psychology and sociology. I ran through volumes that bore upon the causes of my conduct and the conduct of my family. I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime, relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment, relating racial insecurities to the conflicts between whites and blacks. (Wright, *Black Boy*, 278)

Although he does not say so explicitly in this segment, these volumes of tables that he studied were handed to him directly from the sociologists who formulated them. Their extensive research and personal tutelage introduced Wright to the reality that the city itself houses a host of formative power dynamics that directly shape the personalities, physical conditions, and mental states of its inhabitants.

In addition to providing Wright with some of the statistical material that would help constitute his plots for various projects, the Chicago School of Urban Sociology also taught him a lesson in literary form. Like his Chicago contemporaries, Saul Bellow, Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell, Wright learned from these sociologists that “sincere art and honest science were not far apart, [and] that each could enrich the other” (Wright, *Black Metropolis*, xviii). The facts and findings published by the sociologists revealed to Wright that there were a host of socio-economic processes constantly at play that were primarily responsible for the current conditions plaguing the African American community. Wright discovered that in its attempt to understand complex social structures, sociology focused specifically on “the processes and dynamics which take place in that structure” (Wright, *Black Metropolis*, xx). As time continued to pass and

Wright continued to pay more attention to these processes, he began to see more clearly how urban spaces themselves were being developed, destroyed, and arranged in order to facilitate and sustain class division and racial inequality.

In “Sociology of an Existence,” Carla Cappetti examines how the methodological techniques employed by scientists drastically influenced the literary forms produced by Wright, Bellow, Dreiser, and Farrell. Specifically in reference to *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, she cites the “informant” and the “participant observer” as two methodological approaches that Wright borrowed from his mentors, thus, in her opinion, making his work a perfect textual example of the emerging “tendency towards a more objective literature which rediscovered the individual’s unbreachable ties with his or her culture and environment” (Cappetti 25). Perhaps more so than Farrell, Bellow, or Dreiser, Wright emphasizes the impact of these “unbreachable ties” in order to expose, what for him must have been the most pressing social injustice: namely, the continued subjugation of blacks in America. By centering each narrative around the experiences of one individual protagonist, Wright creates novels and an autobiography that closely resemble, in form, the case studies compiled by his sociological mentors.

Before elaborating on how Wright makes use of these two sociological concepts to organize and structure his work, Cappetti suggests that this well documented relationship between Wright and the Chicago School has been little more than “an obligatory point of reference for Wright’s biographers” (Cappetti 25). Although she clearly takes the subject of Wright’s sociological influences much further than her predecessors, Cappetti fails to acknowledge that these other critics did have a major influence on how people read and contextualize Wright’s work, even if—as she

suggests—they have done nothing more than simply summarize “the facts, dates, and names of his sociological readings and friendships” (Cappetti 25). Scholars in the past may not have pinpointed the particular concepts that Cappetti discusses, but in consistently returning to this relationship they have manufactured a literary legacy whereby treatments of Wright’s urbanism—a topic rarely explored at all—have been completely dominated by a sociological template, a template that Cappetti continues to reinforce.

Wright’s urbanism can best be understood, not by tracing Wright’s texts back to the information and methodologies that he inherited from the Chicago School, but rather from his theoretical break from those influences. The influence of sociology on Wright has been so *overly* emphasized—even if only superficially—that it has come to dominate any discourse related to his handling of urban space. This is not to say that the statistics and research failed to enlighten the young writer or that they were not originally responsible for turning him onto the city as an object in need of his criticism; Wright himself repeatedly points out that they did. But it is vital to point out that his ambivalent treatment of the city differs significantly from the models of urban ecology formulated by the sociologists aforementioned. That is to say that he was inspired and educated by the Chicago School, but was not shaped by it. The all too common tendency to read his representations of urbanization solely through a lens of urban ecology ends up limiting the scope of his socio-cultural critique, and as such, reduces the significance of his contribution to urban studies in general. Although the affinity between sociology and literature is blatant throughout Wright’s work, there are also some major points of distinction that mark his texts as being different from the sociological case studies that

many critics treat them as being. The key to understanding Wright's urbanism does not lie nearly as much within the writings of the Chicago sociologists as within his departure from them.

Wright's differences with the Chicago School have received very little attention, but in an interesting little anecdote taken from his own autobiography, Horace Cayton alludes to this possible gap, if only for a brief moment. Referring to the time that he introduced Richard Wright to Robert E. Park, Cayton reports:

One of the last visits I had with [Robert] Park was a few years ago when he had dinner in my apartment in Chicago. After dinner Richard Wright was to come by, as Park had expressed an interest in meeting him. . . . [Park] was old by that time, way up in the 70's, and it was difficult for him to get around. When Wright walked into the room Park began a painful struggle to get out of his chair. Wright impulsively asked him not to rise, and I, too went over to protest. He muttered between pants, "I want to get up; help me Cayton." After Park had struggled to his feet he extended his hand to Wright and said, "I want to shake hands with a great writer. I don't agree with much that you write but it's honest and great writing. (qtd.in Bone, 446)

If Wright's urban representations were designed in accord with the tenets of urban ecology, than Park's comment about not agreeing "with much that you write" should give one pause, to say the least. Was Wright misinterpreting what these men were reporting? Could he have misunderstood their methodologies, their data, and/or their theories?

The answer to all of these questions is quite simply, no. Wright understood exactly what these men were doing, but he disagreed ardently with some of the most fundamental precepts of Park's theory. Originally formulated by Park and fellow sociologist Ernest W. Burgess, the theory of urban ecology states:

cities were environments like those found in nature, governed by many of the same forces of Darwinian evolution that affected natural ecosystems. The most important of these forces was competition. Park and Burgess suggested that the struggle for scarce urban resources, especially land, led to competition between groups and ultimately to the division of the urban space into distinctive ecological niches or ‘natural areas’ in which people shared similar social characteristics because they were subjected to the same ecological pressures. (Brown)

Although Wright would undoubtedly agree that people living under the same socio-economic conditions would of course share “similar social characteristics,” he could not conceive of ghettos and Black Belts as being derivative of any natural process.

Competition for “scarce urban resources” “between groups” was a blatant fallacy when it came to any consideration of the millions of blacks who were migrating to the North, because when they arrived they were effectively prohibited from participating in many of the educational and occupational spheres that would have equipped them with the skills and finances that they would have needed to compete. Furthermore, wealthy entrepreneurs already controlled the markets of land and property ownership, and as a result, made any realistic upward mobility for the majority of newly arrived black migrants implausible, if possible at all. As Wright states rather directly in *12,000,000*

*Black Voices*:

the absolute, as opposed to relative, truth was that Northern racism was every bit as virulent as the Southern strain. . . . Black people were crucified in masse on a Cross of Gold—segregated into high-priced run-down ghettos by landlords, preyed upon by cynical businessmen. (Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, x)

Contrary to what Park and Burgess suggest, Wright argues that neighborhoods divided along ethnic or racial lines do not result from “natural” processes or competitive struggles, but from a host of carefully designed and deliberately implemented policies



that effectively quarter members of particular groups into clearly demarcated neighborhoods.

In *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago 1890-1919*, Robin Bachin explains how the “theories of the emerging Chicago school of sociology” were used to inform the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, which was created to “investigate the events” which led up to the riot of 1919. Bachin points out that these sociologists “helped denaturalize ethnic difference and began to understand race as a sociological construct rather than a biological fact” (Bachin 299). It is on the basis of discrediting essentialist conceptions of racial difference that Park and his colleagues made their most valuable theoretical contributions. And although Richard Wright found himself empowered by their arguments, he also began to drift in a slightly different direction, spotting connections between what he found most valuable in sociology and the Marxist theory that he had become increasingly familiar to him due to his participation in the John Reed’s Clubs and the Party itself.

As Bachin reports, the Chicago school “drew a connection between environment, spatial relations, and racial and ethnic identity,” and based its understanding of these connections on a framework of “human ecology,” developed earlier by Durkhiem and Tonnies. They argued that the city was home to a:

‘race relations cycle’ [that] included competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. They posited an evolutionary understanding of the role that migration would play in creating order from differentiation. Their faith in the inevitable cycle of integration and assimilation to smooth over social conflict in America led many critics to charge them with conservatism in the face of increasing prejudice and intolerance. (Bachin 300)

Wright's disagreements with the Chicago sociologists closely resemble the charges made by the critics that Bachin mentions above. He was much less optimistic than his mentors about urban development facilitating an "inevitable" movement towards social justice, and instead argued that the city had become a primary tool for exacerbating inequality and legitimizing "policies designed to divide workers and generate racial hostility to forestall union gains" (Bachin 288).

Wright's Marxism is essential to any understanding of his theoretical break from the Chicago School and their adherence to the precepts of urban ecology. In accordance with the principles of evolutionary progress, the city, for Park, stands as a "liberating force," where cultures meet, religions mesh, and racial difference dissolves into assimilation. Robert Bone argues that for Park, "The city is not merely a different sort of place than the village; it is higher in the evolutionary scale" (Bone 455). Although Park notes that setbacks will inevitably occur due to the fact that some people will find themselves ill-equipped and unprepared for the new "demands of a complex technological society," he remains optimistic overall, citing urban diversity as the phenomenon that will facilitate "the humanistic dream of a raceless society" (Bone 456). Wright's "metro-Marxist" perspective replaces this meta-narrative of human progress with something that looks a lot more like historical materialism, resulting in a conception of the city that is much more ambivalent and less celebratory.

And here arises the predominant break between the Chicago sociologists and Richard Wright. It is not that Wright objected to the idea of a color-blind future or that he failed to see the possibility of increased assimilation for diverse ethnicities within the city limits. The primary difference between Wright and the Chicago sociologists stems

from the fact that the former's understanding of urban production did not gel with the evolutionary model of "progress" proposed by Park and Burgess. Instead of viewing the city as a more highly evolved site which will inevitably breed human equality, Wright encourages us to see it both physically and procedurally; that is to say, as a form and a process that deepens and proliferates pre-existing inequities.

In addition to what he learned via his involvement with a number of left-wing organizations, Wright's Marxist education came largely from his own personal readings of Karl Marx, Joseph Stalin, and left-wing magazines like *Masses* and *International Literature*. Unfortunately, the impact that these materials had on Wright has received very little attention by literary critics, including Cappetti herself, who treats the Communist Party in *American Hunger* solely as a "formidable institution" against which Wright struggles to define himself, and not as the catalyst for his critique of capitalism that would penetrate his sociological influences and continue to inform his urban critique (Cappetti 25). Instead of attending to the intellectual contributions that his affiliation with the Party may have yielded, still other critics tend to focus exclusively on the soap-opera-like gossip that surrounds anyone mentioned in the same sentence as the Communists. Wright's mere affiliation with the Party receives the majority of critical attention at the expense of attending to the most substantial and subversive aspects of his socio-economic critique.<sup>47</sup> Although Wright condemns the Party throughout his autobiography for its lack of intellectual sophistication and for its predatory practices, he does admit that members of the group seemed to "have access to a fund of knowledge

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<sup>47</sup> For example Cappetti will even divert her attention from Wright's relationship to his environment, a relationship she suggests "is at the backbone" of his work, in favor of his relationship to this "one formidable institution" that has much less influence than the city itself, which receives next to no attention.

denied to ordinary men” (Wright, *Black Boy*, 295). This “fund of knowledge” ultimately helped shape Wright’s urban representations into something remarkably similar to what Lefebvre proposes in *The Production of Space*. For both men, the ongoing process of urban production:

continues to be buried under idealized evolutionary schemata in which change just seems to happen, or arises to punctuate some ineluctable march towards ‘progress.’ This evolutionary idealism disguises the rootedness of restructuring in crisis and in the competitive conflict between old and new, between an inherited and a projected order. (Lefebvre 159)

What Wright exposes through his narratives and what Lefebvre asserts in his prose is that urban restructuring does not necessarily stem from “crisis” or “competitive conflict” as much as it does from the need of a constantly growing system to occupy space and produce spaces that can help the system expand. The development and deterioration of the built environment that we see in the different scenes of *Native Son* is not caused by a particular crisis or true “competitive conflict,” but by the vested financial interests of men like Henry Dalton who seek to profit from new production on the one hand and strategic underdevelopment on the other.

Lefebvre continues along these lines, pointing out:

Already in Marx’s time there were plenty of people ready to sing paeans to the progress achieved through economic, social or political rationality. They readily envisaged such a rationality as the way forward to a ‘better’ reality. To them, Marx responded by showing that what they took for progress was merely a growth in the productive forces which, so far from solving so called ‘social’ and ‘political’ problems, was bound to exacerbate them. (Lefebvre 82)

For the purposes of this exploration, Park, Burgess, and many of their fellow sociologists may be aligned with the singers of paeans that Lefebvre refers to, as both groups hold firmly onto a belief that urban development coincides with evolutionary progress, and as such, will inevitably move towards the eradication of social injustice. In *Native Son*, by illustrating many faces of uneven geographical development as they were unfolding simultaneously in various sections of the greater Chicago area, Wright reveals that what many were taking for progress was really just an expansion in the productive forces that were increasingly shaping and being shaped by the built environment itself. Furthermore, instead of actually “solving [the] so called ‘social’ and ‘political’ problems,” the ongoing transformation of the built environment was actually intensifying them. And what most individuals have the toughest time digesting is that the intensification of segregation and social inequality resulting from urban development was not at all natural, but the result of a carefully executed strategy aimed at reproducing pre-existing socio-economic conditions and enhancing capital accumulation.

With the advent of finance capitalism in the early half of the twentieth century, urban space itself became increasingly important, not only as an instrument used to organize and control the diverse populations of migrants who were flocking to the city from across the Atlantic, as well as from the southern United States, but also as a primary means of facilitating capital accumulation. This is not to say that the built environment was not being used in both of these capacities prior to this point, but as the overall population of cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Newark all continued to escalate, it became more and more crucial for the ruling class to find new and improved ways to protect and preserve its wealth, status, and power. With the

growth of the working class came the strengthening of unions, and those atop the socio-economic hierarchy began to rely more and more on space itself as a device that could effectively extinguish resistance, fragment the working class, and reinforce racial and ethnic divisions. Harkening back to chapter two, one may recall Harvey's assertion that "capitalism has always thrived on the production of difference" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 123). In this particular case, the spatial coercion of racial and ethnic communities into well defined neighborhoods helped disband proletarian activity, not only by breaking down the preexisting unity amongst workers across ethnic lines, but by pitting these groups against one another in competition for the sparse resources and scarce opportunities that the upper class made available.<sup>48</sup>

According to Edward Soja, "more than ever before, there was a need to intervene to reorganize urban space and to make urban systems function more effectively for the accumulation of capital and management of social unrest. This brought finance capitalism into the planning of urban space" (Soja 101). The importance of finance capital continued to escalate throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century—and even more so after the Great Depression and World War II—as it "became clear that imperialist expansion and corporate monopolies alone would not eliminate class conflict and economic crisis" (Soja 101). In addition to becoming a lucrative source of capital accumulation, finance capital helped to enhance the reproduction of "labor power and the social order," while it simultaneously facilitated the ongoing "social production of urbanized space" (Soja 101).

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<sup>48</sup> Note how this competition differs from a real competitive struggle for urban resources and properties. Those at the bottom of the food chain could not compete with the people who owned their properties, but with fellow renters who were more or less in the same boat.

In *Native Son*, Wright draws connections between the increased importance of finance capitalism during the first half of the twentieth century, uneven geographical development, hegemonic efforts to thwart union activity, and the socio-spatial construction of race. Conversely, by linking changes in the built environment with natural processes, healthy competition, and evolutionary progress, proponents of the theory of urban ecology concealed these connections and ended up reinforcing the illusion of spatial neutrality that is so crucial to the success of ongoing subjugation and exploitation.

Wright makes the relationship between uneven geographical development and the socio-spatial construction of race explicit through the development of Bigger Thomas's relationship with his employer/absentee landlord, Henry Dalton. At a time when individuals were less inclined to write about the intricacies of structural and institutional racism than they are today, Wright was writing about how property relations, the creation of niche markets, and specific economic policies were being manipulated in order to secure pre-existing power structures. Wright recognized that by segregating and exploiting African Americans, the white elite could not only create a surplus army of available labor capable of satisfying capitalism's expansionary needs, but it would also be able to bury the deliberate production of unemployment and communal desperation under an ideology of racial essentialism.

In "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Louis Althusser points out that in order for any system to survive, it must reproduce the conditions of its own existence. One of the fundamental conditions of this maxim, specifically within the context of capitalism, is that the system needs to possess a surplus of laborers who can perform the

work required during any point of sudden and profound growth. So in addition to providing finance capitalists like Dalton with exploitable clients, the millions of blacks new to the city supplied the system with the workers that it needed to sustain itself and make way for future development. The mere arrival of new bodies in such large numbers could not alone sustain the system for very long, especially if upward mobility was going to be a realistic possibility, so what was needed were mechanisms that would ensure that their roles and status within that system would remain unchanged.

Althusser proceeds to explain how such a system satisfies these labor needs by ensuring a “reproduction of its skills, and also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order” (Althusser 132). Throughout the pages of *Native Son*, Wright effectively demonstrates how these two aspects of the reproductive process are carried out through the production of urban space. For Althusser there are two types of State Apparatuses that are responsible and capable for carrying out these processes; the Repressive State Apparatus (most often associated with the police, the military, and the judicial systems as a whole) and the Ideological State Apparatus (which he locates in churches, schools, familial discourse, the media, and the arts). What Wright demonstrates is that urban spaces function as both a Repressive and an Ideological State Apparatus.

According to Althusser, Repressive State Apparatuses operate primarily through violence and only secondarily by ideology, while Ideological State Apparatuses operate predominantly via ideology and only tangentially by exercising any kind of physical violence. By showing how space itself spans these two categories, Wright demonstrates how the city maintains an available surplus army of labor and effectively reproduces the



conditions of existence that allow capitalism to survive and grow. Although these roles and functions overlap and intersect, this study will focus on the repressive aspects of urban space in this section to demonstrate how ongoing uneven geographical development teams with enforced segregation to reify pre-existing class relations. In the section that follows, the focus will shift to how the city functions ideologically to reify a racial discourse which transforms individuals into subjects who are conditioned to misrecognize their real relationships to the modes of production, and as such, freely submit “to the rules of the established order” (Althusser 132).

By drawing specific attention to the structural effects of real estate policies designed to segregate blacks from whites, Wright dismantles Park’s suggestion that neighborhoods become organized “into distinctive ecological niches or ‘natural areas’” by organic processes. For Wright, by quarantining African Americans into tightly packed, segregated corners of the city, urban space itself not only functions through acts of violence to physically confine individuals; but in detaining them there, opens up a myriad of other possible practices that reify ruling class hegemony and lower class desperation. Frustrated by the conditions of life in the ghetto and the inability to live anywhere else, Bigger replies to Gus, “Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail” (Wright, *Native Son*, 20). By comparing segregated life in the ghetto to life behind bars, Bigger draws our attention to the violent and disciplinary forces enacted by the city itself that make use of racial difference in order to preserve class division. Once an entire portion of the overall population is frozen in space, it becomes ripe for exploitation in both the realms of production and consumption, and

what Althusser demonstrates is that these two spheres inherently depend on one another. By linking class divisions with racial and ethnic differences, the system buries processes of labor reproduction beneath narratives of racial essentialism that serve as a convenient distraction. This spatially constructed discourse of race plays a major role in creating niche markets and facilitating the reproduction of labor skills to be performed by different segments of the overall population.

By matching individual earnings with sustenance expenses, those controlling wages and market prices make upward mobility for the masses of lower class workers more of an ideological distraction than an attainable reality. Wages, in other words, are determined in large part by the costs of housing, food, transportation, and other necessities required for making sure that the worker will need to return to work the following day. According to Wright, the calculated organization of the city into segregated neighborhoods facilitates class division by making members of the varying classes visually identifiable, and as such, separation that much easier. In addition to calculating these equations, capitalist Bosses could exert increased disciplinary and financial leverage as more and more migrants continued to pool into these designated areas. By having a surplus of workers and a heightened overall percentage of unemployment, these Bosses of buildings and industry were not only able to control the laws of supply and demand in the real estate market but were also able to threaten their workers with the possibility of unemployment.

Throughout the novel, Bigger Thomas moves back and forth between the impoverished sections of Chicago's Black Belt and the lush, suburban neighborhood on the periphery of the city where the Daltons reside. By juxtaposing these black spaces

against white spaces, Wright not only draws our attention to the drastic imbalance in structural quality and to the pervasiveness of racial segregation, but he actually creates a spatial dialectic that shows how these locations symbiotically relate to one another. In order to make this spatial relationship even more explicit, Wright decides that Henry Dalton will not only employ Bigger, but will also be the CEO of the company that owns the tenement building where Bigger resides with his mother and two siblings. In effect, Dalton not only controls both Bigger's wages and his potential job security, but by quartering him into a highly exploited region of the city, also indirectly levies his expenses. As the classic example of the finance capitalist, Dalton is able to accumulate wealth by simply investing his money in properties that he never has to visit, while the very policies that lead to his profit gains end up shaping the livelihood of his tenants. Although Dalton is quick to point out that he is a regular benefactor of the NAACP, a supporter of various, young black students, and a donor of ping pong tables to inner city boy's clubs, he refuses to admit that his commitment to "a code of ethics in business" is really an "agreement among realtors" designed to "keep Negroes in the South Side" (Wright, *Native Son*, 326). By renting properties to African Americans exclusively in well defined sections of the city, real estate tycoons like Dalton control the law of supply and demand, and profit by charging blacks "more rent for the same kind of houses" for which they "charge Whites" (Wright, *Native Son*, 326).

The novel itself is basically unclear as to whether Dalton is disingenuous or not when he attempts to defend his actions in court. Although Wright makes it abundantly clear that Dalton's real estate practices underlie the social injustices that his charity purports to ameliorate, there is no evidence to prove that Dalton understands this innate

contradiction. When Max asks Dalton why he rents properties to blacks exclusively in Chicago's South Side when he owns other properties in other parts of the city, Dalton responds by telling him that "Blacks are happier when they live together" (Wright, *Native Son*, 327). By justifying these racist practices in his own mind with a dubious account of voluntary segregation, Dalton essentially commits the same error as Park and Burgess. In both cases, they develop alternative explanations for how spaces become arranged and constituted, and in effect avoid confronting the injustices associated with these stages of spatial production.

Dalton's profiteering off of the Thomas family's plight actually functions as a microcosm for the more expansive phenomenon of uneven geographical development in general. As Harvey points out:

Capitalism . . . builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image. It constructs a distinctive geographical landscape, a produced space of transport and communications, of infrastructures and territorial organization, that facilitates capital accumulation during one phase of its history only to have to be torn down and reconfigured to make way for further accumulation at a later stage. (Harvey, *Space of Hope*, 54)

In addition to allowing "real estate men" like Dalton to accumulate wealth by exacting elevated rent payments, the (under)development of the Black Belt facilitates the deterioration of an entire neighborhood in order to "make way for further accumulations at a later stage." During an escape scene where Bigger attempts to avoid the police who are searching for him, he remembers "the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved" (Wright, *Native Son*, 248). Bigger's recollection of this event effectively turns the reader's attention to the reality of calculated

underdevelopment. Disenfranchised African Americans lacked the kind of political clout needed to hold landlords accountable for the upkeep of their properties. As an investor and an absentee owner of South Side residential properties, Henry Dalton stands to profit from the deterioration of his tenements on a number of levels. For one, he is in a position to exact exorbitant rent prices from desperate clients while he cuts maintenance costs and allows those properties to fall apart. Secondly, the structural decline of buildings like the one Bigger lives in helps make way for eventual renewal efforts which will inevitably lead to the further dislocation of the African American community and lucrative profit gains for finance capitalists like Dalton.

In another telling scene, shortly after Bigger confesses to Bessie that he did in fact murder Mary, he forces her to follow him into “a high, white building with empty windows” where he can rest temporarily (Wright, *Native Son*, 181). Once inside the abandoned structure, they spot “a rickety stairway,” hear “planks creak,” wave their hands to brush cobwebs away from their faces, and smell the “dank smell of rotting timber” (Wright, *Native Son*, 181). The physical deterioration surrounding them represents what was taking place in varying stages throughout Chicago’s entire South Side. After observing the physical state of the edifice, Bigger realizes:

Some rich folks lived here once. . . Rich white folks. That was the way most houses on the South Side were, ornate, old, stinking; homes once of rich white people, now inhabited by Negroes or standing dark and empty with yawning black windows. He remembered that bombs had been thrown by whites into houses like these when Negroes had first moved into the South Side. (Wright, *Native Son*, 182)

Despite Wright’s rather explicit descriptions and explanations accounting for the multiple stages of uneven geographical development, critics still tend to frame their discussions of

his cities within the meta-narrative of continuous human progress, a narrative that we have already pointed out falls in line with the theory of human ecology that Wright learned about from the Chicago sociologists.

And as if these few passages were not enough to indicate the non-neutrality of urbanization and underdevelopment, Wright juxtaposes these descriptions of the Black Belt alongside equally telling portrayals of wealthy, white suburbs, thereby creating a spatial dialectic that demonstrates how the processes unfolding in one location are inextricably connected to those taking place in the other. As Bigger soon finds out from Peggy, the Dalton family's Irish maid, Henry Dalton married into the majority of his wealth. "She [Mrs. Dalton] made him rich," informs Peggy. "She had millions when he married her. Of course, he made a lot of money himself afterwards out of real estate. But most of the money's hers" (Wright, *Native Son*, 56). Although Henry may have made some money through his real estate ventures, he never made it himself. Once again Dalton proves to be the quintessential example of the finance capitalist as we learn that he has married into the financial resources that allow him to invest in properties dispersed throughout the city. Dalton's opportunism and good fortune represent how finance capitalism, nation-wide, continued to intensify the national imbalance of wealth as it proceeded to manufacture spaces at both ends of the economic spectrum capable of fattening investor profit margins.

When Bigger enters the "quiet and spacious white neighborhood" for the first time, he finds himself in a "cold and distant world" that leaves him feeling fearful and empty (Wright, *Native Son*, 43-44). The "streets and houses" themselves seem to exude "a pride, a certainty, and a confidence" which are all diametrically opposed to the sense

of loss and defeat that emanates from Wright's representation of the Black Belt (Wright, *Native Son*, 44). The members of the wealthy, white elite who have emigrated out of the inner city have spread to areas such as this, further illustrating how changes in urban development unfold in accord with transfers in capital and ethno-centric migratory moves. As white families like the Daltons move to the suburbs to occupy and produce new spaces, they obviously take their wealth with them, transforming what had once been a space of privilege into a space ripe for exploitation. What Wright illustrates is that the development of lush suburban neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city has been made possible by the migration of millions of blacks into the spaces that were earlier occupied by those who have left.

By paying attention to how Wright's spatial representations are not "dead, inert thing[s] or object[s], but" are in fact "organic and fluid and alive" (Merrifield, "Henri Lefebvre: A Socialist in Space" 171), we gain insight into the spatial dynamics that produce Bigger Thomas. Throughout *Native Son*, Wright continuously refutes the proposition that developments in urban space result from competition and crisis, and instead reveals how these changes stem from deliberate efforts to fuel capital accumulation and reproduce the very conditions that sustain the status quo. By effectively segregating blacks from whites, uneven geographical development not only reinforces class division and ensures the reproduction of a surplus army of labor, but it does so through acts of violence, acts of physical manipulation that quarter individuals into destructive environments where efforts to escape become effectively extinguished by channeled economic pressures and the concerted destruction of dreams.

*“What I killed for, I am!”—The Spatialized Formation of Bigger as a Subject*

Thus far, this chapter has focused primarily on Wright’s portrayals of urbanization and uneven geographical development, not solely to refute Baldwin’s claim that Wright teaches us next to nothing about “the social dynamic which we are to believe created” Bigger (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 35), but because initiating a spatially conscious literary practice will enable one to identify the discrete forms of power that play such a critical role in shaping our own daily lives. Baldwin’s criticism of *Native Son* stems from the same false assumption of spatial neutrality that has come to dominate how the vast majority of us conceive of space in general, and as such, is indicative of a much more expansive and inevitably detrimental social condition whereby we permit potentially harmful power dynamics to proceed unimpaired,<sup>49</sup> quite simply because we refuse to acknowledge that they even exist.

With “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin is undoubtedly at the height of his essayistic powers. The sense of social and political urgency that rings forth from his pages is matched in intensity only by the rhythm and poetry of his masterly crafted sentences. Yet even Baldwin’s political fervor, spiritual zeal, and astonishing command of language cannot compensate for the fact that his assessment of the novel is predicated on his failure to account for the complexity and import of Wright’s socio-spatial critique; a fault which becomes all the more surprising

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<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, by limiting our understanding of power, we inevitably restrict the development of new forms of resistance.



once we see how sensitive he is to the non-neutrality of urban space in his own work.<sup>50</sup>

In short, by dismantling Baldwin's criticism of *Native Son* through a detailed investigation of Wright's urbanism, we remove the protective illusion of spatial neutrality and unveil the repressive and ideological forces in and of social space that shape, not only Bigger's existence, but our shared reality as well.

According to Lefebvre, in order to properly understand how spaces are "bound up with [the] function and structure" of "lived experience," one must first stop fetishizing them as individual "things" that exist in isolation and instead start investigating how these seemingly distinct spaces relate to (and constitute) one another, making sure at all times to keep an eye on the kinds of social dynamics that these relationships create. When we read Wright's diverse representations of urban and suburban spaces dialectically, we not only gain insight into how the production of one location is connected to the under-development of another, but we also begin to see how these processes, arrangements, and juxtapositions help to shape individual perceptions and forge the social identities that collectively constitute our much celebrated, but equally problematic, social diversity.

Richard Wright moved from Memphis, Tennessee, to Chicago, Illinois, during the height of the "Great Migration," a period of time generally associated with the twenty year span between 1910 and 1930 when millions of African Americans fled from the Jim Crow governed South to the industrial centers of the North with the hope of creating better lives for themselves and for their offspring. With the release of *Native Son* less

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<sup>50</sup> Baldwin's failure to account for the depths and significance of Wright's urban critique is ironic considering the fact that his own urban criticism is so insightful (see chapter three of this dissertation).

than thirteen years after his initial arrival, Wright—much like Cahan on the Lower East Side—instantaneously became the leading voice to speak for the people with whom he most closely identified. Yet, despite all of the scholarly attention and popular success that the book has continued to receive since its initial publication, its insights regarding the effects of urbanization and spatial production continue to remain, for the most part, regrettably unexplored, thus precluding readers from fully accessing the text's ultimate value.

The migration of millions of people from the southern United States as well as from all across the European continent into America's northern cities essentially transformed these industrial centers into more lucrative and more efficient "resource system[s]," to borrow a phrase from Harvey (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 82). As we have already seen in chapter two, the influx of immigrants from Europe and migrants from the South helped provide the country with a greater surplus of available labor and also paved the way for the development of niche markets which in turn created new avenues of exchange. Throughout his most influential texts, Wright illustrates how these changes in the urban population led to the transformation of all aspects of American social life including—but not limited to—alterations in the physical environment; changes in the ethnic, religious, and cultural make-up of the American populous; and substantial modifications within the market itself.

Although these migration patterns sparked much of the economic activity that would catapult the United States into a position of global dominance, they also gave rise to a number of new challenges that, if not effectively dealt with, could have significantly threatened ruling class hegemony and the trajectory of capital accumulation that the latest

urban developments were implemented to enhance. In order to take full advantage of the migrants' potential as both producers and consumers, the city, first and foremost, needed to find these newcomers places to live. As a result, high-end suburban housing developments were produced to draw wealthy urbanites out towards the city's periphery, in turn leaving inner city neighborhoods in the hands of profiteering real estate companies.<sup>51</sup> Apartment buildings previously inhabited by individual families were immediately converted into diminutive tenement shelters that could now house up to six or even seven families apiece.<sup>52</sup> By increasing the amount of renters within a pre-existing structure, inner city property owners like Wright's fictitious Henry Dalton watched their profits soar. Furthermore, by compartmentalizing poor migrants into carefully circumscribed pockets of the city, these unwritten real estate agreements not only directly benefited those who owned property but also secured the livelihood of everyone else whose welfare depended on the daily exploitation of the working class. Yet, in addition to yielding these economic and social benefits for the well-off, these spatial arrangements also began to facilitate a degree of proletarian solidarity across ethnic, racial, cultural, and national lines that if left unchecked could have significantly undermined the standing hierarchy of social, political, and economic power.

When David Harvey argues that "Capitalism has, in short, always thrived on the production of difference" (*Spaces of Capital* 123), he is speaking in large part to the way that the system has adapted in order to reconcile this contradiction of needing to build up

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<sup>51</sup> Conversely, it should be noted that developments bordering on the city were funded in large part by the profits gained off of these immigrant populations.

<sup>52</sup> In *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright refers to these converted tenement apartments as "kitchenettes." In this section of the text he describes the conversion processes, the elevated rents charged to blacks once they moved in, and the deplorable living conditions that arose from landlord neglect (104-11).

and fragment a large working class population simultaneously: a method previously identified in chapter one as a “spatial fix.” In *Spaces of Hope*, a text published approximately fifteen years after he delivered this initial statement, Harvey continues along these lines, further specifying how the strategic organization and development of particular spaces actually helps to produce the kinds of social differences that benefit an expanding capitalist system. His insights are worth quoting at length:

The central difficulty lies in the presumption that capitalist industry and commodification will lead to the homogenization of the working population. There is, of course, an undeniable sense in which this is true, but what it fails to appreciate is the way in which capitalism simultaneously differentiates among workers, sometimes feeding off ancient cultural distinctions, gender relations, ethnic predilections, and religious beliefs. It does this not only through the development of explicit bourgeois strategies of divide and control, but also by converting the principle of market choice into a mechanism for group differentiation. The result is the implantation of all manner of class, gender, and other social division into the geographical landscape of capital. Class struggle all too easily dissolves into a whole series of geographically fragmented communitarian interests, easily co-opted by bourgeois powers or exploited by the mechanism of neo-liberal market penetration. (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 40)<sup>53</sup>

“The implantation” of social differences within a large working class population makes it possible for a system to expand its means of production, consumption, and exchange while it concurrently weakens any proletarian momentum, thereby effectively preserving (and in fact further polarizing) the prevailing class hierarchy. By organizing neighborhoods around these preexisting cultural, ethnic, racial, or religious differences, the system uses geography as a fundamental tool for creating the niche markets that not

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<sup>53</sup> This particular passage is taken from a chapter titled “The Geography of the *Manfiesto*” in which Harvey talks about Marx and Engels’ treatment of ‘globalization’ in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. His often applies his theoretical ideas, however, to the ongoing work he does on Baltimore, Maryland. In addition to seeing how Harvey applies these ideas to his reading of Baltimore in a number of publications, one can find a number of examples in part two of *Spaces of Capital*, titled “The Capitalist Production of Space.”

only expand market activity, but also reify these distinctions themselves. The rise of “communitarian interests” shaped by tactical geographical arrangements and correlative market choices ends up diverting attention away from the economic injustices that harm workers across these categorical delineations, while at the same time, causing them through their own acts of daily consumption, to accentuate these social distinctions amongst themselves. This is precisely what Harvey is referring to when he suggests that the “class struggle” has been “easily co-opted by bourgeois powers.”

In *Native Son*, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, *The Outsider*, and *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright concentrates specifically on how these geographical arrangements contribute to the production of racial difference. As he learned from Robert Park and Park’s colleagues within the University of Chicago School of Urban Sociology, people subjected to the same environmental pressures will undoubtedly share similar social traits. Furthermore, when racially specific market choices pair up with these racially specific “social characteristics” (constituted, as we know, by geographical arrangements), the ideological discourse of racial essentialism becomes that much more persuasive, thus making it all the more likely that otherwise negligible racial differences will receive the kinds of social emphasis that best suits the driving forces of capital accumulation. Once these differences become artificially substantiated by genetics and biology instead of by the “social pressures” and “market choices” most responsible for their continued production, they become unquestioned fixtures rooted in the deepest recesses of our collective social consciousness. As such, these “fundamental” differences assist the capitalist system by facilitating the expansion of production, exchange, and consumption while simultaneously impeding the mobilization of a growing working class. These

market choices and environmental influences not only prove that race is primarily a social construct, but that these elements themselves are predicated on a meticulously calculated, highly deliberate, and brilliantly instituted geographical design. To say that race is a social construct is no longer sufficient if we truly wish to identify the specific procedures that actually manufacture racial differences. By adjusting our terms ever so slightly so that we begin to think of race as a socio-*spatial* construct, we train ourselves to unveil the generative aspects of social space which have been operating beneath the radar for so long.

As Harvey points out, differences within the working class are often predicated on preexisting “cultural distinctions, gender relations, ethnic predilections, and religious beliefs.” When he and his colleagues state that developments in the urban environment create difference, they are not concerned with issues of causal primacy as much as they are with the recurring reiterative practices that consistently imbue these personal variations with meaning. The grounding of ethnic, religious, and cultural differences in the urban landscape itself is one more example of how, in Lefebvre’s words, capitalism ensures its survival “by occupying space, by producing space” (Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism*, 21). To take this a step further, Wright reveals that capitalism has been able to sustain itself not only by occupying and producing particular spaces, but by occupying and producing subjects through those spaces; subjects—that in treading upon that thin line between homo and hetero geneity—carry out the daily activities of production, consumption, and exchange that sustain and stabilize the nation’s economy. Without getting bogged down in a debate over the origins of various racial differences, the remainder of this chapter will focus on how those distinctions become reified and

reproduced (specifically in reference to the creation of African American subjectivities) through the perpetually evolving and completely ubiquitous, subject-space relationship.

Thus far in this chapter we have seen how various geographical developments make use of and become paired up with various social distinctions in order to help create a fertile resource system that is capable of fulfilling capitalism's expansionary needs. The systemic coercion of individuals into racially marked portions of the city and the subsequent practices of exploitation and underdevelopment that regularly take place there make the violent and repressive form that spatialized power takes readily apparent. But what Wright and critical geographers like Lefebvre, Soja, and Harvey all point out is that in addition to exercising power through violence and repression, spaces also operate ideologically, thus becoming largely responsible for producing the kinds of distinctive subjects that fuel and protect capitalist activity.

At the very beginning of *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler introduces her reader to this generative phenomenon:

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what "one" is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings we are. (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1-2)

Once we decide to lift the veil of spatial neutrality, we find that both of these forms of power are operating in and through space in any and all moments in time. So far, by looking at Wright's urban representations, we have been able to pinpoint a number of practices that make use of geography in order to press "on the subject from the outside." But in order to undertake a proper investigation of how power functions spatially in Wright's work—and more importantly, in the world itself—we must concentrate specifically on how these same spaces supply his characters with the modes, materials, and channels that together give form to their very existences.

Perhaps no single piece of American fiction captures the paradoxical nature of subjection with as much clarity and purpose as *Native Son*. Wright's biting critique of an American North accustomed to celebrating itself as an epicenter of tolerance, equal treatment, and human progress, gains its intensity by following Bigger Thomas as he traverses through a myriad of social spaces that persistently get in the way of his beleaguered quest for self actualization. While the book raises a variety of issues and themes worth exploring, at its core it is a compelling tale about one man and his desperate need to receive human recognition from a world which systematically denies him any.

In the novel's final scene, immediately after his conviction, Bigger Thomas and his Communist attorney, Boris Max, stare out at Chicago's distant skyline through a porthole window of the Cook County jail cell. As the two men proceed to contemplate the urban environment from afar, Bigger declares to Max, "I didn't want to kill. . . But what I killed for, I *am*!" (Wright, *Native Son*, 429). This climactic statement, which leaves the well intentioned attorney in a state of absolute terror, continues to be the



source of tendentious critical debate amongst first time readers, experienced students, and even some of the most well respected literary scholars. More often than not, one's overarching interpretation of the entire narrative will hinge upon how he or she deciphers meaning from this single, rather ambiguous assertion. Those who end up finding the book to be ultimately uplifting tend to agree with Hakutani who says that Bigger's powerful declaration proves that he has finally been able to "transcend the obstacles of city life and gain self-confidence" (Hakutani 109). Conversely, less optimistic readers are inclined to view Thomas' proclamation as the ultimate indication of his unfortunate defeat, proof that he has, in Baldwin's words, "accepted a theology that denies him life" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 23). While critics within both camps often provide compelling and persuasive support for their respective arguments, none of them sufficiently account for the formative forces of urban space that play such a central and pivotal role in Bigger's problematic formation as a subject.

To say that Bigger has been able to "transcend the obstacles of city life" is essentially to suggest that in order for an individual to attain self-actualization, he or she must effectively rise above the discourses and materials that collectively constitute his/her social and physical reality. Ironically, despite the obvious difference between his interpretation and Hakutani's, Baldwin bases his argument on exactly the same premise. When he suggests that "the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality," he implies that Bigger's failure (and by association, Wright's shortcoming as a literary artist) rests in his inability to move beyond the social and spatial conditions which we

know he is innately a part of and which are innately a part of him.<sup>54</sup> The point worth stressing is that both of these readings are predicated on the false assumption that man is ultimately independent from the physical and social world, and that self-realization can be achieved only upon recognizing that autonomy. But once we recognize that power is fundamentally involved in the subject's ongoing formation, and that that power functions in and through space, then the city itself becomes not only a body of obstacles and traps which prohibit Bigger from achieving self-actualization, but also the generative resource needed to make that achievement possible in the first place.

By linking Bigger's problematic self-assertion with the looming image of the city itself, Wright urges his readers to think about how the spaces that we produce and occupy influence and shape the beings that we are (and are becoming). In addition to being an instrument of domination which Bigger feels compelled to oppose and resist, the urban environment also proves to be that which he depends on for his very existence. According to Butler, "'Subjection' signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2). What we find when we trace Bigger's claim back to the city itself is that this "double valence" of power has been operating throughout the narrative all along, and that regardless of whether we read Bigger's declaration of self-hood as triumphant or misguided, the truth remains that he has only become capable of delivering it by conceding to a power which subordinates him. For both Hakutani and Baldwin, the

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<sup>54</sup> In truth, Baldwin is talking about Wright's failure as an artist. Despite the fact that he says Wright had the unfortunate "necessity thrust on him of being the representative of some thirteen million people," his point is that as a writer, he made a grave mistake the moment he chose to deal with his characters "solely in those terms" (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 33).

urban environment and the forces associated with it stand as obstacles that Bigger must surpass in order to achieve self-fulfillment. In the opinion of the former, Bigger's final statement indicates his success, while for the latter, those same words mark defeat. But when we follow Wright's clues and begin to reconsider how we think of power and space, than we can begin to see how, as a subject, Bigger has no alternative but to be "initiated through a primary submission to power," thus discrediting both men's appeal for transcendence. Ultimately, in order to unearth the novel's most valuable contributions, we need to change the very terms of the debate, as neither Hakutani's nor Baldwin's respective arguments account for the paradox of subject formation that Wright so powerfully represents.<sup>55</sup> In short, both of their arguments ask us to leave the urban environment behind and focus on an aspect of humanity no longer held back by the material world. But by repeatedly asking us to turn back to the city in all of his works, Wright reveals that this kind of transcendence is at best an idealistic escape, and that in order to understand Bigger's behavior and the factors that lead him to state, "What I killed for, I am," we must pay close attention to those aspects of space that structure his daily existence.

As Butler stresses in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, when we are born, we enter a world of preexisting social discourses that, despite being constantly subject to rearticulation, have tremendous impact in shaping our conscious lives. Much like the networks of knowledge and power that both she and Foucault have taught us so much about, the spaces that we occupy also supply us with the conditions of our

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<sup>55</sup> Chapter three offers more on the irony of Baldwin failing to acknowledge this paradox in Wright's world while he represents it so clearly in his own.

existence while always remaining susceptible to change. In order to have any shot at diffusing the most oppressive and evasive forms of spatialized power, it is critical that we study the phases of spatial production not only to ascertain how these spaces subordinate, but to discover how they infuse each and everyone of us with certain knowledges and truths “which we harbor and preserve in the beings we are.” In addition to revealing how urban developments facilitate capitalist expansion, Wright’s representations of early twentieth century urbanization also demonstrate how these changes contribute to the discursive production of racial difference, a discourse which proves to be a fundamental factor for Bigger in his quest for self-actualization.

In “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus,” Althusser suggests that all of our social institutions, despite remaining relatively autonomous from both the economic base as well as from one another, stand unified insofar as they all function to ensure that the existing system reproduces the conditions of its own existence. Althusser divides these institutions into two primary categories based on the fact that some function predominantly by violence and others predominantly through ideology; this much we have already seen. Institutions belonging to the latter group, which he refers to collectively as the Ideological State Apparatus, engage individuals through a process of “interpellation,” whereby the institution “hails” or calls out to the individual with the intent of eliciting some type of conscious response (Althusser 174). When the individual turns towards the call, he/she completes the interpellative process by acknowledging that he/she is indeed the one being “hailed.” That moment of recognition—or in Althusser’s opinion, *misrecognition*—allows one’s *imaginary* relationship to the modes of production reign supreme over his/her *real* relationship to the modes of production. For Althusser,

this colonization of the imaginary over the real is what he would call the true aim of all ideology. The various social differences that Harvey suggests directly benefit capitalism emerge, in large part, when individuals begin to recognize themselves as the particular subjects that the spaces that they inhabit interpellate them into being.<sup>56</sup>

Although many of the critical geographers referred to in this document agree that there is an ideological element to any given space, their respective theories regarding what that ideological element may look like or how it actually functions remains deeply abstract and difficult to assess. Richard Wright, on the other hand, very clearly illustrates ideology in motion as the urban (and suburban) spaces that he represents literally call out to his characters, initiating a process of subject formation closely akin to the model provided by Althusser.

Early in the novel, when Bigger first leaves his family's rat-infested apartment and steps out into the grimy streets of Chicago's Black Belt, he spots "two white men in overalls" at work "pasting" up a "huge colored [campaign] poster" for the incumbent State Attorney, Buckley (Wright, *Native Son*, 13). Looking up at the poster, Bigger sees:

one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN! (Wright, *Native Son*, 13)

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<sup>56</sup> Here we can draw a direct connection between how categorical differences are artificially constituted through various forms of consumption and how those same differences are also shaped by an assortment of man-made, ideological state apparatuses.

The words printed on the top of the image, “YOU CAN’T WIN!” stand out in this description and draw our attention to the repressive tendencies of state power, most specifically to the State Attorney himself. But the poster also operates on an ideological level that is far more subtle, invasive, and formative than critics have been willing to acknowledge. Although the phrase literally seems intended for Buckley’s political opponent, it takes on a more critically significant role once we begin to read it as an agent of interpellation that “hails” Bigger himself (as well as all other “passer[s]-by,” who in this neighborhood we can safely assume are black). When Bigger reads the phrase, he immediately identifies himself as the object of that call. Considering the fact that it would have been a blatant tactical blunder for Buckley’s campaign manager to intentionally ostracize potential voters, it only seems logical that Wright wants us to view the poster figuratively. As such, the penetrating gaze of Buckley’s image represents what I call *the hailing of city walls*. In addition to representing the intimidating and repressive qualities of the state apparatus, the poster-scene provides Wright with a way of dramatizing the ideological process of subject formation that is central to Bigger’s ongoing struggle for self-actualization. By launching this call from the walls of the city, Wright urges his readers to consider how the sheer physicality of the ghetto provides Bigger with the raw material with which he can piece together an understanding of himself and his place within the social world. It’s not so much that the State Attorney is telling Bigger that he can’t win, but more importantly, it’s the ghetto itself.

In order to provide their respective readers with a tangible example of what this call and response, subject-forming procedure might look like, both Wright and Althusser decide to use a figure normally associated with the Repressive State Apparatus to stand in

for the ISA actually responsible for extending forth the call; in *Native Son*, Wright uses the image of the State Attorney within the poster, whereas in “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus,” Althusser utilizes a police officer. In each case, once we identify the interpellative process and make sense of its inner workings, we should replace the figure mentioned with a particular Ideological State Apparatus. Interested in drafting an overriding theory for the process itself, Althusser encourages us to substitute his policeman with the educational ISA, the media ISA, the religious ISA, or any of the other examples which he provides. In Wright’s scene, however, the replacement is much more specific. By swapping the unblinking, painted eyes of Buckley with the unremitting gaze of the ghetto itself, we allow ourselves the possibility of beginning to see how space calls the subject into being, thus—quite literally—“providing” Bigger Thomas with “the very condition for” his own “existence.” Furthermore, by fusing the State Attorney’s image with the physicality of Chicago’s South Side, Wright links the ongoing production of the urban environment with the actual State, thus revealing how the novel’s setting functions as a conduit of power, rather than simply as a contextual backdrop removed from the narrative’s unfolding plot and eventual outcome.

In Althusser’s example, the police officer calls out, “Hey You,” and the individual responds by turning to the call. By turning towards that call, the individual acknowledges that he/she is the one being hailed, and in turn internalizes the qualities by which he has been identified. This act of turning then completes the interpellative process and, as a result, the subject “comes into being” or takes on a form. Once we realize that these “calls” are not being launched by police officers or state attorneys, but rather by the vast array of institutions which we constantly encounter, then we can begin to identify the

daily practices that shape our own respective and divergent senses of self. As a social product significantly shaped by state power to benefit capital accumulation, urban space unquestionably qualifies as one of the state apparatuses that might as well appear on Althusser's list. Furthermore, as an ISA, these spaces transform individuals into much sought after subjects, causing them to self-identify with categories and forms that disguise their real relationships to the modes of production. That which we had for so long treated as being simply neutral, urban space, actually turns out to be one of the primary mechanisms responsible for producing the kinds of social differences which enhance market expansion and create artificial rifts within what might otherwise turn into working class solidarity.

The resemblance between Bigger's encounter with Buckley's poster and Althusser's model of subject formation becomes all the more striking once we consider that Wright's version predates the French philosopher's by approximately thirty years. Obviously, the "You" headed atop of the sign looks a lot like the "Hey You" articulated by Althusser's policeman, both representing the original call extended forth by a particular apparatus. But the aspect of Wright's example that is most astounding in its similarity to Althusser's is the recurrent "turning" or responding on the part of Bigger to the unblinking eyes of Buckley on the city wall. For Althusser, interpellation is not a process that occurs on occasion, but one that is perpetually exercised by a host of apparatuses that all operate in conjunction with one another to force any given individual to "freely" submit to the ruling class ideology. The fact that the poster appears to hold Bigger within its gaze regardless of where he stands in relation to it, suggests that the pre-



existence and pervasiveness of the ghetto itself constitutes it as an interpellative apparatus all the more effective due to the fact that it is always-already issuing the call.<sup>57</sup>

Bigger's repeated turning towards the poster exemplifies what Butler would identify as his "passionate attachment" to his own subjection (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 67). In the *Psychic Life of Power*, she explains, that as humans, we each possess an inherent need to have our individual existences validated through some degree of social recognition. In order to receive the recognition which Butler argues we depend on, we feel compelled to respond to the particular calls extended forth by the various apparatuses we encounter.<sup>58</sup> Each time Bigger turns back towards Buckley's image, seemingly against his own will, he reveals how dependent he is on the forces which subjectify him into becoming the black man that the city expects him to be. By thoroughly limiting the means through which he can satisfy his need for social recognition, Chicago makes it clear to Bigger, that if he wants to recognize himself as anything at all, it must be as the "You" that "Can't Win."<sup>59</sup> The dilapidated buildings, the unemployed men who spend their days sitting upon the stoops of those buildings, and the neglected infrastructure of the Black Belt itself are just a few of the urban phenomena

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<sup>57</sup> By linking Bigger's experience with the poster with a "movie blackout," Wright connects urban space with the another of Althusser's ISA's, the media. In *Native Son*, Bigger enters a movie house where he watches *Trader Jack* and whatever, two short films that represent and hence recreate artificial, racial distinctions. The comparison between the two scenes is important in that they both transmit an ideological discourse of racial distinctions that interpellate Bigger Thomas as being black and inferior in comparison to the off-limits pinnacle of beauty, coincidentally enough represented by Mary Dalton.

<sup>58</sup> The individual's hunger for social recognition predisposes him/her to heeding the call in the first place. As Wright demonstrates in his original autobiography, tellingly titled *American Hunger*, he is starving not so much for food, but for the self-actualization in a world that actively refuses to recognize his humanity.

<sup>59</sup> What we discover much later in the novel is that these interpellative moments, combined with his "passionate attachment" to his own subjection, lead him to murder Bessie ..... After murdering Mary Dalton, Bigger realizes that his actions have consequences. Murder becomes the way that he succeeds in achieving social recognition. This is how environment, and more specifically, space, provide one with the instrumentalities with which to express oneself.

that together constitute the ghetto as an agent of interpellation that not only ceaselessly hails Bigger into recognizing himself as a black man, but discursively instills in his mind the (in)significance and meaning of that designation.

Shortly after breaking away from the gaze cast by Buckley's image, Bigger ventures out to the "cold and distant world" of suburban Chicago for an interview with the Daltons. The "pride," "certainty," and "confidence" emanating from the "streets and houses" radically contrasts with the downtrodden images of the city's impoverished South Side, making Bigger blatantly aware that he has entered a world where he clearly does not belong. The "huge" homes, the "quiet" and "spacious" streets, and "the high, black, iron picket fence[s]" that surround each individual property leave him "feeling constricted inside," apprehensive about what would happen were he to be seen by a patrolling police officer. Despite their obvious differences, both locations call out to Bigger, reminding him of the color of his skin and forcing him to consider what the significance of that characteristic may mean. The primary difference between the two locations is that one forces Bigger to associate himself with the poverty, crime, neglect, and hopelessness pervasive throughout Chicago's Black Belt, while the other provides him with the conditions and materials of difference, making him feel like an outsider and clearly conveying to him all that he cannot have and all that he can never be.

Treated dialectically, the two neighborhoods expose the precariousness of racial production itself, demonstrating, on the one hand, how each group becomes defined in opposition to its constitutive other, and, on the other, disclosing how these distinctions themselves tenuously rely on certain consistencies within segregation and uneven geographical development. The juxtaposition of rich white suburbs against impoverished

black ghettos reveals how the meanings and social characteristics most commonly associated with each racial group stem directly from the spatial conditions that house them. By having Bigger traverse back and forth between the polarized extremes of Chicago's unequally developed landscape, Wright encourages his readers to consider how this spatial dialectic produces racial difference, shapes human psychology, and influences social behavior.

Throughout the novel, Wright demonstrates how the various spaces Bigger occupies shape his perception of how he relates to the rest of society. According to Harvey, "Our 'positionality' or 'situatedness' as beings is a social construct in exactly the same way that the mode of production is a social creation. And this 'positionality' defines who or what we are (at least for now)" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 201). In *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright alludes to this psychological phenomenon when he states that, "coming north for a Negro sharecropper" involves "living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness" (Wright, *12,000,000 Black Voices*, 99). This leap into a new psychological state results from the fact that blacks in the North occupied a very different physical position in relation to the rest of society than they had been accustomed to while living in the South. Under the rule of Jim Crow, segregation was overt and thorough in all aspects of social life. Clearly marked signs reading "For Colored and For White" and segregated bathrooms, water-fountains, restaurant counters, schools, and public beaches collectively reinforced the clean and distinct separation between races. But when these same Southern migrants eventually arrived in the cities of the North, much to their surprise, they discovered that these signs were absent and that they were now permitted to share many of these public facilities with their white counterparts.

Although at first, most of these newcomers welcomed these changes, it didn't take them very long to realize that alternative forms of segregation remained strongly intact, operating safely beneath the auspice of a superficial integration. As a result, these contradictions made it increasingly difficult for African Americans from the South to create "cognitive maps" for themselves capable of explaining how they related to the urban totality of which they had now become an integral part.

For Wright, cognitive mapping can become thoroughly confusing even when the streets and avenues form grids, the walls of buildings stand squarely, and the boundaries of residential segregation remain readily apparent. Living as a black man in Chicago, Bigger knows how to maneuver himself throughout the city; he realizes all too well where he can live, where he can work, and where the white people reside. His inability to create an adequate cognitive map for himself does not stem from any navigational deficiency, but rather from the fact that, as a black man, he has been put in a liminal "positionality," neither inside or outside of mainstream American life.

In that famous address that Wright delivered at Columbia University during the week of *Native Son*'s public release, he accounts for Bigger's violent actions:

It was not that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the South, but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago's physical aspect—noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment—did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South. (Wright, *Native Son*, 442)

By exposing African American migrants to the spectacles of "power and fulfillment" ubiquitously on display across the urban landscape, yet continuing to bar them from any

access or possible participation in these arenas, the city not only taunts these newcomers, but in essence actively denies them the means to satisfy their fundamental need for human recognition, as well as the hope of upward mobility extended to immigrants like Levinsky. In doing so, the urban environment unequivocally communicates to Bigger that his membership status within the social sphere is only partial, thus thrusting him into a liminal social position that makes it increasingly difficult for him to determine how he relates to all of the people, places, and things that he inevitably interacts with on a daily basis.

Bigger's struggle for an identity is severely encumbered by the fact that as a black man living in the northern city, he remains unassimilated into mainstream American life, yet present and active in its daily activity. This tension of being *a part of* but not completely *incorporated into* the city's social life stems from the fact that the various urban and suburban spaces which he occupies duplicitously interpellate him as both a Negro and as an American, the "two warring ideals in one dark body" that Dubois first introduced in his 1897 Atlantic magazine essay, "Strivings of the Negro People" (Dubois 11). In *Native Son*, Wright links this split in Bigger's consciousness to urban space itself and draws the two together when Bigger says to Gus:

Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence. (Wright, *Native Son*, 20)

Bigger's emotional confession to Gus proves to be quite telling for a number of reasons. First, he demonstrates that he possesses a very clear understanding of how the city has been subdivided into inequitable, racially distinctive neighborhoods. Secondly, he links

these spatial arrangements to the quality of life either enjoyed or endured by each individual group. Thirdly, by stating that he feels like he's "on the outside of the world peeping in," Wright has Bigger echo Dubois' description of African American "double consciousness," thus linking this racially specific psychological phenomenon directly to the deliberate production of space (Dubois 9). When Bigger states that he feels this way "Half the time," he implies that there are also other times when he is able to temporarily fuse himself with the rest of Chicago, thus implying the liminality aforementioned. These easily overlooked sentences actually carry significant weight as they not only hint at Bigger's inability to find sustenance in his own duality, but also to link his psychological state to the organization and production of urban space itself.

Although Dubois learned to embrace this psychological predicament for the critical perspective that he saw it could provide, he never lost sight of how debilitating it could be for those men and women, who like Bigger Thomas, never receive the kinds of support, tutelage, or guidance oftentimes needed to help one realize its full potential. Like Dubois, Wright unearthed a sense of agency and heightened awareness within his inevitable "submission to power" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2), thus allowing him to use his liminal positionality to his own advantage, cultivating the discerning eye that made it possible for him to write books like *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, and *American Hunger*. But if Wright and Dubois each exemplify the African American subject capable of finding strength in his liminality, then Bigger Thomas represents their less successful counterpart; a man who is still futilely committed to deciphering a unified cognitive map for himself that will explain precisely how it is that he relates to the rest of his society. Before continuing on to explore the measures that Bigger takes in his desperate attempt to

satisfy this insatiable human desire, it is important to recognize that the two irreconcilable selves which Dubois theorizes, one Negro and one American caught in one dark body, each possess their own distinct and incompatible cognitive maps. Dislocation and disorientation surface within a single consciousness because the two maps—like the two selves with which they are aligned—contradict one another, making it impossible for the individual to formulate any clear sense of his or her “positionality” within the urban environment.

Although Wright turned his audience’s attention toward the urban environment during his Columbia University address, his explanation of Bigger’s violent behavior may mislead in that it seems to imply that the city’s incessant “taunting” simply frustrates his protagonist to such an extent that he eventually reaches a breaking point and impulsively lashes out. But when we carefully inspect each of the two murders which Bigger commits, we find that neither act stems from frustration, anger, or any desire for revenge or retribution.

Mid-way through the book, shortly after brutally attacking Bessie Mears, the narrator reports: “Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square” (Wright, *Native Son*, 240). By placing this sentence in the text immediately after Bigger deposits Bessie’s wounded body into an air-shaft, Wright links his protagonist’s violent tendencies with the psychological confusion that stems from not being able to map out his relationship to the rest of the world. Although the orderly, grid-like design of the urban environment unequivocally conveys to Bigger where he is permitted to live and work, it also implies a certain degree of straightforwardness and innocuousness that ends up

enhancing the illusion of spatial neutrality, thus masking the complex forces that splinter Bigger's consciousness and leave him feeling psychologically disoriented. In an article titled "Cartographic Identities: Geographical Knowledges Under Globalization," Harvey suggests that we each have these "mental or cognitive maps embedded in our consciousness that defy easy representation on some Cartesian grid or graticule" (Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 221). But just because these cognitive maps "defy easy representation," that does not mean that we as subjects cease trying to impose on them a Cartesian structure, especially when the models for our spatial sensibilities themselves—the spaces which we occupy—are laid out on the earth like one large industrial grid. Our individual identities are constituted in large part by our perceived relationships to the objects and subjects with which we come into contact. When social spaces interpellate in contradictory ways, they instill within the individual mind conflicting cognitive maps which collectively prohibit that person from being able to formulate any clear relationship between him/herself and the objects and subjects with which he/she shares space. For Bigger, "the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth" because the city instills in him two irreconcilable selves, making it seemingly impossible for him to create any cohesive cognitive map, despite the fact that the city's structural order implies that he should be able to do so.

In Wright's Columbia University address, he explains, "I don't mean to say that I think that environment *makes* consciousness, but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself" (Wright, *Native Son*, 442). By paying particularly close attention to Wright's theory in light of the events that unfold throughout *Native Son*, we see how similar his ideas about



power and space are to both Butler's proposition that power provides the subject "with the very condition of its existence" and Lefebvre's suggestion that space "is bound up with the function and structure" of "lived experience." According to Butler, the individual is "passionately attached" to his/her own subjection by the mere fact that he/she is a conscious being, who by being conscious, innately desires to have his/her existence validated. That validation requires a certain degree of social recognition which can only be achieved through the "objects and channels," which Boris Max argues, "evolved through long centuries for their socialized expression" (Wright, *Native Son*, 400). What Wright points out, is that while the environment may not create this formative desire for social recognition, it undoubtedly provides the individual with the means capable of satisfying those needs. Bigger's problem, and the problem that other African Americans living in early twentieth century Chicago must have encountered, is that by being "Excluded from, and unassimilated" in that society, they have been thoroughly denied access to those "objects and channels," or "instrumentalities," which make self-actualization possible.

So contrary to what Wright seems to imply when he states that "the segregation it [the Northern city] did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South" (Wright, *Native Son*, 442), Bigger never kills out of frustration, anger, or a desire to retaliate against the world which oppresses him.<sup>60</sup> In order to most accurately identify the reasons behind each of the murders which take place in the novel, one must heed Wright's repeated warnings not to simply lump the two together, and treat

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<sup>60</sup> That is not to say that he doesn't demonstrate these emotions and impulses, its just that these feelings are not what motivates him to murder.

them both merely as proof that Bigger has become the “monster created by the American republic” (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 41).

Wright cautions his reader against making this mistake when the Deputy Coroner enters the courtroom and offers “in evidence the raped and mutilated body of one Bessie Mears” (Wright, *Native Son*, 330). By admitting her corpse into the case simply as material evidence, rather than electing to treat her as a human homicide victim deserving of her own investigation, the judge, the jury, and the State Attorney each expose their racist predilections, respectively. Bigger immediately understands the scene unfolding before his eyes and thinks to himself that Bessie, “though dead, though killed by him, would resent her dead body being used in this way” (Wright, *Native Son*, 331). He realizes:

They were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for his having killed Mary, to cast him in a light that would sanction any action taken to destroy him. Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely “evidence.” (Wright, *Native Son*, 331).

Though Bigger sits before the court as the defendant in the case, Wright ends up putting the society at large on trial by overtly exposing how its governing judicial body places varying values on human life, depending on the color of one’s skin. Furthermore, the evidence itself proves to be faulty, as we know from our earlier reading that Bessie was not raped, but in fact consented to engage sexually with Bigger. The flawed logic employed by the State Attorney should not only discredit his tactical use of Bessie Mears but should remind the reader of the specifics leading up to her death. If we as critics choose to treat Bessie’s murder simply as further proof that Bigger Thomas has indeed

become “the monster created by the American republic,” then we are essentially committing the same injustice that we see being perpetrated by the State Attorney, the judge, and the jurors who ultimately decide Bigger’s fate.

The issue which I am trying to press upon here is not that the judge, State Attorney, and jurors are wrong for both prosecuting and convicting Bigger—Wright himself never wishes to acquit Bigger from the crimes he commits—but that the process itself reflects deep-seated racism. The prosecution represents rape as the main crime here, when we know Bigger never raped anyone. Bessie is being used merely as evidence in the case, when she is just as much of a legitimate homicide victim as Mary. In highlighting the problematic issues which take center stage in these particular proceedings, Wright exposes American racism as an institutional phenomenon far more damaging than personal prejudice.

Conversely, Wright encourages us to see past common practices and honestly investigate what prompts Bigger to kill each of the women he murders. Upon doing so, one can begin to discern the particular power dynamics operating in and through the spaces which once seemed neutral.

In the first case, Bigger finds himself alone with an unconscious Mary Dalton in the privacy of her bedroom. Earlier in the novel, before ever meeting her in person, Bigger visits a Regal movie theater and is introduced to her through film. Sensuously depicted “*taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida*,” Mary, along with other “dark-haired white girls,” spark Bigger’s sexual desire (Wright, *Native Son*, 31). When Bigger’s friend Jack tells him that he’d “like to be there,” Bigger responds by saying, “You can. . .

But you'd be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas" (Wright, *Native Son*, 32). The movie theater functions here as a type of safe-house where the two men can temporarily retreat into their imaginations, escape the restrictions that come with being black in a world of white domination, and are able to laugh "softly and easily" at the horrors of lynching. Yet, no matter how deeply they venture into fantasy, the reality of contemporary race relations never strays far from their thoughts, and when Bigger playfully refers to "hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas," he provides the reader with insight into the fears that surface and lead him to press the pillow down over Mary's face.

By placing this movie theater scene early in the novel, Wright encourages his readers to consider what factors contribute to the social construction of desire. When we recall that Mary, and white people in general, were never "really people" (Wright, *Native Son*, 114) to Bigger, then we can begin to see more clearly how she becomes an object, which if possessed, will allow him to "merge himself with others and be a part of this world" (Wright, *Native Son*, 240).

When Judith Butler begins her discussion of subjection in the opening paragraphs of *The Psychic Life of Power*, she points out that power not only oppresses and "subordinates," but actually provides the subject with "the trajectory of its desire" (Butler 2). Bigger's desire for Mary Dalton relates directly to our discussion of spatialized power because as a beautiful white woman, she represents the ultimate object of "power and fulfillment" which he is perpetually exposed to, yet barred from ever possessing. Later, when Boris Max asks Bigger if he feels "more attraction for Mary than for women of" his own race, he replies quite instinctively, "Naw" (Wright, *Native Son*, 352),

suggesting that his desire for her is predicated on more than simply his libido. As he lowers his body down onto hers, Bigger reenters the same fantasy world that he retreats to earlier in the movie theater, temporarily transporting himself into a realm no longer policed by racial biases. Yet, when Mary's blind mother appears in front of the bedroom door, she precipitously shatters the young man's fantasy. Recalling Bigger's playful comment about "hanging from the trees like a bunch of bananas," one may safely assume that the "white blur" "standing by the door" looks frighteningly like a lynch mob moving closer and closer (Wright, *Native Son*, 85). As a result, Bigger panics; he presses the pillow down over Mary's face to prohibit her from making a sound and ends up suffocating her in the process.

When we look back on this scene in light of Wright's remark regarding the increased obstreperousness of Bigger's reaction, then we realize that he is not predominantly talking about the North instigating deeper anger in Bigger and thus provoking *more* violence per se, but is in fact targeting the complex situation that can arise when deep rooted sensibilities stemming from segregation collide with this newfound proximity and intimacy with the objects of "power and fulfillment" widely on display throughout the city. Bigger's panic-stricken aggression can only properly be understood by first recognizing how his consciousness has been shaped by the Southern spaces he has come from and the northern spaces with which he is now forced to deal.

While this discussion regarding the role that the northern city plays in constructing the trajectory of Bigger's desire sheds light on what causes him to kill Mary, it does not fully explain what Wright is talking about when he states that the North caused a more obstreperous reaction than the South would have. After suffocating Mary

and disposing her body into the furnace, the murderous act itself becomes something very different for Bigger than simply a panic-stricken accident. Turning back to what I have already identified as Bigger's "passionate attachment" to his own subjection, one recalls that in order for him to have his existence validated by the society at large, he feels compelled to perform the acts which will produce social recognition. Unlike his white counterparts, however, Bigger continues to be thoroughly "denied the objects and channels [which have] evolved through long centuries for their socialized expression" (Wright, *Native Son*, 400). Yet, by killing Mary, he is finally given the "chance to live out the consequences of his actions" (Wright, *Native Son*, 239). "*He* had done this," thinks Bigger, "*He* had brought this about" (Wright, *Native Son*, 239). The horror surfaces, not when Bigger murders two innocent, young women, but when we learn—more specifically—what these acts actually provide for him. In discovering personal accountability and by committing the acts that initiate a city-wide investigation, Bigger forces the white world to recognize his existence, thereby satisfying that need for validation which he has been starving for all along.

Although we as readers realize that the authorities are going to pursue their investigation and prosecute their suspect regardless of whether the initial murder is deliberate or not, for Bigger, his newfound empowerment depends not only on the nature of their response, but on his own willingness to claim complete responsibility for his actions. "Though he had killed by accident," writes Wright, "not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident," for to do so would be to deny himself the sense of agency which he has only now just discovered (Wright, *Native Son*, 106). By "accepting the deed" and refusing to admit, even to himself, that it had been

accidental, Bigger feels as though he is fulfilling “an obscure but deep debt” to himself. Again, “*He had done this. He had brought this about,*” and it is only by claiming complete responsibility for these actions that he can retain that sense of agency (Wright, *Native Son*, 239). “The terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it,” only further confirms his deep-seeded need to seek the “sign of” his “own existence outside” of himself (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 20).

According to Butler, “Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled;” that is to say that it “is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power,” but is nevertheless still derivative of that power (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 15). Though Mary’s death is not the intentional outcome of the forces which subjugate Bigger, the two are undoubtedly linked. When we begin to view race as a socio-spatial construct, we see more clearly how Mary (the white woman) exists as the vehicle capable of removing Bigger from his troubled liminality. By engaging sexually with her, Bigger attempts to seize an “instrumentality” of “power and fulfillment” that, as a black man, he has been thoroughly denied. Conversely, what Bigger discovers upon killing her, is that he has more fully expelled himself from that same social sphere, thereby providing himself with a positional certainty more satisfying than the troubled liminality he has been struggling with up until this point. The ultimate irony is that in realizing his own agency, Bigger only further confirms his own subjection.

Butler elaborates on the paradoxical nature of agency and subjection when she writes:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination. Precisely at the moment in which choice is impossible, the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence. Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere. (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 20)

After killing Mary, Bigger gains fulfillment in discovering for the first time that his actions carry consequences; *he* has murdered and now *they* must recognize *his* existence.

What Butler's work elucidates is that while Bigger attains the recognition that he so desperately desires, he must do so within the "terms and names that are not of his own making," thus further immersing himself within his own subjection, not as a man, but as a black man. "He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true," states the narrator, "It made things simple" (Wright, *Native Son*, 221). By deeply submitting to the forces of subjection and solidifying his status as an outsider, Bigger provides himself with a unified cognitive map capable of explaining precisely "what he was in relation to all the others that lived" (Wright, *Native Son*, 363). Prior to killing Mary, Bigger suffers from not being able to map out how he relates to the urban totality of which he knows himself to be a part. Once he becomes a criminal, however, he brings himself "for the first time within the orbit of our civilization," providing himself with "an identity, even though it be but a number" (Wright, *Native Son*, 404).

Bigger's newfound identity hinges on his ability to claim complete responsibility for his actions, and as such, he refuses to acknowledge the accidental nature of his crime. By convincing himself that he has acted deliberately, Bigger essentially demonstrates to the reader that he has thrown himself into a world of self-deception in order to satisfy



what we have already identified as his most basic need for self-realization. Intent on reclaiming that certainty and “queer sense of power” which he first discovers only hours before, Bigger confesses to Bessie Mears that he has indeed murdered Mary Dalton, thereby recreating for himself a comparable state of imminent danger that enables him to kill again. Despite convincing himself otherwise, Bigger’s murder of Bessie is not an act of self-preservation, but, more accurately, a desperate attempt to reclaim that fleeting “queer sense of power” which he had acquired earlier that day.

By describing the sensation which his protagonist acquires from killing as a “queer sense of power,” Wright emphasizes the paradoxical nature of agency itself, indicating that Bigger’s empowerment emerges only in further submitting to his own subordination. Read within this context, Bigger’s troubling assertion of, “what I killed for, I *am!*” proves to be less a marker of either his triumphant success or his eventual defeat, and more of a disinterested observation gesturing towards the complexities of subject formation and the frighteningly influential role played by spaces themselves. As both a social product and a shaping force, Wright’s representations of urban space reveal that the city is not simply an obstacle which one can effectively transcend en route to self-realization, but is in fact the enabling condition of existence itself, chiefly responsible for discursively producing the “the categories, names and terms” Bigger relies on for self-definition.

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In an essay on Lefebvre which he wrote for Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift’s collection, *Thinking Space*, Andy Merrifield addresses the difficulties that arise when one

tries to account for the “many aspects and many contributing currents” that have “gone into” the production of any given space in its present state (Lefebvre 110).

Predominantly using Lefebvre’s own words, Merrifield points out that the biggest problem facing anyone intent on conducting a thorough analysis of space is that:

It is never easy to get back from the object [the present space] to the activity that produced and/or created it” (POS: 113). Because once the ‘construction is completed, the scaffolding is taken down; like-wise, the fate of an author’s rough draft is to be torn up and tossed away’ (*ibid.*). So what needs to be done is to ‘reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning. (Merrifield, “Henri Lefebvre,” 171)

Given the difficulties which Lefebvre and Merrifield suggest arise when one tries to account for a particular space’s production, Richard Wright’s work remains as vital today as it did when it was originally published. From the opening lines of *American Hunger*, where “the din of the city” enters the author’s “consciousness” “to remain for years to come,” to the final passages of *Native Son*, where Bigger and Max gaze out at Chicago’s vast and distant skyline, Wright consistently directs our attention toward the ongoing production of the urban environment, encouraging us at all times to consider how these arrangements and developments are “bound up with the function and structure” of our “lived experience” (Lefebvre 94). With the “scaffolding” of our present spaces already “taken down,” we must adopt alternative techniques in order to accurately “reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning.” By creating narratives that center on a single protagonist, Wright invites us to explore the subject-space relationship of an earlier era. Yet, by representing both the city and the subject as entities consistently in states of transformation, and by meticulously illustrating how each produces the other, Wright not only provides us with a gripping portrait of our shared

past, but also with tremendous insight into the condition of our present and a prophetic lens through which we may predict—and thereby, even possibly transform—our collective future.

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja argues that the “reassertion of space in critical social theory is an exercise in both deconstruction and reconstitution” (Soja 12). Likewise, by reading Wright’s texts in light of his critical urbanism, one can more effectively decipher the processes and designs responsible for producing the present states of our cities and therefore, may more adeptly prepare oneself for the skillful production of a new, more equitable future. Rather than simply offering us “a few details of slum life,” Wright creates a comprehensive urban critique that explores how uneven geographical development relates directly to finance capitalism, early twentieth century African American migration, the discursive production of race, and the intricacies of subject formation itself. Throughout the pages of *Native Son*, *American Hunger*, *The Outsider*, and *12,000,000 Black Voices*, Wright consistently represents his settings as places in motion, thereby alerting us, not only to the detrimental aspects of these processes, but to the open opportunity which we have to change them.

The current importance of Wright’s work becomes clear as soon as one links his graphic descriptions of urbanization with the present state of American cities and the current social conditions which they encapsulate. As David Harvey points out:

Capitalism thereby builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image. It constructs a distinctive geographical landscape, a produced space of transport and communications, of infrastructures and territorial organizations, that facilitates capital accumulation during one phase of its history only to have to be torn down and reconfigured to make way for further accumulation at a later stage. (Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 59)

Despite writing predominantly about Chicago and New York during the first half of the twentieth century, Wright's dynamic portrayals of urbanization as a process linked to both capital accumulation and the production of racial difference poignantly anticipate the contemporary state of race relations in America. By representing the variety and simultaneity intrinsic to uneven geographical development, and by demonstrating how these procedures are productive of and contingent upon racial difference,<sup>61</sup> he paints a rather bleak picture of the future, eerily predicting the intensification of certain racially based inequities, which our present unfortunately requires us to confirm.

According to the 2001 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, in 2000, despite comprising only 13% of the total residential population in the United States, African Americans represented 44% of convicted federal offenders (a number up 14 percentage points since the Supreme Court's decision on the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* case in 1954). These staggering numbers relate directly to the ongoing reality that residential segregation for African Americans continues to be the highest among all racial groups. While early stages of suburbanization temporarily saw a slight decrease in national segregation percentages, more recent studies demonstrate that residential and educational segregation patterns have been steadily on the rise since the early 1990s, reaching higher levels than any we as a nation have seen since the mid nineteen-fifties. Statistics taken from the 2000 U.S. Census Report indicate that residential segregation, poverty levels,

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<sup>61</sup> A powerful example of how the production of racial difference enhances segregation, thereby enabling further uneven geographical development, arises when Bigger's criminal trial is used by both the State Attorney and various forms of media to build a campaign of fear. Throughout *Native Son*, one can see how clearly the news is manipulated to further divide blacks from whites on the basis of white xenophobia.

unemployment ratios, and rates of violent crime correspond directly to one another, further suggesting that each of these conditions helps to perpetuate the others. Based on estimates data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics, an organization called Cellblocks or Classrooms “estimates that between 1980 and 2000, three times as many African American men were added to the nation’s prison systems than were added to colleges” during the same period.<sup>62</sup> While statistics like these can be manipulated and maneuvered to support a variety of claims, the fact remains that as the world’s most robust example of capitalism continues to rebuild “a geography in its own image,” it will continue to exacerbate the social inequities and reify the subjective differences which help to satisfy its need for perpetual growth.

While critical geographers like Harvey, Soja, Lefebvre, and others continue to debate over a variety of issues, they all clearly agree that “No social revolution can succeed without being at the same time a consciously spatial revolution” (Soja 92). As an artist and activist deeply committed to the eradication of social and racial injustice, Richard Wright creates a multi-textual urban critique which effectively articulates the sentiment shared by the critical geographers mentioned above. By carefully describing how subjects and spaces perpetually create one another, Wright provides his readers with an opportunity to more effectively identify those discrete forms of power which not only

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<sup>62</sup> The principal authors of “Cellblocks or Classrooms” are Jason Ziedenberg and Vincent Schiraldi of the Justice Policy Institute a project of the Tides Center, with research assistance from Sara A. Newland, Morgan Strecker, Mark Houdin and Sara Meacham. Editorial assistance was provided by Deborah Clark, Laura Jones, Natalia Kennedy, Theresa Rowland and Vincent Schiraldi. Cellblocks or Classrooms was designed and laid out by JaVonne Pope, web master and designer for the Justice Policy Institute. This report was funded by a generous grant from the Criminal Justice Initiative of the Open Society Institute. For more information on the Justice Policy Institute, please visit our website at [www.justicepolicy.org](http://www.justicepolicy.org)

shape our current reality, but, in one way or another, are destined to determine our future as well.

## Chapter 4: James Baldwin and the Urban Production of American Masculinity

Given Baldwin's criticism of Wright, his work provides us with a perfect opportunity to examine how another black artist represents the city. Regardless of whether Baldwin's criticism of *Native Son* stems from his genuine dissatisfaction with the novel or—as Maurice Charney points out—from his need to revolt against “his mentor and spiritual father . . . in order to prove his own manhood and integrity and skill,” the younger writer's representations of urban space and the subject-space relationship reveal that he has a lot more in common with Wright than he ever admits, at least publically (Charney 67).

In “James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright,” Charney skillfully traces the relationship between the two writers, identifying how Baldwin “became Wright's protégé early in his career,” how Wright “helped Baldwin win his first writing fellowship,” and how Baldwin initiated an irreconcilable feud between the two by publically denouncing *Native Son* in the conclusion of “Everybody's Protest Novel:” an essay he published in the spring of 1949 (Charney 67-8). Although Charney briefly accounts for many of the issues that underscore Baldwin's critique, he ultimately concludes that the younger writer correctly rejects *Native Son* for its “naturalism and the naturalist view of reality” that it presents (Charney 69). According to both Baldwin and Charney, by imposing a “preordained pattern set upon” Bigger's reality, Wright denies his protagonist “the consciousness of a human being,” thereby creating nothing more than an incomplete stereotype that Baldwin likens to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. But what both men fail to acknowledge is that while Bigger may “accept a theology that denies him

life,” that does not necessarily mean that he lacks a complex human consciousness. Yes, with *Native Son* Wright depicts one man’s unfortunate defeat at the hands of American racism, but Bigger’s demise does not by definition reduce him to a myth, a monster, or a type.

Baldwin’s condemnation of *Native Son* actually has more to do with his own fear of becoming like Bigger than from a belief that Wright’s portrayal lacks depth and complexity. Afraid of the destruction he knew he would succumb to had he not left for France, Baldwin labored desperately to redefine himself as an artist who would not be shackled by the racial forces that he felt were claiming him and had already claimed Wright. Baldwin’s problem with Bigger Thomas is that Bigger fails to realize, accept, and nurture the inherent humanity within himself that transcends racial discourse. Wright laments that reality as well, but feels compelled to address it directly as he saw it destroying so many throughout the nation. Baldwin, on the other hand, decided that he could only liberate himself as an artist and as an individual by using Wright’s “work like a springboard into my own” (*Nobody Knows My Name* 17). “His work was like a roadblock in my road,” Baldwin admits, “a sphinx, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself” (*Nobody Knows My Name* 17). The primary “riddle” Baldwin needed “to answer” was nothing short of race itself; a “sphinx,” as he describes it, that not only has the power to deny men their inherent complexity, but to strip the African American artist of his creative potential. Determined to create characters that reflect the many dimensions he knew existed within himself, Baldwin strove to address racial issues, but not be proscribed by them. In adherence with his own theory of the novelist’s task, he vowed to deal wholeheartedly with “this web of ambiguity, paradox . . . danger, [and]



darkness;” the only vessel, he argues, within which we can “find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist,” he continues, “this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims” (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 15).

Baldwin’s conception of and commitment to this “vast reality” is what makes his work perfect for the focus of the third and final chapter of *American Ethni/Cities*, a study in its own right that concentrates on the urban production of American masculinity. In *Commitment as a Theme in African American Literature: A study of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison*, R. Jothiprakash states, “although Baldwin had earned a reputation for being a harsh critic, and for exposing the grit and grime in American race relations, he was actually most committed to the problems and possibilities of finding and holding love” (Jothiprakash 57). The inability of Baldwin’s character’s to love stems from their compulsory acceptance of a host of alienating, “normative ideologies” which William Spurlin points out are especially damaging in the forms of “heteronormativity, racism, and other Cold War technologies of violence” (Spurlin 30). As Baldwin attests in both essay and fiction, one can only realize his/her true self by dismantling and transcending the very “system of reality” which he/she is ideologically conditioned to preserve and protect (James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 86). By “guarding and keeping” the “normative ideologies” that impede self-actualization and foster self-distrust, the individual ironically becomes the primary instrument of his/her own persecution (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 86).

In *The Fire Next Time* (1962), Baldwin targets the ideological processes that effectively transform subjects into agents of their own oppression. By pointing out that

this “universe” which has “evolved no terms for your existence, [and] has made no room for you” *is* “other people,” he draws our attention to the performative, discursive, and spatial mechanics of power which foster alienation and distrust, thereby implying that the false reality we adopt stems from the everyday practices we perform (30). In order to arrive at a true sense of self that can serve as a “touchstone for reality,” and thereby enable the individual to realize his/her full potential to love, Baldwin contends that one *must* first venture beyond socio-linguistic constructions of personhood—namely those relating to race, sex, class, gender, and nationality—and honestly confront the depths of one’s own being (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 43).

As a fiction writer, Baldwin spent much of his career addressing the same humanistic concerns he voices in *The Fire Next Time*, composing novels and short stories that examine “how,” as Eve Sedgwick explains, “a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systematically with each other” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 32). Focusing specifically on Baldwin’s treatment of space in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) and *Another Country* (1960), this chapter explores how a number of the author’s characters evolve as sexed and gendered beings through intersecting networks of discourse and ideology.

According to Jermaine Singleton, Baldwin’s first novel “is notable less for its innovative depiction of the sexism that claims African American social and subject-formations than for its unprecedented account of how racism and sexism collude within the African American Pentecostal community” (105). Although Singleton rightfully claims that *Go Tell It On the Mountain* focuses on the intersection of “racism and sexism,” his argument fails to account for both the *full* range of social discourses that

actually collide with one another throughout the text, as well as for the various spaces where their collisions take place (most notably in the home, on the streets of Harlem, in the rural hamlets of the southern United States, and in the surrounding neighborhoods and parks which border the nation's most famous African American ghetto). My intent is not to refute Singleton's claim or debase his contributions, but to extend what he has already started and apply his critical approach to Baldwin's work more broadly.

Singleton goes on to state, "Baldwin's novel is one of few narratives of African American literature that weds racism and sexism, sacred and unconscious. Accordingly, a disciplined analysis of Baldwin's masterpiece requires an interpretive lens that accommodates the depth of this revolutionary text" (Singleton 106). Given the "constellation of factors" (Spurlin 6) that converges and influences subject formation throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as well as within Baldwin's other stories, Singleton's call for "an interpretive lens that accommodates the depth" and complexity of Baldwin's work is not only necessary, but long overdue.

The interpretive lens Singleton seeks now exists due to the recent cultural and critical 'turns' in the field of geography briefly described in this dissertation's introduction. Over the past sixty years, the study of geography has radically evolved from what was once "frequently characterized as an atheoretical endeavor" into an extremely dynamic, extensively theorized, interdisciplinary social science that has produced new possibilities for the ways we decipher power relations, understand the spatial construction of difference, and fashion innovative modes of resistance (Hubbard et al. 3). Although "geography remains distinguished from the other social sciences by its *explicit* focus on space and place," its current inclusion of various aspects of social and

critical theory has made it more useful than ever for those seeking to more effectively understand how the world works (Hubbard et al. 62).

For the purposes of this investigation into how the production of space influences subject formation in Baldwin's work—specifically in regards to the construction of American masculinity—the most helpful geographic ideas stem directly from the recent application of queer theory to spatial production. Following Judith Butler's ideas about performativity and the social construction of gender and sexuality, 'queer' geographers have focused their efforts on examining “the way in which heterosexist behaviors and assumptions feed into the production of spatial Othering and the contestation of what constitutes proper behavior within a space” (Hubbard et al. 79-80). Butler's theory of performativity offers geographers tremendous insight into how a variety of human practices imbue particular spaces with various expressions of power. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that performativity is not a single or intentional act, but rather “the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 2). Applying Butler's theory of performativity to Lefebvre's ideas about any given space being produced by the activities it ostensibly contains reveals how effectively particular spaces function ideologically, especially when it comes to exacting normative attitudes and behaviors relating to sexuality and gender. Butler's contributions to the field of geography have led many to conclude that “space is generally sexed as heterosexual,” and as such, plays a major heteronormative role in our everyday lives (Hubbard et al. 80). Along with geographical approaches informed by Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural theory, geographical studies dealing with the sexing of space and the spatial construction of gender norms will help

shed light on Baldwin's representations of subject-space relationships as they evolve throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*.

In his semi-autobiographical first novel, Baldwin immediately sets out to deconstruct the nexus of socio-spatial power relations that coerce subjects into accepting a false "system of reality" that breeds self-distrust. Revolving around one boy's reluctant initiation into his father's church, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* explores the historical and cultural influences that make a variety of urban spaces aggressively heteronormative, specifically in regards to the spaces occupied and created by New York City's African American citizens. Beleaguered by his growing awareness of American racism and guilt-ridden over his dawning sexuality and burgeoning desire for an older boy in the congregation, John Grimes is ultimately driven to the "threshing-floor" of his step-father's church where he experiences a ritualistic rebirth on his fourteenth birthday amidst the cries and prayers of his fellow congregants. This dramatic climax sparks the novel's unyielding ambiguity, leading some critics to interpret John's fall and subsequent ascent as a symbol of his sexual liberation, while others view the same event as confirmation of his tragic surrender to a cultural program that will only ensure him additional suffering and self-alienation.

In regards to its treatment of spatial heteronormativity, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* focuses predominantly on the production of the domestic, urban, and parochial spaces that collectively constitute Harlem as the overarching medium through which John develops as a subject. As such, the novel explores how members of a residentially segregated and socially marginalized African American community respond to the existence of white patriarchal domination through the everyday spaces they inherit and

create. An examination of these spaces in Baldwin's novel shows how Harlem emerges simultaneously as a catalyst of resistance, creativity, and spiritual transcendence, as well as an engine of internalized oppression that powerfully compels its residents to comply with the delusory and short-sighted norms perpetuated by the dominant culture.

Baldwin's ambiguous representation of John's spiritual rebirth on the 'threshing-floor' deftly captures the paradoxical essence of the neighborhood itself (as well as the paradoxical nature of subjection that Butler theorizes in *The Psychic Life of Power*). The internalization of hegemonically fabricated norms appears most explicit in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* through the customary gender roles Baldwin's characters enact and the heteronormative pressures John encounters.

In *Another Country*, completed approximately eight years after the initial publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin extends his socio-spatial critique of ideological norms out from the confines of Harlem into the other neighborhoods of New York City and beyond. While Baldwin's third novel continues to receive less recognition and praise than his first—in part, no doubt, because of the “fact that allegedly its [*Go Tell It on the Mountain*'s] main theme is race rather than sexuality” (qtd. in Csapo 59)—it is in many ways a much more ambitious and comprehensive critique of the normative processes that plague identity formation and transform subjects into agents of their own oppression. Clearly more explicit in its treatment of homosexuality—in addition to other sexual practices deemed 'deviant' by mainstream America—*Another Country* traces the intersecting lives and relationships of a number of characters who come from a variety of different backgrounds (geographically, racially, culturally, financially, nationally, and sexually). Despite their many differences, each of these characters suffers from an

identity crisis which engenders feelings of intense isolation and an inability to “find and keep love.” Wedding capitalism to the discursive socio-spatial processes that sustain white, patriarchal domination, Baldwin demonstrates how a hegemonic system aiming to ensure white, male supremacy not only preys on women, racial minorities, and non-heterosexuals, but also, ironically, oppresses white, male subjects as well.

For Baldwin, this hegemonic system is intrinsically embedded in and perpetuated by the urban environment itself. As a medium designed to facilitate the accumulation of wealth and preserve white patriarchal control, the city is constantly in a state of uneven geographical development, thereby promoting difference, facilitating exploitation, and perpetuating various forms of inequality and injustice. In addition to achieving its goals by participating in the reproduction of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, the urban landscape also plays into the reification of particular norms related to gender and sexuality. Throughout *Another Country*, Baldwin focuses specifically on the socio-spatial production of masculinity as a narrow and debilitating construct that weighs heavily on all Americans, regardless of their class, gender, race, or sexual orientation. With varying degrees of skill, courage, and success, Baldwin’s characters each struggle to claim a sense of self buried deep beneath a series of discursive constructs that they have been conditioned “to guard and keep.” A spatial analysis of Baldwin’s novel can help us deconstruct the ongoing production of American masculinity and many of the other ideological norms barring human subjects from forging genuine relationships with reality, themselves, and each other.

In “Race, Religion, and Sexuality in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” Csaba Csapo points out that Baldwin’s “conceptualization of identity” is “multiplicative rather than

additive. An additive exploration of the constituents of identity along the axes of types of discrimination,” she adds:

most often presupposes that such subject positions as “African American,” “man,” “heterosexual,” and “saved” are monolithic, thus separable and distinct. A multiplicative conceptualization of identity does not presume that one constituent of it would have ontological priority over the others. Multiplicative identity means that it is flexible, and its constituents are mutable, provisional, and multivalent. The relative importance of different constituents of identity is in constant change according to the type of oppression Baldwin’s characters have to confront. (Csapo 61)

Consistent with Csapo’s ideas about Baldwin’s “multiplicative” “conceptualization of identity,” this chapter outwardly acknowledges that “different constituents of identity” overlap, underscore, reinforce, and often even contradict one another. However, without granting the gender and sexuality-based constituents of identity with an “ontological priority” they do not inherently possess, this chapter nevertheless aims to focus on the ways urban spaces help reproduce the gender roles and heteronormative pressures that shape modern-day conceptualizations of what it means to be a man (and hence a woman as well). In *Another Country*, as well as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin’s characters encounter various types of oppression at different times and in different places. One of the great hopes of this study is that its examination of the symbiotic relationship between urban production and the construction of masculinity will shed light on other ways various discursive processes influence one another as they simultaneously unfold in and through space. Seeing as though there is no such thing as a single, autonomous, and self-contained form of masculinity, a spatial analysis of gender and sexuality in Baldwin’s work must acknowledge that masculinity evolves differently in different communities living in different places. Therefore, any proper exploration of masculinity



in either of the aforementioned novels must take the other discourses intersecting through space into consideration. Approaching Baldwin's fiction through a geographical lens will enable readers to focus on a particular element of identity construction—in this case, masculinity—while making sure to honor and consider the other “constituents of identity” which inevitably intersect with it.

*Hetero-sexing Harlem and the Quest for a Queer Identity in Go Tell It on the Mountain*

In regards to Baldwin's representation of Harlem in his first novel, Addison Gayle argues, “no writer knows the ghetto or its people better than Baldwin, and the frequent depictions of the city in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* express the squalor, the impersonality, poverty and the various crimes that threaten with corruption” (qtd. in Csapo 62). While correct in his assessment of Baldwin's familiarity with the ghetto and its people, Gayle's comments about the author's “depictions of the city” fail to adequately account for the complexity, depth, and profundity of those representations, as well as the extent to which they “threaten” or impact Baldwin's characters. Yes, Baldwin skillfully portrays the environmental conditions which Gayle describes; but more importantly, he carefully details how the public and private spaces Harlem's residents create make the neighborhood a site of community building, resistance, and spiritual transcendence, as well as a medium which breeds racial self-hatred, rigid and oppressive gender roles, and widespread homophobia. The contradictions embedded in the nation's most famous ghetto underscore and structure the central protagonist's beleaguered quest

for self-realization and self-acceptance, thereby making a comprehensive analysis of Baldwin's urban representations critical to any understanding of John Grimes' predicament and personal development.

As a conglomerate of religious, racially marked, gendered, and sexed spaces—some considered private, and others widely deemed public—Baldwin's Harlem deluges his fourteen-year-old protagonist with a host of discursive constructions which he must make sense of and ultimately transcend if he is to have any success in forming a healthy identity. While Baldwin's depiction of life in the ghetto clearly foregrounds the “depth of human sorrow present in the lives of inner city dwellers bound by circumstance and legacy,” his descriptions of how those environmental conditions influence the formation of private and semi-private spaces—like the ones we see in the Grimes family home and in the Temple of the Fire Baptized—are far more important for anyone interested in exploring John's situation (Henderson 6). Baldwin's representations of domestic and religious spaces expose how the most destructive traps we set for ourselves stem from our internalization of false notions of personhood and reality. In order to adequately account for the depth of John's suffering, one must explore how the urban processes shaping Harlem as a dilapidated ghetto influence the creation of familial and parochial spaces that not only marginalize him from the city's dominant white majority, but alienate him from the black community as well.

Although many critics continue to focus on the novel's treatment of race, John's burgeoning desire for Elisha (an older boy he knows from his stepfather's church) emerges as the primary factor that alienates him from both family and friends. Baldwin's treatment of homosexual desire in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is certainly more subtle

than in many of his later novels—namely *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968)—but, as Emmanuel S. Nelson argues, his first novel actually “offers one of the most sensitive portrayals of the developing adolescent gay consciousness in American fiction” (qtd. in Csapo 58). Set precisely on John's fourteenth birthday, the novel pairs a series of rather mundane events and powerful memories with the protagonist's impending initiation into the adult community of his Pentecostal church, as well as with his dawning awareness of his own homosexual desire. Given Christianity's and the Black Power' movement's traditional condemnation of homosexuality, one can clearly see how John's emerging desire for Elisha would interfere with his rite of passage into the fraternity of black men. As Csapo points out, “The male homosexual is . . . menaced by definitions of manhood that are used to denigrate his existence and individual dignity” (Csapo 59). Compelled to join an adult, black community that tends to see same-sex desire as being inherently at odds with its conceptualization of masculinity, John faces a confrontation that certainly affects his “developing adolescent gay consciousness.”

Throughout the novel “the definitions of manhood that are used to denigrate [John's] existence and individual dignity” are formulated and conveyed through the various spaces he inhabits, traverses, and creates. Given that spaces are constituted by the actions which they house,<sup>63</sup> and that African American constructions of masculinity evolved in response to over four hundred years of systematic emasculation, it should come as no surprise that the homes, neighborhoods, and communal spaces Baldwin's

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<sup>63</sup> “‘Space’ is both process and social product, arising from and conditioning everyday spatial practices; it both constitutes and is constituted by social relations (see Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (full citation in Works Cited).

characters create reinforce hyper-(hetero)sexualized conceptions of masculine behavior. As such, John knows, unequivocally, that his emerging homosexual desires must remain hidden at all costs. Otherwise, if expressed, those desires will isolate him from family, co-religionists, and the community at large.

All of the spatial practices which make Harlem decidedly heteronormative in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* stem from the nation's shameful history of racial oppression, as well as from the processes of urbanization that Lefebvre purports have "saved capitalism from its extinction" (Lefebvre 346). According to Lefebvre:

[space] is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces—but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an a priori condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them. Is space a social relationship? Certainly—but one which is inherent to property relationships and also closely bound up with the forces of production; here we see the polyvalence of social space, its 'reality' at once formal and material. Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it. (Lefebvre 85)

As 'a means of production,' New York City—combined with the state itself—*called* for Harlem as a ghetto which it could "organize according to" its "specific requirements;" that is to say, it created Harlem as the necessary reservoir for cheap and available labor by ensuring that its growing population remained in a state of need. Lefebvre expounds on his argument about urban space when he says, "The means of production belong to the individual capitalist and to the bourgeoisie as a class, and are used by them to retain their hold over the working class, to make that class work" (Lefebvre 348). Elevated rent

prices in the ghetto,<sup>64</sup> refusals to grant African Americans housing in other parts of the city, the recruitment of blacks to the neighborhood in numbers which exceeded available job opportunities,<sup>65</sup> and the overall neglect of Harlem's infrastructure<sup>66</sup> all ensured that "the individual capitalist" and "the bourgeoisie as a class" could exploit Harlem as a means to accumulate wealth for themselves.

The cultural production of black masculinity in the United States has evolved in part as a reaction to the conditions aforementioned; conditions which continue to bar many of Harlem's black residents from the means of betterment and fulfillment available to members of the white population. As John's mother recalls of her early days in New York:

There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled; there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 163)

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<sup>64</sup> "The unwillingness of landlords elsewhere in the city to rent to black tenants, together with a significant increase in the black population of New York, meant that rents in Harlem were for many years higher than rents elsewhere in the city, even as the housing stock decayed. In 1920, one-room apartments in central Harlem rented for \$40 to whites or \$100-\$125 to blacks. In the late 1920s, a typical white working class family in New York paid \$6.67 per month per room, while blacks in Harlem paid \$9.50 for the same space. The worse the accommodations and more desperate the renter, the higher the rents would be. This pattern would persist through the 1960s" (New York City Real Estate Guide)

<sup>65</sup> "During World War I, black laborers were actively recruited to leave the southern United States and work in northern factories, thinly staffed because of the war" (New York City Real Estate Guide). The return of soldiers following the end of the war and the rising numbers of immigrants pouring into the city from southern and eastern Europe led directly to the evaporation of available jobs for Harlem's growing number of residents.

<sup>66</sup> In addition to the lack of investment in the buildings of the neighborhood (which caused residential structures to quickly deteriorate), Harlem "enjoyed few benefits from the massive public works projects in New York under Robert Moses in the 1930s, and as a result had fewer parks and public recreational sites than other New York neighborhoods. Of the 255 playgrounds Moses built in New York City, he placed only one in Harlem" (New York City Real Estate Guide).

Recollections of the past, like the one quoted above, surface throughout Part Two of the novel: “The Prayers of the Saints.” The three “prayers” which comprise this section belong to Florence (John’s aunt), Gabriel (John’s stepfather), and Elizabeth (John’s mother). Collectively, they demonstrate how John’s current existence is shaped by a legacy of oppression and struggle that he is just beginning to examine. Carol E. Henderson argues that the prayers in the novel serve as “flashbacks that remind the reader how the past and present coexist,” and as such, draw attention to “the impact collective and personal history has on an individual” (Henderson 2).

Along with inheriting the pain and suffering of his forbearers, John is forced to live within the spaces that their “collective and personal” experiences create. Exacerbated by the city-wide processes of uneven geographical development that pit Harlem as an impoverished ghetto right up against a variety of urban renewal projects—each one testifying to the improved quality of life enjoyed by the city’s white denizens—the aggravation and despair already haunting many African Americans would reach new heights in the 1940s and 1950s, finding expression and relief in a variety of behaviors that in turn produce the religious, domestic, and urban spaces constituting Harlem itself.

Throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin repeatedly refers to the northern city as a menacing phenomenon, calling it “the city of destruction,”<sup>67</sup> a “great city where no one cared,” and a place where “blood” “unceasingly” “ran down” (157, 162, and 137). In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin’s account of his own adolescence in Harlem more than

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<sup>67</sup> “The city of destruction” is a phrase borrowed from E. Franklin Frazier, and Baldwin acknowledges the source of this reference in *The Fire Next Time*.

justifies his choice of words to describe the urban environment in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation; one did not have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long. The humiliation did not apply merely to working days, or workers; I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, "Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?" When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculation concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots. Just before and then during the Second World War, many of my friends fled into the service, all to be changed there, and rarely for the better, many to be ruined, and many to die. Others fled to other states and cities—that is, to other ghettos. Some went on wine or whiskey or the needle, and are still on it. And others, like me, fled into the church. (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 19-20)

I quote this passage at length because it successfully brings together a number of the factors that constitute the city as an agent of "destruction" for so many of Harlem's residents during the 1940s and 1950s. Baldwin's accounts of his childhood experiences outside the ghetto highlight the disciplinary measures taken to bar blacks from participating in the mainstream of American life, thereby impeding their access to means of empowerment and to the acquisition of knowledge (represented in this passage by the "Forty-second Street library"). Additionally, his recollection of these two early encounters with white policemen demonstrates how institutional practices confining blacks to the ghetto reinforce racial distinctions through segregation and spatial constraint.

The spatial practices employed by the policemen above reveal how the city itself systematically emasculates black men. On a literal level, the officers in the second

episode draw upon the myth of the African American male's "sexual prowess" as a pretext for their subsequent attack on Baldwin's manhood, leaving him abused and powerless, "flat on [his] back in one of Harlem's empty lots." On more of a figurative level, the behaviors of all three policemen represent the "incessant and gratuitous [acts of] humiliation and danger" that make it abundantly clear to the black male subject that there is "little one could do to change one's situation."<sup>68</sup> Together, these experiences powerfully demonstrate how various forms of racial oppression function spatially to strip the African American male of his manhood and self-worth. Throughout the nation as a whole, one's ability to work, produce, and achieve financial independence continues to underscore conceptualizations of legitimate manhood. Having those opportunities systematically obstructed only further intensifies the ongoing contestations to black manhood that stem all the way back to slavery.

After elaborating on how his early urban experiences shaped his racial consciousness, Baldwin asks: "How can one . . . dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power?" (*The Fire Next Time* 80). Although he delivers this query within a broader discussion of property ownership and the American Dream, Baldwin's rhetorical question speaks powerfully to the narrow constructions of black masculinity which emerge out of the environmental conditions and spatial practices constituting the ghetto itself. "The Negro's experience of the white world" may not "create in him any respect" for its alleged "standards," he argues, but that lack of respect does not free him from seeking empowerment through the methods exercised by those who seem to have it.

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<sup>68</sup> Baldwin's representations of his own encounters with white policemen closely resemble the State Attorney's poster which hails Bigger in *Native Son*. In both cases, state apparatuses call out to the black male subject and force him to recognize himself as the "You" that "Cannot Win."



Due to the obviousness of white patriarchal domination, the African American man living in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s would have found the most potent “symbols of power” embedded in “society’s obdurate figurations of manhood—ones rooted in strength, power, authority and heterosexuality” (Clark 2). According to Csapo:

People’s way of thinking is strongly influenced by the patriarchal scheme of the culture in which they live, and their judgments deriving from the scheme are deeply embedded in their psyche. Gender roles within patriarchal society prescribe the hierarchal roles of men and women assumed to be “natural,” and labeled as “masculine” and “feminine” as if these categories were ontological. In this context, the heterosexual majority regards homosexuals as those who transgress traditional gender roles and thus violate the prescribed rules of “proper” sexual behavior. Gender identity such as masculinity and femininity is not something inherent, or born with, but a learned entity, a social construction. (Csapo 67)

Given the fact that “many black men have seen their social, gendered status as men as something fiercely contested and persistently withheld” (Clark 1), and that Westerners in general receive “symbols of power” from “the patriarchal scheme of the culture in which they live,” it should come as no surprise that various forms of African American masculinity have historically conformed to the hierarchal gender roles and homophobic tendencies present within the dominant white culture.

Predicated on “the denigration of others,” argues Rudolph P. Byrd, this “strangely emasculating masculinity” “is mired in the slavery of misogyny that prizes outmoded but still powerful values of patriarchy” (Byrd 7). “Such a masculinity,” he adds, “also is enmeshed in the slavery of homophobia and is scornful; fearful of any sexuality that does not present itself within the trappings of a heterosexual ideal” (Byrd 7). By seeking power through the symbols provided by white patriarchy, many black men end up internalizing and perpetuating the ideological “standards” which oppress them in the first

place, thereby demonstrating that “the deepest wounds are often self-inflicted” (Byrd 17). According to Margo Natalie Crawford, “racial self-hatred stems from a white phallocentric worldview;” a perspective, she goes on to add, that is nurtured in the black church and that simultaneously breeds “homosexual self-hatred” as well (Crawford 80, 76).

Spurlin refers to this “emasculating” phenomenon permeating African American culture as “the cult of phallic masculinity” (Spurlin 31). “Represented by the protest novel and by the character of Gabriel in *Go Tell It*,” he argues, “and to a greater extent by black cultural nationalism,” “black phallic masculinity” frequently subordinates women to men and supports “a position of homosexuality as ‘un-African’ (Spurlin 34-35).<sup>69</sup> Through John’s initiation into the black church, Baldwin demonstrates how conforming to behaviors and standards associated with black phallic masculinity leads to self-destruction. Desperate to find a way to stand up to Gabriel, John submits to an institution that punishes him for harboring homosexual desires. Like many black men who concede to the “obdurate figurations of manhood” stemming from the dominant culture, John resorts to a means of resistance against patriarchal domination that paradoxically reinforces the source of his own oppression.

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<sup>69</sup> In regards, specifically, to the relationship between homophobia and black nationalism, many—including Byrd and Csapo—have cited Eldridge Cleaver’s vicious attack on Baldwin’s sexuality as a defining moment which “legitimized homophobia in Black public discourse beyond the domain of the Black church” (Byrd 15). As a result of his mission to “counter [these] limiting constructions of the black male self” (Clark 31), “Baldwin and his work did not fit the image of (straight) black male virility many in the Black Power movement wished to see projected as a mode of resistance to racism” (Spurlin 35). For Baldwin, those who adopted this narrow construction of masculinity to *combat* racial oppression ironically ended up performing the “ideological processes,” which Peter Jackson suggests, work to maintain “a dominant (white) hegemony” (Jackson ??).

While many critics continue to see “John’s religious conversion . . . as a metaphor for his awakening to his new, i.e. gay identity” (Csapo 58), others, like Singleton and Sherry Truffin, disagree: arguing instead—respectively—that the same scene marks his “passage into the realm of hegemonic masculinity” (Singleton 117), and that his “transcendence experience” signifies his acceptance of “roles which are counter to his authentic self” (Truffin 133). Despite fundamentally contradicting one another, both interpretations seem justifiable given the complex ambiguity of Baldwin’s text. Although John’s ritualistic rebirth on the “threshing-floor” represents his graduation into adulthood—and thereby his willingness to adopt the “obdurate figurations of manhood” required by his community—it is an adulthood defined by his willingness to confront his father and embark, maturely, on the troubled road of self-exploration. When John turns to Elisha at the end of the novel and says, “no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *anybody* says, you remember—please remember—I was saved” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 220); Baldwin indicates that his protagonist’s future will be laden with trials and tribulations. The paradox inherent in John’s conversion is that it is at once an accomplishment and a tragic surrender: yes, he has found the strength to face Gabriel and begin carving out his own future—“I’m ready,” he says at the very end, “I’m coming. I’m on my way” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 221)—but he has only done so by submitting to a form of masculinity that he must now transcend as he sets forth on that journey.

As a momentary acceptance of hegemonic masculinity, John’s dramatic collapse on the threshing-floor results from his sheer exhaustion after spending the entire day (and presumably his entire life) confronting the oppressive norms that emanate from the

various spaces he occupies. Moving from place to place throughout the narrative—including his stepfather’s house, Central Park, a movie theater on Forty-second street, the church, and the various streets that literally connect these locations to one another—John encounters a number of phallogentric and heteronormative forces that compel him to question his own sinfulness, attractiveness, masculinity, and self-worth.

Although Baldwin embeds his critique of black masculinity in John’s rebellion against Gabriel—his abusive stepfather who Henderson rightfully points out “embodies white, homophobic society” (Henderson 12)—his criticism also surfaces within his vivid representations of spatial production; that is to say, in the ways that his characters, through their everyday practices, make various domestic, religious, and public places heteronormative and hierarchically gendered.<sup>70</sup> In “(Re)Negotiating the Heterosexual Street: Lesbian Productions of Space,” Gill Valentine draws upon Judith Butler’s notions of gender and performativity to articulate her own conception of the heterosexing of space:

Judith Butler has famously argued that: ‘gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (1990: 33). In the same way the heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalized through repetition and regulation. This repetition takes the form of many acts: from heterosexual couples kissing and holding hands as they make their way down the street, to advertisements and window displays which present images of contented ‘nuclear’ families; and from heterosexualized conversations that permeate queues at bus stops and banks, to the piped music articulating heterosexual desires that fill shops, bars and restaurants. These acts produce ‘a host of assumptions embedded in the practices of public life about what constitutes proper behavior’ and which congeal over time to give the appearance of a ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ production of space. . . . But the production of

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<sup>70</sup> Gabriel “embodies white, homophobic society” because he has chosen to “empower” himself by conforming to the symbols of power pervading the dominant culture.

heterosexual space is not only tied up with the performance of heterosexual desire but also with the performance of gender identities. (Valentine 146-147)

The “heterosexing” of various spaces depicted in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* occurs predominantly through the clearly enacted “performance of gender identities,” rather than through sanctioned acts of heterosexual intimacy, per se; although the latter still plays a significant role in conveying to John what types of sexual encounters are permissible.<sup>71</sup> Valentine’s explanation is important to an understanding of the challenges John faces, because in addition to his growing awareness of what it means to be black in America, he must also confront the reality that his own sexual desires are vehemently condemned by the culture to which he ostensibly ‘belongs.’ By simply inhabiting space in church, at home, and in the street, John learns to associate his desires with sin, thereby fostering with himself deep-seated feelings of shame and alienation. As a fourteen-year-old boy being groomed to one day preach in the Temple of the Fire Baptized, John occupies a host of heteronormative spaces that compel him to “shed” his ““true”” identity “in order to perform *like* other identities” (May 112).

“Accepting that identities are a process, a ‘project,’ and a ‘performance,’” writes Geraldine Pratt, “is compatible with an understanding that a stable identity is reenacted through daily life” (Pratt 28). With clarity and sophistication Pratt explores “how particular places not only enable but exact the performance of particular gender, class, and racial identities” (Pratt 28). Although she never explicitly examines how particular spaces exact performances related to sexuality and sexual orientation, her ideas about the

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<sup>71</sup> John’s mid-day visit to the movie theater stands as one example of the latter.

relationship between spaces and subject formation suggest that such an examination has merit and can help us more effectively understand John's evolution as sexed subject.

Modeled on the patriarchal "symbols of power" extant within the dominant culture and reenacted through a series of homophobic and hierarchically gendered performances, "the cult of phallic masculinity" thriving in black America creates many of the oppressively heteronormative spaces that by the end of the day drive John down to the "threshing-floor." A geographical exploration into the events that make up John's fourteenth birthday not only reveals how the various spaces he occupies are forged by phallic masculinity, but how those spaces "exact" from him a masculine performance consistent with that construction.

Although John's day begins like any other—that is, by waking up from a nightly slumber into the alienating menace of his stepfather's home—a spatial investigation of his daily existence should really begin with an examination of *The Temple of the Fire Baptized*,<sup>72</sup> since the patriarchal practices performed domestically are nurtured in and validated by the church. As a representation of what life was like in many of the storefront churches established in Harlem between World War I and World War II, Baldwin's depiction of *The Temple of the Fire Baptized* demonstrates how the social and religious practices enacted in church inform the patriarchal order structuring daily life in the home.

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<sup>72</sup> As a fictional account of one of the many store-front churches established in Harlem between World War I and World War II, Baldwin's depiction of *The Temple of the Fire Baptized* clearly emerges out of his own experiences within the church he and his family belonged to during his childhood and adolescence.

As Baldwin explains in *The Fire Next Time*, he originally turned to the church as a way to rise above the dangers he faced on a daily basis and to ensure himself that he would not become “one of the sordid people on the Avenue” (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 24). The “unforeseeable paradox” of his decision, however, comes from the fact that by enlisting in the church, he conforms to the same destructive conception of masculinity conditioning young black boys out on the streets. Throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin demonstrates how the religious practices geared towards historical and racial transcendence actually end up reifying the gendered hierarchies, racial ideologies, and homophobic attitudes already haunting Harlem’s residents.

The Temple of the Fire Baptized is the primary location where Gabriel comes to develop his “social, gendered status as” a man; an assertion of his own humanity that he attempts to recover after years of emasculation, first in the South and later in the northern city. Given the frequency and intensity with which he has been forced to question his own self-worth—a reality for Gabriel that Baldwin depicts through the “Prayers of the Saints” and the novel’s non-linear structure—Gabriel seeks to prove his inalienable manhood through the means and mechanisms he finds available within the culture and tradition of Christian patriarchy. By assuming authority at the pulpit, by preaching to the congregation about moral purity and salvation, and by ‘saving’ some of the ‘fallen women’ he meets through marriage, Gabriel exploits a series of hierarchical gender roles grounded in Christianity to substantiate his patriarchal status and testify to his selection as one of the elect. According to Singleton, Baldwin’s novel “invites the reader into a sacred world in which African America’s redemption from its history of racial oppression hides silently behind patriarchal order” (Singleton 106). Gabriel’s attempt to assert his

manhood through his role in the church confirms Singleton's claim, even though he is not the organization's alpha-male.

By seeking patriarchal authority in the church, Gabriel internalizes a theological worldview that associates blackness with sinfulness, thereby paradoxically ensuring his continued emasculation and ongoing racial self-hatred. According to Henderson, "the African American community developed cultural practices . . . of redemption and salvation" "in an effort to circumvent" the prevailing "stigma" that linked their skin pigmentation with their inherent sinfulness. Ironically, however, by deriving these cultural practices through the Christian tradition itself, black church-goers frequently internalized the ideological perspective that they aimed to "circumvent." Their shared perception that one needed to prove his or her humanity through a mastery of the Church's rules and regulations led many blacks to exaggerate the already conservative mores present in the white Christian tradition; conservative mores—that at least in part—are responsible for the creation of the stigma Henderson mentions above. Elaborating on the history of this link between blackness and sinfulness, Anthony Barthelemy argues:

the Christian tradition with remarkable economy attached to all people of African American ancestry an irrevocable bond to a sinful past. . . . [T]his linkage . . . blackness to sin, seeing blackness as an outward manifestation of that sin, condemned blacks and their blackness to a symbolic role. . . [making] the mark of sin on blacks . . . uniquely severe because the sign of their sinfulness is indelible. (qtd. in Henderson, 3)

As someone who sees his own manhood as contingent on his undeniable status as one of the elect, Gabriel constantly feels compelled to prove himself, subsequently conceding to the gender hierarchies, racial ideologies, and rigid moral codes professed by Christian doctrine. Proving himself as one of the saved, however, not only depends on his



willingness to accept Christian values, but more importantly, on his ability to demonstrate an ethical mastery of those values. Like many other “black Christians”—who Michael Eric Dyson argues respond to “the myths of black hypersexuality and sexual deviance” by taking “up the task of being sexual saviors—“Gabriel preaches “a profoundly conservative theology of sexuality” that he adopts in order to represent himself as being “morally upright. . . . [and] [b]eyond reproach” (Dyson 322). Stemming from his need to expunge his past sins (sexual indiscretions) and offer proof of his own salvation, the sexual conservatism Gabriel espouses clearly emerges as part of the broad cultural practice developed by many African American men to assert their humanity and help them “circumvent” the stigma aforementioned. In addition to demonstrating how the church encouraged black men to adopt a set of white patriarchal values and perspectives that paradoxically deepened their racial self-hatred and gave rise to their theological conservatism, Gabriel’s need to showcase his mastery of Christian mores has a tremendous influence in shaping the domestic and parochial spaces his step-son inhabits.

Offering a historical and sociological explanation for the development of the black church’s approach to sexuality in particular—an approach which Baldwin deftly represents through Gabriel and the religious practices enacted by the congregants of the Temple of the Fire Baptized—Dyson argues:

In sharp contrast to the heat of most black worship experiences, there emerged almost immediately in black churches a conservative theology of sexuality. In part, this theology reflected the traditional teachings of white Christianity. Out of moral necessity, however, black Christians exaggerated white Christianity’s version of “p.c.”—Puritan Correctness. Later, many black Christians adopted white Christianity’s Victorian repression to rebut the myth of black sexuality being out of control. (Dyson 313)

The “moral necessity” Dyson suggests drove many black Christians to exaggerate “the traditional teachings of white Christianity” stems from their widespread need to verify a core humanity that the city and the nation continued to contest. Dyson’s playful reference to “Puritan Correctness,” therefore, is actually critical to any understanding of the black church’s philosophy of sexuality, as it provides historical precedent for the link between representing one’s ethical mastery of Christian teachings and offering proof of incontestable humanity. Constructed within this theological context, the Temple of the Fire Baptized emerges not only as a location where Gabriel develops his own subjectivity, but as the very means through which that subjectivity is developed. Taking on the exaggerated “traditional teachings of white Christianity” as the foundation for his own manhood, Gabriel develops a “psychological attitude” that Robert Bone argues is definitively “white” (qtd in Csapo 70).

Due to his virulent hatred for the white world, Gabriel’s adoption of a white psychological attitude demonstrates the paradoxical nature of subjection. Furthermore, the masculine identity he creates not only ensures his own ongoing emasculation, but also infects his children, both of whom must turn to him as a primary example of what it means to be a man. According to Csapo:

Gabriel is to some extent equivalent to the God of the black Church, so he can be identified with the white homophobic society. He thinks that he is immaculate, so to say “white,” without any stain. If he is the saintly, the saved, the elected, then logically there must be the evil, which is the black. (Csapo 70)

By internalizing and exaggerating “white homophobic” norms, and due to the fact that he feels so compelled to portray himself as one of “the saved,” Gabriel emerges as the primary conduit of white patriarchal hegemony that oppresses John and his brother Roy,

instilling them both with the narrowly constructed formulations of race, gender, and sexuality that masquerade for reality and in turn impede self-actualization. As May observes:

Gabriel imposes a religious paradigm on his life experiences because he wants to avoid, at any expense, feeling fragmented and the responsibility he would have to take for his action if he allowed himself to realize that his “Christian” acts (such as beating the sin out of John) were of his own volition. On another occasion, Gabriel again refuses responsibility by interpreting Roy’s street-fighting injury as the fault of white boys. (May 100)

Failing to take responsibility for abusing John and for indoctrinating Roy with the belief that he must physically combat the white world if he wants to attain self-respect, Baldwin exposes Gabriel as a hypocrite who not only uses others to testify to his own salvation and personal coherency, but who passes down to his own male children a conceptualization of masculinity that fosters racial and sexual self-hatred. In his effort to assert patriarchal dominance, Gabriel exposes his fear of “feeling fragmented,” a fear that undoubtedly arises from the fact that he associates the lack of a “coherent, nonfragmented self or identity” with powerlessness and failure (May 101). As a result, Gabriel resorts to a host of desperate measures to claim a “unity of experience” that does not exist (May 101). The consequences prove to be catastrophic for John, Roy, and Royal as the various measures their father takes to avow personal coherence indoctrinate them with a severely debilitating perspective on the world and what it means to be a man. The key point here, at least in regards to a discussion of spatial production in Baldwin’s novel, is that Gabriel’s performance of patriarchal dominance through conservative Christian practices at church and at home helps to create the everyday spaces that structure his children’s development.

Baldwin elaborates on the ways in which Gabriel's behavior and personal history impact John's existence through the flashbacks we receive in "The Prayers of the Saints," where we learn that Gabriel weds Deborah and Elizabeth for the exact same reason: that is, so that he can capitalize on their misfortune and subsequently aggrandize himself (Singleton 116). Each marked by shame—one, due to the fact that she was raped by white men; and the other, because she mothered a child out of wedlock—Deborah and Elizabeth respectively provide Gabriel with the opportunity to act out his saintliness and profess his own manhood. Similarly, Gabriel grooms John to be a fellow preacher, ostensibly saving the bastard son from certain damnation by molding him into the "living proof of his (Gabriel's) forgiveness from God" (Dixon 129). In all three of these situations, Baldwin demonstrates how religious discourse and patriarchal domination coalesce in Gabriel's ongoing production of a gendered self. As I said above, his incessant need to prove his own manhood is important to an understanding of spatial production in the novel—and hence to any interrogation of the normative forces John encounters—because the very spaces John inhabits are shaped by Gabriel's behavior and the way he uses others to secure the patriarchal order that he so desperately desires.

In "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," Vivian May argues:

Baldwin's presentation of many-layered changeable identities and narrative constructions also focuses on how sexuality, desire, and gender are as socially and linguistically embedded as is race. Therefore, Baldwin explores how an aspect of identity such as masculinity is something learned, a "reaction formation," and not a given or "originary model of selfhood." (May 107)

Groomed by his stepfather to someday take up his mantle and preach in the Temple of the Fire Baptized, John is forced to *learn* his masculinity through Gabriel and through the church itself. Once again drawing our attention to the ways in which various social and linguistic constructions coalesce, May points out:

[John's] religious identity as a preacher also intersects with the formation of both his masculine identity, because preaching is a traditionally masculine role, and his (supposed) sexual identity, for being a preacher portends heterosexual marriage and fatherhood. (May 109-110)

Confirming the intimate and definitional relationship between gender and sexuality, May demonstrates how John's development as a future preacher involves a whole lot more than a theological mastery of the Old and New Testaments. Regulated and constituted by a host of intersecting ideologies relating to race, gender, and sexuality, John faces the daunting task of needing to navigate through this socio-linguistic terrain if he is to find himself and avoid simply becoming what others want him to be.

With the very first paragraph of the entire book, Baldwin indicates that John's future as a preacher had been decided well before he could have possibly had any say in the matter:

Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 11)

Although "discursive practices do not radically determine the subject," argues May, "they [do] constitute the subject" (May 110); and as such, by being prepped to "become a Great

Leader of His People” John inherits a barrage of narrowly contrived terms for understanding himself as a gendered and sexualized subject that foster his current state of alienation (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 19). When Baldwin states “by then it was already too late,” he is not simply referring to the fact that John will inevitably become the head of a congregation, but that the measures employed to prepare him for that position interfere with his ability to embrace and accept his true desires and inherent complexity. Regardless of whether or not John ever becomes a preacher, his identity as a sexual and gendered being has already been shaped by the forces aiming to place him in that role. He is as confined by expectations as he is by geography, and the ongoing production of the spaces he inhabits makes those expectations all the more clear and clearly defined.

One of the most explicit sexual lessons John receives from the church occurs during a Sunday morning service when Father James publically reprimands Elisha and Ella Mae for “the sin that he knew they had not committed yet” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 16). Learning that they were spotted holding hands and spending a lot of time together, the pastor unleashes a humiliating rebuke of the two young sinners which reflects the conservative theology of sexuality referred to earlier. Father James’ scare tactics are not only intended for Elisha and Ella Mae, but for everyone crowded into the room. For John in particular, the preacher’s words make it abundantly clear that like Ella Mae, he too must relinquish his desire for Elisha.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> As John observes Elisha and Ella Mae standing in front of the altar, he begins to think about what Ella Mae’s face looks like when she’s alone with Elisha. Clearly jealous of the intimacy she shares with Elisha, he becomes “afraid to even think of it.” Nevertheless, the narrator tells us that “the fever of which they stood accused began also to rage in him,” indicating that by thinking of Ella Mae’s face, he likewise begins to feel desire for Elisha (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 17). Secondly, as he imagines the two lovers

By admonishing Elisha and Ella Mae for committing acts that will inevitably lead to heterosexual sinfulness [making it clear to the two that “if they came together again it would be in wedlock” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 17)], Father James delivers a powerful heteronormative message to the entire congregation. On the one hand, he conveys strict ground rules regarding both the type of sexual intimacy the church considers permissible and the mandatory pre-conditions sexual partners must first meet before engaging in those acts. As a result, John understands that his peers have the opportunity to forge a sexual relationship, but only after they wed one another in a ceremony officially recognized and sanctified by the church. But in addition to sanctioning certain heterosexual acts under rigidly defined conditions, Father James also indicates what will happen to those who deviate from the righteous path he mandates.

If holy parishioners like Elisha and Ella Mae face damnation for performing the casual acts the pastor describes, then an eternity in hell must certainly await John Grimes, given the sins he knows he committed in the days leading up to Father James’ moral warning:

In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 18-19)

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together, “when they were not surrounded by the saints,” John becomes terrified, not only by the homosexual desire he senses within himself, but also by the prospect of standing in her place before the congregation.

Traumatized by the recent example Father James makes of Elisha and Ella Mae, John becomes hyper-conscious of his own sinfulness, recalling a moment in the school bathroom when he masturbated while fantasizing about his male schoolmates. Feeling excessively guilty about sinning twice in one single act—first, for masturbating, and secondly for harboring same-sex desires—he realizes that he has disobeyed “warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings:” warnings, not only coming from Father James, but from his mother, father, and the congregation as a whole. The intensity of John’s guilt is commensurate with the frequency and force with which he has been told what he can and cannot do. “He would never dare to speak” of these transgressions, because he knows that an admission will elicit the violent fury and debasing judgments of the entire community.

In *James Baldwin’s God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*, Clarence E. Hardy writes specifically about the “extent to which Christianity has contributed to African disfigurement,” beginning his discussion with a reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* that speaks directly to the crippling sense of guilt we see haunting John in the passage quoted above (xi). According to Hardy:

Baldwin is willing to confront how black people have “avoided and despised” themselves, and he is determined to link Christian conversion not only with the celebratory impulses of any communal initiation but also with those religious sensibilities that foster self-loathing by restricting healthy sexual expression. (Hardy 25-26)

Distressed by the forbidden desires surfacing within, and distraught by the fact that he “sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive,” John wakes up on his fourteenth birthday fully immersed in the kind of crisis Hardy describes. Elaborating on the “link”



between black Christianity and “those religious sensibilities that foster self-loathing,”

Dyson argues:

Black Christians are reluctant to admit the connection [between spirituality and sexuality] because we continue to live in Cartesian captivity: the mind-body split thought up by philosopher Descartes flourishes in black theologies of sexuality. (Dyson 227-8)

Father James’ comment about Elisha and Ella Mae’s sin being “in the flesh” despite not yet existing in “their minds” evinces that the “Cartesian captivity” Dyson suggests “flourishes in black theologies of sexuality” exists in full force in the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Stemming from “the psychological poison [white hegemony] pumped into the intellectual diets of” many African Americans—namely that “black bodies were . . . ugly, disgusting, and bestial;” that “black women were . . . hot and ready to be bothered; and that black men . . . [had] big sexual desires and even bigger organs to realize their lust” (Dyson 223-224)—the black church developed an ideology of “extreme self-denial . . . aimed to rid the black body of lascivious desires and to purge its erotic imagination with ‘clean’ thoughts (Dyson 227).

John’s recollection of Elisha and Ella Mae’s punishment is vital to an understanding of the pressures he faces, not so much because of the pastor’s fiery rhetoric, but due to the fact that the episode as a whole converts the Temple of the Fire Baptized into a heteronormative space that forcefully regulates the behaviors of its congregants and strives to “purge” their “erotic imagination[s] with ‘clean’ thoughts.” By isolating the two young sinners in front of the altar, publically admonishing them for acts of sexual intimacy yet to be committed, and enacting the call and response ritual that makes each and every parishioner a player in the disciplinary process—“Let the church

cry amen to this!” prompts Father James. “And they cried: ‘Amen! Amen!’”—the congregation as a whole transforms the chapel from a place of worship into a punitive instrument, disseminating and policing rigidly constructed norms related to both gender and sexuality (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 17).

The incredible force of a congregation “in heat” must not be underestimated, and Baldwin does everything in his power to make sure his readers recognize how intensely episodes like the one we have been examining influence John’s budding consciousness. In yet another example of how the spatial practices employed by the church’s congregants convey power, Baldwin describes a typical Sunday morning ritual in church, explaining that “the Power [inevitably] struck someone,” thrusting that person into the center of the congregation where he or she would stretch out his or her arms and invoke the clamor of clapping, stomping feet, and the jangle of tambourines (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 15). Music would commence and individual dancers would propel themselves into the unfolding event. “Then the church seemed to swell with the Power it held,” informs the narrator:

and, like a planet rocking in space, the temple rocked with the Power of God. John watched, watched the faces, and the weightless bodies, and listened to the timeless cries. One day, so everyone said, this Power would possess him; he would sing and cry as they did now, and dance before his King. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 15)

The sheer physicality of the conversion ritual, reenacted week after week in the Temple of the Fire Baptized, imbues the storefront church with an overwhelming “Power” which Baldwin repeatedly identifies with a capital “P” for emphasis. The constant reminders from “everyone” that “one day . . . this Power would possess him” mirror the “warnings

he had received from his earliest beginnings,” both representing the relentless processes of indoctrination that compel John to assume an identity at odds with his inner-most self.<sup>74</sup>

The storefront church achieves its heteronormative power, not simply by overtly punishing casual acts of heterosexual intimacy like the ones of which Elisha and Ella Mae stand accused, but also by refusing to recognize the much more deplorable sin of homosexuality at all. Citing Sedgwick’s claim that “historically, Christianity had always named homosexuality by not naming it,” Bryan Washington points out that this is “precisely what happens in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: John’s sin, his love for Elisha, cannot be named; it can only be transcribed into a spiritual battle between self-love and unquestioning devotion to God’s will” (Washington 85-6). Along the same lines, May adds that “John cannot *be* gay because the gay subject is *not*. To be gay is not viable for John because the option does not exist within his frames of reference. . . . Homosexuality lies beyond John’s conscious realm because it is deemed unthinkable” (May 115-6). The Power conveyed through institutional silence on the subject echoes Baldwin’s claim in

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<sup>74</sup> The irony, of course, is that by reproaching Elisha and Ella Mae, the “church members condemn a sexual expressiveness that their own bodies in their dancing celebrate” (Hardy 16). Dyson writes about this “central paradox” in the black church’s treatment of sexuality, arguing that the institution’s promotion of “extreme self-denial” seems to contradict the “erotic intensity of the black worship experience” enacted in black churches all across the nation. Supporting his claim that “the black worship experience formed the erotic body of black religious belief, with all the rites of religious arousal that accompany sexual union,” Dyson catalogues the various elements of religious practice that he claims demonstrate its inherent eroticism. The eroticism of the black worship experience vividly depicted in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* not only offers members of the congregation a ‘healthy’ outlet for the sexual energies that the ritual itself aims to “purge” from their bodies, but it also instills the religious ceremony with a corporeal force that intensifies the pressure to conform. Constantly urging John to surrender to the ‘ways’ of the church, the weekly conversions transforming the Temple of the Fire Baptized into a Powerfully heteronormative space make it very clear to him that dancing “before his King” really means conceding to the rigidly policed notions of sexuality and gender performed by his fellow congregants.

*The Fire Next Time* that “the universe . . . has evolved no terms for your existence.” As such, the heteronormative forces that “foster self-loathing” in John not only stem from the “acts of overt prohibition” that he encounters through family and church, but—as Judith Butler points out—through a form of oppression that:

works . . . covertly, through the constitutions of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects—*abjects*, we might call them—who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. Here oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. (qtd in May 115)

The ubiquitous silence pertaining to homosexuality throughout the novel suggests to John that his sin “was [particularly] hard to forgive,” because without naming it, one could not possibly wash it away. Combined with the congregation’s performance of (and adherence to) clearly marked gender roles aimed at securing patriarchal dominance, the unwillingness on the part of the institution and its members to even acknowledge homosexuality demonstrates how the intersection of discourses related to sexuality and gender in the church creates a (non)space for the unnameable; John cannot possibly develop a homosexual relationship with Elisha, because there is no place within the gender hierarchy for them to exist. As someone who is being prepped to someday preach in the church, John faces pressure to assume a position on the pre-existing gender hierarchy that is fundamentally predicated on him being heterosexual.

In “Florence’s Prayer,” Baldwin demonstrates that the patriarchal order of the church that we see reified through the ritualistic practices of conversion dates all the way back to those days in the South when Gabriel’s predecessors first turned to Christianity for relief from their suffering. Obviously conditioned by the religious sensibilities of her

own forbearers, Gabriel's mother envisions a future for her son that is starkly different from the one she concocts for her daughter, thereby indicating how the strictly contrived gender roles oppressing John get passed down from one generation to another. Recalling her childhood, Florence remembers:

With the birth of Gabriel, which occurred when she was five, her future was swallowed up. There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed. Her mother did not, indeed, think of it as sacrifice, but as logic: Florence was a girl, and would by and by be married, and have children of her own, and all the duties of a woman; and this being so, her life in the cabin was the best possible preparation for her future life. But Gabriel was a man; he would go out one day into the world to do a man's work, and he needed, therefore, meat, when there was any in the house, and clothes, whenever clothes could be bought, and the strong indulgence of his womenfolk, so that he would know how to be with women when he had a wife. And he needed the education that Florence desired far more than he, and that she might have got it if he had not been born. It was Gabriel who was slapped and scrubbed each morning and sent off to the one-room schoolhouse—which he hated, and where he managed to learn, so far as Florence could discover, almost nothing at all. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 72-3)

Gabriel's mother raises her two children in accordance with a gender hierarchy that she inherits from white patriarchal society. Privileging her son by affording him educational opportunities, providing him with nutritional sustenance (when there is little to go around), and buying him clothes “whenever clothes could be bought,” she prepares him to “go out one day into the world to do a man's work;” that is, to fulfill his calling to God, assert his masculine authority, and hopefully lead a congregation down the narrow path of salvation. Conversely, she denies Florence any of the same opportunities, instead opting to groom her for a life of domesticity; teaching her how to sacrifice to Gabriel now so that she will be prepared to aptly carry out “all the duties of a woman” once she has a husband and “children of her own.”

The patriarchal order Gabriel's mother upholds is forcefully reproduced and exaggerated through religious ritual in the North where the prosperity enjoyed by others—in being more explicitly visible—contests black manhood in new and (in some respects) increasingly destructive ways. By pitting this account of Gabriel's upbringing alongside the ritualistic assertion of patriarchal dominance in the church, Baldwin illustrates how the Christian values adopted by blacks in response to Southern emasculation become even more pronounced and extreme when transferred to the North.

Lefebvre's theories on spatial production offer insight into the development of the Temple of the Fire Baptized and into the creation of black urban spaces in general. "We produce only the reproducible," he argues:

and hence we produce only by reproducing or imitating past production. This is the ultimate contradiction: inasmuch as the capacity to produce space produces only reproductions, it can generate nothing but the repetitive, nothing but repetition. The production of space is thus transformed into its opposite; the reproduction of things in space" (Lefebvre 377)

Lefebvre's postulation about spatial production producing "only the reproducible" pertains specifically to the development of the storefront church as a medium that reproduces the same hierarchy of gender roles that informs Mrs. Grimes' approach to parenting, thrusts Gabriel into the trap of phallic masculinity, and confines Florence to a future proscribed by her domestic responsibilities as a woman. The "contradiction" produced in this particular case emerges when the spatial practices aiming to liberate the congregants from a shared history of racial oppression end up reproducing the ideological order that gave rise to that history in the first place. From the literal elevation of the male pastor above the rest of the congregation to the call and response rituals that socially

affirm his authority, the spatial practices constituting the Temple of the Fire Baptized as a sacred place of worship simultaneously reproduce the cultural infrastructure of patriarchal domination and heteronormativity. Seeing as though the energy and force poured into such rituals rises in proportion with the degree of humiliation and despair endured by its congregants, the New York City storefront church emerges as the spatial conduit of an intense power; a term that should not be equated with emotional force, but with the ideological discourses that, when reiterated, reinforce the prevailing hierarchal order.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin repeatedly draws attention to the relationship between the production of religious spaces and the reproduction of gender hierarchies in particular—honing in on one aspect of the power relayed through custom, tradition, and ritual. He accomplishes this feat by demonstrating how Gabriel, while preaching, seeks confirmation through the approving eyes of Deborah, Esther, and later Elizabeth; how John feels intimidated by the pulpit as he dusts it off and realizes that this “holy” site belonging only to men “dominated all;” and how Father James elicits repeated “Amen’s” from his congregants in order to affirm his own patriarchal authority (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 53). According to Lefebvre, “in produced space, acts reproduce ‘meanings’ even if no ‘one’ gives an account of them” (Lefebvre 144). By demonstrating how a host of religious practices reify the sexual and gender norms that “foster self-loathing” in his protagonist, Baldwin confirms Lefebvre’s claim and skillfully illustrates how the power dynamics which have the greatest affect on John operate covertly.

Elaborating on how ‘gestural practices’ produce social space—thereby reproducing “social relations, including, importantly, gender relations” (Duncan 4)—

Lefebvre argues that “organized gestures, which is to say ritualized and codified gestures, are not simply performed in ‘physical’ space, in the space of bodies. Bodies themselves generate spaces, which are produced by and for their gestures” (Lefebvre 216). As an impressionable observer of the “ritualized and codified gestures” which constitute the storefront church as a consecrated place of worship, John receives a strict education on how to behave as a gendered and sexed subject. “The predominance of visualization [as a means by which space conveys power]” adds Lefebvre, “serves to conceal repetitiveness” (Lefebvre 75). As such, the dramatic performances John witnesses on a weekly basis achieve their power not only through the forcefulness with which they convince congregants to conform—a forcefulness conveyed through the visible manifestation of passion in song and dance—but also through the clandestine manner by which they constitute the subject through repetition. Beneath the auspice of religious conversion, the Temple of the Fire Baptized elicits particular gender performances from the bodies of its congregants, thereby discursively reinforcing patriarchal domination and heteronormative control through a host of reiterative spatial practices.

For John, the message delivered by the church and its congregants could not be any clearer: in order for him to enter the community as an adult and fulfill his destiny as a leader of his people, he must adopt a masculine identity that is consistent with the preexisting order. According to Hardy:

Baldwin represents the conversion of John both as a communal celebration of adulthood and individual transformation, and as an expression of social control from a rigid, religious community. The expressed need for social control, though predicated on a desire for safety from an unjust, dangerous world, becomes the mechanism through which a great familial curse is handed down to untold generations of black people. (Hardy 25)



Implementing its “expressed need for social control” through the spatial regulation of gendered bodies, the Temple of the Fire Baptized compels John to conform to a rendition of masculinity that alienates him from himself. The “great familial curse” that Hardy claims gets “handed down” from one generation to another stems directly from the perception that one can only claim his/her inherent self-worth by complying with the narrowly contrived norms that in turn verify one’s ability to achieve moral cleanliness and racial transcendence. Hardy rightfully identifies this inherited world-view as a “curse,” because the need to proclaim one’s moral purity and abide by these restrictive norms not only impedes genuine self-realization, but is also predicated on the acceptance of one’s color as proof of one’s racial inferiority; that is to say, as the sign of a divine punishment for an inherent sinfulness that one must incessantly strive to overcome.

Baldwin’s use of “Grimes” for the family’s surname clearly links the patriarchal lineage of “the curse” haunting John to the pervasive filth that plagues the neighborhood; infiltrates the home; and casts an impenetrable layer over the pews, pulpit, and threshing-floor of the storefront church. Just like the family name he inherits from his stepfather, the form of masculinity John receives through Gabriel’s example is a discursive construction that originated in the white patriarchal society that stripped slaves of their history and freedom, and assigned them Anglicized names. Predicated on the need to wash away the stain of one’s inherent sinfulness, the construction of black phallic masculinity Gabriel passes on to his children fosters in them intense feelings of racial and sexual self-hatred, thereby indicating that the incessant effort to clean and purify oneself paradoxically *creates* the very dust it aims to remove.

The pervasiveness of dust throughout the novel suggests that the curse of black phallic masculinity is systemic, and that it not only stems from a history of racial subordination, but that it actually propagates that history, instilling in new generations of young black men and women the same “psychological poison [that had been] pumped into” the minds of their predecessors (Dyson 223). As Singleton correctly points out,

Baldwin couches the gendered dimensions of African American racial uplift within the preoccupation with physical and moral cleanliness. Baldwin depicts the Grimes family as a microcosm of post-Emancipation African America—a community preoccupied with washing away the indelible stain of blackness left by racial slavery. (Singleton 107)

As our investigation into the “gendered dimensions” of religious practice have already revealed, individual and communal efforts to transcend a history of racial oppression led many African Americans to reiterate the patriarchal order and gender hierarchies underscoring so much of their ongoing despair. Through the “trope of impossible sanitization,” Baldwin builds off of this concept, uniting the spiritual practices of racial purification with the domestic practices employed by individuals to accomplish the same goal of “racial uplift” at home (Singleton 111). In conflating the two—most explicitly through John’s custodial responsibilities in both locations—he thereby demonstrates how the spaces produced by African Americans in response to racial subjugation often end up engendering internalized oppression. Like the rituals enacted in the Pentecostal sanctuary, the domestic practices ensuring patriarchal order at home convert the household into a heteronormative trap equally as powerful in constituting John’s gendered subjectivity as the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Like the storefront church, the home becomes a place where Gabriel combats his contested manhood by exercising

domination and proclaiming moral authority. Confirming Maurice Wallace's claim that "the house . . . is the very image of the structure of black masculinist consciousness," Gabriel transforms his home into a physical manifestation of his own 'unquestionable manhood,' buttressing his status as the insurmountable patriarch with the gendered roles and responsibilities he mandates from his wife and children (Wallace 120).

Baldwin also draws upon "the trope of impossible sanitization" to illustrate how the urban processes constituting Harlem as a dilapidated and neglected African American ghetto poison the neighborhood's residents with a racial consciousness that fosters self-loathing and triggers the self-destructive practices geared towards racial uplift previously described. After sweeping the front room of his stepfather's house, John gazes out the window and notices:

a high wind filled the air with scraps of paper and frosty dust, and banged the hanging signs of stores and storefront churches. It was the end of winter, and the garbage-filled snow that had been banked along the edges of sidewalks was melting now and filling the gutters. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 30)

The tempestuous wind propelling the garbage from the street into the "signs of stores and storefront churches" also launches the dust and debris into the Grimes family home, signifying how the filth pervading the ghetto permeates the interior spaces its residents create.<sup>75</sup> In contrast to the melting snow that represents all of the benefits that come with being white in America—and that consequently remain unavailable to Harlem's predominantly black population—the garbage "filling the gutters" and "the air" serves as

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<sup>75</sup> "Interior space" in this particular passage refers to both architectural and psychological realms. The squalor of the urban environment influences the daily practices that produce domestic spaces, as well as the development of an individual's conscious mind.

a reminder to the neighborhood's residents that they are cast-offs: that is, as they are treated and seen as the filth and waste that lingers when all that is good and valued dissipates.

In "My Dungeon Shook," the opening letter of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin warns his nephew that although "the details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you," "you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (8, 4). The image of John gazing out at the melting snow and leftover filth aptly represents the debilitating psychic process from which Baldwin attempts to protect his nephew. The "details and symbols" which he says "have been deliberately constructed to make" him believe what white people say about him are inscribed in urban space itself, most notably through the uneven geographical development that pits Harlem as a downtrodden slum populated almost entirely by African Americans right up against a slew of high-end neighborhoods testifying to the higher quality of life enjoyed by whites. Read in conjunction with one another, the dirt and debris John sees from inside his home and Baldwin's warning to his nephew reveal how the deliberate construction of urban space casts powerful messages regarding the meaning of racial difference in America. Furthermore, by repeatedly creating images of dust which permeate the home and church, and emanate from John's body as he cleans—as well as from the bodies of his fellow congregants during prayer—Baldwin illustrates how segregating blacks into Harlem gives rise to a set of responses that, contrary to their objectives, ultimately compel subjects to internalize "what the white world" says about them. The filth and squalor rampant throughout the neighborhood issues the same ideological call to John as the

poster of State Attorney Buckley does to Bigger Thomas, making him well aware that he too is the subject who cannot win!

In church and at home, John's elders incessantly instruct him to sweep the floor and dust the furniture, a task that appears Sisyphean in its endlessness and futility once we realize that the filth in need of removal is unfortunately blackness itself (albeit, a conception of blackness inherited from the dominant white culture). Stemming from the squalor outdoors, the layers of dust infiltrating the interior spaces of John's life represent the regrettable association of blackness with sin and inferiority. The psychic paradox that Baldwin attempts to dismantle becomes clear once we recognize that the cleaning itself actually generates the dust that the work aims to remove. Throughout the novel Baldwin demonstrates how the urban environment instills African Americans with a conceptualization of race that compels them to employ a set of practices that actually reproduce the stigma, rather than enabling black subjects the opportunity to transcend it.

Fully aware that "no labor could ever make it clean," John sets out to perform his chores and remove the dirt from the family's front room:

Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, burnt black on the bottom, hanging above the stove; was in the wall against which they hung, and revealed itself where the paint had cracked and leaned outward in stiff squares and fragments, the paper thin underside webbed with black. Dirt was in every corner, angle, crevice of the monstrous stove, and lived behind it in delirious communion with the corrupted wall. Dirt was in the baseboard that John scrubbed every Saturday, and roughened the cupboard shelves that held the cracked and gleaming dishes. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 21-2)

Baldwin's marriage of the literal and figurative within this passage reveals how the methods employed by many to overcome racial subjugation conversely foster a psychological perspective that reinforces the stigma itself. The prayers and conversion

rituals designed to deliver the saints from their own inherent sinfulness, Florence's bleaching of her own skin, and John's effort to eradicate dust from the nooks and crannies of his own house all stem from the same source of internalized oppression. The horrific irony, of course, is that although all of these practices are enacted with the intention of abetting racial uplift, they ultimately deepen the wounds of racial self-hatred. John hates "sweeping the carpet," for whenever he does, dust rises, "clogging his nose and sticking to his sweaty skin" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 26). Likewise, Baldwin depicts the same pattern unfolding in *The Temple of the Fire Baptized*:

In the air of the church hung, perpetually, the odor of dust and sweat; for, like the carpet in his mother's living room, the dust of this church was invincible; and when the saints were praying or rejoicing, their bodies gave off an acrid, steamy smell, a marriage of the odors of dripping bodies and soaking, starched white linen. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 49-50)

Conjoining John's domestic responsibilities with the "praying and rejoicing" of the saints, Baldwin indicates how both sets of activities leave the bodies of the participants covered in a layer of dust; the very dust, paradoxically, that through their various efforts, Harlem's residents incessantly strive to remove.

Like the rituals enacted by the congregants in *The Temple of the Fire Baptized*, the duties John performs at home reify the gender hierarchy that sustains patriarchal domination, thereby marking how the assignments he receives from his parents influence his evolving identity as an African American man. On the one hand, sweeping the floor and dusting the furniture are tasks traditionally associated with a woman's household duties, and as such, serve as a humiliating reminder to John that he has not yet proven himself as a man in either the black Pentecostal community or his step-father's home.

Being forced to perform a set of duties that testify to his unfulfilled status as a man clearly adds to the mounting pressure he faces to conform to “the cult of phallic masculinity.” On yet another level, however, John’s custodial assignment of removing the filth from both church and home represents the fact that his successful initiation into adulthood depends upon his willingness to accept his own blackness as a stain which requires incessant cleaning.

As a spatial manifestation of Gabriel’s effort to transcend racial subjugation through patriarchal dominance, the home John grows up in emerges as the primary obstacle he must overcome if he ever hopes to forge an authentic identity for himself. The myriad of gender roles that each member of the family performs—including Gabriel’s physical abuse of his ‘inferiors,’ Elizabeth’s defense of his violent outbursts as acts of love, her conformity to the stereotypical duties of a woman in the home, and John’s execution of various household chores—all produce the Grimes home as a physical and architectural expression of Gabriel’s patriarchal control, replete with the heteronormative forces underscoring the ongoing reproduction of black phallic masculinity. By assigning John household duties typically associated with women’s work, his parents remind him that he has not yet demonstrated his viability as an African American male subject, making the home itself a spatial conduit of power and a mechanism of social control that compels him to conform to the standards of gender and sexuality previously described.

Again, Lefebvre’s notion of space as both a product produced by the practices and gestures it houses, as well as a means of production that shapes the subjects it contains, helps to elucidate how the Grimes household emerges as both a physical manifestation of

patriarchal domination and a spatial process that informs John's evolving subjectivity. For all intents and purposes, the home becomes the place where congregants of The Temple of the Fire Baptized put the patriarchal order they consecrate in church into everyday practice. As such, the Grimes home structurally testifies to Gabriel's supremacy, and his religious mantra—"Set thine house in order"—affirms the fact that he seeks confirmation of his own manhood in the physical space he allegedly rules. Furthermore, by linking the dust which infiltrates the home, streets, and avenues with Gabriel's Christian mantra, Baldwin draws attention to the ways in which the adoption of Christian mores leads to the internalized perpetuation of a racially based inferiority complex; an inferiority complex, we must remember, that is reinforced by the urban environment itself.

As John begins to surrender to the conversion ritual in the novel's closing chapter, he recalls a moment in his father's bathroom when he committed yet another 'sin' for which he now feels increasingly compelled to seek forgiveness:

Yes, he had sinned; one morning, alone, in the dirty bathroom, in the square, dirt-gray cupboard room that was filled with the stink of his father. Sometimes, leaning over the cracked, "tattle-tale gray" bathtub, he scrubbed his father's back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's hideous nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod. (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 197)

By invoking "the biblical story of Ham looking at Noah," Baldwin demonstrates how the constellation of ideological forces related to gender, race, religion, and sexuality coalesce in the Grimes family home, creating a standard of "heterosexual masculinity from which the 'funny child' is alienated" (Crawford 75). Called upon to literally scrub his father's back, John performs yet another custodial task in the service of patriarchal domination,



thereby enabling Baldwin to link “the trope of impossible sanitization” with the story of Ham, a story that Crawford points out, “was used as a justification for the enslavement of Africans as Ham was imagined to be ‘black’” (Crawford 75). Furthermore, by establishing Ham’s act of merely looking at Noah’s naked body as his unpardonable transgression, Christian traditions have linked blackness as a punishment to homosexuality as an unforgivable sin. Therefore, in recreating the biblical episode through John and Gabriel, Baldwin draws attention not only to the way Christianity has historically abetted racial oppression, but to how the adoption of Christian norms by many blacks—specifically in regards to gender and sexuality—continues to propagate a legacy of homophobia. When John gazes down at his father’s penis and thinks of it as “slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod,” he associates it with both sinfulness and power, thereby indicating how the construction of black phallic masculinity he is called to serve and expected to one day embody is predicated on homophobia and male domination.

Like his household duties, John’s scrubbing of Gabriel’s back marks yet another way in which he participates in the production of a domestic space that reinforces patriarchal domination, testifies to Gabriel’s moral purification, and subsequently facilitates his own ongoing alienation from both his family and himself. Weaving the story of Ham into his representation of spatial production, Baldwin reveals how the home itself functions as a vehicle of power, passing a host of ideological norms from one generation to another through the compulsory participation in the prevailing gender hierarchy. The domestic space produced by these practices not only supports Gabriel’s status as the unchallengeable patriarch, but more importantly, provides John with the

structure for understanding himself, a consequence that becomes overtly apparent and increasingly disturbing when he looks into the mirror while finishing up his household duties.

“[H]aving put away the broom and dustpan,” John grabs a cloth and proceeds to dust off the mirror in the living-room, “watching his face appear as out of a cloud”

(Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 27). According to Crawford, this passage illustrates:

the very process of a young black man learning to “read” his body through a critical gaze. As John’s bewildered eyes look at the body in the mirror, he wonders if his image is ugly. As Baldwin emphasizes the distance between the bewildered eyes and bodily identity the eyes have been assigned, John’s mirror image exemplifies Lacanian *meconnaissance*, the recognition that is a misrecognition. (Crawford 77)

Although most critics read this moment in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as proof of the way John, like many black men, is forced to view himself through the “monocularistic gaze of Western racialism” (Wallace 6), the fact that it appears in the house while he is doing his chores suggests that there is something else at play. Staring “at his face as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger,” John definitely *misrecognizes* himself in the mirror, but the image he encounters is not only mediated by white hegemonic standards of beauty, but also by the ideological norms he inherits from his father in his very own house (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 27). By placing John’s confrontation with himself through the mirror within the broader context of him fulfilling his household duties, Baldwin indicates that the film he must gaze through—like the dust he works so fervently to remove—is generated by the act of cleaning itself: that is to say, by the processes of black Pentecostal subject formation that posit racial transcendence, spiritual purification, and heterosexual conformity as prerequisites for the achievement of

legitimate manhood. Given Keith Clark's rightful observation that "Baldwin's primary concern was not so much with how white society deformed and destroyed black men, but how these men participated in their own demise;" one can see how this particular scene focuses more on John's struggle to find himself within the discursive constructs of his own community, than through the hegemonic gaze of Western racialism—though the former is obviously shaped in large part by the latter (Clark 32).

In response to "their living conditions and bleak futures," Baldwin's characters create a series of spiritual, cultural, and domestic spaces designed to serve as a "safe haven" from the dangers that await them in the 'real,' white world (Henderson 2). These spatial responses, however, end up producing harsh forms of social control which gravely impede one's ability to realize the fullness of his/her inherent humanity, and—in this particular case—leave John feeling incarcerated by his own community. Although he knows "the arms stretched out to hold him back" aim "to save him from this city where, they said, his soul would find perdition," John nevertheless craves reality—which is to say, the opportunity to really find himself—even if that means facing the dangers that inevitably lie ahead (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 33). Looking into the mirror of his father's house, John is unable to honestly confront his own desires, let alone identify an authentic self consistent with those desires. Heeding Baldwin's warning in *The Fire Next Time* that "to defend oneself against a fear is simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it" (27); John not only ventures out of his house and away from his church, but beyond the borders of Harlem itself, leaving the spatial constraints of the neighborhood to face his fears and seek an alternative to the "narrow way, where his people walked" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 34). For Baldwin, the rigid constructions of personhood and the stringent

prescriptions of righteousness emerging out of the African American Pentecostal community constitute a communal defense against fear, rather than a healthy facing of it. Mirroring Baldwin's own decision to leave Harlem, John gratefully takes birthday money from his mother and immediately sets out for "his favorite hill . . . in the center of" Central Park (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 33).

In *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Melvin Dixon draws attention to the "spatial dichotomy" Baldwin configures between "the threshing floor and the mountaintop," the latter represented through the Central Park hill John enthusiastically ascends (Dixon 126). Contrary to the religious ritual, which marks John's temporary acceptance of the narrow path paved by Harlem's Pentecostal community, the hilltop provides him with the opportunity to engage with the secular mainstream of American life and envision a future existence as part of it. Reaching the hill's highest point, John inhales "the brilliant sky," gazes out at "the skyline of New York," and fantasizes about living "in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 33). But before taking the plunge and throwing "himself headlong into the city that glowed before him," John pauses, remembering "the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 33).

As Dixon's spatial comparison suggests, John's trip to Central Park emerges as a ritualistic foil to the rite of passage extended to him by his church and family. Though only fourteen years old, and hence somewhat limited by his age and lack of worldly experience, John perches himself atop the highest point in the entire park and begins to deliberate, as a self-determining individual, whether he should return to the narrow streets

of Harlem to pursue a future which will ensure “humiliation forever” or descend down the hill in the opposite direction, thereby immersing himself in the “perdition that sucked at the feet of the people who walked there” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 33-4). Ruminating over how this critical decision will shape his future, John begins to literally map out an identity for himself that will either be defined by the narrow path of righteousness awaiting him in Harlem or by the “*Broadway*” of a secular existence where “he might eat and drink to his heart’s content and clothe his body with wondrous fabrics, rich to the eye and pleasing to the touch” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 34). Gazing out at the urban environment below, John begins to view himself in relation to the rest of the world, and in doing so, exercises a degree of independence, bravery, and maturity that testifies to his transition into adulthood. If he chooses the path which his elders have already chosen for him, he knows he will adopt a cognitive map for himself that steers him away from the complexity, excitement, and pain that await him should he opt to immerse himself in the city. John’s future as a preacher presupposes his renunciation of the physical world, and as such, will supply him with an identity predicated on his ability to transcend his urban existence and repudiate his physical desires. In sharp contrast to “the way of the cross,” however, forging a secular existence beyond the borders of Harlem will force John to face and endure the discursive and material forces of oppression that will marginalize him on the bases of class, race, and sexuality. Ultimately, if John chooses to leave Harlem and develop an identity for himself within the Promised Land that “his ancestors had seen with longing from far away,” he will need to navigate an overwhelmingly complex and threatening environment.

According to Kathleen Kirby, cognitive mapping first emerged as a technology for understanding the self in the Renaissance and was later “standardized in the Enlightenment” (Kirby 45). Pointing out the fundamental inadequacies with a process that makes self-coherence contingent upon the psychic construction of a “consistent, stable, organized environment,” she argues that cognitive mapping only really serves “those men who are accustomed to dominating their landscapes—white, youngish, physically able professional-class men” (Kirby 53). Since its very inception, she purports, mapping has been an instrument of power, used by explorers to assert their superiority over the land and the Others who inhabit it. Elaborating on its purpose and history, Kirby points out:

Part of the function of mapping is to ensure that the relationship between knower and known remains unidirectional. The mapper should be able to ‘master’ his environment, occupy a secure and superior position in relation to it, without it affecting him in return. This stance of superiority crumbles when the explorers’ cartographic aptitude deteriorates. To actually be in the surroundings, incapable of separating one’s self from them in a larger objective representation, is to be lost. (Kirby 48)

Kirby’s account of mapping, power, and the psychic construction of superiority relates directly to John’s situation atop the Central Park hill in a couple of ways; on the one hand, it speaks to the way subjects conceive of themselves in relation to the spaces they occupy; and on the other, it links John’s inability to master his environment with his subject position as a young, black, homosexual, male in 1950s New York. Kirby goes on in her essay to challenge Fredric Jameson’s use of ‘cognitive mapping’ in his account of the postmodern condition, arguing that the “‘crisis’ in subjectivity” that he suggests stems from inhabiting unmappable spaces “may be largely a crisis only for those subjects

who previously were able to establish dominance over their surroundings” (Kirby 54). Citing “Jameson’s gender as well as his bourgeois whiteness” as the source of his limited perspective, Kirby argues that “women and others who are less able to control their environment, but are more responsible for its production and reproduction, have long been used to the feeling of overwhelming immersion” (Duncan 6).

As a fourteen-year-old black boy who is only beginning to discover his own homosexual desires, John clearly belongs to the group which Kirby suggests have for a long time been “less able to control their environment.” The compartmentalization of blacks into Harlem and the heterosexing of urban space that makes the city itself an agent of heteronormativity indicate how those in power create a mappable domain for themselves by physically excluding Others and assigning meaning to difference in order to buttress the coherency and superiority of their own perceived identities. In regards to John’s situation in particular, Kirby’s comments help elucidate how courageous and terrified he is as he charges down the hill into the dangerous landscape of New York City. Although John’s attempt to anticipate what awaits him in the city is certainly an exercise in cognitive mapping—and as such, is an attempt on his part to envision a cohesive identity for himself—his obvious inability to master the environment testifies to the bravery he demonstrates and to the boldness of his decision to immerse himself in the unknown.

While John’s racial sensibilities certainly underscore both his anxiety about entering the city and his struggle to map out a coherent identity for himself, Baldwin subtly suggests that his sexuality will play an increasingly important role as well as he attempts to adapt to urban life outside the ghetto. Just as John reaches the bottom of the

hill, he narrowly escapes knocking “down an old white man with a white beard, who was walking very slowly and leaning on his cane” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 34). As John struggles “to catch his breath and apologize,” the old man smiles, suggesting to Baldwin’s young protagonist that “he and the old man had between them a great secret” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 34-5).

Csapo accurately points out that secrecy consistently emerges in the novel as a signifier of homosexual desire. When “Baldwin refers to a possible gay content in Elisha’s thoughts or John’s feeling towards Elisha,” for example, “it is secrecy that dominates the narrative of John’s fantasies” (Csapo 66). Likewise, when John gazes into the old man’s eyes and thinks that they “had between them a great secret,” Baldwin suggests that the elder pedestrian either harbors same-sex desire as well, or functions as a traditional representation of an all-knowing Judeo-Christian God who blesses the young man as he ventures forth into the city. In regards to the former interpretation, the mere suggestion of the old man’s homosexuality—combined with the moment of identification he shares with John—indicates that John’s task of mapping a coherent and healthy identity for himself will not only require him to negotiate racial politics, but to find a way of living within a heteronormative society that also rejects him on the basis of his sexual orientation. The heteronormativity of urban space in general becomes more apparent in Baldwin’s later work, as we will see in our investigation of *Another Country*; but in a text that is primarily concerned with the protagonist’s willingness to venture out from the constraints imposed upon him by both church and home, this subtle reference to sexual normativity in the city at large foretells what John will face in the future, as well as what Baldwin will soon take on as a literary artist. Like Kirby, who celebrates the postmodern



condition as a historical moment that may finally destabilize white, male spatial domination—and hence disrupt the illusion of cohesiveness misleadingly solidifying conceptualizations of white, male identity—Baldwin sees potential in the urban confusion: for as his prophet courageously descends into the urban milieu, he embodies the courage and ability to formulate a new, more empowering form of masculinity.

Despite the dangers and difficulties that inevitably await John once he decides to leave Harlem, Baldwin clearly indicates that the city at large still offers him more of an opportunity to find himself than he will ever find at home. Venturing out from the confines of the ghetto, climbing the hill in Central Park, gazing out over the urban landscape, and imagining what his future might look like should he dare to descend, John takes his first adult steps towards liberating himself from the shackles of race, sexuality, religion, and family that hinder his personal development and stifle his artistic creativity.

Like so many great modernists before him, Baldwin needed to exile himself from his home in order to effectively write about it. As a semi-autobiographical portrait of himself as a young artist, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* depicts that critical moment in the author's own life when, like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, he realizes: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (Joyce 203). Like Dedalus, Joyce, and Baldwin himself, John becomes aware that he too must escape from the discursive traps holding him back. His temporary respite atop the Central Park hill provides the story's title with its relevance and power, marking John's dawning realization that in order to survive, he must risk it all and launch himself into the uncertainty of the undoubtedly hostile environment that exists beyond the ghetto.

But before he can ever free himself from Harlem and begin his life as an adult, he must return to face his stepfather on *his* home turf. Therefore, after leaving the park and touring the city for a few hours, John returns home, only to find his parents attending to Roy, who has just sustained a knife wound during a fight with some white boys outside the ghetto. Although John's mother and aunt clearly acknowledge that Roy "went *deliberately*, with a whole lot of other boys, all the way to the west side, just *looking* for a fight," Gabriel refuses to accept that reality, and instead directs his frustration and anger toward John, telling him to "take this like a warning from the Lord. This is what white folks does to niggers" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 46). Despite John's recent revelation—that is, that he must leave the ghetto if he ever hopes to truly find himself—the traumatic reality of Roy's condition drives him back towards the church, seeking refuge from the dangers rampant throughout the perilous city. In the coming hours, John will accept the invitation to join the church on its terms, descending down upon the threshing-floor in a state of rapture only to be lifted up by his fellow congregants, thereby signifying his successful conversion and ascent into Black Pentecostal manhood. As we have already noted, however, the ambiguity emerges when we try to determine whether the completed ritual marks John's conformity to the church's program—and hence, to an ideology that will impede self-actualization—or to an acceptance of aspects of himself that he knows the institution condemns.

Baldwin makes the connection between Roy's injury and John's temporary submission to "the way of the cross" explicit by directly transitioning from the aforementioned scene in the apartment to the moment when John unlocks "the church

door with his father's key" (*Go Tell It*, 49).<sup>76</sup> But before he can surrender to the ritual promising him safety and salvation from the dangers that have most recently harmed his own brother, John must resume his duties and prepare the chapel for worship, once again sweeping the floors and dusting the pews. While working, John hears a "knocking at the door" and opens it to find "Elisha, come to help him" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 51). The two boys playfully chastise one another before Elisha drops "the stiff gray mop" and lunges at John, "catching him off balance and lifting him from the floor" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 52). A brief wrestling match subsequently ensues in which "John, watching these manifestations of his [Elisha's] power, was filled with a wild delight" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 53). Clearly harboring sexual desire for the elder boy, John relishes in the physical contact they share.

Commenting on Sedgwick's "model of triangulation," Christopher Castiglia points out that the social structure organizing and sanctioning male relationships in Western societies "depends on the repression of homosexuality into homosociality" (qtd. in Csapo 69). By dropping the phallic symbol of the "stiff gray mop" and engaging John in a wrestling match, Elisha initiates this process, encouraging John as well to sublimate his homosexual desire into an acceptable form of homosocial expression: a critical prerequisite that John must fulfill before participating in the rite of passage that takes place mere hours later. Furthermore, in opting to pair the adjective "stiff" with the custodial instrument, Baldwin links the phallus with the cleanliness metaphor he draws upon so frequently throughout the novel, as a result creating a vital symbol that

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<sup>76</sup> Notice how this sequence of events parallels Baldwin's account of his own adolescent entry into the church described in *The Fire Next Time* and earlier in this chapter. The threat of violence and danger drives both Baldwin and John Grimes directly toward the church.

encourages readers to unpack the intersecting discourses of race, gender, religion, and sexuality.

By interrupting the linear structure of the novel with the various flashbacks found in the book's second section, Baldwin indicates that John's spiritual surrender stems from the fact that he has been overwhelmed by the legacy he has inherited, causing him to lose track of both space and time, as well as his own conscious potential to make healthy decisions for himself. As Part One of the novel ends, John spots his mother, father, and aunt entering the church; and when present action resumes at the beginning of Part Three, John already finds himself lying "on the floor, in the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned" moments earlier (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 193). "[W]ithout knowing how it had happened," John becomes conscious of the fact that he feels "possessed" by a power he has trouble understanding and "an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 193).

The shadow of ambiguity Baldwin casts over the novel's conclusion leaves the reader with a series of unanswered questions. When John responds affirmatively to Elisha's inquiry as to whether or not he has been saved, do the words which the narrator explains "came upward . . . of themselves, in the new voice God had given him" testify to his acceptance of his own homosexuality or to his submission to the 'cult of phallic masculinity' (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 206)? When the saints sing aloud, "Lord, I ain't no stranger now!" are they rightfully acknowledging that John has gained the ability to look into the mirror in his step-father's living-room and see an authentic self, or do their words signify that he has finally accepted the identity that has been constructed for him? When Elisha seals the novel with "a holy kiss" on John's forehead, does his gesture mark the

fact that the Lord now blesses John despite the same-sex desires he harbors, or does this act further indicate the successful “repression of homosexuality into homosociality” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 221)?

Critics have been debating these issues ever since the novel first appeared in print in 1958, and by doing so, have enabled *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to emerge as an exploratory tool which can help readers deconstruct the wide range of ideological norms that impede self-actualization and bar them from accessing reality. Rather than offering a resolution to any of the ongoing debates that add to the richness of the novel, a spatial analysis of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reveals how the various places John occupies impact his “adolescent gay consciousness,” thereby enhancing our ability to examine the complexity and ambiguity inherent in his experience, as well as within the text itself.

“While Baldwin may have left America because he was black,” writes Kendall Thomas, “he left Harlem, the place he called ‘home,’ because he was gay” (Thomas 327). Despite obvious problems with the clear distinction Thomas makes between Baldwin’s experience of racial and sexual oppression, and in spite of the fact that Baldwin felt sexually marginalized even after leaving Harlem, Thomas’ comment speaks directly to the production of the ghetto as an intensely heteronormative space that drove Baldwin from his “home” and promises to have the same affect on John. Despite their shared desire to liberate themselves from their troubled history and from ongoing racial oppression, Baldwin’s characters produce a set of domestic and parochial spaces that reproduce the debilitating forces of internalized oppression. Through their adherence to strictly contrived gender roles; their promotion of highly conservative sexual mores; and their commitment to preserving a patriarchal order derived from white, male hegemony;

these characters transform the ghetto into a highly rigid mechanism of social control that transfers the curse of black phallic masculinity from one generation to another.

But as Vivian May reminds us, although “identities are grounded in socio-linguistic constructions . . . these productions do not radically determine the subject (May 109). And when Baldwin closes the novel with a sheen of light sealing the “holy kiss” Elisha places on John’s forehead, he offers his readers a small glimpse of hope, elevating the “homoeroticism” of the moment “above the heterosexual self-hatred” represented fully in Gabriel’s non-smiling face (Crawford 84). Although John’s religious submission seems to indicate that he has accepted God and himself within the socio-linguistic terms that the church prescribes—socio-linguistic terms, that is, that are reified and conveyed through the spatial practices that make *The Temple of the Fire Baptized*, the Grimes family home, and the ghetto itself aggressively heteronormative—his surrender seems temporary at best.

While this discussion of John’s struggle to formulate an identity for himself may seem like an abrupt digression from a concentration on space to a focus on socio-linguistics, Lefebvre teaches us that space is actually “not formed separately from language,” and that any successful examination of how space is produced, or what it produces for that matter, remains contingent on full recognition of that reality (136). “Filled with signs and meanings, an indistinct intersection point of discourses, a container homologous with whatever it contains,” he asserts, “space so conceived is comprised merely of functions, articulations and connections—in which respect it closely resembles discourse” (Lefebvre 136). As such, in order to identify how the places John inhabits function as spatial conduits of power, one must make a concerted effort to examine not

only how ideological discourses participate in the creation of particular spaces, but how those spaces—incessantly in a state of their own ongoing production—simultaneously elicit particular behaviors from the individual that inform subject formation itself.

Before John steps across the threshold into the architectural manifestation of Gabriel's patriarchal control, he stares directly into the eyes of his stepfather and mutters, "I'm ready. . . . I'm coming. I'm on my way" (Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, 221). Now willing to confront Gabriel; the phallic masculinity *he* embodies; and the ideological forces emanating from the city streets, the church, and even his own home; John indicates that he has truly entered adulthood. He has been to the hill-top and gazed out over *his* promised land, as imperfect and threatening as we know it will be. He has immersed himself in the history, struggle, and complexity of his people; traversed the streets that produce false and crushing renditions of reality; and initiated an inward journey that will propel him out from the confines of the ghetto and beyond the socio-linguistic constructions that have been holding him back. By closing with this spellbinding image of John about to reenter Gabriel's domain, Baldwin reiterates his firm conviction that "to defend oneself against a fear is simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it." Produced by and reiterative of the ideological norms which confirm white patriarchal dominance, the Grimes family home is precisely the space John must confront as he progresses on his quest to realize his full potential as an artist, as an individual, and as a man.

*Envisioning Another Country Beneath the Virile Ideal*

With *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin launched his socio-spatial critique of hegemonic masculinity by interrogating the ways many African American men—in response to ongoing contestations to their gendered status as men—create domestic and parochial spaces that affirm patriarchal domination and subsequently give rise to reductive and destructive formulations of manhood. Constructing masculine identities through the same “symbols of power” that underscore much of their ongoing oppression—“symbols of power,” that is, derived from white patriarchy itself—Baldwin’s deeply troubled male characters internalize the racism, sexism, and homophobia extant within what Georges-Michel Sarotte calls an “American virile ideal” (Sarotte 9), thereby confirming Audre Lorde’s claim that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (qtd. in Clark, 55). Furthermore, by exaggerating the authoritative, domineering, and heterosexist components of the already problematic conceptualization of masculinity pervading mainstream American life, Harlem’s residents pass down “a curse” from one generation of black men to another, testifying to the truth of Kendall Thomas’ theory that “the homophobia and virulent masculinism that underwrite the politics of racial authenticity . . . are best understood as the displaced expression of internalized racism” (Thomas 332).

In his third novel, *Another Country*, Baldwin ventures out from Harlem into other regions of New York City and beyond, broadening his socio-spatial critique of black phallic masculinity to include a more thorough investigation of the ways discursive



formulations of manhood constrain and oppress diverse groups of men from a variety of geographical, racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic backgrounds. The novel's primary male characters—Rufus, Vivaldo, Eric, and Richard—all struggle to find themselves within an urban environment consisting not only of glass, concrete, and steel, but of discursive constructions of normalcy and personhood that catastrophically pass for reality and foster deep-seated feelings of self-alienation.

As these characters traverse the streets of New York City in an ongoing attempt to secure meaning in their lives, fulfillment in their relationships, and peace within themselves, they remind us of the truth in Robert Park's maxim that "if the city is the world which man created, it is [also] the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live" (Park 3). For Baldwin, the production of urban space is always concomitant with the production of ideological norms; and therefore, the city he meticulously depicts is not just a physical landscape that contains subjects, but a conduit of power that produces them. Living within a world subsumed by human constructs—both architectural and discursive—Baldwin's characters reveal that for one to realize his/her innate human potential, he/she must be willing to resist conformity, transgress taboos, and brave the waters of genuine self-exploration.

Late in the novel, Baldwin captures the intensity of this urban struggle as he describes what the arrival of "the New York summer" (*Another Country* 316) means for the city's "unprecedented multitude" (*Another Country* 4):

The heat and the noise began their destruction of nerves and sanity and private lives and love affairs. The air was full of baseball scores and bad news and treacly songs; and the streets and the bars were full of hostile people, made more hostile by the heat. It was not possible in this city, as it had been for Eric in Paris,

to take a long and peaceful walk at any hour of the day or night, dropping in for a drink at a bistro or flopping oneself down at a sidewalk café—the half-dozen grim parodies of sidewalk cafés to be found in New York were not made for flopping. It was a city without oases, run entirely, insofar, at least, as human perception could tell, for money; and its citizens seemed to have lost entirely any sense of their right to renew themselves. (*Another Country* 316)

Baldwin's description of New York in the summer screams of oppression, frustration, and confusion. The inescapable heat destroying "nerves and sanity and private lives and love affairs" symbolizes the incessant and stifling pressure to conform that becomes all the more intense as people start spending more of their time outside and in "public." Combining his claim that the city is "run entirely . . . for money" with his statement about it lacking any "oases" capable of offering people relief, Baldwin not only fuses the economic life of the city with the production of urban space, but—in a fascinating and critically important way—ends up linking those two processes to subject formation itself. By emphasizing the relationship between economics, urban production, and the psychological state of the city's residents, Baldwin urges his reader to consider how the spaces we occupy in the United States—urban spaces, in particular, produced by capitalistic modes of production, exchange, and consumption—impact identity formation in a variety of profound ways. The "oases" his city-dwellers so desperately yearn for are not simply physical spaces capable of offering them relief from the heat, but spiritual opportunities to escape the discursive constructs which stifle individual growth and personal fulfillment. Unlike the European cafés open for "flopping," socializing, and simply enjoying the moment, the American parodies of those cafés exist solely for profit, and as such, seat their patrons, rush their orders, and send them on their way as quickly as possible. For Baldwin, this seemingly innocuous distinction actually makes all of the

difference as the American spaces his characters occupy—again, spaces created by and for capitalism itself—give rise to an ethos of materialism, greed, competition, and power that shapes the way people view themselves, each other, and the world at large.

Baldwin's comparison of American and European cafés actually houses the critical distinction he aims to highlight between the ways cities on either side of the Atlantic function as conduits of power. By emphatically claiming that New York—unlike Paris—is “run entirely . . . for money,” Baldwin makes it clear that he sees American capitalism as the driving force behind the ongoing production of American cities, and hence, as the primary influence behind ideological oppression in the United States. Given, as we have already determined, that subjects and spaces shape one another, one can see how this particular passage encourages the reader to consider how American capitalism produces spaces that ensnare individuals into its own means of production, roping them into an ongoing economic process that subsequently dominates their everyday lives, informs the way they understand themselves, and compels them to participate in a series of spatial practices which end up securing and reproducing pre-existing power relations. Throughout *Another Country*, Baldwin's vibrant representations of urban space and urban living unmask the relationship between spatial production and discursive forms of power, ultimately enabling him to deliver an enlightening and disturbing critique of American masculinity.

Early on in the novel, as Vivaldo gazes out at the city through the window of a taxi cab carrying him back to Rufus' apartment, he starts to think about the “shapes acquired by” those who consider New York City their home, leading him—within moments—to begin “wonder[ing] about his own shape” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 60).

Linking Vivaldo's thoughts on the subject-space relationship to the previous passage which distinguishes American cities from their European counterparts, one can begin to see how deliberate Baldwin is in his investigation of the ways that American capitalism produces spaces that contribute to the construction of American identities. In regards to the discursive construction of masculinity in particular, Baldwin's contrasting representations of European and American settings reveal how a "virile ideal" inherited from Europe takes on new and more extreme formulations when inserted into an American city "run entirely . . . for money."

This ideological distinction—marked by the increased intensity and rigidity of gender norms in their American formulations—becomes increasingly apparent when Baldwin claims that Paris enabled Eric "to take a long and peaceful walk at any hour of the day or night" (*Another Country* 316). Unlike New York, Paris provides Eric with the space to find himself; that is to say, with the opportunity to forge a genuinely loving relationship with another man that ends up helping him fully and honestly embrace all aspects of his own identity, including his sexuality. Conversely, the fast-paced and harshly competitive streets of Manhattan promote hyper-masculinized notions of manhood that celebrate domination, reject male passivity, and generate widespread homophobia. Recalling his earlier life in New York, Eric remembers engaging in sexual activity with "an army of lonely men who had used him, who had wrestled with him, caressed him, and submitted to him" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 210-11). They came to him "not out of joy but out of poverty;" and as a result, caused him to take on a role as "the receptacle of an anguish which he could scarcely believe was in the world" and which ended up setting "the dimensions of his trap" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 210-11).

Conversely, by situating Eric and Yves' open and loving courtship in Europe, and by having Eric return to New York later in the novel with what Cass identifies as a "sense of himself," Baldwin makes it clear that Eric's experiences abroad have enabled him to transcend the discursive limitations imposed on him in the United States (*Another Country* 374).

In a late essay titled "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin argues: "we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male" (218). The crisis currently plaguing men throughout the Western hemisphere, he adds, stems from the fact that we inherit a conception of manhood that disproportionately values the traits and behaviors associated with 'masculinity' over those identified with 'femininity,' thereby creating a cultural pathology that prohibits men from realizing and accepting their innate androgyny and full potential to love and live. Among its many effects, Baldwin argues that the Industrial Revolution intensified "commercializing the roles of men and women" ("Here Be Dragons," 208), and as a result, gave rise to a hyper-masculinized conceptualization of manhood that we have already noted Sarotte identifies as the "Western virile ideal" (Sarotte 299). Predicated on heterosexuality, the "Western virile ideal" equates manliness with sexual conquest, patriarchal dominance, and complete self-control; and conversely, requires the total renunciation of any behaviors and sensibilities associated with femininity: including

passivity, emotionality, an interest in the arts, and most importantly, a sexual interest in men.<sup>77</sup>

According to Sarotte, the “European virile ideal” differs from its American counterpart in that it “is less extreme” in its “repression of femininity” (Sarotte 304). The European version, he argues, “can tolerate refinement, elegance, [and] tenderness” (Sarotte 304), whereas “all of American society holds to this virile ideal that shuts out the sensitive, artistic, ‘feminine’ man” (Sarotte 9). Baldwin clearly plays up this distinction through Eric’s successful sojourn to France, where he falls in love with Yves and subsequently finds comfort in his own existence. Furthermore, just before returning from Europe to pursue a career opportunity on Broadway, Eric warns Yves that “It’s going to be worse [for the two of them] in New York” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 224). Through Eric’s anxiety, Baldwin once again highlights how European and American spaces function differently from one another, exercising varying degrees of heteronormative pressure and producing alternative versions of masculinity.

As the novel begins, Baldwin immediately establishes an important and distinctively American connection between the ongoing construction of the virile ideal and the capitalistic production of urban space. Staggering out of a movie theater where he has just spent the last ten hours in hiding, Rufus Scott walks right into the heart of

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<sup>77</sup> As we saw earlier in the chapter, “black phallic masculinity” in the United States emerges as an intensified formulation of the American virile ideal—a discursive norm in its own right that evolved out of a European past. The point worth making is that the “American virile ideal” emerges as an intensified version of its European predecessor, and the version of masculinity produced in Baldwin’s representation of Harlem emerges as an intensified version of that.

Times Square where he encounters a barrage of advertisements and various kinds of financial exchange. Baldwin writes:

A sign advertised the chewing gum which would help one to relax and keep smiling. A hotel's enormous neon name challenged the starless sky. So did the names of movie stars and people currently appearing or scheduled to appear on Broadway, along with the mile-high names of the vehicles which would carry them into immortality. The great buildings, unlit, blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear, guarded the city which never slept. (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 4)

By opening the novel in Times Square, Baldwin takes his reader directly into one of the city's most iconic and commercially active locations; thereby drawing attention to the ways capitalism creates spaces that structure the lives of the city's inhabitants. The sky only seems starless because the glaring lights of advertisements dominate the night, encouraging pedestrians to pursue happiness through chewing gum and "immortality" through the commercialized institutions that claim—yet fail—to accurately measure professional and artistic quality. Nature is completely overrun by the world man has created, and as a result, the city's inhabitant's become duped into pursuing fulfillment through reductive channels that make true satisfaction unlikely at best. Compelled to succeed within the framework imposed upon them, members of the city's "unprecedented multitude" unknowingly conform to a system of norms and roles that systematically deny them the opportunity to achieve genuine self-realization.

Black, penniless, and hungry, Rufus feels deeply marginalized from the urban activity he observes and proceeds to cower beneath the "great buildings" towering overhead; the sublime symbols of American hubris, exceptionalism, and financial domination. But by describing the skyscrapers as "blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear," Baldwin not only identifies the buildings as national emblems of economic

power, but as urban symbols of American masculinity, thereby indicating that the American virile ideal is ideologically constructed by the same capitalistic processes that erect the towers and produce the city itself.

Yet, in addition to symbolizing the construction of American masculinity—and suggesting that the same processes producing the city produce our ideas about legitimate manhood—Baldwin’s metaphor actually conflates the two processes, indicating that the ongoing production of urban space *is* the very means by which we reify the American virile ideal. In *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey attests to the legitimacy of Baldwin’s connection by arguing that “capital continuously strives to shape bodies to its own requirements,” and that these bodies—in turn—create spaces through the social practices they perform (115). Expounding on the subject, Harvey argues:

Insofar as gender, race, and ethnicity are all understood as social constructions rather than as essentialist categories, so the effect of their insertion into the circulation of variable capital (including positioning within the internal heterogeneity of collective labor, and, hence, within the division of labor and the class system) has to be seen as a powerful force reconstructing them in distinctly capitalistic ways. (*Spaces of Hope* 106)

For Baldwin, the American modification of the European virile ideal stems precisely from its “insertion into the circulation of variable capital.” The capitalist processes producing urban space must be recognized as the “powerful force” responsible for “reconstructing” the masculine ideal “in distinctly capitalistic ways.” Eric correctly warns Yves that the sexual discrimination they will face in New York is “going to be worse” than that which they encountered in France, quite simply because American capitalism has taken the European virile ideal and transformed it into a more rigid and intensely repressive ideological construct.



In *Male and Female*, Margaret Mead comments on the American adaptation of the virile ideal, explaining that “American culture had fixed once and for all the physical appearance and desirable character traits of males;” urging each man to “avoid an interest in music, painting, [and] poetry,” and mandating that he “earn a great deal of money, advance in his work, and have a wife and children” (Sarotte 4). For Baldwin, these sharply drawn and “paralytically infantile” prerequisites not only make it “virtually forbidden . . . [for] the American boy [to] evolve into the complexity of manhood” (“Here Be Dragons” 208), but they stem from a capitalist system that compels men to incessantly proclaim their manliness through economic means. Capitalism intensifies the “repression of femininity” already present in the “European virile ideal,” because it instills its subjects with the sense that they are always in a state of competition, and as such, that their masculinity is something which is always contested and must therefore be incessantly proven. Capitalism thrives on insecurity, and by imposing an incessant challenge to one’s legitimate manhood, it compels male subjects to assert their masculinity through economic production and the successful performance of narrowly contrived gender roles, regardless of how “paralytically infantile” those roles may be. By opening the novel with a heart-wrenching portrayal of Rufus staggering hungry through the streets of New York beneath the phallic towers, Baldwin reminds his reader that the economic opportunities underscoring this problematic yet widely accepted rendition of masculinity remain much less accessible to blacks than to whites, thereby reinforcing his earlier claims delivered throughout *Go Tell It On the Mountain* about the country’s ongoing contestation of black manhood.

Writing explicitly about the impact and meaning of skyscrapers, Lefebvre argues that “the vertical ‘is’—namely, arrogance, the will to power, a display of military and police-like machismo, a reference to the phallus and a spatial analogue of masculine brutality” (Lefebvre 144). Although Richard, Vivaldo, and Eric respond differently than Rufus to New York’s towering skyline, as well as to the presence of policemen pervasive throughout the novel (the human manifestation of Power in the city), their whiteness does not protect them from the repercussions that come with living within an urban environment that incessantly compels men to affirm their masculinity through financial, social, and sexual domination. “Repressive space,” Lefebvre continues, “wreaks repression and terror even though it may be strewn with ostensible signs of the contrary (of contentment, amusement or delight)” (Lefebvre 144). In the Times Square scene referred to above, Rufus eyes the images of “contentment, amusement, and delight” issued by the advertisements surrounding him. Yet, as a black man, he also realizes how the American city bars him from ever attaining the financial status and receiving the kind of recognition that underscores one’s incontestable manhood. According to Beverly Tatum, personal prejudice accounts for only one aspect of racism in America, and racism should be defined as a “system of advantages based on race” (Tatum 7). Upon accepting Tatum’s definition, one can clearly gather how Rufus’ relationship to the towers fosters within him intense feelings of frustration and despair. Conversely and paradoxically, however, Baldwin uses Vivaldo, Eric, and Richard (all white characters) to demonstrate how New York’s towers relate to the production of a virile ideal that alienates men from themselves, regardless of race, creed, or sexual orientation.

As chapters one and two have already demonstrated, David Harvey is correct in pointing out that capitalism thrives on the production of difference in order to fragment the working class and create an economic imbalance that enables those in positions of power and privilege to benefit from the labor of others. By reading Cahan's and Wright's work through a geographical lens, we have seen how capitalism relies on uneven geographical development to create the ethnic and racial differences that enable the system to survive, in part by maximizing profits for some and diffusing potential resistance. But in addition to focusing on how the social hierarchies constituted by capitalist productions of space oppress the exploited and support the wealthy, Baldwin broadens his discussion in *Another Country* to include an analysis of the harm done to those who the system seemingly aims to serve; that is, he focuses on men, and other than Rufus Scott, he focuses specifically on white men.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin argues that, "the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being" (96-7). Similarly, he also asserts that they "are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand," and "until they understand it," he adds, "they cannot be released from it" (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 8). With both of these passages, Baldwin draws attention to the traps laden in manufactured superiority, pointing out that those in positions of power tend to develop an artificial and mistakenly coherent sense of identity predicated on the perceived inferiority of others.

Throughout *Another Country* Baldwin develops his theory more fully, exposing how his male characters, with varying degrees of effort and success, resist and succumb

to a masculine ideal that fosters psychological bewilderment, sexual confusion, sadistic acts of violence, and deep-seated feelings of self-hatred. Although Vivaldo, Eric, and Richard are not black, and therefore, obviously do not have to deal with the racial implications of being African American in New York, they do have to cope with the “murderous” “weight” of an American virile ideal that presses down upon them on a daily basis and forcefully compels them to abandon critical aspects of themselves. When Baldwin writes that Rufus was “one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell,” he not only alerts the reader to the inherent instability of the phallic construct, but overtly points out that the reiteration of roles and practices that it relies on for its continued existence fosters intense loneliness in each member of the city’s “unprecedented multitude,” isolating city-dwellers from one another and alienating them from themselves.

Due to their whiteness, Vivaldo, Eric, and Richard ironically have *more* difficulty identifying the forces which instill them with terror than Rufus, even though they—simply by being white—enjoy much greater access to the financial channels that underscore the American virile ideal in the first place. Eric, clearly much further along on his personal quest towards self-realization than either Vivaldo or Richard—due in part to his experiences abroad—has paradoxically benefitted from identifying himself as a homosexual, simply because his marginalized status has enabled him to recognize more clearly the fundamental inadequacies of accepting and trying to conform to the American virile ideal. While one might think that Rufus (as a black man) and Eric (as a homosexual) are the characters that suffer the most from inhabiting urban spaces that provide the American virile ideal with its ideological power, Baldwin actually argues

otherwise, asserting that conformity breeds self-delusion, and that the only thing more damaging than being beaten up by reality is being barred from accessing it. Without the ability and willingness to tap into the real, the individual cannot develop the healthy sense of self he/she needs in order to achieve genuine fulfillment. As Baldwin's representations of the city strongly suggest, the spaces we occupy play a major role in preserving these illusions.

Recalling Valentine's assertion that "the heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalized through repetition and regulation," one can see how Baldwin's opening representation of the falling towers relates to the ongoing urban processes that compel his male characters to conform to the "obdurate figurations of manhood" that constitute the status quo. The social practices which create the city end up producing the norms of gender and sexuality that confuse and oppress Baldwin's characters, thereby making urban space itself both the product of, and the means of production for, the ideological illusions that overrun nature and misappropriate reality.

By conflating the production of ideological norms with the everyday practices of urban life, Baldwin highlights how power functions spatially. According to Valentine, ubiquitous performances of heterosexual desire and conventional gender identities make various spaces decidedly heteronormative. Concurring with this postulation, Baldwin demonstrates how men and women who deviate from the norm are disciplined and punished through the comments made, the gazes emitted, and the insults cast by those programmed to "guard and keep . . . what they assume themselves to be." The regulatory measures incessantly propping up the American virile ideal are most powerfully

exercised by the city's pedestrians themselves, thereby making urban space a panoptic instrument that presides over the city's most "public" and "private" spaces.

Baldwin initially introduces the forcefulness of the public gaze through the dirty looks directed at those who are involved in interracial relationships. Rufus resents the glares he encounters as he walks down the street with Leona, and Vivaldo feels as though he is being accused of betrayal by the white women who spot him holding hands with Ida.<sup>78</sup> Yet, as the novel wears on, Baldwin gradually turns our attention from the public treatment of interracial romance to the widespread intolerance and mistreatment of homosexuals. In addition to the overt performances of heterosexual desire and conventional gender roles which make the bars, house-parties, and public parks of New York City decidedly heteronormative, the dirty looks, brutal insults, and other homophobic reactions enacted by many of Baldwin's characters add a dimension of violence to the disciplinary process, thereby providing urban space with a degree of forcefulness that not only reifies the norm, but outwardly punishes those who deviate from it.

Waiting for Vivaldo and Ida to meet him at a bar in Greenwich Village, Eric anticipates the abuse he will receive once the public identifies him as a homosexual. He "began to feel . . . unbearably odd and visible," writes Baldwin, "unbearably a stranger. It was not a new sensation, but he had not felt it for a long time: he felt marked, as though, presently, someone would notice him and then the entire mob would turn on him, laughing and calling him names" (*Another Country* 248). Having just returned to New

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<sup>78</sup> See *Another Country*, pages 28, 30, 31, and 144.

York after spending three years in France, Eric fears the threat that he once knew all too well. His anxiety and concern with being identified as a homosexual demonstrates how the spaces he occupies compel heterosexual conformity, forcing him to make sure that he doesn't reveal himself through either his gestures or his appearance. Similarly, as Vivaldo, Ida, Eric, and Ellis stroll through Washington Square Park, they pass by "two glittering, loud-talking fairies," and Ida remarks, "I always feel so *sorry* for people like that" (*Another Country* 263). Although she dresses her comment in concern, Ida nevertheless objectifies the two gay men, prompting Vivaldo's facetious retort: "I'll pick one up for you next week and we can keep him around the house as a pet" (*Another Country* 263). Both Eric's fear of being identified as gay and Ida's comment about how sorry she feels for "people like that," reveal the ways in which the city's denizens provide urban space with its heteronormative force. Ida explicitly divulges her true feelings about homosexuality later in the novel when, in a conversation with Vivaldo, she accuses Eric of wanting to make her brother "as sick as he is" (Baldwin, *Another Country* 323). Privy to her earlier remark about the couple they pass in the park, Eric clearly knows what Ida really thinks about homosexuality. Given his silence, one is left imagining the discomfort Eric must feel as he leaves the park with his 'friends.'

While the heteronormative city makes Eric blatantly aware of his precarious condition as a gay man, it also compels Baldwin's other male characters to adopt a figuration of manhood that makes self-acceptance fundamentally impossible. Richard Silenski, for example, clearly emerges as the novel's preeminent example of an individual who wholeheartedly conforms to the American virile ideal. Disconnected from his wife, in need of commercial validation for his work, harshly judgmental, and

outwardly homophobic, Richard—of all the novel’s characters—is clearly the most ill-equipped to free himself from the ideological constraints of legitimized masculinity. Unsurprisingly, he is also—of all the novel’s aspiring artists—the one who is most willing to sacrifice his artistic integrity for financial gain. Richard’s willingness to compromise his craft directly coincides with his total surrender to the American virile ideal, not only because the latter concession results in the former, but because both actions mark the loss of self that occurs when one conforms to a set of norms that become increasingly narrow and dehumanizing once they are inserted into the “circulation of variable capital.” By wedding Cass, Richard has ‘married up,’ so to speak, and as a result, has developed a socio-economic complex that makes him feel the need to prove himself through professional advancement; an objective that he hopes to achieve by writing a book that will satisfy his publisher and become a commercial success. Through Richard, Baldwin highlights how capitalist interests influence the production of American masculinity. Succumbing to the pressure to “earn a great deal of money [and] advance in his work,” Richard not only compromises his art, but more importantly, sacrifices his inner most being, leaving him deeply insecure and glaringly detached as both a husband, a father, and a friend.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin uses Vivaldo, Richard, Eric, and Rufus to illustrate how one’s ability to create meaningful and valuable art hinges on the individual’s willingness to confront the depths of his own being and face the realities of life obscured by tradition, habit, and ideology; the same prerequisites that underscore one’s successful acceptance of self and one’s ability to love other’s, as well as one’s self. Richard’s deteriorating marriage to Cass stems in large part from his all-consuming



commitment to write the kind of novel that will attest to the legitimacy of his manhood, hence signifying his inclination to conform to the socio-economic conditions underpinning the erection of the phallic towers which appear at the outset of the novel. In a telling conversation with Vivaldo, Cass makes this connection for herself, linking her husband's preoccupation with "his agent and all those horrible people," to the poor quality of his work and to his unwillingness to "see" or "touch" her anymore (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 274).

Furthermore, when Cass finally confronts Richard and explains to him why she has entered into a sexual relationship with Eric, she states: "He has something—something I needed very badly. . . . A sense of himself" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 374). By conforming to the American virile ideal, Richard forfeits the sense of himself that he needs to sustain a loving relationship with Cass, thereby driving his wife to seek genuine companionship out of wedlock. Upon hearing Cass explain why she entered into an affair with Eric, Richard predictably responds with a violent, homophobic retort: "'A sense of himself,' he repeated, slowly. 'A sense of himself. . . . Forgive your coarse-grained husband, but I've always felt that he had no sense of himself at all. He's not even sure he knows what's between his legs, or what to do with it'" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 374). Richard's incendiary attack on Eric's sexuality reveals that he is not only furious about his wife's infidelity, but that he views her decision to fornicate with a presumed homosexual as a personal affront to his own manhood. With his frustration and anger mounting, Richard ends up resorting to violence, grabbing Cass by the hair, slamming her head "back against the chair," and slapping "her across the face, twice, as hard as he could" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 376).

Richard's outburst and subsequent attack on Cass emerges as the culmination of a destructive process that Baldwin indicates stems all the way back to the ways in which we learn what it means to be a man. Thoroughly convinced of his own need to assert his masculinity through financial achievement and patriarchal domination, Richard epitomizes the white, male figure who has wholeheartedly bought into the rendition of legitimate manhood advertized, learned, and reinforced by the daily practices which constitute the city itself. Skillfully and insightfully, Baldwin creates a series of situations which illustrate the earliest phases of this process, focusing specifically on how young boys begin to conform to the cult of masculinity previously described.

When Eric returns from France, for example, he notices that a "note of despair, of buried despair, was insistently, constantly struck. It stalked all the New York avenues, [and] roamed all the New York streets," and Eric "could not escape the feeling that a kind of plague was raging, though it was officially and publicly and privately denied (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 230-1). When Eric spots some young boys conforming to the conceptualization of manhood that he knows from experience fosters self-alienation and the extreme distrust of others, Baldwin makes it increasingly clear that this city-wide epidemic stems directly from the reification of the virile ideal. Baldwin writes:

Their very walk, a kind of anti-erotic, knee-action lope, was a parody of locomotion and of manhood. They seemed to be shrinking away from any contact with their flamboyantly and paradoxically outlined private parts. They seemed—but could it be true? and how had it happened?—to be at home with, accustomed to, brutality and indifference, and to be terrified of human affection. In some strange way they did not seem to feel that they were worthy of it. (*Another Country* 231)

To Eric, the boys' gestures demonstrate that they are already conforming to a construction of masculinity that will prohibit them from achieving a healthy relationship with their own bodies, let alone with the other boys and girls with whom they interact. By having Eric identify the way that they walk as a "parody of locomotion and of manhood," Baldwin highlights the ongoing ideological processes which claim young boys and compel them to evolve into the confused and deeply troubled men we meet throughout the rest of the novel. The "kind of anti-erotic, knee-action lope" that they enact elucidates the fact that masculinity is in fact a performance, and by grounding that performance in "their very walk"—perhaps the most mundane of all human gestures—Baldwin indicates that the city itself is a perpetual stage; that is to say, a theatrical arena in which each and every one of us is incessantly called upon to act in accordance with a script and give the perpetually engaged audience what it expects.

Additionally, by linking the actions of the boys to the "plague" which he feels is "raging" throughout the city, Eric's observation also encourages the reader to consider the means by which this infection is passed from one generation to another, as well as to think about the symptoms it creates in those who contract it. On the one hand, Eric's assessment that the city's residents "officially and publicly and privately denied" the very existence of this epidemic suggests that its passage occurs unbeknownst to those it infects. The masculine performances of the boys in the street stem from the reality that they are merely conforming to an ideological norm, thereby reinforcing the status quo through their concession to it and instilling the urban environment with its heteronormative power. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre points out that "gestural systems embody ideology and bind it to practice. Through gestures," he continues,

“ideology escapes from pure abstraction and performs actions;” actions, which in turn, “generate [the very] spaces” we occupy (215). Seeing as though “the heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalized through repetition,” the behaviors that the boys collectively exhibit not only demonstrate that they have been infected by “the cult of phallic masculinity,” but that they are also involved in spreading the disease, essentially providing urban space with its ideological influence.

The symptoms that the “plague” produces already begin to surface in the boys Eric observes. Noticing that they seem “accustomed to . . . brutality and indifference,” and “terrified of human affection,” Eric highlights the early signs of a disease that will only become increasingly destructive if those infected continue to deny its existence. Richard’s violence, homophobia, and inability to forge a healthy identity represent what lies ahead for the city’s youth if they continue to conform to the American virile ideal. Pointing out to Eric that the city is “getting uglier all the time,” Cass attests to the fact that the “plague” is indeed spreading, and that it continues to do so in large part because the city’s residents continue to surrender themselves to the discursive constructs of gender and sexuality amplified by their “insertion into the circulation of capital:” it’s “a perfect example,” she purports, “of free enterprise gone mad” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 231).

Although the “plague” ravaging the city seems to spread throughout the entire novel, Baldwin does leave his reader with a glimmer of hope as Cass, Eric, and Vivaldo all take significant strides in their respective quests towards self-discovery by the time the story ends. As a woman married to a man who has fully capitulated to the American virile ideal, Cass faces a different set of challenges than Eric and Vivaldo, although she

too is forced to deal with the “obdurate figurations of manhood” underscoring so much of the city’s ideological pandemic. In an early conversation with her husband, Cass expresses her frustration with her current situation, stating, “what men have ‘dreamed up’ is all there is, the world they’ve dreamed up *is* the world. . . . I had to try to fit myself around you and not try to make you fit around me” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 108). While Baldwin clearly focuses his attention on the grave affects the American virile ideal has on men, his creation of Cass as a central character enables him to showcase how patriarchal hegemony and the discursive reification of American masculinity oppress women as well. Cass correctly acknowledges that the world men have “dreamed up *is* the world,” but only insofar as the world she is referring to is the world of daily American life as opposed to the true reality that still exists beneath ideology and illusion. Her emphasis on the fact that men have created modern-day life through their dreams reiterates the point that everyday existence has become a byproduct of preexisting power relations and the resultant fictions they reproduce. As such, her comment foreshadows the confrontation with reality each character must face if he/she is to make any headway before the narrative concludes.

Cass’s need to break free from the oppressive dream-world men have created leads her to violate conventional morality and commit an act of marital infidelity with Eric. Compelled for so long to “fit” herself around Richard, she has blindly surrendered her adult life to a domestic existence and subsequently finds herself entrenched in a mid-life crisis. As the story concludes, Baldwin leaves us with few clues as to what will happen between Cass and Richard, but he does grant her the important victory of being truthful to herself and confronting her husband on her own terms.

As men, Rufus, Eric, and Vivaldo have a very different relationship than Cass to the narrowly contrived construction of American masculinity breeding despair throughout the city and threatening to destroy the Silenski's marriage. While Cass must stop molding her own life around a husband who has conformed to the virile ideal, Rufus, Eric, and Vivaldo face the daunting task of needing to dismantle that construct if they are to have any chance at developing a sense of manhood consistent with their inner-most selves. Baldwin's representation of the "heterosexing" of urban space demonstrates how mainstream American life promotes men's sexual conquest of women and demonizes homosexual intimacy, commercializing the former through the gendered performances of women advertizing themselves as objects for sexual consumption and relegating the latter to the back alleys of the metropolitan landscape and to the dark balconies of movie theaters airing unconventional films.<sup>79</sup>

In "Live Sex Acts," Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant argue that the cultural production of national identity in the United States continues to be predicated on a "pedagogical project" that makes "people into 'private citizens' who understand their privacy to be a mirror and a source for nationality itself" (56). Given the nation's interest in constructing a morally upright identity for itself, this "pedagogical project" takes the form of an outright war on the "perceived attack" of "atypical sexualities" (Warner and Berlant 55). According to Warner and Berlant, this far-reaching project aims to install "a

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<sup>79</sup> As the novel begins, we learn that Rufus has just spent the last ten hours "sitting in the movies, in the top row of the balcony" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 3). "Twice he had been awakened," Baldwin continues, "by caterpillar fingers between his thighs." Baldwin's subtle reference to the impersonal sexual activity that takes place in the back rows of the theater precedes his more extensive representation of Rufus' crippling despair. By opening the novel with this image, he immediately draws our attention to the reality of a sexual underworld where men seeking homosexual encounters are seemingly forced to satisfy their desires in secrecy and isolation.

sanitized image of normal culture” into everyday existence by compelling individuals to aspire toward “iconicity or deadness” in their sexual lives (57, 62). As a result of this effort by a “national culture industry” to establish “sexuality as the fundamental index of person’s political legitimacy,” the concept of privacy becomes a mere fantasy and the most personal and potentially intimate of all human interactions becomes mediated by publicity and ideology (Warner and Berlant 58).

Frustrated by his inability to make any headway on his novel, Vivaldo Moore paces the floor of his Greenwich Village apartment, gazes out from the window, and notices a neighbor returning home “from her round of the bars and the coffee houses with yet another boneless young man” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 129). Eying the couple as they walk “down the street, hand in hand, but not together,” Vivaldo begins to imagine the scene that will “inevitably” commence once the two enter the ‘privacy’ of the young woman’s apartment. Knowing all too well what will unfold—namely because he admits to himself that “he had been there too”—Vivaldo tells himself: “Well, now, they would make it—make what? not love, certainly—and should he be standing at this window twenty-four hours hence, he would see the same scene repeated with another boy” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 129). The disturbing scene which subsequently unfolds in Vivaldo’s mind deftly illustrates precisely what Berlant and Warner are concerned with when they argue that the cultural production of national identity takes place in the privacy of people’s homes as they conform to the nationally sanctioned practices of dead sexuality. Playing the scene out in his own head, Vivaldo imagines the preliminary gestures and predictable acts of foreplay that will inevitably bring “on the climax—joylessly, with loathing, and too soon” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 132). Ruminating

over which one will make the first move to “conquer” the “tremendous . . . fear” that he knows they both share, Vivaldo pictures the girl “sighing and halting,” and then thinks about how the boy would either “lunge over the girl as though rape were in his mind, or he would try to arouse her lust by means of feathery kisses, meant to be burning, which he has seen in the movies” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 131).

Through Vivaldo’s imagination, Baldwin reveals how the public commercialization of sexuality and gender not only promotes a conceptualization of masculinity predicated on domination and violence, but also informs the ways that two people engage in sexual intimacy with one another, encouraging them to perform a set of scripted roles which make the actual encounter thoroughly impersonal and inherently self-deceptive. “Every movement that seemed to bring her closer to him,” Vivaldo continues, “to bring them closer together, had its violent recoil, driving them farther apart. Both clung to a fantasy rather than to each other, tried to suck pleasure from the crannies of the mind, rather than surrender the secrets of the body” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 131). Furthermore, by writing that “a commercial replaced the love song” playing in the background, Baldwin reiterates his contention that the allegedly ‘private’ heterosexual encounters taking place in apartments are in fact thoroughly mediated by the highly public discourses of gender and sexuality incessantly reiterated throughout the city.

In order to overcome the ideological constructions that strip the life out of sexual intimacy and prohibit boys from “evolving into the complexity of manhood,” Baldwin’s male characters must embrace their repressed desire for passivity and relinquish the need to dominate their sexual partners, the spaces they occupy, and the inherent emotions that



they all possess. As Eric's recollection of his sexual past reveals, the need to be passive is rampant in men throughout the city, and the pressure to repress that need exacerbates their despair and compels them to engage in high risk and humiliating acts with strangers. Thinking back, Eric realizes that "the role he played was necessary, and not only for himself":

They were husbands, they were fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers; and they were everywhere. Or they were, in any case in all of the places he had been assured they could not be found and the need they brought to him was one they scarcely knew they had, which they spent their lives denying, which overtook and drugged them, making their limbs as heavy as those of sleepers or drowning bathers, and which could only be satisfied in the shameful, the punishing dark, and quickly, with flight and aversion as the issue of the act. They fled, with the infection lanced but with the root of the infection still in them. Days or weeks or months might pass—or even years—before, once again, furtively, in an empty locker room, or an empty stairway or a roof, in the shadow of a wall in the park, in a parked car, or in the furnished room of an absent friend, they surrendered to the hands, to the stroking and fondling and kissing of the despised and anonymous sex. And yet the need did not seem to be predominantly physical. It could not be said that they were attracted to men. They did not make love, they were passive, they were acted on. The need seemed, indeed, to be precisely this passivity, this gift of illicit pleasure, this adoration. They came, this army, not out of joy but out of poverty, and in the most tremendous ignorance. Something had been frozen in them, the root of their affections had been frozen, so that they could no longer accept affection, though it was from this lack that they were perishing. (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 211-212)

Eric's memory of his own involvement in New York's homosexual underworld reveals important information regarding the "plague" that he associates with the boys loping down the avenue. First of all, Baldwin connects the two scenes together through the metaphor of "disease," stating in the passage quoted above that the men engaging in these secretive practices "fled, with the infection lanced but with the root of the infection still in them." Like the boys who divulge their sickness through the "parodies of locomotion and manhood" they perform, the "husbands," "fathers, [and] football players"

using Eric to fulfill their repressed needs expose themselves simply as actors who have taken on a reductive script in their own daily lives that disables them from accepting the beauty and complexity of themselves. Secondly, Eric's flashback also reiterates the fact that Baldwin is more concerned with how homophobia compels men to divorce themselves from the "feminine" aspects of their own being than he is with homosexual oppression in and of itself. By saying that the needs of these men were not "predominantly physical," and by reinforcing that point by writing that "it could not be said that they were attracted to men," Baldwin points out that the "root of the infection" lies in the need to incessantly dominate, thereby emphasizing that the American construction of masculinity—a byproduct of capitalism's spatial production—denies men the opportunity to realize and accept their innate androgyny and full potential as men. Homosexual oppression, therefore, not only surfaces in the novel as an injustice that harms Eric, but as a manifestation of the American virile ideal that oppresses all of Baldwin's male characters. By conforming to the sexual and gender norms which constitute American masculinity, the men in Baldwin's novel find themselves in a place where they can "no longer accept affection" at all.

Additionally, by pointing out that these men would periodically return to an "empty locker room, or an empty stairway or a roof," Baldwin not only indicates that homosexual encounters have been banished from public view, but more importantly, he dramatizes the desperate measures men will resort to in an effort to relieve themselves from the perception that they need to dominate. These men clearly feel compelled to satisfy their need for passivity by surrendering themselves "to the hands, to the stroking and fondling and kissing of the despised and anonymous sex;" and of course they must

do so in secretive locations, so as not to openly divulge the feminine aspects of their innate androgyny. The heteronormativity of public space clearly marginalizes homosexuals throughout the novel, but—as Eric’s flashback reveals—it also forcefully prohibits all men, regardless of their sexual orientation, from honestly embracing core aspects of themselves.

Returning from France with a much greater sense of himself than the one he had before departing, Eric explains to Vivaldo that he is no longer willing to engage in the kinds of sexual activity that associate same-sex intimacy with shame and that take place in the underground locations described in the previous passage. Listening to the “noise coming from two [adjacent] taverns,” Eric explains to Vivaldo that he had “visited each of them once”:

‘One of them’s gay,’ he said, ‘and what a cemetery *that* is. The other one’s for longshoremen, and that’s pretty deadly, too. The longshoremen never go to the gay bar, and the gay boys never go to the longshoremen’s bar—but they know where to find each other when the bars close, all up and down this street. It all seems very sad to me, but maybe I’ve been away too long. *I* don’t go for back-alley cock-sucking. *I* think sin should be fun.’ (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 333)

Just like the homosexual encounters that Eric despairingly remembers, this passage draws our attention to the fact that many men engage in homosexual sex in order to satisfy needs that their conformity to the virile ideal prohibits. Additionally, however, Eric’s proclamation that he will no longer participate in these back-alley practices suggests that he has reached a point in his life where he no longer feels compelled to associate his homosexual desires with either secrecy or shame. As Yves disembarks the plane and prepares to rejoin his lover in New York at the end of the novel, Baldwin makes it clear that Eric may finally have the opportunity to nurture a loving relationship in America,

even in this heteronormative city that systematically punishes men for attempting to be themselves.

Shortly after returning from France, Eric delivers an important comment to Ida, Cass, and Vivaldo that once again enables Baldwin to connect the distinction between European and American ideologies to each culture's respective production of urban space. Responding to Ida's question about whether or not he is beginning to enjoy New York as much as he enjoyed Paris, Eric explains, "I'd enjoy it [New York] a whole lot more if you'd put your rivers and bridges in the middle of the city instead of having them all pushed off on the edges this way. You can't *breathe* in this city in the summertime; its' frightening" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 325). By pointing out that Europeans integrate "rivers and bridges" into their urban landscapes, and by contrasting that design with Eric's observation that in the United States they are "pushed off on the edges," Baldwin employs a powerful metaphor to highlight what he sees as an important cultural distinction. The fresh air that Europeans allegedly enjoy as a result of integrating "rivers and bridges" into their urban landscapes suggests that those living on the eastern side of the Atlantic have created a more open and accepting environment that offers them a greater degree of existential freedom (at least in regards to sexuality). As such, the "rivers and bridges" denote the cultural means that enable individuals to pass back and forth between a whole set of ideological binaries that structure the way people are conditioned to view racial, gender, and sexual differences in particular. The lack of bridges inside Manhattan's city limits, therefore, represent how Americans—through their everyday spatial practices—reify the "paralytically infantile" and distinctively

separate categorizations that compel people to see themselves and each other in destructively inadequate terms.

In *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Melvin Dixon offers additional insight into Baldwin's figurative use of bridges throughout the novel, focusing specifically on how the metaphor relates to Rufus' suicidal leap from the George Washington Bridge at the end of the book's opening chapter. "The bridge is an architectural metaphor for Rufus's attempt to merge the vastly different worlds of Harlem and Greenwich Village and of homosexual and heterosexual experiences," argues Dixon. "Rufus's suicide after his climb up on the bridge," he continues, "represents his failure to link the two countries" (Dixon 134). Read in conjunction with Eric's comment about the bridges in America being "pushed off on the edges" of the city, Rufus' desperate plunge from the George Washington Bridge clearly suggests that he feels defeated by an urban existence that makes it seemingly impossible for him to successfully develop and embrace the complexity of his own being. Connecting New Jersey to the northwestern corner of Manhattan, the actual location of the George Washington Bridge confirms Eric's observation about "rivers and bridges" being relegated to the periphery of American cities, further suggesting how the daily production of urban space reinforces the ideological binaries which plague Baldwin's characters and Americans in general.

In addition to marking the cultural differences between American and European life through his metaphorical use of bridges and cafés, Baldwin reinforces that distinction by comparing the panoptic and ideological power of Chartres' iconic cathedral to the phallic towers that loom above Rufus in the novel's opening scene. Marking a pivotal

moment in their budding relationship, Yves chooses to bring Eric to the cathedral which he had had visited once, years before. “[T]his gesture,” writes Baldwin, “this desire to share with Eric something he had loved . . . signaled Yves turning out of that dark distrust with which he was accustomed to regard the world and with which he had held Eric at bay (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 214). Yet before the two men physically consecrate their relationship for the first time, Baldwin has them traverse the town beneath the “shadow of” the church’s “great tower” (*Another Country*, 218). As Eric recalls:

All of the beauty of the town, all the energy of the plains, and all the power and dignity of the people seemed to have been sucked out of them by the cathedral. It was as though the cathedral demanded, and received, a perpetual, living sacrifice. It towered over the town, more like an affliction than a blessing, and made everything seem, by comparison with itself, wretched and makeshift indeed. The houses in which the people lived did not suggest shelter, or safety. The great shadow which lay over them revealed them as mere doomed bits of wood and mineral, set down in the path of a hurricane which, presently, would blow them into eternity. And this shadow lay heavy on the people, too. They seemed stunted and misshapen; the only color in their faces suggested too much bad wine and too little sun; even the children seemed to have been hatched in a cellar . . . and everywhere they walked, the cathedral was watching them. (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 219-221)

Contrary to what one might expect—given the distinctions that Baldwin repeatedly draws between American and European culture throughout *Another Country*—his description of Chartres demonstrates how the production of European spaces convey ideological power as well, and therefore exact the “perpetual, living sacrifice” that Eric perceives in the “stunted and misshapen” French citizens living in this historic town. Like the imperial towers of New York City, the cathedral’s phallic steeple casts its shadow over all of the people living below, thereby proclaiming the church’s moral authority and making it abundantly clear to everyone on the ground how they are expected to behave and who

they are expected to be. The phallic similarity between the cathedral and the American skyscraper suggests that the construction of masculinity in each country is likewise produced in accord with each culture's respective spatialization of power. Furthermore, Baldwin's use of the adjective "misshapen" in this passage directs us back to the moment when, peering out from the taxi-cab window, Vivaldo questions the "shapes acquired by those who had" tried to make New York City their home. In both cases, spatial production influences subject formation in profound, confounding, and fiercely limiting ways.

The primary difference between the spatial productions of a virile ideal in these two contexts, however, is that one is founded on Christianity and the other is based in capitalism (in regards to the latter, we have already seen this reality represented through Baldwin's depiction of New York's cafés as parodies of their European counterparts). Traversing the winding streets of Chartres, Eric and Yves are unable to avoid the spectral glare cast by the cathedral, thus signifying their shared awareness that their love for one another is fundamentally forbidden by the pre-capitalistic constructions of morality and manhood policing daily life in the French village. As such, their decision to physically consecrate their relationship beneath that gaze marks each man's monumental triumph over an ideological force which has until now compelled him to "regard the world" with "dark distrust." Baldwin's description of the shadow cast by the church tower makes it clear that the plague raging throughout New York City is spreading throughout Europe as well, although Eric and Yves' successful courtship, combined with the increased size and power of the American skyscraper, suggests—at least for Baldwin—that the virile ideal has become even more forceful and repressive in its capitalistic manifestation.

Unlike Eric, Vivaldo has not traveled abroad, and therefore, has not been afforded the same opportunity to temporarily escape New York's repressive climate and embark on a search for self within the more liberal spaces of a European city. Yet despite his predicament, Vivaldo does take important strides towards self-acceptance by the time the story concludes, and as such, emerges as the character that experiences the most drastic transformation. Upon first meeting him, we learn that Vivaldo is an aspiring novelist whose ability to write is perpetually stifled by his ongoing submission to the American virile ideal. He repeatedly enters into unsustainable sexual relationships and routinely travels uptown to Harlem where he attempts to assert his masculinity by paying black women for sex. The psychological drive behind Vivaldo's frequenting of prostitutes in Harlem seems obvious, as the women who accept his money and his sex help him confirm for himself not only his dominant status as a white man, but as a heterosexual as well, a key aspect of his manufactured identity that he incessantly feels compelled to assert through acts of sexual conquest.

Unwilling to openly acknowledge how his sexual escapades have enabled him to avoid a confrontation with reality, the narrator tells us what Vivaldo cannot:

uptown, his alienation had been made visible and, therefore, almost bearable. It had been his fancy that danger, there, was more real, more open, than danger was downtown and that he, having chosen to run these dangers, was snatching his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire. . . . He was forced, little by little, against his will, to realize that in running the dangers of Harlem he had not been testing his manhood or heightening his sense of life. He had merely been taking refuge in the outward adventure in order to avoid the clash and tension of the adventure proceeding inexorably within. (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 132-133)



For Vivaldo, the real “danger” threatening him from within is the same “plague” that infects the boys parodying manhood on the city streets, compels Eric to seek refuge in France, transforms Richard into a violent and emotionally bereft homophobe, and impels Rufus to seek salvation by throwing himself from the George Washington Bridge. As his problematic relationship with Ida gradually evolves, he is “forced, little by little, [and] against his will,” to realize that his own actions have only deepened the debilitating internal wound which continues to fester with each new day. By traveling up to Harlem, ostensibly to face the overt dangers that come with being white in a black ghetto, he not only conforms to the American virile ideal, but evades a confrontation with that construction, essentially exacerbating his infection with each distractive attempt to overcome it. Through Vivaldo’s behavior, Baldwin represents the paradox at the heart of his socio-spatial critique of American masculinity: that is, by seeking to assert his manhood by dominating space and the sexual partners he pays, Vivaldo immerses himself more deeply into the discursive trap of the American virile ideal, “the source of the infection” that fosters his ongoing alienation, impedes his ability to write, and urges him to assert his manhood through impersonal acts of sexual domination.

Part of Vivaldo’s problem early on in the novel is that he refuses to acknowledge how the power dynamics operating throughout the city impact others, as well as himself. He dismisses Rufus’ reluctance to escort him to a hospital as the byproduct of racial paranoia, and then forcefully asserts to his friend—in a conversation about each man’s past homosexual experiences—that “We’ve all been up the same streets,” thereby ruling out any possibility that his own subject position as a white, heterosexual male is predicated on a false notion of his own superiority and upon the manufactured inferiority

of Others (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 52). While the two men may have literally traversed many of the same streets, their perspectives and experiences have obviously been vastly different. Vivaldo fails to recognize that he has been conditioned to accept a cognitive map for himself that is predicated on the false notion of spatial neutrality and on his own ability to dominate the spaces he inhabits and the people with whom he interacts. Seeing as though his need to confirm a non-fragmented identity for himself hinges upon his ability to navigate the urban environment, he has a vested interest in seeing the city as an impartial and objective arena that provides all people—regardless of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation—with the same experiences. As such, recognizing how power functions throughout the city will not only force him to acknowledge what Others face, but—more importantly—will expose him to the reality that his own seemingly coherent subject position is contingent upon the white, patriarchal domination of Others, thereby implicating himself as being responsible for the suffering of those he cares about so deeply.

When Vivaldo tells Rufus, “We’ve all been up the same streets,” he is correct in acknowledging that both men have “been taught to lie so much about so many things, that [they] hardly ever know *where* [they] are,” but incorrect in believing that the pressures and challenges people face are indistinguishable. Laughing at his friend for his inability to recognize a reality which to him seems so blatantly obvious, Rufus says, “If you don’t see it, I can’t tell you. . . . Everybody’s on the A train—you take it uptown, I take it downtown” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 70). As an African American man who feels the need to leave Harlem in order to have a chance at bridging the various constituencies of himself, Rufus recognizes precisely what Vivaldo is up to in traveling uptown to pay

black women for sex. Rather than allowing him to snatch “his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity,” which is what he would like to believe, Vivaldo’s “whoring” activities prove to be a desperate attempt to reinforce the cognitive map that he has been conditioned to “guard and keep” at all costs. Rufus recognizes the violence at the heart of Vivaldo’s behavior—even if his friend does not—and in so doing, begins to see that Vivaldo’s ongoing attempt to maintain his own subjective coherence is part of the very process underscoring so much of the suffering—that as a black man growing up in Harlem—he has had to endure throughout his entire life. This realization explains why Rufus stops laughing, quickly becomes “sober and still,” and within an instant starts to look “at Vivaldo with hatred” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 70).

Following a number of the race riots that erupted throughout the United States in the late 1960s, “President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois to identify the causes of the violence and to propose policies to prevent its recurrence” (Massey and Denton 3). In addition to arguing that segregation was the central cause behind “growing racial inequality” in the nation, the commission explicitly states what Rufus acknowledges as he sits back and listens to Vivaldo talk about frequenting prostitutes in Harlem (Massey and Denton 4). The Kerner Commission Report states:

Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it. (U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1)

Upon hearing Vivaldo boastfully talk about his sexual exploits in Harlem, Rufus erupts in anger, furious that his friend fails to understand what he “can never forget;” that is, not only that “white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto,” but that that “white society” includes Vivaldo, in particular. In asserting that he and Rufus have “been up the same streets,” Vivaldo essentially dismisses the existence of racism altogether, enabling him to avoid the reality that his own identity is less stable and more dependent on his proclivity to dominate others than he ever cares to admit. The paradox, of course, is that the coherence of Vivaldo’s white, male identity is an illusion, just like the notion of spatial neutrality upon which it stands.

Vivaldo eventually accepts this reality, although only after Rufus has chosen to take his own life. In fact, it is not until Vivaldo surrenders himself and his body to Eric that he is able to transcend the ideological constructs associated with white masculinity; relinquish his need to dominate; submit “to the luxury, the flaming torpor of passivity;” and begin to confront the depths of his own being (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 385). According to Sarotte, “homosexuality . . . is the most categorical rejection of [the] virile ideal, which must of necessity be gained heterosexually. To be homosexual is to be relegated to nonconformity, to be cast among the subhuman, the pariahs, the girlish” (Sarotte 295). Although Vivaldo may not self-identify as a homosexual, his sexual encounter with Eric confirms Sarotte’s claim about homosexuality’s inherent subversiveness. Marking his successful and much needed “rejection of [the] virile ideal,” Vivaldo’s sexual liaison with Eric enables him to transcend the stigmas associated with male passivity, embrace aspects of himself which he previously refused to accept, engage

Ida in truthful conversation about their relationship, and begin composing honest and meaningful prose.

Before leaving Eric's apartment, Vivaldo makes it clear that he is not interested in an ongoing sexual relationship with Eric, stating, "it's not my battle, not my *thing*" (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 397). While Vivaldo's comment seems to echo the actions of the men described earlier in the novel, who—after partaking in secretive homosexual acts with Eric—deny what has happened and attempt to reclaim a sense of manhood consistent with the cultural norms, the truth is that his interest in resuming his own "battle" is not proof that he is in a state of denial. To the contrary, by having Vivaldo parley the personal empowerment he has gained in Eric's apartment into an authentic and loving confrontation with Ida, Baldwin problematizes the binary conceptualization of sexuality itself, thereby emphasizing—once again—that the American virile ideal not only oppresses homosexuals, but alienates all men from themselves, hence impeding their ability to love.

Baldwin reinforces this critical point even further when, after successfully liberating himself from the ideological constraints of American masculinity and engaging Ida in an honest conversation about their relationship, Vivaldo accesses—for perhaps the first time in his entire life—reality:

The coffee pot, now beginning to growl, was real, and the blue fire beneath it and the pork chops in the pan, and the milk which seemed to be turning sour in his belly. The coffee cups, as he thoughtfully washed them, were real, and the water which ran into them, over his heavy, long hands. Sugar and milk were real, and he set them on the table, another reality, and cigarettes were real, and he lit one. Smoke poured from his nostrils and a detail that he needed for his novel, which he had been searching for for months, fell, neatly and vividly, like the tumblers of a lock, into place in his mind. (*Another Country* 427)

Like Eric, Vivaldo begins to experience artistic success the moment he successfully liberates himself from the shackles of normative masculinity and decides to brave the waters of genuine self-exploration. As an artist, his potential to create work of meaning and value is contingent upon his willingness to confront the realities of life that lie buried beneath illusion and ideology, the same prerequisite that, according to Baldwin, underscores one's ability to love others, as well as him or herself. As the commonplace objects scattered around his apartment begin to reveal themselves to Vivaldo for the very first time, Baldwin indicates that his central protagonist has finally accomplished that feat, and as such, has embraced his material existence and acquired an authentic sense of self that will not only provide him with a "touchstone for reality," but will enable him to exercise his inalienable right to love.

Towards the end of the sermon he delivers at Rufus' funeral, Reverend Foster criticizes the way people sacrifice themselves and do harm to others by conforming to a host of ideological norms, thereby providing Baldwin's readers with the central thesis of the entire novel. Directing his comments specifically at those who believe that Rufus' suicide should bar him from having a proper Christian burial, Reverend Foster states:

I know a lot of people done took their own lives and they're walking up and down the streets today and some of them is preaching the gospel and some is sitting in the seats of the mighty. Now, you remember that. If the world wasn't so full of dead folks maybe those of us that's trying to live wouldn't have to suffer so bad. . . . The world's already bitter enough, we got to try to be better than the world. . . . You got to remember . . . he was *trying*. Ain't many trying and all that tries must suffer. Be proud of him. (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 121-122)

By claiming that the living dead are responsible for creating the conditions oppressing “those of us that’s trying to live,” the pastor motivates his listeners to think about the ways in which their own self-sacrificing behaviors reify the very norms that made it so difficult for Rufus to survive. Through the Reverend’s plea that one should “try to be better than the world,” Baldwin issues a challenge to each and every one of his readers, urging us to transform the oppressive spaces we create through our own daily practices into havens of acceptance, sources of empowerment, and means to more effectively realize our own capacities to love. Let Rufus’ life and death, Baldwin seems to say, serve as a reminder that that task now lies within each and every one of us to build the bridges necessary for our survival as individuals and our triumph as a collectivity.

Mid-way through the novel, Ida pauses to think about her troubled relationship with Vivaldo and recognizes that “love was a country he knew nothing about” (Baldwin, *Another Country*, 296). As the primary indicator of meaning behind the novel’s title, Ida’s thought not only asserts that Vivaldo’s long-standing concession to the virile ideal has prohibited him from realizing his human potential, but that the novel itself—as its title proclaims—offers an alternative vision of what the United States of America can and should become if its citizens are only willing, like Rufus, *to try*. Through both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, Baldwin exposes how the daily practices of ‘normal’ human beings imbue the particular spaces we inhabit with ideological power. In order to fulfill our greatest potential as individual human beings—that is, to love ourselves, as well as one another—we must accept Baldwin’s challenge and transform our world into another country: a country that nurtures affection, celebrates truth, and

encourages each one of its members to embrace the complexity and beauty of who we discover ourselves to be.



## Chapter 5: Reading Space and Looking Forward

By applying various aspects of geographical theory to the works of Cahan, Wright, and Baldwin, *American Ethni/Cities* aims to formulate a new methodological approach to the study of literature that has the potential not only to enrich our interpretations of any given text, but to enhance our ability to accurately assess how the spaces we inhabit and produce shape our lives and our identities. Individually, each chapter has revealed how certain components of critical geography can be employed to shed light on a particular author's treatment of subject formation: Cahan's focus on the Jews of New York; Wright's exploration of early twentieth century, black, urban experience; and Baldwin's handling of gender and sexuality provide the project with the diverse subject matter it requires. The project as a whole, however, is just as concerned with promoting this interdisciplinary partnership between geographical and literary studies as it is with revealing insight into the subject forming processes each author respectively represents. The ultimate hope of *American Ethni/Cities* is that others will someday take this geographically informed literary practice to new heights, formulating readings of any number of works that will yield even greater degrees of knowledge and understanding than anything this project can rightly claim to have offered.

Despite how far-reaching and perhaps far-fetched these goals may seem, undertaking this endeavor has already confirmed a few of the benefits that I had hoped would emerge as a result of employing a spatially conscious literary practice.

For one, like other theoretical devices, critical geography enables one to read familiar narratives in new and exciting ways. By utilizing Lefebvre and Harvey to

inform my readings of the texts examined, I was able to open avenues of understanding into the process of Jewish American acculturation detailed by Cahan, into the experiences of black migrants portrayed by Wright, and into the heteronormative forces depicted by Baldwin. In fact, any exploration into these themes that fails to account for the impact of uneven geographical development, the spatial constituents of the modes of production, or the incessant and inherent dynamism of spatial production itself now seems inadequate and incomplete. Insofar as one is sincerely interested in investigating an author's treatment of subject formation—regardless of whether the writer's emphasis is on ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender, or sexuality—he/she must attend to the active role various spaces play in the process.

Furthermore, this project confirms that a spatially conscious literary practice has the potential to enhance the degree of satisfaction that we often seek when we read literature. As most readers will certainly agree, with a greater degree of understanding comes a heightened degree of pleasure. By helping one unveil otherwise unseen aspects of a text, critical geography gives us the opportunity to make the narratives we already adore even more meaningful, more informative, and as such, more enjoyable.

Yet, despite its capacity to enhance one's understanding and enjoyment of literature, the most important benefit that comes with implementing a spatially conscious literary practice is the potential it provides readers to deepen and sophisticate their understanding of the world they inhabit. As Lefebvre and Harvey repeatedly contend, most people lack the ability to identify and comprehend the forces that give “function and structure” to their daily lives, quite simply because they have been conditioned to treat the spaces they occupy and create as neutral containers that innocuously house the

relationships, individuals, materials, and processes primarily responsible for the way things are. Conversely, however, by drawing upon components of geographical theory to explicate a literary text, readers equip themselves with the knowledge and skills they need to more effectively apprehend how power functions in their day to day lives.

Employing a spatially conscious literary practice will enable readers to exercise and refine a myriad of skills related to spatial literacy that will enhance their ability to create new, more just, and more equitable spaces for everyone. Novels, short stories, works of non-fiction, and even poetry give us the chance to experiment with critical geography, to picture and flesh out what its theorists propose, and to develop the sensibilities that we need in order to take on the critical task of abetting socio-economic advancement for all people of all cultures.

For example, the texts examined in this dissertation emphasize the important role the geographical relationship between employment opportunities and residential patterns play in regards to a person's (and a group's) prospect for socio-economic advancement. As Cahan demonstrates, New York's Jewish population benefitted tremendously by the fact that each and every component of the garment trade was situated within a few city blocks of their Lower East Side neighborhood. By contrast, Bigger Thomas travels miles on public transit to an unfamiliar and inhospitable suburb just to attain a low-paying job as the Dalton family's private chauffeur, a job opportunity for which most of Wright's characters expect Bigger to be grateful. The expenses associated with each character's commute obviously make a difference economically, but what is far more interesting and influential is the degree to which Levinsky benefits from working alongside members of his own community versus the psychological angst Bigger experiences each time he

crosses the tracks into the plush, privileged, and gated community where the Daltons reside. The geographical relationship between domesticity and labor not only impacts what kinds of opportunities one can afford to take advantage of, but it also plays heavily into how an individual evolves as a subject, shaping his sense of self and how he cognitively maps out how he relates to others.

A comprehensive investigation into space in these novels also dispels common misconceptions about why one group was able to achieve socio-economic advancement so quickly while another continues to struggle, generations later, to achieve comparable success. As Karen Brodtkin argues in chapter one, many American Jews proudly attribute their group's unparalleled advancement to the value their ancestors placed on education, community building, and old-fashioned hard work. Along similar lines, many critics of today's African American population suggest that the ongoing achievement gap in schools and the high rates of black male incarceration stem from that group's lack of effort and willingness to embrace and promote a similar set of values. Without belittling the commitment, dedication, and personal sacrifices made by many of the immigrants Cahan writes about, and without discrediting the importance of education and family values, *American Ethni/Cities* challenges those explanations and exposes them as being drastically incomplete.

On one hand, comparing Cahan's representations of Jewish acculturation in New York to Wright's depictions of African American migration in Chicago reveals something very important about the role racial difference plays as a factor in impeding socio-economic advancement in the United States of America. David Levinsky, like many Jewish immigrants living within the Lower East Side around the turn of the twentieth

century, elects to mask certain aspects of his identity that otherwise would have solidified his ethno-racial assignment as a not-quite-white Other. His decision to opt for invisibility makes it possible for him to exit the confines of the Lower East Side, enter the mainstream of American economic and social existence, and benefit from the opportunities that await him once he does. While Cahan remains concerned about the psychological and spiritual problems that stem from Levinsky's decision, he clearly acknowledges the economic advantages that come with successfully conforming to the majority.

Bigger Thomas, Gabriel Grimes, and Rufus Scott are never given that option. They are visibly marked by the color of their skin and are thereby unable to opt for the kind of invisibility that enables Levinsky to climb the socio-economic ladder. As Massey and Denton point out in *American Apartheid*, blacks living in urban, American ghettos face a different set of circumstances than other people migrating to American cities:

For these other groups . . . U.S. cities served as vehicles for integration, economic advancement, and, ultimately, assimilation into American life. For rural blacks, in contrast, cities became a trap—yet another mechanism of oppression and alienation. The urban ghetto, constructed during the first half of the twentieth century and successively reinforced thereafter, represents the key institutional arrangement ensuring the continued subordination of blacks in the United States. (18)

Unlike the Jews of the Lower East Side who gradually dispersed to neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx, other regions of Manhattan, and eventually to the suburbs, black migrants and their children more often than not remained confined to the ghettos to which they were assigned. According to Brodtkin, Jewish success had more to do with the removal of certain social barriers that marked the immigrants as “not-quite-

white” than it did with any of the capacities or values that they possessed. Their ability to mask themselves and bleed into the dominant culture underscores their residential mobility. As Massey and Denton astutely point out:

As groups move up the socioeconomic ladder, they typically move up the residential hierarchy as well, and in doing so they not only improve their standard of living but also enhance their chances for future success. Barriers to spatial mobility are barriers to social mobility, and by confining blacks to a small set of relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods, segregation constitutes a very powerful impediment to black socioeconomic progress. (14)

A spatial investigation into the work of Cahan, Wright, and Baldwin not only confirms Brodtkin’s claim that the removal of certain social barriers enabled Jewish American success, but that these barriers impact residential mobility, a key indicator and agent of socioeconomic advancement. Furthermore, studying their narratives in conjunction with another through a geographical lens also elucidates the relationship between urban design and the ongoing construction of race in America, thereby highlighting how the spaces we continue to produce play definitively into the perpetuation of inequality and injustice.

Additionally, the chapters comprising this dissertation do not outwardly acknowledge the important distinction between voluntary and involuntary immigration, nor have they attended to the longstanding ramifications of that distinction. Although Cahan and the Jewish immigrants he represents left eastern and southern Europe in order to escape political and cultural persecution, the fact remains that they had options and deliberately chose the United States of America as their final destination. Once they arrived they may have been shocked at what they found, but they were able to rebuild their families and congregate with fellow travelers. They transformed the Lower East Side into a neighborhood based on the culture and values of Yiddishkeit, and recreated

the social bonds that subsequently served as the launching pad for their socio-economic ascent. At the risk of stating the obvious, one cannot adequately say anything about the history of black experience in the United States without acknowledging the existence and legacy of slavery. The deliberate dissolution of family bonds, the systematic erasure of cultural history, and the outright dehumanization of an entire population must be taken into account when one tries to compare African American advancement with that of other immigrant groups. In addition to the obvious influence of skin color, it warrants mentioning that Cahan's characters came to this country with a set of skills that prepared them for adaptation and success, whereas the population Wright attends to lack that advantage. As Wright so eloquently asserts, "Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city." The relative degree of preparation for urban America that members of each population possessed is congruent with the fact that one group chose the United States as their future home while the other did not. Elaborating on the relationship between voluntary/involuntary migration and urban preparedness is perhaps the subject of another investigation, but I would be remiss not to at least acknowledge that critical distinction.

Up until now, I have only referred to the benefits that a spatially conscious literary practice can offer someone immersed in the study of literature. It is worth mentioning, however, that geographers stand to gain just as much from this disciplinary partnership as literary scholars. By applying their theories to the study of literature, geographers not only receive situations, examples, and opportunities that can help them develop and substantiate their various claims, but also inherit a larger audience of potential learners, thereby making their work more relevant and influential for students

and professionals outside of their own discipline. In short, developing a more elaborate and sophisticated dialogue between geography and literature will benefit scholars and pupils in each respective field, not only by breaking down disciplinary boundaries which reductively compartmentalize the ways in which we attempt to make sense of the world, but by fostering new kinds of relationships and interdisciplinary conversations that will undoubtedly generate insights and propel scholarship as whole, forward.

Having briefly recapitulated how implementing a spatially conscious literary practice can benefit both literary scholars and critical geographers, I feel compelled to say something more about the decisions I made to pair Cahan, Wright, and Baldwin with each chapter's respective focus on certain constituents of identity formation and the role urban spaces play in their development.

More so than any other writer whose work I have read, Cahan depicts the complexity of the Jewish American immigrant's urban adjustment. His vivid representations of the Lower East Side, his careful depictions of Jewish dispersion, and his sound understanding of the relationship between urban production and American capitalism make him an ideal fit for this particular project. I discovered Lefebvre and Harvey at roughly the same time that I started reading *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and it is almost as if *they* made the decision, not me.

In regards to chapter two, I decided to use Wright's work for my investigation into the relationship between urban space and the construction of race because no other writer seemed to do a better job of capturing the details inherent in such a drastic move from the agrarian South to the industrial North. Wright felt compelled to write about the



black migration experience, and his affiliation with the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, his background in Marxist theory, the controversy surrounding the publication history of *American Hunger*, the richness of *Native Son*, and his creation of *12,000,000 Black Voices* make him an incredibly attractive option as an author to draw upon in my effort to formulate this new methodological approach to literature. Although Baldwin's exploration of black urban experience would make him an excellent authorial subject for any investigation into the relationship between cities and African American identity, as a child of migrants who made the transition—that is to say, as someone who was actually born in the North—I felt he lacked the first hand experience of the move and the adjustment that *I* was interested in exploring.

For chapter three, I really wanted to employ aspects of geography that crossed over with my interest in gender studies and queer theory. Given Baldwin's propensity to take on so many constituents of identity formation, he was clearly not the easiest author to investigate, but perhaps one of the most insightful. As one of the first celebrated American writers to ever explicitly and courageously venture into the uncharted territory of writing about homosexuality, inter-racial sexuality, and bisexuality, he piqued my interest and quickly emerged as the author to focus on in the dissertation's final section. Furthermore, his treatment of masculinity as a social construct is complex, rich, and compelling. His ability to expose how the city functions as a conduit of power is unparalleled and his investigation of religious spaces, domestic spaces, and the micro-gestures that create them make his work ripe for the fleshing out of a spatially conscious literary practice.

At the outset of this dissertation, I declared that *American Ethni/Cities* is first and foremost about space. But in saying that is about space, I am really saying that it is about people. It is about relationships, power, modes of production, and struggle; it is about urban design and the impact the spaces we inhabit have on who we assume ourselves to be; and it is about looking forward—using geography and literature to help us understand how we can address injustices of the past and present, and generate new spaces capable of fostering greater degrees of equality, greater access to opportunity, and a greater chance for each and every one of us to fulfill our utmost potential. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues:

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space. (Lefebvre 54)

While *American Ethni/Cities* does not explicitly call for a revolution, it does call for significant change. By advocating for a spatially conscious literary practice, *American Ethni/Cities* aspires to encourage readers to develop the skills and generate the knowledge that we all need to more effectively understand how power works, how each and every one of us is implicated in its transmission, and how we can individually and collectively create new spaces that work for all.

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