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by

Eve Exandria Dunbar

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This Dissertation Committee for Eve Exandria Dunbar certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

The Crossroads of Race: Racial Passing, Profiling, and Legal Mobility in Twentieth-Century African American Literature and Culture

Committee:

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Helena Woodard, Supervisor

---

Barbara Harlow, Co-Supervisor

---

Neville Hoad

---

Douglas Taylor

---

Adam Z. Newton

---

Gerald Torres

The Crossroads of Race: Racial Passing, Profiling, and Legal Mobility in Twentieth-  
Century African American Literature and Culture

by

Eve Exandria Dunbar, B.A., M.A.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Signpost One: Legal and Literary Starts—Homer Plessy and Charles Chestnutt	18
Chapter One: Post- <i>Plessy</i> Motion Sickness: The Anxiety of Travel and Race In James Weldon Johnson's <i>Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i>	28
Signpost Two: Post-passing, Post-War	73
Chapter Two: Police(d) Men: Ellison, Himes, Harlem	77
Signpost Three: Communities Against the Law—Patricia Williams and Community Formation	125
Chapter Three: Passing into the Future: Passing and Policing in Contemporary Science Fiction Films	129
Epilogue: Ties to the Past, Stakes in the Future	163
Works Cited	174
Vita	179

## Introduction

I'll begin this project with two anecdotes: one based in the realm of entertainment and the other fairly personal. Each anecdote will elucidate how this project came into existence, and hopefully set the tone for its place within the field of African American literary studies. In many ways this project began where it ends, in the future, or, more specifically, with science fiction cinema. I like to say that I started this project as a sophomore in college, the first time I watched Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. I fell in love with the movie—I was taken by the cinematography, the violent beauty of a Los Angeles on fire from above and drenched in rain and color from below. I had a very visceral response, and that response has grown into an intellectual pursuit. Although at that time I did not understand it, I saw in *Blade Runner* themes and ideas that would resonate with what has become my academic interest in African American literature and culture. Very basically, I saw a narrative framed in terms of good and evil, and found myself identifying (as I believe all viewers are meant to) with evil. But more importantly, it was a narrative within which difference was almost invisible and yet remained punishable. In a film about replicants and bounty hunters, I saw and still see the narrative of American racism, where the policing of space and boundaries is almost always tied to someone's life or death.

But in many ways still, this project began even before my sophomore year in college. It began in Greencastle, a rural Pennsylvania town located just seventy miles north-west of the nation's capital. A transplant from Hartford, Connecticut, I found myself one of two African American students attending Greencastle-Antrim High School.

I was an oddity of sorts: a Black Northerner in a not-exactly-Northern town. Not only was my family new to town, but we did not have one of the two last names usually associated with the town's Black families, Dixon or Jones; nor did we live in the part of town where the Dixon or Jones families lived. I later learned that members of these two Black families had always been found in the same part of town: in a small group of houses located just west of the town's old railroad station located off the town square. However, while my family disrupted the known narrative that Greencastle had established for its few Black residents, this disruption did not save me from the mistreatment that Black families before mine had endured for decades in that small town. Held hostage by tradition, Greencastle has played host to minstrel shows in the school cafeteria and Klu Klux Klan membership rallies officiated by hooded members in its town square. Greencastle has a distinct relationship to race that assumes racial difference is abhorrent and must be eliminated. The word "nigger" was rarely uttered out of my earshot. I now know that the use of the term to describe African Americans was second nature for most of my peers, because with so few Blacks there was never a need for these children to censor themselves. Additionally, I have come to realize that their mistreatment had nothing at all to do with me; it had, instead, to do with the narrative about people like me they had been given. I was merely a body to which to attach their words and notions concerning non-whites. I was not white like them—even if my body, name, and residence, which was outside of the town's long-established parameters for Blacks, posed a problem of easy identification—I was still made to feel my Blackness, my difference, every day.

It goes without saying that kids can be cruel and that rural America often holds an antiquated relationship to race. However, what makes my story interesting to me, at least, is that it is with this groundwork in place that I have set out in the world only to find that I am often taken for something I am not. After so many years of being called a “nigger,” I have been shocked by the number of times I have been approached on the dance floors in Austin, Texas by strangers who ask if I am Brazilian. Likewise, I have been assumed to be white by my colleagues, and watched the shock register on the faces when I tell them otherwise—that, in fact, neither of my parents nor my grandparents are fully white, and that we have not been for a few generations now.

Thus, my understanding of racial identity and its perception by others and the resulting treatment such perception solicits, has always been one of contradiction. I have been compelled to explore how the desire on the part of some to classify contradicts the inability/unwillingness on the part of others to classify/be classified. My compulsion has caused me to be oddly aware of how space and place affect human sensitivity to difference. For instance, in Greencastle, your name and home are key indexes to your racial identity. Conversely, in other public spaces, desire often clouds the ability of some to read racial markers. And in the Academy, (not) too-sensitive academics are often looking for their own image, unwilling to pick up on the subtle nuances of race that many of us have grown all-too accustomed to living with. All this is to say that each situation has made me aware of the power of racial identification. It is with this highly personal interest in the relationship among geography, topography, movement, power, policing and race that I began this project.

But over the course of writing this document, I have realized that more than just stemming from my own personal narrative, this project is about communities: how they are constructed and the mechanisms used to keep them from falling apart. But this will not be one of those projects which plots to a happy ending. I will not attempt to entice you with stories of cohesion, because this project is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion. It is a project about race relations in the United States and, as such, the stories I tell and analyze are violent: stories of mistaken identity, policing, lynching and murder. I also tell and analyze stories of how communities are formed in response to the violence of race in the United States. The stories of the project will move you around the country and into different spaces, and this movement often poses a threat to the narrators and protagonists of the texts I analyze, but it is always necessary. So, tension is at the core of this project, and it is a tension that can be witnessed in the narratives of racial passing and racial profiling.

Analyzing a set of literary, legal, journalistic, and cinematic discourses produced between 1896 and the dawn of the twenty-first century, this dissertation argues that racial passing and racial profiling have historically been competing yet mutually constitutive practices: the person who "passes" avoids but often lives in fear of profiling; likewise, technologies of profiling develop in response to strategies of racial dissimulation or disguise. Each chapter does the work of establishing the direct connection between these two practices, and argues that they are bound together by U.S. law. For this reason, I begin my analysis with the 1896 Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which establishes a foundational intersection of passing and profiling and acts as a legal

signpost for the entire project. Each subsequent chapter is introduced by another “signpost” which helps to ground the reading that follows by providing a historical framework that not only explores the role that passing has played in the production of African American literature and culture, but also establishes the importance of these activities to U.S. culture. I have made use of this “signpost” format to ensure that the legal and historical realities out of which the text I analyze emerges do not find themselves subsumed by my textual readings. Some may feel that such an arbitrary distinction is a divisive technique which undermines the continuity that I seemingly argue is at the heart of my textual analysis and the legal and historical periods about which I write, but I believe the signposts must stand alone and ahead of the textual analysis so that readers will enter each chapter with a knowledge not only of where they have been, but also where each chapter plans to take them. These signposts set the tone for the chapters that follow. For example, when I refer to the Johnson’s novel as a post-*Plessy* passing narrative, it is important that readers first understand and absorb Homer Plessy’s story in its own right in order to understand how writers like Johnson respond to the social climate the case creates in the United States.

The *Plessy* case was selected as the dissertation project’s starting point because it touches on racial passing and racial profiling simultaneously: passing because Homer Plessy's story is one of a Black man who happens to appear more white than Black, and his attempt to undermine racial segregation can be understood as an attempt to make apparent the fluidity of racial categories; and profiling because his story highlights government sanctioned power for some citizens to distinguish and reroute African

American bodies into *appropriate* locations—“officers of [...] passenger trains shall have the power and are hereby required to assign each passenger to the coach or compartment used for the race to which such passenger belongs.”<sup>1</sup> The train officer’s legislative right and responsibility to direct passengers to their proper “racial space” and the problems that may arise when such directive decisions are made incorrectly, further demonstrate the interconnectedness of passing and profiling in legislative and judicial decisions.

Additionally *Plessy* is useful because it brings together issues of race and the movement of bodies within and across the American landscape; coincides with the start of a modern African American experience, an experience marked by an increased mobility and financial stability among African Americans around the country; and legally codified American segregation, by transforming fears of integrated private association into legalized public **disassociation**. Yet more than sanctioning against interracial interaction by legalizing the removal of Black bodies from “white spaces,” *Plessy* ultimately led to the limitation of the free movement of people of color within the United States; and in so doing, it established the negative link between travel and race.

This dissertation project, then, is arranged around two distinct periods: post-*Plessy* and post-Civil Rights. The post-*Plessy* period begins with the Supreme Court’s rendering of the *Plessy* decision in 1896 and officially concludes in 1954 with the Court’s ruling in *Brown v The Board of Education in Topeka Kansas*.<sup>2</sup> Likewise for this project the post-Civil Rights period, commences with the 1978 ruling in *Regents of the*

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<sup>1</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 540-41 (1896).

<sup>2</sup> In this well-known case the Court reexamines the doctrine of “separate but equal” set in place by *Plessy*. With the aid of sociological evidence proving psychological harm from segregation, the Court concludes

*University of California v. Bakke*. The particulars of *Bakke* will be explored later, but it should be noted that the case seems to usher in a negatively-charged relationship between African Americans and national policies for dealing with race.

The fulcrum between the two periods mentioned above is the Civil Rights Movement. And while the Civil Rights Movement has no exact starting date,<sup>3</sup> the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v The Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 marks a clear shift in the Court's approach to dealing with African American citizens. *Brown* nullifies the constitutionality of *Plessy's* "separate but equal" edict, and ushers in a series of judicial and legislative changes for African Americans: the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which established a "watchdog" Commission on Civil Rights to investigate violations of civil rights; the 1958 Court case of *Cooper v. Aaron*, which overturned an Arkansas legislative decision to close schools rather than integrate them; and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, enacted under the Constitution's 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Commerce Clause, which attempted to rid the country of large pockets of segregation by addressing voting, public accommodations, facilities, education, employment, federally assisted programs, and extending the life of the Commission on Civil Rights until January 31, 1968.

But since this project is in many ways about the connections between race and movement, an especially useful case establishing the connection between mobility and Civil Rights is *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*. The 1964 suit was brought against the Heart of Atlanta Motel in Georgia because the motel failed to honor the Civil

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that "[s]eparate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (347 U.S. 483 (1954)), and are unconstitutional. School integration results from *Brown*.

Rights Act of 1964 by offering rooms to Black costumers. The hotel justified its discriminatory practices by contending that it didn't engage in interstate commerce—although 75 percent of its registered guests were from out-of-state—and, thus, wasn't subject to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>4</sup> In this 1964 case, the Court offers the following facts and ruling:

[Americans] have become increasingly mobile with millions of all races traveling from State to State; that Negroes in particular have been the subject of discrimination in transient accommodations, having to travel great distances to secure the same; that often they have been unable to obtain accommodations and have had to call upon friends to put them up overnight; and that these conditions have become so acute as to require the listing of available lodging for Negroes in a special guidebook which was itself “dramatic testimony of the difficulties” negroes encounter in travel.... The power of Congress to promote interstate commerce also includes the power to regulate the local incidents thereof...Congress may—as it has—prohibit racial discrimination by motels serving travelers, however “local” their operations may appear.<sup>5</sup>

The Court's ruling in *Heart of Atlanta Motel* clarifies the intent of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination by places of public accommodation, even if such establishments claim not to be engaging in interstate commerce. The ruling reasons that any establishment—even one that designates itself as only serving “locals”—that impedes the free movement of citizens falls under interstate commerce.

However, in 1978 the Supreme Court changed its relationship to affirmative action. In 1978 Alan Bakke, a white male, brought suit against the Regents of the University of California for denying him admission into the UC Davis medical school in

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<sup>3</sup> Rhoda Blumberg marks the start of the Civil Rights Movement with the 1956-55 bus boycott by Black citizens in Montgomery, Alabama. However, the integrationist ideas brought to fruition by *Brown* must underpin the protest.

<sup>4</sup> *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*, 379 U.S. 243.

both 1973 and 1974. Bakke argued that students with grade point averages and MCAT scores lower than his own were offered admission, and claimed that the special program<sup>6</sup> which allowed such allegedly low achieving students admission violated his rights under the California Constitution. Bakke won at the California Supreme Court level, prompting the University of California Regents to appeal the case to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court, divided in its vote, upheld the lower court's ruling because the Supreme Court deemed Davis' special admissions program, which "involve[d] the use of an explicit racial classification," unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty-four years after *Brown, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* signaled the end of the Civil Rights Movement's halcyon days, not because all the cases mentioned below were necessarily harmful to African Americans—many of them in fact benefit Black Americans—but because they would later be fought out on the covers of newspapers, in home towns, and in the Court, once more. And while *Bakke*, unlike *Plessy*, did not necessarily have visible effects on the production of literary genres, it did usher in a series of cases that promulgate the end of the Supreme Court's Civil Rights era: *Richmond v. J.A. Croson Company*<sup>8</sup> (1989), *Freeman v. Pitts*<sup>9</sup> (1992), *Adarrand Constructors, Inc. v. Frederico Pena, Secretary of Transportation*<sup>10</sup> (1995), and *Missouri*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>6</sup> The special admission program was based upon a classification of race and ethnic background. The program allocated 16 seats to "minimally qualified applicants," leaving white applicants to compete for "84 seats in the entering class, rather than the 100 open to minority applicants" (438 U.S. 265 (1978)).

<sup>7</sup> *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978)

<sup>8</sup> The Court ruled Constitutional an ordinance passed by the City of Richmond requiring a percentage of its construction contracts to go to minority contractors.

<sup>9</sup> The Court ruled that "where resegregation is a product not of state action but of private choices, it does not have constitutional implications" (503 U.S. 467 (1992)).

<sup>10</sup> The restrictions applied in *Richmond v. J.A. Croson Company* is applied to the federal government.

*v. Jenkins*<sup>11</sup> (1995). Taken as a whole, these are cases in which the U.S. Supreme Court demonstrates its increasingly hostile stance on integration and affirmative action. The cases announce the end of a friendly relationship between the U.S. judicial system and African Americans. And although the Supreme Court recently upheld its decision to allow for certain types of affirmative action, the national narrative concerning the issue continues to raise red flags all over the country.

But this increased hostility has not gone unnoticed. Many U.S. cultural texts produced after 1978 reflect this change and the start of a post-Civil Rights era in literary and cultural production. In much the same way as writers like Chesnutt responded to *Plessy* by producing texts that engage with the law and its restrictions, science fiction films with passing narratives as integral plot components produced during the 1980's and 1990's creatively redeploy the Court's hostilities. Developing character entanglement with national politics and conspiracies perpetrated against citizens by futuristic government agencies, filmmakers reiterate the necessity for questioning the nation's legal relationship to racial distinctions and discrimination.

Overall, my historical approach focuses on U.S. legal documents, literary works, and other related texts to illustrate the interconnectedness of all texts and to demonstrate how these texts affect not only the lived experience of the African American, but also the literary genres that African American writers and American writers and filmmakers generally choose to produce. The decision to examine genre engagement stems from the

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<sup>11</sup> The Court restricts the district court's power to transfer students interdistrictly by creating magnet schools in order to lure non-minority students into the inner-city.

idea that a genre can be influenced by contemporaneous social events. As Michael

McKeon notes, genres are

conceived as integral structures, [they] have a temporal and spatial existence that defines the scope of their identity; conceived as parts of greater wholes, genres have a structural existence in relation to other internal formations. That is, *genres are formal structures that have historical existence in the sense that they come into being, flourish, and decay, waxing and waning in complex relationship to other historical phenomena.*<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the passing narrative as a genre and the African American preoccupation with this genre is inevitably altered by various types of documents produced in the United States.

Additionally, I argue that racial passing narratives must be understood alongside the practice of racial profiling to appreciate how the motif continues to evolve and be redeployed for political purposes. Two texts that have been useful to the development of this particular type of argument are Cathy Boeckmann's *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892-1912* and Robyn Wiegman's *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. Each text has provided insights into the arbitrariness of racial constructions, while also encouraging me to consider how science is inextricable from race and literature in the United States. Boeckmann makes connections between late nineteenth and early twentieth century ideas of "race, passing, bodies and American literature."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately seizing upon the idea of language as a bridge between literature and the science of race, she finds the vocabulary of science and literature using the same words and ideas to connote characteristics of race. Because the

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<sup>12</sup> Michael McKeon in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cathy Boeckmann, *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892-1912*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), 3.

Black person attempting to pass as white allows for a discussion concerning the subjective construction of race, Boeckmann explores how writers such as Twain, Howells, Chestnutt, and Johnson attempt to establish as “fact” the failure of visible markers of race. In response to the century’s obsession with the visible, she contends that many American authors try to break the link between the visible and the “real.”

Likewise, Robyn Wiegman’s *American Anatomies* is a text that seeks to understand how (not necessarily *why*) visual markers of race and gender—more particularly understanding how “blacks and women”—have become the focus of much cultural analysis in the American academy. However, more primary to her research is exposing the “nexus of race and gender that emerges from the rise of race science and its obsession with delineations of ‘being’.”<sup>14</sup> Joining the categories of race and gender together, Wiegman exposes the “economies of visibilities”—“the shift from vision to the visual to the visible”—and reliance of these economies upon making the body the central location of representation.<sup>15</sup> She is interested in the problematics of locating all of difference in visible bodies. Most interesting is her consideration of how the Black male body functions as a location for noticing the limits of the typical binary system of feminism (male vs. female), because it considers the multiple levels upon which the discrimination and subjugation of bodies works. In light of lynching, she considers the Black male body a sort of panoptic location of spectacle and torture; the Black man’s lynched body becomes the site for joining race, sex, sexuality, and gender.

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<sup>14</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Wiegman, 6.

Boeckmann's and Wiegman's books serve as models for how to conduct a deconstructive analysis of race, while at the same time providing useful analyses of literary texts. Their ability to move between theory, literature, movies, news, etc. has proved to be useful to me in my attempt to construct this project. And while the cultural studies aspect of this project cannot be denied, I hope that the movement between the artifacts that I have selected provides a more comprehensive vision of race relations of the twentieth century—one that moves beyond consideration of whether or not visual markers of race are valid or invalid. So in addition to a movement between types of objects selected for analysis, my attention to the movement of bodies within a distinctly U.S. topography is another way in which this project veers from the criticism that has come before it. Many who write about African American-authored passing narratives focus on the ways in which these texts undermine assumptions concerning racial purity and contamination, but this project challenges these assumptions, to question what is at stake in the larger U.S. racial narrative of which passing narratives and profiling narratives are part.

The first chapter, "Post-*Plessy* Motion Sickness: The Anxiety of Travel and Race in James W. Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," begins with an analysis of journalistic accounts of the 1919 lynching of John Hartfield by a set of railroad tracks in Ellisville, Mississippi. I use Hartfield's lynching, a relatively unknown victim, to theorize the relationship among race, violence and travel. Moving from an analysis of Hartfield's murder, I explore how James Weldon Johnson crafts a passing narrative filled with alternating scenes of violence and his own narrator's travel-induced

physical discomfort/sickness. I argue that the physical anxiety experienced by Johnson's "Ex-Colored Man"—anxiety which manifests itself in both the character's unwillingness to commit to a Black identity, as well as in the physical sickness he experiences when confronted with "Blackness"—reveals the very real dangers associated with being Black in the United States. Ultimately, the fictional and factual narratives collide at the railroad tracks, allowing me to bring these two accounts of violence, mobility and race into dialogue. And this dialogue provides the starting point for understanding the role that racial passing and racial violence (profiling) play in the African American literary mind.

The second chapter, "Police(d) Men: Ellison, Himes and Harlem," examines how Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes "unflatten" the mid-century urban Black experience. The chapter begins with Richard Wright's *Bigger Thomas* in order to establish the role policing plays in the literary development of Black masculinity. However, I argue that Wright's depiction is flat—actually focusing on scenes which depict Bigger reading about himself in the newspaper to highlight the flatness of both his character and the space he occupies—in its unwillingness to explore the multidimensionality of Black urban identity and experience. Moving to Ellison's *Invisible Man* and a selection of novels from Himes' Harlem detective series, I argue that both men depict multi-layered urban spaces and Black inhabitants. Topography and its relationship to Black identity are the central concerns of this chapter. So while the police and police violence are no less harmful to the development of Black identity in the novels analyzed in the chapter, Ellison and Himes offer visions of Black spaces that are equally confining and freeing. This chapter plays on notions of violence and race established in Chapter One of the

project, but explores in more depth the ways in which African Americans might act as agents in their own narratives. Whereas Johnson's narrator opts to drop out of the Black race, the characters of Ellison's and Himes's novels engage with race and violence in ways that allow them to remain alive.

The third chapter, "Passing into the Future: Passing and Policing in Contemporary Science-Fiction Films," follows the passing genre into the late-twentieth century as it takes form in science-fiction cinema. In this chapter I explore contemporary science-fiction films and their often subtle metalanguage about race and discrimination. This chapter argues, then, that these futuristic films engage with the U.S. history of racial passing and profiling on more than just an allegorical level. I explore how movies like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Gattaca* (1997) use a form of "difference" not predicated on racial inferiority to encourage constructive viewer engagement with the issue of racial policing/profiling. This chapter, like the two before it, picks up on notions of violence, movement, and race. Moreover, I examine how each film engages with the life and death scenario that racialized citizens live with everyday in the United States. Thus, this final chapter is concerned with how science-fiction cinema might be used as a pedagogical tool to prepare African Americans, and other interested parties, for creating new understandings of racial inequality in the United States. I consider how a genre not traditionally associated with African American culture might offer insight and hope for the future.

Finally, in my epilogue I narrate my own journey from Austin, Texas to Ellisville, Mississippi in search of the story of John Hartfield's lynching. Through narrating this

journey, I hope to model the power and importance of revisiting the past. Uncovering Hartfield's story, however fragmented, illuminated the importance of conducting the type of scholarly work of which I believe my project is a part. Because the violence of race cannot be left in the archives of Mississippi, it must be revisited, witnessed, felt, and retold.

As I said earlier, this project is about communities. It concerns itself with the ease and unease we experience in attempting to move between and into certain communities. Readers will note that as the project progresses, I make the use of the pronoun "we" increasingly. This is intentional. This tracks the shift in the function of the passing narrative throughout the twentieth century. Early passing narratives attempt to demonstrate how the racial barriers constructed by mainstream culture could be transgressed and, thus, these narratives focus on individual attempts at subterfuge and community disassociation. Whereas passing narratives of science-fiction cinema, I argue, serve to unite view-participants and rely on community involvement for successful subterfuge. This transition from individual to community, from "I" to "we," is absorbed into the language of the project, which itself attempts to breakdown barriers that still exist in mainstream culture concerning race relations and racial identity.

In conclusion, this project attempts to make sense of the vexed relationship between racial passing and racial profiling. Moreover, "The Crossroads of Race" establishes a lexicon for navigating African American literary production and concerns, as well as an archive which acknowledges the broad implications that African American literature has for American culture. So even as community is flawed throughout this text,

I hope the project does not allow the nihilism of racism to undermine the communities it seeks to unite. I hope that “we,” however imperfect the application of such a pronoun might be, will come to a better understanding of the importance of the tension between race, place, and identity.

## Signpost 1: Legal and Literary Starts—Homer Plessy and Charles Chestnutt

From *Dred Scott* and the Civil War Amendments<sup>16</sup> to the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court has remained involved in the African American lived experience. In fact, in the last decade of the nineteenth century the U.S. legal system found itself embroiled in defining the racial identity and attending rights of the nation's Black population. And the Court's entanglement in defining what constitutes a Black identity and the rights holding said identity might grants did not go unnoticed by African American writers. Particularly astute in identifying the link between Black life and the United States' legal system at the turn-of-the-century is Charles Chesnutt. Chesnutt, a Black man who happened to look more white than Black himself, was a lawyer turned writer whose fiction and his work is the perfect place to begin a discussion concerning the effects of *Plessy v. Ferguson* on African American literary production, particularly the production of passing narratives. His novel *House Behind the Cedars* is one of the first passing narratives written by an African American after the *Plessy* decision; it must serve as a starting point. *Plessy* and Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedars* (1900) are both rich texts to open an analysis of the issues surrounding racial passing and racial profiling, because both texts tell a story of race in the United States and its relation to law: *Plessy*'s lawyers challenge the constitutionality of train car segregation by using a

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<sup>16</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution. These amendments gave free slaves, among other things, citizenship, protection under the Constitution, and the right to vote.

white-looking Black man to push racial boundaries; likewise, prompted by a judge's legal advice, Chesnutt's fictional family attempts to pass for white.

The 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* determined where Black citizens could sit on Louisiana trains, and ultimately reflected the country's anxiety concerning the location of Black bodies within a post-slavery U.S. landscape.<sup>17</sup> The Court's decision characterizes the start of the nation's legislative and judicial involvement in providing national definitions of racial difference. Yet a discussion of *Plessy* has to start in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1890.<sup>18</sup>

In the spring of 1890, the Louisiana legislature passed Act 111, which mandated that state railroad companies provide equal, but separate, accommodations for their white and Black passengers. More than segregating train cars, however, the legislation required train officers to assign passengers to racially fitting cars, with a twenty-five dollar fine levied on officers improperly assigning passengers: "officers of ...passenger trains shall have the power and are hereby required to assign each passenger to the coach or compartment used for the race to which such passenger belongs."<sup>19</sup> Racially fitting, in this instance, meant that the officer of the train was required to direct a passenger to the train car to which he or she might belong by nature of his or her apparent race. This race-based train car assignment obviously became a tenuous job for train officers, as it

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<sup>17</sup> Prior to emancipation, the policing of Black bodies had been carried out by the practice of slavery—from documents that detailed the number and placement of bodies that could fit in the hull of a slave ship to the detailed account many slave owners kept.

<sup>18</sup> Louisiana provides the setting for an interesting "test" because the state had previously permitted separate privileges for mixed-race Blacks under French customs.

<sup>19</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 544 (1896).

required train officers to make judgment-calls on every passenger's racial status. Based on a visual survey of an individual, officers of the train were obligated to direct this individual to either a Black car or a white car. But it was not always easy to draw a distinct line between Black and white.

In addition to instructions to train officers on proper car placement, the law also provided for the fining and removal of all non-complying passengers. And all non-complying railroad companies faced fines ranging from one-hundred to five-hundred dollars. Not a popular law for Louisiana's colored population or for the railroad companies—it was a financial burden for carriers to supply extra cars for Blacks—the Act immediately met opposition. Two seemingly antagonistic parties, white railroad car owners and Black Louisianans, found themselves in agreement that Act 111 placed an undue burden upon each party.

Subsequently, in the fall of 1891 a group of Black Louisiana citizens formed the “Citizens’ Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Law.”<sup>20</sup> After a failed first attempt at testing the limits of the law,<sup>21</sup> the group found Homer A. Plessy, a man described as being one-eighth Black but having no discernible signs of Blackness, and immediately began to conduct another test. The test fashioned by the Citizens’ Committee was highly orchestrated and required the cooperation of the railway owners: to guarantee Plessy’s arrest (rather than simply his denial and dismissal from the train) for attempting to board the white passenger car, his lawyers had to let the railway

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 29.

company in on the plan; the company had to be informed of Plessy's race (he didn't look Black) to be sure that the train officer on duty would deny Plessy access to the white car and call for his arrest. Immediately after finding a train company that would comply with the testing, Plessy boarded a train and was arrested for protesting car assignment.

Once their client was arrested, Plessy's lawyers went to work arguing in the Louisiana court, under the rule of Judge Ferguson, that train car segregation was a breach of amendments Thirteen and Fourteen of the Constitution. However, since separate cars do not enslave or place riders in involuntary servitude, Ferguson quickly dismissed arguments related to the Thirteenth Amendment. The dismissal of the Thirteenth Amendment violations left Ferguson with the task of determining "whether or not the statute violates the fourteenth amendment, which provides that 'no state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States [rights granted by the Fourteenth Amendment]...'.<sup>22</sup> Ferguson ultimately found that the separate car act was in no such violation, the logic being that, if the trains were equal, then no privileges were being infringed.<sup>23</sup>

Oddly enough, Ferguson ended his opinion by encouraging Plessy's lawyers to prove that Plessy was a white man and, indeed, placed in the wrong car by the train conductor:

The discretion vested in the officer to decide primarily the coach to which each passenger, by race, belongs, is only that necessary discretion attending every imposition of a duty, to determine whether the occasion exist which calls for its exercise. It is a

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<sup>21</sup> This first attempt failed due to issues of interstate travel and commerce. For more information on this first attempt involving Daniel Desdunes, see pages 32-40 of Lofgren's *The Plessy Case*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ex parte Plessy*, 11 So. 948, 949 (La.1892).

<sup>23</sup> *Ex parte Plessy*.

discretion to be exercised at his peril, and at the peril of his employer. It is very certain that if relator shall prove, in this prosecution, that he did not, as charged, “insist on going into a coach to which, by race, he did not belong,” an erroneous assignment by the conductor would not stand in the way of his acquittal, or exempt the officer and the railway from an action for damages, whatever defenses might lie open to them, based on good faith and probable cause.<sup>24</sup>

This lengthy quotation raises questions concerning the arbitrariness both of racial distinctions and of racial profiling, issues that will be taken up later. But for now, proving Plessy’s race was not a concern for his lawyers; instead, his lawyers were more interested in appealing the lower court ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In the spring of 1896, four years after Ferguson’s ruling in Louisiana, Justice Henry Brown issued the Supreme Court’s opinion: the Court agreed with the decision of Louisiana’s lower court—that train accommodations being equal, the Louisiana law requiring that the races be separated while traveling is not a violation of a passenger’s constitutional rights. Plessy’s lawyers had spent the four intervening years filing for a writ of error<sup>25</sup> and readying themselves for the trial. Charles Lofgren notes “that in the early 1890’s about three years still elapsed between the filing of a case and argument, with a decision coming a month or so later.”<sup>26</sup> Although the true lapse between the lower-court and the Supreme Court decision might seem long by today’s standards, all was on schedule in 1896.

So in 1896, much like at the lower-court level, the Supreme Court quickly dismissed any allegations that the separate car law was in violation of the Thirteenth

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 951.

<sup>25</sup> A method for getting the Supreme Court to review your case.

Amendment. The Court further stated that, while the Fourteenth Amendment enforces legal equity, it could not be expected to “abolish the distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.”<sup>27</sup> Citing miscegenation laws and precedent justifying separate schooling, Brown argued that racial segregation is “within the police power of the state.”<sup>28</sup> Plessy’s case and the railway legislation are an issue of states rights, not one of equal rights. The Court agreed ultimately that a state has the power to police its citizens.

Taking issue with the Plessy team’s argument that separate cars imply the inferiority of the Black race, Judge Brown added: “We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.”<sup>29</sup> Placing the burden of racial equality on the backs of African American citizens—they are at fault if they believe the Court’s decision leaves them inferior—Brown unproblematically assumed that inequality could not be “overcome by legislation.” In fact, he believed “[l]egislation [wa]s powerless to eradicate racial instincts, or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the difficulties of the present situation.”<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Lofgren, 150.

<sup>27</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 544.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 544-45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 551.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 551.

Supreme Court washed its hands of the case, and in so doing, changed the way white and Black Americans would live and move within the United States.<sup>31</sup>

### Literary Beginnings

But the law binds us. The law marks us as its own to protect, to prosecute, to punish. And where one falls under the legal system, as sheltered or penalized, is often a matter of circumstance and may not always depend upon grand notions of justice or rightness, but upon something more practical and administrable: precedent. A lawyer or a judge must always ask, “what have been the previous rulings in similar situations?” Precedent is often unkind; a fact encapsulated in the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy*. Charles Chesnutt illustrates this idea in *House Behind the Cedars*. In a dialogue between characters John Walden/Warwick and Judge Straight that takes place prior to the enactment of Civil War Amendments, Straight informs Walden that precedent, e.g. The *Dred Scott* Case, requires that a drop of “Black blood” makes John a Black man. More importantly, this stain, however small, legally denies John white privileges: the freedom to plead his case in a court of law, the right to defend himself when confronted by a white

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<sup>31</sup> Justice Harlan was the only dissenter in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and his opinion condemning the Court’s ruling was scathing:

If a state can prescribe, as a rule of civil conduct, that whites and blacks shall not travel as passengers in the same railroad coach, why may it not regulate the use of streets of its cities and town as to compel white citizens to keep on one side of a street, and black citizens to keep on the other? [...] Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. [...] It is therefore to be regretted that this high tribunal, the final expositor of the fundamental law of the land, has reached the conclusion that it is competent for a state to regulate the enjoyment by citizens of their civil rights solely upon the basis of race. In my opinion, the judgment this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious as the decision made by this tribunal in the *Dred Scott* Case. (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 557-559 (1896))

citizen, and the ability to travel unimpeded.<sup>32</sup> And the only way for Walden to escape his fate as a Black man is to leave the place where he is known to be a Black man: Walden should move to South Carolina. Straight sets the stage by encouraging Walden to think creatively about racial constructions:

You need not be black away from Patesville. You have the somewhat unusual privilege, it seems, of choosing between two races...As you have all the features of a white man, you would, at least in South Carolina, have simply to assume the place and exercise the privileges of a white man. You might, of course, do the same thing anywhere, as long as no one knew your origin.<sup>33</sup>

Bucking precedent and taking Straight's legal advice, John Walden leaves his hometown in North Carolina, changes his surname to Warwick, and passes for white in South Carolina.

Yet the above conversation and Walden's subsequent decision to leave town are rendered out of sequence in the novel; Chesnutt commences *House Behind the Cedars* with a trip backward in time to a time before slave emancipation. This atemporal storytelling allows Chesnutt to create an air of mystery surrounding Warwick's intentions and identity when he returns to the small town of Patesville. The novel begins ten years after the conversation between Walden/Warwick and Straight; it begins with Warwick coming home. After a case of mistaken identity—Warwick's mother doesn't recognize him as her (Black) son because he looks so much like a white man—Warwick tells his mother that he's returned to claim his "fair" sister, Rena, as white. Once claimed, he and Rena move back to South Carolina so that she too might shake the unwarranted burden of her

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 113.

<sup>33</sup> Chesnutt, 115.

Blackness and reap the benefits of being a beautiful white woman: marriage, financial security, and leisure.

In South Carolina, Rena falls in love with the lawyer, George Tryon, her brother's white friend. She is quickly engaged to marry Tryon, who is unaware of Rena and her brother's racial stain. By narrative folly Tryon unknowingly finds himself in Rena's hometown just as she is back also to care for her sick, Black mother. Readers need only wait until convention draws these two characters together: after a few near-encounters, Tryon discovers Rena's true racial identity while waiting outside a local drugstore. Unable to love a Black woman, Tryon abruptly ends their affair, and heartbroken Rena once again assumes her identity as a Black woman. The plot—sometimes told in flashback, sometimes chronologically—then follows Rena and George as they cross each other's paths but never find love again. And the story ends with Rena's death; she dies a martyr to her race because she devotes her post-Tryon (post-white) life to teaching poor Black children and never embarks on another romantic relationship.

While readers have a clear sense that Rena and her family are high ranking individuals in the Black community due to their Caucasian features, Chesnutt does not miss a chance to lay bare the color hierarchy that exists within the community. And even after Rena returns to Blackness, Black community members treat her with reverence because she was once white. But all this intra-racial elevation fails to carry over into white culture; no matter what their degree of Blackness may be, equality continues to evade Blacks (and nearly-whites) in Patesville.

However melodramatic its plot, Chesnutt recognizes the seriousness surrounding the practice of racial passing in the United States during the Reconstruction era. Although the Civil War Amendments are supposed to grant Black citizens equal protection under the law, Chesnutt's protagonists pass as white to avoid the discrimination and racism that continues to wreak havoc on newly incorporated Black citizens. Decidedly Black characters, like Frank, are treated with little respect by the other characters (Black and white), demonstrating Chesnutt's astute understanding of discrimination and white privilege.

## Chapter One

### Post-*Plessy* Motion Sickness: The Anxiety of Travel and Race in James W. Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

3000 WILL BURN NEGRO

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NEGRO JERKY AND SULLEN AS BURNING HOUR NEARS

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To be Taken to Scene of Crime and Stood Before Crowd

(From the *New Orleans States*, June 26, 1919)

#### I. Introduction

##### A Lynching in Mississippi

On June 26, 1919 a mob estimated at 3,000 flocked to Ellisville, Mississippi to participate in the lynching of John Hartfield. Although little documentation exists today of Hartfield's life, newspapers, from the Jackson, Miss. *Daily News* to the New Orleans, La. *New Orleans States*, covered the events immediately leading up to his death. Accused of assaulting Miss Ruth Meek, a young, white Ellisville resident, Hartfield spent over a week hiding from the law, but was ultimately captured and removed from Ellisville police custody by the town's citizenry for punishment. It is reported that the citizens took him back to the scene of the alleged crime, near the Ellisville railroad tracks, where they lynched him.<sup>34</sup>

On the day of Hartfield's lynching the *Daily News* offered the following report of what was expected to happen in Ellisville:

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<sup>34</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Burning at Stake in the United States* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919), 20.

John Hartfield, the negro alleged to have assaulted an Ellisville young woman, has been taken to Ellisville and is guarded by officers in the office of Dr. Carter in that city. He is wounded in the shoulder but not seriously. The officers have agreed to turn him over to the people of the city at 4 o'clock this afternoon, when it is expected he will be burned. The negro is said to have made a partial confession.<sup>35</sup>

Picking up on the story and treating it with a similar lack of journalistic integrity concerning the possibility of Hartfield's innocence, the *New Orleans States* detailed the mob's intentions: "Dissention has broken out among the indignant citizens as to what disposition should be made of the prisoner [...] Some angry citizens, it is said, want Hartfield lynched, while others want him burned."<sup>36</sup> These newspaper accounts acted as advertisements, informing readers of the pertinent information: the "who," John Hartfield; the "what," lynching; the "how," by hanging or by burning; the "where," near the scene of the crime; and the "when," in the afternoon of June 26, 1919. All of this was crucial to ensuring that citizen attendance would be high at the event.

These accounts demonstrate that while racially motivated violence was newsworthy to many U.S. citizens, often information concerning the alleged crime was far from reliable. For instance, the Jackson and New Orleans accounts failed to mention the status of Hartfield's case in the legal system. Were formal charges filed against him? Was he given legal representation? All significant information concerning the legal validity of the situation was evacuated from the coverage, and in its place was recounted the story of extralegal violence.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

During the first decades of the twentieth century violence perpetrated against racially marked citizens was often met with a lack of attention to the legal rights of its victim. And more importantly, the violence was just as often ignored, if not condoned altogether, by many representatives of the United States government. For example, all six lynching cases collected in the NAACP pamphlet, *Burning at Stake in the United States*, include or reference letters written by the Secretary of the NAACP to state governors in whose states lynchings had occurred. In Hartfield's case, the Vice President of the United States, Thomas Marshall, was contacted by the NAACP concerning reports of Theodore Bilbo's, then governor of Mississippi, unwillingness to request military intervention on behalf of Hartfield. When Bilbo was confronted with the intention of the Ellisville lynch mob, he offered the following statement: "I am powerless to prevent it. We have guns for state militia, but not men. It is impossible to send troops to the scene for the obvious reason that we have no troops."<sup>37</sup> As an elected state representative, Bilbo's reluctance to intervene encapsulates many officials' unspoken policy in cases of extralegal violence: inaction. In fact, the *New York Sun* was one of the few papers recorded to have treated the Ellisville incident with any discernable attention to the lynching's extralegality. A *Sun* writer, pointing out the inherent inconsistency between Bilbo's statement and the U.S. Constitution, stated that if Governor Bilbo was "utterly powerless to prevent the lynching, then Mississippi is not enjoying the republican form of government guaranteed to the United States under Section 4, Article IV, of the Constitution. It enjoys mob law." The writer goes on to point out that "the declaration of

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

utter powerlessness comes from a man who made it before the lynching and who seems to have lifted no finger in defense of the law and to have supinely ignored his oath of office.”<sup>38</sup> The *Sun*’s criticism of Bilbo is ultimately a criticism of the United States government. Just as Bilbo was “powerless” to come to the aid of Hartfield, the U.S. government’s long inactivity concerning the necessity to protect the rights and wellbeing of all its citizens speaks to the nation’s inattentiveness in confronting the plight of continuing extralegal violence against Blacks.

Twelve years after Hartfield’s death, Hilton Butler recounted for the readers of *The New Republic* what he had witnessed as a reporter and a member of the mob at the Hartfield lynching. In his essay, he states that “[i]n the noon edition of the state’s biggest newspaper, *The Jackson Daily News*, Editor Frederick Sullens definitely announced in an eight-column front-page streamer that Hatfield would be lynched promptly at 5 p.m.” Butler, remembering the haphazard brutality of the mob, tells *The New Republic* readers that he “had to drop from a tree behind [Hartfield] to escape bullets fired at his swinging body.” In fact, he remembers that he reported in his own newspaper account at the time of the lynching “that not less than 2,000 bullets were fired into his [Hartfield’s] body.” Finally, Butler recalls a bullet fortuitously clipped the rope hanging John, and his “body fell to the ground, a fire was built around it, and John was cremated.”<sup>39</sup>

We may question his memory of the decade old proceedings, but Butler’s account corroborates regional newspapers covering the events leading up to Hartfield’s death at the time. More useful than his ability to corroborate, however, is Butler’s temporal

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

distance from the lynching. Bulter is able to retell the story of the lynching's events, rather than simply those events leading up to the lynching. Whereas the local newspaper accounts written at the time of the lynching seem uncertain of the day's outcome—they are unsure of just how many people would attend the lynching, whether John would be burned or hanged, whether or not there would be governmental intervention, etc.—Butler's personal account fixes the day and, as a result, crystallizes the frenzy surrounding Hartfield's murder. Butler's retelling of Hartfield's lynching, similar to accounts in the both the *Daily News* and the *New Orleans States*, is devoid of facts detailing the crime allegedly committed, but his attention to developing the character of a few Ellisville citizens allows for a greater understanding of how the lynching affected the Ellisville citizen-participants. For instance, Butler writes of being approached by a lynching attendee who kept as a souvenir one of Hartfield's fingers; the man admitted to severing the finger while Hartfield was still alive. Butler further remembers that the same man also approached him selling postcards featuring pictures taken of Hartfield's body in various stages of mutilation.<sup>40</sup>

Like any good reporter, Bulter recalls events and actions in order to create a clearer picture of what happened on June 26, 1919. Yet Butler's accounts of the series of lynchings he attended in the first decades of the twentieth century unwittingly fetishizes the violent fanaticism he critiques. The *New Republic* essay begins with the cries of Jim Ivy, who Butler recalls as having been lynched in Rocky Ford, Mississippi. Butler describes Ivy's cries as "the only sound from a human voice that [...] might, by sheer

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<sup>39</sup> Hilton Butler, "Lynch Law in Action," *The New Republic*, July 22, 1931, 256.

strength alone, reach heaven.’<sup>41</sup> By coupling heaven and the cries of a Black man, Butler seemingly crafts a pathos-driven testament to the inhumanity of lynching. However, the text actually abounds with examples of Butler’s heroism and humanity in the face of the brutality he witnessed: like heaven, Butler hears the cries of Ivy. Butler showcases his heroism by telling the story of how he bought and destroyed a set of postcards with pictures of the lynched John Hartfield to ensure no one else could buy them. His acts of fearlessness are often juxtaposed with the graphic recounting of the subjugation and mutilation of Blacks. In fact, Butler seems as interested in showcasing his heroism and moral superiority to *New Republic* readers, as he is interested in detailing the atrocity of the United States’ lynching problem. His desire to build his ethos in many ways undermines the power of the events he recounts, because it detracts from the stories of the people harmed by the violence of which he writes.

And that part of his *New Republic* essay that is not marred by his displays of self-importance is quickly undermined by Butler’s true intention for writing the essay, which is to forward his hypothesis about why lynchings occur more frequently in small, Southern towns. Butler believes that small-town residents lack industrialized occupations and/or entertainment and that this void encourages them to seek out less-than-ethical forms of entertainment. Thus, extralegal violence, according to Butler, is initiated by the small community’s innate desire for amusement. He argues “that the generating cause [of lynching] is overlooked. It is this: In the sections where the lynching toll is heaviest, there is a noticeable lack of crowd-drawing amusements and a type of employment that

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 256.

permits abandonment on sudden notice and a return at convenience without inviting the loss of a job.”<sup>42</sup> He even goes as far as to link the rise in lynchings to U.S. economic decline and the resulting rise in unemployment: “In Mississippi, for example, there are more men out of work today than at any other time in the history of the state [...]. Such a situation not only sets up the danger of idlers taking the law into their own hands with real or imaginary criminals, but it gives added hours for crime commission.”<sup>43</sup> So what began as a condemnation of violence, seemingly becomes a condemnation of economic conditions in the United States. In fact, Butler’s closing remarks criticize institutions like the N.A.A.C.P., religion, law and government for failing to effect sufficient change; he instead speculates that “the radio, the movies, the dance halls, the hotel lobbies, the pool rooms, good roads and cheap automobiles” will do more to save the lives of blacks.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Butler argues that the South, which for him is synonymous with the unindustrialized and the boring, might curb its acts of indiscretion with a greater investment in the trappings of industrialization.

Butler offers a too simplistic theory, to be sure; however his explanation, with its focus on entertainment, opens the door to the consideration of another possible cause of extralegal violence against Blacks: the power and importance of spectacle. While economics cannot be ignored as a key contributor to violence against African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century, it is not the sole root. Re-occupation (employment or recreation) will not serve as the corrective for mob violence.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 258.

Nevertheless, in his *New Republic* essay, Butler, through the narration of his larger-than-life persona and his speculation about entertainment's role in lynching, magnifies the insidious role spectacle plays in racially motivated violence. With its wayward theories, Butler's essay requires that we reconsider the definitive purpose of the spectacle of lynching: why would 3,000 people flocked to a small Mississippi town to watch one man's murder?

The objective of a lynching, the type of which Hartfield's is symbolic, was to reinstate white power. That is to say, Hartfield's lynching was important to the Ellisville community, not simply because he had broken the law, but because he was a black man who was perceived by the "community" to have broken the laws of racial conduct. Accusations of Hartfield's assault on a young white woman were an affront to the white "community's" sense of dignity and power. What is at stake, then, in this case, and every case in which a Black person is lynched because he or she is accused of crimes against the "community" (or a community member), is the power of the "community" to protect and control its members. Here the Ellisville "community" is synonymous with whiteness because during this period of legally-sanctioned segregation, the town would have been bifurcated, and as a Black man, Hartfield would not have been considered a member of the Ellisville community which punished him. The (white) Ellisville citizens sought retribution against the outsider for his destruction of community property, of which the assaulted white woman, Miss Meek, was a part.

But extralegal violence required the Ellisville citizens to perform the ritual of punishment as a community for two reasons, both of which will be considered separately:

first, a large portion of the community had to witness and participate in the reassertion of white power; and second, Hartfield's death served as a threat to Blacks of what could happen to those who transgress racial boundaries. As Michel Foucault notes, public acts of torture are always about power; and furthermore, the type of power at stake is a power "that present[s] rules and obligations as personal bonds, a breach of which constitute[s] an offence and call[s] for vengeance."<sup>45</sup> Foucault maintains that when one breaches the power of a perceived sovereign, the breach is seen as an "[act] of hostility, the first [sign] of rebellion."<sup>46</sup> Foucault, although describing public displays of torture in the context of pre-nineteenth-century monarchical Europe, regards such acts of violence as concerned less with reestablishing law and justice than with reactivating power.<sup>47</sup> He contends that the sovereign's subjects, acting as witnesses or "guarantors" of the punishment, are obligated by law to protect the king by participating in the punishment of his transgressors.<sup>48</sup> In short, Foucault imagines a system in which the spectator is both taught a lesson by witnessing the punishment and is integral to the punishment of the guilty.

Hartfield breached societal rules of racial boundary, and the community was obligated to seek vengeance. Hartfield's alleged assault of Miss Meek was an act of hostility, a sign of rebellion. This act of rebellion forced the community to reactivate its power through public punishment. Thus, through the spectacle of lynching the community was reassured of its power to establish and maintain racial boundaries.

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<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Spectacle of the Scaffold" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

But because Foucault writes about spectacle and torture in the very specific context of the European sovereign and subject system, his theory is in two ways incompatible with the history of racially motivated lynchings in the United States: first, because the U.S. is a democracy; and second, because Foucault's paradigm considers torture that was the end result of a legal process, whereas in the U.S., lynchings took place outside the bounds of the legal process. The first incompatibility is fairly easily addressed. Because Foucault's theory places power within a binary of sovereign vs. subjects, it provides insight into the U.S. binary of white vs. Black race relations. It would be erroneous to assume that one could replace "sovereign" with "white" and "subject" with "Black," but one could consider the power relations inherent in both scenarios similarly compelling. Just as betrayal of the king's sovereignty led to the need for public punishment, a betrayal of white superiority led to the same outcome. The protection of whiteness's power prompts the actions of the Ellisville community.

Foucault's theory is additionally difficult to apply to a U.S. context because the violence he describes takes place as the end result of a trial, while what happened in the United States was a form of extralegal violence. While this incompatibility cannot be dismissed, there are two ways to harmonize the practice of lynching in the United States with Foucault's theory of spectacle. First, we might consider that those who participated in extralegal violence in the form of lynching considered their victims guilty; many lynching victims were reported to have confessed to their accused crimes. Even in John Hartfield's case, one newspaper mentioned that he had given a partial confession.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 58 and 59.

Admission of guilt precluded the need for an actual trial—because once one was an admitted criminal, the community felt free to move forward with punishment. Additionally, although Foucault limits himself to a legal context, the power dynamic inherent in extralegal violence mimics his construction of sovereign and subject. Foucault imagines a sovereign who punishes when he feels his power threatened; yet similarly, in the context of extralegal violence, the community might be read as occupying the position of sovereign—if we can equate hegemony with sovereignty. Like the sovereign, whose word is law and must be enforced, the community, through violence, enforces societal norms of racial boundaries as if they were law. And like an unquestioned sovereign’s exercise of authority, the community’s power to practice extralegal violence is rarely challenged—as illustrated by Governor Bilbo’s inability, unwillingness to intervene on Hartfield’s behalf.

The power dynamics inherent in the spectacle of lynching did not go unnoticed; lynching deaths were often documented in newspapers around the country,<sup>49</sup> and the NAACP was a constant chronicler of extralegal violence against Blacks. And although these archives were often kept in the hopes of building a case against those who participated in lynchings, they can also be read as testimony to the dangers associated with being Black in the United States during the period. Consequently, in addition to lynching functioning as a way for white citizens to reinstitute their power to control societal norms, it also functioned as an object lesson for what might happen to Blacks who failed to adhere to racial boundaries.

### Vulnerable site, Stabilizing activity

But Hartfield's lynching is symptomatic of a larger epidemic of racial violence occurring at the dawn of the twentieth century in the United States.<sup>50</sup> His is one in a long line of violent outbreaks; and because such outbreaks had become embedded in U.S. culture and the U.S. imaginary, many writers,<sup>51</sup> especially African Americans, were unable to tell the story of U.S. race relations without telling the story of violence. Consequently, the importance of Hartfield's case rests not in its exceptionalism, but in its mundanity: between 1882 and 1968 about 4,443 people were lynched in the United States, and "southern blacks" are said to have made up 3,446 of the total.<sup>52</sup> And while lynchings were all too frequent, the proximity of Hartfield's to the Ellisville railroad tracks provides an entry into understanding the complex, important role that travel (or more broadly, movement) plays in the cultural climate of violence in the United States.

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<sup>49</sup> In 1882 the *Chicago Tribune* was the first organization to begin tracking lynching statistics in the United States.

<sup>50</sup> See in its entirety *Burning at Stake in the United States*, as well as the NAACP's *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States*, Ida B. Wells's *Red Record*, *Southern Horrors* and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*, and *The Negro Almanac*.

<sup>51</sup> In 1901, Mark Twain, infuriated after reading about a lynching that took place in his home state of Missouri, wrote an satirical essay titled "The United States of Lyncherdom." In the essay Twain argues against spectacle/entertainment as the catalyst for lynchings; he, instead, believes that cowardice and peer pressure are the root causes of the U.S. lynching habit. As a curative, Twain proposes more men be placed within each U.S. city to serve as models of courage—these men would stop the violence that others were to afraid to speak up against. Likewise, he calls on missionaries in China to give up their posts and come back to the United States to help fight the war against peer pressure. And while both suggestions are comical, Twain attempts to make sense of the absurdity of the racially motivated violence he sees spreading around the country. He calls on the American public to stand up to violence, to be brave.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Howard, *Lynchings: Extralegal Violence in Florida during the 1930s* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 18. Howard suggests that lynching calculations may be low because many went unreported.

Railroad tracks undermined the stability of Ellisville. As a site of constant flux, trains caused towns to become susceptible to any number of dangers: the train brought strange and unknown travelers whose presence could signal impending criminal deeds or intentions. It is fitting then that Hartfield's alleged crime and his death took place at one of the town's most vulnerable locations, because to punish his transgressions—a punishment prompted by the need to restore Ellisville societal power—at the site of vulnerability is, in some ways, an attempt to establish control over an uncontrollable location. Although Ellisville citizens may not have been able to regulate every stranger on the trains that passed through their town, they were able to subdue and punish certain types of strangers, African Americans for instance, and thereby enforce the socially-constructed racial boundaries on the traveler. Hartfield's lynching by the tracks can be read as a demonstration of power over a population who, by benefit of trains, might be inclined to travel into previously uncharted territories. In this way Ellisville citizens not only maintained racial boundaries, but further protected their most vulnerable possessions, be it Miss Meek or the Ellisville power dynamic.

But by 1919 the Ellisville anxiety surrounding Black transgression into white spaces, whether metaphorical or literal, was not a new phenomenon. In 1896 the United States Supreme Court had determined that a Louisiana law requiring railroad companies to provide separate cars for Black and white riders was constitutional. The decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* dictated the codification of racial boundaries well into the twentieth century, because along with simply determining who might be able to ride on trains and where, the decision also had the effect of creating a system under which racial identity

was to be determined by the most minute trace of “racialized blood.” Before *Plessy*, states had different requirements for demonstrating whiteness—one could be Black in one state but white in a neighboring state, depending on each state’s blood ratio requirements. However, post-*Plessy*, the United States adopted a national “one drop” rule for determining Blackness. This Court decision spawned a crisis of identity in Blacks and a crisis of identification in whites. Blacks, especially that mixed-race portion of the culture, were forced to decide how and whether to identify with their Blackness; and whites were burdened with the job of determining and policing the boundaries of whiteness.

Moreover, just as white communities experienced anxiety in attempting to barricade their racial-social boundaries, an anxiety articulated in random acts of violence against African Americans; Blacks too experienced anxiety—unease in learning to live with the knowledge that they might be touched by violence and that the legal system would offer little solace. While it would be simplistic to limit the root cause of this anxiety to a single court case, it is fruitful to consider how monumental Court decisions, like *Plessy v. Ferguson*, have altered race relations in the United States. Marking the start of a genre shift after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, with its attention to racial categorizing and travel, offers insight into the ways these racial anxieties become both discursive fodder and important touchstones for many African American writers.

Consequently, this chapter treats the occurrence of racial anxiety and travel in a canonical African American text: James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912, 1927). Published in the midst of U.S. racial segregation, this text

tells the story of a character born (legally) African American who—in response to the anxiety of racial (self)determination and racial violence, or occasionally even out of convenience—decides to pass as “white.” Considered a passing narrative, Johnson’s text is a sometimes violent rendering of the friction that arises along the color line in the United States. It depicts a world in which travel/movement often prompts a visceral response in African American characters. This response should be considered a type of “motion sickness,” or a negative physical manifestation of the unease experienced by a Black character while in transit. Thus, Johnson constructs a narrative where both physical and metaphorical travel registers the anxiety of racial distinctions and dislocation in the post-*Plessy* United States. Moreover, Johnson’s text illustrates the connection between (racial) visibility and mobility, two issues that will find themselves coupled and explored throughout this project.

But even as traveling sometimes prompts a type of sickness in this narrative’s passing character, it is a key convention to the literary genre. Movement allows characters of passing narratives to formulate and articulate ideas concerning systemic racism in the United States. With characters moving between the poles of whiteness and Blackness as they move from city to city, state to state, uptown to downtown, or even upstairs and downstairs, narratives like Johnson’s expose the arbitrariness of American racial dichotomies. However more than exposing racial dichotomies and the impossibility for such dichotomies to remain static, Johnson’s text provide readers with characters negotiating situations often fraught with the threat of racial violence.

## II. James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

In May of 1912 the *New York Times* featured a book review of the anonymously published text *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The similarly anonymous *Times* reviewer describes the text as the “startling tale” of a Black man who successfully joins the white race. Although the reviewer never articulates just exactly what is startling about the text or to whom it might be startling, it may be assumed that the book’s very publication is one of its most unsettling attributes: the text depicts a United States in which the perceived biological and legal barriers between the races at the turn of the century could be transgressed effortlessly. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* begins by confirming this “startling” “reality” by opening with an unnamed narrator confessing the “greatest secret” of his life: that he is (legally) a Black man who has made a decision to live the rest of his life as an “ordinary white man who has made a little money.”<sup>53</sup> A meandering and often didactic story, the rest of the text is taken up with the Ex-Colored Man’s explanation of how he came to be “white.” Readers of *The Autobiography* are taken on numerous journeys between the Southern and Northern regions of the United States, as well as to Europe, all to find the Ex-Colored Man at a lynching in Georgia that forever changes his life. So struck by the lynching of another Black man, the Ex-Colored Man decides he must cease to be Black because he can no longer stand to be a part of a race that would allow such an atrocity to happen to its members. The narrator decides that he will neither disclaim “the black race nor claim the

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<sup>53</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 154.

white race; but [he] would change [his] name, raise a mustache, and let the world take [him] for what it would.”<sup>54</sup> But more importantly, shame, he tells readers, is what drives him from the race.

And while there is much to be said of *The Autobiography*, the text’s 1912 *Times* reviewer spends the majority of column space considering the utility of the text. For this particular reviewer the virtue of the autobiography is in the text’s ability to crystallize the polemics of race in the United States in a detached manner: the text serves, writes the reviewers, as a “dispassionate study of the race problem in the United States from the standpoint of a man who has lived on both sides of it.”<sup>55</sup> For the reviewer, the narrator’s lack of “passion” regarding his life’s story lends to the text’s accountability. So even as the *Times* reviewer might, and does, second-guess the authenticity of the narrative, the overarching contents and concerns of the narrative are what matter: “However true or untrue may be the personal side of the story,” writes the *Times* reviewer, “the observations upon the condition of the negro race in the South and of the attitude of the whites toward it are full of interests.”<sup>56</sup> What is at stake, then, for this reviewer is not exactly the text’s portrayal of one man’s “true life”—real or fraudulent, the Ex-Colored Man’s experiences are perceived as delivering insights into the American race problem—but instead the text’s ability to offer a portrayal of Black experiences. This reviewer can recommend the Ex-Colored Man’s story because the text allows readers access to “real”

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, 139.

<sup>55</sup> “An Ex-Colored Man.” Review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. *New York Times*, 26 May 1912, 319. Reprinted in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1997), 19.

<sup>56</sup> “An Ex-Colored Man,” 20.

Black culture. This issue will be taken up later, but it is important to note how the review manages to maneuver around the issues like authorship and authenticity.

But in its lauding of *The Autobiography*'s "realism" and the reviewer's own rhetorical sophistication, the review falls into the standard dichotomous trappings that often accompany criticism of race relations: North versus South, Black versus white. The Ex-Colored Man, in the estimations of the *Times* reviewer, as a "man who has been behind the embankments on both sides and understands what each is fighting for," stands at the brink of each of these dichotomies, straddling the color line.<sup>57</sup> But even as it appears that the reviewer has read *The Autobiography* in its entirety, it is less apparent that the reviewer understands all the intricacies of the work, because to limit the narrative's scope and content as applicable merely to the Southern regions of the United States is a failure to comprehend the text's rich, far-reaching topical scope.

Fortunately, the limitations of geographical specificity that the *New York Times* reviewer places on *The Autobiography* are in many ways remedied in a contemporaneous review appearing in *The Crisis*, a monthly magazine published by the NAACP.<sup>58</sup> Like the *Times* review, *The Crisis* review, written by Jessie Fauset,<sup>59</sup> concludes that the text is a proper drawing of American race relations. However, unlike her contemporary, Fauset argues that "[t]he work gives a view of the race situation in New England, New York City, in the far South, in city and country, in high and low society, with glimpse, too, of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>58</sup> The NAACP's *Crisis: a Record of the Darker Races*, a highly successful monthly magazine, was first published in 1910 under the guidance of W. E. B. Du Bois.

<sup>59</sup> In *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice*, Eugene Levy attributes *The Crisis* review to Jessie Fauset.

England, France and Germany” (38). Fauset’s recognition of the broad geographical implications of race relations raised by the text, as well as the text’s awareness of class differentials, removes *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* from the restrictive regionalisms that the *Times* review creates, and opens the 1912 text to a broader discussion of race relations across the United States—and beyond. This broadening is crucial because it acknowledges that race problems are of national importance—if not international—and not merely the concern of Southern whites. Likewise, Fauset’s widening of the geographical relevance of the text invites readings that reflect on the relevance of race from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of locations.

Yet more than supplying us with an analysis of what *The Autobiography* does to help its readers understand U.S. race relations, both *The Crisis* and the *New York Times* reviews raise important questions of authenticity. So while both reviewers offer differing views on the geographical scope of the book’s project, each spotlights what they describe as the text’s authentic portrayal of national race relations. In fact, Fauset contends that *The Autobiography* is “indeed an epitome of the race situation in the United States told in the form of an autobiography.”<sup>60</sup> However, the reality portrayed or, more specifically, the authenticity of the narrator and his tale, is complicated by the reality of its authorship and the conditions under which it was published. There are many important facts that need to be elucidated in the publication narrative of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* before we can even begin to discuss the broader implications of the text itself.

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<sup>60</sup> Fauset, Jessie. “Review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.” *The Crisis* 5: (November 1912): 38, 21.

The 1912 edition of *The Autobiography*, while received favorably by critics, was never popularly successful and seemingly disappeared into narrative obscurity.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the text's realism never reached a broad reading public. But in 1927 this dismissal ended. At the height of what would be coined the "Harlem Renaissance," *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was republished by Alfred A. Knopf with James Weldon Johnson's name officially attached as author. This newly reissued text featured an introduction written by Carl Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926),<sup>62</sup> a white writer who spent much of the first decades of the twentieth century both writing about Black Harlem and introducing Black writers to the literary fold. Van Vechten considered James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as foundational to his own writing of *Nigger Heaven*; consequently, out of admiration and a desire to establish Johnson's texts as part of the canon, Van Vechten wrote the introduction to the reissued text. His introduction was glowing and revealed that Johnson's *The Autobiography* was actually fiction:

*The Autobiography*, of course, in the matter or specific incident, has little enough to do with Mr. Johnson's own life, but it is imbued with his own personality and feeling, his *views* of the subjects discussed, so that to a person who has no previous knowledge of the author's own history, it reads like *real*

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<sup>61</sup> William Andrews notes that publishing black novels at the turn of the century was still a financial risk for mainstream publishing companies: "When the *Autobiography* appeared in 1912, the publication of African-American novels by Northern commercial publishers was still a new and risky venture [...] During a three-year period, Houghton Mifflin published four works of fiction by [Charles] Chesnut, but none sold well enough to leave either the publisher or the author sanguine about the financial prospects of a black fiction writer who wanted to address problems of the color line in America in any serious way" (*Autobiography* xv).

<sup>62</sup> Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* was his attempt to get at the true local "color" of Harlem, NYC. Constructed around a love triangle, the novel both met praise and opposition from the African American community due to its "primitive" portrayals of Black life in Harlem. See Chidi Ikonnè's *From Du Bois to Van Vechten: The Early New Negro Literature, 1903-1926* (1981) for more on Van Vechten's relationship to Black culture in Harlem.

autobiography. It would be truer, perhaps, to say that it reads like a composite autobiography of the Negro race in the United States in modern time.<sup>63</sup>

In the sense that genre is important to reception, Van Vechten's "outing" of Johnson's book as a novel might have been fairly damning to the text's new readership—in an era of "realism," (white) readers of African American authored texts often craved "true" depictions of Black culture. But with swift rhetorical maneuvering, Van Vechten moves *The Autobiography* out of the realm of "personal narrative" and into that of community discourse; under Van Vechten's guidance, what might have been characterized as one man's intensely-personal story becomes the "composite" story of Black oppression in the United States. Therefore, Van Vechten attempts to broaden the scope of Johnson's text by proving its applicability to the "the Negro race in the United States in modern time."<sup>64</sup>

Still Van Vechten's maneuvering is in many ways absolutely problematic. It is often unwarrantable to conclude that one man's "views" and "feelings" can speak for those of an entire race; more problematic, however, is that Johnson's narrator might be said to speak for the entire Black race. From the *Times* reviewer and Jessie Fauset to Carl Van Vechten, these early critics considered Johnson's narrator an earnest storyteller, capable of helping the white world decipher the Black. And in his own way James Weldon Johnson is responsible for the confusion surrounding the text's authenticity: in his own autobiography he says that he meant for the novel to be taken as a "human

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<sup>63</sup> Carl Van Vechten. "Introduction" in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1997), 25.

<sup>64</sup> Van Vechten, 25.

document.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, many critics have noted that the decision to use the first-person narrative voice has also diluted our ability to determine a strict genre in which to place Johnson’s narrative.<sup>66</sup> At the time, with what is now considered the African American canon still in the process of codification, Johnson’s text found itself in the company of first-person narratives written by such figures as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. Among this burgeoning literary tradition, it was impossible for many readers not to take Johnson’s narrator at face value.

But even as Johnson used the raw material of his life to craft his tale and intended to have it read as if it were a true story, readers who are aware of the realities of the majority of Blacks in the country at the period, should quickly notice that the Ex-Colored Man is far from a representative Black man. First, the narrator is not aware that he is indeed (legally) Black until he is in grade school. Recalling the formative moments after a teacher divulges his racial identity to him and his classmates, the Ex-Colored Man reflects: “I did not know it. When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the trauma of being raced is something that continues to alienate the Ex-Colored Man: “I do not think my [white] friends at school changed so much toward me as I did toward them,” he writes, “I grew reserved, I might say suspicious. I grew constantly more and more afraid of laying myself open to some injury to my feelings or pride.”<sup>68</sup> Unable to associate with whites, the narrator learns from his Black peers that their status is his, but says that he “had a very strong aversion to being classed

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<sup>65</sup> In *James Weldon Johnson: Black leader, Black voice*, Eugene Levy notes that Johnson called his book a “human document” in a letter to a friend.

<sup>66</sup> Levy argues that Johnson’s friends serve as the “raw material” of the tale.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, 11.

with them.” As a result, the narrator becomes “solitary,”<sup>69</sup> and this solitariness haunts him for the rest of the novel.

Thus, much of the contemporary scholarship on the novel explores the uses of irony in the text, in an attempt to reconcile the “reality” of the Ex-Colored Man’s life with the life experiences of the majority of African Americans, which if further mirrored in the disparity between *The Autobiography* and a tradition of African American letters.<sup>70</sup> Often these scholars conclude that, although the Ex-Colored Man is not a representative Black, both the irony that he employs and the irony employed against him by Johnson (the author) points to the text’s racial self-awareness. And it is this racial self-awareness that allows many to take the text’s narrator for the authentic racial representative that writers like Fauset and Van Vechten would have the narrator be.

However, as most critics attempt by various methods to define the irony, duality, or positionality of the Ex-Colored Man, this attention is in many ways misplaced. Such attention to the narrator assumes that the text is a bildungsroman of sorts, that the text is a story of the narrator’s growth.<sup>71</sup> But such an assumption fails to recognize that the Ex-Colored Man undergoes little emotional or psychological development in *The Autobiography*. Always egotistical, the Ex-Colored Man is persistent in reminding his readers of his superiority in every aspect of his life: he describes himself as nothing less

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>70</sup> See Joseph Skerrett’s “Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*”; Roxanna Pisiak’s “Irony and Subversion in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*”; Donald Goellnicht’s *Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man**”; and Neil Brooks’s “On Becoming an Ex-man: Postmodern Irony and the Extinguishing of Certainties in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*” for a more on the treatment of irony in Johnson’s novel.

than a child prodigy on the piano; he tells us he was among the smartest students and was, by general consensus, a beautiful boy; he boasts of learning to speak Spanish better than native speakers; and similarly, after only hearing ragtime music once, the Ex-Colored Man tells readers that he quickly became the best ragtime piano player in all of New York City. More than a just a model representative of Du Bois's "talented tenth," the Ex-Colored Man is challenged by nothing and, as such, never grows as a character. Eugene Levy notes, "character development and motivation is weak in *The Autobiography*"; instead, "what [character development that does exist] was superimposed by the author rather than growing out of the character's psychological reaction to his environment."<sup>72</sup> Levy goes on to claim that "Johnson primarily uses his protagonist as a window through which he points out and interprets the American racial scene."<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, instead of considering the narrator and his psychological and emotional growth as central to *The Autobiography*, it might be more fruitful to examine how three particular events provide the impetus for our passing character's being: a train ride to Jacksonville, Florida; a shooting in a New York City night club; and a lynching at a train station in Georgia. In addition to reminding readers that U.S. race relations are regionally borderless, these three events have been selected because of the increasing violence of each and, more importantly, because each is increasingly erosive to the Ex-Colored Man's already-thin Black identity. Although the Ex-Colored Man is central to

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Japtok, in "Between 'Race' as Construct and 'Race' as Essence: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*," labels Johnson's text as a "coming-of-age story."

<sup>72</sup> Levy, 134.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 134.

each incident—it is an “autobiography,” after all, and as such the reader’s attentions are implicitly directed toward the narrator—violence takes precedence over character. Set against the backdrop of character locomotion, each violent act articulates the literature’s understanding of the ever expanding role that racially motivated violence has played in stunting the development of Black identity.

A traveling ethnographer of sorts, Johnson’s narrator moves around the United States collecting the material of his life. From his educational and employment pursuits to his quest to assemble Southern music (Black spirituals) and consequently deliver it to classical music halls, the Ex-Colored Man spends a lot of time in transit. In fact, one of his earliest memories is that of moving from his birthplace in Georgia to his adolescent home in Connecticut. While his traveling often offers him time to reflect on the state of U.S. race relations, it is not without risk for Johnson’s narrator; dangerous incidents are almost always linked closely to travel in *The Autobiography*. And there are a few early clues that allow us insight into race’s connection to the danger of travel. As previously mentioned, the reader first encounters the traveling Ex-Colored Man as he is moving from Georgia to Connecticut as a small child. Although this trip is without incident (he spends the bulk of it sleeping) and, thus, would seem to contradict the connection between race, violence and travel, one must remember that it isn’t until he is in grade school that the narrator learns his true racial identity. So without a sense of the place he occupies in a world where race is of the utmost importance, the Ex-Colored Man does not have the experience to react to the nature of his positionality. This first travel experience, then, serves as the base line for all the narrator’s future travels: it is the last time the Ex-

Colored Man will be able to move about the country unhindered by the knowledge of his racial identity, and subsequently, without perceiving the danger inherent in his movements.

On his next train trip, the racially aware Ex-Colored Man travels to Atlanta University—due to the recent death of his mother and strained finances, he is unable to attend a Northern university and must travel south for his college education. The train ride from Connecticut to Atlanta is disappointing for the narrator: “The further I got below Washington, the more disappointed I became in the appearance of the country,” he notes.<sup>74</sup> Along the way he is struck by what he considers to be the South’s inferior landscape: “I did not find the grass so green, nor the woods so beautiful, nor the flowers so plentiful, as they were in Connecticut.”<sup>75</sup> And the narrator’s disappointment is only heightened when he reaches Atlanta, which he describes as “a big, dull, red town.”<sup>76</sup> His disappointment with the landscape only marks the beginning of the Ex-Colored Man’s disenchantment.

The Ex-Colored Man’s journeys within that dull town, Atlanta, are further marred by misfortune and frustration. Upon arriving in the city, he believes he is too early to be admitted to Atlanta University and spends his first night in a segregated boarding house catering to Pullman car porters. The room is dirty, and the Ex-Colored Man longs for home. “I should not be the first to use the sheets and pillow-case since they had last come from the wash. When I thought of the clean, tidy, comfortable surrounding in

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<sup>74</sup> Johnson, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 37.

which I had been reared, a wave of homesickness swept over me that made me feel faint,” he notes.<sup>77</sup> His faintness is of dual importance here because it illustrates his unease with his shift in geographical location, as well as drawing attention to the important bond between race and class. What might otherwise be read as the Ex-Colored Man’s snobbishness concerning the American South could actually be read as his attempt to rebuff a newly confronted racial-economic status. Until this point in his life the Ex-Colored Man’s peers had always treated him as nothing less than a middle-class American. However, away from the comforts of his boyhood home, he is forced to associate intimately with the Black working class. His faintness demonstrates a visceral reaction to his environment, not unlike his response to discovering his racial identity all those many years ago.

Similarly, the Ex-Colored Man is repulsed by the Black lower class and is almost sickened by the odor and sight of traditional Black “soul food”<sup>78</sup>: “From the kitchen came a rancid odor of fish fried over several times, which almost nauseated me.”<sup>79</sup> What is slowly unraveled is the picture of a man confronting the harsh realities lived by a large segment of the Black population at the dawn of the twentieth century: poor quality food, poor working and living conditions, and urbanization. Again, the Ex-Colored Man’s response demonstrates his uneasiness at rubbing elbows with an unfamiliar segment of African American society, the southern Black working class, and ultimately his own identity-based unease.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 41.

However, after his life's savings are stolen, the Ex-Colored Man is forced to confront both his own poverty and his race. Unable to attend college because he can not afford to pay his tuition and too poor to stay in Atlanta, a fellow boarder convinces the narrator to leave Georgia for Jacksonville, Florida. The boarder offers to help the Ex-Colored Man stowaway, and for twelve hours the Ex-Colored Man is locked in the linen closet of this boarder's Pullman porter car where his body is made to feel the agonies of race. "I may live to be a hundred years old, but I shall never forget the agonies I suffered that night," he bemoans.<sup>80</sup> He is literally forced to occupy a space often reserved for Blacks, the servant's quarters of a train car. Still, more than just occupying this racially marked space, the Ex-Colored Man is confined to the inner-most corner of this space. Doubled over, with dirty linens below and clean above, his body is crippled by his newly acquired racial-economic status. It is interesting to note then that the Ex-Colored Man, standing among a Black man's soiled linen, is made uncomfortable by a shelf of clean (white) linen just over his head. This confining hierarchy is made all the more poignant by his, again, visceral response to his space: "The air was hot and suffocating," he writes, "and the smell of damp towels and used linen was sickening."<sup>81</sup> Bumping, jumping, and becoming "bruised against the narrow walls of [his] compartment,"<sup>82</sup> the Ex-Colored Man is overcome by nausea. Trapped within a symbolic space saturated with racial-economic allegory, the Ex-Colored Man's bodily discomfort and physical sickness register the very real and dangerous cultural realities of Black America throughout the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 47.

period. Johnson's text discloses that to be African American is to be forced to live within a suffocating, sickening, physically distressing and dangerous world that is only exacerbated by travel.

The Ex-Colored Man's time in the closet, however short-lived, is a motif that appears in various forms throughout the text. Through the duress of his protagonist-narrator, and with physical confinement and sickness as key indexes, Johnson attempts to represent the troubled history of race relations of the United States. Yet, the Ex-Colored Man seems emotionally and intellectually untouched by Johnson's fairly contrived lesson. He is unable to comprehend what he should have taken away from the closet: "The next morning I got out of the car at Jacksonville with a stiff and aching body. I determined to ask no more porters, not even my benefactor, about stopping-places."<sup>83</sup> Robert Stepto notes that the Ex-Colored Man lacks the sort of "historical mind" that would allow him to see the connections between himself and African American culture and history.<sup>84</sup> So rather than understanding his predicament (with all of its financial and physical discomforts) as an opportunity to form a community bond, the narrator flees, unwilling to make contact with his porter-benefactor. Finally, even as his body was made to suffer, he is intellectually unable to grasp the inherent danger of being Black in the United States and the necessity for community building.

But there is a reprieve in the Ex-Colored Man's racial education while in Jacksonville, at least his education in African American culture, because his contact with

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Stepto, "Lost in a Quest: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*" in *Critical Essays of James Weldon Johnson* (G.K. Hall & Co.: 1997), 60.

African Americans is limited. Ironically, it is during this period that the narrator supposes himself to have entered “the freemasonry of the race”<sup>85</sup> Prior to Jacksonville, the narrator tells readers he had only theorized about “what it was to be colored,” but while in Florida he says he gains firsthand knowledge of the Black community. Yet, one soon notices that his observations concerning Black life and culture are always cursory and made from a distance. It is in this chapter that he outlines the Black struggle for first human and then social recognition; he waxes philosophical about the white community’s interest in the “Negro Question;” and he creates a hierarchy of Negro-types that is based on each type’s social relationship to whites. And while his observations are astute,<sup>86</sup> the reality of his situation in Jacksonville is that he spends very little time with Blacks in the community; instead, the majority of his acquaintances are Spanish-speaking, Cuban-American cigar factory workers. He describes his stay within this community as both successful and enriching: “I discovered that I had a talent for languages as well as for music. The rapidity and ease with which I acquired Spanish astonished my associates [...] I was able in less than a year to speak like a native. In fact, it was my pride that I spoke better Spanish than many of the Cuban workmen at the factory.”<sup>87</sup> And his pride is not limited to his language acquisition. The Ex-Colored Man rises in the factory’s ranks

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<sup>85</sup> Johnson, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Stepto concludes that the Ex-Colored Man’s observations are astute only because they had been made before by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In fact, Stepto’s article, “Lost in a Quest,” documents the numerous ways Johnson’s text is indebted to various canonical African American literary texts.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, 53.

to hold the coveted position of reader.<sup>88</sup> A peer-elected position, his title can be regarded as his insertion into the Cuban-American community, rather than the African American.

This experience again illustrates another instance of the Ex-Colored Man's unmindfulness and inability to identify with an African American community. Just as he is unable to register the importance of the train ride to Florida, he is unable to recognize that rhetorical engagement with race is not the same as physical, emotional, or even intellectual engagement. To comprehend that the United States has a "Negro Question" is not the same as understanding one's place within the dichotomy that such a question raises. In fact, Robert Stepto characterizes the Ex-Colored Man's disengagement with Black culture as evidence of his position as "not a guide but a bystander" to the race.<sup>89</sup> As a bystander, the Ex-Colored Man's observations and opinions are dubious. Furthermore, the narrator's bystander position directs attention to the events. These particular events are important because they culminate with the lynching of another Black man. And because he regularly proves himself to be an unreliable narrative guide regarding issues of race and race relations, readers are forced to take notice of his unaffected physical responses to the events.

To be sure there are many instances in Johnson's novel where readers can witness the Ex-Colored Man's vexed relationship to race and his own racial identity. But it is in chapters VI through VIII, during his digression into New York City night life, that his identity becomes once more embroiled with the paired themes of racial violence and movement. Additionally, Johnson again explores the motif of race-related confinement.

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<sup>88</sup> A "reader," according to Johnson, read from newspapers and novels to the cigar factory workmen.

For example, the bulk of the narrative action during this portion of the novel is carried out within the small rooms of an unnamed gambling house and a place he refers to as “the ‘Club.’” The gambling house is described as catering to a predominantly Black clientele and is made up of a series of connected rooms replete with music, dancing, and lots of gambling. For instance, *The Ex-Colored Man* is warned by an acquaintance that the gambling tables often become a prison, a cycle of inescapable wins and losses: “My informant went on to say that sometimes a fellow would become almost completely dressed and then, by the turn of the dice, would be thrown back into a state of semi-nakedness. Some of them were virtually prisoners and unable to get into the streets for days at a time.”<sup>90</sup> This space, described as a prison, is a constant setting for the Ex-Colored Man while in New York. Likewise, he describes the “Club” as an intimate space filled with ragtime music, drinking, and predominantly Black patrons. In fact, the narrator notes that the walls of the club are lined with photographs paying homage to “every colored man in America who had ever ‘done anything.’”<sup>91</sup> Even as the “Club” functions for the narrator as a location for him to hone and display his skill for playing ragtime piano, it is, like the gambling house, a racially marked and physically confining space.

As the Ex-Colored Man’s life in New York becomes limited to “ten blocks”<sup>92</sup> and endless nights languishing in the small rooms of various makeshift clubs, we see again a

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<sup>89</sup> Stepto, 60.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, 70-71.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson’s text describes a pre-Harlem Manhattan, so the ten blocks that the Ex-Colored Man travels are located between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Streets and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. This area is in the heart of what was known as the

type of very literal-physical confinement linked to a more abstract notion of racial confinement. This chapter of the novel, then, is concerned with how the Ex-Colored Man will escape the African American community. It should be noted that his return to the North, to New York City, might have offered him the opportunity to be initiated into African American culture—he had previously spent his time in Florida integrating himself into the Cuban-American community—but this opportunity is missed because most of the Ex-Colored Man’s interactions are based upon impersonal games of poker, pool and “craps,” and alcohol. Moving between the gambling house and the “Club,” the Ex-Colored Man becomes increasingly disengaged from Black culture; and although a majority of his acquaintances are Black, the chapter lacks substantial dialogue between the narrator and his peers and there is little action leading to character growth. This statement might seem contradictory because night life and music are crucial to the creation of a type of African American identity and culture—for instance, even the Ex-Colored man notes that the ragtime music he loves so much traces its origins to Black musicians in various Southern/Mid-Western cities—however, for the narrator, Manhattan night life allows him to again fail to foster long-lasting community ties. He regretfully informs his readers that he is unable to “contrast [his] views on life among colored people of New York” because during his stay he “did not become acquainted with a single respectable family.”<sup>93</sup> But more than just admitting to his unwillingness to acquaint himself with “respectable” families, a statement which in itself perpetuates notions of

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Tenderloin District, a district notorious for police corruption and home to the bulk of the lower-class African American community (those people too poor to live in Brooklyn).

<sup>93</sup> Johnson, 83.

racial-economic hierarchies, his statement illustrates his own recognition of missed opportunities. Just as he formed no attachments to the “prisoners” of those ten blocks, he also failed to connect to any African Americans anywhere else in the city.

But the Ex-Colored Man’s relationship to his race and to African American culture is not as uncomplicated as it might appear. While his travels are limited to a few cramped African-American hangouts and, in spite of his confinement to these locations, he manages to remain detached from various people and aspects of the culture to which he is confined, the Ex-Colored Man oddly takes on the racially marked persona of ragtime piano player. He establishes ragtime as “black music,”<sup>94</sup> and proceeds to detail how his expertise in the musical genre allows him to escape from the prison of those ten (Black) New York blocks. Further complicating this scenario, his relationship to ragtime music simultaneously endangers his life and allows him to flee his New York “prison.”

The Ex-Colored Man’s musical expertise draws him acclaim in Manhattan and the “Club,” where he plays. Additionally, it allows him to pull away from the gambling table by providing him a more reliable source of income. But more importantly, ragtime music allows him to gain “a friend who was the means by which” he escapes “from this lower world.”<sup>95</sup> The Ex-Colored Man’s “friend” is a white millionaire who, while “slumming,” finds the piano man at the “Club.” The Ex-Colored Man tells readers that

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<sup>94</sup> One way the Ex-Colored Man establishes ragtime music as originating out of Black culture is by describing using racially marked/racist language: “It was music that demanded *physical response*, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The *barbaric harmonies*, the *audacious* resolutions, often consisting of an *abrupt* jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most *unexpected* places [...] a most *curios* effect,” he writes (72 italics my emphasis). The Ex-Colored Man’s tendency to use such language to describe African Americans and their cultures is indicative of his propensity to separate himself from both the people and the culture.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, 84.

his relationship with his friend begins when the man hires him to play for a party at his home and, because he plays so well, the millionaire offers to give the narrator plenty of future work. The man's only stipulation is that the Ex-Colored Man can play no such venues as the one he played for the benefactor unless under instruction or with the permission of the benefactor. Why his benefactor covets his piano playing is never articulated, but one gets the sense that there is power in both owning and renting out the Ex-Colored Man to friends. The Ex-Colored Man notes, "I afterwards played for him at many dinners and parties of one kind or another. Occasionally he 'loaned' me to some of his friends. And, too, I often played for him alone at his apartments."<sup>96</sup> During his private sessions for the benefactor, the Ex-Colored Man comments that he was often filled with "unearthly terror" because of the man's mercilessness in driving the narrator to exhaustion from prolonged playing. Not seeing the irony in his servitude, that he is seemingly substituting one type of racialized confinement for another, the Ex-Colored Man continues to consider his job for the millionaire a financial blessing.

The Ex-Colored Man might have continued to live in such limbo had it not been for shooting at the "Club" involving a white woman and a Black man. As the Ex-Colored Man hones his skills by playing piano at the "Club," he gains notoriety and limited star status with the patrons, especially the white women who frequently slum in the gambling district. One white woman in particular—he calls her the "widow"—catches the Ex-Colored Man's eye. The "widow" is, however, involved in an interracial

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 88.

relationship with a man known in the narrative as a “bad man,”<sup>97</sup> and the Ex-Colored Man becomes embroiled in a love triangle that ends with him witnessing the shooting of the “widow” by her boyfriend. After watching the “widow” get shot through the neck by the “bad man’s” revolver, the Ex-Colored Man flees the scene of the crime. He tells his readers, “I traveled [away from the scene], not by sight, but instinctively. I felt like one fleeing a horrible nightmare.”<sup>98</sup> Readers are never actually sure if he flees in fear for the safety of his own life or for fear of being implicated in the crime.

But the “widow’s” shooting is an important event for various reasons. First, it allows Johnson to make a statement about race relations in the North: that they are just as present and vexed there as they are in the South. Corroborating what Fauset and Van Vechten pointed out in their reviews of *The Autobiography*, the novel doesn’t follow any binary that constructs the North as void of racial hierarchies and the violence that accompanies such a system. In many ways, then, Johnson highlights the borderlessness of the system and proves that U.S. citizens, no matter where they are located and no matter what their race happens to be, are always at risk of being hurt by racism—although not equally, or in the same ways.

Additionally, the Ex-Colored Man’s response to the shooting reveals the bond between the issues of movement, violence, and race. In much the same way as the train ride to Florida was physically uncomfortable and marked the narrator’s transitioning between racial identities, his response to the murder of the white woman marks a shift in his location, his relationship to race, and, for a short time, his sense of his own physical

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 89.

safety. As stated earlier, the Ex-Colored Man leaves the scene of the crime quickly. In so leaving, he moves outside of the ten blocks where he has spent the past few months living. Again, it is important to note that these blocks are inhabited predominantly by African Americans, and in moving outside this area he moves into a “white world.” In fact, when he runs into his millionaire friend, the friend responds by asking, “What on earth are you doing strolling in *this* part of town?”<sup>99</sup> He is outside his perceived proper racial space, the dangers of which will be explored in more depth later; but more importantly, his movement outside the Black space allows him the sense of escape from the violence associated with Blackness.

This event also establishes travel as the Ex-Colored Man’s method for escaping both racially motivated violence and for shirking his responsibility to the African American community. In order to escape totally the dangers associated with race, though, he moves outside the United States altogether by accompanying his millionaire benefactor to Europe and acting as this man’s valet. Physical illness, or seasickness, is his body’s response to traveling away from the racial violence of the city. “This morbid state of mind,” he writes, “together with sea-sickness, kept me miserable for three or four days. [...] It was not, however, until the morning that we entered the harbor of Havre that I was able to shake off my gloom.”<sup>100</sup> His gloom and sickness are ever-present reminders of New York because “the jet of blood pulsing from [the “widow’s” wound] is an

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 90 (emphasis mine).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 92.

indelible red stain” on his memory.<sup>101</sup> So even as he attempts disassociate himself from the violence of the United States, he never forgets the murder.

The cities of Europe are almost a blur in his narrative. He and his benefactor move from Paris to London to Amsterdam and other European cities, as the Ex-Colored Man develops a lack of racial identity—neither Black nor white. For the most part he is nothing more than a man traveling around Europe, except during those few moments when he is reminded of his race: once, when he sits next to his father and half-sister at a opera in Paris—they have no idea who he is and he leaves without telling them. Another time a European friend asks him if they really “burned men alive in the United States.”<sup>102</sup> Caught off guard by this reminder of racial violence, he cannot even remember what he told the man. He does remember wishing that he could have told his questioner that an incident like that had only happened once in the United States. Yet, this man’s question provides a stark reminder of the dangers associated with having an African American identity in the United States.

Oddly enough, it is his time spent in Europe occupying the space of racial ambiguity that drives the Ex-Colored Man back to the United States.<sup>103</sup> He goes back home in order to claim his race and rise within its ranks by converting Black Spirituals into Classical music pieces.<sup>104</sup> His decision is financially motivated but the Ex-Colored Man broaches it as more spiritual in origin. He says he made up his mind to go to the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 99. This question resonates with the title of the NAACP pamphlet.

<sup>103</sup> This transition is odd considering the frequency with which African American intellectuals and artists left the United States to be “free” in Europe—Wright, Baldwin, Robeson, etc—after WWII.

<sup>104</sup> He leaves against the better judgment of his benefactor—who suggests that the Ex-Colored Man begin passing as white.

“very heart of the South, to live among the people, to drink in [his] inspiration first hand.”<sup>105</sup> Yet, readers can see through his feigned spirituality when he says, “I gloated over the immense amount of material I had to work with, not only modern ragtime, but also the slave songs—material which no one had yet touched.”<sup>106</sup> However duplicitous his goals for returning to the United States, his return marks a shift in his relationship to his racial identity. Upon his return, he is Black and finally lives among African Americans. In fact, while aboard ship back to the United States, he becomes close to a “tall, broad-shouldered, almost gigantic, colored man.”<sup>107</sup> This man, whose size is symbolic of the large role he plays as a positive representative of Black culture for the Ex-Colored Man, is the first African American with whom the narrator uses the pronoun “we.”<sup>108</sup> The big man also plays an important role in supplying the Ex-Colored Man with the names of other African American professionals to contact and stay with while traveling through the American South.

With his newly discovered Black identity, the Ex-Colored Man proceeds to travel through the South collecting experiences and music. However, he occasionally strays from this Black identity when making his way through the South. In one instance he rides in a Pullman car from Nashville to Atlanta listening to the heated and racist discussion of a group of white men concerning the “Negro Problem” in the United States. Although he does not openly admit to passing for white during the train ride, readers must assume from clues such as his Pullman car companions’ candidness concerning

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 110.

Blacks and the Ex-Colored Man's own reluctance to speak to the subject, that he is passing for white. Additionally, he notes and takes pleasure in the occurrence of being mistaken for white at train stations in various southern towns.<sup>109</sup> These incidents establish that racial passing continues to be a viable and even desirable activity for the Ex-Colored Man. And passing's viability and desirability are crucial to understanding the final, and most important, violent event of *The Autobiography*: the lynching of a Black Man.

The lynching of the unnamed Black man takes the narrative and the narrator by surprise. After having spent a few weeks traveling through the South with little or no racial hostility noted, the narrator finds himself in a small, non-descript Southern town staying in the home of a Black man who holds "a job of some kind on the railroad."<sup>110</sup> Through lack of description, Johnson establishes that the Ex-Colored Man could be in any location.<sup>111</sup> The situation of the narrator's temporary lodgings, by the railroad tracks, and his offhanded attention to his proprietor's occupation initially seem unimportant; however, consistent with other central events of the novel, this site of travel quickly becomes the locus of racial danger. While sitting in his room, he begins to sense what he calls "alarm" in the air and hears footsteps outside. Moved by a combination of fear, curiosity, and bravery that he believes stems from the fact that he felt confident that his "identity as a colored man had not yet become known in the town,"<sup>112</sup> the Ex-Colored

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 134. "The town was that kind which hardly requires or deserves description," writes the Ex-Colored Man. It consists of "a straggling line of brick and wooden stores on one side of the railroad track and some cottages of various sizes on the other side," he goes on to report.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 135.

Man ventures outside his room and is swallowed up by a crowd heading to the railroad station. When he reaches the station he finds the following:

There was gathered there a crowd of men, all white, and others were steadily arriving, seemingly from all the surrounding country. How did the news spread so quickly? I watched these men moving under the yellow glare of the kerosene lamps about the station, stern, comparatively silent, all of them armed, some of them in boots and spurs; fierce, determined men. [...] At the first suggestion of daylight they began to disperse in groups, going several directions. There was no extra noise or excitement, no loud talking, only swift, sharp words of command given by those who seemed to be accepted as leaders by mutual understanding. In fact, the impression made upon me was that everything was being done in quite an orderly manner. In spite of so many leaving, the crowd around the station continued to grow; at sunrise there were a great many women and children.<sup>113</sup>

The Ex-Colored Man watches the mob argue over whether to hang or burn their unnamed, Black victim. The scene is gruesome. The Ex-Colored Man recalls that

a railroad tie was sunk into the ground, the rope removed, and a chain brought and securely coiled around the victim and the stake. [...] Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch; the flames crouched for an instant as though to gather strength, then leaped up as high as their victim's head. He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. [...] I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see.<sup>114</sup>

And after standing by the railroad tracks through the night, the Ex-Colored Man is driven away from the lynching scene with the smell of burnt flesh fresh in his nostrils. His response to the lynching is similar to that of watching the murder of the "widow": visceral.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 136.

He is in a daze, unable to move while he considers the degenerate state of human and race relations in the United States. His own body is immobilized by the violence he has just witnessed: “How long I sat with bitter thoughts running through my mind I do not know [...]. When I decided to get up and go back to the house, I found that I could hardly stand on my feet. I was as weak as a man who had lost blood.”<sup>115</sup> And while he has not literally lost any blood, this violent scene is the event that drives the Ex-Colored Man to renounce his association with the Black race, to renounce his “blood.” Moved by his personal shame for a race that could allow itself to be burned alive for no reason (no reason is ever given for the Black man’s murder), the Ex-Colored Man decides to forsake his racial identity because he deems the quest for equality hopeless. Until this moment, the Ex-Colored Man’s physical responses have been the only indexes for registering the far-reaching dangers of occupying a racialized identity. But the lynching pushes the Ex-Colored Man to face the harsh reality that being African American carries with it the indelible mark of a positionality which, no matter one’s financial standing, can easily lead to a brutal death for perceived racial transgressions.

It is his first and only moment of character development. It is meaningful, then, that it is also the moment when he makes the definitive decision to pass out of the Black race. And with his passing, what had been previously documented as motion sickness, or the physical response to the anxiety of traveling around the United States and to Europe as a Black man, slowly fades from the Ex-Colored Man’s body. He leaves the South for

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 138.

New York once more; behind him lie death and a Black identity, and before him lie “the towers of New York and” the “future that the city held in store for [him].<sup>116</sup>

### III. Conclusion

This chapter began with the lynching of John Hartfield in order to provide a name and face, however incomplete, to an activity that lacks humanity. Additionally, because this chapter is in many ways concerned with fairly abstract notions like “motion sickness,” “race,” and passing, Hartfield’s death functions as grounding force. And while Hartfield’s death falls in the midst of the two publications of Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, his death marks the starting point of this chapter because of the reality it portrays. It is important to note that this chapter in no way attempts to equate the reality of Hartfield’s death with that of a fictional, unnamed character; instead, it attempts to illustrate the many ways reality influences (and finds itself echoed in) fiction.

Concern for reality’s relationship to fiction is not new; yet it is pivotal to exploring the fictions of racial passing. Because the practice of racial passing is limited to a distinctly small population—it requires that one lack what are considered typical characteristics of Black physiognomy—and because its reality has historically been underreported in order to guarantee the safety of its practitioners, narratives of racial passing are often far from the reality that most people in the United States encounter. Yet, if one is to talk about the importance of such narratives within a broader literary and cultural context, there has to be some attention paid to the reality, material and historical

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 139.

conditions, under which these narratives were produced. For this reason, this chapter is careful to ground its analysis of *The Autobiography* in factual events and historical realities.

The lynching scene described in *The Autobiography* is not unlike that of John Hartfield's lynching, similar in both deed and location, and the Ex-Colored Man's description of the lynching resonates with the description given by Hilton Butler of John Hartfield's death—down to the groans that permanently resound in each man's ears. The similarities between these two events, one fictional and the other factual, illustrate many of this chapter's overarching concerns with race, travel, physical and racial liminality, confinement, and violence. All of these concerns, along with the practice of lynching, ultimately provide the substance for making an argument concerning the state of race relations in the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century: that argument being that African American bodies are under constant surveillance and threatened by violence.

It is no accident, then, that the narrative contained within *The Autobiography* and the narrative of the lynching of John Hartfield collide at the train tracks, or more specifically around the issue of mobility. Both texts explore the national anxiety over the movement and punishment of African Americans; it is an anxiety that a case like *Plessy v. Ferguson* highlights. More importantly, in the post-*Plessy* world of each narrative, the hazards surrounding the travel of African-American-identified citizens is made explicit. And the Ex-Colored Man's relationship to movement is in many ways at odds with that of Hartfield—at the site where Hartfield finds death, the ultimate form of identity immobility, the Ex-Colored Man always finds his identity in mobility. Train tracks, and

other modes of transportation, supply *The Autobiography*'s narrator with a means for escaping the dangers of a fixed Black racial identity. However, the contradiction inherent in this point of contact highlights the larger concern of this project: establishing passing and profiling as conflictive, yet, constitutive practices. So Hartfield's death at the train tracks juxtaposed with the Ex-Colored Man's freedom after watching a lynching at the same site demonstrates the importance of racial passing to understanding what is truly at stake when one owns a fixed racial identity.

## Signpost 2: Post-passing, Post-War

Gayle Wald begins the fourth chapter of *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* with an analysis of an article that appeared in the May 1950 issue of *Negro Digest*. The article, titled “I Refuse to Pass,” is the story of why Janice Kingslow, a young and promising African American actress, decides not to pass for white at the prompting of a major Hollywood studio. Told that she would have to “change her name and publicly adopt a white identity,” Kingslow refuses to forsake her race by taking the studio’s offer.<sup>117</sup> Wald is interested in stories like Kingslow’s because she believes they signal a changing relationship to whiteness for Black people; these stories “[interrogate] dominant cultural assumptions regarding the inherent disadvantages of ‘Black’ identity, instead depicting ‘Blackness’ as a source of positive identification.”<sup>118</sup> Calling narratives like Kingslow’s “postpassing” due to their adamant disavowal of the necessity for passing, Wald asserts that postpassing narratives “trouble the distinction between public and private identities, turning individualized self-disclosure into an occasion for collective representation.”<sup>119</sup> For Wald, such stories signal to readers (mostly a Black audience, because Wald finds these articles in postwar African American periodicals) the value in retaining an African American racial identity; these narratives speak to a changing social and economic climate in which racial self-articulation is deployed powerfully. Postpassing narratives and the postwar Black

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<sup>117</sup> Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>118</sup> Wald, 117.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

periodicals<sup>120</sup> in which they appear, even as they attempt to affirm the plausibility of a “collective ‘black’ consciousness,”<sup>121</sup> work to re-inscribe hegemonic ideals. These postpassing narratives come into existence after World War II, hence the “post” in postwar; and Wald’s use of “post” as a prefix for passing narratives supports her belief that these narratives mark the demise of the genre of passing narratives. According to Wald, “these [postpassing] narratives mobilized fantasies of racial equality and racial justices in ways that supported dominant discourses while also offering readers a critical vocabulary with which to interrogate normative constructions of ‘race’.”<sup>122</sup> Racial equality, in the form of economic and social mobility, then, is the ultimate message of the stories featured in Black periodicals of the period. Attempting to relate the possibility of an egalitarian American society, postpassing narratives interact with U.S. nationalism in various ways. As Wald suggests, they provide readers a sense of Black unity and affirm the value of a Black identity. But less positively, the narratives, as Wald argues, eschew the issues of class, gender, and race inequity with which the majority of non-bourgeois Blacks of the period dealt, in favor of promoting the dominant ideology (the myth of the “American Dream”). These stories about the “death” of passing raise hopes of national inclusion for Blacks which are measured by Black consumer power—the likelihood for African Americans to attain middle class lifestyles and values, to achieve the “American Dream.” In the case of postpassing narratives and the periodicals in which they appear,

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<sup>120</sup> Wald cites well established periodicals like *Ebony* and *Jet* to lesser known, often short lived, magazines *Color* and *Tan* as participating in the publication of postpassing narratives. Many of these popular magazines surface soon after World War II and in the early 1950’s as forum for African Americans to voice a sense of increased financial stability and consumer power.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

upward financial-mobility becomes synonymous with equality. These articles seem less interested in legal equality than with personal financial growth. So inequality in this post-War period is considered financial stasis; while equality is measured by Black earning power.

Wald asserts that postpassing narratives represented the popular dissemination of the belief that African Americans could be incorporated easily into the democratic community, a community that promised to endow Black Americans with equal citizenship, equal rights. And as such, their emergence marks a shift away from the use of the passing narrative to provide a competing story to the U.S. legal discourse that sought to deny Black citizenship. As a signal of the end of the passing novel's usefulness to Black writers, postpassing narratives gave Blacks a sense of hope in the United States and pride in their African American identity. The postpassing narrative's historical context, its appearance just on the verge of the *Brown* case in 1954, should be read as an early indicator of the emergent Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Thus, the chapter to come will explore how writers like Ellison and Himes imagine post-WWII African Americans might negotiate between the hope and the despair of the years leading up to the post-Civil Rights era. Likewise, this chapter also explores how Ellison and Himes engage with the trope of passing, even if it has seemingly gone out of vogue for the African American writer.

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## Chapter Two

### Police(d) Men: Ellison, Himes, Harlem

I'm not attempting an indictment of black or white racism. My stories are about people, about their lives and crimes in the ghetto. Most of the people I write about are only vaguely conscious of oppression and discrimination. It is part of their existence, and they don't even think about it.

Chester Himes from "Conversation with Chester Himes, the American Crime Writer"

Harlem is vicious  
modernism.  
BangClash.  
Vicious the way its  
made.  
Can you stand such beauty?  
So violent and transforming

Amiri Baraka from "Return of the Native"

There is a moment during the "Flight" section of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) when protagonist, Bigger Thomas, after having accidentally murdered Mary Dalton,<sup>123</sup> watches Chicago close in on him. At this point in the novel, Bigger is in hiding and is desperate to see what the outside world is saying about him, so he obtains a newspaper. While reading a paper, Bigger's eyes are drawn to a "black-and-white map of the South Side, around the borders of which [i]s a shaded portion an inch deep," and he subsequently notes the caption serving as the map's key: "Shaded portion shows area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White

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<sup>123</sup> Mary Dalton is the daughter of the white Chicago business man for whom Bigger works as a chauffeur.

portion shows area yet to be searched.”<sup>124</sup> This is a very visual moment, and Wright asks us to see what Bigger sees: a life being flattened and reduced to front page material for daily newspapers, and readers—the readers being Bigger, Chicago residents and the readers of Wright’s novel, alike—watch as the Chicago police attempt to flush Bigger out of the abandoned tenement buildings of the city’s “Black Belt.” After his first encounter with this map, whose white space is always directly proportional to his freedom, a frenzied Bigger is confronted again with a more shaded version of the first map. The second set of captions reads: “24-HOUR SEARCH FAILS TO UNEARTH RAPIST [...]. RAID 1,000 NEGRO HOMES. INCIPIENT RIOT QUELLED AT 47TH AND HALSTED.”<sup>125</sup> Bigger is caught not long after reading the second set of headlines.

Many readers of *Native Son* have noted that there is something about Bigger’s tale that is too incomplete for broad application to the multi-facetedness of African American life and culture during the mid-twentieth century. More specifically, Wright’s novel fails to complicate what newspaper coverage supposes, that Black life is black and white. As suggested by James Baldwin, Bigger’s failure as a human being can be attributed to the fact that “he has accepted the theology which denies him life, that he admits the possibility of being sub-human.”<sup>126</sup> And while Baldwin goes on to frame Bigger’s failure in terms of a failure of genre<sup>127</sup>—“The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence

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<sup>124</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980), 230.

<sup>125</sup> Wright, 239.

<sup>126</sup> James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1984), 22-23.

<sup>127</sup> Wright’s writing belongs to the school of American naturalism, which stresses either biological or socio-economic determinism.

that it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended”<sup>128</sup>—it might be argued that the genre is not the most damaging flaw of text. Instead, its failure lies in its lack of attention to community as a means for transcendence. That is not to negate the entire story of Bigger’s life, nor is it to deny that U.S. racism is unrelenting; instead, it is to say that the applicability of Wright’s novel is lamed by its failure to provide a viable community plan of action for dealing with the issues that surround mid-century race relation in the United States. Bigger’s decision to answer the problems of racial inequality—and its accompanying emotional, psychological and financial stagnation—with unplanned violence demonstrates only one avenue for African American engagement with racism. And while there is honor in Bigger’s choice to “read” his implication in the deaths of Mary Dalton and his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, as the two most formative moments in his life, Bigger’s decision to cast their deaths as his own salvation<sup>129</sup> excludes the possibility for consideration of how African Americans might make a space for themselves within the United States. Because if personal freedom is predicated on the death of women, particularly African American women, it become nearly impossible to form long-lasting community bonds—bonds that propagate.

Bigger’s disassociation from his community is further illustrated by the Black community’s reaction to his aggressions. For example, while in hiding, Bigger overhears two African American men discussing the connection between his fate and theirs:

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<sup>128</sup> Baldwin, 23.

<sup>129</sup> Of the murders, Bigger concludes that “[h]e had brought all this about. In all his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight” (225).

“Lissen, Jim. Ef he [Bigger] wuzn’t guilty, then he oughta stayed ‘n’ faced it. Ef Ah knowed where tha’ nigger wuz Ah’d turn im up ‘n’ get these white folks off me.”

“But, Jack, *ever*’ nigger looks guilty t’ white folks when somebody’s done a crime”

“Yeah; tha’s ‘cause so many of us ack like Bigger Thomas; tha’s all. When yuh ack like Bigger Thomas yuh stir up trouble.”

“But, Jack, who’s stirring up trouble now? The papers say they beatin’ us up all over the city. They don’ care whut black man they git. We’s all dogs in they sight! Yuh gotta stan’ up ‘n’ fight these folks”

“ ‘N’ git killed? Hell, naw! Ah gotta family. Ah gotta wife ‘n’ baby. Ah ain’t strtin’ no fool fight. Yuh can’t git no justice pertectin’ men who kill....”

“We’s *all* murderers t’ them, Ah tell yuh!”<sup>130</sup>

One of the most interesting elements of the dialogue between these two characters is their understanding of how Bigger’s actions affect the entire Black community. So, while Bigger understands his implication in the murders of Mary and Bessie as his own personal salvation and as a single revolutionary act, his actions, in fact, have community-wide repercussions. The Chicago’s “Black belt” finds itself under siege from a white police force. In short, Bigger’s actions, though revolutionary for him, are conceived of by Blacks and whites alike as the actions of the entire Black Chicago community. The dialogue between the two men represents the differing opinions concerning both the power and danger of Bigger’s murders, however Bigger’s own death does little to advance the community’s quest for racial equality, or safety, at the very least.

But more than illustrating the fate of Blacks, or one Black man who is meant to represent the potential of every oppressed Black man<sup>131</sup> in America, *Native Son* in some

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<sup>130</sup> Wright, 235.

ways depicts a too simple dialectical relationship between African Americans and a police system controlled by white citizens. The final images of the newspapers, where the color white is used to represent freedom and the color black is used to represent the lack of freedom (or death), sets up a binary in which African Americans are always at odds with a singular and predictable white policing system. This scenario rings true to the experience of many African Americans, and is ultimately a larger concern of this project; however, Wright's depiction of the hunt and capture of Bigger Thomas fails to capture the complicated power dynamics involved in policing the African American community. Additionally, with the bulk of the police attention focused on unpopulated buildings and in search of a single violator, Wright's depiction of the policing of Black people and the spaces they inhabit is far from developed.

So Richard Wright's weakness in *Native Son* is that of creating not only a flat character<sup>132</sup> in Bigger, but of creating an urban Black experience that has been flattened by power structures like the mass media and the police and legal systems. This nihilism of the text denies the possibility for a dynamic life, even if it be in the midst of what might be considered a well-defined "Black space." Thus, the need to add depth and texture to the mid-century Black urban experience is at the heart of this chapter. Along those lines, this chapter wrestles the life events of the African American community away from the headlines and explores the motivations and internal workings of crime and the

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<sup>131</sup> Interestingly enough, the fate of Black women is one of even less agency than Black men. Bigger first rapes and then murders Bessie, his girlfriend, and finally throws her body down a tenement airshaft. Bessie's fate, then, is one of sexual and physical violence at the hands of a Black man. Because Wright takes great pains to illustrate that Bigger's fate was fixed well before he committed any crime—he is powerless against a system under which all Black men are murderers—Bessie's is warped and confined by the same system, as well as being destroyed by sexism and misogyny.

police, topography, and community through the writings of Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes. As a result, this chapter shifts its focus from Chicago to one of the most well known “Black spaces” in the United States: Harlem, New York City. This shift is carried out because, unlike the empty Black space represented in black and white by newspapers in *Native Son*, Harlem in the writings of Ellison and Himes does not necessarily represent a lack of freedom or death for African Americans. Instead, it is as restorative as it is destructive, as peaceful as it is violent. Harlem is not empty. Its tenements are filled with people and its streets are meant to be traversed. The Harlem of Ellison and Himes is filled with contradictions that provide a rich backdrop for examining African American life mid-century, at the dawn of the Civil Rights movement.

So how exactly is the mid-century urban Black experience unflattened, given depth? One way of adding depth to this experience involves paying close attention to topography. It is necessary to get a lay of the land in order to understand the people who inhabit it. That is to say, a close reading of the literature of Ellison and Himes reveals symbolic multilayered maps of Harlem. And although the maps the two writers provide are not exactly the same,<sup>133</sup> both do give depth to the cityscape: the streets are filled with African American characters, and these streets, as well as the business establishments and homes that line them, are given names. We can begin to imagine a realistic city grid upon which characters are placed and over which they move. For instance, when the Invisible Man, the unnamed narrator/protagonist of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), first

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<sup>132</sup> It might be argued that Bigger Thomas has been flattened by a lifetime of racism.

<sup>133</sup> Lawrence Jackson’s “The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright” makes reference to the fact that Ellison critiqued Himes’ early protest novel *The Lonely Crusade*,

steps out of the subway and onto the streets of Harlem he is taken aback by what he sees: “I had never seen so many black people against a background of brick buildings, neon signs, plate glass and roaring traffic. [...] They were everywhere. So many, and moving along with so much tension and noise that I wasn’t sure whether they were about to celebrate a holiday or join in a street fight. There were even black girls behind the counters of the Five and Ten as I passed.”<sup>134</sup> Likewise, within the first pages of Chester Himes’ *Rage in Harlem* (1957), the first installment of his Harlem detective cycle featuring his now-famous detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, readers are given the exact location of the text’s main characters: “They were standing around the kitchen table. The window looked out on 142<sup>nd</sup> Street. Snow was falling on the ice-locked piles of garbage stretching like levees along the gutters as far as the eye could see.”<sup>135</sup> By placing characters within the Harlem landscape, both Ellison and Himes demonstrate that Harlem is not only populated with African Americans, but that the life events of these novels’ characters correspond to a very real space and, as a result, matter. Such precise detailing begins to add an element of authenticity to these fictionally represented experiences. And despite the fact that authenticity is not inevitably the aim of fiction, especially African American fiction, it is a necessary element in ensuring that the fictional image of African American life corresponds to a richer representation of the urban Black experience—an objective that this chapter argues is at the heart of Ellison and Himes’ fiction.

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thus severing the possibility of either man ever sharing literary ties (except for the one they shared in Wright).

<sup>134</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 159.

<sup>135</sup> Chester Himes, *Rage in Harlem* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1985), 6.

This is not to say that either Himes or Ellison is particularly invested in realism. In fact the writings of both men often border on the absurd: Ellison's *Invisible Man* begins and ends the novel underground in a hole which is lit by over 1300 light bulbs; and Himes' detective fiction is filled with senseless murders and characters invested in such farfetched schemes as a "Back to the Plantation Movement." Yet, through it all, both authors remain true to the urban experience and, most importantly, its accompanying racism—a practice which both would later define in terms of its absurdity<sup>136</sup>—through relying on geographical realities. "After witnessing the 1943 Harlem Riot, Ellison had achieved a dispassionate use of violence in his fiction," writes Lawrence Jackson, "embracing the surreal and burlesque, particularly since these techniques offered promise when illuminating traumatic moments of the African American historical past."<sup>137</sup> Likewise, Himes considered the absurdity of his texts as indicative of their realism: "My books are as authentic as the autobiography of Malcolm X. But I don't strain after authenticity when I'm writing them. I sit there laughing at the people, I believe in them so completely." For Himes, then, emotional, even when comical, connections can often

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<sup>136</sup> In an interview for the *Sunday Times Magazine* (November 9, 1969) Himes is quoted as saying, "When most people write about the American Negro his is either a functional character, or a vehicle for sociological comment. In my case the two are indivisible. My books are as authentic as the autobiography of Malcolm X. But I don't strain after authenticity when I'm writing them. I sit there laughing at the people, I believe in them so completely." Additionally, Himes titles the second volume of his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity*, making apparent his awareness with French existentialism. However, his awareness is merely awareness and not engagement—Himes never defines exactly what he means by "absurdity" in his autobiography. In fact, he notes in a 1983 interview with Michel Fabre that he did not become acquainted with surrealism (the absurd) "until the fifties, and French Friends had to explain it. I have no literary relationship with what is called the surrealist school. It just so happens that in the live of black people, there are so many absurd situations, made that way by racism, that black life could sometimes be described as surrealistic. The best expression of surrealism by black people, themselves, is probably achieved through blues musicians" (140 *Conversations with Chester Himes*).

<sup>137</sup> Lawrence Jackson, "The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright," *American Literature* 72:2 (June 2000): 337.

stand in the place of realism. Moreover, even given that both Himes and Ellison were greatly influenced by Wright's writing, both felt the need to step out from under his shadow in many ways by abandoning his naturalistic-social protest novel for more freeing novelistic forms: Himes, the perceived lower genre of detective fiction and Ellison that of the Modernist novel.<sup>138</sup>

However, providing a “realistic” portrayal of metropolitan African American experiences requires more than just adding Black characters to streets that really exist. Instead it is to provide a varied collection of experiences that resonate with those that might exist within any cityscape—i.e., racism, police brutality, poverty, violence, crime, the quest for civil rights, friendship, and community. So even if there are Bigger Thomass in the Harlem of Himes and Ellison—some even argue that Ellison's *Invisible Man* is no less one-dimensional than Bigger in his inability to take charge of his own life<sup>139</sup>—Bigger's particular brand of coping with racial inequality in the United States is not the end of the possibilities for dealing with inequality in their texts. Likewise, Ellison and Himes provide alternatives to the fear of racial violence and policing witnessed in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. These writers address the violence of racism with a sense that community might provide a safty net, while Johnson's narrator consistently flees from the Black community. As this chapter will demonstrate, Himes and Ellison enhance the landscape of urban Black American by

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<sup>138</sup> Phillip Harper argues in “‘To Become and Yet Many’: Psychic Fragmentation and Aesthetic Synthesis in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*” that Ellison's novel employs Modernist writing strategies with his concern for the individual.

<sup>139</sup> In fact, Irving Howe, in “Black Boys and Native Sons,” describes the *Invisible Man* as a “passive victim of his experience” because he believes the *Invisible Man*'s inability to take action leaves him with even less agency than Bigger.

providing a motley of character possibilities. Additionally, texts like *Invisible Man*, *Rage in Harlem*, *Real Cool Killers* and *Run Man Run* allow for a far more developed discussion of the police state of African American urban life during the mid-century. Written and published between the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement (late 1940s) and the first ten years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education* (1954), Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Chester Himes' detective fiction play out versions of the turmoil of U.S. race relations. And while there are many aspects to this culture of turmoil that it would be worthwhile to analyze, this chapter will concern itself with the following issues as they relate to the selected texts: police and police violence, detection and disguise, movement and topography, the vernacular, identity, and community. In short, this chapter explores how Ellison and Himes take the framework of urban Black life erected by Richard Wright in *Native Son*, and develop it so that it might reflect both the shifts in national policy for dealing with issues of race and the urban African Americans experiencing these shifts.

### Ralph Ellison: Invisible and Unlimited

In 1948 Ralph Ellison wrote, but did not initially publish, an essay titled "Harlem Is Nowhere."<sup>140</sup> The reader of the first few paragraphs of this essay is navigated through a basement toward the reception area of a psychiatric clinic. More disorienting than the quick turns the narrative takes around corners and up stairs, is that this free clinic, the

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<sup>140</sup> This essay was originally written for *Magazine of the Year*, 1948, but went unpublished until it appeared in *Shadow and Act* (1964), a collection of Ellison's essays written throughout the 1940's and 50's to shed light on his craft and his ideas concerning race and racism in the United States.

Lafargue Clinic, represents for Ellison the United States' first true move towards democracy. It may seem odd that Ellison binds the treatment of mental illness to democratic progress, but this peculiarity is illuminated as he considers the distortion of Harlem life symptomatic of the nation's disoriented relationship to African Americans. American racism and inequality create a world in which "[Harlem] life becomes a masquerade" where "exotic costumes are worn every day," according to Ellison.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, he believes that African Americans, particularly those living in Harlem, unable to make sense of their dual identity as citizens of the United States and as Blacks,<sup>142</sup> and are prone to a type of identity conflict characterized as mental illness. Ellison is adamant that Harlem is a place where the sickness of racism is experienced and as a result "[o]ne 'is' literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a 'displaced person' of American democracy."<sup>143</sup> So, he concludes, that through treating Harlem residents—a treatment which embodies the country's recognition that even African Americans can suffer, with acuteness, the symptoms of modern life—Blacks are given hope.

However, the most captivating element of Ellison's "Harlem Is Nowhere" is his characterization of Harlem itself. What exactly is Harlem? "Harlem is a dream," he contends—a wicked dream.<sup>144</sup> Yet Harlem is the lived reality of Blacks, "the scene and

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<sup>141</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere" in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 297.

<sup>142</sup> Here Ellison echoes W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."

<sup>143</sup> Ellison, 300.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 296.

symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth."<sup>145</sup> So Ellison's essay is less a commentary on the reality of Harlem's geographical positionality, and more a criticism of the fact that Harlem (and its residents) is nowhere on the imagined map of U.S. power and importance. Ellison believes that the nation's continued treatment of African Americans as outsiders is to blame for the alienation that seeps out in the form of insane violence for which Harlem is well known. And despite the essay's problematic pathologizing of African American life and culture, what becomes apparent is that Ellison's coupling of the "real" and "unreal" to describe Black life in Harlem provides a rich starting point for discussing the role the *place* plays in the identity formation of this (imagined) African American community.

The version of Harlem depicted in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a pre-Civil Rights Harlem. It is a symbolic space where Ellison works through issues as far-ranging as the complicatedness and impossibility of developing a cohesive Black identity and accompanying response to police brutality. However the issues tackled are neatly woven to produce a diverse fabric representative of African American life. *Invisible Man* is the story of how one man both finds and loses himself in Harlem. This man, the unnamed protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, takes a journey through space, as well as through the African American psyche. The narrative of the Invisible Man, then, begins at its end and ends where it began: an undisclosed underground location on the outskirts of Harlem. It is a circular narrative that renders Black life complicated and filled with many unexplainable incidents and aspects. Moreover, though many have

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 297.

described the novel as a quest for selfhood or a Bildungsroman,<sup>146</sup> such a characterization fails to acknowledge that throughout the novel the Invisible Man fails to come to any certainty about his identity. He “yam what [he] [y]am;” but who *is* he?<sup>147</sup> The unanswerability of that question might be discouraging, but an analysis of both his identity ambivalence and the space of Harlem is fruitful. Because when stability as an analytical objective is forgone, the story of a dynamic community in transition begins to emerge. So, as readers are unable to say with certainty who the Invisible Man is or for what he stands, Ellison creates a more realistic image of a community on the constant verge of becoming, rendering the community of Harlem, not just the novel’s narrator/protagonist, as an important site of creation. In fact, Harlem becomes a space for facilitating the growth of its members in Ellison’s novel. Unlike Bigger, whom readers always know and whose end (fate) is, likewise, seemingly preordained, Ellison’s Invisible Man remains a mystery.

Additionally, by emphasizing the Invisible Man’s relationship to Harlem and “Not-Harlem,” or those places outside of Harlem, Ellison’s narrative makes use of the Invisible Man’s contrapuntal movement between these spaces to emphasize the power of Harlem’s mutability. Furthermore, Harlem and Not-Harlem as dialectical extremes allow for extensive commentary of the status of race relations in the United States at mid-twentieth century. There are four particular symbolic spaces of importance to this novel:

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<sup>146</sup> Jim Neighbors in “Plunging (outside of) History: Naming and Self-Possession in *Invisible Man*” notes that most critics, as well as Ellison himself, offer heroicized readings of *Invisible Man*. Yet, Neighbors believes it is difficult to reconcile the idea of a holistic identity with the narrative’s unstable resolution.

<sup>147</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, (1952) 1995), 266. Even in this moment of clarity concerning his identity as a yam-loving Black man, the Invisible Man is unable to commit to recognizable pronouns to describe himself.

the Liberty Paint factory located on Long Island; the streets of Harlem; the streets of lower-Manhattan; and underground. Each of these spaces provides readers glimpses into the relationship among identity, community, and race. Likewise, they provide a way for readers to understand how boundaries function as means for policing and containing Black bodies.

First, into the streets of Ellison's Harlem. During an early-morning excursion, the Invisible Man is approached by a trickster-like character who identifies himself by various names, like Peter Wheatstraw<sup>148</sup> and Blue. Blue, a master of word-play, presses the Invisible Man into conversation with a vernacular greeting meant to solicit whether or not the Invisible Man is willing to identify and acknowledge their similarities. "What I want to know is," Blue asks the narrator, "is you got the dog?"<sup>149</sup> The Invisible Man is initially reluctant to participate in the exchange, but Blue presses on: "Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain't nobody out here this morning but us colored— Why you trying to deny me?"<sup>150</sup> Blue's greeting is important for a number of reasons. First, Blue coerces the Invisible Man into acknowledging their shared history—they are both participants in the Black migration. This fact is important in as much as it illustrates the work that the Harlem streets can do to create a space for community identification: they are both Black, they

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<sup>148</sup> This character is often thought to be a fictionalized version of the blues musician Peetie Wheatstraw, best known for having sold his soul to the devil for a successful blues career. However, in a letter written to Robert O'Meally, Ellison writes that he was not familiar with Peetie and that his Wheatstraw character was based upon childhood mythology, stemming from his incomplete knowledge of a particular story from the Black vernacular: "For a novelist and descendant of storytellers, such items of folk tradition are part of his inheritance and are to be used—much as the composers of music used the folk music of their individual backgrounds—in the expression of his own unique vision. They are part of the mother lode which supports his storytelling and are as free to be used by the conscious writer as they are by the oral tellers of tales."

are both walking the streets, and they are both from the South—with all its connotations of racism, oppression, and Black migration. Second, Blue’s coerced conversation also requires the Invisible Man to realize that the North is not without its problems: “Harlem ain’t nothing but a bear’s den,” Blue says as he proceeds to show the Invisible Man the imaginary bear bites the city has dealt him.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, Blue’s comments do the work of designating the streets of Harlem as a definitive Black space. Harlem may be a bear’s den, but as Blue points out, “it’s the best place in this world for you and me, and if times don’t get better soon I’m going to grab that bear and turn him every way but loose” (174). Harlem, and by extension urban life, is dangerous—it is a bear’s den—but it is a home and it is the safest place for Black men. The Invisible Man finds comfort in Blue’s company.

However, lest the reader get too attached to the idea of a stagnant Harlem with unwavering Black inhabitants for whom community is easy and inevitable, it should be noted that Blue is on the streets that morning collecting and transporting into Harlem discarded blueprints. He is saving the unused plans for some unknown purpose because, while he recognizes that they are useless—“Here I got ‘bout a hundred pounds of blueprints and I couldn’t build nothing,” he says—they represent unlimited possibility. Blue believes that every plan is not only worth saving, but the more plans one has, the better. In contrast, the Invisible Man believes that one plan is enough and he tells Blue as much. Blue sees the Invisible Man’s inflexibility as a disadvantage and responds to it by

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<sup>149</sup> Ellison, 173.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 174.

saying, “You kinda young, daddy-o.”<sup>152</sup> In many ways, Blue is more suited to living in the bear’s den than the Invisible Man because he is able to recognize life’s possibilities—however useless they may be—and the necessity for mutability. Nothing is perfect in life or within Harlem, and now Blue has a collection of plans he believes will somehow aid him in combat. It is a lesson whose importance it takes the Invisible Man much longer to recognize.

Recognition is a key trope in *Invisible Man*. Ellison plays with the notions of blindness and sight throughout the novel. The Invisible Man’s ability to see connections, to see the truth, to see himself in others, to see the long-term plans of others, etc., begin to weigh heavily on the narrative. At one point in the novel a character calls out to the Invisible Man, “There’s no point in blinding yourself to the truth. Don’t blind yourself...”<sup>153</sup> And such emphasis on seeing or detecting is deeply implicated in the history of racial detection in the United States. As *Plessy* made clear in 1896, there is cache and power in the ability of ordinary citizens to detect with the naked eye the visual markers of race. The whole system of segregation rests on this ability. Likewise, readers of *Invisible Man* are made aware of the importance of determining people’s real identities, real motives, and real intentions; however, the text also participates in the negation of any such ability for detection. In this way, Ellison’s novel can be said to be engaging with both the history of racial passing and racial profiling, or policing. He makes use of how these two practices encourage citizens to attempt to suss out the “true” identities of others, be they racial or not.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 175.

For example, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, after having been informed that Bledsoe, his old schoolmaster, has sabotaged his chances of ever going back to college at his alma mater, secures work at the paint factory owned by one of the college's white trustees. Traveling from Harlem to Long Island (moving from Harlem to Not-Harlem), the *Invisible Man* is welcomed by a sign which reflects the reality of race relations in the United States—the quest for racial purity: “Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints.”<sup>154</sup> The irony of this paint factory, reputed to produce the whitest white paint in the country, is that a few drops of black “dope” are added to every pint to give it its gleaming whiteness. Thus, where one-drop of black blood would taint a bloodline forever, a drop of black “dope” makes Liberty Paints suitable for even the United States government. “White! It's the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a pint any whiter. This batch right here is heading for a national monument,” exclaims the *Invisible Man*'s boss, Kimbro.<sup>155</sup> This vignette, then, should be read as a type of passing narrative, where not-quite-white paint passes for white.

The irony of the paint factory is deepened when the *Invisible Man* makes a mistake while mixing the paint. Unable to detect the difference between two black substances, he later learns that one is the “dope” and the other is paint remover; in the meantime, he puts the wrong black substance into the mixture and ruins the whole batch of paint. But in an attempt to save the order, the *Invisible Man* is instructed to put ten more drops of black “dope” into the mixture. But this addition causes the batch to take a

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

gray rather than a gleaming white hue. Yet, the miscegenated batch goes undetected by the narrator's boss: "I looked at the paint slab. [...] a gray tinge glowed through the whiteness, and Kimbro had failed to detect it. I stared for a minute, wondering if I were seeing things, inspected another and another. All were the same, a brilliant white diffused with gray," the Invisible Man tells readers.<sup>156</sup> The paint is shipped for use on national monuments.

Ellison allegorical use of paint production at Liberty Paints identifies racial miscegenation as an integral component and concern of both American and African American cultures. Thus, Ellison's *Invisible Man* might be read as a continuation of themes present in passing narratives, particularly the themes of masquerading and detection. In fact, the trope of invisibility aligns well with the activity of passing—as passing is the suppression of certain aspects of one's racial identity in order to make it invisible to the white population. That is to say, the racial identity of the successful passer is invisible to the naked eye; the passer undermines the power of racial detection, thus short-circuiting the system of racial segregation and oppression. Likewise, under a system where one's ability to see and decipher racial markers (skin color, hair texture, etc.) is valued, one's aptitude for detecting such differences is an asset. But what the Kimbro incident illustrates is that this mode of seeing/detecting is often flawed because (white) people only ever see what they desire to see.

But one can only take the similarities between *Invisible Man* and the passing narrative so far. Unlike the passing character, the Invisible Man is identifiably Black.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 205.

We later find that he is seen only as a Black man and nothing more. However, he is not deterred from attempting to operate outside of a system devoted to detecting or seeing (understanding) the motivations of others. In fact, the rest of his time at Liberty Paints, and the in novel, for that matter, the Invisible Man fights the system of identity detection. For example, due to an explosion in the paint factory the Invisible Man finds himself at the plant hospital undergoing experimental psychological and physical treatment. Upon awakening from the explosion he is asked to supply his doctors with his identity. Initially he is unable to give them the desired information: “A tremor shook me [...] I was overcome with a swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name. I shut my eyes and shook my head with sorrow. [...] I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my mind.”<sup>157</sup> The Invisible Man continues to plunge into blackness and each time he comes back without a solid identity to share with his physicians. In response the physicians become more and more annoyed with what they imagine to be his refusal to give them the answer they desire. In a last-ditch effort, they ask him to describe a character from African American folklore, Brer Rabbit. And with this question the physicians test the Invisible Man’s ability to recognize and acknowledge his Blackness.

But as he recognizes his own (racial) identity, he realizes that his physicians are using this identity as a means to exert power over him. Once they are able to figure out his name they will have the upper hand. In fact, the Invisible Man describes the search for his identity as combat in which he and his physicians are involved. As a result, the hospital scene reads like a description of torture, with the Invisible Man in search of the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 239.

trigger (his identity) that will free him from his captors' cage.<sup>158</sup> Thus, the Invisible Man decides to reclaim control over his identity by becoming both the investigator and investigated, both "detective and criminal."<sup>159</sup> And when he is finally set free from the hospital, and told his name by his physician—they knew all along—he remains unconvinced of its applicability to him. He leaves the hospital feeling as if he is "in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within" himself.<sup>160</sup> This quest for a stable identity is repeated throughout the novel. The Invisible Man still has not learned Blue's lesson concerning the power of multiple identities and possibilities.

Returned to the streets of Harlem, the Invisible Man continues to be plagued by questions of his identity. Even in the pivotal moment when he becomes a spokesperson for Harlem residents, he struggles to answer the same question first posed at the plant hospital: "Who the hell is you" a bystander asks the Invisible Man as he stands on the street watching the eviction of an old Black couple. Still unable to answer the question, he reacts by deferring the question, "Never mind, I am who I am," the Invisible Man responds.<sup>161</sup> In addition to dodging the question, the Invisible Man's attentions move to the eviction of an elderly Harlem couple. He is moved by their eviction and responds by taking control of the situation. His words rouse the crowd to action, first to attack the white man carrying out the eviction and then to move the Black couple's furniture and belongings back into their apartment.

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<sup>158</sup> The Invisible Man later plays on the similarities between the words "nigger" and "trigger" when eulogizing Tod Clifton.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 269.

His actions are seen by a group of white people who readers come to know as members of the Brotherhood, a Communist organization seeking a foothold in the Harlem. The Brotherhood sees the Invisible Man's oratory skills as an asset and proceed to recruit him for their services. What is most important about this incident, however, is that it is the first time the Invisible Man's lack of identity is conceived of as an advantage. As the Brotherhood members tell him, "[t]he longer you remain unknown to the police, the longer you'll be effective."<sup>162</sup> What follows in the narrative is the Invisible Man's rise to power within the Harlem community.

Yet, this power is not without its problems. The novel's plot unveils the complications of being a race leader, especially one hired for the purposes of recruiting for an organization that Ellison depicts as not having the most pressing concerns of Harlem's Black community at heart. The Invisible Man's anonymity is what the Brotherhood most desires. They change his name and remake him in the image of Booker T. Washington,<sup>163</sup> all with the hope that he will gather the Harlem masses to their cause. It becomes apparent that the Brotherhood wants the Invisible Man simply because he happens to look Black. Readers learn that he is no less invisible to the Brotherhood; in fact, it is his invisibility and anonymity that they most desire. But the Invisible Man is not the only race-leader-in-training; Tod Clifton is another African American being groomed by the Brotherhood. The Invisible Man's double, Clifton provides another

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>163</sup> Booker T. Washington, a Black leader, is historically depicted as a staunch supporter of racial segregation at the expense of Civil Rights. Washington's politics called for the Black community to forgo dreams of racial equality and, instead, focus on economic improvement. Thus, the Brotherhood's desire to create the Invisible Man in Washington's image illustrate their lack of interest in supporting racial-political progress.

opportunity for Ellison to demonstrate that Black identity shaped by whites poses a threat to the physical and mental wellbeing of African Americans.

Clifton's fate could be that of the Invisible Man. As the Brotherhood loses its hold on the Harlem community—the residents are unwilling to support an organization that is unwilling to make race a primary component of its platform—the Invisible Man and Clifton become estranged from each other and the concerns of the Harlem community. The next time the Invisible Man sees Clifton is in midtown Manhattan at Forty-Second Street selling dancing Sambo paper dolls. Once again, the location of Not-Harlem holds a lesson for the Invisible Man. Clifton has been driven mad by his lack of Black identity and prolonged exile from Harlem. Watching as he performs a neo-blackface routine, the Invisible Man questions why Clifton has been reduced to a Sambo doll, a caricature of his race. What he fails to realize is that Clifton has been performing this same dance for the Brotherhood all along. In an attempt to assuage his crisis of identification, the Invisible Man repeats the Brotherhood's rhetoric—“[...] only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls.”<sup>164</sup>

In spite of everything, what unfolds outside of Harlem changes the Invisible Man's feelings concerning his identity. As he watches Clifton—a once-great orator for the Brotherhood, now nothing more than a dancing Sambo—die from a gunshot wound inflicted by a white police officer, the gravity of the situation begins to sink in. Clifton's demise illustrates the risks of losing control of one's identity and relationship to the Black

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 434.

community. In witnessing Clifton's death, not only does the Invisible Man become Clifton's only historian,<sup>165</sup> but he soon comes to realize the role that the Brotherhood plays in restricting Black autonomy. "You were not hired to think," he is told by Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood.<sup>166</sup> And so begins the Invisible Man's move back to Harlem and toward autonomy.

The role of Harlem in shaping the Invisible Man's identity is complicated. Ellison's novel offers no definitive word on Black identity. Instead, what is offered is a vision of a place and a people in flux. Harlem and its inhabitants stand at the cusp of a historical moment where all sorts of possibilities—blueprints—seem achievable. Ellison's narrator embodies these possibilities as he travels through Harlem in disguise. (The disguise is necessary because the community hates the man that the Brotherhood has made him.) After being mistaken for a man named Rinehart, the Invisible Man dons a hat and a pair of sunglasses and proceeds to move through Harlem. What he learns is that Rinehart is something different to everybody in Harlem—a gangster, a preacher, a pimp, a numbers runner, and a lover. Pretending to be Rinehart frees the Invisible Man from the chains the Brotherhood placed him in and allows him finally to realize the freedom of movement:

My entire body started to itch, as though I had just been removed from a plaster cast and was unused to the new freedom of movement. In the South everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown. How many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering anyone who knew you, and how many nights? You could actually make yourself anew.

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<sup>165</sup> The Invisible Man chooses to recount the history of Clifton's death wrong, however. When asked about why Clifton was selling dolls at the time of his death, the Invisible Man replies, "I don't know. I only know that he was shot down. Unarmed." He takes control of Clifton's final identity.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities and turned away.<sup>167</sup>

What the Invisible Man finds in Harlem is possibility.

So as the novel closes, a race riot rages above ground<sup>168</sup> and the Invisible Man moves underground until the dust settles and he is able to understand what possibilities lie before him. In his movement underground, he chooses not play into a world view which privileges any particular stagnant identity. In fact, the Invisible Man burns the vestiges of his old life—a Brotherhood pamphlet, his high school diploma, Clifton's Sambo doll, a letter, a sheet of paper with the name given to him by the Brotherhood written on it—<sup>169</sup>and in so doing, creates a new life for himself. How long he stays underground is unknown, but what he finds there is freedom. He finds it not in the North or the South, but down and out-of-sight. In this space between Harlem and Not-Harlem, the Invisible Man takes the time make sense of some of the questions he began to ask himself after meeting Blue and while posing as Rinehart. Readers are left to wonder what Harlem will look like when the Invisible Man finally emerges.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 499.

<sup>168</sup> The riot stems from the community's retaliation against Tod Clifton's murder.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 570.

## Chester Himes: Doing the Police in Different Voices

In January of 1957 Marcel Duhamel<sup>170</sup> approached Chester Himes to write a crime novel for the Gallimard publishing house's *Série noir*. Himes, who, like so many of his African American contemporaries,<sup>171</sup> had left the United States four years earlier to live in Europe, was finding it difficult to sustain himself financially and agreed to write for the *Série noir* because the publisher advanced him a thousand dollars on the novel.<sup>172</sup> And while Himes's had no qualms about writing strictly for money, the success of the novel, *La Riene des pommes*,<sup>173</sup> in France encouraged him to continue writing in the genre. Ultimately Himes would come to believe that the genre of detective fiction offered him, and other African American writers as well, the optimal outlet for expressing the violence of Black life in the United States: "American violence is public life," he wrote, "it's a public way of life, it became a form, a detective story form. So I would think that any number of black writers should go into the detective story form. As a matter of fact, I feel that they could be very competent. Anyway, I would like to see a lot of them do so."<sup>174</sup> Duhamel's invitation to Himes would spark the creation of some of

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<sup>170</sup> Marcel Duhamel was the editor of the *Série noir* and had previously translated Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*.

<sup>171</sup> Himes often cites Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Melvin Van Peebles among the peers he had while living in Paris and Europe.

<sup>172</sup> In a 1970 interview, Himes told his interviewer that he only wrote the first novel because he was "very broke and desperate for some money," and "The *Série noir* was the best-paid series in France. So they starting off paying [him] a thousand-dollar advance, which was the same as the Americans were paying, and they went up to fifteen hundred dollars, which was more."

<sup>173</sup> The novel is translated and published under the titles *For the Love of Imabelle* or *A Rage in Harlem* when released in the United States.

<sup>174</sup> John Williams, "My Man Himes: An Interview with Chester Himes" in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 48.

the most interesting and rich African-American authored crime fiction of the twentieth century.

But what makes these detective novels so special are their varied topics, themes, and characterizations concerning mid-century urban Black life. From rogue police officers and cross-dressers to dope and sex fiends, the men and women who populate Himes' literary account of Harlem offer readers a version of the Black experience that is grim, dirty, but always vibrant and always moving. Moreover, the fabric of life that Himes weaves into his depiction of an unremitting Black Harlem is complex. It is a complexity that depends upon Harlem's *local color*. Or as Himes more aptly states, "I put the slang, the daily routine, and complex human relationships of Harlem into my detective novels, which I prefer to call 'domestic novels' for that reason."<sup>175</sup> In other words, creating Harlem as a domestic space, a space of "home," a space where inhabitants can be themselves, is crucial to Himes. And Himes' Harlem cycle, his "domestic novels"—which consists of eight novels<sup>176</sup> written between 1957 and 1969 with Harlem as a primary setting—depict a very intimate space. Like any domestic space, then, these novels grant agency to those with first-hand knowledge of this home space.

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<sup>175</sup> Michel Fabre, "Chester Himes Direct" in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 129.

<sup>176</sup> The Harlem cycle usually refers to *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), *The Crazy Kill* (1959), *All Shot Up* (1960), *The Big Gold Dream* (1960), *The Heat Is On* (1961), *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), and *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969). However, Himes' *Run Man Run* (1966) should be added to this list because it is also a detective novel set predominantly in Harlem, although it lacks Grave Digger and Coffin Ed. Likewise, in 1982 Himes' incomplete manuscript titled *Plan B* was published—he had been working on it at the same time he wrote *Blind Man with a Pistol*, but failed to ever complete the novel. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed meet their demises in *Plan B*, thus marking the end of the Harlem cycle.

It follows that those who are not part of the domestic space lack the intimacy, familiarity, and, thus, a certain amount of agency within Harlem. Within the Harlem cycle, more often than not, those who lack that familiarity are the white police officers. This shift in agency within Harlem is what Himes prized most about his novels. As Wendy Walters suggests, taking her cue from Himes himself, detective fiction was Himes' way of intervening in a national narrative which had rendered the average African American powerless. "Himes's detective novels allow him to control the site of nostalgia, briefly to imagine refashioning U.S. race relations and law enforcement practices," Walters writes.<sup>177</sup> Acting as the patriarch of this domestic sphere, Himes attempts to remedy the problems inherent in U.S. race relations and the Jim Crow system, both of which have contributed to the formative conditions of a space like Harlem—a space that is decidedly Black. From *A Rage in Harlem* to *Blind Man With A Pistol*,<sup>178</sup> Himes conceives of Harlem as a space where two Black police officers, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, have the power to solve crimes and protect Black citizens from themselves and, more importantly, from the white police force. Harlem, for Himes, is a place where police men and policed men can be interchangeable and, as such, the typical conceptions of white-power/Black-powerlessness are challenged.

As a result, the term "domestic" has a twofold resonance: it illuminates Himes' quest to depict a symbolic Black space that is home to its residents, as well as to underscore the very intimate story of African Americans living under a police state—a

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<sup>177</sup> Wendy Walters, "Limited Options: Strategic Maneuverings in Himes's Harlem," *African American Review*, 28:4 (1994), 615.

<sup>178</sup> It should be noted that in *Blind Man with a Pistol* Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are unable to solve the novel's mystery because of the white power-structure.

story with which he became familiar during the time he spent as prison inmate.<sup>179</sup> The tension present in Himes' fiction, the tension between Harlem as home and Harlem as police state is a key concern for this analysis. Himes attempts to articulate this tension as follows: "When I describe life in Harlem, the people live in poverty and moral misery, but retain a capacity to enjoy every moment. Most of the characters are petty criminals or victims, and many of them have only a hazy perception of the oppression they suffer, or any understanding of the link between racism and economic exploitation. Of course, all of this is part of the fabric of their lives, and they aren't thinking about it. They're far too busy surviving."<sup>180</sup> Himes is somewhat patronizing of Harlem residents' ability to understand racism as the cause of their socio-economic oppression, but his confidence in the group's ability to continue to create life's fabric in the face of oppression is visible in his novels. As Raymond Nelson notes, "[w]ithout sacrificing his bitter moral outrage, without taking his eyes from the ugly wound at which he has relentlessly pointed for some thirty-five years, he brightens his sordid criminal Harlem with the wild comedy, eccentricity of character, and exotic low-life that he inherited from the celebratory black writers of the twenties. The characters who crowd the pages of the detective stories are shockingly appropriate composites of Bigger Thomas and the lovable picaroons who wander in and out of Langston Hughes's tales of Jesse B. Semple. They are at once depraved and funny, grotesque and amiable, absurd and pragmatic, agonized and

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<sup>179</sup> Himes was sentenced to a twenty year prison term in 1928 for robbery. He served almost eight years of the term and was paroled for good behavior. It is during his prison sentence that Himes begins writing. He also read the detective fiction of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler while incarcerated. Himes claims that these two writers, along with Faulkner, influenced his writing the most.

<sup>180</sup> Michel Fabre, "Chester Himes Direct" in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 126.

witty.”<sup>181</sup> Ultimately, understanding the resilience of his characters is key to making sense of the dark and violent detective novels of Himes and the role they play in intervening in the national narrative of race relations.

To explore exactly how Himes intervenes in the national narrative of Black power/powerlessness, this analysis will deal specifically with Himes’ *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), *Run Man Run* (1959), and *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969). These particular texts have been selected because they represent a cross-section of themes that can be found throughout the Harlem cycle. Particularly, the roles topography and the policing system. Additionally, the texts have been selected because their publication dates (1957-1969) and the deteriorating success of detectives Grave Digger and Coffin Ed in solving crimes coincide with the reality of a deteriorating national belief in the possibility of racial equality for African Americans. By the time Himes writes *Blind Man With A Pistol* in 1969, the nation is being torn apart by race riots, which Himes includes in the text, and the novel’s depiction of Grave Digger’s and Coffin Ed’s ineptitude invites a discussion of contemporaneous national race relations.

### *Topography*

In much the same way as Ralph Ellison depicts the dichotomous relationship between the symbolic spaces of Harlem and Not-Harlem, Chester Himes is interested in Harlem’s role in creating and sustaining a form of African American urban identity. Himes, unlike Ellison, centers the narrative action of his novels within Harlem. And excluding *Run Man Run*, the space of Not-Harlem plays a minor role, at most, in the

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<sup>181</sup> Raymond Nelson, “Domestic Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes” in *The Critical*

novels. This outside space, instead, is often referenced only to mark Harlem's boundaries; it exists for Himes as Harlem's antithesis.

But what and where is Himes' Harlem? The answer to this question is complicated. On the one hand, Himes' Harlem exists on the map he creates through his incessant recital of street numbers and landmarks. Himes is invested in recreating a verbal map of Harlem, and it is an accurate map, made up of streets, cross-streets, and major landmarks. On the other hand, the map Himes creates is one formed out of his memories of this real space—and as we shall come to see, these memories are far from accurate. First, to his creation of a verbal map. The extended description below demonstrates Himes' ability to delineate and his interest in recreating a verbal map of Harlem.

Where 125<sup>th</sup> Street crosses Seventh Avenue is the Mecca of Harlem. To get established there, and ordinary Harlem citizen has reached the promised land, if it merely means standing on the sidewalk.

One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street connects the Triborough Bridge on the east with the former Hudson River Ferry into New Jersey on the west. Crosstown buses ply up and down the streets at the rate of one every ten minutes. White motorists passing over the complex toll bridge from the Bronx, Queens or Brooklyn sometimes have occasion to pass through Harlem to the ferry, Broadway or other destinations, instead of turning downtown via the East Side Drive.

Seventh Avenue runs from the north end of Central Park to the 155<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge where the motorists going north to Westchester County and beyond cross over the Harlem River into the Bronx and the Grand Concourse. The Seventh Avenue branch of the Fifth Avenue bus line passes up and down this section of Seventh Avenue and turns over to Fifth Avenue on 100<sup>th</sup> Street at the top of

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*Response to Chester Himes* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 54.

Central Park and goes down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square.

Therefore many white people riding the buses or in motor cars pass this corner daily. Furthermore, most of the commercial enterprises – stores, bars, restaurants, theaters, etc. – and real estate are owned by white people.

But it is the Mecca of the black people just the same. The air and the heat and the voices and the laughter, the atmosphere and the drama and the melodrama, are theirs. Theirs are the hopes the schemes, the prayers and the protest. They are the managers, the clerks, the cleaners, they drive the taxis and the buses, they are the clients, the customers, and the audience; they work it, but the which man owns it. So it is natural that the white man is concerned with their behavior; it's his property. But it is the black people's to enjoy. The black people have the past and the present, and they hope to have the future.<sup>182</sup>

Himes maps, very specifically, the boundaries of Harlem: it is located in upper-Manhattan, starting about 110<sup>th</sup> St (above Central Park); it is bordered on either side by water, the Hudson and the Harlem Rivers; and it is linked to the rest of the city and boroughs by a network of bridges, ferries, streets, and subway tunnels. It is a precise map whose fictional grid is rendered with an accuracy that Himes, through frequent visits to Harlem during his expatriation, would spend years developing. Himes' devotion to his realistic verbal maps offers readers a clear sense of the space within which the characters of his novels interact and, more importantly, live (or die, more often than not).

But more than just detailing a map of Harlem, Himes' attention to Harlem's contours—from the natural and manmade structures that mark its boundaries to the apartment buildings and historic landmarks that fill the space—creates a sense that every recess of Harlem is important, that every space has some symbolic importance to the plot

and character. Even his choice to call Harlem “Mecca,” a symbolic space in its own right, serves as a signal to readers that the site holds a power and is a refuge for its inhabitants.

However, the Harlem that Himes describes in his domestic series is the Harlem of his memory. Correct in topographical detail, Himes made no secret of the fact that he was not a Harlem resident. “I didn’t know what it was like to be a citizen of Harlem; I had never worked there, raised children there, been hungry, sick or poor there,” Himes writes. “The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real: I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books.”<sup>183</sup> Similarly, Himes recounts in an interview an incident involving a Black college professor who attempted to chastise him for being an inaccurate writer of Harlem and, as a result, an inauthentic spokesperson for the Black condition. Himes responds to the accusation by stating that he “had created a Harlem of [his] mind; that [he] had never attempted to be a spokesman for any segment of the black community.”<sup>184</sup> Each of these quotations brings to bear, once again, the question of realism on this analysis.

How is the gap between realism and memory bridged, especially when that memory has no substantive experiential base? Responding to Himes’ admission that he had never lived in Harlem, Michael Denning suggests that Himes’ stories should be considered “topographies of this unreal city [Harlem], a mapping of its symbolic

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<sup>182</sup> Chester Himes, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, 1969 (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 19-20.

<sup>183</sup> Chester Himes. *My Life of Absurdity: The Autobiography. Vol 2*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 126.

<sup>184</sup> Michael Mok, “Chester Himes” in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 105.

landscape.”<sup>185</sup> “The Harlem of his [Himes’] topography assaults the imaginary Harlem of the stories of white America,” according to Denning.<sup>186</sup> Denning’s assessment of Himes’ novels, and Himes’ own assessment of those same novels, encourages readers to think of the domestic detective cycle as a guide to understanding a *type* of urban Black experience. The creation of the Harlem cycle is an attempt to reappropriate a space that, as Himes describes it, is “owned by white people.” So, the Harlem domestic series is both an assertive representation of the African Americans community’s hold on its past, present, and future,<sup>187</sup> along with Himes’ own attempt to take hold of a narrative that has been the “property” of a white imaginary for too long. Thus, to think of Harlem as a symbolic space where various allegories of U.S. race relations in circulation during the mid-twentieth century can be explored from an African American perspective, allows for the simultaneous commingling of realism and memory.

From Harlem streets, apartments, basements, restaurants, bars and crime scenes to the police station, Himes’ domestic detective novels offer readers varied glimpses into Black life in Harlem. But this is, after all detective fiction, so much of the action in the Himes’ Harlem series takes place “off the beaten path.” Readers are given access to marginal spaces, but, more importantly, they are shown the ways in which marginal spaces can be manipulated by characters. We see the insides of pot dens, abandoned funeral parlors, criminal hideouts, and brothel bedrooms more frequently than we ever

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<sup>185</sup> Michael Denning, “Topographies of Violence: Chester Himes’ Harlem Domestic Novels” in *The Critical Response to Chester Himes* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 157.

<sup>186</sup> Denning, 167.

<sup>187</sup> The connection between the “lesser genres” of detective fiction and science fiction will become more apparent as this project progresses. However, Himes’ attention to the future as a concern for the African American provides a direct link to later chapters.

see the inside of “respectable” homes—occasionally characters will visit family and friends who live outside of Harlem, but they always seem out of place. In fact, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, who live on Long Island or Queens depending on what book one reads, are rarely placed in their homes. What begins to develop, then, is an understanding of these marginal spaces within Harlem are metonymical to a greater Harlem. Looking back at Himes’ description of Harlem as a space that outsiders often travel around or “pass through” on the way to someplace else, so it is with these marginal spaces. They are overlooked and underused; they are dangerous. Himes’ novels are filled with descriptions of Harlem spaces that are “dark, deserted, dismal [...] eerie, shunned and unpatrolled at night, where a man could get his throat cut in perfect isolation with no one to hear his cries and no one brave enough to answer them if he did.”<sup>188</sup> In many ways Himes’ Harlem is exactly the Harlem of the white imaginary—it is violent, dirty, and filled with seemingly unredeemable residents.

Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on high banks of the Hudson River, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of the sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts. Stick a hand in and draw back a nub.

*That is Harlem.*

The further east it goes, the blacker it gets.<sup>189</sup>

More often than not, Himes describes Harlem as a cesspool filled with cannibalizing, Black piranhas.

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<sup>188</sup> Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem*, 1957 (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 67.

<sup>189</sup> Himes, 93.

But this is the very image of Harlem that Himes wishes to expropriate. He redeploys this version of Harlem by recasting the milieu. Whereas Harlem appears at a distance to be a fetid ocean of tenements, in Himes' Harlem no space is exactly what it appears to be. Himes' attention to perspective—being at a distance versus being in the midst of—creates a system whereby those who never enter these marginal spaces are never able to decipher the complicated eco-systems these spaces support. Most of these marginal spaces serve a multiple array of functions for residents. For instance, in *A Rage in Harlem*, Goldy, the cross-dressing, nun-impersonating, brother of the tale's protagonist, conducts all his business in the back of a tobacco-store, “which fronted for a numbers drop and reefer shop.”<sup>190</sup> Additionally, this shop serves as the hangout for a group of delinquent boys. Adding another layer, Goldy uses his room in the back to shoot-up speedballs and hatch his own confidence games. As a result, readers are shown the underbelly, the potential depth of every space in Harlem.

Himes' continues to explore the multiplicity of Harlem spaces in *Blind Man With A Pistol*. The novel opens on a sign in the window of a long-condemned house that reads: “Funerals Performed.” Neighbors have noticed an onslaught of Black nuns entering and exiting the building, but have investigated no further because they assume that the building is being used as a convent: “The colored neighbors just assumed it was a convent, and that it was in such bad repair seemed perfectly reasonable in view of the fact that it was obviously a jim-crowed convent, and no one ever dreamed that white

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<sup>190</sup> Himes, 28.

Catholics would act any different from anyone else who was white.”<sup>191</sup> Soon after the nuns’ foot traffic is noticed by the neighbors, another sign appears in the window: “Fertile womens, lovin God, inquire within.”<sup>192</sup> It is not until this sign appears in the window that the police are moved to investigate the space. What they find inside is a old Black man named Reverend Sam, his eleven wives, and more than fifty naked children eating at a trough. The smell of feces and chitterlings and other animal bowels plagues the air. Questioning reveals that Sam is a Mormon, the father of all fifty children and that he likes to keep twelve wives for religious purposes—hence the sign in the window for fertile women. Sam’s hypersexualized household—the detectives make note that the genitalia of Sam’s young sons appear to be elongated—plays into antiquated stereotypes concerning Black sexual prowess. And Himes does little to dispel this myth and others concerning the viability of a traditional African American family. In fact, we find later that Sam is part of an illegal child smuggling ring. His children are being given away to whites for purposes that remain unclear.<sup>193</sup>

What begins to take shape is the expected narrative of Black sexuality, family disorder and foul living conditions. But Himes distorts and hyperbolizes this well-known narrative until it becomes unrecognizable to (white) readers<sup>194</sup> expecting a certain version of Black identity. Even the white police officers are forced to admit the implausibility of

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<sup>191</sup> Chester Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, 1969 (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 7.

<sup>192</sup> Himes, 8.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 36-7.

<sup>194</sup> I am going out on a limb here designating the readers of Himes’s novels as white. I feel justifies in taking this step, however, because all of these texts were published and released in France first. Himes often commented that his readership was predominantly a white, French audience, who do not get him. Likewise, his U.S. readership does not get established until the 1980’s when Vintage begins to republish his

what they find in the condemned house; they are frustrated by questioning Sam and his family because all of their answers are all too expected. And herein lies the power of this particular symbolic space. Reverend Sam's "home" is both what whites expect and what they believe can not exist. Himes reclaims Black sexuality and the Black home and family, by creating a space so foul and unimaginable that it is untouchable by the white community. Police are expelled.

In addition to creating a hyperbolic vision of Black identity, Himes uses the strategy of drawing attention to the ways in which Harlem creates palimpsestic spaces—new spaces built upon old ones, with the new space never fully erasing the place that came before it. Similar to his use of Goldy's "office" to illustrate how Harlem consists of many spaces that are used for a motley of purposes by a cross-section of Harlem residents, in *Blind Man With A Pistol* Himes explores how these spaces remain in constant circulation. Unlike the empty tenements that Bigger Thomas hides out in Chicago, Himes' Harlem is fully occupied. And, more importantly, like a Middle Eastern city, Harlem is built upon itself but the imprint of the past is never far from the surface. It is this imprint that outsiders find confusing. One such palimpsestic space is the auto insurance office of Seymour Rosenblum. Himes writes that a sign, which reads, "CHICKEN AUTO INSURANCE, Seymour Rosenblum, " was often misunderstood by white motorists driving through Harlem.<sup>195</sup> He goes on to note that "white motorists thought that the Negro speaker was selling 'chicken auto insurance' for Seymour

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detective fiction. Also, Himes's detective fiction does not appear in any of the major anthologies of African American fiction published recently.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 21.

Rosenblum. They could believe it. ‘Chicken’ had to do with the expression, ‘Don’t be chicken!’ and that was the way people drove in Harlem”<sup>196</sup> However, the “chicken” part of the sign was left over from a bankrupted restaurant had been replaced by Mr. Rosenblum’s insurance company. Yet the layers to the space go deeper. Besides glossing a history of the vexed relationship between Blacks and Jews in Harlem, Himes posits this site as a site of racial revolution. The genuine use of this space is for Marcus Mackenzie to preach the gospel of brotherhood. Mackenzie, a Black preacher, is convinced that the answer to the U.S. race problem is for Black and white people to march half-naked through the streets of Harlem. However farfetched Mackenzie’s plan, his concern for an answer to the race problem in the United States underscores the relationship between national politics and Harlem’s symbolic spaces. This history is layered, with each layer influencing the one that will come after it. History of space and race is the unavoidable truth of Himes’ use of layered symbolic spaces in the domestic series.

### *Police(d) Men*

Just as Himes is unremitting in his quest to problematize mainstream notions of Harlem, he is equally concerned with disrupting notions of identity. For that reason, there are two types of men in Himes’ detective fiction: police men and policed men. To say that these positions fall down racial lines would be to undermine the complicated racial scenario that Chester Himes creates in each of his novels. Because Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are Black police officers and, at least at the start of the domestic series,

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 21.

control Harlem with violence and guns, as well as control the white precinct's relationship to Black Harlem, the typical "white police officers against Black residents" scenario is hard to sustain in these books. While Wright constructed the process of Black criminal identification as systematic, Himes constructs narratives in which the process of detection and policing are at time unsystematic and unreliable. Moreover, policing Harlem is a practice that requires community involvement—sometimes voluntary, sometimes coerced by violence—both Black and white. But the aim, then, is to work within the system of policing to make it impossible for white police officers to perpetuate racism-induced police brutality in Harlem—Digger and Coffin are the only police officers who have geographical, physical, and intellectual access to Harlem residents. As Wendy Walter's points out, "their license for brutality is based on the police department's utter reliance on them as skilled readers of Harlem's behavioral and linguistic codes."<sup>197</sup> However, rather than supplying the white police with Black victims, they act as "community protectors." Grave Digger and Coffin Ed complicate a notions of Black criminality with their insistence that Harlem residents are not all criminals. This complication is something Himes encouraged. When asked if he thought Grave Digger and Coffin Ed were "sellouts" to their race because they policed Harlem with violence, Himes responded by saying that he had created them as idealized versions of Black police. "I replaced a stereotype," says Himes, "I've taken two people who would be anti-black in real life, and made them sympathetic."<sup>198</sup> Unlike the "real" police, they are able

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<sup>197</sup> Wendy Walters, "Limited Options: Strategic Maneuverings in Himes's Harlem," *African American Review*, 28:4 (1994), 618.

<sup>198</sup> Michel Fabre, "Interview with Chester Himes" in *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 85.

to protect Harlem because they care. So, while they are representatives of the law, they are just as interested in protecting Harlemites as they are in solving crime.

In no other of the domestic novels is Grave Digger's and Coffin Ed's commitment to protecting Black Harlem more apparent than in *The Real Cool Killers*. This novel centers around the death of a white man in Harlem. As the story progresses we learn that the white man who has been murdered is a sexual pervert with a penchant for beating under aged Black girls. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's investigation is juxtaposed with a larger, white police investigation of the same murder. But where Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are interested in getting to the bottom of the murder, the white police officers cling to racial stereotypes and rely on excessive violence to little avail.

Uniformed [white] police stood on the roof, others were coming and going through the entrance; still others stuck their heads out of front windows to shout to other cops in the street. The other front windows were jammed with colored faces, looking like clusters of strange purple fruit in the stark white light.

“You can see for yourselves we're looking for the killer,” the chief said. “Were going through those buildings with a fine-toothed comb, one by one, flat by flat, room by room. We have the killer's description. He's wearing toolproof handcuffs. We should have him in custody before morning. He'll never get out of that dragnet”

Rather than investigate the events leading up to the white man's murder, a massive manhunt is initiated and every Black person in the ghetto is treated like the potential killer by the white police force.<sup>199</sup> The police let racial slurs fly and violence ensues, but they are still unable to detect who done it. The white police investigation is impeded at

every pass by the Real Cool Moslems, a group of teenaged delinquents who disguise themselves as Arabs<sup>200</sup> when on the streets of Harlem. Most of the Harlem community knows who the boys are in “real” life, but the police are unable to coerce their identities out of any residents. In fact, when they end up in the hideout for the Moslems and come face-to-face with the group and its leader, who later incriminates himself as the murderer, the police are still unable to be sure of the group’s identity.

In the midst of this manhunt we find Grave Digger and Coffin Ed given the charge by their Lieutenant to get to the bottom of the murder. “You know Harlem, you know where you have to go, who to see,” the Lieutenant tells Grave Digger. Their familiarity with Harlem is valued and allows them to conduct a less oppressive (no less violent, however) search for the white man’s murderer. According to Denning, the central roles of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger in Harlem “comes not as we have seen, from their position as heroes or centers of consciousness, but as mediators, between black and white, life and death, law and crime.”<sup>201</sup> As Denning points out, the two detectives are successful because they can solve crimes for the white establishment, and in so doing, keep the Harlem community safe from that establishment. It is Grave Digger who after all uncovers the sex ring surrounding the white murder victim.

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<sup>199</sup> Wendy Walter’s notes that Himes’ descriptions of the Black faces as “strange purple fruit” resonate with the blues song “Strange Fruit” which alludes to lynching. Walter’s suggests that the scene has the potential to become a lynching.

<sup>200</sup> Throughout this section on Himes references to Middle Eastern and Arab culture have been made. I do not believe it is merely a coincidence that Himes is playing with the connections between African Americans and Arab culture. Written in the midst of the rise of a Black Muslim identity association in the United States, Himes was aware of the African American relationship to Islam. Moreover, the connection between a history of profiling of discrimination against Blacks in the United States helps to us to elucidate and see patterns in the United States’ contemporary relationship to the Arab world and the profiling of Arab Americans in the United States.

But Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are not Harlem residents; they live in one of the boroughs when not engaged in crime detection. As a result their ability to read the codes of Harlem life are not always consistent. As Grave Digger admits, “But this is Harlem. Nobody knows all the connections here.”<sup>202</sup> For instance, throughout *The Real Cool Killers*, the Real Cool Moslems are able to keep hidden from Coffin Ed that his daughter is a part of their gang, and that she is the lover of a prominent gang member. Coffin Ed’s daughter, Evelyn (a.k.a. Sugartit, when she hangs out in Harlem), remains undetectable to him because no one will let him in on her moniker. Coffin Ed spends the bulk of the novel questioning after Sugartit, who we learn was to be the next sexual victim of the white man whose murder in Harlem ignites novel’s investigation. The web of disguises and code names makes it difficult for anyone outside of Harlem to decipher the multiple relationships that exists between residents.

Moreover, by the time Himes writes *Blind Man With A Pistol*, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are as confounded by Black Harlem as some of their white colleagues. Again this novel revolves in many ways around the murder of a white man in Harlem. And again the reason behind the murder is sexual—he is killed while engaging in gay sex. But this time Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are unable to get to the bottom of the mystery. Citywide politics—the murder victim has unexplained ties to government officials—intervene and call off the search for the murderer. *Blind Man With A Pistol* is the story of a Harlem in transition—it is a space where even the best Black detective cannot make

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<sup>201</sup> Michael Denning, “Topographies of Violence: Chester Himes’ Harlem Domestic Novels” in *The Critical Response to Chester Himes* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 160.

<sup>202</sup> Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*, 1959 (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 43.

sense of the power dynamics with which they are presented. “All we’re doing is losing leads. We’re as bad off as two Harlem prostitutes barefooted and knocked up,” an exacerbated Grave Digger confesses to his Lieutenant.<sup>203</sup> The Lieutenant responds by telling them that they’ve been in Harlem for too long, that they are no longer able to detect with fresh eyes the changing Harlem milieu. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are forced to watch crimes go unsolved, riots break out, and a confused blind man kill innocent people in a Harlem-bound subway train. *Blind Man With A Pistol* marks the end of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed.

Yet Chester Himes had been offering counterpoints of authority for a long time. As early as *A Rage In Harlem*, there are signs that point to the fact that the two Black detectives are not the only people policing Harlem. The dope-loving, nun-impersonating Goldy provides a site of counter-authority in *A Rage in Harlem*. An undercover officer of sorts, Goldy spends the bulk of his time on the Harlem streets gaining familiarity with the residents and monitoring their behavior. When his brother, Jackson, comes to him for help in finding his girlfriend, Imabelle, and retrieving the money he has lost to a group of grifters, Goldy is quick to realize that Jackson has been exploited by both the grifters and Imabelle. Like any good detective, though, Goldy checks his leads. And it is his methods that are most indicative of the ways in which white power structures can be circumvented by those outside of the structure. “So he [Goldy] put on his gray wig and white bonnet and went down to the Harlem branch post-office on 125<sup>th</sup> Street to study the rogue’s gallery of wanted criminals.” Through studying the pictures and visiting the

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<sup>203</sup> Chester Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, 1969 (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 158-59.

“dice games, the bookie joints, the barbecue stands, the barber shops, professional offices, undertakers’, fleaheavens, grocery stores, meat markets called ‘The Hog Maw,’ ‘chitterling Country,’ Pig Foot Heaven,”<sup>204</sup> Goldy begins to piece together the narrative of fool’s gold, confidence games, and murder. Goldy occupies the position of policed and police men, making it difficult to draw a distinction between the two.<sup>205</sup>

*Run Man Run* is another novel in which Himes offers a counter-narrative to the traditional policing story. The novel begins when a drunk, white cop walks into an alley convinced that three late-night porters for a luncheonette have stolen his car. He proceeds to kill the two of them in cold blood, and shoots the last. This third porter, Jimmy, escapes before the police officer, Walker, can murder him. The novel, then, chronicles Jimmy’s quest to remain alive after implicating Walker in the murders. Although readers know from the start that Walker is guilty, the characters in the novel are harder to convince. Everyone thinks Jimmy has gone insane and Walker uses this misrepresentation to his advantage to track Jimmy throughout Harlem. The novel ends with Walker’s brother-in-law solving the mystery, leaving Jimmy free to start a life with his fiancé, Linda Lou.

But the tone of *Run Man Run* is different from that of the detective novels featuring Grave Digger and Coffin Ed; it is much more typical in its depiction of white-on-Black violence: a white cop controls the narrative of Black violence, even when the

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<sup>204</sup> Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem*, 1957 (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 37.

<sup>205</sup> Goldy is ultimately killed by the grifters, but it is not before he has totally figured out the mystery behind what is in Imabelle’s trunk. Himes seems to realize that free agents like Goldy have their place within the Harlem community and the policing system, but because they are so close to the community, they are a higher risk involved in their type of investigation.

Black man happens to be innocent. However the novel does attempt to intervene in the police power narrative in an interesting way when Jimmy decides to pursue Walker. Inverting the police-policed scenario, Jimmy decides he must kill Walker in order to free himself.

After making his decision to kill Walker, there is a moment in *Run Man Run* where Jimmy stands in front of a bookstore in Harlem and reads the book titles of various Harlem Renaissance writers whose books are displayed in the window. He is standing in front of the bookstore waiting to buy an illegal gun, and it is at this moment, while reading the titles of Black-authored book that Jimmy feels secure: “Suddenly he felt safe. There, in the heart of the Negro community, he was lulled into a sense of absolute security. He was surrounded by black people who talked his language and thought his thoughts; he was served by black people in businesses catering to black people; he was presented with literature of black people. Black was a big word in Harlem. No wonder so many Negro people desired their own neighborhood, he thought. They felt safe; there was safety in numbers.”<sup>206</sup> Literature becomes a sort of palliative from the stresses of policing. Moreover, literature is implicated in the reclamation of not only the space in which African Americans live, but the lives which they lead there. Literature, that is, reminds Jimmy that Harlem is his “safe space,” his Mecca, and he has to fight for his right to control its narrative. “I’m going to kill the schizophrenic bastard and keep on living myself,” exclaims Jimmy with a passion.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Chester Himes, *Run Man Run* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1966), 152. This quote is also interesting because it links Black Arts to Black space. Jimmy feels safe in Harlem because he is reminded out a history of literary production.

<sup>207</sup> Himes, 162.

Jimmy's plan to confront Walker backfires because Walker is able to shoot faster than Jimmy—his police training has made him a far better shot. Walker leaves Jimmy for dead and makes his way back downtown to kill the final witness to his original crime. He is, however, apprehended by Brocks, his brother-in-law, who also happens also to be the police detective assigned to the case. Himes, in a last attempt to make apparent the corruption of the police system, has Walker and his brother-in-law plot a final counter-narrative to the one that Jimmy will tell in order to guarantee that Walker enters an insane asylum rather than a prison:

“What happened to you that night?”

“I don't know. Just drinking too much I suppose.”

“No,” Brock said. “It was more than that.”

“Maybe too many women,” Walker said.

“No, not that either,” Brock said. “Are you sick?” he asked.

Walker stared at him blankly for a moment. “You mean insane?”

“No, I mean sick physically,” Brock said. “Syphilis or cancer or something like that.”

Walker broke out in a sudden boyish laugh. “Not that I know of, unless I have syphilis of the brain.”

“That could be,” Brock said.

“What do you think they'll do with me?” Walker asked.

“it was a break for you that you beat up those two women,” Brock said “That will probably get you into the nut house.”<sup>208</sup>

The power of the white police narrative takes priority once more. In fact, Brock even intimates that he had attempted to fix the case so that no one would ever know that he had killed the Black men in the luncheonette, “I thought you'd know I wanted you to get rid of the gun; I thought you'd have sense enough to see that.”<sup>209</sup> Unwilling to accept the final story, Walker goes for his gun to kill Brock and Brock kills him instead.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 188-89.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 189.

The novel closes with Jimmy recovering from another non-fatal gunshot wound, inflicted again by Walker. And while his plan to police the police has failed, Himes' readers are given the sense that Jimmy's actions, successful or not, are important. Jimmy's drive is to tell his story. "But I want to explain to you [why I went after Walker]. You got to know," he tells his girlfriend. To take control of a narrative that has seemingly spun out of control is what is at stake for Jimmy, and Himes, for that matter, in *Run Man Run*.

### Conclusion

In short, both Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes attempt to complicate the narrative of the mid-century urban Black experience. Ellison suggests that Harlem can be a space where African Americans might begin to experience the freedom of possibilities. With blueprints as a guiding metaphor, Ellison illustrates that plans, and lots of them, will be key to the future of Harlem residents. Harlem, for Ellison, represents a site of unfixed identities. The Invisible Man's quest for his identity is left open ended, thus, validating the possibility that African Americans have the power to shape and mold themselves.

Likewise, Himes challenges what it means to police and to be policed. He attempts to intervene in a well-known narrative where African Americans have been cast simply as powerless criminals. Traditionally unable to imagine themselves as viable agents for self- and community protection, from Goldy to the Real Cool Moslems and Jimmy, Chester Himes' domestic cycle offers counter images of Black-white power dynamics. I would argue that each man authors versions of the same space, using different genres to do it, in order to highlight all the possibilities that Ellison was unable

to recognize. Ellison and Himes create a Black space full of potential and lacking in the extreme nihilism of Wright's *Native Son*.

Both Ellison and Himes create narratives that encourage readers to consider the relationship between racial passing and racial profiling. From Ellison's description of the work that goes on in the Liberty Paint Factor to Himes's construction of Harlem as a police state, the narrative of Black life written by African Americans and this narrative's relationship to the U.S. national narrative concerning how control this life are at constant odds. Himes and Ellison, through engaging many of the motifs recognizable as part of the passing and policing narratives, attempt to redefine both activities in order to provide a more textured vision of African American life during the height of the struggle over race relations in the United States.

Signpost 3: Communities Against the Law—Patricia Williams and Community Formation.

In an article published in the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* (1987), Patricia Williams recounts her early career as a lawyer in Los Angeles, CA and the daily walk down courthouse halls “lined with waiting defendants and families of defendants, almost all poor, Hispanic and/or black,” who, as she passed, “stretched out their arms, and asked [her] for [her] card.”<sup>210</sup> Besides calling attention to a disturbing trend in which the American legal system has become a family-affair and the courtroom an uncanny “family room” for a disproportionate number of men and women of color, Williams also draws attention to the issue of a knowledge gap between law practitioners and their clients. The description of the walk down the courthouse hallways makes disturbingly real the untrained person of color’s inability to wield any power on his or her own behalf under the legal system—the discourse of law is not universal, yet it makes itself universally felt. Williams,<sup>211</sup> an African American woman, notes that those who reached out to her in the hallways, reached out with a profound sense of “helplessness—a knowledge that without a sympathetically effective lawyer (whether judge, prosecutor or defense attorney) they would be lining those halls of the lockup for a long time to

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<sup>210</sup> Patricia Williams, “Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights” in *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 22 (Spring 1987), 402.

<sup>211</sup> Although Williams is trained as a lawyer, in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* she makes clear that she is not immune to racism. In fact, Williams recounts a story of how she was denied access to a United Colors of Benetton store in New York City. Couched as a commentary on legal writing, Williams’s narrative illustrates the powerlessness many African Americans, even those trained to legally defend themselves: “I am still struck by the structure of power that drove me into such a blizzard of rage. There was almost nothing I could do [...] that would humiliate [the clerk] the way he humiliated me” (ARR 45).

come”<sup>212</sup> The law’s ability to affect drastically the lives of people of color is not a new idea.

In fact, as Williams points out, the American legal system continually (historically and presently) manages to devote itself, especially in the case of racial minorities, to the denial of rights rather than to their granting or defense:

rights are to law what conscious commitments are to the psyche. This country’s worst historical moments have not been attributable to rights-assertion, but to a failure of rights-commitment. From this perspective, the problem with rights discourse is not that the discourse is itself constricting, but that it exists in a constricted referential universe. The body of private laws epitomized by contract, including slave contracts, for example, is problematic not only because it endows certain parties with rights, but that it denies the object of contract any rights at all.<sup>213</sup>

Williams’s assessment of the relationship between a denial of civil rights and contracts is interesting if one considers the United States Constitution as a contract, a contract into which many Americans enter simply by virtue of being born in the United States. To call the Constitution a contract acknowledges that it stands as a binding agreement of rights and responsibilities between citizens and the government. And in a perfect world the Constitution is supposed to function both as a champion and as a protector of the citizen, while also securing American democracy—itsself often placed in metonymic correspondence with each individual American citizen. So with the purpose of protection in mind, the Constitution becomes a framework through which legislation must pass. And legislation that fails to fit the constitutional framework is argued and revised until able to fit, or be determined to fit, within the confines of the document.

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<sup>212</sup> Williams, 403.

Yet the rights granted by the Constitution often become muddied when applied to African Americans,<sup>214</sup> a point illustrated by the Supreme Court in 1896 when it allowed the *separate but equal* train car legislation to pass through the constitutional framework. However morally offensive the legislation may seem, as Williams argues, the real outrage should come from the judicial action's irreverence toward the bodies involved. The Court's decision in *Plessy*, by eliminating African Americans' presence and importance in legal decision-making, strikeout black involvement in the constitutional contract of the United States.<sup>215</sup> Constitutionally, *Plessy* signals the government's post-reconstruction commitment to denying a valued space within the national contract for African American citizens—the case makes Black train riders invisible to white train riders. That said, the following chapter will explore science fiction cinema's reaction to the nation's denial of the relevance of marginalized, mobilized bodies.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 424.

<sup>214</sup> The Constitution explicitly left out black slaves.

<sup>215</sup> In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1819) the Court declared that slaves were not citizens and thus weren't entitled to the rights and privileges granted to citizens by the Constitution. Although the decision was overruled by the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, the decision in *Plessy* demonstrates a denial of full Constitutional rights to African Americans.

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## Chapter Three

### Passing into the Future: Passing and Policing in Contemporary Science Fiction Films

White at last! Gone was the smooth brown complexion.  
Gone were the slightly full lips and Ethiopian nose.  
Gone was the nappy hair that he had straightened so  
meticulously ever since the kink-no-more lotions first  
wrenched Aframericans from the tyranny and torture of  
the comb. There would be no more expenditures for  
skin whiteners; no more discrimination; no more  
obstacles in his path. He was free! The world was his  
oyster and he had the open sesame of pork-colored skin!  
--George Schuyler, *Black No More*

A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice.  
--Ruth Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference"

I want more life, Fucker.  
--Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

Toni Morrison gives away the ending to *The Bluest Eye* (1970) within the first few pages of the novel. Even before the story-proper begins, readers know that Pecola will be raped and impregnated by her father, that he will die, and so will her child. And as Morrison's narrator tells us, "[t]here is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how."<sup>218</sup> Pecola's story is one of a young Black girl driven to madness by a world that privileges whiteness. Pecola, we are told often, thinks herself ugly and longs for blue eyes; but more importantly, she longs to escape from her life and into a world accessible only to those who see it through blue eyes. Her quest is the novel's namesake. We, as readers, are constantly reminded that we must take refuge in understanding *how* the characters of Morrison's novel react to a foreboding racism, because many *whys* remain unfathomable even as the novel closes.

Moreover, Morrison's narrative technique, providing the end of the story before it begins, encourages us to think about how *The Bluest Eye* is a type of futuristic novel. That is to say, the narrative begins by plotting both the future and the past simultaneously.

Told predominantly from the perspective a young Black girl coming of age at the same time as Pecola, *The Bluest Eye* focuses on how young women of color learn to hate themselves because of their lack of whiteness. Framed in terms of beauty, this novel is about the racism inherent in U.S. culture—a culture of white privilege. One of the most intriguing elements of *The Bluest Eye* is the way the novel speaks to a long tradition in African American literary production that attempts to make sense of the senseless privileging of whiteness—a tradition that is made apparent by the existence of racial passing narratives. So when Morrison's narrator instructs readers to forgo their attachments to the "why" of one little girl's quest for the bluest eyes and instead cling to understanding "how" a little Black girl attains blue eyes, she is speaking out of a long tradition.<sup>219</sup> And as part of this tradition, the narrator's request in *The Bluest Eye* asks us to reconsider what the traditional passing narrative looks like. The novel introduces the question of whether or not racial passing can be achieved just as easily through a psychological disengagement with Blackness as it might be achieved through disassociation with a perceived Black phenotype.

However, before Morrison even imagined Pecola, George Schuyler wrote *Black No More* (1931). A satirical novel that imagines a world in which Blackness *can* be

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<sup>218</sup> Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). New York: Plume, 1994. 7.

<sup>219</sup> From texts like Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* to Larsen's *Passing* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* which explore race and identity.

eliminated through medical treatment, Schuyler's text is one of the first African American-authored science fiction novels. Lacking the poignant longing after whiteness that is portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*, *Black No More* provides instant gratification; the "why" of racism, the desire not to be Black is never questioned. But unlike Morrison's novel, the "how" of such a racial transformation eludes readers. After observing vitiligo<sup>220</sup> sufferers, Schuyler's fictional doctor, Dr. Junius Crookman, whose name underscores the duplicitous nature of his treatment-turned-scheme, develops a medical procedure that he believes is destined to "solve the American race problem."<sup>221</sup> Lest you be encouraged by Crookman's claims, think that he might be on to something, his treatment remains purposefully vague throughout the novel: he tells a group of reporters that he cannot "divulge the secret [of the procedure] any more than to say that it is accomplished by electrical nutrition and glandular control. Certain gland secretions are greatly stimulated while others are considerably diminished."<sup>222</sup> Readers are given a glimpse of the "sparkling" apparatus that resembles a "cross between a dentist's chair and an electric chair," into which patients are helmeted and "bottles filled with strangely colored fluids" are pumped into their bodies, presumably.<sup>223</sup> This scientific endeavour is conducted in the name of whiteness. Shrouded in mystery, then, as Schuyler's novel progresses, readers learn little more than that millions of African Americans enter Crookman's Black-No-More sanitariums with Black skin and exit with the anonymity and opportunity that only white skin can supply. In fact, Crookman's procedure is so

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<sup>220</sup> Vitiligo is a skin disease that is characterized by patches of skin that lack pigmentation; it results in the whitening of the skin.

<sup>221</sup> George Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931) (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 11.

<sup>222</sup> Schuyler, 11.

successful that he manages to annihilate Blackness almost completely, “except for the black folk in prisons, orphan asylums, insane asylums, homes for the aged, houses of correction and similar institutions.”<sup>224</sup> The institutionalized remain black and outside the scope of racial freedom, probably due to their extra-marginalized positions in society. Perceived as non-functioning members of society, they do not warrant the opportunity now afforded to Blacks. But they do, however, function as the sole racial survivors. Schuyler’s text imagines a world in which the most racially “authentic” members of society will be the institutionalized.

However successful the treatment, the closest that readers get to an extended description of the procedure is through watching the novel’s protagonist, Mathew Fisher (née Max Disher, his name before he turns white), undergo the change. As the first African American to pay fifty dollars in order to become “Black-no-more,” Max Disher’s narrative illuminates the procedure in terms of its profound physical discomfort: “[Disher] felt terribly weak, emptied, and nauseated; his skin twitched and was dry and feverish; his insides felt very hot and sore.”<sup>225</sup> In a description that harkens back to James Weldon Johnson’s narrator’s physical distress while traveling in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Disher’s testimony provides readers with the understanding that freeing oneself from “the specter of black blood”<sup>226</sup> is not without its discomforts.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 96.

And this sort of physical discomfort is also felt on a national scale. With the Knights of Nordia, a thinly-veiled stand-in for the Klu Klux Klan, as representative of the thoughts and ideals of a nation that privileges and guards whiteness and white identity through violence and laws, *Black No More* comments upon the national unease concerning race and miscegenation. “The entire nation became alarmed,” Schuyler writes, “[h]undreds of thousands of people, North and South, flocked into the Knights of Nordica. The real white people were panic-stricken, especially in Dixie. There was no way, apparently, of telling a real Caucasian from an imitation one. Every stranger was viewed with suspicion, which had a very salutary effect on the standard of sex morality in the United States. For the first time since 1905, chastity became a virtue...One must play safe, the girls argued.”<sup>227</sup> This national discomfort rests upon issues of authenticity. African Americans in Schuyler’s text, displaying a distinctly American consumer-driven imperative, buy white identities, and the triumvirate of capitalism, race and sexuality combine to threaten racial purity. More specifically, African American consumerism threatens to undermine national hierarchies and racial distinctions by providing Black-No-More patients with a previously unheard of sexual freedom: “From that time on there were frequent reports in the daily press of white women giving birth to black babies,” Schuyler writes, “In some cases, of course, the white women had recently become white but the blame for the tar-brushed offspring in the public mind always resting on the shoulders of the father, or rather, of the husband.”<sup>228</sup> In short, Schuyler’s story plays on old fears and assumptions concerning the Black male sexual prowess, with “Mathew

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 88.

Fisher” serving as the prime example of the Black male’s lust for white women: “Old Max ain’t losin’ no time, Doc. When that niggah gits white Ah bet he’ll make up fo’ los’ time with these ofay girls,” speculates ones of Crookman’s lackeys.<sup>229</sup> He is right, because besides the obvious financial gains to be had from occupying a white identity, the freedom to fall in love with whomever one desires is gained. Mathew Fisher takes advantage of this by marrying the daughter of the leader of the Knights of Nordica.

The entirety of *Black No More* stands as a testament to Schuyler’s ability to illuminate not only the faulty racial politics of white America, but also those within the Black community. Laden with parodies of Black leaders and establishments ranging from W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey to the NAACP, Schuyler’s text twists through the intricacies of U. S. intra- and interracial race relations in order to prove that, as Mathew Fisher tells a friend, “hatred and prejudice always go over big. These people [United States citizens] have been raised on the Negro problem, they’re used to it, they’re trained to react to it.”<sup>230</sup> Fisher identifies the underlying philosophy of *Black No More*, that racial difference even when eliminated, continues to occupy a central role in the imaginary of the United States. In fact, in a cruel twist of irony, whiteness in Schuyler’s book begins to take on a negative hue as the bulk of the Black population turns white. And as the racial purity of even the most established white families in the United States begins to be questioned—in a presidential race between Democrats and Republicans, it is revealed that several (the bulk) of the key political players have “Black blood” flowing

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 106.

through their veins—whiteness itself ceases to be desirable. So when the Knights of Nordica founder exclaims, “I guess we’re all niggers now,”<sup>231</sup> readers know that the end of whiteness as a positive social determinant is near. Consequently, when a white scientist comes out with his findings that Black-No-More patients are in fact too white, we are not surprised:

the consternation of many Americans, that in practically every instance the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians, and that approximately one-sixth of the population were in the first group. The old Caucasians had never been really white but rather were a pale pink shading down to a sand color and a red. Even when an old Caucasian contracted vitiligo, he pointed out, the skin became much lighter.

To a society that had been taught to venerate whiteness for over three hundred years, this announcement was rather staggering. What was the world coming to, if the blacks were whiter than the whites? Many people in the upper class began to look askance at their very pale complexions. If it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of the possession of Negro blood, of having once been a member of a pariah class, then surely it were well not to be so white!<sup>232</sup>

If we are all in fact “niggers,” Schuyler’s 1931 text provides an opportunity to begin a conversation concerning not only the relationship between racial purity and U.S. race relations, but also of how we continue to maintain categories of difference in the face of scientific advancements that seek to eliminate racial categorization. This chapter, then, makes connections between the history of U.S. race relations and representations of these relations in the future. Playing off Schuyler’s and Morrison’s depictions of alternative versions of passing and the havoc such “passing” wreaks on the psyche of individuals and the nation, this chapter will explore science-fiction cinema’s relationship

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 155.

to the narrative of racial passing in the United States. So as a world in which racial differences become less and less apparent is imagined, this chapter analyzes how difference gets recast and recirculated in science fiction film. Not unlike the retooling of shades of whiteness in Schuyler's *Black No More*, science fiction cinema's representation of difference lies in a viewer-participant's ability to dabble in the realm of subtleties. Viewers must be able to realize that we may all be "niggers" in the future—or not, as it is more often the case that racial difference is evacuated from sci-fi film—but we are expected to be aware of the subtle differences that make some of us "Blacker" than others.

However even with George Schuyler's *Black No More* establishing an African American claim to the genre of science-fiction film, African Americans continue to be excluded from much of the conversation concerning representations of the future. In fact, in a popular, recently released comedy-documentary directed by Spike Lee, *The Original Kings of Comedy*, Cedric the Entertainer, a contemporary African American comedian, delivers a humorous and insightful joke concerning what he calls "space movies." While rejecting the possibility for African American involvement in space travel by stating that Blacks aren't interested in space movies, Cedric contends that "white people love space movies." He goes on to say that whites love space movies because such movies offer white viewers the hope for separation from earth-bound Blacks—Earth is figured here as its own type of institution, where only the Black population will remain; not unlike the scenario offered by Schuyler. As the ultimate form of white flight, space travel functions

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 177-8.

in Cedric's joke as something that not only divides the viewing tastes of the Black and white public—Blacks don't like space movies, whites do—but also reinforces old norms of racial segregation in the United States. However Cedric jokingly dismisses the possibility for an easy extrication of whites by supplying the following punch-line (in the form of a threat): "If y'all [whites] move to the moon, we're [Blacks] coming to the moon, too. We'll be right behind you in a space shuttle with Cadillac grills!" In Cedric's joke, space travel, though not necessarily desired by Black Americans, will not be allowed to be usurped by whites as a means of neo-segregation.<sup>233</sup>

The heart of this joke lies in Cedric's attention to a perceived desire on the part of white Americans to escape permanently the presence of African Americans. In drawing attention to this desire, real or unreal, Cedric's joke acknowledges a history of forced racial segregation in the United States. In fact, his joke takes this history of segregation and moves it into the future—a future where space travel is affordable and feasible enough to be used as an easy escape route by the average white American. And in moving segregation into the future, the punch-line of Cedric's joke recapitulates the forced integration familiar to the late nineteen-fifties and sixties in the United States: whites may try to create "white space," but Blacks will always threaten to infiltrate it.

Yet even as the joke is delivered with a witty comic-timing, Cedric the Entertainer's observation is problematic. More than just confirming a racial dichotomy, one that continues to imagine Black and white disunion well into the future, the joke

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<sup>233</sup> By neo-segregation I mean to call upon the ways in which racial segregation continues to enter the consciousness of U.S. politics. Additionally, the ways in which it continues to remain an option for the United States to police the barriers between the races.

reinforces racial hierarchies. Cedric's joke depends upon a continued power dynamic in which white Americans hold the upper-hand in travel and mobility. As in the *Plessy* case a century earlier, Cedric imagines that whites will continue to desire separate modes of transportation. But by framing Black space travel as instigated by a desire to follow whites, the joke imagines African American mobility as a reactionary mobility, directly motivated by the movement of white Americans. In addition to construing Black space travel as a copycat maneuver, Cedric's joke also assumes a lack of scientific and technological advancement on the part of future African Americans. Although the Cadillac had historically been a status symbol for many African Americans and the creation of Cadillac-space ships attests to an ingenuity and creative adaptability among future African Americans, Cedric quickly undermines the technological wherewithal needed to design a reliable means of space travel by describing the Black spaceship pejoratively; he calls attention to the vehicle's illegal tags and its excessive size. Forced to drive make-shift Cadillac spaceships—slower, less dependable versions of white spaceships—the future Black people of Cedric's joke will go where white men have gone before...but slowly. In short, his joke leaves space travel and technology without grandeur for African Americans.

Stemming from this lack of grandeur, Cedric's inclination to render space movies and, by association, any original imagining of the future, as solely a white enterprise is suspect. This rhetorical move is problematic because it severs African American creative and consumer ties to the genre of science fiction. But the connection is very important because of futuristic fiction and film's ability to make the still unmade world. In

participating in sci-fi consumption, audience members occupy an important position in shaping the all-too-important present, as Fredric Jameson points out in his essay “Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future.” Jameson imagines science fiction as a genre that “does not seriously attempt to imagine the real future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present in the determinate past of something yet to come.”<sup>234</sup> According to Jameson, the future imagined by sci-fi creators defamiliarizes audience members toward their present, forcing them then to return to this present with the belief that it is the past: “SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history,” regardless of the dystopic or utopic vision offered by the text.<sup>235</sup> As the past, the present becomes accessible and malleable in unimaginable ways, granting audience members an increased power over their present situations.

Unlike Cedric the Entertainer, who designates movies based in the future as interesting only to white Americans, Jameson reaffirms the importance of the genre for those who wish to engage in present-day change. Because of sci-fi’s ability to serve as a locale both for addressing contemporary issues and for encouraging audience members to reshape the present and near-future, its presence and function become doubly important when considered in the context of race in the United States.

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<sup>234</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future,” *Science-Fiction Studies* Volume 9 (1982): 152.

<sup>235</sup> Jameson, 153.

Likewise, African American science fiction writers and critics like Samuel Delany and Charles Saunders make arguments similar to that of Jameson. Saunders, in “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction,” stresses that

there are reasons for blacks to read and write sf and fantasy that go beyond the number of black writers in the field or the number of black characters who can break dance on micrometeroited in a hard-science plot line. Sf serves as the mythology of our technological culture. The human imagination manifests itself in stories. Some of those stories become the legends and myths that define and sustain a culture, whether they are told around a campfire or over the Internet. [...] We [blacks] need only take hold of our culture’s mythologies as well and provide alternatives to the stereotypes before they become our assigned legends.<sup>236</sup>

He conceives of the science fiction genre as one in which technological advances are recorded and imagined; it is a genre that allows its writers to shape their relationship to technology and the future. The ability to shape is particularly important for African Americans, according to Saunders, because he believes that the lack of black engagement allows for the persistence of wrongly ascribed stereotypes of Blackness.

However, more important than dispelling negative racial stereotypes is the need to address the persistence of the vexed relationship between African Americans and science and technology. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scientific attitudes created a biological imperative for the continued segregation of “inferior” Black bodies. Much in the same way that the discourse of law justified racial discrimination, science was used to elide the possibility of African American equality and absorption into the nation. With scientific racism’s introduction into the United States in the 1830’s as

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<sup>236</sup> Charles Saunders, “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction,” *American Visions* Volume 15 (2000): 34.

means for justifying chattel slavery, a highly developed teleological approach to human evolution, further established Black inferiority. Anthropology, anatomy, phrenology, and physiognomy were all used to designate a racial hierarchy under which African American citizens were labeled biologically incompatible with whites and equality. In well known texts like Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* science is often used against Blacks: during a heated court scene, Twain uses fingerprinting to uncover the true identity of a small town's murdering-thief, a Black man passing as white. Though Twain attempts to write a passing narrative where racial character is shown to be more a matter of nurture than of nature, the text ultimately places Black equality at odds with science—especially since the passing character is sold into slavery at the novel's close. Science has historically been used as a profiling tool, a tool first to identify Blackness and then to punish it.

The vexed relationship between race and science is, then, another focus of this chapter. Using contemporary science fiction films, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Gattaca* (1997), the chapter argues that futuristic texts engage with the contemporary U.S. history of racial passing and profiling on more than just an allegorical level. By engaging with the process of defamiliarization of which Jameson writes, the chapter explores how the use of difference not predicated on racial inferiority encourages viewers to engage with contemporary cases of racial policing/profiling in constructive ways. In addition, because the policing of difference in movies like *Blade Runner* and *Gattaca* is carried out with technologically advanced equipment—machines that analyze the DNA carried by flakes of skin and others that measure the relative quickness of the blink of an eye—the chapter explores the role of technology in profiling.

## New Frontiers: Passing and Policing in Contemporary Science Fiction Films

In his essay on the detective fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley, Robert Crooks, criticizes Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," for its unproblematic portrayal of the American frontier as a space that marked the meeting point between Euro-American and Native American cultures. Crooks makes it clear that while Turner's essay was a "watershed for the European-American versions of the history of North America,"<sup>237</sup> the frontier ideology developed by Turner continues to have resonance in contemporary U.S. culture. And while this resonance may seem unimportant on its own, Crooks notes that the ideology nonetheless fails to capture the larger structures inherent in the segregatory practice of frontierism—when the "frontier" is conceived of as a space/place that relies on notions of "us"<sup>238</sup> versus "them," with the space also functioning as its own battleground. However, such an ideology requires inchoate notions of class politics and racial segregation. Crooks, instead, argues that "[in] geographical terms, the western frontier was a battlefield in a territorial war that was articulated within various struggles over issues including race, the structuring of the state, and the proper use of land and resources."<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, frontier ideology, according to Crooks, is as much about confinement and purity as it is about space. That is to say, the frontier mentality depends more on "our"

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<sup>237</sup> Robert Crooks, "From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier" in *Race-ing Representation: Voice, History, and Sexuality* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 175.

<sup>238</sup> Crooks also notes that the idea of an individual at war against the "others" is key to frontier ideology because individualism allows for structures of power to remain hidden behind single "heroes." From Daniel Boone to the Lone Ranger (who, though paired with Tonto, was the lone "white" ranger in the West), American frontier ideology relies on images of single white men patrolling the territories and successfully defending against the masses of savages.

<sup>239</sup> Crooks, 177.

ability to keep “them” from contaminating “us” by crossing boundaries, be they racial, class, gendered, or sexual: “no longer enemy territory to be attacked and conquered or vacant land to be cultivated, [the frontier] now constitutes in mainstream European-American ideologies pockets of racial intrusion, hence corruption and social disease to be policed and contained—insofar as the “others” threaten to cross the line,” writes Crooks.<sup>240</sup> With this refined understanding of the frontier’s function, Crooks is able to redeploy the “frontier” metaphor to illuminate contemporary methods of the policing system in the urban cityscape.

Although Crooks’s discussion of Himes and Mosely might have just as easily found itself presented in the previous chapter, it belongs within this chapter because of the work it does to align a popular genre, detective fiction in this case, to the ideas of urbanization and the frontier. And while both *Blade Runner* and *Gattaca* are big-budget Hollywood films, they still occupy the marginal cultural space of science-fiction. Likewise, both films are set within urban landscapes of the future. Moreover, Crooks’s interest in the burgeoning role of African American detective fiction as a site of resistance against hegemonic discourse and power structures provides a workable theoretical framework for a discussion of science-fiction cinema’s similar function as a site of resistance.

As both *Blade Runner* and *Gattaca* imagine a future in which outer space and space travel serve a function similar to that of the American frontier in the U.S. imaginary—by providing an outlet for potential escapism and demonstrations of

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 178.

heroism—they seemingly participate in the frontier ideology that Crooks’s essay outlines. However, each movie’s participation in this ideology is complicated by the fact that, unlike mainstream notions of frontier ideology, which cast the heroes of their texts as members of the “master” class, these movies alter viewer-participant identification away from those in the power majority by focusing on the plight of those who, for all intents and purposes, are marginalized “others.” So while predominant examples of frontier narratives cast a singular (white) hero as protagonist, *Blade Runner* and *Gattaca* not only focus on those “othered” by their futuristic mainstream societies, but interestingly enough, in each movie the idea of a singular protagonist (hero) is relinquished. Alternatively, community participation is key to that protagonist’s survival. For example, in *Blade Runner* we see a set of four replicants attempt (unsuccessfully) to work together in order to stay alive, and in *Gattaca* the protagonist is aided (successfully) in his genetic subterfuge by people ranging from his genetic superiors and a company doctor to an insightful custodial worker. Both films reveal that in the future, passing will rely upon community awareness and involvement because an individual alone is powerless against the comprehensive surveillance and detection mechanisms at work around them. Viewer-participants of these movies are likewise asked to identify and engage with the dilemma of the protagonists, further solidifying the role community plays in the disrupting and redeploying of traditional notions of national narratives of power which the frontier ideology attempts to transcribe.

*Blade Runner* opens with the camera moving slowly over a city of lights that happens also to appear to be on fire; the chiming of Asian-inspired music resonates. It is

from this perspective, high above the city, that viewers are introduced to the landscape of Los Angeles, California in 2019. It is a perspective that will come to be recognizable as belonging to the future's rich and powerful. *Blade Runner*, then, is a movie about space and perspective. In the cinematic rendering of Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982)<sup>241</sup> chronicles the story of a reluctant bounty hunter's, a blade runner's,<sup>242</sup> quest to kill four humanoid-replicants that are attempting to pass as humans on Earth. The movie makes use of a Reagan-era fears of Asian overpopulation and foreign consumption of American business and real estate, and relies on visible hierarchies that translate into racial hierarchies—poor minorities occupy the lowest levels of the city, while the richest, most powerful white men live hundreds of stories above ground level. The rich see the sun, the poor are drenched in rain every waking hour. Access to space is a theme that carries through the text.

It should be noted that *Blade Runner* is in many ways a different text from the one Philip Dick produced in 1968, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Where Scott's film makes use of a racialized vision of the future, Dick's novel makes no references to race. Also, Dick's novel imagines a more mechanical humanoid subject, whereas Scott's film creates a replicant subject that bleeds and is far from unhuman. These differences are important in as much as they illustrate how *Blade Runner* attempts to muddy the

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<sup>241</sup> *Blade Runner* was released in 1982 and exists in two versions: the theater release and Ridley Scott's director's cut. The director's cut is now the preferred version of the movie, as it lacks the voice-over narration and Hollywood ending of the theater release. Harrison Ford plays Rick Deckard, the bounty hunter; Rutger Hauer plays Roy Batty, the lead replicant; and Sean Young plays Rachael, Deckard's replicant love interest.

<sup>242</sup> Blade runners are police detectives who specialize in tracking and "retiring," killing, rouge replicants.

boundaries between human and non-human subjects, such a distinction that has been used historically to deny the marginalized rights and access to power.

In her article titled “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography,” Ruth Gilmore asserts that “[i]f race has no essence, racism does. Racism is singular because, whatever its place-based particularities, its practitioners explore and renew *fatal* power-difference couplings.”<sup>243</sup> That in mind, Gilmore goes on to note that racism functions to create situations in which members of minority groups bear the brunt of “an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world,” but due to “*political* distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of” their burden.<sup>244</sup> So, minorities are in a constant struggle to gain access to the resources that are put in place, in many ways, to keep them at a political disadvantage. One of the ways in which Gilmore conceives of this struggle in contemporary society is as a constant battle for space. For Gilmore this spatial struggle is more literal than metaphorical. “A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice,” she writes.<sup>245</sup> Thus, access to particular spaces and the ability to create space are ways in which those in power are able to organize minorities.<sup>246</sup> And such organization is always already a form of what Gilmore terms *premature death*, as it denotes how minorities are denied access to structures of power (spaces), and thus are purposefully excluded from engaging fully with “life.”

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<sup>243</sup> Ruth Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography,” *The Professional Geographer* 54:1 (2002): 16.

<sup>244</sup> Gilmore, 16.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

Gilmore's theory illuminates a concern that is easy to lose sight of when watching *Blade Runner*: why the group of rogue replicants has returned to Earth. They return because they want more life. "I want more life, Fuckers," Roy Batty screeches when he meets the man who "made" him, Mr. Tyrell. While characters like blade runner, Rick Deckard, and his police chief, Bryant, are apprehensive about the return of the humanoids because they pose the potential threat of enacting random acts of violence against the unsuspecting population of Earth, viewers know that the replicants have returned to find a remedy to the four year lifespan given to them at their inceptions. Because they have been designed to be "more human than human," according to Tyrell, the scientific mastermind who created and continues to "perfect" replicant life, they constantly threaten to cross the boundary between human and non-human. The Nexus-6 variety, of which all the rogue humanoids are examples, is the closest to human life that the Tyrell Company has produced. In an early scene, Tyrell tells Deckard, who has just administered the Voigt-Kampff<sup>247</sup> test to the Nexus-6 replicant, Rachael, that his aim is to create a replicant that will beat the Voigt-Kampff machine. In fact, it takes Deckard more than double the normal amount of questions to determine that Rachael is not human. With little hindering the possibility of a replicant from joining and being absorbed by mainstream culture, the Voigt-Kampff test and blade runners are the only line of defense

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<sup>246</sup> Gilmore writes specifically about race and racism within her article, but due to my own concern for a "less-race" specific lexicon for dealing with the issues I read in science-fiction cinema, I'm going to speak more broadly of minority status.

<sup>247</sup> The Voigt-Kampff machine measures the relative reaction time, the blink of an eye, that a specimen has when asked a variety of question that are designed to measure empathy. It is the only method available to distinguish humans from humanoid replicants. While *Blade Runner* makes only one reference to the possibility that the Voigt-Kampff test might be an imperfect science—Rachel asks Deckard if he has ever

against human contamination. Thus, these two mechanisms function as the preferred profiling tools in *Blade Runner*.

With the fairly simple quest of the rouge replicants working as catalyst, the bulk of *Blade Runner* is devoted to tracking the conflict between the humanoid desire for life and the desire on the part of the police to keep the humans of Los Angeles safe. It is a conflict that mirrors the ideas of both spatiality and death that Gilmore outlines. In their quest to escape their own premature deaths, the replicants must attempt to gain access to a variety of spaces that are off limits to them. Of course, Earth is their first spatial transgression. But once in Los Angeles, the replicants proceed to integrate themselves into society by taking various jobs: Leone works for a waste management company; Zhora works as an exotic dancer in the city's red light district; Pris, a "pleasure model," finds herself making a home with J.F. Sebastian, the man who will provide her peer group access to the Tyrell corporation; and Roy Batty, who has no official occupation, acts as ring leader and organizer for the group. In all instances, the replicants are able to remain indistinguishable enough from Los Angeles inhabitants for more than two weeks.

However, the jobs that these replicants hold offer a point of departure for discussing the importance their bodies play to the functioning of Los Angeles. The typical urban landscape is unrecognizable without references to the sex trade and waste management. Yet, sex industry has historically been a site of danger for women, and waste management an occupation that often exposes its employees to harmful chemicals.

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"retired" a real human by accident—Dick's *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* explores the probability that the test might wrongly identify those with mental illnesses as possible replicants.

It is no mistake, then, that these replicants find themselves funneled into these types of jobs, as they most often lead to premature death for their employees.

These characters are linked to the marginalized population in many ways. One of those ways is through the use of the street as a familiar topos. Until this point in the film, the street served to mark the space occupied predominantly by the people of color who remain on Earth. This film shares in the sentiment of Schuyler and Cederic in imagining Earth as a type of institution for people of color. The rich have moved to the colonies, off Earth, or they live in high-rise apartments and drive hover vehicles. So it is important one of the first times we see two replicants interacting that it be on the street, as it grounds them in a space that the film has taken pains to establish as “othered.” As the replicants stop to have a conversation they are engulfed by bicyclists riding in two parallel lines. The cyclists, clad in what are recognizable as Chinese peasant hats, come out of nowhere and disappear just as quickly as they came. Inevitably, by entering and sharing the frame with Roy and Leone, the movement of the cyclists is fixed to that of the two replicants—they are both minority groups relegated to roaming the streets. And while the movement of the cyclists disrupts Roy and Leone’s conversation, the mobility of the cyclists introduces the possibility of mobility for these two characters. A link that is explored further after the cyclists exit the frame and Roy and Leone move into a satellite manufacture for the Tyrell corporation. They illegally enter the workshop of an older Asian man who genetically engineers eyes for the Tyrell corporation and proceed to harass him for information. “Morphology? Longevity? Incept dates?” Roy Batty prods the eyeball engineer. The engineer is unable to give answers to the questions Batty asks,

but does offer them information concerning J.F. Sebastian, who the engineer believes will be able to take them to Mr. Tyrell. Moreover, the interaction between Roy, Leone and the eyeball engineer illustrates the ways in which the powerful limit information dispersal by relying on a multitude of very specific minor players, who themselves have very little access to the power structures that control their own lives. Thus, the juxtaposing of the mobility of the cyclists and the information gathering of the replicants highlights the connection between replicant mobility and their desire to find a solution to premature death.

In addition to linking the replicants to people of color, *Blade Runner* links the replicants to the segment of the population left on Earth are those perceived as genetically inferior. Besides the streets being filled with Asian and other non-white bodies, the screen is populated by an unusually large number of midgets. In this cinematic representation of Los Angeles in 2019, midget bodies stand in as visual reminders of the abnormality of Earth dwellers. Their small bodies are always at odds with the white power structure. In a scene that places Deckard in his car on the street outside the dilapidated apartment building of J.F. Sebastian, the location where Deckard will “retire” the film’s two remaining replicants, a group of midgets vandalize his car. The street is dark and wet, and while Deckard is parked, a police hovercraft mistakes him for a “little” person.<sup>248</sup> The scene consists of visual layers that provide insights into the inherent power dynamics: the police never touch the ground, they move through space as

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<sup>248</sup> I’m playing on the term “little person” here. While Deckard is by no means a “little person,” meaning a midget, the term plays on the threat Lieutenant Bryant makes in order to make Deckard return to his job as blade runner: “If you’re not a cop, you’re little people!,” barks Bryant at Deckard’s recalcitrance. It is an

disembodied, hovering voices; the blade runner does roam at ground level, but only because his job requires him to occupy this space; and the “little people,” in this instance meant to be taken literally, must survive on Earth by scavaging. In the film sequence, Deckard, distracted by the police car hovering above him as it checks why he is where he is not supposed to be, which is on the ground, quickly finds his car covered in midgets. Once the police verify his whereabouts and corroborate his narrative with that of their police logs, Deckard attends to his saboteurs by pressing on the gas peddle and knocking them off the car. Treated as pests, these “little people” fall back the ground, restoring the apparent power structure that viewers have come to recognize in the film. It is a moment when viewers can watch all the ways the film riffs on hierarchies. The midgets, however, have managed to destroy a portion of Deckard’s car, a symbolic space previously uncontaminated by ground dwellers, offering a glimmer of hope for the possibility that the marginalized might be able to dismantle power systems that keep them “little.”

In addition to the vertically challenged, *Blade Runner* plays out fears concerning other genetic ailments. For example, J.F. Sebastian suffers from “accelerated decrepitude,” a genetic anomaly that makes him to appear geriatric even though he is only twenty-five years old. Sebastian tells Pris that his ailment keeps him from migrating to the off-world colonies. When he divulges to Pris his condition and how it limits his mobility, she responds by saying, “We’re not that different.” These two characters are marked for death into similar ways by the power structures at hand. More important, however, is that each is alienated from his or her mobility by a system that denies them

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odd turn of phrase that underscores that the power dynamics are as much about humanity as they are race,

access to the spaces in which they most desire entrance—Pris, the Tyrell Corporation, and Sebastian, the off-world colonies.

The rest of *Blade Runner*, then, focuses on the competing stories of the inevitable “premature deaths” of the replicants and their quest for more life, with these competing narratives punctuated by the visual renderings the systematic annihilation of the replicants. Viewers watch as Deckard tracks and murders the humanoids one-by-one. However, what is most striking about these deaths is the film’s treatment of replicant corporeality: their bodies bleed, they scream and twitch in the throws of death. Representing the death of the replicants with such graphicness pushes viewers to explore what actually separates these characters from the other characters of the film. Especially considering the fact that the film does little to develop the personality of those humans who happen not to be white, powerful men, the replicants (who have been established, if not as equal to humans as at least, literally occupying the same space as the people of color who traverse the streets of Los Angeles) provide the only developed insight into marginalized identity. Thus, as they die, so do the marginalized.

And one of the most graphic and moving deaths in the film is that of the replicant, Zhora. Deckard, who has tracked Zhora to a burlesque club located in LA’s red light district where she performs, proceeds to impersonate a government worker in order to gain access to her dressing room. In a sexually-charged exchange, Zhora is naked for most of their conversation, Deckard warns her of men who drill holes in dressing room walls to get a glimpse of nude women. The game continues in this manner while Zhora

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class, gender, and size in this film.

showers and dresses, all done in front of Deckard. Each knowing that the other knows his or her true identity and motive, Zhora asks Deckard to dry her back. He, of course, obliges, only to find himself in a chokehold—she was designed to be a member of a military combat team off-Earth. Deckard's life in her hands, Zhora is forced to abandon choking him to death as the other performers enter the dressing room. The result of this disruption is a chase sequence through the streets of Los Angeles. It is a visually rich progression that underscores the difficulty Deckard has policing and capturing the replicants. Zhora weaves in and out of streets congested with LA inhabitant, she disappears at times, only to reemerge further down the street. Blending easily with the masses, it is nearly impossible for Deckard to kill her without possibility injuring human bystanders. Not only does her spatial position illustrate yet another instance in which replicant life is intertwined with those on the streets, but it also serves as a reminder of the ways in which *Blade Runner* deploys the familiar trope of passing.

But Zhora is unable to outrun Deckard and is isolated from the masses. The camera begins filming in slow motion and the sounds of the street are replaced with the thumping of a single heartbeat, presumably Zhora's. The camera follows her running body as it moves (again, slowly) through the plate glass windows of an unmarked storefront. These storefront windows house a diminutive scene depicting a winter wonderland, and provide the perfect milieu for Zhora's death: the purity and quiet of the snowy scene is contaminated by Zhora's inhuman body. But more than contaminating the scene with her physical presence, Zhora's blood begins to spatter against the fabricated snow. If this snow, ersatz in its own right, can be read as symbolic of the

white purity that has been established as normative and desirable throughout the film, then her body matter disrupts the narrative that the snow attempts to create. In short, all is not white or right in the world behind glass because this marginalized character has upset the scene. So as the music, again the sound of a heartbeat, begins to slow to a stop, the camera looms over Zhora's blood-covered face set against the snowy scene, and the heartbeat is replaced with the sounds of the street. The sequence makes apparent that Zhora's premature death comes because she has attempted to transgress into sanctified spaces and, thus, she (more specifically, her body) serves as an object lesson to those who might attempt similar transgressions.

Finally, *Blade Runner* posits memory as a possible curative for the problem of premature death. Early in the film, Tyrell tells Deckard that in order better to control the replicants, his company has begun to engineer them with implanted memories, or histories, of childhood and families that do not exist. However, it seems that these fabricated memories have resulted unexpectedly in instilling the desire for "more life" in the replicants. Ultimately, it could be argued that these implanted memories serve as the catalyst for replicant rebellion. They want more life, but more than that, they want the opportunity to make more memories. In this film, memories are most often represented as photographs. For example, the replicant, Rachael, is forced to recognize her true identity when Deckard takes the photograph she believes is of her mother and herself as a child, and begins to narrate her memories to her, memories that only she could have. His invasive storytelling becomes a way for him to undermine Rachael's perceived autonomy. The link between pictures and memory is furthered when Deckard takes

photographs from Leone's apartment and uses them to track down Zhora.<sup>249</sup> Again, there is a sense that Deckard has invaded the privacy of these replicants. If the ability to control access to personal history is closely tied to autonomy, then in addition to fighting for their lives, *Blade Runner* narrates the difficult fight marginalized people have in controlling access to their own personal history, as represented by memories.

So when Roy Batty closes the film by narrating his memories, he is attempting to reassert his claim to this world: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in the rain," says Batty as he stares into Deckard's eyes and dies. What is striking about Batty's recounting of the things he has seen is that he is the only one who has access to those memories. They were not implanted by the Tyrell corporation, but self-acquired through a lifetime (however short) of experience and he makes it clear that they are just as valuable, possibly more so because he has been places where humans can never tread, as any other human experience. As a result, Batty's death is bittersweet. He dies, but not at the hands of Deckard and only after having made a claim for what is important in this world: the ability to access spaces and to share one's memories of those spaces with others. Premature death denies the creation and sharing of communities, but *Blade Runner* seemingly offers viewers a blueprint to subverting the power structure through the sharing of memories.

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<sup>249</sup> Many critics have commented upon the impossibility of the machine Deckard uses to manipulate the picture. However, I would argue that the feasibility of the machine is unimportant. Instead, the existence of a machine that could so thoroughly dismantle a picture (memory) illustrates the relationship between memory, technology and policing.

Although less focused on vertical hierarchies and without the same attachment to memory, *Gattaca* too finds its characters forming subversive communities in order to disrupt social hierarchies. Set in the not-too-distant future, *Gattaca* imagines a world in which everyone is genetically engineered for perfection and those who are not are second-class citizens. *Gattaca* opens with an extreme close-up of fingernail clippings falling onto a surface. Hairs follow. A dusting of something that looks like snow, but is in fact flakes of skin. Still more hair, smaller this time. These minuscule elements of body debris are given momentous gravitas; we hear each hair fall with a resounding thud that disrupts the classical music of the film's soundtrack. The camera angle expands to focus on a white man (played by Ethan Hawk) grooming meticulously: scrapping, showering, and shaving his body, and finally burning the waste that only such meticulousness could produce. This same man proceeds to open a refrigerator stocked only with a collection of intravenous bags of blood and urine. There is something vampiric in his collection, and the painstaking way in which he treats this human material makes this opening sequence eerie. Strapping a bag of urine to his thigh and using a small syringe to insert blood into a prosthetic finger tip, the film's protagonist is a man of detail.

But it is in the succeeding scene that this film's most important theme becomes apparent. From the extreme close-up of these varied pieces of human detritus, viewers are moved into an unidentifiable, ultra-modern structure. Indistinguishable men and women, made all the more indistinguishable by the fact that they are wearing identical dark-colored suits, deposit a blood sample into an automated turnstile to gain entrance

into the building. The camera reintroduces the man seen from the first sequence as he too gains entrance into the structure. The camera then cuts and moves into a close-up of this man's hands typing at a computer keyboard. He types feverishly for a few moments, but then takes a small vacuum to the computer keyboard, eliminating the particles of his skin that have inevitably detached from his body. In addition to calling attention to the importance of bodily waste, this moment highlights the tension between technology and human corporeality that plays out in *Gattaca*.

The tension between technology and corporeality is most explicit in the murder scene that provides the tension needed to set the plot in motion. In this sense, we see *Gattaca* (and *Blade Runner*) participating in a history of racialized detective fiction that was covered in the previous chapter's discussion of Chester Himes. Again, the camera moves from the desk of protagonist-apparent and into a hallway filled with the similarly dressed men and women. Our protagonist moves into the hall with the rest of his co-workers and sees blood spilling from a doorway and a body near by.

But there is a break in the narrative sequence. Before viewers are given any additional information concerning the blood and body in the doorway, the camera cuts to a classic car on a sunny beach, a man and woman are engaged in sexual intercourse. The next shot is of a woman in a hospital giving birth to the child that was conceived on that sunny day. The voice of the man the camera has established as the protagonist begins to narrate and viewers know that he is the child we have just watched be born. But the tranquility of what should be a happy day is quickly shattered as the delivery nurse, after taking and analyzing a blood sample from the newborn, begins to read off the statistical

probability (over ninety percent) that this child will die of heart failure by the age of 30.2. The nurse hands the newborn a death sentence, and so begins the narrative of the protagonist's fight against his own premature death.

The newborn is given the name Vincent Anton Freeman, because his father is unwilling to make the child his namesake. The adult Vincent continues to narrate a set of traumatic moments from his childhood, as the camera recreates them visually. In one instance the family is turned away from a nursery school and forced to stand outside its gates because Vincent's "illness," which has yet to manifest any real symptoms, makes him a liability for the school. Apparently in the future the cost of insuring an in-valid, the term given to those who are not genetically engineered (valids), will be prohibitive. But more important than illustrating the monetary burden associated with being marginalized, this sequence exposes the ways in which marginalized in the future will be denied access to important institutions. Again, as Gilmore notes, access to space and resources is always what is at stake in every social situation and *Gattaca* picks up on this fact.

Vincent's accessibility<sup>250</sup> problems are further illuminated by his brother's presence: his brother is younger, but always faster, bigger, and an overall healthier human specimen deserving of his father's name. A scene in which the Freeman family sits around the dinner table offers an insight into the ways in which Vincent is even alienated from his own family. Younger brother, father, and mother sit at the table sharing a meal, as Vincent sits away from the family reading a book about careers in the

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<sup>250</sup> Obviously *Gattaca* makes use of a language most often associated with contemporary disabilities studies, but my interests rest in making connections between this film and a recognizable story of racial passing.

space industry. What might be seemingly innocuous moment of teenaged rebellion in any other family, underscores just how little faith the Freeman family has in Vincent's potential to contribute to the society in which he lives. They have absorbed the narrative concerning his inevitable (premature) death and proceed to discourage him from thinking of himself as a valid member of family and society. With Vincent's narrative set at odd with the space industry, the ultimate frontier, *Gattaca* creates a system of transgression not unlike that depicted in *Blade Runner*.

After this family dinner Vincent extricates himself from his family permanently. His voiceover tells viewers that he lives the next few years fairly transiently; never settling down, instead living as an outcast of society. When Vincent resurfaces, he is employed as part of the janitorial staff for Gattaca, the future's version of NASA. Unwilling to continue being treated as a second-class citizen, Vincent embarks on a quest to change his identity: he begins to pass as Jerome Eugene Morrow (played by Jude Law), a valid. His passing requires that he acquire the body matter of another to mask his own. In a society of genetic superiority, the black market meets the needs of those who wish to become "borrowed ladders"<sup>251</sup> and escape the status of "de-generate." That is to say, Morrow, who has been handicapped by an accident, sells his blood, urine, hair, and skin to Vincent and Vincent, in turn, uses these materials to gain access to Gattaca—the future's most coveted space.

Vincent justifies his passing by noting that he belongs to "a new underclass, no longer determined by social status or the color of your skin." Are we to long for the good

old days when race and class were the sole determining factors for discrimination? While we should be troubled by Vincent's assessment of inequality in the future, the intended spirit of the statement opens the door to understanding how this film is able to bridge the gap separating a history of racial (and economical) discrimination and audience members for whom such a history may have no bearing. Because none of the viewers have been genetically engineered, they are encouraged to absorb Vincent's plight as what their own might be in the future. Vincent's story, then, becomes the story of viewers, even able-bodied white men of privilege, the group to which Vincent appears to belong from a strictly visible standpoint, will not be privileged in the future depicted in *Gattaca*. We are all marginalized. That may seem an odd statement, but it is arguably one of the founding premises for discussing *Gattaca* as a movie which champions community engagement with dismantling discrimination and policing systems that enable discrimination.

The flashback segment of the film ends with informing viewers of how Jerome (née Vincent) came to be a valid, as well as establishing the viewer-protagonist relationship. The camera cuts back to the present as Gattaca personally stares at the puddle of blood in the doorway. At this point the body is out of sight, but with Jerome's voiceover leading the way, the body connected to the blood begins to emerge in the doorway. Jerome's narration tells viewers that the body positioned in the doorway is that of the only mission director who had ever come close to determining Jerome's true identity. And a thin murder mystery plot acts as the film's catalyst.

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<sup>251</sup> This is the phrase used in the film to describe those who exchange money for the body matter and

The mystery concerning who killed the project leader is fairly weak. He was never an established character, so his death means little to viewers. However it does provide the vehicle for an extensive investigation that threatens to undermine Jerome's passing. Additionally, the moment the camera lingers on a computer keyboard covered in blood and an investigator (distinguished from the Gattaca personal by his trench coat and fedora) joking mumbles, "I guess we can rule out suicide" as he fingers the blood-covered keyboard, the film refocuses the viewer's attention to the vexed relationship between technology and human bodies in this film. So as men in fedoras begin to collect all stray genetic materials, viewers begin to worry whether Jerome's body can survive an extensive murder investigation.

As was stated earlier, *Gattaca* relies on community involvement. Jerome's subterfuge is impossible without an extensive network of co-conspirators. More important, this network relies on the constant transmission of body matter. His genetic double, the real Jerome Morrow, provides the "perfect" genetic material that allows him to enter Gattaca. And Irene (played by Uma Thurman), his love interests, after having exchanged bodily fluids with Jerome through sexual intercourse, is implicated in his cover up. Likewise, Dr. Lamar, the physician who runs the systematic urine and blood tests used to police the purity of Gattaca personnel, fails to report Jerome's true identity, though he determines his ruse early in his tenure at Gattaca. Each of these characters comes into contact with Jerome's body matter and as a result is bound to him for the rest of the film. This binding is important as it represents the possibility of community

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power of the genetically superior.

building in the face of highly-evolved policing mechanisms dedicated to denying the marginalized access to spaces reserved by and for the powerful majority. And unlike *Blade Runner*, where the marginalized community is slowly diminished by said policing mechanisms, *Gattaca* allows for a successful subterfuge: Vincent is cleared of the murder that threatened to expose his lie and is able to realize his dream of traveling into space.

### Conclusion

In short, both *Blade Runner* and *Gattaca*, two big-budget Hollywood films, engage with the futuristic but recognizable motifs of passing and profiling. Each film is seemingly purposeful in its disengagement with race as the imperative for either activity. And although many viewers might find each such eliding of racial difference in reference to the main characters—all major roles in both movies are played actors who appear to be white—off-putting at first, the absence of race functions to make contemporary racial policing more visible. Viewers of movies like *Gattaca* and *Blade Runner* are forced to re-enter society (the present) after having watched these films with the knowledge that policing based on arbitrary differences is an erroneous activity. And although each movie suffers from its own problems and discontinuities concerning race, both offer viewers a pedagogical experience that might ultimately change his or her interaction with the present-day systems of discrimination. Additionally, both seem to posit that the only way to resist the policing that passing seeks to undermine is through community involvement, *Gattaca* depicting such community formation most positively.

So like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Gattaca* and *Blade Runner* challenge what the traditional passing narrative looks like. No longer is passing merely an individualistic

activity, but in these cinematic narratives, passing has to be a community affair. In fact, if readers learn anything from *Pecola*, it is that when passing, or more importantly, when the fight against racial inequality and white privilege, is conceived of as an endeavor for the individual, the individual will fail. As *Pecola* slips further and further away from the reality, readers begin to understand the importance of a community in struggle.

Likewise, *Gattaca* and *Blade Runner* propose ways in which viewer-participants might engage, as a community, with issues of inequality.

Epilogue: Ties to the Past, stakes in the future



(Railroad tracks near old Ellisville, Mississippi train station, summer 2003)

The following is an account of the 1919 lynching of John Hartfield. However, in addition to recounting a lynching, this is the narrative of how I came to document John Hartfield's death. Like that of so many of the African Americans lynched in the United States as the twentieth century dawned, the story of John's murder is relatively unknown. The traces of his death—the facts of his life still remain a mystery to me—are scattered around the country from New York to Mississippi (and now Texas). His story and my

own quest to uncover it, is forever tied to Ellisville, Mississippi, a small Southern town cut down the center by a set of railroad tracks.

But my inquiry into Hartfield's death began in the summer of 2002 at the Schomburg Library in Harlem, New York City. On a hot June morning I took an uptown train to Harlem with one goal in mind: to find a link between racially motivated violence and travel. I had no leads, save only the scene from James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* where the Ex-Colored Man watches a Black man be lynched at a railroad station. As I consider it now, it seems odd that my search for facts sprung out of fiction. But I could sense that location was important to understanding the novel's account of lynching and, thus, it was important to me. I meant to document and consider the role that travel and movement play in reinforcing racial inequalities and perpetuating racial violence. *Violence, trains, movement, death, Negroes*: these were my keywords, my motivation.

So, Johnson's novel prodding me on, affirming what I can only describe as a feeling, I began pouring through microfilm, manuscripts, personal letters, and other archival materials until I happened upon a small pamphlet. The pamphlet was little more than 25 pages and seemed too fragile to be handed over to me so easily—all I had to do for access to this little thing was sit and wait for my number to be called. Published by the NAACP in the summer of 1919, the pamphlet was aptly titled, *Burning at Stake in the United States: A record of the public burning by mobs of six men, during the first six months of 1919, in the states of Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas*. The NAACP pamphlet, whose title leaves little to the imagination, is comprised of a

collection of republished newspaper stories and editorials, and letters to the President, Vice President and various state governors written by the NAACP secretary. Taken separately these objects seem merely “facts,” but once bound together, they create a document which serves as a witness to injustice. The contents tell the story, in various incarnations, of mistaken identity, mob rule, violence, death, and community uprising. More importantly, the pamphlet documents the egregious unwillingness of the United States government to intervene in incidents of racially-motivated extralegal violence taking place around the country. But its specificity in both scope and period first made *Burning at Stake in the United States* appear to me to be an idiosyncratic collection of materials rather than a resource useful to my work. The first five entries, though moving and informative, did nothing to support my guiding hypothesis concerning the relationship among violence, race, and travel. However, as I paged through the pamphlet to the last entry documenting the lynching of John Hartfield, I was stopped in my tracks.

The four documents collected under Hartfield’s entry tell the fractured story of a man lynched in Ellisville, Mississippi for assaulting (sexually?) a white woman. Moreover, the republished clippings capture the community’s fervor and commitment to punishing John Hartfield for his transgression. However, rather than merely gathering the gruesome relics of a man’s death, the NAACP juxtaposed two clippings from the pro-lynching Mississippi and New Orleans newspapers with two anti-lynching editorials published in contemporaneous New York newspapers. Both types of entries represent the nation’s conflicted relationship to race. This conflict is in itself interesting, but what attracted to me to Hartfield’s case was its proximity to the railroad tracks. One particular

line, in fact, drew me in: “It is said the negro [sic] will be taken to the scene of his crime, near the Ellisville railroad tracks, where he attacked Miss Meek, and will be stood up where everybody can see him.” The vividness and exigency of the incident and its description was a red flag for me. It was at this moment—where the past met the present—that my story intersects with John Hartfield’s. His death and my academic life became intertwined in the Schomburg.

I read and reread what amounted to less than four pamphlet pages documenting a man’s murder. It wasn’t much, and Hartfield’s entry ended abruptly and blank pages followed, leaving me to wonder what had really happened between John and Miss Meek. Why had so many people been interested in participating in one man’s death? (Newspapers reported that over 3,000 people were expected to flood Ellisville to observe and participate in Hartfield’s lynching.) And even though I could understand that it was important to the mob that retribution be enacted at the original crime scene, I began to wonder why the crime had taken place at the railroad tracks anyway. I wanted more. But the NAACP pamphlet had given me all it could. I had the fragments of a story and a sense that, 82 years later, it was still an important one. I packed up my fragments on that June afternoon, made my way back to the subway and, ultimately, back to Texas. John’s story would have to wait a year before it could be uncovered further.

The drive between Austin, Texas and Jackson, Mississippi is a long one. As I drove, I watched the color of the landscape transform from brown to shades of green, and wondered what I would find at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. I

wondered because I had found find little documenting John Hartfield's life in the interim year between my initial trip to the Schomburg and my current drive to Mississippi. I had begun to question whether or not John Hartfield's lynching had ever taken place. Save a mention of it in 1931 by a reporter who purported to have been an attendant at the lynching, I found little corroborating his life or his death.<sup>252</sup> Yet, I trusted in the NAACP pamphlet, I hoped for proof of life, and made my way towards Mississippi. Once there, I had a two-fold plan: I would attempt to flesh out the story provided in *Burning at Stake in the United States*, and I would revisit the actual site of Hartfield's lynching. I had to see Ellisville for myself. I wanted to take pictures and walk on the train tracks that probably would have been one of the last things John Hartfield saw.

So on a Monday morning in August of 2003 I found myself again in transit and in search of information. This time, however, I had a lead and it led me to the small and not uninviting research room serving as the portal to Mississippi's archives. As I entered the room, I realized that I was not the lone researcher, at least two other people were there, but I got the impression from the cemetery and marriage records that lined the walls that most of the archive's visitors came in search of family ties. Based on this, I was worried that my intentions might be negatively misconstrued; yet, the small white woman working the door surprised me by not batting an eye when I told her I was there to do research on "extralegal violence"—I had decided earlier that that was the least offensive euphemism for lynching. Divested of all my personal belonging, given a pencil and a researcher's card, I quickly began searching through weeks of microfilmed newspapers

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<sup>252</sup> There are Web sites dedicated to documenting lynching victims upon which John Hartfield's name

for the back story that the NAACP pamphlet did not provide. And what I found at the Mississippi archives was a story infinitely more complicated and interesting than the one told in *Burning at Stake in the United States*. I found a story filled with accusations of attempted rape and rape (depending on which day one reads the papers), of a massive manhunt, of friendly fire, and, finally, of death. I found the story of John Hartfield's lynching on the front pages of the Jackson *Daily News*.

The Jackson newspaper began carrying the story of Miss Ruth Meek's assault on Monday June 16, 1919. Sandwiched between discussions of the League of Nations and American's role as international police—oddly, the headlines resonant with those of today—Meek's story was front page news from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup>, the day after Hartfield's lynching. And the narrative of those ten days unfolds like a soap opera.

Ruth Meek was a young, unmarried woman who lived at home with her mother in Ellisville. She worked as a hotel clerk in Laurel, a town about five miles north of Ellisville, and took the interurban train to and from work everyday. On the night of June 15<sup>th</sup> Ruth failed to return home as expected; instead, it is reported that she returned home around four o'clock in the morning bruised and barely dressed. Ruth told her mother and the police that she had been followed off the train by a Black man who then grabbed her and held her hostage by gunpoint for hours near the railroad station. Early in the coverage Ruth claimed that, while her aggressor had attempted repeatedly to assault her, she had been able to fight him off and escape. This story would morph as newspaper coverage progressed, and when all was said and done, it was reported that Ruth had been

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appears, but the internet is suspect, at best, and is not place to begin and end one's research.

violated repeatedly by her “rapist,” whom she apparently knew because she identified him to the police as John Hartfield on the morning following her alleged assault.

However, John and Ruth’s interaction could not be explained away so easily. Besides obvious questions concerning how a young woman might have been able to fend off a man with a gun for hours and escape with minimal harm (as the original account suggests), one has to ask how Ruth came to return home undressed. In answer to this question Ruth told the police that her aggressor had forced her to undress and give him her clothing so that he might escape by train dressed as a Black woman. Disguised as a woman, papers would later report, Hartfield was able to flee to a neighboring town. The papers speculated that he was hiding out in an old mill near the railroad tracks.

How long Hartfield remained in drag remains unclear, but he was able to escape police and vigilantes—the papers reported that over 1000 private citizens were searching for John—for over a week. The initial coverage of Ruth’s story is followed by regular updates concerning the manhunt for Hartfield. From false sightings to friendly fire—a recently returned, white soldier was killed by another citizen after being mistaken for Hartfield—Hartfield remained at large until he tried to contact another African American in Ellisville for help. Hartfield’s friend turned him away and then alerted the police concerning Hartfield’s whereabouts: a neighboring swamp. It was in this swamp that he was captured and taken back to Ellisville to be lynched under a gum tree.

So with the fragmented story from the NAACP pamphlet finally fleshed out, I left the confines of the Mississippi archives and drove south-east from Jackson in search of Ellisville. For miles I drove and passed road crews, many of them comprised of young

Black men dressed in orange and white stripes. And as I drove I passed a 10 mile strip where crews were cutting, uprooting and then burning trees that grew in the road's median. With the Texas landscape still fresh in my mind, I wondered why a state would want to burn so much greenery—I still wonder.

But the burning passed, the landscape became green again as I entered the town of Ellisville. It had taken me a year to get to this sleepy Southern town with railroad tracks running down its center, and as if by instinct, but probably due more to city planning, the road I drove took me right up to the steps of the county courthouse, which was located only yards away from the still-functioning railroad tracks. I pulled into a parking lot, got out of my car, and began taking photographs, first of the courthouse and then of the railroad tracks.

As I snapped away, I began to feel disappointed as I realized that the Ellisville of 2003 was not the Ellisville of 1919. The train tracks I stood on were covered in empty plastic soda bottles and faded newspaper, which I tried unsuccessfully to photograph around. Surrounded by litter, I began to feel I might as well be taking pictures of the train tracks that run through the small Pennsylvania town in which my grandparents live. The activity of picture taking felt empty as I began to realize that I was attempting to take pictures of ghosts—both the ghost of a town and the ghost of man killed by ghosts that once inhabited that town. While standing on the railroad tracks, it hit me that I had spent the past year tracking down a ghost who haunted no one.

But I snapped a few more shots and went to the hardware store that stood next to the tracks. I had decided that due to its proximity to the railroad tracks and its state of

dilapidation, that it made a fine candidate for an ex-train station. I entered the store and asked the clerk, an older Black man, if the structure had ever served as the town's train station. He quickly informed me that it had not, but that the parking lot where my car was currently parked had. In an interaction that lasted only sixty seconds, he told me that train station had been converted and served as the town's police station (he specified no date of conversion), but once the new police station was built, they had the older structure demolished. I thanked him, walked back to my car, took one last picture of a tree that stood off in the distance near the tracks, got into my car and drove away. I had gotten to Ellisville too late.

But I am unwilling to admit that my trip to Ellisville was a bust. Instead, I am reminded of the Civil War re-enactors that frequently crowd old battlefields and parks that surround Greencastle. I am reminded of their attempts to recreate the life and death experiences of war. Some might consider their activities odd, but I have come to appreciate their desire to make the ghosts of war more real for us in the present. They value the importance of touching the past, and understand how it continues to touch us. However, because I have no intention or desire to re-enact what happened in Ellisville, these re-enactors only provide me a starting point for understanding what I've spent the past years doing. Where they play over and over again a narrative many of us know all too well, I hope to reconstitute a narrative that few know. It is a narrative that began with excitement, ended abruptly with the death of one man, and managed to fall almost out of

sight. My goal, then, is to allow this narrative to be haunted by the ghost of John Hartfield, to let the reality of his experience permeate these words.

So this project ends where it begins, and begins where it ends. And this temporal repetition, I hope, is not without its lessons. If only we were able always to linger over (and over, again) the past, the present, and the future. To consider constantly how these discrete moments cease to be discrete and affect each other and us. This project has tried to make an argument for the connectedness between historical events and literary-cultural production. More important, however, it has tried to investigate just exactly how the United States continues to enact violence against racial marked citizens literally and narratively. From the passing narratives written at the dawn of the twentieth century to the science fiction films produced at the century's end, the stories of policing and violence weigh heavy. It is impossible to tell the story of U. S. race relations without telling the story of subterfuge, contamination, and death. But it is a familiar story, and I hope that this project has made it apparent how our shared past haunts the stories we tell of our present and even our visions of the future.

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## VITA

Eve Exandria Dunbar was born in Manchester, New Hampshire on June 16, 1976, the daughter of Clover Dunbar. After Completing her work at Greencastle-Antrim High School, Greencastle, Pennsylvania, in 1994, she entered The Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pennsylvania. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Penn State University in May of 1998. In August of 1998 she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin.

Permanent Address: 1700 Poquito Street, Austin, Texas 78702

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