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**AMERICAN RUINS: NOSTALGIA, AMNESIA,  
AND BLITZKRIEG BOP**

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**AMERICAN RUINS: NOSTALGIA, AMNESIA,  
AND BLITZKRIEG BOP**

**by**

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# **AMERICAN RUINS: NOSTALGIA, AMNESIA, AND BLITZKRIEG BOP**

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“American Ruins: Nostalgia, Amnesia, and Blitzkrieg Bop” considers the symbolic role of contemporary urban ruins in the American imagination and in their relationship to America’s past. The United States contains more urban ruins than any other developed nation, yet ruins remain largely ignored as official sites of commemoration. This dissertation takes a look at the prominence of ruins as well as their invisibility, considering their role as sites of cultural memory, as well as how they are represented in literature, film, the visual arts, and the media. Throughout this study, an analysis of ruins as a motif in Romantic literature demonstrates how contemporary ways of seeing American ruins both challenge and conform to Romantic modes of contemplating these structures. In Chapter One, the fate of Civil War ruins is set against the history of Civil War commemoration and preservation in order to trace what narratives have been promoted about the conflict and what narratives have been erased.

Chapter Two focuses on amusement ruins in Asbury Park, New Jersey. In popular recollections of Asbury Park, these ruins recall a legacy of racism and corruption as well as inspire nostalgia for the “glory days” of a working-class resort. In Chapter Three, the Aliso Village Housing Project ruins in Los Angeles testify to the ways in which attitudes towards age and ruin can help to justify the displacement and disruption of low-income communities. The final chapter studies the ruins of the World Trade Center in light of a history of New York City ruins beginning with the South Bronx during the 1970s and 1980s. Taken together, these case studies demonstrate how ruins can reflect the cultural memories of communities that remain under-represented by national monuments and memorials. The sites considered in this dissertation highlight examples of insidious traumas that frame the American experience (racism, displacement, economic upheaval), issues that put the process of commemoration/signification in crisis. These examples suggest possibilities for the incorporation of ruins into a commemorative landscape that would recognize America’s violent past and convulsive economic changes, as well offer a place to mourn and learn.

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## **The American Acropolis: An Introduction**

In 1995, photographer Camilo José Vergara floated a bold plan as a response to a process of deindustrialization and white flight that left large swaths of Detroit's skyline in ruins. Vergara had come to know the area intimately over the course of more than ten years of photographing its abandoned buildings as well as those of other urban centers such as New York, Newark, and Los Angeles for his photo-documentary monograph, *The New American Ghetto*. As part of the book's conclusion, Vergara proposed that Detroit create a moratorium on the razing of twelve square blocks of downtown skyscrapers. Vergara called for the city to stabilize the buildings, but leave them as ruins to become "a grand historical park of play and wonder, an urban Monument Valley."<sup>1</sup> As the buildings shed their exteriors, he imagined scaffolding placed around their lower levels would protect pedestrians from debris. Vergara envisioned plants winding around their concrete and steel skeletons. He reasoned:

After all, large fields in Pennsylvania have been set aside to commemorate the Battle of Gettysburg. Why not secure the blocks with the tallest and most notable structures, those around Grand Circus Park, along Woodward Avenue, Griswold Street, and Washington Boulevard, and transform the space into a memorial to our throwaway cities? (220)

Vergara's plan flew in the face of urban renewal strategies designed to attract new industry and construction to the downtown Detroit area. It also provided an interesting critique of monument culture. Vergara's declaration laid bare the act of commemoration, reducing the consecrated grounds of Gettysburg to "large fields...set aside." By elevating an area associated with urban blight to the level of a national Civil War monument,

Vergara drew attention to the ways in which the selection of commemorative sites corresponds to versions of national history that federal or local government agencies (most frequently charged with monument creation) wish a community to remember (for example, the military history of the Civil War), as well as those histories they would like a community to forget.

If the National Park Service imagines that the Gettysburg National Military Park teaches visitors about nation building, courage, and sacrifice, what might those ruined buildings in Detroit teach future generations about modernity and the history of deindustrialization? It is hard to read Vergara's proposal without noting a bit of irony as he suggests a monument "to our throwaway cities." Vergara has spent more than thirty years documenting urban landscapes in such places as the South Bronx, Newark, Harlem, and Chicago. In much of his photography and writing, he argues that the federal government (as well as industry) turned their backs on American cities throughout the twentieth century. Vergara's crumbling monuments would be a place to celebrate one set of national values—the idea of progress and faith in industrialization that helped to raise those buildings—as well as to contemplate their limits.

Most critics called Vergara's idea of a ruins park or an "American Acropolis" absurd; many sensed the ways in which these ruins would loom as spectacular indictments of contemporary urban policy as well as economic failure. Others attacked Vergara's plan in terms that were surprisingly nationalistic. These critics argued ruins were simply not American. "The Romans, that is a dead civilization," Michael Goodin of *Crain's Detroit Business* explained, "Americans are not a dead civilization" (221).

Goodin expressed a sentiment born of a Romantic ideology that privileges the ruins of ancient civilizations or of distant pasts but not those from recent history. It also reveals what some define as an “American” relationship to the past, one that values history only in so far as it does not compromise a commitment to progress. In response to Vergara’s proposal, architect David Schervish declared: “This is not a European country. If a building is sitting here and does not fit into the scheme of things, it is going to be demolished” (222). Ruined buildings, structures that because of changing economic fate no longer “fit into the scheme of things,” exist all over the United States. Many stand ignored; most face demolition; a small percentage have been renovated; a few, such as the Alamo, have become national sites of commemoration.

Goodin and Schervish’s nationalistic protests assume that Europe serves as home to the past, while the United States represents the land of limitless progress and a promising future. What symbol better embodies the past than a ruin? Cultural geographer and historian David Lowenthal explains that Comte de Volney’s classically anti-revolutionary text, *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires*, “was much cited by Americans to whom the Old World’s moldering castles stood for oppression.”<sup>2</sup> Art critic Christopher Woodward notes:

In the generation after independence in 1784 Americans believed that their nation was God's chosen people and that the New World would be free of decay as if, like an infectious contagion, it could not cross the Atlantic... Thomas Jefferson studied monuments, not ruins.<sup>3</sup>

But Thomas Jefferson also worried about the ephemeral nature of American constructions, most of which were built with wood. Writing on the fifty-year lifespan of these edifices in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson complained: “Every half

century then our country becomes a tabula rasa, whereon we have to set out anew, as in the first moment of seating it.”<sup>4</sup>

Although I will provide a brief history of ruin in the United States later in this chapter, I want to note that by the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the assumption that America should be “free of decay” seems to still be widely held, albeit quite incorrectly. In fact, Vergara and other urban scholars, such as Mike Davis and Marshall Berman, have observed the opposite is true. Davis writes: “The sign of our times is the ruin. They surround our lives.”<sup>5</sup> Davis explains that in contrast to Western Europe, US “inner-city wastelands endure as seemingly permanent landscapes.” Today, the United States contains more urban ruins than any other developed nation.<sup>6</sup> Yet as recently as 2001, James E. Young and Svetlana Boym, scholars on monuments and memory, told reporters in *The New York Times* that until the attacks of September 11, America had been a land without ruins.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they propagate a version of our past that presumes an innocence that our violent history and the convulsions of late capitalism simply do not support.

This dissertation considers how contemporary urban ruins function as symbols in the American imagination as well as in relationship to national and local pasts. I am interested in both the prominence of ruins as well as their invisibility. I will explore the representation of ruins, from their importance in Romantic poetry to their appearance in contemporary culture. During the Romantic period, ruins not only came to represent an aesthetic ideal, but also were fundamental in expressing certain ideological beliefs that helped to solidify British nationalism. For Romantics ruins have proved places to

contemplate mortality and transience, the cyclical nature of history, the consequences of corruption, or the defeat of tyranny. I will consider the historical use of ruins as a motif in literature in order to demonstrate how our ways of seeing American ruins both challenge and conform to Romantic modes of contemplating these structures.

American ruins have been places from which to view the worst of our nature: our violence and our prejudice. This project is organized around particular sites: the ruins of Southern cities after the Civil War; amusement ruins in Asbury Park, NJ; housing project ruins in Los Angeles; and the ruins of New York City as evidenced by the South Bronx and the World Trade Center. These sites highlight the destruction of war and terrorist attacks, as well as examples of insidious trauma that frame the American experience (racism, displacement, economic upheaval, neglect). Unlike those Romantic ruins that legitimized the ideals of the British nation, many contemporary ruins serve as evidence to support critiques of the United States. The sites associated with insidious traumas put the process of commemoration and signification into question. In fact, the act of recognizing these problems as traumas forces us to interrogate our ideas of national values. This explains, in part, why ruins are largely ignored as official sites of commemoration. I will frame my discussion of unrecognized ruins with a consideration of officially sanctioned sites of memory such as Gettysburg National Military Park and the proposed monument at Ground Zero.

I believe that as unrecognized markers of the past, ruins can evidence histories that are still not acknowledged through officially sanctioned sites of memory such as monuments, memorials, and military parks. Frequently, these “unrecognized” ruins

testify to events associated with racialized histories in the United States. When Vergara asked Arthur Johnson, vice president for community affairs at Wayne State University, to evaluate Vergara's proposal for an "American Acropolis," Johnson saw the ruins as a "sign of failure that has more to do with race than anything else" (223). A racial uprising in 1967 stigmatized Detroit as its declining industrial strength reduced job opportunities. Decades of white flight contributed to the fact that—even today—Detroit leads the nation in declining urban population rate. As white residents and industries left the inner city, many felt that local, state, and federal governments abandoned the mostly black residents who remained. While others saw the empty buildings as symbols of economic failures, Johnson saw their connection to a history of racial segregation and discrimination.

Vergara's proposal and the reaction it received highlight a general aversion for ruins on the American landscape. Many view these structures as eyesores; virtually none have been recognized as official monuments by the federal government. Few have sought to understand them as a particularly American phenomenon. What follows is an overview of the scholarship that has been most important in my attempt to account for American attitudes towards ruins: literary studies, cultural studies, and writing on the relationship between place and memory. This introduction ends with an explanation of my own writing style and my selection of sites.

### **A Map Through the Ruins (1): Literary Studies and the Legacy of Romanticism**

From the palaces and monuments of antiquity to a recently abandoned factory or office building, ruins act as catalysts for the human imagination in the visual arts,

literature, and film. Historically, literary studies of ruins focus on the ruins of antiquity as a motif common to artistic movements such as European Romanticism.<sup>8</sup> The literary study of ruins highlights the symbolic function of ruins (both actual and imagined) serve in a text. No comprehensive studies deal with ruins as symbols in the literature of the United States. Providing such a history of literary ruins fell beyond the scope of this project.

Instead, I focus on actual urban ruins at sites across the United States: ruins of the Civil War, of Asbury Park's Casino Palace, of the Aliso Village housing project in Los Angeles, of the South Bronx and of the World Trade Center. In order to gauge how these ruins might function as sites of memory, I am curious not only about the history of these sites, but about what a particular community sees when they look upon them. I am particularly interested in how these ruins reflect or contradict the cultural memory of a particular community. Sometimes these community attitudes are made apparent in the debate over the fate of these structures from quotes in newspaper articles about plans to raze a housing project or in nostalgic recollections on personal websites. For example, published travelogues or photographs offer evidence of attitudes towards Civil War ruins. I have also attempted to gauge attitudes toward ruins by analyzing how ruins have been represented in the visual arts, literature, and popular culture. Because ruins remain largely unrecognized in the American landscape, they have not inspired significant literary creations (in contrast, for example, to Latin American works such as Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Machu Picchu* or Octavio Paz's *Hymn Among the Ruins*). While I do analyze poetry related to ruins, I have also considered films and song lyrics that refer to ruins.



These texts do not always reference the actual histories of the sites. For example, I analyze how Asbury Park's ruins function as the backdrop to a crime thriller that is "set" in a Long Island town. These representations of ruin speak to general attitudes towards ruins in the United States and offer testimony to how ruins are seen when removed from their historical context.

Throughout the dissertation, I reference the work of Romantic poets. Despite its almost constant presence in art and history, the fascination for ruin reaches a peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Romanticism taught us to "see" ruins in ways that affect our perceptions of them even today, which is why throughout the dissertation I will use examples of ruins in Romantic poetry as a basis for comparing and contrasting contemporary representations of ruins. The persistence of Romantic modes of seeing ruins may explain why many ruins in the United States remain unrecognized. As such, differences between contemporary ruins and their Romantic counterparts are worthy of some attention.

Many critics have noted how ruins in Romantic poetry came to serve a growing sense of British nationalism. To critic Laurence Goldstein, the trope of the ruin in eighteenth-century English literature and art represents a cyclical view of history that helped to forge an analogy between the rise and fall of empires and the process of organic decay and rebirth.<sup>9</sup> Critic Anne Janowitz builds on Goldstein's research to describe how ruins legitimize British nationalism by providing the "authority of antiquity."<sup>10</sup> (The same holds true for the indigenous ruins of Mexico and Peru.) Janowitz locates the first urban ruin in literature in Blake's *Jerusalem* "an anomalous text in the early nineteenth century

for locating the site of the ruin in the city rather than the countryside.” Interestingly, the poem also demonstrates the “strongest oppositional voice” to the “official version of national victory over the ruin.” Today, American ruins serve narratives that frequently critique the nation.

Unlike the Roman Coliseum or Tintern Abbey, ruins associated with a past or a culture far removed from the time of their beholders, contemporary American ruins do not represent a distant epoch or foreign culture. Because of this immediacy, they function in symbolically distinct ways from ancient or medieval ruins. For example, Janowitz describes how Druid ruins legitimize British nationalism in Romantic literature and painting. But American ruins, frequently found in or around the inner city, relate less to the legacy of an ancient civilization or an overthrown social order than shifting economic conditions or the unequal distribution of resources. They put into question the very ideals of progress and equality that our society holds dear. For example, in response to Vergara’s “American Acropolis,” Gary Sands, an urban planner at Wayne State university, revealed the shame associated with ruins when he said: “This is an embarrassment to us; we don’t make ruins, we make wonderful things.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the majority of ruins in the United States have been created within the past sixty years. Thus, in the case of many contemporary American ruins, viewers know what these structures looked like before they fell into disrepair. An American, contemplating the ruin of the factory where he or she once worked, will experience a vastly different sense of ruin than Lord Byron’s Childe Harold before the ruins of Rome. For many Americans, the ruins in their midst were once places of employment or

recreation, their schools or their homes. They can be sites related to traumatic events (such as war, terrorism, or natural disaster) as well to more insidious traumas such as the legacy of racism in our country. As such, our emotional response to these sites—be it shame or fear or anger—can be more immediate.

Finally, the original architecture and material composition of contemporary urban ruins may make them less appealing to observers than the ruins lauded through the aesthetics of the picturesque. Vergara divides the most common types of contemporary ruins into four main categories. These include: Beaux Arts Palace-inspired grand public buildings constructed at the turn of the century or shortly thereafter such as the former Bronx Borough Courthouse or the Casino Palace in Asbury Park, NJ; industrial ruins that include factories, warehouses, and distribution centers often made of reinforced concrete; public constructions built around the mid-century such as housing projects like the Aliso Village; and temporary structures such as single-family homes or barns built from wood. I would like to add a new kind of ruin that has become more common on the American landscape especially in the latter half of the twentieth century: the half-built edifice, a scaffolding of concrete and rebar that remains incomplete when money for a particular project dries up or legal squabbles halt development.<sup>12</sup> Many of the materials used to construct buildings in the twentieth century simply age less gracefully than ancient monumental structures did. Most twentieth-century buildings were not designed to be monuments.

Throughout this dissertation, I highlight the ways in which Romantic models for seeing ruins influence our perceptions of contemporary ruins, as well as the ways in

which our perceptions have changed. By seeing a ruin in essentially Romantic terms (as the evidence of the organic rise and fall of an empire, as evidence of particular corruption, as a material example of a spiritual condition), the actual history of such a site can often be suppressed. This dissertation aims to uncover the most prominent narratives, trauma stories of war and slavery, of racism and economic inequalities, represented by contemporary ruinous sites around the United States. Still there are many other factors beyond a relationship to Romanticism that determine American attitudes towards ruin. Literary history could only account for some of the ways in which ruins have been interpreted in our landscape. In order to understand their contemporary reception, I offer a brief outline of significant moments in a history of American ruins.

### **Toward a History of American Ruins**

Unlike Britain or Mexico, where ruins are made symbols related to national myths, the United States finds its initial identity in its freedom from ruin. Native American ruins leave no permanent place in the national imagination. The first ruins associated with national identity come into being during the Civil War with the large-scale destruction of Southern cities. Immediately, some see them as evidence of the nation's maturity, able to inspire nationalism as ruined abbeys had for the British. But the quintessentially Romantic ruin stands at a remove from the observer as the relics of another time or culture. For much of the US population, however, the ruins of the Civil War do not stand at a distance. As evidence of brutal destruction, Civil War ruins do not fit into an essentially heroic narrative of the conflict. I will discuss these developments

more fully in chapter one. Eventually Civil War ruins are—for the most part—forgotten as actual structures.<sup>13</sup> This pattern will be repeated with other ruins. Catastrophes such as the Chicago fire or the San Francisco earthquake produce similar devastation across densely populated urban areas. The ruins from these events are largely forgotten as well.

With the early twentieth century and the development of photojournalism, images of urban destruction from World War I and World War II as well as the Spanish Civil War are brought home to American readers. Faced with this massive devastation, people begin to view ruins in a new way. By the mid-century, ruins have lost much of their benign pastoral appeal. Ruin scholar Rose Macaulay writing in 1953 about the newly created ruins of European cities decries: “But *Ruinenlust* has come full-circle: we have had our fill.”<sup>14</sup> This is the first time we can speak of modernist ruin. These ruins do not legitimize nationalism, nor do they evidence an organic process of decay and rejuvenation as Romantic ruins did. Rather, they are perceived as evidence of the widespread corruption of Western Civilization and its barbaric potential. These modernist ruins find their place in the literature of Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and HD’s *Triology* to name a few examples. After World War II, many actual ruins are preserved in Europe and Japan as monuments to an explosive barbarity: an internment or concentration camp; a clock stopped at the moment the bomb was dropped at Hiroshima; Oradour-sur-Glane, a deserted village in south-west France where 650 men, women and children were killed by German soldiers.

While spared the ruin of war, rapid urbanization and industrialization would birth slums and decrepit housing conditions in American cities during the first half of the

twentieth century. In the post-war years, the effects of deindustrialization and contemporary federal urban policy leave the US landscape littered with abandoned buildings: department stores and once-luxurious hotels, public housing complexes and warehouses. Many become increasingly associated with critiques of society, such as the one embodied by Vergara's monument to "throwaway American cities." Referring to the half-finished skeleton of an Asbury Park hotel, Mark Moran writes on the *Weird New Jersey* website: "...the 10-story carcass of that ill conceived luxury high-rise still stood like a monument to greed and stupidity."<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, viewers tend to see war-like destruction in urban ruins. The ruins of the South Bronx are compared to London after the Blitz; the ruins of Asbury Park are compared to Sarajevo. But each war-related metaphor displaces these ruins to the realm of the foreign. In this way, they continue to appear as if they are anomalies in the American landscape, instead of one of its most dominant features. Ruins are everywhere in the American landscape by the end of the twentieth century, and yet we still do not recognize them as part of a national legacy.

### **A Map Through the Ruins (2): A review of cultural studies scholarship on ruins**

The history of American ruins does not entirely explain—nor does it account for—the relationship between ruins and memory in specific communities. My work is informed by many disciplines beyond literary studies such as cultural geography, anthropology, and urban studies. The cultural geographer David Lowenthal, the

anthropologist Rose Macauley, and the art historian Christopher Woodward present an international view of ruins but tend to focus on examples from antiquity. Cultural geographers JB Jackson and Kenneth Foote, as well as monument scholar James E. Young, consider the relationship between ruins and sites of memory.<sup>16</sup> Only recently have writers begun to consider ruins as a particularly American phenomenon. Marshall Berman, Mike Davis, and Camilo José Vergara have been some of the few to note the predominance of ruins in the American landscape, but none have considered a pre-twentieth-century history of ruin. Few scholars have commented on ruin symbolism, that is: what a community sees when they look at ruin, as well as how the media and popular culture represent them. Taken as a whole this scholarship can help to explain why ruins in the United States remain largely ignored by official modes of commemoration, as well as how ruins might potentially function as part of remembrance, healing, and identity formation within a community.

The relationship between landscape and memory is complicated. Walter Benjamin saw his environment as a palimpsest recording the processes of modernity. For Benjamin, the turn of the century Parisian arcades became a site from which to investigate the workings of capitalism and the relationship between cityscape and past. More recently, cultural geographer David Harvey, in his book *Spaces of Hope*, asks his readers to “see the production of space as a constitutive moment within the dynamics of capital accumulation and class struggle” and to become aware of the potential these dynamics have “to destroy and rebuild landscapes.”<sup>17</sup>

A landscape bears the marks of consecutive waves of capitalist development, of destruction and reconfiguration. The needs of the market modify a landscape: factories give way to office towers or luxury lofts. We are often most aware of what is being constructed: the scaffolding, hard hats, backhoes, and cranes of a new apartment lofts or glass office tower. And yet ruined edifices are equally instructive in our considerations of late capitalism's impact on a landscape. Ruins exist in a state of decay. Therefore, we must consider them not as spaces of consumption, but as spaces of psycho-emotional content. Interestingly, that content may differ depending on the cultural memories of the viewer. Where some see shame, others see hope.

Pierre Nora offers insight into how memory functions in relation to place that has some important implications for my study of ruins:

...we might oppose, for example, dominant and dominated *lieux de mémoire*. The first, spectacular and triumphant, imposing and generally imposed—either by a national authority or by an established interest, but always from above—characteristically have the coldness and solemnity of official ceremonies. One attends them rather than visits them. The second are places of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory.<sup>18</sup>

While Nora's binary classification seems somewhat oversimplified, it is helpful in our understanding of how ruins can function as *lieux de mémoire*, especially on the American landscape where they have so infrequently been recognized as “dominant” spaces of memory.

Many theorists agree that ruins have the potential to serve as monuments despite the ridicule with which Vergara's proposal for an “American Acropolis” was met. So why have they not been recognized as such? In his essay "The Necessity for Ruins,"



cultural geographer JB Jackson makes the link between ruin and monument with the example of a ruined church in West Berlin that “provides a startling reminder of World War II and is a monument whose message is not easy to forget.”<sup>19</sup> He questions a contemporary obsession with the renovation and restoration of ruined buildings that he feels points to a changing relationship to the past within the United States. While Jackson believes that traditional monuments remind a culture of covenants, pledges, and original identity, restored environments celebrate the personal or “vernacular.” For Jackson, the emphasis placed on an “everyday” experience of the past drains “ideological” content or politics from our notions of history. Thus, Jackson is more interested in traditional monuments—statuary, columns, the ruined church that remains a ruin—because they “are a guide to the future” reminding us of some obligation to the past. Jackson understands the symbolic potential of a ruin that remains unrestored.<sup>20</sup> Jackson does not acknowledge the fact that ruins as monuments frequently serve multiple ideologies. A ruined church in Dresden held very different symbolism for the town’s inhabitants than it did for the communist authorities. I am fascinated by ruin’s potential to serve multiple interpretations of history, and as such, stand as a marker for histories not typically represented through officially recognized modes of communication.

James E. Young worries about what version of the past might be remembered by ruins. Young explains that ruins tell no story but act as stand-ins for historical knowledge much like the vernacular artifacts of restored environments. Studying the ruins of concentration camps Young protests that “we risk mistaking the piece [the ruin] for the whole [the historical event], the implied whole for unmediated history.”<sup>21</sup> Young fears

that ruins can be used as “material evidence and proof” to support ideological interpretations of the past.

But Young does not take into consideration the ways in which ruins—especially those that have not become officially recognized memorial spaces—may accommodate the collective memories of groups that have not been memorialized in any significant way by a dominant culture. This is especially true of those ruins that relate to histories of racial or ethnic minorities. While the ruins of Auschwitz may not tell the complete story of the crimes committed there, they did serve as a reminder for many years before they were turned into a curated memorial space. In the United States, the Manzanar internment camp, used to confine Japanese-American citizens during World War II, existed as an unrecognized ruin from the late 1940s until 1973 when the California Department of Parks and Recreation erected a historic landmark plaque. Yet even without official recognition, without signage and curatorial efforts to narrate the events that had taken place there, survivors and their families made pilgrimages to the site and to other camps like it for years.<sup>22</sup> Manzanar’s status as a “dominated space of memory,” to use Nora’s terminology, eventually helped it to achieve status as a “dominant space of memory,” and thus allow a marginalized history to be made known to a larger audience.

But few examples of American ruins related to histories of race have become officially recognized. This may be partially explained by American’s negative attitudes toward age and decay. David Lowenthal, like Jackson, sees a desire to raze or renovate ruins as particularly American. Lowenthal explains: “Americans do not bother to repair something old, they would rather give it a new face, even if it means having a lot of old

faces around pending replacement.”<sup>23</sup> Lowenthal cites a study of the inhabitants of four US cities in which “scenes regarded as ‘new’ were regularly adjudged beautiful, clean, rich, and likeable, while those felt to be ‘old’ were concomitantly ugly, dirty, poor, and disliked.” For Lowenthal, these results confirmed “negative associations with age.” I am not convinced that we can speak “generally” about American attitudes toward anything. But scholarship by Lowenthal and Woodward supports this perception about America’s relationship to the past. As Jackson reminds us, many Americans are fascinated with a renovated or reconstructed past. It is simply that many Americans want their past to look brand new and to conform to dominant readings of our history and ideals.

What constitutes that “history” or those “ideals” varies depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic level. For example, while white business leaders saw the ruins of Detroit as a symbol of economic failure, to others they were a symbol of racism. For inhabitants of decimated urban spaces, Vergara suggests ruins serve as proof that “the world is down on you” or that whites “have walked away from their property.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of Detroit, Vergara explains that African-American inhabitants see the monumental ruins of the downtown Detroit as examples of white investment in the city. That these buildings were allowed to fall to ruin provides physical evidence of the ways in which white business and government leaders turned their backs on the city after white flight. That the ruins of Detroit can support two distinct interpretations of Detroit history suggests that they could serve as inclusive memorials: places in which to educate a broad public about those distinct interpretations of the past.

## **Cultural Memory and Cultural Trauma**

Which ruins do we remember and which do we forget? The process of monument and memorial creation involves community debate over the significance of an event. At a site of memory, the very discrepancies over how an event should be commemorated and signified make themselves known. In order to consider how this process works in the case of ruins, it is important to refer to scholarship on memory and history.

Marita Sturken distinguishes between "personal memory," "cultural memory," and "official historical discourse."<sup>25</sup> Sturken defines "cultural memory" as "memory shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning."<sup>26</sup> Like Sturken, I believe that cultural memory has a role in producing the concepts of the "nation" and of "an American people" through memorials, public art, popular culture, literature, commodities and activism.<sup>27</sup>

But who does the sharing? Sturken acknowledges that cultural memory "both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed." This is especially true when a culture debates the significance of a particular place of memory. For example, Sturken considers how the Vietnam War Memorial generated varied responses from groups with differing aesthetic expectations. To some the Maya Lin memorial was indicative of the shame of war, to others it was a fittingly ambiguous memorial to an ambiguous conflict, but its interpretation did not necessarily reflect one's relationship to that war. In the case of other memorials, such as those related to the Civil War, these "divisions and conflicting agendas" represent more than just political differences. Interpretive conflicts may arise along lines of ethnicity, race, or

socio-economic group. Memorials themselves can be used to subjugate the knowledge of particular social groups in order to promote the cultural ideology of another.

This dissertation focuses on sites associated with cultural memories that produce "divisions" and conflicting narratives along economic, ethnic, or racial lines: ethnic communities deemed decrepit slums, a ruin seen as a monument to racism. Furthermore, I am interested in how divergent interpretations of these sites might serve to reinforce particular ethnic, economic, or racial identities. In the United States, cultural memory can be as amnesiac as "official historic discourse" when it comes to recalling genocide, violence, and oppression (often racially or sexually motivated). Sturken asks us to consider cultural memory as "a field of contested meaning." In fact, I believe that "cultural memories" differ among particular racial, ethnic, or economic communities in regards to their relationship to ruin.

These cultural memories form the very fabric that can help unify many communities. When it comes to determining the significance of a particular site, the differences between the cultural memories of particular groups can be highlighted. Critic Ron Eyerman suggests:

...national or cultural trauma always engages a 'meaning struggle' a grappling with an event, that involves identifying the 'nature of the pain,' 'the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility.'<sup>28</sup>

For example, the manner by which the National Park Service has preserved battlefields of the Civil War—while largely ignoring both sites that reference slavery and the large-scale destruction of the war—offers some clues into how the cultural memory of one group (Anglo-American war veterans) has influenced official historic discourse and effectively marginalized the cultural memory of another segment of the population

(African-Americans). Cultural memory in places such as Civil War military parks supports versions of the past that strengthen a particular sense of group identification.

Thus, it is important to be mindful that the ideological needs of particular racial, ethnic, social, and economic communities can shape cultural memory (which can be oppositional but also entangled with history). Around many of the more traumatic events of national history and the ruins associated with them, narratives can be created that promote the cultural memories of one group while suppressing those of another. In addition, many sites associated with violent or traumatic events become obliterated. In doing so, a society eliminates one potential mechanism through which to speak and/or debate the meanings of difficult events.

I believe that the commemorative silences in our landscapes point to unresolved conflicts and conflicting cultural memories. Sites related to slavery have only recently begun to be excavated and marked because the existence of slavery and the failure—even to this date—to deliver on the promise of racial equality draws into question those national values around which traditional memorials are supposed to unite us. In a similar fashion, the fact that a memorial to World War II veterans was not constructed until more than fifty years after the conflict points to the shame associated with the resolution of the conflict and the dropping of atomic bombs on civilian populations. Behind that shame, the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki loom.

Shoshana Felman explains that culturally traumatic events require “a positive necessity of accounting” instead of articulation or confession. She cites Walter Benjamin’s idea of “translation” as a possible metaphor for a representation of history

that implies “a new relation to the past” or the “historical performance of radical discontinuity.”<sup>29</sup> Felman writes: “The task of the translator, on the contrary—in opposition to confessional apologetic discourse and to traditional historical cognition—is to read the textuality of the original event... without reducing the original event to a false transparency of sense.” In the United States, we have often failed to perform “translations” of our most traumatic national experiences such as slavery, the Native American genocide, the Civil War devastation of Southern cities, the guilt associated with the dropping of the atom bomb, or the legacy of segregation. The struggle to develop a “false transparency of sense” at sites such as the battlefield at Gettysburg has implications for Anglo-American identities, as well as ethnic-American and class identities. This struggle can also be witnessed in our attitude toward urban ruins in the decision to raze a public housing complex in Los Angeles or restore amusement ruins in New Jersey. I believe that until those sites that were instrumental to the narrative of slavery, for example, become acknowledged and turned into places where we might mourn its cost and victims, both African-Americans and Anglo-Americans will suffer a legacy of guilt and anger. Until we are willing to acknowledge our own violent past, we will continue to promote a false sense of isolation and innocence. The traumas of economic devastation and urban uprisings resulting from United States policies both within and beyond the national boundary may also be “translated” through marginalized places of memory: the wreckage of deindustrialization, the empty skyscrapers of Detroit.

So how can ruins with their ability to play home to so many desires serve cultural memory? Critics such as Eyerman, Flores, and Sturken have already noted that traditional

memorials often promote limited and contested interpretations of events. How does the polysemous nature of a ruin complicate or aid the process of remembrance?

Because of their incomplete nature, many contemporary ruins have not been associated with the narratives necessary to create those kinds of traditional monuments that a critic such as JB Jackson appreciates. While many contemporary monuments skew traditional narration of historic events, their presence testifies to a site's significance. While ruins present a wide range of interpretations and emotional responses, they also allow a space through which lessons and perspectives often forgotten by official historical discourse might be given voice.

Thus contemporary ruins can accommodate a wide range of cultural memories including those cultural traumas that remain untranslated. For example, the amusement ruins of Asbury Park can stand as a nostalgic reminder of the "golden days" before racial tension and economic hard times befell the community or as monuments to capitalism's failures. An abandoned housing project becomes a symbol of a racial and economic "elsewhere" that a city government will destroy, as well as a memorial for a lost sense of community. Throughout this dissertation, I will provide examples of how ruins can sometimes make visible and sometimes obscure legacies of cultural trauma related to race relations in the United States.

Urban ruins and the texts written around them beg us to consider the questions: Do the processes of forgetting and remembering differ when cultural remembrance is performed around an officially sanctioned site (i.e.: the war memorials of Gettysburg) or when an "unofficial" site becomes imbued with memory (i.e.: the boardwalk ruins in



Asbury Park)? What kinds of identities are being modeled by amnesiac versions of our past that leave out the issue of slavery or the destruction of the Civil War? What kinds of identities could be created if we faced the most difficult chapters of our history?

### **Talking Ruins, Ruinous Talking: A Note on Writing Strategies**

Shoshana Felman insists that translation provides a strong metaphor for the retelling of history because a translation will also be incomplete, a failure. Translation, thus, provides a “constant fragmentation of a totalizing view.”<sup>30</sup> Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart explains: “Where a master narrative cuts through a swath of extraneous detail and gathers the “objects” at hand to the broad outlines of History as a sequence of events, local practices of re-membling follow the dense fabulations of luminous fragments and ruins that hit the place and leave it reeling.”<sup>31</sup> In this work, I had to narrate the traumatic histories of ruined sites, as well as consider the way in which these stories have been narrated: in the mass media, in personal testimony on web-sites, in literary and filmic representations. As I narrate, I rely on collage with its gaps, juxtapositions, and suggestive linkages in order to avoid oversimplified classifications and causal claims or what anthropologist Michael Taussig calls “rosary-bead claims of cause-and-effect.”<sup>32</sup> The new anthropological methods of such writers as Taussig, Stewart, and Ruth Behar who utilize the 'auto-ethnographical' first-person have also been influential to my writing. I use first person wherever it seems appropriate. Thus, the tension between

narrative and non-linear modes of representation highlight much of my thinking about trauma, memory, ruin, and commemoration.

My own poetry comes from a fascination with techniques of fragmentation, collage, and juxtaposition. As writers such as Janowitz and Thomas McFarland in his *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, have noted, the fragment became a popular model for the lyric in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In twentieth century poetry, cultural fragments form one significant strategy of modernism. I have always been inspired by those twentieth-century avant-garde strategies that privilege a more radical form of fragmentation, embodied by John Ashbery's famous mid-century predilection "to leave it all out." Writers such as Ashbery as well as postmodern descendents in the form of L\*A\*N\*G\*U\*A\*G\*E poets and New Coast writers have resorted to fragmentary modes of lyricism to energize the field of the poem and make manifest the play of the mind. But poetry has not only influenced the formal aspects of this project.

Poetry trains the sensibility in an understanding of the symbolic significance of material culture. James Clifford begins his seminal work on cultural anthropology, *The Predicament of Culture*, with a reading of William Carlos Williams' poem "For Elsie." Clifford's reasoning is simple: the poem (which provides a ruminations on the "pure products of America") shares with modern ethnography "diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation."<sup>33</sup> Clifford's notion of the poet as participant/observer influenced my first collection of poetry, *Pioneers in the Study of Motion*, as it records my experiences as a woman raised in a white-ethnic,

working-class community within the United States as well as living in Latin America for much of the 1990s.

Throughout the twentieth century, poets have served as “ethnographers” writing essays that draw from the field of cultural studies. In addition to his “ethnographic” poetry, William Carlos Williams authored a book-length interpretation of US history entitled *In the American Grain*. James Agee penned his groundbreaking epic on tenant farming *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a founding text in the field of American Studies, only two years after winning the prestigious Yale Series for Younger Poets prize. More recently Edward Dorn would act as ethnographer writing about Native American culture in the Dakotas in his book *The Shoshonians*. Only last year, poet and translator Clayton Eshleman completed a 20-year study, part essay, part poem, on cave paintings in France entitled *Juniper Fuse*. Today, the continued melding of ethnographic and cultural studies to literary techniques and aesthetics are exemplified by Clifford’s notion of ethnopoetics as well as Michael Taussig’s ideas about fictocriticism. In fact, the journal *XCP: Cross-Cultural Poetics* consistently features the work of poets and anthropologists often leaving the reader to refer to contributor’s notes in order to discern who is who.

As I have previously stated, the relationship between poetry and ruins dates back well beyond the Romantic period where it reaches perhaps its most frequently cited manifestation, and continues on throughout Modernism and throughout much of the post-war period. I hope that my own knowledge as a practicing poet has served me in this investigation into urban ruins.

## **The Selection of Sites and Archive**

The selection of sites has proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of this dissertation. With these sites, I hope to demonstrate both how officially sanctioned or "dominant places" of memory (to use Nora's terminology) operate as well as how cultural memory functions in "dominated" sites. Therefore, while this project will primarily focus on ruins that have not been recognized as monuments (in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in East Los Angeles, and in the South Bronx), I have chosen to frame their discussion with considerations of Civil War commemorative history and the plans for the memorial at the World Trade Center site as examples of traditional sites of memory.

The transitory nature of ruins contributed to the difficulty of this study. Contemporary ruins in the United States have varied life-spans—ranging from a several years to a several decades. The Aliso Village housing project in Los Angeles stood for only a few months as an abandoned ruin before being demolished to make way for new public housing. And yet it is the subject of a variety of texts, as well as of a series of photographs that blur the lines between art and documentary. I am interested in these transformations. The choice to destroy, ignore, or reconstruct an abandoned site is intrinsically bound to a community's memories of that site. In this dissertation, I consider sites that represent all three of those possible outcomes.

Finally, I sought sites that offered places to contemplate either racial or economic injustices, sites of Civil War battles or urban uprisings. I selected sites that would narrate the process of our economic policies and ideological attitudes, as opposed to those that

might be representative of a single and unique act of violence (the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles where Robert Kennedy was assassinated) or a violent act of nature such as the ruins of the Chicago Fire or Hurricane Katrina.<sup>34</sup> In part, this decision came from my desire to represent not a particular moment of crisis, but something quotidian and insidious, a chronic state of emergency perpetuated by late capitalism (Benjamin, Harvey). These sites and the archives associated with them provide insight into cultural memories that may have been marginalized, silenced, or forgotten. As such, they begin to reveal a cultural history of the Americas that challenges more conventional narratives of national values.

Chapter One looks at the ruins of the Civil War, the first to dominate our national landscape in a significant way. I consider the fate of those ruins, against the legacy of Civil War commemoration and preservation in order to trace what narratives have been promoted about the conflict. The photographs of Southern ruins reprinted in the North—most notably those of George Barnard—create a narrative through which Northern military might and industrial power overcome the decadent South. Chronicles by Northern writers such as Charles Trowbridge and Robert Cromwell offer additional examples of how these ruins are seen. These initial images offer a first glimpse of how the conflict and the destruction it caused was initially signified. I will also consider how a site such as Gettysburg becomes a nationally recognized memorial for the conflict instead of the ruins of plantations or Southern cities. In the erasure of these ruins, a legacy of violence on our own landscape has been sterilized.

While Chapter One establishes a starting point for a history of ruin in the United States as well as outlines the limits of a Romantic view of ruin, Chapter Two provides the

first example of a contemporary ruin and offers insight as to how a Romantic notion of ruins influences our ways of seeing these structures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The broken glass, boarded doors, and Victorian spires of the abandoned Casino Palace amusements in Asbury Park dominate scrapbook-like personal web pages. During the summer of 2002, their ghostly silhouettes featured prominently in New York newspaper and television reports of urban renaissance in this depressed seaside town. But whose story are these ruins telling? In many popular representations, the amusement ruins symbolize a “once upon a time” that tantalizes the imagination in ways contemporary Asbury Park cannot. In popular recollections of Asbury Park, a legacy of unequal distribution of resources fueled by racism and corruption falls way to nostalgia for the “glory days” of a working class resort or a tale of promising restoration. Thus, I analyze popular narratives of Asbury Park as told through the press (*New York Times*, *The Asbury Park Press*, *the Today Show*), a strange assortment of individual webpages, and film. In addition, I focus on how the ruins of Asbury Park became a model for reconstruction and renewal in the year following the attacks of September 11.

Chapter Three centers on an example of ruins in Los Angeles. As the capital of postmodernity or altar to an impending apocalypse, the Southern California landscape has captured the imagination of critics from Jean Baudrillard to Mike Davis. But the rapidness with which Los Angeles transforms its own landscape, makes an investigation of its ruins difficult. I have chosen to focus on the short-lived ruins of the Aliso Village housing project. The project was built in 1940s when the city demolished a low-income community and replaced it with public housing. In 2000, the city decided to raze those public housing structures to build new mixed-income townhomes.

While the case of Aliso Village can also be used to discuss issues of community building and disruption as well as the ideology of New Urbanism, I am most interested in the symbolic use of the housing project ruins. On one hand, images of the abandoned structures supported their very destruction on the Los Angeles Housing Authority web pages. On the other, photographer Anthony Hernandez created a series of images by sneaking into the buildings when the demolition crews were gone. Hernandez's photographs operate under the aesthetics of an austere, nearly abstract modernism, and yet provide an extremely humanizing view of the project and its former inhabitants. The case of the Aliso Village housing project demonstrates how attitudes towards age and ruin can be used to justify the displacement and disruption of inner-city communities, especially the communities of low-income residents of color.

The final chapter of this dissertation takes a look at the ruins of the World Trade Center in light of a history of New York City ruins beginning with the South Bronx during the 1970s and 1980s. While the devastation of the South Bronx resulted from vastly different circumstances than those that caused the destruction of the World Trade Center, the ruins of the South Bronx have also been incorporated into larger nationalist narratives of devastation and war. Throughout the chapter, I will use the examples of writers such as Marshall Berman and Mike Davis, as well as filmmakers who have forged narratives of warlike destruction inspired by the ruins of New York for many years before the attacks of September 11. As the closing chapter in this work, a consideration of the World Trade Center site provides an opportunity to analyze the production of a "dominant place" of memory and investigate the ways in which ruins offer a model for

what Young calls the “anti-monument.” With these examples, I hope to suggest possibilities for the incorporation of ruins into the American landscape.

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In this work, I have theorized that behind every ruin there exists an archive of ruins that precede it: World War II ruins that rise up behind the ruins of the South Bronx; the images of Beirut that ghost the ruins of Asbury Park. The content of that archive varies from individual to individual dependent on official historic discourse and cultural as well as personal memories. The ruins that shadow those of this study are the ruins of my birthplace, Newark, NJ, and of the World Trade Center. I was born in Newark on Christmas Eve 1967, after the long hot summer of uprisings in that city that *Life* magazine called “The Predictable Insurrection.” My parents grew up on Highland Avenue in the city’s traditionally Italian-American First Ward. By the time of the riots, they had moved from Newark to the neighboring city of Bloomfield. Although the riots never came close to that community, my father purchased a handgun; within 12 months, my parents moved from Bloomfield to the suburbs of Fanwood, New Jersey, where I would grow up.

Family remained in Newark. For years, we would return to Highland Avenue to visit my grandparents. With disappointment and worry, my parents would comment on the changes taking place in their “old neighborhood”—its growing Hispanic, mostly Puerto Rican population, its growing crime rate, the rise in derelict properties. From the windows of cars and trains that brought me through Newark over the first twenty years of



my life, I remember noticing the ruined factories, warehouses, storefronts, and apartment buildings. Perhaps this dissertation serves as way to understand some of what those ruins symbolized for me as well as to situate their existence within a larger national landscape.

I left New Jersey when I was 18 years old and did not return for more than short visits until the summer of 2001, when I rented an apartment in New York City's Bowery. At least once every couple of weeks, I would take a train out of Manhattan's Penn Station to the New Jersey suburb of Edison, where my parents lived. I was on a train from New Jersey into Manhattan on the morning of September 11, 2001 when planes smashed into the World Trade Center. This dissertation serves as a way to find a context for those ruins as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 220. All further citations are from this edition and will be noted in the text.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 175.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (New York: Vintage Press, 2001) 196.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 160.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Davis. *Dead Cities* (New York: The New Press, 2002) 380.

<sup>6</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: Monticelli Press, 1999) 12.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Boxer, "A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory" *The New York Times*, October 27, 2001. For a more complete discussion of Young's comments see Chapter 4 where I discuss the ruins of New York City.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire. The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977). Anne Janowitz, *England's ruins: poetic purpose and the national landscape* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990).

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<sup>9</sup> Goldstein 6.

<sup>10</sup> Janowitz 2.

<sup>11</sup> Vergara, *American Ruins*, 206.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Smithson noted a similar phenomenon in his “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, NJ” when he wrote about “ruins in reverse.” For Smithson, these consisted of “all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the ‘Romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built, but rather rise into ruin before they are built.” Smithson notes the difference between the Romantic ruin—organic in its decay the result of time and neglect—and the ruins in reverse that come into being as a result of the process of development. Still, I believe that Smithson references a particular moment in the development of an edifice. I am referring to a structure that remains suspended in this half-construction for a significant period of time.

<sup>13</sup> I realize that in this statement I might be “outing” myself as a Yankee. I know that inhabitants of the south continue to live with the memory of Civil War destruction in ways that US citizens from other regions of the country do not. But I believe this regional disparity in the memory of the Civil War is worth noting. The point remains that the ruins of the Civil War do not have a place in our national consciousness in the same way that other historic sites, such as Gettysburg, do.

<sup>14</sup> Rose Macauley, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (New York: Walker, 1966) 454.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Moran. “Greetings from Abandoned Asbury Park, NJ” *Weird New Jersey*. 02 Oct 2002. <[http://www.weirdnj.com/\\_abandoned/asburypark.html](http://www.weirdnj.com/_abandoned/asburypark.html)>.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground. America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1997). JB Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins*. (Amherst: Univ of Mass Press, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> David Harvey. *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press) 57-59.

<sup>18</sup> Nora 23.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson 91.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson does not consider the debate over national values that might be responsible for why these national monuments no longer exist. Interestingly, he mentions the battlefield at Gettysburg as one of the first examples of this change from commemorating values to preserving an environment: “It was in effect a reconstruction of the environment. It was no longer a reminder, it no longer told us what to do; it simply explained the battle.” I believe that it is exactly the challenge to a unified understanding of national values

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brought about by slavery and Civil War that makes such a change in our relation to history possible.

<sup>21</sup> Young 127.

<sup>22</sup> Foote 306.

<sup>23</sup> Lowenthal 126-127.

<sup>24</sup> Vergara, *The New American Ghetto*, 204.

<sup>25</sup> For the purposes of this investigation, I am defining “official historical discourse” as does Richard Flores. According to Flores, historical discourse “refers to specific norms and values concerning evidence and interpretation” and yet also “shares many of the characteristics of other discourses such as literature, myth and cultural memory” (17).

<sup>26</sup> Marita Sturken. *Tangled Memories. The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*. (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997) 1-3.

<sup>27</sup> Sturken distinguishes between collective and cultural memory preferring the term cultural because of what she calls the “self-consciousness with which notions of culture are attached to these objects of memories” as cultural memory. Sturken refers to testimonies that become part of a government archive or are left at official monuments. But I believe the archive of the internet represents another source of knowledge a place where versions of history get told.

<sup>28</sup> Ron Eyerman. *Cultural Trauma; Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 7.

<sup>29</sup> Shoshana Felman 162

<sup>30</sup> Shoshana Felman. 161.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York : Routledge, 1992) 6.

<sup>33</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1988) 9.

<sup>34</sup> The ruins of New Orleans came into being as this dissertation was being written. In the future, what ruins remain in New Orleans and other cities devastated by Hurricane Katrina may be symbolic not only of natural disaster, but of massive government failures.

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It will be years before society will be able to discern the range of stories that can be told through whatever ruins remain.

## Chapter One: The Lost Ruins of the Civil War

A black and white photograph that ran in the May 29, 2005 edition of *The New York Times Magazine* depicts a scene of complete destruction. Piles of rubble appear in the foreground, as does a portion of wall. In the background, half-crumbling façades and ruined chimneys sketch a ragged skyline. A single fluted column charred and marked by bullet holes rises up defiantly through the center of the frame with nothing standing around it. Four black children sit on its base staring at the camera. A caption reads: “The ruins of Charleston, S.C., April 1865.”<sup>1</sup>



*Figure 1: The Ruins of Charleston, S.C., April 1865 (Library of Congress).*

Today, images of urban war ruins frequently become associated with areas of devastation far from home: Baghdad or Kabul, Beirut or Sarajevo. But the Library of Congress contains hundreds of photographs documenting the devastation of the US Civil War, a devastation that the editors of *The New York Times Magazine* felt was sufficiently equivalent to modern-day war-zones that this photograph accompanied an essay drawing comparisons between the Reconstruction and the current war in Iraq. That comparisons could be made between post-Civil War domestic reconstruction and a post-invasion reconstruction in Iraq says much about the colonial aspirations of our current foreign policy. It also speaks to the frequency with which the differences between domestic and foreign war ruins become elided.

Up until the Civil War, the United States had largely thought of itself as a land without ruins. In the widespread devastation of Southern cities, all of that changed. How could such ruins be incorporated into the history of a nation that defined itself as an alternative to ruined ancestry of Europe? Some sought to see the ruins—and the conflict that produced them—as a necessary step towards the nation’s maturation. As recently as 2001, historian David Blight reaffirmed this vision of Civil War ruins:

In the immediate wake of the war, the battlefields, in combination with the devastated southern cities, made America for the first time, a land with ruins. Unlike the haunting, destroyed abbeys of the English civil war of the seventeenth century or Rome’s ancient, majestic city of ruins, America’s destruction was brand new—new, but instantaneously historic, and at many battlefields and burial grounds, therefore, sacred.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Romantic depictions of the Britain’s ruined abbeys or Druid monuments could be used to legitimize British nationalism by providing the “authority of antiquity,” so the

Civil War ruins offered sites from which Blight suggests the fledging nation gained its own authority through the legitimacy of war. If British nationalism rests upon a perceived conquest over antiquity—as represented by both its Druid and Catholic past—then the United States would gain its authority through the defeat of a far-less industrialized (read=modern) South.

For Blight, Civil War ruins are “instantaneously historic,” that is to say, worthy of our cultural remembrance, because they are legitimizing symbols. It is an odd assumption to make about history and the nation. Can history only be written through ruins, through evidence of death and mass destruction? Can a nation only become legitimized through conquest or war? How can we evaluate this claim with the knowledge that very few ruins from the Civil War have survived to this day?

Blight’s argument assumes certain similarities between British ruins and those of the US Civil War that simply do not exist. Blight fails to see how American ruins might not seem “historic” for citizens of destroyed Southern cities. In the late nineteenth century, Americans could not respond to Civil War ruins in the same way that an English traveler could look upon a crumbling abbey. Civil War ruins are not simply tourist attractions or relics from distant conflicts. Instead, these structures formed part of a traumatic and quotidian experience of war.

While Blight is correct in asserting the sites were “instantaneously” worthy of attention, much debate arose over the narrative surrounding the creation of many of these ruins (Were the fires that ravished Columbia started by retreating Confederates or Union troops?) and the stories they might tell. Differences emerged in the ways ruins were

perceived by Southerners and Northerners, blacks and whites. For white Southerners, the ruins of their cities were evidence of defeat: the destruction of an economy and way of life. For Northerners, they may have symbolized justice or the costs of war. For African-Americans, they may have concretized the overthrow of slavery. Perhaps this is because ruins highlight the differences between what Marita Sturken would call “official historic discourse” and competing “cultural memories” at a time when “official historic discourse” surrounding the Civil War was first being written. In any case, we must read them as much more than the symbols of national maturity that Blight seems to suggest they were.

How these ruins were first perceived and then were eventually forgotten provides an important chapter in the larger story of how the Civil War has been remembered in the United States as well as how ruins relate to the larger narratives of national history. In order to understand both how the most prevalent narrative of the Civil War was constructed and the role that ruins may have played in its development, this chapter considers early images of Civil War ruins in the photographs of George N. Barnard, as well as travelogues and diaries from Northern writers. I am especially interested in those representations of ruins—both visual and literary—that reinforced an essentially Romantic notion of the South. Here I am taking nostalgia for pre-industrial society as one tenet of Romanticism. Other elements of high Romanticism such as exoticism and a fascination for the supernatural will also evidence themselves in early descriptions of Civil War ruins. In the years following the Civil War, writers and photographers utilize these particular aspects of Romanticism to depict the conflict and the political turmoil



that followed as “the struggle of the picturesque and unjust civilization of the past with the prosaic and leveling civilization of the future,” to quote Southern writer Edward King.<sup>3</sup> While some will see Southern ruins as essentially picturesque, others will use elements of Gothic storytelling or exotic depictions to put the South and its post-war reality at a distance from the viewer. In terms of Civil War ruins, Romanticism provides a model for seeing ruins that makes them difficult to incorporate into our landscape, and therefore easier to forget, especially for those citizens who do not know the destruction firsthand. Describing the ruins in ways that reference foreign landscapes and fantastic literature enables the North to lessen its commitment to reconstructing and reforming the region.

As this Romantic vision of the Confederacy prevailed, so did the Myth of the Lost Cause, a narrative that would emphasize the noble nature of antebellum Southern society as well as a military retelling of the conflict instead of the racism and oppression at the heart of the war. A commemorative landscape reinforces this heroic narrative. Eventually, regardless of attempts to characterize them in Romantic terms, the actual ruins of war disrupt such a narrative, highlighting the devastation and particularly cruel methods of warfare intended to produce significant damage to civilian infrastructure. So the impetus to preserve ruins wanes. Instead, the National Military Parks of the Civil War tell a story of battle strategy, emphasizing courage evidenced on both sides of the war, and downplaying the issue of slavery as well the damage inflicted throughout the civilian population. Those battlefields, preserved and sanctified, offer the impression of a war fought at an eerily silent and sterilized remove from daily life.

As part of my analysis of ruins, I have considered some of the earliest efforts at Civil War commemoration as well as one of its most important sites: Gettysburg. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of Robert Lowell's 1960 poem "For the Union Dead." This work provides an opportunity to discuss a more contemporary perspective on Civil War memorials as well as the representation of war ruins in an atomic age. While the actual ruins of the Civil War have no significant place on the commemorative landscape, Lowell's poem combines a meditation on a Civil War monument as well as urban ruins in light of the failures of contemporary monument culture and the Civil Rights era.

Today no sites of Civil War ruins (buildings destroyed as a result of battle) occupy a prominent place among our nation's historic sites. Civil War battlefields have become the locations where we remember the conflict. These battlefields sanitize our notion of war in the way that no war ruin could. Civil War ruins testify to the destruction and carnage of war contesting the traditionally heroic modes of telling war stories. As a result of their destruction, the United States continues to be characterized as "a land without ruins," an assumption that denies our violent past and potential. This desire to view ruins as aberrations on the American landscape will persist throughout the twentieth-century in the war-like destruction of the South Bronx as well as in the failure to connect the devastation at Ground Zero to historical narratives of urban destruction.

## **Photographing the “Picturesque Civilization of the Past”**

With the Civil War, the medium of photography provided a new kind of testimony to the devastation of war and war ruins. Photographs provide some evidence as to how Civil War ruins were perceived when they existed on the landscape. One of the most fascinating collections of war ruin photography comes from George N. Barnard, who published his *Photographic Views of Sherman’s Campaign* in 1866. The limited-edition collection included sixty-one photographic plates, which initially appear without captions, depicting the devastation wrought by Union General William “Tecumseh” Sherman and his army through Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. An accompanying booklet with an uncredited essay written by Theodore R. Davis tells the story of Sherman’s final campaign without direct mention of the pictures themselves.

Sherman’s campaign, which began on November 15, 1864, signified what many historians have called “the start of modern warfare.” In their march from Atlanta to Savannah, more than 62,000 soldiers laid waste to everything in their path. Sherman aimed to bring the war home to the South, to inflict damage on any resources that could be used to support the Confederate cause, and to demoralize both the civilian and military populations. So Sherman’s men set about burning plantations, felling bridges, destroying railways (bent rails came to be known as “Sherman’s bowties” or “Jeff Davis neckties”), as well as helping slaves to escape in a 50-mile-wide swath of devastation that resulted in ten billion dollars in destroyed property. Sherman, himself a landscape painter, might well have known the intimidating effects that the images of ruined buildings and once

stately plantations would have on the Confederacy as “modern warfare” irreparably changed the landscape of the South.

Barnard joined Sherman’s troops as the official photographer of the Military Division of Mississippi. *Photographic Views of Sherman’s Campaign* begins with a portrait of “Sherman and His Generals” and ends with “Ruins of the Railroad Depot, Charleston, S.C.” sketching a narrative that critic Alan Trachtenberg believes monumentalizes “not the force of righteousness or political rectitude, but naked military power.”<sup>4</sup> Barnard begins his collection of photographs in Tennessee and follows Sherman’s path from Atlanta to Savannah. The last ten photographs of the album contain images of Columbia, S.C., Fort Sumter, and Charleston. Unlike Mathew Brady’s famous photographs of trenches strewn with dead soldiers and dirty, combat-weary troops, Barnard includes no corpses or common soldiers in his photographs. Barnard’s battlefields stand as deserted areas of downed trees; the most striking evidence of war devastation comes from the ruined buildings of Atlanta and Columbia. Thus, the collection of photographs becomes “a celebration of the North’s modern, rationalized system of warfare” without illustrating the human cost of the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

War ruins enact a particular kind of desire in the viewer as monuments to conquest. As Rose Macaulay explains, “It is pretty safe to suppose that the earliest ruin pleasure was inextricably mixed with triumph over enemies, with moral judgment and vengeance, and with the violent excitement of war.”<sup>6</sup> Macaulay traces the first written expressions of such a desire to the earliest Hebrew poets such as Isaiah who cursed the ruins of Babylon proclaiming: “...wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate

houses.” Barnard’s photograph collection—produced in New York for a primarily affluent Northern audience—does not participate in such an overt narrative of moral judgment, although moralizing does occur. Instead, Barnard depicted the ruins as testimony to the power of Sherman’s army.

Image after image captures neoclassical Southern architecture in ruins. An early pair of photographs, “Trestle Bridge at Whiteside” and “Pass in The Raccoon Range,” depicts a trestle bridge erected by the First Michigan Engineers and the Railroad Construction Corps on the ruins of a stone bridge destroyed by retreating Confederates.



*Figures 2 and 3: George Barnard’s “Trestle Bridge at Whiteside” and “Pass in The Raccoon Range.”*

To Trachtenberg these images symbolize “Union skill replacing an older masonry structure with a new industrial form.”<sup>7</sup> Barnard reinforces the triumph of Northern military and industrial might over decadent Southern constructions throughout the collection. In “The New Capitol, Columbia, South Carolina,” the half constructed capital stands surrounded by fields of brick, and a single tower stands in the background.



*Figure 4: Barnard's "The New Capitol, Columbia, South Carolina"*

The accompanying text somewhat glibly pronounces: “The destruction done at Columbia was immense and sincerely regretted by a great portion of the army.”<sup>8</sup> The three images that follow (“Columbia from the Capitol,” “Ruins in Columbia, S.C., No. 1” and “Ruins in Columbia, S.C., No. 2”) evidence bombed-out buildings, scorched trees, columns supporting no roofs, lots reduced to little more than rubble and stairways rising into emptiness. Their placement after the photograph of the half-constructed capitol suggests a causal relationship between the creation of a Confederate government and the devastation that followed as retribution from Union forces.

Another interesting causal relationship suggests itself through a photograph entitled “Fountain, Savannah, Ga.” The frame depicts a neo-classical garden fountain surrounded by trees and rose bushes. There is no cannon abandoned by Rebel troops, no indication that the site has any particular military significance. So why does Barnard include it in this collection devoted to Sherman’s campaign? Perhaps because Barnard found it illustrative of “decadent” Southern tendencies. While technically a neo-classic sculpture, the quantity of ornamentation (mermen, garlands, an archer) veers toward the baroque. Its placement within Barnard’s collection, as well as the eerie photographs of moss dripping from trees above tombstones at the Bonaventure cemetery, offer a Romantic, nearly exotic representation of the South, and one that seems meant to elicit both wonder and judgment. The photograph solidifies a narrative of northern dominance, modernity’s triumph over an earlier regime. The decadent fountain serves as a symbol for the larger society’s decadence and excess that Barnard seems to suggest might be the reasons for the war. But there is also an exotic beauty in the photographs that may well have been meant to inspire sympathy for the South. Still, the narrative of the photographs offers a clear conclusion. In the collection’s final photograph, “Ruins of the Railroad Depot, Charleston, S.C.,” the crumbling remains of a railroad resemble a ruined Roman aqueduct in a desolate landscape.



*Figure 5: Barnard's "Ruins of the Railroad Depot, Charleston, S.C."*

Trachtenberg concludes: "by symbol as well as narrative the book asserts triumphant the victory of the North, its industrial trestles prevailing over decadent Southern porticos."<sup>9</sup> By providing a visual reference to an artifact representative of the fallen empire of Rome, ruins take on a symbolic function essential to the book's moral and narrative.<sup>10</sup> And yet, it is also a function that allows the ruins to appear foreign, something out of the past.

But this victory was an uneasy one at best. Not everyone applauded the triumph of Northern industrial might over King's "picturesque civilization of the past." The Myth of the Lost Cause would garner more support across the entire nation as it reconfigured the South as the last alternative to the powerful process of industrialization and federal centralization that would follow the war. As Lost Cause scholar Rollin Osterweis notes, by the turn of the century industrialization brought with it "feelings of a 'dislike of the



present' and nostalgic longings for 'the happier pleasanter existence in the agricultural society of long ago.'"<sup>11</sup> Naturally, the "happier pleasanter existence" imagined fails to represent the actuality of the oppressive system of slavery and the struggling economy it supported. But the Lost Cause Myth did provide a false sense of alternative to the oppression of industrialization.

Images of Civil War ruins could justify this nostalgia for the "picturesque civilization of the past" representing a pre-modern, pre-industrial state. For example, in Barnard's photograph, a ruined railroad depot resembles ancient Roman ruins. In doing so, it elevates pre-war Southern society to that of a great civilization. Father Abram Ryan, known as the Poet Priest of the Lost Cause, found the war ruins to be a source of inspiration and spiritual renewal. "A land without ruins is a land without memories," said Ryan. He adds that because of its ruined landscape, the South will garner "the sympathy of the heart and of history."<sup>12</sup> Here, Ryan, like Blight more than one hundred years later, equates ruins with a kind of national legitimization. Perhaps this is because, by the late nineteenth century, ruins seem an inevitable byproduct of modernity. As the years passed, this sympathy for a nostalgic version of the agricultural South posited as an alternative to the industrial North would increase. Many writers have focused on the ways in which Southern writers shaped narratives of the war into an essentially sentimental and nostalgic view of the South. But Northern writers provide fantastic or exotic views of the former Confederate states that may have also contributed to an understanding of the South as a distant land, not a source for a national system of racial oppression, nor the

victim of a particularly brutal military campaign. Again, a Romantic perception of ruins contributes to the consolidation of these impressions.

### **Chronicles of Ruins: Trowbridge's Exoticism**

Travelogues published in the North in the years immediately after the war evidence both a desire for elements of literary exoticism and adventure, as well as a need to balance the Northern victory against the demands of Reconstruction and an increased yearning for national reunification. Several Northern writers embarked on tours of battlefields and burned-out cities. The novelist and poet John T. Trowbridge wrote the longest and most lyrical of such accounts, *The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities*, one that also paints an image of the region as a nearly foreign land.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Trowbridge may have helped contribute to the South as a land of fantasy, a place from which it was easier for the north to eventually withdraw from reconstruction and its commitment to preserving the rights of black Southerners.

Trowbridge's account, published in Hartford in 1866, emerges from two visits through the South beginning in the summer of 1865. Trowbridge sets off from Gettysburg where he looks for evidence of the battle and describes the contrast between the pastoral scene and the carnage that took place there. He describes the place as "a more fitting spot for a picnic, one would say, than for a battle" (24).

But as he journeys southward, the evidence of war becomes more obvious. In the Pennsylvania community of Chambersburg, Trowbridge encounters the remains of the town burned in a Confederate raid in 1864:

On every side were the skeletons of houses burned by the Rebels but a little more than a year before. We looked across their roofless and broken walls, and through the sightless windows at the red sunset sky. They stared at us with their empty eye sockets, and yawned at us with their fanged and ragged jaws (34).

In his recourse to a personified landscape, Trowbridge recalls a common trope of Romanticism. Throughout the 590 pages of his travels, Trowbridge's descriptions of war ruins coincide with Romantic notions of the picturesque and Gothic. His narrative reads like the stuff of fantasy, making the effects of war seem little more than a fantastic landscape.

Instead of lingering on the destruction, Trowbridge immediately looks past the ruins to their future reincarnation. The ruins of Chambersburg are seeds of renewal:

But there is no loss without gain. Chambersburg will in the end be greatly benefited by the fire, inasmuch as the old two-story buildings, of which the town was originally composed, are being replaced by three-story houses, much finer and more commodious. So let it be with our country; fearful as our loss has been, we shall build better anew (39).

The ruins of the North offer a prospect of renovation. Trowbridge sees the destruction of war as inspiring new "much finer" improvements. It is a kind of consolation he will also proclaim before the ruins of the South. But there are differences in his considerations once he crosses the Mason-Dixon line. When faced with Confederate ruins, Trowbridge must negotiate a complex set of feelings and expectations: there's a desire to celebrate the defeat of an enemy as well as a desire to champion the process of reconstruction. A Romantic perspective on ruin enables him to make these negotiations.

Trowbridge personifies the ruins of Charleston as well, but their sad appearance becomes feminized. "The town resembled to my eye some unprotected female sitting

sorrowful on the wayside, in tattered and faded apparel, with unkept tresses fallen negligently about features which might once have been attractive (70).” In describing the ruined city as an unprotected female, Trowbridge may be equating a traditionally gendered desire to defend a woman to a national sense of responsibility to rebuild the South. This trope also allows Trowbridge to suggest that the destruction of the South, like the woman’s “unkept tresses,” may be a result of its own behavior.

At other places during his journey, Trowbridge suggests the ruins of the South symbolize just punishment for Confederate transgressions. The sight of the ruined courthouse where John Brown was tried becomes a “consolation” for Trowbridge (71); elsewhere he describes the church of “the God of the slaveholder and the aristocrats” as well as “the hand of ruin that had smitten it” (74).

Trowbridge references the ruins and fragments of literary and painterly Romanticism. His account of Richmond utilizes Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” as a way to make Southern devastation legible to his Northern readers. In doing so, the actual trauma of war becomes the element of a fantastic story, not a tragedy in which Northern readers might feel implicated:

Passing over a bridge to the main land, and crossing the canal which winds along the river-bank, I was hastening towards the city, when I met, emerging from the sombre ruins of the burnt district, a man who resembled more a wild creature than a human being. His hands, arms, and face were blackened with cinders, his clothes hung upon him in tatters, and the expression of his countenance was fierce and haggard. He looked so much like a brigand that I was not a little startled when, with a sweeping gesture of his long lean arm and claw-like fingers, he clutched my shoulder.

"Come back with me," said he, "and I'll tell ye all about it; I'll tell ye all about it, stranger."

"About what?"

"The explosion, - the explosion of the laboratory thar!"

Dragging me towards Brown's Island with one hand, and gesticulating violently with the other, he proceeded to jabber incoherently about that dire event.

"Wait, wait," said he, "till I tell you! " - like the Ancient Mariner with skinny hand holding his unwilling auditor. "My daughter was work'n' thar at the time; and she was blowed all to pieces! all to pieces! My God, my God, it was horrible! Come to my house, and you shall see her; if you don't believe me, you shall see her! Blowed all to pieces, all to pieces, my God!"

His house was close by, and the daughter, who was "blowed all to pieces," was to be seen standing miraculously at the door, in a remarkable state of preservation, considering the circumstances. She seemed to be looking anxiously at the old man and the stranger he was bringing home with him. She came to the wicket to meet us; and then I saw that her hands and face were covered with cruel scars.

"Look!" said he, clutching her with one hand, while he still held me with the other. "All to pieces, as I told you!

"Don't, don't, pa! " said the girl, coaxingly. "You mustn't mind him," she whispered to me. "He is a little out of his head. Oh, pa! don't act so!." (159-160)

In this scene, readers bear witness to the irrational mind of the Confederate traumatized by war. Trowbridge, like Coleridge's reluctant wedding guest, does not want to hear the man's tale of the "explosion." The analogy brings up various possibilities for interpretation. If the Mariner had sinned in his disrespect for "all things great and small," the analogy confirms that the survivor of the burnt district is similarly responsible for his own destruction. The comparison also helps to render the ruins and their survivors as part of otherworldly, nearly supernatural environs, the stuff of fantastic retribution rather than the policies of war.

For Trowbridge's Northern readers, this may have been a way to distance themselves from the realities of a military strategy that proved particularly brutal to their former enemies. As Macaulay notes in *The Pleasure of Ruins* our relationship to ruins seems most comfortable the further our distance from them: "Ruin pleasure must be at one remove, softened by art..., by the ruin poets or centuries of time. Ruin must be a fantasy, veiled by the mind's dark imaginings...."<sup>14</sup> Trowbridge's representation of Civil War ruins supports Macaulay's premise. For Americans living in the wake of the Civil War, the ruins are not fantasy. Thus, chroniclers of the devastation often sought to "soften" these scenes of destruction through literary recourse. Trowbridge's interpretation of his encounter with a man by the bridge in Richmond's burnt-out district reads at first like a ghost story, then like the rant of a madman. It is a trauma narrative, a struggle to comprehend an incomprehensible horror, the near death (one supposes) and disfiguring injuries of a daughter. It also evidences one man's desire to find a witness to his horror. But as an anecdote about a haunted survivor, it may have read so much like fiction as to provide Northern readers with little actual sense of the devastation wrought. Here we approach the limits of the Romantic notion of ruin. If ruins must stand at a distance, then these literary tropes of the exotic or fantastic will help to create that distance. But, these approaches to representing ruin prevent more complex reactions inspired by the devastation of war or other acts of violence.

Trowbridge uses another trope of literary Romanticism by invoking the exotic in his descriptions of Richmond and its black inhabitants. In Atlanta, he writes:

Everywhere were ruins and rubbish, mud and mortar and misery. The burnt streets were rapidly rebuilding, but in the meanwhile hundreds of the

inhabitants, white and black, rendered homeless by the destruction of the city, were living in wretched hovels, which made the suburbs look like a fantastic encampment of gypsies or Indians (453).

It is important to remember this is not a “fantastic encampment” but a gathering of US citizens: recently liberated African-Americans and Anglo-American whose relationship to the nation is still being debated under the changing legal climates of Reconstruction. In another passage, Trowbridge explains that the black population of Richmond gives the streets a “peculiarly picturesque and animated appearance.” He writes: “More than once I have fancied myself in Naples, but that I looked in vain for the crowds of importunate beggars and the dark-skinned lazzaroni lying all day in the sunshine and on the street corners” (178). Here, Trowbridge reminds his readers that that blacks of the South may look foreign, but prove more industrious than their appearance might suggest—thereby acknowledging as well as attempting to deflect the racist sentiments harbored in the North.

Despite the racism and exoticism that may underlie Trowbridge’s depictions of African Americans, he also represents them working among the ruins to rebuild the South. Here Trowbridge’s use of a ruin narrative functions to support the work of reconstruction. Trowbridge depicts the way in which black laborers “sitting down amid the ruins, broke the mortar from the old bricks and put them up in neat piles ready for use” (36). The ruins provide a site for renovation that in turn becomes a mode for the rebuilding of race and labor relations.

In other scenes, Trowbridge more directly references the dominant aesthetics of Romanticism. “The ruins of Charleston are the most picturesque of any I saw in the

South” (514). But as he moves through the territory left in the wake of Sherman’s destructive march, the ruins look less like aesthetic objects and more like testaments to the horrors of war. When describing the damage inflicted by Sherman’s troops in South Carolina, he quotes a local newspaper: “The beautiful homesteads of the parish country, with their wonderful tropic gardens were ruined...choice pictures and works of art from Europe, selected and numerous libraries, objects of peace wholly, were all destroyed” (548). This description allows his readers in the North to consider the landscape through the eyes of its inhabitants; instead of rendering the ruins as foreign, they become the ruins of a home front—even if the home front may validate its own wealth with art from abroad. Trowbridge develops a certain sympathy for such an environment: “Of the desolation and horrors, our army left behind it, no description can be given (564).” The ruins can no longer be described in the terms of the picturesque—and to a certain degree—Trowbridge admits he does not know how to render them.

Thus, the war ruin takes on a different aspect than the trophies of victory referenced in Macaulay or evidenced by Barnard’s photographs. As a trophy of conquest, the war ruin would work against the attempts to reunite and reconstruct the nation in the wake of a Civil War. It no longer inspires a celebration of triumph. Nor do such ruins evoke distant cultures or an ideal beauty that defies the perfection of classicism as proponents of the picturesque suggested. Instead, they become symbols of loss: “a wilderness of crumbling walls, naked chimneys and trees killed by these flames” (564).

The instances in which Trowbridge seems to acknowledge these limits of a Romantic way of seeing ruin seem rare. Much of Trowbridge’s narrative and the travel



writing of many Northerners who visited the South in the wake of the Civil War rendered the South as an exotic or fantastic landscape. Within his narrative, there is space for Northern contempt of the South as well as moments to cheer on the prospects of Reconstruction; there is little room to acknowledge the many tragedies of the conflict or the deep changes that would necessarily have to occur in race relations on either side of the Mason-Dixon line. An analysis of Trowbridge demonstrates how descriptions of the post-bellum Civil War landscape can contribute to a rejection of the reality of war by emphasizing picturesque, fantastic, and exotic characteristics of the landscape instead of the costs of war.

### **Chronicles of Ruins: Conwell's Gothicism**

In 1869, Union Veteran Russel Conwell toured the Southern states, writing a series of articles for Boston's *Daily Evening Traveler*. He utilized many of the same techniques that inspired Trowbridge, but Conwell's literary sources are more varied than Trowbridge's and serve to create connections between ancient ruins and the Civil War ruins. As a veteran of conflict, Conwell does not shy away from depicting the costs of the suffering for both sides and appears more tuned to the reality of war. Still he frequently depicts scenes of death and destruction in fantastic terms. Often his depictions of particularly difficult battles are followed with a reaffirmation of why the war was just. Finally, as a veteran he is also concerned with how those sacrifices will be remembered on the landscape. Conwell offers another type of fantasy constructed around the ruins of

war, a mode of representing ruins that attempts to create the distance that extended between British Romantics and the ruins that inspired them.

Conwell begins his chronicle three years after Trowbridge wrote his. While many of the ruins that Trowbridge described still remain, Conwell notes that they are now surrounded by the work of rebuilding. When he arrives, a former prison-camp in Richmond is “buzzing with machinery.”<sup>15</sup> For Conwell and his Northern readers, these signs of development like Barnard’s trestle bridge offer testimony to one of the goals of the war and reconstruction: to modernize the Southern economy. Like Trowbridge, Conwell deploys a Romantic trope to depict the ruined landscape as a symbol of Southern society:

Gorgeous marble buildings have risen phoenix-like from the ashes of their predecessors and around them stand the staggering ghastly ruins of warehouses and mills destroyed at the Confederate evacuation...Buildings partially burned out have been reconstructed and, like their original owners, present a queer combination of the good and the bad, the old and the new (14).

Thus, Conwell reminds readers that the work of reconstruction is not complete. Conwell notes lingering bitterness, strained racial relations and occasions of lawlessness on his journey. But everywhere he re-imagines the ruins of war as seeds of renewal: “Even the halls in which they concocted treason have disappeared and their ashes enrich the soil of a Negro freedman” (74).

Conwell peppers his articles with literary references from Shakespeare and Pope among others, as well as references to ancient wars, civilizations, and ruins. He makes comparison between the ruins of the South and the ruins of antiquity quoting Pope’s “Iliad of Homer” (“The Day shall come, the great avenging day”) among the ruins of

Charleston (74) and likens the aristocratic citizens of Vicksburg to the “vainglorious” Romans (133). This is not unlike Barnard’s visual comparison between the Roman aqueduct and the railway ruin. It depicts Southern pride and decadence evidenced by the ruined structures of Southern cities as reasons for the fall of the South.

Throughout Conwell’s travels, mentions of soldiers’ remains that litter the fields and coasts become a kind of Gothic refrain. The whole of the Southern landscape seems haunted for Conwell. The twenty-six-year-old veteran remarks that “skulls, bones, graves, hobgoblins and ghosts” form “our daily companions” (49), while “skeletons and ghosts haunt us in our dreams” (16). On the beach at Fort Wagner, bones bleached by sun and sea take on an exotic appearance “like the rarest gems of India” and remind him of “the human sacrifices of the Aztecs” (77). Once again, the loss and destruction render the landscape so odd as to be foreign: the remains of Conwell’s fellow soldiers become exotic jewels wrought from fantastic myths.

But Conwell can be clear about the cost of war. Like Trowbridge when he confronted the devastation of Sherman’s March, Conwell cannot help but lament the tragedy. He writes:

...the proofs show us some heinous barbarity, preclude denial and show the worst side of war. We must say that the ruin and ashes we saw and the tales with which the people filled our head destroyed all the poetry we used to see in “While we were marching through Georgia” [a Union army song] (93).

For Conwell not all ruins can be made distant. In fact, their very presence as evidence of “heinous barbarity” serves to “destroy all the poetry” as it makes impotent the very “art” that might make such barbarity palatable.

Unable to distance himself through a resort to literary or visual Romanticism, Conwell finds consolation in the noble cause for which he contends that the North waged this war. He quickly follows his contemplation of ruin with a tale of renewal. New life springs among the ruins:

Surely a blighting curse came upon this people. Slavery was rooted out with fire and its traces washed away in blood. But the cotton and the corn have begun to grow. Here and there a shanty is in process of construction and soon the same tract of land, under a free-labor system will 'blossom as the rose,' and a few years hence war and its horrors will live only in history. Some must die that others may live (93).

Again, Conwell attempts to distance his readers from the actual effects of the war. Is “a blighting curse” responsible for the South’s infatuation with slavery? Or does the “blighting curse” represent the devastation of war that befell the people—just as “fire” stands in for Union bombardments and Sherman’s desire to “make the South scream”? In Southern ruins, Conwell sees the destruction as the beginning of a renaissance “under a free-labor system.” He praises the day when “its horrors will live only in history.”

Conwell ends his chronicle where Trowbridge began his: Gettysburg. There, Conwell notes an already blossoming Civil War tourism: “The town of Gettysburg is now enjoying an era of prosperity which, but for the battle, it would never have seen” (184). As a veteran of the war he is wary of the day when the sacrifices suffered will be nothing more than a history lesson. The significance that place will have in telling the story of the war is not lost to Conwell: “Soon, unless we, by example and work, make an impression upon the coming generation, the war we have seen will have been forgotten. Its trenches, redoubts and rifle pits are fast disappearing. Its barracks and tents are mouldering into the

earth” (190). But, here too, Conwell can only imagine preserving the military remains (rifle pits, barracks and tents) instead of contemplating other modes of preservation.

### **Commemoration and the Triumph of the Lost Cause**

While Barnard offered a view of purely structural war damage, depicting the crumbling buildings instead of war’s victims, travel writers often make these sites of devastation seem more like the stuff of literature and thus less real. Barnard, Trowbridge and Conwell all used Romantic modes of viewing ruins—comparing the ruins to ancient ruins or those of a foreign civilization and allowing them to serve as backdrops in tales that read like fantastic stories. Thus, ruins can stand as something other than the remains of a recently defeated enemy in a civil war. Eventually, they disappear from our landscape because they were never incorporated into it. Suddenly, there is less evidence by which to remember the costs of war or the reasons why it was fought.

Despite the promises of Reconstruction, the North’s waning commitment to Southern reform would eventually lead to the withdrawal of Federal troops in 1877, the rise of many former Confederate leaders to state government positions, and the establishment of Jim Crow laws. All of this becomes possible as the narratives told about the war change from a conflict fought to end or preserve slavery to a sentimental clash waged to test the strength of the nation. Many of these narratives will become solidified at sites chosen to commemorate the war. The ruins of devastated Southern cities and plantations do not become part of the commemorative landscape in part because their

existence has not been incorporated into the symbolic-commemorative landscape. The cruelties of the plantation system and the devastation of battle no longer have a place in the narratives of war as the myth of the “Lost Cause” becomes more prominent.

Critics such as Blight or Alan Nolan argue that the failures of Reconstruction reinforce the myth of the “Lost Cause,” which effectively removes the issues of slavery from the telling of the war, and thus the need to protect African-American civil rights in its aftermath. Southern writers and historians attempt to put the best face on the turn of events for the South and minimize the importance of slavery to the conflict. The story of the “Lost Cause” is first promoted in the decades following the war. Much has been made of the work of Southern writers such as Jubal A. Early or Edward Pollard who contributed to the sentimental retelling of the war that would recast it as a noble battle between brothers. Civil War ruins contribute to this retelling.

As Reconstruction efforts faltered, both Northern and Southern leaders continued to struggle to find a meaning for the war, a way of telling the story that would allow both sides to feel as if their sacrifice was worth it. Blight observes that those semiotic struggles often played themselves out on the sites of Civil War battles, sites that Americans would “memorialize, Romanticize, and even explain.”<sup>16</sup> But these struggles over commemoration would deny the cultural memory of African-Americans, as well as the devastating effects of battle on the civilian population. Blight reminds us “This is the story of how in American culture romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory.”<sup>17</sup> Ruins became sites where tales of that “sentimental remembrance” may have been born.

This turn of events was not inevitable.

The ruins of the Civil War provided a backdrop for a series of ceremonies and public performances beginning in 1865 in which Southern African Americans reclaimed public spaces and celebrated their freedom. The siege of Charleston had left most of the lower half of the city in ruins by the end of 1864 with much of the white population evacuated. Blight recounts an event that took place in Charleston in March 1865 when approximately four thousand blacks marched through town in a “victory parade” complete with a cart that “contained a coffin with a sign announcing the ‘death of slavery.’”<sup>18</sup> On April 14, four years after the surrender of Fort Sumter, a celebration took place to commemorate the Union victory for which 3,000 black Carolinians came to praise the defeat of Confederate forces. Both events demonstrate a significant renegotiation of public space on the part of African Americans. For African Americans, the ruins do not need to be seen as signs of defeat or loss, instead they provide a literal “opening” creating a space where they might signify the conflict. But the early commemorative activities of freemen and women do not shy away from the tragic and traumatic narratives of war. Largely excluded from the heroic combat narratives, blacks could also create spaces to mourn amidst the ruins.

Later that spring, in the abandoned remains of a former Confederate prison camp that was once the race track, three freedmen’s relief associations planned for the proper interment of the 257 Union prisoners who had died on the site. On May 1, “an estimated ten thousand people, most of them black former slaves” participated in what came to be known as the “First Decoration Day.” In the days prior to the event, African-American

volunteers built a fence to enclose the cemetery. On the day of the dedication, the ministers from all of the black churches in Charleston led the ceremony.<sup>19</sup> After the cemetery's consecration, crowds gathered to hear speeches by Union veterans and abolitionist ministers. People picnicked on the grounds. Later, a full-brigade of Union soldiers, including black units, held a drill on what was once the infield of the racetrack. In this instance, a site of leisure for the oppressor class becomes a site to honor those who were martyred in order to overturn a slave system. The race track/prison was not simply erased; it became a place of commemoration. But it would certainly be a place where it would be hard to celebrate the "noble battle" that many would choose to think of when they remembered the war. The ruins of the prison camp offer a different narrative.

Decoration Day was a precursor to Memorial Day, an initially Northern ritual of commemoration that began in 1868. But Blight notes "many a speech flowed with reconciliation as it honored its dead."<sup>20</sup> For Southern whites, Memorial Day soon became a forum for forging the myths of the Civil War. By the 1870s, Northerners and Southerners participated together in Memorial Day rituals emphasizing reconciliation.

Within the changing narratives of Civil War history, Southern whites offer differing perspectives on the commemorative landscape and the ruins of their cities. Southern writers such as Mary Chestnut and Mrs. St. Julien Raven initially see the ruins as examples of Northern barbarity. "I am writing from the roadside below Blackstocks en route to Camden," Chestnut explains traveling the South Carolina countryside in 1865. "Since we left Chester, solitude, nothing but tall, blackened chimneys to show that any man has ever trod this road before us."<sup>21</sup> Mrs. St. Julien Raven explained that by the end



of 1864 Charleston had “an extraordinary appearance...it was awfully biblical.”<sup>22</sup> Both attempt to describe a landscape that defies representation, as neither has a frame of reference for devastation on such a scale. St. Julien Raven’s use of the adjective “biblical” evidences her need to qualify this kind of destruction as seemingly beyond human capability.

But as time passes, the Romantic notions of the picturesque help some Southerners to see the ruins as contributing to a sentimental ideal of the region. In this conceptualization, the ruins of the war enable the South to become a land of nostalgia and nobility and to occupy an increasingly important place in the American imagination as the full effects of industrialization begin to show their negative consequences. The ruins of the South serve to consolidate Southern regionalism. By 1878, proponents of the Lost Cause would realize this potential, as Father Abram Ryan explains:

A land without ruins is a land without memories; a land without memories is a land without liberty. A land that wears a laurel crown may be fair to see; but twine a few sad cypress leaves around the brow of any land, and, be that land barren, beautiful, and bleak, it becomes lovely in its consecrated cornet of sorrow, and it wins the sympathy of the heart and of history.<sup>23</sup>

Ryan’s reasoning presents some leaps in logic. His declaration that “a land without memories is a land without liberty” seems oblique at best. Does he suggest that liberty must always be gained at the price of violent struggle, battles that would produce both memories and ruins? To whose liberty does he refer? It seems unlikely he references the liberty of African Americans, so he may be referring to the liberty of those sympathetic to states’ rights. The ruins become symbols of tyranny.

I began this chapter with images of the Civil War ruins from a collection of photographs, as well travelogues published in the North. These images provide some of the first narratives of the war. But by resorting to Romantic modes of viewing these ruins, a distance is established between the Northern audience and the violence these ruins represent. As such they offer the first seeds of a fantastic, sentimental notion of the South that will reach its fullest expression in the “Lost Cause” narratives. As time passes, this narrative will continue to be solidified on the actual commemorative landscape. As this sympathy for the South increases, a new commemorative landscape becomes created through the monuments and memorials to the Confederate dead.

Heroism and nobility become fundamental elements of the “Lost Cause” narrative. As historian Alan Nolan explains, “The legend tells us that the war was a mawkish and essentially heroic and Romantic melodrama, an honorable sectional duel, a time of martial glory on both sides, and a triumphant nationalism.”<sup>24</sup> This narrative leaves little room for the inclusion of the African-American perspective or the business of slavery. This narrative offers no room to contemplate the brutality of the plantation system or the cruelties of war. Such mentions might inspire guilt or regret. Such mentions might require a complete undoing of the narratives of Southern chivalry and military heroism.

In his study, *Memory in Black and White*, Paul Shackel notes that the metaphor of family conflict is frequently invoked to allow for “a sweeter reconciliation between the North and the South creating a stronger bond and a more unified nation.”<sup>25</sup> This reconciliation becomes enacted on the battlefields of the Civil War. For example, the

Gettysburg National Military Park serves as a case study for how technologies of memory can be used by a nation to deal with one trauma—the trauma of war—at the exclusion of another trauma narrative—that of slavery. From the start, Gettysburg was conceived as a place for Union veterans and their families, a place where the heroic narratives of war reign. By the late nineteenth century, the park became a site for the pilgrims of reconciliation, feeding off of a tourist industry supported by both Southerners and Northerners. In 1888, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle brought together Union and Confederate veterans and the idea of national reconciliation became a park priority. In 1916, a Great Reunion was staged in Gettysburg to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle. Some 50,000 veterans from both the Union and Confederate sides gathered on the fields where they had previously fought. On a website dedicated to the event, the National Park Service explains:

Former foes walked together over the old battlefield and re-lived the terrible days where so many of their comrades had lost their lives. Not only were there veterans of Gettysburg, but men who had fought under McClellan at Antietam, Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley, Sherman in Georgia, Grant in Tennessee, Bragg in Kentucky, Hood at Atlanta, and Ord at Appomattox. This was the largest gathering of former soldiers who had changed the face of a nation, torn it apart, and now delighted in its reunification.<sup>26</sup>

A 1922 history of the park referred to it as “the American Mecca of Reconciliation.” Not one of the photographs represented in the 1922 park history provide any evidence of an African-American presence at this event. Nolan writes: “The reunion was exclusively a white man’s phenomenon and the price of reunion was the sacrifice of African Americans.”<sup>27</sup>

James Loewen, the author of *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, traces the obfuscation of the issue of slavery at Gettysburg by looking at monuments to the Confederate dead. For example, Loewen compares the language of the South Carolina Ordinance of Secession (“But an increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery has lead to a disregard of their obligations”) with the South Carolina monument at Gettysburg dedicated in 1965 (“That the men of honor might forever know the responsibilities of freedom...”).<sup>28</sup> Loewen concludes: “This monument is an attempt to do the impossible: to convert the Confederate cause—a war to guarantee that 3,950,00 people might never know the responsibilities of freedom—into a crusade on behalf of states’ rights.”

Today, “racism” and “slavery” receive scant mention in the park’s museum signage, on interpretive tours lead by park rangers, or among the many web pages created by the National Park Service to promote the site. At the park’s visitor center, long glass display cases feature rifles, canons, and handguns as part of a small two-floor museum. Each firearm bears a detailed description of where it was produced, how many were produced, and whether it was used on the Confederate or Union side. Other glass cases include piles of bullets or shrapnel, as well as bed frames and cabinets from local houses riddled with bullet holes. And yet a visitor has to descend to the museum’s basement-floor, just beyond the staircase in a dimly lit corner, to view a single display case containing artifacts such as recruitment posters and uniforms that testify to the fact that 200,000 free blacks and former slaves were enlisted in the USA Army and Navy. The only printed use of the word “slavery” within the park comes in a humble display case at

the museum's entrance that includes a copy of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and examples of abolitionist pamphlets. The non-profit Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg sponsor the display case.

Among the guided tours none directly addressed the issue of slavery or the plight of African-American soldiers or civilians in Gettysburg. On a trip during the summer of 2003, I had to visit the privately-run Rupp House History Center in downtown Gettysburg to find out that hundreds of freed African-Americans lived in Gettysburg, most of whom fled when news of the amassing armies reached town in fear that they could be captured and re-enslaved.

As Scott Hartwig, Supervisory Park Ranger, explained: "It's true. You could walk through the entire park and never know who won the war, let alone why it was fought."<sup>29</sup> Hartwig explains that the original mandate of the National Park Service was to relate all of the interpretation to exactly what happened within the boundaries of the park. And yet a 1991 NPS report states that the park's objectives include: "Using the battlefield setting as the primary interpretive resource, interpret the Battle of Gettysburg (and its impact on the community and the country) in the context of the Gettysburg Campaign, the Civil War and US history, the significance of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address..."<sup>30</sup>

It is a place of unity as well as reunion. Gettysburg offers a kind of master narrative without room for gaps or contradictions. Even the space itself appears eerily whole, undisturbed. No ruins exist on the property. The few structures from the time of the battle that remain on site have been completely restored. Most remain inaccessible to visitors. Even the fences that stood between the fields over which the battle raged have

been reconstructed. The effect is sterilizing. It is hard to image that humans could have once walked over such meticulously tended landscape, let alone bled and died there. But Gettysburg offers just one example of the kinds of omissions found in Civil War related sites across the country. In his study of the commemoration and sanctification of sites related to the Civil War, Shackel observes: “African Americans were quickly forgotten in the commemoration of the Civil War because it would be easy to question the nobility of a society when it held others in bondage and racism prevailed.”<sup>31</sup>

The desire to unify the Anglo-American nation becomes more important than the desire to remember the full story of the war. Critic Ron Eyerman explains:

By the mid-1880s the Civil War had become the “civilized war,” “a space both for sectional reconciliation and for the creation of modern southern whiteness” (Hale 1998:67ff). As the nation was re-membered through a new narration of the war, blacks were at once made invisible and punished.... The memory of slavery was recast as benign and civilizing, a white man’s project around which North and South could reconcile.<sup>32</sup>

Unwilling to accept the guilt associated with slavery or the failure of society to overcome racism, whites create a commemorative narrative of reconciliation to erase their responsibility and accommodate continued prejudice. White artists and writers promote the myth of the “happy slave.” According to these writers, the war is defined as part of the inevitable “growing pains” of the adolescent nation and slavery is reconsidered to be both “justified and necessary.”<sup>33</sup>

Eyerman notes that as early as 1866 some began to voice their opposition to the manner in which the story of Gettysburg and the Civil War as a whole was being told:

William Dean Howells, America’s foremost literary critic... believed that commemoration following the war should focus not on soldiers and battles, but on the ideals over which the war was fought... As an

alternative [to military representations] he pointed to “The Freedman” a sculpture of a freed black slave done in 1863, as “the full expression of one idea that should be commemorated.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite other possible tellings, the military history continues to be privileged at Gettysburg and other sites around the country. The construction of statues to white Civil War veterans becomes ubiquitous.

African American participation in commemorative culture would continue to wane as stronger expressions of white supremacy were tolerated and mixed with xenophobia brought about by new waves of immigrants at the turn of the century. Shackel records: “A proposed statue design for the US capitol with Abraham Lincoln and a kneeling slave beside him was rejected by a committee ‘because of fear that the figure of a Negro in a public monument would arouse the resentment of the Irish citizens.’”

Only one monument dedicated solely to an African-American was erected during the nineteenth century: a memorial to Frederick Douglass was raised in Rochester in 1899. Throughout much of the twentieth-century, the monument culture surrounding the Civil War continued to emphasize a military interpretation of the conflict and the heroism on the both sides. The first monument devoted solely to African-American soldiers killed during the Civil War was erected in the late 1980s. Those African-American soldiers who fought at Gettysburg still wait for a place within the National Military Cemetery.

Within these semiotic struggles, ruins themselves prove difficult memorials. As we have seen, ruins can be viewed as evidence of triumph (in the case of Barnard’s photographs) as well as testament to atrocity (in the case of the comments of Chestnut and Mrs. St. Julien Raven). For African-Americans, the ruins were places in which to

assert their presence in public rituals of celebration and commemoration; for Confederate sympathizers such as Father Abram Ryan they were symbols of tyranny upon which to consolidate regional unity and sympathy. But they are not innocent spaces. Feelings towards these ruins will differ depending upon one's relation to the conflict, but the ruins will always represent some kind of violence: the violence of defeat or the violent overthrow of an oppressive social order. Initially, Romantic modes of seeing ruin attempt to erase that violence by casting them as fantastic creations or comparing them to foreign landscapes. But the story they tell of the Civil War is far too messy when compared to those recounted at our national military parks where a battle might be explained as if it were a number of moves on a chessboard. I do not mean to suggest that the narratives offered by ruins are more complete than those told at the dominant sites of memory where the story of the Civil War is now represented. Ruins might offer what Shoshana Felman characterizes as a "constant fragmentation of a totalizing view," a place to remember the complicated, tragic, hopeful and never fully constructed edifice that is the story of war.

### **Recording the Picturesque: the Changing Ruins of the South**

Less than a decade after completing his *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*, Barnard would return to the South to continue his work as photographer. But a change in his subject matter demonstrates how views of the South and its ruins during reconstruction will quickly evolve from examples of Northern dominance to inspiration for Southern regionalism.



In the years after the war, Barnard continued to work as a photographer of urban ruin, documenting the wreckage of the Chicago fire. But by 1873, Barnard returned to Charleston to set up base. Despite the war damage, Charleston was enjoying an increase in business; tourists flocked to the harbor and Battery neighborhoods with their “luxurious gardens and picturesque magnolia trees.”<sup>35</sup> By 1875, a writer in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* praised Charleston in Romantically nostalgic terms that establish the dualism between Northern industrialism and Southern civility: “[The city] never seems to be growing or racing ahead, like the Northern towns; but finished complete... with settled, mature ways and habits.” Thus, Charleston becomes a counterpoint to the industrialized North, representative of a civilization with history (“settled, mature”). And yet, despite its image as a “complete” community, war damage continued to plague large areas of the city, much of which remained in ruin. By failing to mention these ruins, this writer ignores the larger reason why the city does not seem to be “racing ahead.” He also avoids the racist and oppressive nature of what was until a few years earlier these “settled, mature ways.”

By the mid-1870s, Barnard sold stereographic views of “Magnolia Garden” as well as other tourist neighborhoods such as South Battery or King Street to the city’s visitors. Despite the fact that much of the city stood in disrepair, Barnard avoided photographing any evidence of war damage or Reconstruction struggle. One of the few examples of ruin photography that Barnard made during this period, “Ruins of the Old Dorchester Church on the Ashley River,” depicts the church tower grown over with weeds. Removed from the city and more widespread destruction, the photograph is purely

picturesque and reminiscent of images of English abbeys. War ruins no longer represented a version of South that had commercial appeal. The images of Northern triumph upon which Barnard built his name only nine years earlier were no longer popular. Images of the picturesque had triumphed.

By the turn of the century, even the most brutally tragic images of the Civil War themselves were being re-contextualized to suit more sentimental war narratives. Because of their immediacy, war photographs could undo the heroic conventions of war, depicting its brutality and trauma, as well as its most mundane and nonsensical moments. As time passed, publishers would attempt to reaffirm—not counter—the noble aspects of battle itself and of the Confederate cause through the packaging of such photographs. In 1911, Francis Tevelyn Miller published the *Photographic History of the Civil War*, whose introduction affirmed the “Romantic myth” of the conflict: “This is the American epic that is told in these time-stained photographs—an epic which in romance and chivalry is more inspiring than that of the olden kingdom....”<sup>36</sup> In order to maintain the “Romantic myth” of the conflict in the face of the reality of the photographs, the images were reprinted with abundant captions. Miller explains that these texts provide the necessary “mental pictures” to assure the proper interpretation of the photographs.” The “mental pictures” refer to the representational gap between the war as depicted in photographs (with its corpses, dirty troops) and the heroic narratives traditionally associated with battle.

Through this gap, the true suffering of the war falls away from our notice. Through this gap, the devastation of Sherman’s campaign looks like dispatches from a

foreign land and the story of the war sounds like a tale from “the olden kingdom.” Within this gap, the myth of the “Lost Cause” and a Romantic interpretation of Southern culture can expand. They explicate our photographs and determine what sites should be preserved and remembered throughout both the North and South. By the turn of the century, continued industrialization only increased nostalgia. As Osterweis remarks:

The North had become restless with its booming industry, rapidly growing fortunes, success symbols, urban slums, labor unrest and muckraking reformers. Nostalgia for an earlier agrarian, more gracious American way of life occasionally manifested itself.<sup>37</sup>

This “nostalgia” proved increasingly forgetful of the racism and oppression that lay at the heart of much of that “more gracious American way of life.”

The myth of the “Lost Cause” has not only persisted, it has continued to gain credibility. By the mid-twentieth century the myth had been taken up by popular culture. Its most famous manifestation is *Gone With the Wind* in both the book and film version. But it is also apparent in the decision to remember the war through its military parks, not through the ruins of southern cities, nor through the ruins of plantations. It is apparent through the National Park Service decision to carefully chosen to strip the issues of race and slavery from the narrative of the Civil War told at Gettysburg.

### **After the Monumental Age: “For the Union Dead”**

Without the actual ruins of the Civil War, it is hard to imagine how we might be able to see them today. One of the most interesting intersections between past and present ruins as well as the legacy of Civil War race relations comes in the form of Robert

Lowell's poem, "For the Union Dead." In this work, Lowell re-contextualizes the sacrifices of Civil War veterans, both black and white, against a backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, urban ruins, and the atomic bomb. Lowell challenges Romantic perspectives of ruins—that attempt to decontextualize and distance these sites from their viewers—by allowing his readers to connect Civil War destruction to the ruins of gentrification as well as the ruins of Hiroshima. In doing so, Lowell sketches a history of American ruins not readily apparent from the actual structures that remain on our landscape.

Lowell's poem considers the memorial to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry erected in Boston Commons in 1897. Shaw, the son of a well-to-do abolitionist family, enlisted shortly after the attack on Fort Sumter. Early in his service, he expressed his view that African Americans should be allowed to participate in combat. In February 1863, the governor of Massachusetts asked Shaw to lead the first all-volunteer African-American regiment. At first Shaw refused, but he finally accepted his commission. The troops quickly proved themselves in battle. Within a month after leaving Massachusetts, the regiment led an assault on Fort Wagner. Among the 1,515 Union casualties suffered that day, Shaw was one of the first to fall. The Confederates stripped Shaw down to his underclothes and dragged his body through the lines before burying him in a ditch with his troops. Plans for a Shaw memorial in Boston began in August 1865, but it was not until 1884 that sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens was commissioned to complete the project.

Originally, Saint-Gaudens had proposed an equestrian monument, but the Shaw family protested because of their son's lack of military experience and the fact that such a monument would leave out the role of the troops in the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, Saint-Gaudens' bronze sculpture would place the colonel in the foreground on horseback in the center of his marching troops. The African-American soldiers appear in low relief behind the colonel, some of their bodies or expressions obscured by Shaw's profile. They march to battle with rifles over their shoulders. Above them floats an allegorical figure holding laurel branches and poppies. Critics have debated for decades whether the monument "tower[s] above the odious 'color line'" or simply replicates racial hierarchy and stereotypes.<sup>39</sup> The statue places the young Colonel in a far more prominent place than his black soldiers. While its depiction of "negro infantryman" may have seemed "to tower above the color line," it is certainly does not make up for the great omissions in African-American representation on the Civil War commemorative landscape.

Writing in 1960, Lowell uses the statue to argue for both the accomplishments and failures of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Lowell was invited to participate in the Boston Arts Festival where he read "For the Union Dead" for the first time. Before his reading, he offered this statement: "My poem, 'The Union Dead,' is about childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly, Colonel Robert Shaw and his Negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54th." He added: "We've emerged from the monumental age."<sup>40</sup> Certainly, both the statement and the poem reference the hypocrisy of American Civil War monuments, which at best ignore the contributions of African Americans and at worst glorify slaveholders. But

Lowell's statement also indicates a change in monument culture following World War II. "For the Union Dead" offers a new model for monuments, one that does more than mark a fixed event or lesson about the past, but rather creates connections between various points in the past and contemporary legacies.

The poem opens with a reference to the ruin of the South Boston Aquarium as a symbol of loss and an easily discarded past, the "evisceration of our modern cities" ("I often sigh still/ for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom..." (9-10)), before reflecting on the construction of a parking garage near Boston Commons. The aquarium stands as a kind of Tintern Abbey-like monument to childhood memory, albeit a threatened monument. But Lowell's vision moves beyond a Romantic view of monuments, as the aquarium takes on significance as more than a site of childhood memories.

Critics such as Thomas Travisano have noted that Lowell's poem offers three examples of monuments: the aquarium, the statehouse, and the Shaw memorial.<sup>41</sup> Each of these stand "shaken, debased" by the construction of the Charles Street Parking garage. I would argue that the aquarium should be understood as a ruin/monument. As such, it provides a link between the poem and poetic tradition, as well as between the Civil War and World War II, warlike destruction and urban renewal. In such a reading, Lowell allows us a glimpse of what it might be like to contemplate those Civil War ruins that no longer exist as part of the American landscape. In doing so, he offers us a sense of a ruin in a post-Romantic world.

From an opening description of the aquarium, the poem records the noise and rumble of excavation then describes the monument to Col. Robert Gould Shaw, creating a movement from ruin (aquarium) to monument (Shaw) that will recur later in the poem. Lowell describes the monument to Shaw and his black soldiers as “a fishbone/ in the city’s throat” (29-30). The monument metaphorically becomes a painful reminder of racial discrimination unresolved by the Civil War. With later reference to “Negro school-children” on his television, Lowell links the legacy of the Civil War to contemporary issues of desegregation.

Thus, Lowell’s ruin represents the failings of cultural memory. Lowell alerts his readers that like the boarded up aquarium the Colonel “is out of bounds now” (37), his lessons of sacrifice largely unheeded. Even in his time, Shaw’s contributions to the Union cause were met with mixed response. Lowell writes:

Shaw's father wanted no monument  
except the ditch,  
where his son's body was thrown (49-51)

But the moment when Shaw’s sacrifice will be entirely forgotten becomes confirmed by Lowell’s proclamation: “The ditch grows nearer.” Lowell, a staunch opponent of US military policies during World War II, critiques cultural memory as well as how contemporary war is waged and remembered. A poster of “Hiroshima boiling” (56) transports the reader from the inglorious ruins of Hiroshima to a non-monument: “There are no statues for the last war here” (54). The intersections between monuments, ruins, national memory, and amnesia prove vital to Lowell. They provide a key to understanding urban ruins at the turn of the century. Lowell demonstrates that we are no

longer able to distance ourselves from ruins or their power as a symbol of our own destructive potential—even without monuments some events will not be forgotten. After World War II, all ruins exist as reminders of nuclear ruins.

At the dawn of the Cold War and in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, Lowell's poem also sought to reveal that the "odious 'color line'" was not so easily removed. The linking of the largely unrealized promises of the Civil War—evidenced by the image of Negro school children on the speaker's television screen—with Hiroshima sets up an interesting contrast between issues of honorable death and new methods of warfare.

Further, Lowell's poem underscores the frightening potential of atomic war, concretized in the half-ruined hulk of the abandoned aquarium. Lowell's view of the aquarium reminds us that after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no urban ruin can stand without recalling those two cities. By the early twentieth-century, the ruins of the Civil War become less recognizable as the trophies of conquest (as Macaulay suggests war ruins can often be) or even moralizing examples of the fate that awaits the "vainglorious" (as early fashioners of Civil War ruin imagery such as Barnard and Conwell suggest). Instead, they became seen as examples of the brute force of modernism. In the post World War II world, war ruins represent an uneasy sense of victory—noted by Lowell's observation that there are no monuments to the last war—a victory garnered by nuclear might. After World War II, war ruins represent new fears about nuclear warfare, the "leveling civilization of the future,"—a threat from which no city will ever be safe again.



The ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki draw nearer, so close that we can even see them in the hulking remains of an aquarium about to be felled to create a parking garage.

Civil War ruins remain at a distance. The Civil War ruins referenced at the beginning of this chapter no longer exist. The National Park Service does not count one Civil War ruin under its stewardship. The few ruins of the conflict that remain stand by accident. Without the ruins of the Civil War, the manicured lawns of National Military Parks serve as a space from which to contemplate the horror of the conflict and the complexities of reconciliation. But within recent years, archeological digs and private organizations have begun tours of plantation ruins throughout the south. Still, there are still only a handful of these sites.

Instead, contemporary ruins litter the landscape, largely unrecognized as official sites of commemoration. The ruins of Asbury Park and of the Aliso Village housing projects differ from Civil War ruins in that they did not come into being from national conflict but through more insidious and localized policies. Still, they represent a continued legacy of racial prejudice in the United States. While the Civil War ruins of the Southern cities remain largely unremembered, the ruins of World War II (as represented by the post-nuclear landscapes of Japan, as well as the firebombing of Berlin or the blitzkrieg of London) will haunt such places as Asbury Park, the South Bronx, or Detroit. Through these sites, I will continue to monitor the persistence of Romantic representations of ruin, as well as the limits of this seeing, and the attempts to reconnect these edifices to narratives about the nation and the communities in which they stand.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The image also appeared on the PBS website for the Ken Burns Civil War documentary where it was identified as “View of ruined buildings through porch of the Circular Church (150 Meeting Street).” There is no mention of the figures in the photograph. The image is attributed to the photographers of the “Federal Navy and Seaborne Expeditions against the Atlantic Coast of the Confederacy.”

<sup>2</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U Press, 2001) 33.

<sup>3</sup> Edward King, “The Great South Louisiana” *Scribners Monthly*, VII (November 1873) 1-12, qtd. in Osterweis, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Trachtenberg 103.

<sup>6</sup> Rose Macauley, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (New York: Walker, 1966) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Trachtenberg 103.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore R. Davis, “Sherman and His Generals” *Photographic Views of Sherman’s Campaign* preface by Beaumont Newhall 2ed (1866: New York; New York: Dover, 1977) xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Trachtenberg 103.

<sup>10</sup> Tayler Lewis’ essay *State Rights: A Photograph from the Ruins of Ancient Greece* (1864) provides another link between these Civil War ruins and ancient ruins drawing an analogy between the Southern desire for autonomy and Greece’s own fall. Christopher Woodward credits the pamphlet as offering photographs—taken by Lewis himself—of “the charred skeletons of the cities burned on Sherman’s march” (202). I’ve found no evidence that such photographs exist or were ever published with Lewis’s text.

<sup>11</sup> Osterweis 129.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Blight *Race and Reunion* 33.

<sup>13</sup> John T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities* (New York, Arno Press, 1969). All further citations are from this edition and will be noted in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Macauley 454.

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Conwell, *Magnolia journey: a Union veteran revisits the former Confederate States* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974). All further citations are from this edition and will be noted in the text.

<sup>16</sup> David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield* (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) 174.

<sup>17</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Chestnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1980) 527.

<sup>22</sup> Abram Ryan, lecture, 1873, as qtd in Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, (Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1980) 59.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Nolan “The Anatomy of the Myth” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*. ed Gary W. Gallagher and Allan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 12.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Shackel, *Memory in Black and White*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003) xvi.

<sup>26</sup> “Virtual Tour.”

<sup>27</sup> Nolan 28.

<sup>28</sup> James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, (New York : New Press, 1999) 371.

<sup>29</sup> A D. Scott Hartwig. Personal Interview. 24 July 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Harlan D. Unrau, *Administrative History. Gettysburg National Military Park and Gettysburg National Cemetery, Pennsylvania*. (Washington: US Department of the Interior/National Park Service, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> Shackel xvi.

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<sup>32</sup> Eyerman 4-5

<sup>33</sup> Eyerman 16.

<sup>34</sup> Eyerman 17.

<sup>35</sup> Davis 187.

<sup>36</sup> Trachtenberg 78, 80

<sup>37</sup> Osterweis 108.

<sup>38</sup> Shackel 129.

<sup>39</sup> Shackel 133.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Rudman, *Robert Lowell, an introduction to the poetry*, (New York: Columbia U Press, 1983) 132.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Makeup of a Postmodern Aesthetic*. (Charlottesville: U. Press of Virginia, 1999).

## Chapter Two: Nostalgia and Amnesia in Asbury Park

Sand sculptures stand on the normally deserted beach. Crowds mill in front of the boardwalk's boarded up storefronts. The Cuckoo's Nest. The Beach Boy's Arcade. Joe's #1 House Goods/ Dry Goods, Madame Marie's fortune telling booth, the Church of Good Intentions. Tourists stand under a swept blue sky, once laced with the twisted steel of the Galaxy Roller Coaster ride, while weeds poke up through cracks in the miniature golf course. At the boardwalk's end, the white Victorian spires, copper sea-serpents, and broken glass panes of the ruined Casino arcade and auditorium form a dramatic backdrop. It is the summer of 2002, and Asbury Park has become a darling of the New York media. All of the major metropolitan dailies (*The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *The New York Daily News*) run stories touting the rebirth of this impoverished New Jersey shore town.

*The Today Show* broadcasts live from the beach resort to celebrate the release of Bruce Springsteen's new album, *The Rising*, a rock reflection on a post-9/11 world. As the New York community clears a site for rebuilding in Lower Manhattan, the promise of restoring Asbury Park to its glory days serves as a potent symbol of hope. The live broadcast is interspersed with recent reporting and historical footage. Black and white film clips show men and women in burdensome early twentieth-century dress waving from a boardwalk's railing. Ladies push carefully decorated baby carriages. A couple strolls, the camera hums. The Ferris wheel makes its dizzying spins.

*Today Show* reporter Rehema Ellis begins: "Asbury Park was once the jewel of the Jersey shore. In the early 1900s, it was a magnet for tourists, grand hotels and money. But by the late 1960s, the big spenders fled, the joy was gone, and this resort by the sea

was becoming a painful reminder of a time and a place left behind....”<sup>1</sup> Jittery film rolls: police in riot-gear march towards an intersection, an African-American man is pushed into the back of a police car, smoke rises from the carcass of a burned-out building. An unidentified anchor from *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* proclaims: “The resort city of Asbury Park, New Jersey, was calm today...” And then the broadcast cuts away to the amusement ruins as they stand in 2002: plywood shuttered businesses, rotting planks on the boardwalk, peeling paint.

Ellis’s voice-over continues: “Riots tarnished the city of 17,000 and her reputation. Vacationers stopped coming. Attempts at reviving Asbury Park failed.”

Bruce Springsteen sings: “My city of ruins...”

“It became a symbol of urban blight.”

“My city of ruins...”

“Now, after nearly 30 years of decay, Asbury Park hopes to rise again, on the brink of a billion-dollar plan to revitalize the community. It’s the largest development project in the state....”

By Spring 2005, the whine of drills and rumble of heavy machinery sound throughout the waterfront as a long-promised revitalization seems to finally be taking hold. Ground has been broken on three separate upscale residential complexes, which will create 3,000 beachfront condominium units. Many of the ruined buildings recorded by the *Today* show’s cameras have been torn down or are slated for demolition. Nostalgia for the resort’s hey-day conspires with a developer’s promise to restore the beach town to its former glory. But in building an upscale, oceanfront, high-rise community, developers run the risk of creating a place that will no longer be accessible to the working class

families who once frequented the resort and will largely uphold the city's old divisions of segregation. Redevelopment forces have capitalized on nostalgia for the resort's past, utilizing images of amusement ruins on the waterfront to support their plans, but they are not alone in illustrating their story through images of contemporary ruin.

Photographs of Asbury Park's Casino Arcade dominate scrapbook-like web pages reinforcing a longing for the resort's "golden age," a period vaguely defined as stretching somewhere from the 1930s to the 1970s when tourists still came to the waterfront. In addition, these images appear in pseudo-archeological websites chronicling trespass through the buildings and celebrating the beauty of ruined structures. With its broken windows and caved-in roofs, the Casino Palace also serves to illustrate the failures of contemporary urban policy, corrupt politicians, post-Civil-Rights-Era race relations, or more general social problems such as the breakdown of the nuclear family (as setting for the movie *City by the Sea*) or the underworld of the Mafia (as backdrop for episodes of the television series *The Sopranos*). Finally, the ruins of the Casino Palace feature prominently in newspaper and television reports of resurrection. On programs such as *The Today Show*, the ruins of Asbury Park come to stand in for a larger narrative of destruction and healing in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Its proximity to two major metropolitan areas (New York and Philadelphia) certainly has contributed to the attention that Asbury Park has received, as well as the fact that it served as home and/or muse to Bruce Springsteen, South Side Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, and Johnny Cash. Once the ruins of Asbury Park formed part of a guided Rock and Roll Tour of the Jersey Shore—now turned into a book in its second edition—that brought fans to landmarks referenced in Bruce Springsteen's lyrics. They have their

place in two cultural histories of Asbury Park (*Fourth of July: A History of the Promised Land* by Daniel Wolff and *Asbury Park's Glory Days: The Story of An American Resort* by Helen-Chantal Pike).

Still, I argue that the ruins of Asbury Park provide an example of how contemporary urban ruins in the United States can support a range of ideological positions about a community's past, from nostalgic glorification to condemnation. For some, they inspire a longing for a "golden age" that existed prior to the Civil Rights Era. For others, they loom as failures: evidence that the battles for Civil Rights still rage and that the war on poverty was not won. This chapter traces the symbolic function of images of the Casino Palace ruins. The contemporary relationship between ruin and nostalgia has been influenced by traditionally Romantic modes of seeing ruins. In the case of Asbury Park, nostalgia inspires dangerously innocent notions about the past, notions that veil a history of racial segregation and corruption.

I have chosen to focus part of my study on interpretations of Asbury Park's history from websites that feature images of these ruins. While many of these websites offer individual memories about the resort's past, I believe, as does Marita Sturken, that when "personal memories of public events are shared their meaning changes."<sup>2</sup> These personal memories become part of "cultural memory," a kind of collective memory related to notions of American culture and the nation.<sup>3</sup> These examples of cultural memory offer a version of Asbury Park's past that can teach us about perceptions of life in post white-flight and post-Civil Rights Era cities.

When considering Asbury Park's contemporary condition, the narratives I have analyzed frequently invoke the 1970 racial uprising, which smoldered and sparked



through the streets of Asbury Park and neighboring communities for five hot days. Seventy people were shot, hundreds were injured or arrested, both jails and emergency rooms overflowed. The fact that the uprising was focused primarily in the traditionally African-American neighborhood on the west side of town (never touching the shorefront buildings in actual ruin today) often escapes mention. The fact that rioters were protesting for “better housing, improved recreational activities, more jobs and an effective crackdown on narcotics” is not included in the telling.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the communities that rose up in violent protest had long felt and continue to feel unwelcome on Asbury Park’s beaches. They have about as much connection to the beachfront ruins as they do to the coliseum in Rome.

The decline of Asbury Park began as the result of many complicated factors that started well before the racial uprising of 1970, including the growth of suburbia, the construction of a new highway, and changing demographics. Failed development schemes in the 1980s left more than 48 vacant lots—fields of cyclone fence, weeds, and cement—not to mention a whirlpool of tax bills and litigation, scores of abandoned properties, as well as the half-completed skeleton of a 10-storey condominium building on the waterfront Ocean Avenue. But in many media narratives and those recounted on the personal web sites, a legacy of unequal distribution of resources fueled by racism and corruption often gives way to nostalgia for the “glory days” of the resort, to an eerie celebration of its failure, or to a tale of promising restoration.

In June 2002, the Asbury Park city council passed a redevelopment plan that requires a \$1.2 billion dollar investment over the next ten years. When completed, 3,000 new luxury condo units will open on Ocean Avenue in addition to 450,000 square feet of

new commercial space. But critics are skeptical of how it will affect many of Asbury Park's residents. Rev. Allyson Estes, pastor of the First Methodist Church, told the *Daily News*: "There's an economic divide, and the plan isn't going to help those who are working poor move into a better situation."

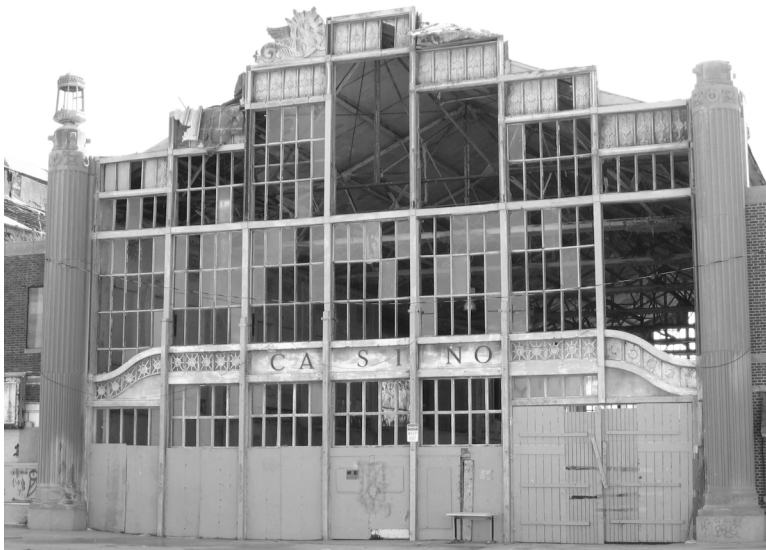
Many of Asbury Park's most famous ruins face demolition. Redevelopment engineers had leveled 14 structures by 2003 and called for the razing of an additional 33 apartment buildings, 22 single-family homes, 18 businesses, and 4 rooming houses. An organization spearheaded by a Bruce Springsteen fan from Maryland struggled unsuccessfully for the preservation of the Palace amusement building. The building was razed in June 2004. Now the group plans to create an on-line museum of the mementos from the structure's various incarnations as amusement center and Jersey Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame.

Amidst criticism of redevelopment, the local government created the Asbury Park Historical Society in 2001. Unfortunately, as urban preservationist Rebecca Birch Dowling writes, the group "has not engaged in any advocacy on behalf of threatened resources."<sup>5</sup> The group's major project to date has been the restoration of a fountain in front of the town's library. By choosing to preserve a fountain instead of fighting to preserve more hotly contested resources such as the Casino Palace, the society effectively endorses even those redevelopment plans that will threaten historic structures.

Dowling sees Asbury Park as a case study in the failure of local, state and federal preservation efforts. Dowling and other redevelopment critics fear that much of Asbury Park's unique character will be lost through redevelopment. But the issue of restoration has a complex relation to the cultural memories of a community. Preservation does

nothing to ensure that the past will be remembered as anything more than a series of artifacts or an architectural style. Preservation does little to remind us of our accomplishments or failures as a society or community. As a result, the preservation of these ruined structures may only reinforce amnesia. In the case of Asbury Park, this amnesia relates to the city's history of race.

The Casino's auditorium has been closed since the early 1980s when plaster fell from its 40-foot high ceilings. The arcade has been closed and abandoned since 1987. The city sold the entire structure as part of a redevelopment plan. Much of its roof has caved in. At least part of it is slated for demolition.



*Figure 6: Casino Palace, 2002. (Photograph by the Author).*

Since redevelopment began, not one new structure has been built.

Meanwhile 36.1 percent of Asbury Park's inhabitants today live below the poverty line; Asbury Park's unemployment rate is nearly three times the state average,

and there are 20.5 violent crimes per 2,500 citizens; in 2000, more Asbury Park families received food stamps or lived on public assistance than anywhere else in the county; the median household income slumps at \$23,081.<sup>6</sup> None of these numbers, nor the racial and class inequities they belie, will be made apparent through the images of ruin represented in the popular press or on websites.

Still the cameras turn to the battered façade of the Casino.

### **A Brief History of Asbury Park**

The 1.5 square mile city was founded in 1871 some 37 miles south of New York City as a vacation spot for wealthy New Yorkers. During the nineteenth century, stately Victorian Mansions, elegant boardwalk hotels, and refined guesthouses welcomed visitors. By 1890, the city boasted a 1,200-seat opera house. By the 1920s, 150 hotels, 8 theaters, salt-water swimming pools, custard shops, and bathhouses tempted visitors.

But the kind of investment needed to maintain a tourist economy weighed heavily on the city's coffers. Asbury Park's hard times can be traced back as far as the 1930s when the city spent \$3 million to build a waterfront Convention Hall and the Paramount Theater. At the same time, the city built a new Casino to replace a structure that had burned in a 1929 fire.

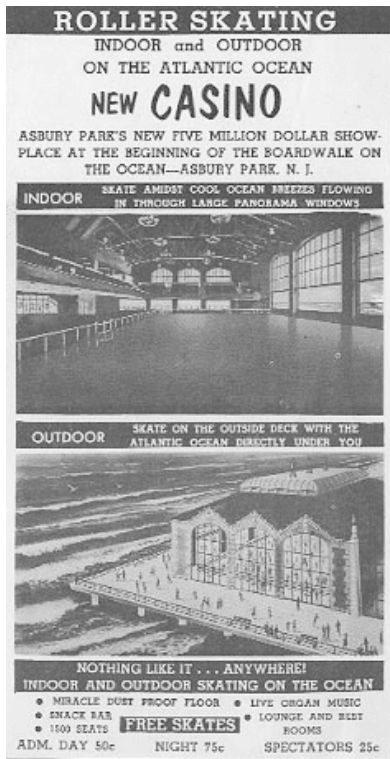


Figure 7: Casino Palace Advertisement.

Designed by the same architectural firm who built New York City's Grand Central Station, the new Casino featured an arcade spanning the south end of the boardwalk as well as an auditorium that stretches out into the ocean on a pier. The auditorium housed conventions and swing dances. It was flooded in winter for ice-skating or used for roller-skating in the summertime. But the city fell into bankruptcy during the depression era after racking up millions of dollars in debt from refinancing waterfront redevelopment. Many historians believe that by 1930 Asbury Park's heyday was long past.

During World War II, the military took over the Convention Hall as a training facility and used some of the oceanfront hotels to accommodate servicemen. But the

army's lease agreements barely covered building maintenance.<sup>7</sup> The decades following the war proved difficult for the city. Dowling explains: "The cumulative effect of new highways, suburbanization, the decentralization of commercial centers, public housing programs, and other trends contribute to a cycle of disinvestment and decline."<sup>8</sup> Tourists began to shun the larger shore resorts for smaller towns made accessible by the construction of the Garden State Parkway.

Many Asbury Park residents accused the city of pouring money into a failing tourist economy instead of addressing the needs of its citizens. In July 1970, the African-American residents of the city's west side rioted against businesses limited to their own neighborhood. Rev. Verner R. Matthews, pastor of the Second Baptist Church, and a member of the board of trustees of the West Side Community Center told the *Asbury Park Press*: "When people see the condition of the streets—bottles, dope addicts, and vagrants—they do not want to do business with the shops bordering on this mess."<sup>9</sup> He added that "the political leaders are only interested in the main source of revenue for the city—the Boardwalk—and that the general concern for the West Side on the part of politicians is lacking." The riots hurt an already faltering economy.

The needs of the city's residents continued to grow. Because of state deinstitutionalization policies, many of the city's smaller hotels and boarding houses became halfway houses for mental patients in the 1970s. In 1978, the Brookings Institute named Asbury Park the twelfth most distressed city in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Once again, the city placed its hopes in plans for waterfront redevelopment. A variety of different scenarios for investment unfolded throughout the 1980s. In 1985, Johnny Cash gave a benefit

concert to promote the waterfront and invested in the renovation of a major hotel where he occupied a suite on an upper floor.

Today, the half-moon dome that once housed a carousel sparkles, but nothing remains of the original amusement ride. The painted ponies have long since been auctioned off. Over the window, a copper-locked Medusa looks west towards Cookman Avenue. Victorian porches and dimly lit palms flicker in the water of the canal that separates Asbury Park from Ocean Grove, a dry, sleepy town originally founded as a Methodist retreat. Now it is home to pricey bed and breakfasts, elegant antique stores, and cafés. There's a footbridge between the two towns that the Ocean Grove Mayor began locking from midnight to dawn in 1995. He explained to reporters: "We're trying to make it harder for people to get mugged, raped and stabbed."<sup>11</sup>

### **Ruins and Nostalgia**

Many have turned to the Internet to preserve their memories and tokens from the past. The Internet has become archive to a variety of personal sites that show both the oceanfront ruins, as well as photographs that testify "to days gone by." With titles such as *Beyond the Palace*, *Remembering Asbury Park*, *The Boys from the Casino*, *A Laff in the Dark*, *Troubled Time* or *A Virtual Tour of Asbury Park*, some websites focus on a personal anecdote; others are devoted to the material culture of the heyday with images of programs, postcards, and "a collection of ride and prize tickets, scanned with love by yours truly."<sup>12</sup> One site lists the retail stands that lined the boardwalk. Another gives detailed descriptions of the rides that once filled the arcade. Many of the people who

create these sites do not live in the Asbury Park community, and some never have. Despite their differing approaches to recording their memories, all of these sites share a common element: longing. Each one testifies to an historical moment, some vaguely defined yesterday now irretrievably gone. Through the websites, these authors connect a personal experience of loss related to their memories of childhood to larger historical narrative of the economic demise of Asbury Park. In short, these nostalgic narrations of Asbury Park's past penned by mostly white former residents and tourists, recall the "golden age" prior to a racial uprising that tarnished the city's reputation.

Christopher Clay, a New Jersey native now living in Minnesota, authors the website *Asbury Park Then and Now: A Seaside Ghost Town...Trying to Rise Again*. The site includes both contemporary photographs (taken within the last seven years) as well as historic images, mostly postcards, some of which he dates as far back as 1908. In an introduction to the site, Clay writes:

Welcome to my web pages intended to help preserve the memories of Asbury Park and to raise awareness regarding its current state of affairs. Growing up along the New Jersey Shore in the 1970's and 1980's, one always maintains a love, a connection to this magical place along the Atlantic Ocean. Throughout the web site, you will find memories of many places, including several in New Jersey.<sup>13</sup>

Clay organizes the web pages around Asbury Park sites such as "The Boardwalk" (including the Casino), hotels, and a department store. Each section includes postcards, a brief history, and recent photos. The site's opening page features recent images of the Casino in its ruined state.

Other Asbury Park websites are also organized around buildings. Contemporary photographs appear frequently with vintage images and recollections. The "Beyond the Palace" website features a series of images chronicling the Casino's deterioration from



1984-2000.<sup>14</sup> In addition to offering souvenirs scanned and posted on the site, Asburyboardwalk.com has a page entitled “Memory Mail” where writers from all over the country post personal anecdotes, frequently childhood memories. For example, Edward Russo writes:

My father worked with the late actor Vic Morrow at Skillo. It was a bingó parlor. My father and brother would tell me stories how they met the Three Stooges on the Boardwalk. I remember the greatest drink was those orange drinks but I cannot remember the name (Kohr's). I can also remember the trolley car that would take you up and down the Boardwalk.

Murray Fleck testifies:

I remember the baby parade of 1934, my sister Nan was in it. I remember the Morro Castle [a 1934 shipwreck off the coast], the boardwalk collapse, and the beginning of parking meters installed for the sight seers. I remember going to Bond Street Grammar School, being a safety crossing guard and getting in to see the Asbury Park Blue Bishops football team for free. I remember the Main Central hotel fire, and I remember the Monterey Hotel, and the Drug Store at the Berkley Carteret....<sup>15</sup>

The recollections read as simple lists, a roll call of childhood. Inevitably, these sites mourn the demise of Asbury Park and express a desire for the restoration or preservation of the places and artifacts relating to these memories. As Clay explains: “Like most, I only wish for the preservation of those places still standing in Asbury Park and a return to prosperity for the city.”

In this nostalgia for childhood and desire for “a return,” contemporary writing about the ruins of Asbury Park recalls Romantic poetry that also referenced ruins as a representation of privileged “origins,” a structure through which to approach memory. Again I argue that despite the differences between the ruins that inspired Romantics and contemporary ruins, Romanticism offers one way of interpreting ruin. Cultural

geographer and historian David Lowenthal explains that the Romantics were the first to express nostalgia for childhood.<sup>16</sup> Just as ancient Greece had once been held up as model for civilization, so childhood becomes a model for desired human consciousness, a privileged origin. Ruins mark the sites of childhood memory, and their corruption symbolizes what is inevitably lost in adulthood.

One of the greatest artistic tributes to this nostalgia comes in Wordsworth's poems about his youth. As critic Lawrence Goldstein notes, Wordsworth returns to Grasmere fleeing the brutal reality of the French Revolution and his own delusions with politics. There, Goldstein explains, "the revisitation of his childhood paradise would come to be an obsessive desire of his adult life,"<sup>17</sup> something that would give him "life and food/ For future years" ("Tintern Abbey" 64-65). But that childhood paradise has, of course, changed. In the poem, "The Tuft of Primroses" (1808), Wordsworth writes:

.....Alas how much  
Since I beheld and loved thee first, how much  
Is gone, though thou be left. I would not speak  
Of best friends dead, or other deep-hearted loss  
Bewail'd with weeping, but by River sides  
And in broadfields how many gentle loves,  
How many mute memorials pass'd away. (71-77)

Wordsworth recalls not just "best friends dead," but "mute memorials," markers of psycho-emotional content. In a series of poems, Wordsworth bemoans changes to the Wye Valley and Grasmere, remarking on the loss of these place-markers for his memory.

But Wordsworth's nostalgia signals a retreat from politics, from the conflicts of daily life. Wordsworth was a fierce opponent of modernity's potential for spiritual corruption. The Wye Valley holds a special place for him as a refuge from the city with its tendency to force man to confront the "national events" which would "reduce [the

mind] to a state of almost savage turpor.”<sup>18</sup> A desire to escape the “national events” shared by both Romantic and contemporary writers might account for the persistence of a Romantic mode of seeing ruins.

Local ruins, as well, serve as monuments to Wordsworth’s memories. Critic Anne Janowitz explains that in Wordsworth’s “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” the ruined abbey becomes a symbol for the memory of Wordsworth’s time in the Wye Valley. But the image has repercussions beyond individual recollection. She writes:

In Wordsworth’s poem, the building as ruin stands outside the field of vision (we are now a few miles upstream from the ruins of Tintern Abbey) and it functions as a marker for the real poetic monument which is located in Wordsworth’s memory as well as in Dorothy’s mind (the edifice to be built as a ‘mansion for all lovely forms’ [l. 140] and in her memorializing memory, ‘a dwelling place/ For all sweet sounds and harmonies [ll. 141-20]’.<sup>19</sup>

Through the view a few miles from “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth could reference private memories. By returning to the Wye, he can remark upon the power of memory itself: “How oft, in spirit have I turned to thee” (55), as well as its failings: “I cannot paint/What then I was.../—That time is past” (75-76, 83). By referring to Tintern Abbey, he also presents us with a ruin of England’s past: a reference to cultural memory and history. Janowitz continues:

The contraction from built structure to poem-monument to the self is part of a set of parallel shifts: from public to private thematic compass, from history to individual history, from history to memory, from the poetic structure of memorialization to a postponed longing for a realizable poetic structure.

The “built structure” around which Wordsworth creates a “poem monument” is a ruined structure. The incompleteness of the structure itself, the distance between its intended use

(as a site of religious organization) and its function as poetic marker of unstructured childhood, offers an interesting commentary on change and the fluidity of memory. In other words, because of the incomplete nature of personal memory itself (its “sad perplexity” 60), Wordsworth chose a ruin, not a complete monument, as a marker for his own memory. In addition, the structured living of religious devotion resonates against the exploratory nature or the “coarser pleasures” (73) of his childhood.

But again it is important to recall what Wordsworth chooses to forget in such a recollection. While Janowitz is correct in recognizing the national significance of a ruined abbey, Wordsworth does not directly reference national history in his recollections. In fact, his nostalgia represents a turning away from both history as well as “national events.” By the late twentieth century, nostalgia for childhood has become a fully normalized response to modern culture. Writers on Asbury Park who recollect their childhood with a certain longing seem to be walking in the footsteps of the Romantic thinkers seeking a similar refuge from modernity. But there are many important differences between Wordsworth’s ruin and the crumbling Casino Palace.

The ruins of Asbury Park represent a profane space, a space of capitalist recreation, as opposed to a sacred space such as Tintern Abbey. In addition, Wordsworth confronts a ruin that preceded him. Those writers on websites that commemorate Asbury Park regard structures that have fallen into ruin within their lifetimes. They have had the experience of knowing the ruin when it was complete and functional. Before such ruins, one experiences the loss of a past self (the writers will never be children again) as well as of a space to which they cannot return.

Perhaps most significantly, the notions of childhood remembered on websites devoted to Asbury Park cannot be disentangled from local and national events. When recollecting their childhood in the city, these authors inevitably recall a time before desegregation or before a racial uprising. Clay offers this version of Asbury Park's history on his website:

We know that into the 1970's, the city was still thriving. I imagine this continued into the later 70's. Several who have emailed or written indicate race riots started much of the decline of Asbury Park. I am told the riots occurred July 4th weekend in the summer of 1970. They lasted 5 days. The riots moved to the downtown area where 46 people were shot. I do know that in the early 1970's, there were actually riots (minor in comparison) at my High School, Central Regional in Bayville NJ (I was not there as I was only 7 or 8 years old in the early 70's). It wouldn't surprise me that the riots in Asbury Park would have hurt "tourist business." Most probably visited from more wealthy areas (this is only my opinion, but it seems logical based on Asbury Park's makeup). Riots may have "started" the decline in visitors to Asbury Park, while increasing it to nearby shore resorts.

Thus, the loss of innocence represented by the loss of childhood finds a parallel narrative in the nation's "loss of innocence" during the Civil Rights disturbances of the 1970s. But those with a clear sense of history must realize that America has never been innocent in matters of race. Many of the authors of such sites over-emphasize the role of the racial uprising in Asbury Park's decline. They refer to a simpler time, when racial tensions, violence, or inequity escaped the notice of those who visited the seaside resort. And their desire to preserve the amusement sites of Asbury Park reflects an incomplete understanding of the city's history and current socio-economic make-up.

In this, the nostalgic writers of Asbury Park differ from Wordsworth. While Wordsworth seeks to preserve the mansion of the mind (lines 139-141), the ruined abbey is an ultimately appropriate symbol for memory because Wordsworth knows that the

mansion of memory inevitably deteriorates. For the writers of Asbury Park, desire for “preservation of those places still standing in Asbury Park and a return to prosperity” can represent a failure to come to grips with the faults of the past. In his essay, “The Necessity for Ruins,” cultural geographer JB Jackson notes that restoration creates a “vernacular” experience of the past bereft of the lessons of history. Jackson explains that preservation can “suggest that the past is a remote, ill-defined period of environment when a kind of golden age prevailed, when society had an innocence and simplicity that we have since lost...”<sup>20</sup> Jackson implies that such innocence never existed. But this relation between ruins and preservation as return to innocence runs throughout the history of ruins in the United States. The notion of innocence denies the destructive elements of modern progress as well as the violence and injustice that form a significant chapter of national history especially in regards to race.

In relation to Asbury Park, the notion of “innocence and simplicity” can be deceptive. Nostalgic visions of Asbury Park do not represent the complexity of the social and financial problems that have plagued the city. Many of Asbury Park’s economic troubles had already begun to burden the city as early as the Great Depression. Furthermore, the economic burden was disproportionately borne by low-income residents, many of whom were black. The childhood amusements enjoyed by the mostly white writers who post their memories on personal websites were not made accessible to people of color until desegregation. And yet this nostalgia can have a dramatic impact on the future of Asbury Park, especially as it coincides with the goals of redevelopment.

Imagine how a visitor might feel walking through the jumbled reflections of a restored Crystal Mirror Maze. Her image wavers, oddly disfigured, bloated or stretched.

Stunned with the multitudinous repetitions of her own face would she remember segregation?

## **Human Ruins**

In order to further gauge the symbolic importance of the ruins of Asbury Park, I want to turn to the representation of those ruins in popular film. Just as photographs of the ruins of Casino Palace punctuate personal and cultural memories of Asbury Park, these images of ruin serve as backdrops to fictionalized stories of corruption and redemption. In this, they recall another essentially Romantic function of ruin in which a ruined structure becomes a symbol for social or individual corruption. Thus the ruins of Asbury Park became the setting for a 1992 film *Fathers & Sons*, which takes on serial killers, psychics, and a deteriorating father-son relationship. The second season of the Mafia drama *The Sopranos* ends with an episode in which mob boss Tony Soprano kills his friend and crew member, “Pussy” Bompensiero. The realization that “Pussy” has turned state’s evidence comes to Tony through a dream sequence that takes place on the Asbury Park boardwalk. But by far the most dramatic use of the Casino ruins takes place in the movie *City by the Sea*.<sup>21</sup>

In *City by the Sea*, Asbury Park’s beachfront ruins serve as backdrop to a tale of child abandonment and father-son reconciliation. Based on a true account, the movie narrates the story of Vincent LaMarca, a New York City detective called back to his former hometown to investigate a murder. LaMarca’s estranged son, Joey, becomes the prime suspect in the case. As LaMarca (played by Robert DeNiro) and his partner try to

track Joey down, viewers learn that LaMarca left the child and his mother many years ago, repeating a cycle of abandonment that began when LaMarca's father was executed for a murder/kidnapping when he was a child.

In the film, Asbury Park stands in for LaMarca's actual hometown of Long Beach, Long Island. On the DVD commentary track, screenwriter Ken Hixon explains the decision to shoot the film in Asbury Park instead of Long Beach. Hixon explains: "You couldn't build a better set than Asbury Park... There's something extraordinary to walk into a place that was once so vital and alive whether it is an old cathedral or an old theater that has fallen in disarray. If you've been there, you don't forget it. It's striking." Hixon expresses a sentiment that seems nearly sublime. But the Casino Palace is neither a ruined cathedral, nor a bombed out London church—this is an amusement arcade. Perhaps the structure's monumental architecture allows such comparisons. The Casino Palace represents one of the few contemporary ruins considered in this dissertation built in the Beaux Arts Palace-inspired style of grand public buildings. Despite this fact, my research suggests that not all viewers regard these ruins with Hixon's enthusiasm.

For Hixon, the decayed beachfront in Asbury Park symbolized the past that Vincent LaMarca had fled. The movie opens with a montage of post-cards and home movies (culled from responses to an ad placed in the *Asbury Park Press*) before cutting to a scene of La Marca's son, Joey, walking down the boardwalk as it stands in 2001. Joey, a heroin addict and petty thief, lives in the decrepit Casino amusement building. Later in the film, a scene that ends with LaMarca giving up his grandson to child welfare agents then cuts to a shot of Joey huddled on the sand under the ruined Casino structure on a rainy night. Joey lives in the abandoned structure but can no longer return, since the cops



are looking for him. While the film's narrative takes place in Long Beach, the images of Asbury Park—both as it appeared before it became a symbol of urban blight and after—bring that city's history complete with its images of a heyday, evidence of a fall, and a potential for redemption into the story.

The fusing of the corrupted human with the corrupted structure also coincides with another traditionally Romantic trope. Despite the differences in medium as well as the hundreds of years that separate their creation, I believe Romantic poetry offers a model for these ruins that represent human corruption. In poems such as “The Ruined Cottage” or “A Night on Salisbury Plain,” Wordsworth uses a ruined domicile as well as the ruins of Stonehenge to represent the corruption and deterioration of the human spirit. But as Janowitz points out, Wordsworth's intentions were essentially political.<sup>22</sup> The figures he created in his poetry offered a way for him to level a critique of British society.

The drama in *City by the Sea* offers a much more localized and less blatantly political critique. The ruins of Asbury Park appear in the movie as a symbol for both societal and family corruption, but only as far as this corruption affects white middle- and working-class families. The only African American—nearly the only character of color—in the film is a stereotypical drug dealer who works out of an abandoned lot on the waterfront. This coincides with the use of Asbury Park's ruins on personal webpages that tend to focus only on the resort's place in white, middle- and working-class cultural memories. The film's conclusion rests on the re-establishment of the authority of the father—perhaps a metaphor for the re-establishment of socio-political authority in Asbury Park, also white, also working class. This re-establishment of authority amidst the ruins will come up again in my analysis of the film *Fort Apache the Bronx*.

*City by the Sea* ends with a father-and-son reconciliation. While police hold his son at gunpoint, Vincent simultaneously establishes his son's innocence and takes a bullet for him. His son will serve time in prison for lesser charges than murder. In the film's last shots, Vincent LaMarca sits in a lawn chair on a deserted beach, while his four-year-old grandson plays with a pail and shovel at his feet. The Casino ruins loom in the background.

The symbolism of this return is doubled: First, LaMarca steps back into the role of father re-establishing his authority as the head of the household. Second, he returns to the city he left. He is the only one on the beach—a frontiersman reclaiming a heritage, a white working-class cop staking out a spot in the sand. The shot forms an interesting bookend to the film's opening sequence, which features home movies of a crowded Asbury Park boardwalk. It is a moment when the film visually references the history of Asbury Park, despite being "set" in another community. The film's final shot implies that not only will the LaMarca family be reunited, but the beach will—should—be reclaimed by this white, paternal figure of authority. But from whom? From the majority of its actual inhabitants, working-class and poor people of color? The film does not answer that question. For our purposes, it is important to note that as symbols of the corruption of the spirit, the ruins not only symbolize great failures, but a potential rebirth. When white patriarchal authority is restored, the buildings themselves will be redeemed. While the desire to establish authority over ruins can be seen as well in examples of the ruins of the South Bronx, the Aliso Village and Ground Zero, this desire will not always result in calls for restoration. The ruins of the Aliso Housing complex will not be redeemed. In the view of the Los Angeles Housing Authority, their destruction will bring about

redemption and the re-establishment of authority. But for others, the absence of authority evidenced by ruin can be worthy of celebration.

### **Ruins of a Fall**

On the *Dark Passage* website, a series of muted color photographs set against a black background offer moody impressions of the Casino ruins under a section entitled “Urban Post-Mortems.”<sup>23</sup> In the first shot of the dimly lit arcade, a faded and pockmarked tin sign depicts an Art Deco graphic of a man and woman linking arms in a skaterly embrace. “Asbury Park” the script announces. “Casino Skating Palace” appears beneath. The couple’s featureless, rosy faces mark a stark contrast to their blue winter attire. Within the photo’s tight cropping, peeling paint frames the couple’s careful pose. Water stains seep like ink blots through the ceiling above them. The caption below describes Asbury Park’s rise and subsequent bust in uncomplicated shorthand. Writer Julia Solis’ notes that the I-beams sprung from the unfinished condominium project just down the street from the Casino give the locale a “flavor of Beirut.” The conglomeration of beachfront ruins, she explains, has earned Asbury Park the name “Sarajevo-by-the-Sea.”<sup>24</sup>

These references merit exploration for the desires they illuminate in regards to both Asbury’s history and future. While Asbury Park’s decline can be traced to economic failure and corruption, both Beirut and Sarajevo were victims of violent destruction related to war—and in the case of the latter—ethnic cleansing. In my analysis of Civil War ruins, I explain how early chroniclers of the destruction of southern cities often invoked foreign landscapes in their descriptions of war ruins. By the late twentieth-

century, the comparison between urban ruins (frequently created by government mismanagement and decreased funding) and war destruction becomes commonplace. (It is a trope I will discuss again later when I consider the ruins of the South Bronx.) Wracked by wave after wave of mismanagement, violence, and neglect, Asbury Park tumbles into the imaginary realm of the “third world,” war-torn, needy, devastated, foreign. These viewers of the ruins of Asbury Park enact a literary trope common to American ruins, one that can be traced back to travelogues of Civil War ruins, using metaphor to create distance between the viewer and the ruin, to de-nationalize them. In doing so, the United States can remain a land without ruins or decay.

Most of the commentary on the Dark Passage website describes the building’s condition, the possibility of access, and the potential for exploration: “Most of the stairs inside the palace have crumbled. Entire patches of the second floor dangle like curtains towards the ground floor. Only a few structural parts are solid enough to ascend.”

“The view of the skating rink, however, is well worth the climb.”

Visitors on the virtual tour witness the ragged rink. What was once a glass roof is a fragile web of metal supports. Rusted beams cast a tattered scrawl over the clouds. Trees and weeds thicket the rink and what remains of the viewing stands around it, half cathedral, half meadow.

“Now nature is staging its own performance here. We can't help but applaud.”

While few sites so overtly celebrate Asbury Park’s deterioration, many websites illustrate a fascination with its demise. Webpages such as *Weird New Jersey*, *The Unusual Museum of the International Net*, and *Urban Decay* provide written testimony and photographic evidence of the decline of Asbury Park’s buildings. In contrast to those

websites that serve as scrapbooks for photographs and souvenirs of the resort's past, these sites feature only images of its ruinous present. Instead of casting a glance back to a glorified past, these sites envision ruins as inevitable markers of failure. On the *Weird New Jersey* website, a half-constructed high-rise was described as “a monument to greed and stupidity.”<sup>25</sup>

The ruins of Asbury Park can also be compared to a traditionally Romantic ruin that was once representative of an empire's inevitable decline. But there is still an important difference between the failure of empire seen on certain websites of the Casino Palace ruins and that expressed, for example, by Shelley in “Ozymandias.” Critic Laurence Goldstein believes those eighteenth-century ruins represent a cyclical view of history, the rise and fall of empires, and the process of organic decay and rebirth. “Ubiquitous in literature as in geographical location, ruins were a means of mortifying in the public those worldly desires which caused the great empires, like Persepolis and Egypt, to decline and fall.”<sup>26</sup> Ruins symbolized a natural process where some civilizations must ascend while others decline. But while serving a critical intention, the ruined monument to Ozymandias represents the failure of a distant civilization, an ancient civilization, and is a warning to Britain. The ruined Casino Palace in the hands of the writers for *Weird New Jersey* or the “Dark Passage” website becomes evidence of national decline already in progress. While Romantic modes of viewing can de-historicize ruin, they can also put our current political historical moment into the context of other empires that have failed.

In the nostalgic popular imaginary represented by scrapbook-like webpages, the ruins of Asbury Park stand as a reminder of lost childhood origins. As a backdrop for

films and television, the ruins of Asbury Park reference the corruption of society and its effect on the individual. But they also offer a promise of redemption. For others, the site is a symbol of the folly—not of Asbury Park’s working-poor population—but of Asbury Park’s elite, city managers, civic leaders, councilmen, developers. “This site contains photographs from two different artists that reflect the decadence surrounding the New York/New Jersey area,” the *Rash Reflections* website proclaims.<sup>27</sup> Thus ruins become reminders of an empire that deserves to fail. All of these symbolic interpretations of and uses for ruins suggest the structures’ ability to represent varied ideologies and attitudes about both the past and the present.

### **A Tale of the Rising: Asbury Park and Lower Manhattan**

Sitting in Asbury Park’s Stone Pony bar in the summer of 2002, *Today Show* host Matt Lauer explained: “9/11 reconnected a lot of people with the values we used to hold dear: bravery, hard-work, sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup> In the wake of 9/11 and an increased awareness of possible terrorist attacks, the entire nation was called on to be brave or to sacrifice for the good of their community. In the days and weeks after the attacks, that kind of bravery and sacrifice took the form of volunteerism, charitable donations, and even patriotic consumerism. But as wave after wave of security alerts rippled into the summer of 2002, as US foreign policy lumbered on hell-bent to wage more war, and as dump trucks carted away all traces of the World Trade Center from Lower Manhattan, what was required of the nation—and New Yorkers in particular—became less clear and more frightening.

Asbury Park provided another narrative “reconnecting” us with “the values we used to hold dear.” Consider the lead paragraphs from two stories written in 2002 on Asbury Park’s redevelopment that ran in the *Daily News* and on the Associated Press wire, respectively:

When Michael Liberatore bought a weekend house in Asbury Park, NJ, a few years ago, his New York friends thought he was nuts.

When Howard Raczkiewicz decided to move his successful Ocean Grove restaurant to neighboring Asbury Park, people thought he was crazy.<sup>29</sup>

Both openings speak of a kind of “bravery” in the face of urban devastation. Both stories spin a “heroic” and “self-sacrificing” tale of gentrification in a city “corroded by drugs and violence” without questioning either the process that led to such urban devastation—although relating it to a racialized other—or the possible downsides of gentrification.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the beach community, the implications for the New York metropolitan area may have been more psychological. I do not mean to suggest that the urban blight of Asbury Park should seem easily comparable to the devastation of 9/11. But I do believe it is possible that because of their magnitude, the specter of the terrorist attacks hover in unusual places. During the summer of 2002, as the one-year anniversary of 9/11 approached and Department of Homeland Security alerts continued to close New York bridges and harbors, any story of revitalization would have been welcome by the metropolitan media. On a deeper level, the scripting of a narrative of resurrection for Asbury Park may coincide with a kind of projection. The act of envisioning rebirth in Asbury Park may be an attempt to approach a more difficult act of rebuilding in Lower Manhattan. This is not to say the narrative of Asbury Park could somehow “explain” terrorist attacks, but consider the possibility that the media’s tale of the resort town’s

decline and rising—complete with its initial ‘wounding’ at the hand of a racialized other—offers a narrative blue print for resolution or catharsis.

The release of a new Bruce Springsteen album, *The Rising*, brought Matt Lauer to Asbury Park just weeks before the first anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup>. *The New York Times* praised the Grammy-award-winning effort as “a song cycle about duty, love, death, mourning and resurrection.” But the track, “My City in Ruins” with its eerie imagery of urban destruction was originally written about Asbury Park:

Now the sweet bells of mercy  
Drift through the evening trees  
Young men on the corner  
Like scattered leaves,  
The boarded up windows,  
The empty streets  
While my brother's down on his knees  
My city of ruins  
My city of ruins

Come on, rise up! Come on, rise up!<sup>31</sup>

The lyrics promote compassion for the economic blight of Asbury Park as well as the devastation of New York City. They also bespeak hope. Much of the album resonates with the gospel-like chorus: “Come on, rise up!” But the “rising” has been as slow in Asbury Park as it has in Lower Manhattan. And the question Springsteen poses: “Tell me how do I begin again?/ My city's in ruins” does not lend itself to easy answers either for Lower Manhattan or for Asbury Park.

Much in the same way that redevelopment in Asbury Park comes packed in a nostalgia, many initially responded to the attacks on the World Trade Center with the idea of rebuilding the towers exactly as they once stood. Both represent a desire to return



to the past in the face of a difficult present. Referring to eighteenth-century nostalgia, David Lowenthal writes:

The great changes of the times had made nostalgia pervasive. Revolutionary upheaval sundered past from present; after the guillotine and Napoleon the previous world seemed irretrievably remote—hence to many doubly dear.<sup>32</sup>

I believe that Romanticism once again provides an interesting comparison as well as a model upon which many of our contemporary nostalgic narratives are based. Lowenthal notes that the 1960s and 1970s were also times of great turmoil that brought about a natural turn to the past. The same seems true in post 9/11 world. But nostalgia has its limits, as does the Romantic mode of viewing ruins. As quickly as the cries for a new World Trade Center were heard, opponents reminded us that the history of the World Trade Center's development demonstrates that it was never an innocent place. Others questioned: who would want to work in it?

This question has relevance for the redevelopment plans of Asbury Park: Who will live in or visit an Asbury Park reconstructed exactly as before? Will working class tourists flock to the resort? Much of redevelopment seems intent on attracting upscale residents, not tourists. The question remains: how will these new inhabitants interact with their neighbors many of whom live at the poverty line? Anxiety as to how those questions will be answered can be found in interesting places. Despite Springsteen's hopes for his city, when developers decided to name a 224-unit waterfront condominium "The Rising" after his album, the rock star politely asked that the name be removed.

## **The Tale of the Haunting**

The ghosts of the five violent days when African Americans marched and looted and sparked and crashed and raged continue their slow sweep through the streets of Asbury Park—extending to sites the actual rioters never touched—to rest in text and memories that surround photographs of the Casino grimly cast against a moody sky.

And yet they are silent. Before they raise their voices, chains of cause and effect like handcuffs link these protesters to Asbury Park’s urban decay. Despite the many complex and well-documented reasons for Asbury Park’s decline as recently as May 2005, Benjamin Genocchio wrote in *The New York Times*: “The city of about 17,000 people is best known as a crumbling shore town that time, race riots, and poverty have left in disrepair if not despair.”<sup>33</sup>

Asbury Park Councilman Ed Johnson claims he is well aware of those voices that have been silenced. Johnson explains: “The way I’ve heard about the race riots is that everything was perfect here—and then there were these riots. There are a lot of people here who feel their voice has never been heard no matter what they say.”<sup>34</sup>

“Everybody says it was the riots,” explains Werner Baumgartener, the former city historian and former member of the Asbury Park Historical Society. “It wasn’t the riots that ruined Asbury Park, it was redevelopment. It was the city’s declaring itself an urban blight zone.”<sup>35</sup> That designation came in 1984 when the city created the redevelopment authority. Baumgartener believes that the designation encouraged people to allow properties to fall into disrepair, as well as contributing to the city’s negative image and further discouraging investment.

Cultural memory is a product of complex interactions. In Asbury Park, cultural memory as evidenced by the web-based testimony and mass media representations can be silencing, amnesiac, conspiratorial with the needs of the white working- and middle-class tourists and former residents—as well as those of wealthy developers and new residents. As such, we can only speak of the “cultural memories” of one segment of the community. As I’ve previously noted, Sturken acknowledges that cultural memory “both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed.”<sup>36</sup> In the case of the ruins of Asbury Park, these “divisions and conflicting agendas” represent more than just political differences. They follow lines of ethnicity, race or socio-economic group.

For the community’s Hispanic and African-American members, the waterfront and its ruins do not recall a heyday, but segregation, when the African-American population was only allowed to bathe on a small portion of the beach behind the Casino building. Councilman Johnson explains:

You have generations of people here in Asbury Park who could care less about redevelopment. Why should they care about the beach when they were never allowed to go there or work there? .... I went to a meeting today where someone told me that the reason they don’t take their kids there is because they don’t feel welcomed. Young black kids in town don’t go there because they don’t feel welcomed.

While the race riot haunts narratives of Asbury Park, the trauma of segregation continues to haunt those Asbury Park communities affected by it.

Since the Civil War, both the promise of racial equality and the failure to keep that promise has been a great source of national shame. On the national landscape, the

sites that most frequently remind us of those failures (the slave quarters, dwellings of immigrant populations) are frequently erased. Monumental public structures such as Asbury Park's Casino Palace or the skyscrapers of Detroit that fell to ruin in the late twentieth century cannot be so easily erased. In their decay, they present themselves as evidence of failures intimately tied up to the issues of segregation and discrimination. They remind some of white flight. They remind some of how significant investment in urban neighborhoods waned.

Current redevelopment plans will drastically alter the landscape and demographics of the city. The challenge, Johnson suggests, will be to allow those voices that have been traditionally silenced to be heard through the clamor of redevelopment. Still Johnson tries to be optimistic: "I think we are at a very important moment here in Asbury Park because we are dealing with thirty years of anger--and corruption."

With much of the waterfront—including the Convention Hall and the Casino—in the hands of developers, it is unclear what impact the city might have on shaping redevelopment. Plans for redevelopment in Asbury Park include buildings that will fit a few different architectural traditions: Art Deco, Mediterranean, Arts and Crafts. "The idea is for the new stuff to be varied, so it looks like a city that was built over time," Larry Fishman, chief executive of the master redeveloper Asbury Partners, told *The New York Times*.<sup>37</sup> While most storefronts continue to remain closed and shuttered along the boardwalk, developers have whitewashed the buildings and painted murals of new businesses that might one day inhabit these places: a pizza stand, a flower shop. Preservation of many of Asbury Park's most important historical buildings seems

unlikely. The ruins will not be restored to a previous state of existence, nor preserved as ruined monuments. Most of them will simply be razed.

I wonder what monument could be created if some of these buildings were preserved as ruins, as painful reminders of prejudice and failed policies. I worry that the Casino Palace, as an isolated example of ruin, may do as much to obscure a racialized history of ruin as it does to make that history seen. One way to de-romanticize these ruins may come from seeing them not as anomalies but as common features in our landscape.

In lieu of a restoration, some champions of the ruins of Asbury Park have settled for preserving their memories of Asbury Park in a virtual environment:

AN INVITATION TO HELP CREATE  
THE PALACE-ON-LINE MUSEUM

We're hard at work on a new web site that will be dedicated to the history of the Palace, invite you to share with us your favorite recollections for possible use on the site. Did you ride the carousel? The Ferris wheel? Fly upside down through the roof on the Rock-O-Plane? Scream in the Haunted Castle? Tour the Asbury Park Rock 'N' Roll Museum? We are interested in documenting the full range of the Palace experience: the Fun Houses, the dark rides, the Auto Skooters, the pinball and skee ball machines, the games of chance, and the ever changing array of attractions.

Please send your favorite recollections soon, either by email to [pbjcrane@erols.com](mailto:pbjcrane@erols.com), or mail to: Palace On-Line Museum, 12606 Billington Road, Silver Spring, MD, 20904.

But this interest in Asbury Park will offer little benefit to what remains of the city. It will not prevent another historical building from being demolished—in fact it makes preservation seem as simple as scanning a photograph. It does little to educate viewers about the city's history. More importantly by directing interest to a virtual rather than

actual landscape, it discourages people from becoming involved in the actual city and those policies that will shape its future.

### **Asbury Park In The Headlines And On The Web**

“The mayor of Ocean Township, NJ, who also serves as the city manager for Asbury Park, unexpectedly resigned today, saying he had committed illegal actions connected to his job as mayor.

“In a series of raids in January, federal agents searched Mr. Weldon’s office in Asbury park.... Agents also searched the homes of several former Asbury Park officials and local business men associated with the city’s failed waterfront redevelopment plans...”

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“Except for a drying puddle of blood and a swarm of investigators, there was little sign today of the violence that shook this broken-down resort town Sunday night as a pack of armed young men rampaged through a crowd of revelers. Three men were shot, and more than a dozen people were arrested.”

No images appeared with these stories confined to the back pages of *The New York Times*, on October 8, 2002 and July 18, 2001 respectively. There was no voice over to accompany them. No dramatic video clips. No site to memorialize these events.

A story from the front page of *The New York Times*’ Sunday New Jersey Section (June 26, 2005) ran with a photograph of the Casino and the cut-line: “As Asbury Park reinvents itself, the weathered hulk of the old casino still looms.”

JB Jackson reminds us that in the United States an increased interest in preservation has changed our relationship to the past. Jackson observes that the preservation and restoration movement offers a “new interpretation of history”. He writes:

It sees history not as continuity but as a dramatic discontinuity, a kind of cosmic drama. First there is that golden age, the time of harmonious beginnings. Then ensues a period when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect. Finally, there comes a time when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty.<sup>38</sup>

In Asbury Park, that beauty may take the form of a city that “looks like it was built over time” at the expense of actual urban infrastructure. More importantly, by erasing the evidence of a material past in favor of an historical style, developers and city officials alike may be doomed to forget the inequities and mistakes of their history. While luxury condos are constructed on the waterfront, the same communities that rose up to protest their living conditions in the 1970s may see few benefits from redevelopment. In this new relationship to the past, Jackson notes: “There is no lesson to learn, no covenant to honor; we are charmed into a state of innocence and become part of the environment.” These new architectural environments will remind viewers of a “golden age” that never actually existed in Asbury Park. These structures will not remind them of the corruption, racism, and discrimination that will remain the city’s most enduring legacy. These structures will not even remind them—as the ruins always do—that Asbury Park’s “golden age” once ended.

The Ferris wheel that twirled in the night sky over Ocean Avenue was sold off years ago. The carousel horses have been hauled away. With each day another “souvenir” slips away from Casino arcade. We know this. We have scanned and photographed it. Another Internet page records it.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhehema Ellis, “History of Asbury Park” *Today*, NBC, 30 July 2002, transcript.

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<sup>2</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories. The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997) 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Sturken 3. Sturken distinguishes between collective and cultural memory preferring the term cultural because of what she calls the “self-consciousness with which notions of culture are attached to these objects of memories”. Sturken refers to testimonies that become part of a government archive or are left at official monuments. But I believe the archive of the internet represents another source of knowledge a place where versions of history get told.

<sup>4</sup> James McCormick, “Quiet Prevails In City; Patrols Guard Streets; \$4 Million In Damage Estimated” *Asbury Park Press* 7 July 1970: A-1.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Birch Dowling, “Asbury Park Rising: Overcoming the Limitations of Public Policy to Protect Historic Resources at the Local Level” MS thesis, Columbia Univ., 2004 69.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Strauss, “Welcome to Asbury Park, a Work in Progress” *The New York Times* 26 June 2005: 14-1.

<sup>7</sup> Birch Dowling 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Birch Dowling 33.

<sup>9</sup> McCormick.

<sup>10</sup> Birch Dowling explains: “A distressed city has socioeconomic challenges and deteriorated physical conditions such as a large stock of substandard housing, a declining population, and high property taxes” (8).

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Ingrassia, “Glory Days. After decades of troubled times developers, homebuyers, businesses and politicians are lined up to revive legendary Asbury Park” *Daily News* 28 June 2002: Lifeline-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Remembering Asbury Park* 28 April 2003 <[www.elvision.com/asburypark](http://www.elvision.com/asburypark)>.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Clay, *Asbury Park, New Jersey. A Seaside Ghost Town*, 28 April 2003 <<http://www.drakkar91.com/ap/asbury.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Beyond The Palace*, 2001, 02 Oct 2002 <<http://www.beyondthepalace.com/btp/index.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> “Memory Mail,” *AsburyPark.com*, 28 April 2003 <[www.asburypark.com](http://www.asburypark.com)>.



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- <sup>16</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Lawrence Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire. The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977) 124.
- <sup>18</sup> William Wordsworth, "1802 Preface to the Lyric Ballads," *Romanticism* ed. Duncan Wu (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994) 254.
- <sup>19</sup> Anne Janowitz, *England's ruins: poetic purpose and the national landscape* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990) 79.
- <sup>20</sup> JB Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins*. (Amherst: Univ of Mass Press, 1980) 98.
- <sup>21</sup> *City by the Sea*, screenplay by Ken Hixon, dir. Michael Caton-Jones, perf. Robert DeNiro, Frances McDormand, and James Franco, Warner Bros Pictures, 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> Janowitz 117-118.
- <sup>23</sup> Julia Solis, "Ice Skating Palace Asbury Park, New Jersey." *Dark Passage*. 02 Oct 2002. <<http://www.darkpassages.com/postmortems/asbury.htm>>.
- <sup>24</sup> An article from the Weird New Jersey website credits former Asbury Park Councilman, Angelo Chinnici with coining the phrase "Sarajevo-by-the-Sea". I could not corroborate that myself.
- <sup>25</sup> Mark Moran. "Greetings from Abandoned Asbury Park, NJ" *Weird New Jersey*. 02 Oct 2002. <[http://www.weirdnj.com/\\_abandoned/asburypark.html](http://www.weirdnj.com/_abandoned/asburypark.html)>.
- <sup>26</sup> Goldstein 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Julia Solis, "Dark Passage: Exercises in Forensic Archaeology." *Dark Passage*. 02 Oct 2002. <<http://www.darkpassages.com/postmortems.htm>>.
- <sup>28</sup> "The Boss, E Street Hitting the Road," *The Today Show*, NBC, 30 July 2002, transcript, MSNBC, 2 October 2002. <<http://www.msnbc.com/news/787142.asp#BODY>>.
- <sup>29</sup> See Ingrassia and John Curran, "Greetings from Asbury Park: Waterfront plan, new investment key revival" Associated Press. 21 June 2002.
- <sup>30</sup> Ingrassia.
- <sup>31</sup> Bruce Springsteen, *The Rising*, Sony, 2002.

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<sup>32</sup> Lowenthal 8.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Genocchio, "Making Art Amid the Ruins," *The New York Times*, 22 May 2005, late ed.: 14-1.

<sup>34</sup> Ed Johnson, personal interview, 16 March 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Werner Baumgartener, personal interview, 16 March 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Sturken 1.

<sup>37</sup> Antoinette Martin, "At Last, Asbury Park Starts to Reawaken," *The New York Times on the Web*, 10 October 2004, 28 April 2005  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/newjersey.html>>.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson 101-102.

### **Chapter Three: The Ruins of Utopia and the Aliso Village Housing Project**

Mike Davis opens *City of Quartz*, his seminal study on Los Angeles, with an interesting proposal. To understand the future of this city, Davis suggests we look to the failures of its past. Davis begins: “The best place to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future.”<sup>1</sup> Standing upon what remains of the foundation of the General Assembly Hall of the Socialist city of Llano del Rio, founded in 1914, Davis gazes down upon the Antelope Valley to observe what he calls “the last frontier of the Southern California Dream” (94). From this vantage point, Davis foresees an ill-conceived desert housing boom that he predicts will strain meager infrastructure resources (most notably water) to leave the primarily working-class inhabitants of these new developments facing horrendous commutes to jobs in Los Angeles from isolating new communities. By most accounts, Davis’ prediction has proven true.<sup>2</sup> As recently as 2003, Los Angeles and Ventura County (where the Antelope Valley is located) were embroiled in lawsuits to prevent new development in the region because of scarce water resources as well as traffic and pollution problems. But despite these worries, the desire to find a better life outside of the Los Angeles urban area continues to fuel a housing boom and urban sprawl.

The dream of community utopia and its failure, as suggested by the ruins of the Great Assembly Hall and the hoards of bulldozers and commuters in the Antelope Valley, signifies one of the most troubling issues plaguing Los Angeles: housing. And, as Davis

suggests, one can learn from what is being built—as well as from that which has been abandoned or that which is being torn down.

If the United States is often perceived as a land without ruins, then no city is more emblematic of our nation's infatuation with youth and a denial of decay than Los Angeles, a metropolis that rapidly transforms its own landscape often razing reminders of its successes and failures, its tragedies and shame. The Ambassador Hotel where Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, for many years the city's most famous ruin, was demolished in February 2006 to make room for a school auditorium. The demolition was marked with a wrecking party, memorial service, and much media attention. Crews even spared a portion of the hotel kitchen pantry—now in storage—where Sen. Kennedy was fatally shot.<sup>3</sup> But most of Los Angeles' ruins receive far less attention before they meet their demise.

Like Davis, many thinkers over much of the past 50 years have considered the relationship between Los Angeles and its history—especially in regards to how that past might be remembered or forgotten through its landscape. In fact, as early as 1944, Frankfurt School critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” would highlight the impermanence of Los Angeles' landscape, where “the older houses just outside the concrete city center look like slums, and the new bungalows on the outskirts are at one with the flimsy structures of world fairs in their praise of technical progress and their built-in demand to be discarded after a short while like empty food cans.”<sup>4</sup> Their description presents Los Angeles as a place where progress comes hand-in-hand with impermanence, where not even a home is built

to last but rather demands “to be discarded.” It also reveals the decay inevitable even in a city that worships “the new.” Los Angeles offers a provisional landscape, a place where present and future can be subject to change at any moment. The result is a landscape that in its ruin and wear betrays its own myth of development and progress.

In the 1990s, photographer Camilo José Vergara observed scenes of abandonment and decay that continued to defy the mythology of Los Angeles and—to a large extent—California. Vergara recalls a conversation with a Los Angeles inner-city resident that demonstrates Los Angeles exceptionalism, an effort to distinguish the problems of Los Angeles from those of other urban centers to the point of denial. “We are built-up around here. We don’t have bombed out areas around here,” the manager of a housing agency told Vergara.<sup>5</sup> The housing manager’s “around here” implies an “out there” that probably references cities more typically associated with urban blight such as Newark, Detroit, and Camden. But Vergara documented neighborhoods that betrayed the manager’s claim. “I see many vacant lots along Central Avenue. Roses, laurel, ivy and grass continue to grow alongside abandoned bungalows.”<sup>6</sup>

All of this indicates the uneasiness with which the past has traditionally found its place on the Los Angeles landscape—especially in the form of ruined or abandoned structures. As elsewhere in America, ruins are largely unseen and frequently destroyed. Much of Los Angeles’ engagement with the present points to a sense of “pastlessness,” a sense that the past is without consequence and subject to being revised on the landscape itself. This is not to imply a complete disconnect with the past. In her collection of essays, *Where I Was From*, Joan Didion notices both a strong sense of history among

Californians in general and a peculiar amnesia. Didion's observations have implications for Los Angeles, as well as the state as a whole. She notes that Californians take pride in a historic myth based on pioneer determination and a frontier-inspired desire to tame the landscape. That myth inspires constant renovation and reconstruction in the name of progress. "In California we did not believe that history could bloody the land or even touch it."<sup>7</sup> Didion's remarks can be particularly insightful when considering Los Angeles, where the past that is remembered serves a myth of development.

Writers such as Davis and Didion also underscore the fearful knowledge that the "California Dream" of endless development has never been that easy: the land has always been subject to seismic shifts and plagued by droughts. Along with a projection of paradise comes a constant fear, the knowledge that at any moment the whole thing could unravel with the suddenness of a tectonic shift because of an inner-city uprising or the passing of anti-immigration laws, because of a Red Scare or changes in public housing policy. In the midst of such a tenuous existence and mythmaking, evidence of the failures of the past can be especially condemning. While the ruins of Asbury Park support a mythologized version of the community's past, the ruins of Los Angeles betray the city's myths.

The Socialist City of Llano del Rio disbanded in 1917 after internal feuding, outside creditors, and a lost battle over water rights, forced the socialists to relocate to Louisiana. But utopian ideals continued to shape the landscape of Southern California. In the 1940s, the city government's version of utopia took the form of housing projects first created to combat the ills of slum life. Later these utopias would be refashioned in the

New Urbanist-inspired redevelopment plans that would seek to eliminate the problems of inner-city poverty by eliminating significant numbers of low-income housing units in favor of mixed-income developments.

This chapter considers the story of one short-lived Los Angeles ruin: the Aliso Village housing project. The Aliso Village in East Los Angeles highlights the problems of poor Los Angeles residents in their quest for decent housing. The housing project was built in the 1940s when the city decided to demolish a low-income immigrant “slum” and replace it with public housing. In 2001, the city razed the public housing complex to build New Urbanist-inspired, mixed-income town homes. Critics such as Jack Burnett-Stuart writing in the *Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Public Design* complain: “the stated reason for rebuilding rather than repair is funding...”<sup>8</sup> Burnett-Stuart accuses the city of being enticed by federal HOPE VI dollars that could only be used to demolish and rebuild the project. In doing so, city officials ignored the “enormous social costs” of displacing the Aliso Village community. As such, the story of the Aliso Village underscores some of the larger issues central to understanding Los Angeles: how public policy has both encouraged and impeded the realization of the American dream, how a fantasy of development and opportunity can betray the most vulnerable communities, and how images of urban decay can fuel destructive redevelopment.

While the case of Aliso Village redevelopment offers an opportunity to discuss issues of community building and disruption as well as the ideology of New Urbanism, I am interested in how the images of these ruins are being used and what ideologies these uses suggest in regard to issues of race, class, and redevelopment efforts in Los Angeles.

Images of the abandoned structures justify their very destruction in the narrative created on the Los Angeles Housing Authority web pages, despite the fact that the authority condemned the buildings and forced residents out. In contrast, photographer Anthony Hernandez created a series of ruin images by sneaking into the abandoned buildings when the demolition crews were gone. His work, along with the work of the activist-artists Ultra Red, testifies to the housing project as a site of community and domesticity. As a counterpoint to the ruins of Asbury Park, the Aliso Village housing project highlights the differences between those ruins that are cherished and those that are destroyed. In addition, the ruins of Aliso Village underline the manner in which prejudice against age and decay fuel often racist assumptions about those who inhabit a structure.

### **Building Blocks of the New World**

In previous chapters, I've demonstrated how Romantic poetry provided a mode of seeing ruins that persists despite the considerable differences between urban ruins in the United States and their Romantic predecessors. The relationship between housing for the poor, urban ruins, and utopian ideals has its roots in the early nineteenth century. In *Jerusalem* (1804), William Blake references a ruined London in a continuous state of construction and decay:

“—In fears  
He builded it, in rage & in fury. It is the Spiritual Fourfold  
London, continually building & continually decaying desolate.”  
(J 53: 17-19)



Blake's image of a city "continually building & continually decaying" could describe equally Marshall Berman's vision of New York City under urban planner Robert Moses as well as Los Angeles' own dizzyingly swift desire to recreate its landscapes. But Blake was creating an imaginary world (inspired by London, but imaginary, nonetheless) and pushing forth a call for political change.

For a poet such as Blake, depicting the slums of London allows him to wrest the image of ruin away from pure notions of picturesque and use it to highlight the corruption of his political moment—including the colonial domination of Ireland. Observing the tenements inhabited by the Irish immigrant population, Blake knew firsthand London's decrepitude: "I behold Babylon in the opening streets of London. I behold/ Jerusalem in ruins wandering about from house to house (16-17)." But, in Blake's *Jerusalem*, the act of rebuilding remains an act of redemption, evidence of corruption as well as a promise for the future. As critic Anne Janowitz explains Blake's ruins "function as building blocks of the new world."<sup>9</sup> Ruins have long symbolized a potential for re-creation. Likewise, the ruinous dwellings of Los Angeles' poorest citizens have served as building blocks with which to re-envision urban neighborhoods. Los Angeles's earliest social reformers saw the potential for improving the lives of its citizens through slum clearance and public housing. But even when inspired by the best intentions, these plans radically and irreversibly impact a community. In the worst of cases, these "best" intentions mask redevelopment schemes inspired by profit, not charity.

In this sense, the ruins of public housing provide an often short-lived glimpse into both the promise and failures of social policies in the United States. The fate of these sites illustrates discrepancies between the local and federal government's particular

impressions of impoverished non-white communities and the ways in which the communities see themselves. For those looking in from outside, derelict and ruined housing projects loom as spectacular monuments to poverty, drug addiction, gang violence, and a myriad of other ills associated with inner-city woes. Rising up on streets where outsiders (those who live beyond its socio-economic bounds) will not tread, these projects have been described as the “failure of the American dream” and “city-states of the poor.” But within the community, these ruined structures are symbols of failures linked to racism and corruption. Whether they stand in Detroit, Asbury Park, or the South Bronx, ruins can testify to the ways in which the city or federal government has abandoned America’s underclass. Amidst the rubble and decrepitude of the poorest communities, we find the sites where government officials, architects, urban planners and developers—like Blake—once sowed their utopian vision of the future. But the ideologies of these visions speak volumes about our present.

Los Angeles provides a particularly important case study in public housing policies in part because although public housing followed different design models than it did elsewhere, it has fallen to the same fate as projects throughout the country. Throughout this chapter, I reference a brief history of public housing in the United States as a point of reference with which to compare Los Angeles. While the local policies of the Progressive Era sought to reform tenement housing as early as the late 1890s, it was not until the Great Depression that the federal government became involved in creating public urban housing. Vergara introduces images of ruined housing projects with a quote from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who created the first federally funded public housing

program in 1937 with the cry: “Today marks the beginning of a new era in the economic and social life of America. Today we are launching an attack on the slums of this country, which must go forward until every American family has a decent home.”<sup>10</sup> Public housing programs initiated first under the WPA, then in the late thirties under the Wagner-Steagall Act, sought to provide housing for lower-income working families as well as work for the unemployed through the clearing of urban “slum areas:” frequently ghettos of ethnic or racial minorities. Vergara’s images of largely vacated high-rise structures and their demolition testify to the failure of government to continue to go forward “until every American family has a decent home.”

The earliest housing reformers of the twentieth century believed that the physical conditions of housing in the ghettos and slums (cramped quarters, shared bathrooms, and often substandard construction) made them breeding grounds for the spread of many social ills. Burnett-Stuart reminds us that the reformers insisted the decrepitude of the slum buildings bred moral as well as physical illness: “... the concern of the reformers was not simply that the physical conditions were unhealthy, but that they also contributed directly to the moral corruption of the people who lived there, condemning them to a life of vice and crime.”<sup>11</sup> But this position was not fully supported and may demonstrate class and racial prejudice. Scholars of the history of Los Angeles public housing, such as Burnett-Stuart and Dana Cuff, suggest that slums may have been less of a breeding ground for crime than for a community lifestyle that because of the race, ethnicity, or class of its inhabitants appeared dangerous to those who observed it from the outside. Burnett-Stuart finds that public housing advocates as early as the turn of the century were

afraid “of the largely hidden and unregulated lives of a new class of urban poor, brought into being by the rapid growth and industrialization of the city.” Public housing projects provided one way to establish authority over the ruinous dwellings by simply eliminating them.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Flats neighborhood of Los Angeles, bounded by the Los Angeles River to the west and Boyle Heights to the east, was known as one of the city’s worst slums. Leonard Nadel, a photographer who documented life in the area wrote that Bubonic Plague started in the Flats in 1924 killing 31 people, and “for years rats with Bubonic germs had infested the area.”<sup>12</sup> But Los Angeles “slums” were unlike the tenements found in larger eastern cities. More recently, Cuff observed: “For the most part, Los Angeles’ slums were neither physically dense nor consistently substandard.”<sup>13</sup> The mostly Mexican and Russian immigrant inhabitants of the Flats lived in low-rise detached housing consisting of 1-2 room units with common walkway and shared bathroom facilities in house courts.<sup>14</sup>

The Aliso Village was built in 1941 as part of slum clearance project that resulted in the demolition of some 417 housing units in the Flats, some 392 of which were deemed “substandard,” in a practice that was a combination of ethnic prejudice and real estate clearance. The appraiser for Aliso Village, Charles Shattuck, was the president of the California Real Estate Association and an official of the Home Owners Loan Corporation responsible for redlining neighborhoods. Shattuck and his crew condemned most of the structures in ruinous terms: “hardly fit for human habitation,” “shacklike,”

“building is a wreck.”<sup>15</sup> Cuff notes that recently discovered photographs of such buildings “indicate otherwise.”<sup>16</sup>

Nadel’s photographs have been archived in the Los Angeles Public Library. Naturally, they do not provide conclusive testimony as to whether the structures of the Flats created actual health threats. A photographer can use angle, focus, light and composition to obscure and modify our perceptions. Still, they do provide an interesting glimpse of perceptions of slum-like conditions. A 1952 photograph contains the caption: “View of slum dwellings being demolished in preparation for the building of Aliso Village Extension.”



*Figure 8: Nadel’s “View of Slum Dwellings.” (SPNB Collection/Los Angeles Public Library: 1952). Reproduced with permission of the Los Angeles Public Library.*

The image depicts narrow, dirt paths between the wooden structures. An outhouse appears, as do wires that seem to indicate the structures had electricity. Only one structure can be seen in full. While it is unclear whether the image depicts the front or rear of the house, it is evident that the house suffers from some disrepair. The white

siding is stained with dirt. The porch is cluttered. A trash can fire smolders in the foreground. A modern concrete structure (perhaps a school?) rises up in the background in contrast. But the house seems plumb; the roof undamaged. Nagel chose to include no inhabitants in his image, so the viewer has no way of gauging the impact these living conditions might have on their lives. Cuff offers evidence that these structures may not have been as decrepit as they were originally thought to be.

In other photographs, Nadel uses his captions to document conditions that he feels support slum demolition. For example, consider the following photograph from the Flats, the only photograph by Nagel included in the Los Angeles Public Library archive to depict the interior of a slum building.



*Figure 9: Nadel's "Mrs. Gillen Washes Clothes" (SPNB Collection/Los Angeles Public Library: 1952). Reproduced with permission of the Los Angeles Public Library.*

The photo suggests grueling work, cramped quarters, and a certain amount of disarray. The rug under the woman's feet appears damp with water; the cupboard behind her seems

dirty. Its caption describes a series of conditions that loom beyond the photograph's frame.

Mrs. Gillen washes clothes in a metal tub with a washboard in the three-room slum dwelling they rent for \$50 per month. She and her husband, who is a laborer, her 4 children, and a grandmother share the house with another family. The house has no hot water, no refrigerator and a shared toilet. The family was evicted by the Health Department and relocated to Aliso Village.

The photograph and caption elicit sympathy for Mrs. Gillen and her family. Their living conditions certainly seem worthy of improvement, but their forced removal, implied by the word “eviction” gives me reason to pause. I wonder if their situation might have been greatly improved simply by providing additional low-income housing and renovating the structures that already existed. It seems quite possible that attitudes towards age and ruin especially as they related to housing helped to justify the destruction and building necessary to create the projects.

While disease may have spread more easily in these concentrated communities, the fear that resulted in their demolition also came from misconceptions about the behavior of inhabitants. Cuff observes that residents of the Flats “constructed an internal community of civility and neighborliness.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Cuff explains that urban reformers presented an epidemic model of social ills that would plague the city if left to grow unchecked in the slum. Cuff writes:

Disease, vagrancy, immorality—these would spread like a virus from house to house, and then beyond the borders into the next neighborhood unless contained. Urban blight was the physical correlate of this pathology, where run-down houses were portrayed by housing advocates, lending institutions, and city officials as dragging down their neighbors.

Considering attitudes toward age, rubble and ruin, it is easy to imagine how such structures might look infected, as if age itself were a kind of a disease. Despite the many ways that Romanticism—especially notions of the picturesque—has informed contemporary ways of looking at ruin, one main difference persists: a ruined dwelling still being inhabited is rarely considered beautiful. From Wordsworth’s “Ruined Cottage” to Blake’s *Jerusalem*, ruined houses tend to inspire pity for their inhabitants as well as a critique of social conditions. By the twentieth-century, this view of decrepit housing will support both the creation of public housing projects as well as their destruction.

Armed with the evidence of “shabby constructions” and “decrepit conditions,” the social engineers of public housing projects sought to reconstruct the community in a nearly colonizing practice that would not only determine where people lived but how: in single-family units with much shared public space. Cuff describes the Aliso Village as “utopian in the comprehensiveness of its sociopolitical goals,” which included aiding in social mobility, enabling assimilation, aiding the defense industry workers during WWII and creating a shared sense of community.<sup>18</sup> Some of these goals were achieved through the construction of the buildings themselves. Unlike the monumental projects in New York City, the Aliso Village complex, designed by Lloyd Wright (son of Frank Lloyd Wright) consisted of modernist two- and three-story C-, U- and H-shaped buildings, grouped around 22 courtyards entered through breeze-ways. Shared public space included splash pools, pedestrian walks, clotheslines, and playgrounds. Aliso Village also featured a community center, playground, tennis court, and child-care facilities. The entire development encircled the Utah Elementary School.



On the day of the Aliso Village's opening, October 23, 1942, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a special supplement to congratulate the City Housing Authority on its public war housing effort.<sup>19</sup> An article in *California Arts and Architecture* published only two years after the Aliso Village was constructed raised the question: "When slum dwellers move into a modern housing development, what happens to them? Do they continue their old habits and former way of life or do they respond to their new environment and blossom out with new personalities?"<sup>20</sup> The authors cited a survey of improved resident behaviors as positive proof that the projects reformed the residents.

Despite the racism lurking behind in the slum clearance programs that lead to Aliso Village's creation, the project was one of the first to be racially integrated. After documenting the slum, Nadel turned his camera to life in the projects in an unpublished book featuring four resident families: one white, one black, one Hispanic and one Asian. His photographs as well as other documentary photographs from Aliso Village archived through the Los Angeles Public Library depict Cinco de Mayo festivities and Halloween Parties, PTA meetings and Ladies Luncheons, Spaghetti-eating contests and talent shows. The placement of the photographs in the Los Angeles County Library suggests that Los Angeles may not wish simply to abandon its past; it also lends credence to the idea that any such respect for the past extends only as long as it does not interfere with plans for the present landscape.

## **Utopia in Ruins**

A brief overview of post-war public housing history will clarify the case of the Aliso Village's fate during the last half of the twentieth century. From the start, most public housing was designed to provide temporary assistance to working families. By the 1950s and 1960s, the modern highway system and lower mortgage rates helped more of the working class achieve the goal of buying a single family home in the suburbs. As a result, the neediest residents became concentrated in public housing. In cities such as New York, where public housing was often particularly dense in some neighborhoods, certain areas of the city bore more of the burden of helping to support this underclass. Robert Moses, New York City's construction coordinator from 1946-1960, built fifty percent of all public housing in the most economically disadvantaged and crime-ridden neighborhoods. He also favored a monumental-scale: Moses' housing projects frequently rose more than seven stories tall and contained more than 1,000 units.

By the late 1960s, federal housing programs were being blamed for the demise of working-class neighborhoods, despite the fact that evidence suggested the projects had still done much to improve the lives of the urban poor.<sup>21</sup> In the decades that followed, inadequate funds, mismanagement, vandalism, and the loss of support institutions (daycare centers, employment centers, adult education centers) all contributed to a sense of growing isolation and besiegement in housing projects. By the late 1980s, many of these projects were decrepit, semi-inhabited buildings, difficult to secure and maintain—ghostly ruins of their promise, haunted by their potential as well as by those whom they had failed to serve.

Public housing projects came to exemplify the worst of our urban problems: entrenched poverty, crime, destabilized families. Security within the buildings was a major concern especially in the skyscraper constructions that were popular in the Northeast. Vergara observed: “The tall, isolated, often unlocked, and over-crowded buildings of public housing complexes offer drug dealers a secure and accessible base of operations and a place to recruit employees and customers.”<sup>22</sup> Vergara notes that the very layout of the high-rise structures also encouraged thefts and muggings as unlit elevators and darkened hallways left residents vulnerable. By the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, images of high-rise public housing projects in Chicago, Detroit, Newark, Camden, and the South Bronx screamed from front pages and loomed on television screens. News reports described the projects as hot-beds of gang activity and crack addiction. Despite the lack of law or authority, some critics called them “city states of the poor,” describing them in terms that evoke a division from the rest of society.<sup>23</sup> City governments increasingly struggled with how to maintain them as federal funding continued to suffer dramatic cuts. Some city governments actually refused to repair these structures, allowing them to fall to ruin. Finally, demolition became a spectacularly symbolic way to demonstrate a city’s efforts towards eliminating blight. Recounting the “implosion ceremony” for the Columbus Homes, Vergara observes that Newark Mayor Sharpe James proclaimed: “This is the end of an American dream that failed.”<sup>24</sup> The Mayor’s remarks are noteworthy for several reasons. Through the use of the word “American,” Mayor James nationalizes the failure of the Columbus Homes. By doing so he may be acknowledging that federal government policies contributed to such a failure. A more

accurate remark would have been: this is the end of the government's providing significant assistance for the working poor in their quest to find safe and affordable housing.

Critics of such demolitions complain that the cards were stacked against the success of the projects in the form of mismanagement, corruption, and—eventually—by federal policies such as the HOPE VI program that funded the demolition of housing projects in order to make room for privately managed, mixed-income townhouse developments. In fact, HOPE VI may have done more than any other government policy to encourage the creation of urban ruins because the program made it easier for city governments to get money to destroy these projects than to repair them. While ruins are generally despised on the American landscape, allowing a building to fall to ruin in order to profit from federal aid has become commonplace. The program, which stands for Homeownership Opportunities for Everyone, began under the administration of President George Bush Sr. as a way to eliminate the high-density poverty of housing projects. Under HOPE VI, old “monumental” projects like Newark’s Scudder homes and Columbus Court were demolished to make way for mixed income, townhouse developments that benefited from both private and public investment. When HOPE VI funds were used to demolish Cabrini Green, former residents cheered. The program was expanded under the Clinton administration, until it was killed by President George W. Bush’s administration during the summer of 2004. With bipartisan support, congress voted to continue funding for the program albeit in a limited fashion until 2011. The Bush administration has focused its efforts on the Section 8 program that provides vouchers to

assist with housing payments. The program does little to help insure that urban real estate markets will serve poor or working-class residents. Critics of HOPE VI claim that it reduces the number of low-income dwellings available, a fact that became especially significant during the urban housing boom of the 1990s. For example, in the 1980s, Detroit demolished sixty thousand dwellings, ten times more than the number of newly constructed apartments.<sup>25</sup>

Decrepit buildings, the ruins of modernist social experiment, have become so identified with social ills that despite the initial investment or potential for their continued use, they are most frequently destroyed. Vergara describes the 1987 “implosion ceremony” in Newark for the Edward W. Scudder Homes with critical irony: “Near the podium, built especially for the occasion, were a large number of officials whose job it was to provide decent housing for poor people, blowing up an unpopular but solid building with two hundred apartments.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps more so than any other ruined structure, half-empty, unkept housing projects evidence government failure: tax-payer dollars gone to waste as well as a broken promise to care for the underclass. A decrepit housing project symbolizes a failure, whereas a vacant lot in the inner city can be seen as an opportunity.

### **The End of Aliso**

The Aliso Village housing project suffered from many of the same ills that plagued housing projects throughout the country during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. But

some of its problems are particular to the politics of Los Angeles, while others result from the inability of federal government policies to be sensitive to the differences between the Aliso Village projects and those large, “monumental buildings” that had been constructed in the east.

As scholar Don Parson points out in his study *Making a Better World. Public Housing, the Red Scare and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*, the initially utopian impulses of public housing to build better citizens and better communities came under considerable criticism during the McCarthyism of the 1950s. Despite public and government support of public housing programs in Los Angeles at the start of 1950, by the end of the year the pro-public housing City Council had an anti-public housing majority. The last pro-public housing supporter to switch his allegiance, Harold Harby, worried that public housing programs had become “the creeping cancer of socialism [which] will bring us to stateism...and social decay.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, public housing moved from being the solution to the ills of social decrepitude in its ability to alleviate “slum” conditions, regardless of what social upheaval their construction created, to become an avatar of another “social disease”—this time communism itself.

Between 1939 and 1955, all public housing facilities built in Los Angeles were “socially planned projects” like the Aliso Village, constructed in the “community modernism style” that emphasized shared public spaces and community support services<sup>28</sup> After 1955, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) built no new traditional housing projects, focusing their efforts on voucher programs and leased housing programs, a policy turn that solidified Los Angeles’ future as a city

“circumscribed by a vision of corporate modernism” in which inner-city redevelopment is conceptualized “for commercial purposes on a monumental scale.”<sup>29</sup> While Parson’s analysis reflects trends hardly limited to Los Angeles, it does explain the demise of traditional projects in Los Angeles such as Aliso Village.

With no additional public housing projects being built after the mid 1950s, growing concentrations of the most impoverished residents continued to be housed in the Aliso Village as well as the nearby Pico Garden and Aliso Extension projects. Like housing projects around the country, the Aliso Village inhabitants found their quality of life decline from the 1960s through the 1990s because of slashed federal budgets, dwindling support services, and rising maintenance costs. The lack of funding and lack of commitment to the public housing program evidenced by the Los Angeles government as early as 1950 insured the failure of a large-scale undertaking. Without the money or the will to provide broad social support to inhabitants in the projects, the quality of life within them continued to decline in subsequent decades and crime—especially gang related crime—became widely publicized. By the late 1990s, Gloria Ohland, a writer for *LA Weekly*, named the Pico-Aliso projects (as the combined projects were called) “the largest and most dangerous public-housing project west of the Mississippi.”<sup>30</sup>

The nearby Pico Garden housing project was demolished in 1997. In June 1998, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority declared the Aliso Village buildings “structurally unsafe,” requiring 23 units to be vacated. This allowed the city to qualify for HOPE VI federal grants and to formalize plans to construct the Puerto del Sol development of privately managed, mixed-income townhouses. But this would come at a

significant loss in terms of the numbers of units available for low-income residents. According to the HACLA website, the original Aliso Village contained 685 units, all of which were demolished and replaced with 269 units of public housing, including 134 affordable rental units, 66 for-sale homeownership units and 27 for lease/purchase. While no one can deny the problems of the projects, I question whether their wholesale demolition was the most effective way to deal with these problems. Evidence suggests that despite these problems, the projects still foster community. Residents and critics alike questioned the city's decision. In the *Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Design*, Burnett-Stuart wrote of the Aliso Village:

To the outsider, the buildings appear shabby, but not particularly foreboding. On the weekend, the space around the buildings is full of life, typical of many poorer neighborhoods in the city: gardening, car repair, bathing in paddling pools. But not so many outsiders probably venture to take a look: the impression given by the media is of a gang-dominated war zone. Whatever the true nature of the gang problem, one senses that there is much more to the culture of Aliso Village than the gangs alone.

Burnett-Stuart suggests that media images of the projects create an impression of lawlessness and dereliction. In contrast, the activities he observed such as “gardening” and “car repair” suggest residents take pride in their homes and exert effort to improve their material conditions. His observation of residents “bathing in paddling pools” evidences that the buildings continue to be sites of pleasure not simply places of fear, regardless of their disrepair. Burnett-Stuart's comments humanize the conditions of a neighborhood most frequently described through crime statistics and the dilapidated conditions of its buildings. Burnett-Stuart's description of the building attempts to counter a process by which the beginning of ruin, the shabby conditions resulting from



the federal and local governments' inability to maintain these spaces, conspires to indict the inhabitants of these structures.

To critics such as Burnett-Stuart and Cuff, the city's decision to evacuate and raze the projects smacked of the same prejudice and profiteering that motivated the original "slum clearance" program. And yet, while the upheaval created by the "slum clearance program" resulted in the creation of low-income housing and—at least for a while—a series of social supports to help improve the lot of residents, plans to raze the Aliso Village under a HOPE VI grant lead to a net loss in the number of low-income dwellings.

Some 250 families from Aliso Village rallied to form the Unión de Vecinos to fight the demolition plans. In August 1998, they produced a structural engineering report that contradicted the city's claims that "deterioration" as well as "structural damage" required the complex's evacuation.<sup>31</sup> A report by the Long Beach-based Parlee Engineering found that "all the buildings require some form of minor repair, but none of the buildings need(s) to be demolished because of flaws in the structural integrity." Representatives from Unión de Vecinos charged that the demolition was an excuse to reduce housing for the poor. Those low-income residents of Aliso Village faced limited opportunities when their home became slated for demolition. Despite the report's findings, HACLA continued with plans to raze the Aliso Village. Residents of the complex were given three options: they could be housed temporarily in a neighboring project and be ensured of a unit in the new Puerto del Sol development; they could use Section 8 vouchers to find temporary housing and apply for a new unit in Puerto del Sol with no guarantees, or they could accept Section 8 vouchers and \$5,200 in relocation

assistance to forfeit their eligibility for residency in the new development. But the numbers of units demolished and those created suggest that less than half of the original Aliso Village residents could find housing in Puerto del Sol.

In March 2000, residents of Aliso Village gathered for a last celebration of their community before demolition. Adults circulated photographs reminiscing about life in the place that had been home to three generations of some families. Children spray-painted messages on their condemned homes. At first, the spray-painting gesture may seem like an extension of the act of graffiti artists: the desire to claim a space or tag it. But the former Aliso residents knew that their homes could not be claimed, that demolition signified the manner by which these homes were never really theirs. Instead, with aerosol cans, these former inhabitants were creating a memorial, a place where—even briefly—their community would be remembered.

In 2001, after months of legal delays the Aliso Village was torn down. *LA Weekly* reporter Gloria Ohland records Father Mike Kennedy, from the Dolores Mission parish that serves the projects, carried a replica of the Virgin of Guadalupe to bless the demolition fiesta. The gesture evidences the extent to which demolitions have been so normalized that they can be seen as worthy of a benediction. Those who bless or applaud these demolitions may be celebrating change in their communities, in neighborhoods that suffer from the problems of poverty and crime. Unfortunately, demolition can be the equivalent of sweeping such problems under the rug, in an act inspired by the belief that neighborhood will be improved by forcing most of its poor residents into other areas.

Today, on the site where the Aliso Village once stood one can find two- and three-story stucco townhouses fronted by porches and balconies. A new community building and pool have been constructed, and a new light-rail line and station are planned. To the north, “For Sale” signs have sprung up on well-kept lawns. But resident organizers estimate that only 250 to 300 of the 1,200 families that used to live in the Pico-Aliso complex have returned.<sup>32</sup> Those who took their chances with Section 8 vouchers found out that President Bush would be eliminating 850,000 vouchers by the year 2009. Most probably found housing in neighborhoods plagued by the same kinds of problems that once dogged Aliso Village or in areas far outside of the city where they would struggle to find public transit, social services or jobs—not to mention a community.

Proponents of HOPE VI, as well as the New Urbanist constructions that it encouraged claimed that the program helped to mix the poor and working class, reducing the density of poverty and crime. But critics, like Cuff, question the cost in terms of the social disruption to the community and wonder about the effectiveness of such policies:

Again social problems with economic roots are being redressed by utopian physical solutions. If gangs like AVK (for Aliso Village Killers) no longer have a home, then the problem will go away, or so this naïve logic goes. Like overcrowding in the thirties, gangs are to be defeated by new buildings, only this time the buildings look backward to a nostalgic America.<sup>33</sup>

Cuff’s comparison between the slum reformers of the 1930s and the housing project destroyers of the new millennium points to important commonalities: both groups sought to reform complex social and economic problems by wrecking and recreating what had been deemed “ruined” spaces. For these reformers, the end of slum living would mark the end of disease and crime, just as the end of public housing projects could bring about the

end of drug addiction and gang violence. But the difference between the “community modernism” approach promoted by public housing advocates and the New Urbanism solution is also significant. As Cuff notes the New Urban construction style signifies “the government’s adoption of nostalgic architectural imagery” and will bring ‘a thematic suburbia into the urban core.’” The “thematic suburbia” referenced by these constructions was notoriously segregated: America before the aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement or the Great Society. It is the vernacular of the past that JB Jackson warns about, symbolized by artifacts and architectural styles instead of a sense of commitment to the struggles and sacrifices of history.

The streamlined modernist designs of many California public housing projects built between 1940-1960 have now become synonymous with their failures. Their model of community ripe with shared public spaces has also become a thing of the past. The architects of the new Puerto del Sol community explain that the decentralized townhouse-style apartments with doors and windows opening to front- and back-yards allow residents to monitor and take control of private space. While the private-sector management company’s “zero-tolerance” policy has reduced crime, it has also encouraged neighbors to spy on neighbors and allowed new residents to look on former residents of Aliso Village with considerable suspicion.<sup>34</sup>

### **Remembering the Ruins of Aliso**

In places such as Newark or Chicago, the ruins of modernist, high-rise public housing projects stand as more than symbols. Until recently, most served as dwellings.

As a result they contain artifacts of former inhabitants; they bear witness to individual lives as many other ruined structures do not. In his books, Vergara intersperses history and analysis with interviews of residents, anecdotes from his visits, descriptions of the environment, and lists of objects he has found in abandoned buildings. His writings and photographs provide an intimate glimpse of the projects that stand in stark contrast to their monumental size and nearly monolithic architecture, a kind of urban anthropology that reminds us these ruins do not belong to a long dead civilization, but to our fellow citizens. For example, upon his last visit to the Christopher Columbus Homes in Newark, NJ, shortly before their demolition, Vergara discovered copies of “*Waiting for Godot*, a book of poems by Sylvia Plath, *Gorky Park*, *The Invisible Man*” as well as textbooks. On a bedroom wall near a window with a view to the demolished buildings, Vergara found a penciled drawing of a small house within which someone had written the following poem:

I am Sitting Here All Alone  
Waiting, Waiting  
To Find a Home  
At night I lie in bed and dream  
And sometimes I wake up and start to scream  
What is this fear I feel inside,  
Is it of being alone  
Or is it my mind?  
I am Sitting Here All Alone,  
Still Waiting to Find A Home<sup>35</sup>

For Vergara, the poem testifies to former residents’ desire “for respect, for love, for a modicum of order and society.”<sup>36</sup> I agree with Vergara’s analysis of the sentiment behind the text, but the fact that the writer chose to inscribe it on the wall of house awaiting

demolition begs to be considered as well. Like those children of the Aliso Village who spray-painted their names on their former apartments, this poet enacts a memorializing gesture. The inscription of the poem becomes an act by which to lay claim to a site of memory. The placement of the poem next to a window that overlooks a demolition site demonstrates the fragility of the relationship between public housing residents and the idea of “home.” The poem and the other artifacts that Vergara found in abandoned projects serve an important function. They testify to lives inside these buildings. They offer a counter narrative to official histories of housing projects, many of which blame residents for a project’s failure, and justify policies of displacement and community disruption. In doing so, they contest the ideas of disease or corruption read through the project’s ruined surfaces. They serve as temporary memorials to increasingly rare examples of public housing projects

Driving along what is now called Gabriel García Márquez Street in the Boyle Heights neighborhood once known as “The Flats,” one finds no visible reminders, no memorial for the Aliso Village housing project. As recently as 2004, new homes selling for \$300,000 to \$400,000 were still rising along streets where the Aliso Village projects and courtyards once stood. To find the ruins of the Aliso Village community, one would have to look to LA-based artists such as the photographer Anthony Hernandez and the avant-garde sound art group Ultra-Red. These artists document both the ruins and the Aliso Village community as part of larger investigations into the workings of urban development and housing policy in Los Angeles.

Like Vergara, Hernandez has made a career photographing urban ruins. One of his most recent projects includes a stark group of photographs of the Aliso Village as the buildings stood between their evacuation and their eventual demolition. One image depicts an absolutely bare, lime-green wall that appears luminous. This is not the image of decay and abandonment that one might expect even from a contemporary photographer of urban ruins. The image glows with a kind of tranquil beauty and evidences the care that one particular resident took in decorating his/her home at Aliso Village. Another depicts the box of a closet painted a warm pink; again it is an almost minimalist study in color and light as the viewer records the intensity of hues on the closet's three walls. In fact, were it not for three hooks also painted a vibrant pink that protrude from the back of the closet, the viewer could easily mistake the image for a Donald Judd-like study of color and perception. But ultimately those "near mistakes" are part of Hernandez's project: to get his viewers to bring the same kind of sensibilities that they would use when looking at a canonized example of abstract minimalist art (like one of Judd's boxes) to bear upon spaces, such as a housing project, that are viewed with a different set of expectations and sensibilities. Thus, through Hernandez's viewfinder, a wall of graffiti scrawled, crossed out, rewritten in black and red marker or scratched into gray concrete becomes an almost Pollock-like canvas of swirling abstraction. Ironically, this graffiti from a ruined housing project now hangs on the walls of an art gallery.

No people appear in the photographs, nor does Hernandez permit us a glimpse of the world outside of the housing project. Despite Hernandez's use of abstract aesthetics to de-contextualize these pieces, the hooks in the back of the closet, the heart enclosing the

words “Norma y Polo,” the light switch painted green to match the wall remind us that Hernandez is photographing domestic spaces. Judd forged steel boxes out in the abandoned army barracks of Marfa, Hernandez works off of a found minimalism. In doing so, Hernandez asks us to suspend assumptions about aesthetics and beauty, as well as about where art is made. In another photograph from Aliso Village, a small plastic skeleton hangs taped from the middle of a ceiling. Paint peels away from a crack; dirt or mold darkens the room’s furthest corner. Both building and toy represent skeletal remains; both remind us of those who once lived there. Hernandez wrests the image of the projects and its ruins from the image of violence promoted by the media. If there’s a violence implicit in Hernandez’s photographs, it is the violence of absence, the forced removal of families from their homes.

Hernandez has been photographing urban landscapes since the 1970s, but he began focusing on contemporary urban ruins during a residency at the American Academy in Rome. Hernandez’s photographs in the series *Pictures for Rome* feature none of the iconographic ruins of the Italian capital. Instead, Hernandez photographed aborted commercial structures, a never-finished hospital, a vacant housing complex. The subtle question lingering behind these photographs seemed to be: “What kinds of ruins do we treasure? What kind do we destroy?” In the United States, it seems we are mostly likely to destroy any ruin in the name of development. But it is certainly easier to destroy ruins that we associate with shame (the failures of public policy), than it is to destroy ruins associated with a past so distant (the past of a childhood, the past of our vaguely described innocence as a nation or community.) Hernandez asks the viewer to question a



notion of ruins that suggests structures such as the Coliseum might serve as benign reminders of time's passing or of a failed, distant civilization. Instead Hernandez encourages viewers to focus on the destructive tendencies of late capitalism.

After Rome, Hernandez continued his exploration of abandoned urban spaces in Oakland, California, before refocusing his gaze on his hometown of Los Angeles and the Aliso Village, where he was born and raised. Hernandez created the work by sneaking into the buildings when the demolition crews were gone. Despite an obvious connection to the place, one does not sense sentimentality in the photographs he made; a social critique works through these pieces. His choice to focus on the structures instead of the inhabitants short-circuits the viewer's ability to see Aliso Village inhabitants as "others." The documentary photographers of the "Flats," such as Leonard Nadel, fueled reformers who called for the slum clearance programs and building of Aliso Village. In the 1980s and 1990s, media images of gang- and drug-related violence helped to spark plans to raze the projects. Hernandez does not ask us to sympathize or critique the lives within the walls of Aliso Village, but his images—like Vergara's list of books found in the abandoned Columbus House—remind us that the residents who carefully paint their walls and closets might not be all that different from anyone who cares about their own home. The project of Hernandez and Vergara are different than those of Blake or Nagel. For these contemporary photographers, ruins are not the building blocks upon which to construct a new world, they are places to contemplate the results of a push to destroy, reconstruct, and renovate.

The photographs of the Aliso Village were shown as part of a series entitled *Pictures for Los Angeles*. The series also featured photographs of the abandoned Belmont High School, where construction was halted mid-project when it was discovered that the site rested on a hillside of methane gas. Finally, Hernandez included photographs from the construction of the Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, designed by Frank Gehry. Together the images form an interesting triptych on urban renewal: the utopian housing project awaiting demolition, a failed construction of what was to be the largest high school in the country, and the construction of a center for high-art pursuits underwritten by one of the wealthiest and most powerful corporations in the country. These juxtapositions suggest to me a further critique on the workings of urban renewal in Los Angeles. Without knowing the social context of the sites, the warm colors and handwritten scrawls from Hernandez's images of the Aliso Village suggest a sense of domesticity bereft from the other images in the series. They offer the most inviting spaces Hernandez has depicted. In contrast, the steel beams separating what would have been classroom walls at Belmont are photographed to look like the walls of a prison. How can we trust a government who would tear down such warm interiors to construct a jail-like school? Finally, the photographs of the construction of the Disney Concert Hall suggest investment and effort. One image depicts a workman's sledgehammer balancing upright on a worktable against a backdrop of scaffolding, drywall, and a wheelbarrow. The photograph reflects the power of public works projects. It offers a symbol for labor that evokes communist imagery, an ironic allusion when we consider that the construction is the product of corporate investment.

Through these sites we can trace changes in community investment in Los Angeles, from the housing project built in the 1940s with nearly utopian goals to the corporate sponsored music hall built in 1999. Tellingly, the only site that currently serves the community—the Disney Concert Hall—provides benefits primarily to the city’s elite. In addition, Hernandez provides us with images to challenge our visual expectations, a half-constructed school appears like a prison, graffiti takes on the elegance of abstract expressionism, a ruined housing project offers spaces of light and warmth. In doing so, Hernandez has created one of the few remaining archives of life at the turn of this new millennium in the Aliso Village Project, an archive that humanizes and—when taken together with the other works in the series—contextualizes these ruins.

Another art project that archives of Aliso Village life comes from the electronica/sound art collaborative, Ultra-Red. The sound piece *Structural Adjustments* uses layers of sound-samples from residents who rallied unsuccessfully to prevent the project’s demolition, as well as ambient sounds recorded at the project. Using testimony from residents taped at protests, city council meetings, and marches, the sound piece takes aim at housing politics in Los Angeles.

The compilation opens with a nine-minute track entitled “El Nuevo Urbanismo” (New Urbanism) that features jackhammers grinding away at their own rhythm interspersed with the sound of nail guns and powersaws. It signals that unlike electronic soundscapes that celebrate public architecture, Ultra-Red takes a critical stance towards the destructive impulses of contemporary urban planning. Only after a jarring two minutes of drilling does the track give way to sound-music compositions: birdcalls then

drums then static spun into a melody woven from whispered voices. The track symbolizes the process by which the clamor for new development drowns out the sounds of nature, music, and the voices of community—and while it is not an “easy listen”—it certainly testifies to the force of urban development.

Another track, “Canción de la Posada” (“Song of the Posada”) references the traditional Christmas reenactment of Joseph and Mary’s search for an inn and features looped chants of a Spanish-language chorus: “I don’t want gold or silver, the only thing I want is a home.” The track “Structurally Sound” begins with testimony from a city council meeting. “My name is Maria Torres,” a woman explains in Spanish to the members of the city council, “and I am from Aliso Village.” An interpreter translates. Her testimony continues: “There are 685 units of housing. Of the 40 that are damaged, all are structurally sound.” Her testimony, scrambled and repeated, forms a chorus throughout the track.

But the moment that most stunningly creates a record of ruin comes from the track entitled “Yo Vivo Aqui.” Amid the din of beats and what sounds like a shopping cart rolling over the sidewalk, a child’s voice is heard.

The child poses the question: “What do you mean you are listening to the area?”

A man, presumably one of the members of Ultra-Red, answers: “Did you know they are thinking of tearing down this building?”

“I live here,” the child answers.

“I am recording what the area sounds like. Because, you know, across the street and down the way where all the buildings are gone, it sounds a lot different than what it sounds like here.

“It sounds happier here.”

“It does. There’s music.”

Like Hernandez in his ability to see evidence of community in the abandoned buildings, the members of Ultra-Red hear the music in the projects—and contrast it with the silence of the ruined buildings and the din of demolition. For Ultra-Red, a ruin in East L.A. becomes an absence of family, music, and community. On “Yo Vivo Aqui” (I live here) and other tracks, they record the strange chimes of a neighborhood ice-cream truck, church bells, conversations. These melodies function like Vergara’s inventory of books or Hernandez’s warmly pink closet. But the chimes become quickly distorted and remixed over jump-up beats; a child’s voice trails off to the sound of jackhammers.

Another way to humanize the face of the projects and respond to images of pure decrepitude, Ultra-Red literally gives voice to the residents. Combined with the work of Hernandez, these recordings reveal the projects as spaces of community not as the “obsolete World War II public housing development” described on the Los Angeles Housing Authority’s web site or as home “to a gang shooting every week” described in the media. Because of the work of Ultra-Red, the voices and songs of the Aliso Village residents remain long after the projects have been demolished. With their focus on the sound of the community, Ultra-Red does not glorify these ruins, because a ruin registers as silence

## **Ruins and the Provisional City**

Architecture and urban planning critic Dana Cuff sees the story of the Aliso Projects as exemplary of those “convulsive urban upheavals” that plague the history of Los Angeles public housing and are largely characteristic of a “perpetual state of emergency in the attitude toward housing.”<sup>37</sup> This “state of emergency” makes the most far-reaching utopian plans temporary, part of what can at best be called “a provisional city.” Cuff’s “perpetual state of emergency” echoes Walter Benjamin’s “one single catastrophe” and Michael Taussig’s “chronic state of emergency.” All describe states symptomatic of late capitalism’s insidious traumas (racism, economic discrimination) made evident in ruins on the American landscape and erased in their destruction.

Slum clearance policies in Los Angeles destroyed the social structure of low-income minority communities, like The Flats, in order to create the utopian public housing projects. In doing so, many of these projects also improved the lives of their residents, relieving the burden of high housing costs and, for a short time, providing support services as well as community. But when political tides turned against projects, the funding and political will to support public housing waned. Their subsequent neglect led many of these projects—including the Aliso Village—to fall to ruin before being slated for demolition. And another community was destroyed to make way for the creation of yet another “utopian” environment—the New Urbanist town house communities that do far less than either of their previous incarnations to provide housing for society’s most impoverished citizens.

Public housing reformers should value the actual community networks established in the places they seek to improve. While the structures of the Aliso projects needed to be repaired, I wonder how renovations might have bettered the neighborhood—even permitted the influx of working class and middle class residents—without destroying the social networks established by those already living there. I wonder what would have happened if increased social services and police presence would have accompanied such renovation. I wonder what kind of eyes it would take to see such possibilities instead of condemning the site to ruin and redevelopment.

“Why should we bother to pause and think about these buildings and what they represent?” Vergara asks his readers in the middle of his own exploration of abandoned housing projects. “Why pick among the fragments to create an archeology of doomed buildings?” His answer could have been uttered by Blake as he walked passed the Irish tenements imagining in Jerusalem a story of redemption. “[B]ecause it is here inside abandoned buildings surrounded by ruins,” Vergara explains, “that we feel most intently the need to create a better world.” Vergara suggests that “here inside” these buildings offers something more valuable than what might be garnered from a view of the outside. From an exterior vantage point, urban ruins can inspire a kind of neo-Romantic nostalgia (in the case of Asbury Park). But even from a Romantic perspective, the housing ruins have always inspired pity or disgust and been seen as a place for profit or reform. For the brief time that they remained, the ruins of the Aliso Village reminded us of the cataclysmic nature of these utopian desires: what promises they fulfilled and where we failed. Inside these spaces—especially the ruins of public housing projects—we must

come face to face with their inhabitants. Before the warm colors of an Aliso Village closet or in front of the words written on a wall, the ruin becomes dwelling. Before such evidence we might consider the negative effects of development and displacement; we might consider the possibility for repair.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: excavating the future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990) 3. All further citations are from this edition and will be noted in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Filmmaker Jenny Cool supports Davis' prediction in her chilling documentary "*Home Economics: A Documentary of Suburbia*" (1994) that bears witness to the traumatic isolation and economic hardship experienced in these working-class suburban developments. Cool turns her camera on the subdivisions of the Antelope Valley in a stunningly intimate treatment of three inhabitants of these developments. As they share their stories of becoming home owners, they narrate the hardship of living in communities divided by racism, facing long commutes, and becoming increasingly vulnerable to traffic and pollution as plans unfold to begin a major mining operation just outside of Santa Clarita.

<sup>3</sup> The move seems oddly contradictory. By preserving the pantry, city officials acknowledge its value and thus the relationship between place and memory. And yet by removing the pantry from its environment, they violate that connection. I wonder what kind of memory will be inspired when visitors enter the pantry without the context of hotel and the landscape that surrounds it. Less monument or memorial, the pantry has become a relic.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* translated by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 188.

<sup>6</sup> Vergara 188.

<sup>7</sup> Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) 71.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Burnett-Stuart, "The New Aliso Village And The Ideology Of The Fresh Start," *Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Design* (Issue 0, 1999). November 2004 <[www.laforum.org/forum\\_issue0/](http://www.laforum.org/forum_issue0/)>.



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<sup>9</sup> Anne Janowitz, *England's ruins: poetic purpose and the national landscape* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990) 153.

<sup>10</sup> Vergara, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Burnett-Stuart.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) 143.

<sup>13</sup> Cuff 49.

<sup>14</sup> Dana Cuff, "The Figure of the Neighbor: Los Angeles Past and Future," *American Quarterly* Vol 56. No 3 (September 2004) 564.

<sup>15</sup> Cuff, *The Provisional City* 141.

<sup>16</sup> Cuff, *The Provisional City* 54.

<sup>17</sup> Cuff, "The Figure..." 564.

<sup>18</sup> Cuff, "The Figure..." 564.

<sup>19</sup> Don Parsons *Making a Better World. Public Housing, the Red Scare and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 10.

<sup>20</sup> Liz Falletta, "Same Difference : Baldwin Hills And Aliso Villages," *LA Forum for Architecture and Urban Design* 3 (2001) May 29, 2006.  
<[http://www.laforum.org/forum\\_issue\\_3\\_rethinking\\_housing/same\\_difference\\_baldwin\\_hills\\_and\\_aliso\\_villages\\_by\\_liz\\_falletta](http://www.laforum.org/forum_issue_3_rethinking_housing/same_difference_baldwin_hills_and_aliso_villages_by_liz_falletta)>.

<sup>21</sup> Vergara 42. As late as 1966, sociologist Lee Rainwater, continued to assert that public housing was a successful component of the war on poverty: "No matter what criticisms are made of public housing projects, there is no doubt that the structures themselves are infinitely preferable to slum housing."

<sup>22</sup> Vergara 45.

<sup>23</sup> Gloria Ohland, "Renaissance in the Barrio," *LA Weekly* 18 November 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Vergara 65.

<sup>25</sup> Vergara 40.

<sup>26</sup> Vergara 60.

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<sup>27</sup> Parsons 123.

<sup>28</sup> Parsons 2, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ohland.

<sup>31</sup> Paul O'Donoghue, "Aliso Village," City News Service, 6 August 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Ohland.

<sup>33</sup> Cuff, *The Provisional City* 168.

<sup>34</sup> Ohland

<sup>35</sup> Vergara 64.

<sup>36</sup> Vergara 65.

<sup>37</sup> Cuff, *Provisional City* 143.

## Chapter Four: Blitzkrieg Bop and the Ruins of New York

Where are the ruins of the World Trade Center? Ground Zero has been swept clean at an astounding pace. All that remains are a fenced construction site, a concrete basin, and a significant absence. In May 2006, the Trust for Historic Preservation, a private non-profit group, listed the “Survivors’ Stairs,” the last above-ground vestige of the World Trade Center on site, as “one of the nation's most endangered historic places” demonstrating the vulnerable nature of the tower’s remnants.



*Figure 10: Survivors’ Staircase by Robert Kornfeld Jr. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Trust for Historic Preservation).*

For much of the past five years since the attacks, the stairs leading from the plaza to ground level on Vesey Street, the “bathtub” or the slurry wall that held back groundwater from the Hudson River, and a cross formed from the intersection of two steel I-beams discovered among the buildings’ rubble have constituted the only ruins from the Twin

Towers left on the site of their destruction. The most spectacular of the buildings' remains—the Gothic arches of the twisted aluminum façade—lie in a hangar at John F. Kennedy Airport, while much of the site's debris rests in a Long Island landfill.

Few ruins have become significant sites of memory on the American landscape. Despite their capacity to testify to the devastation of war, Civil War ruins have not become significant sites of Civil War memory as sanitized military battlefields came to tell the dominant narrative of the conflict. But contemporary ruins that remain unrecognized as public memorials, such as the ruins of Asbury Park and the Aliso Village, have come to function as sites of memory for some members of their respective communities. In this light, the on-going debates surrounding plans for the World Trade Center site underscore the difficult relationship between ruin and memorial in this country, as well as offer an opportunity to consider how ruins might be used in an officially recognized memorial of national importance.

Within weeks of the attacks of September 11, sources as varied as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art called for portions of the buildings' ruins to be left on site as part of a memorial. And yet the area was cleared and plans were approved for rebuilding at a speed that initially surprised many observers and terrified critics. As architectural scholar Mark Wigley wrote in 2002: "There was an obscene haste to remove all traces and rebuild in a desperate attempt to fill the void in so many hearts and bank accounts."<sup>1</sup> Despite claims of an economic imperative to redevelop the site, much evidence suggests that lower Manhattan had already been dethroned as the economic center of the metropolitan area. In part, the haste with which the World Trade

Center site was cleared can be traced to a long American tradition of obliterating sites associated with community or national tragedy, with shame or trauma. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to highlight examples of this phenomenon from Charleston to East Los Angeles. The need to quickly clear and to plan the World Trade Center site's future belies a political desire to control the narrative of events surrounding 9/11, and to establish an official story in order to foreclose on the possibility of larger conversations.

In the face of United-We-Stand patriotism, media spectacle, and controversial foreign policy, the Bush, Pataki, and Giuliani administrations rushed to “memorialize the event” by clearing the site, bulldozing sentiments as fragile and complex as the steel façades that briefly stood among the rubble of these buildings. Quickly, ruins were dismissed as inappropriate for the memorial. John Tierney, writing in *The New York Times* only weeks after the attacks, explained: “New York is too young and vibrant for the ruins and grand monuments to the past that are trademarks of European capitals.”<sup>2</sup> But New York and the rest of the nation have been marked by a history of ruin that began with the destruction of southern cities such as Charleston and Atlanta during the Civil War and continued throughout the twentieth century through “slum clearance” policies that destroyed whole neighborhoods and disrupted populations. In forgetting these ruins, critics, scholars, and politicians create a vision of the American landscape that does not recognize a legacy of violence and refuses to confront a history of corruption, prejudice, and mistakes.

Thus, my consideration of the World Trade Center site begins with an attempt to disprove this notion of innocence through examples of New York City ruins that predate

the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> : the ruins of the South Bronx from the 1970s and the 1980s. While separated by nearly thirty years as well as vastly different modes of coming into being, the ruins of the South Bronx and those of Ground Zero both lend themselves to larger nationalist narratives of devastation and war, sacrifice and redemption. An understanding as to how these ruins are seen and located within larger national narratives becomes vital as we consider the ruins of the World Trade Center. Ultimately, the ruins of the World Trade Center and the rush to remove them from Ground Zero must be viewed in terms of a legacy of urban ruins.

For many, the ruins of the South Bronx recalled the ruins of World War II in the same way that the ruins of Asbury Park recall Sarajevo and Beirut. By opening this chapter with the ruins of the South Bronx, I want to illustrate the ways in which both scholarly and popular renderings of this neighborhood depend on descriptions of war-like destruction many years before the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. In order to do so, I have chosen to look at images of the South Bronx in two films: the first, a more mainstream characterization of the ruins as seen in *Fort Apache the Bronx*; the second, an alternative view of ruins offered by Jim Jarmusch's *Permanent Vacation*. Both movies incorporate scenes of urban ruins in ways that reflect common beliefs about ruins and the communities in which they exist. In addition, I will consider how the ruins of the South Bronx are represented in the writing of scholars such as Marshall Berman and Mike Davis. The result of urban neglect and the disruption of functioning communities, these ruins come to be explained through racialized narratives of bomb-like devastation and reclamation.

The desire to see all urban ruins as war ruins allows for such ruins to be seen as “foreign,” as anomalies or aberrations in the American experience. Thus, I believe it is easier for communities to want to raze rather than preserve them, regardless of what they might help to remind us about the past. The desire to raze ruins represents a desire to establish authority over ruins and to control specific notions about the past and present. Razing the ruins of slavery and Civil War devastation in southern cities helped to suppress narratives about the high costs of war as well as the racial oppression at its heart. Condemning the Aliso Village housing project to demolition instead of renovation, helped to support a narrative that blamed housing projects for inner-city problems instead of more endemic causes such as a lack of social services, unemployment, and rising housing costs. In both the ruins of the South Bronx as well as Ground Zero, a similar desire to control a narrative can be traced. This chapter will also explore how the ruins of the World Trade Center might be able to fulfill and subvert the purposes of traditional monuments.

### **Fort Apache: Reclaiming the Frontier**

As an adolescent, I remember watching with particular fascination commercials for Daniel Petrie’s 1981 movie *Fort Apache the Bronx* in which a young Paul Newman, as Officer Murphy, bravely walked the streets of the South Bronx in an NYPD patrolman’s uniform waving a small pistol amidst a wilderness of broken glass, rubble, and garbage. Disturbing images of the South Bronx flashed on my parent’s kitchen television in the working-class, New Jersey neighborhood where I grew up. I watched

Newman and his costars move past block after block of burned-out, boarded-up, and abandoned buildings. In addition, to stunning images of ruin, *Fort Apache the Bronx* offered a tagline that evokes both mythic tales of nationhood as well as the genocidal tendencies behind them: “No Cowboys, No Indians, No Cavalry To The Rescue, Only A Cop.”<sup>3</sup>

By the early 1980s, the South Bronx had become symbolic of massive urban failure. With its raging fires and frightening rubble, the actual South Bronx may have seemed inaccessible and unfathomable to anyone from beyond the borough’s borders. Shot entirely on location, *Fort Apache the Bronx* attempts to create a tale of social realism providing a glimpse into an area that the media portrayed as a wasteland. In doing so, the movie replicates views about ruins consistent with many of the other texts I have referenced in this dissertation. In the trailers for *Fort Apache the Bronx*, these urban ruins become compared to an absence of civilization, lawlessness. The movie’s tagline, with its reference to cowboys and Indians, conjures up a pre-Manifest destiny frontier world, an encounter with an “uncivilized” society—which many critics of the film thought referred to the mostly black and Hispanic residents of the South Bronx. In this scheme, the movie promotes ruins as evidence of social and spiritual corruption. As Officer Murphy watches a patrol man strap on a series of guns in a frightened response to the killing of two rookie cops, he asks him: “What is this the gun-fight at the OK corral?”

For all of its wild-west ruggedness, critics did not agree on how to interpret the movie’s image of the Bronx. Some considered it racist, while others found it sympathetic to residents and the public servants who worked there. Vincent Canby, writing a review



of the movie in *The New York Times*, explains: “One of the reasons the film is so effective is that, right from the start, the audience shares a sense of physical desolation that eventually becomes psychological as well as spiritual.” Like the movie *City by the Sea*, the use of ruins in *Fort Apache* also recalls a Romantic trope in which social disintegration becomes evidenced by physical decay (see Wordsworth’s “Ruined Cottage” or the “Female Vagrant”). For example, in *Fort Apache*, Cookie, the prostitute played by Pam Grier, whose cold-blooded murder of two rookie policemen opens the film, almost always appears walking through or past some crumbling building or rubble-strewn lot. The film suggests she is as broken down as the landscape around her. Throughout this dissertation, I have suggested that Romanticism provides one of the most common ways of viewing ruins, persistent even today. This seems especially true in popular representations of ruins such as films. Unfortunately, this view of ruins prevents people from seeing these spaces as the products of complex historical circumstances. In *Fort Apache the Bronx*, the Romantic mode of fusing landscape and inhabitant leads to the not-so-subtle message that the community and the buildings of the South Bronx can be renovated.

Paul Newman’s Officer Murphy will not give up on the people he “serves and protects,” despite a series of harsh revelations (he watches another cop brutally kill an innocent young resident; his girlfriend ODs). After testifying against his fellow officer for the murder, Murphy turns in his badge. But in the film’s final moments, Murphy decides to recommit to the force by pursuing a purse-snatcher, who has eluded him throughout the film. Viewers watch Murphy and his partner, Officer Corelli (played by

Ken Wahl), run past ruined buildings and streets lined with debris. The camera pans through a rubble-filled lot where the viewer observes the scattered personal effects of the people who once lived in the buildings or who still take refuge among their remains. The film drives home this point: people live among these ruins. As the camera pans the wreckage of an abandoned lot in the film's final frames, the viewer sees a rolled-up carpet that contains the body of the prostitute Cookie.

As the cops continue their high-spirited pursuit of the purse-snatcher, they run past a construction crane tearing down an abandoned building. In Petrie's South Bronx, the crane razing an abandoned building symbolizes the "reclamation" of the "hostile territory," in the same way a detective running after a purse-snatcher can be emblematic of a re-establishment of authority. The message: the frontier will be bravely (re)settled—as long as policemen stay on their beats—and the South Bronx will be bravely redeveloped. It is an idea that seems strangely prescient of both Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's zero-tolerance law enforcement policy, as well as the redevelopment that would mark much of the 1990s in New York including the South Bronx. (It is a narrative echoed in the film *City by the Sea*.) In *Fort Apache*'s final frame, Officer Murphy dives in the air toward the purse-snatcher. The image freezes then fades as the felon appears to be just within Murphy's reach. Petrie suggests that the process of reclaiming the South Bronx—clearing the ruins and re-establishing order—may be within reach as well. But the historical reality of what brought the Bronx to ruin suggests that reclamation may take more than cops returning to their beat. Redevelopment in the neediest communities—such as the South Bronx, Asbury Park, and East Los Angeles— has most frequently

created more ruins by encouraging landlords to allow buildings to fall into disrepair, and then to profit from their destruction and redevelopment. The true re-establishment of order requires sufficient investment of resources such as additional police officers as well as social services in these communities. It is a strategy that is almost never pursued.

And yet Petrie (like many developers and city government officials) seems to ignore the role that certain kinds of development like the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway had in leading to the neighborhood's collapse in the first place. Petrie suggests redevelopment will prevail. But the film does little to provide any real understanding of how the South Bronx became a blighted area. As Murphy bemoans the murder of the South Bronx youth, he turns to his partner and asks: "If he were Italian or Irish, it would be different." Murphy's Italian-American partner replies: "If he were Italian or Irish, it would be different. He'd be in Ireland or Italy getting blown away by one of his own." The characters see the South Bronx as one example of a larger crisis of Western civilization. *The New York Times* reviewer Canby observes the film suggests "that what's happening in this community is inevitable—nothing less, really, than the collapse of civilization and the beginning of the new Dark Ages."<sup>4</sup> This kind of commentary from a movie reviewer, in its failure to distinguish between the movie and "what is happening in the community" suggests to me that manner by which this movie might have provided a particular way to read the ruins of New York or reflected the ways in which they were already being seen.

Again, to see the inevitable decline of a civilization through its ruins is not new. For many Romantics, ruins symbolized a natural process through which some

civilizations must ascend while others decline. But I believe the kind of decline exemplified by the South Bronx, and discussed by Officer Murphy and his partner, was not perceived as stemming from an organic process. Petrie's film creates a vision of the South Bronx that seems a part of systemic corruption, evidenced by a world where cops murder and nurses hide heroin addictions. The reviewer Canby suggests it is not the decline of "a" civilization but of "civilization." To see the ruins of the South Bronx as inevitable and part of a pervasive decline—just one example of something that was happening all over the world—is troubling and different from a Romantic sense of ruin.

It is also incorrect. In the New Jersey suburb where I grew-up, watching with fear and horror the trailers for *Fort Apache*, civilization was not collapsing. Despite the Cold War rhetoric of doom and Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" declarations, despite my father's temporary layoff and the shooting of a boy from my high school, civilization was not falling apart—not for me, not for the majority of Americans. It is just that in the places where things were going terribly wrong (like the South Bronx or Newark or Detroit), we could imagine the far end of a continuum, the bottom of a slippery slope that we might as well be on. The inevitability of such ruins allows us to evade responsibility for their creation. So more and more white families rushed from the inner cities to the higher grounds of the suburbs, seeing in the ruins of the South Bronx an apocalyptic fantasy, instead of the products of very particular and localized practices: disinvestment on the parts of local and federal governments, bank redlining, insurance scams, and an increased need for social services at a moment when such services were being reduced.

Many mark the beginning of the South Bronx's dissolution and destruction in the 1950s and 1960s with the construction of the Cross Bronx and Bruckner Expressways that divided neighborhoods and displaced residents. Critics such as Camilo José Vergara, Mike Davis, and Marshall Berman point out the Bronx was in swift decline by the 1970s as city funds for social services were reduced and crooked landlords, bankers, and insurance underwriters devised arson schemes for profit. According to the social science research team of Deborah and Rodrick Wallace, the South Bronx Firestorms of 1974-1977 created a "catastrophic destruction of habitat" that occurred in a place that only seven years earlier was not "even listed as a poverty area."<sup>5</sup>

But the actual history of the South Bronx and the causes for its failure were not only lost to producers of popular images of the Bronx such as Petrie. Scholars seemed as inarticulate in describing the neighborhood's demise. Consider Marshall Berman writing in 1982 about the area of the Bronx where he grew up in *All That's Solid Melts into Air*:

Among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation. The Bronx...has become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness.... hundreds of boarded-up abandoned buildings and charred and burnt-out hulks of buildings; dozens of blocks covered with nothing at all but shattered bricks and waste.<sup>6</sup>

In Berman's vision—like Petrie's—ruin becomes associated with a complete and total failure of social and community function. His use of the word "accumulation" connotes a tidal wave of social ills that first made land in the South Bronx.

For Berman, an unchecked and nearly inevitable modernity produces the landscape of the South Bronx. Ruin no longer represents the organic rise of a civilization or modernity's triumph over an ancient regime, as it did for certain Romantics. Ruins become a by-product, a condition of modernity itself. Berman writes: "Even in the most highly developed parts of the world, all individuals, groups and communities are under constant and relentless pressure to reconstruct themselves; if they stop to rest, to be what they are, they will be swept away."<sup>7</sup> Berman is critical of this unending, inevitable impetus. In the case of the South Bronx, Berman casts New York developer Robert Moses as a modern day Faust fulfilling a desire in which "devastation and ruin" are "built into the same process of human development."<sup>8</sup>

This "unstoppable, nearly pandemic corruption" which Petrie's characters align with a global collapse of civilization and which Berman sees as a product of capitalism itself leads to a strange acceptance of ruin (although it does not mean they will be recognized as potential monuments or memorials). I want to offer one last example of urban ruins that comes to be seen an inevitable product of modernity. James Merrill's poem "An Urban Convalescence" is one of the most frequently-cited poems dealing with New York ruins. It also reinforces an odd acceptance of ruin that Berman (writing in *All That's Solid*) shares albeit in a more critical way. As the poem opens, the speaker observes a building's demolition on the New York City street where he lives. Amidst the rubble of the building, a construction crane "fumbl[es] luxuriously." For Merrill's speaker, it brings to mind Robert Graves' creatively-destructive "White Goddess." He laments:

As usual in New York, everything is torn down  
Before you have time to care for it (8-10).

The poem itself moves from the ruined building, “a single garland sways,” (20) to a question of personal remembrance “When did the garland become a part of me?” (23) to the speaker’s own faulty memory “(of) no one I can place” (33). He imagines the building collapsing around him, crumbling as memory does, in perhaps yet another reference to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” Before the destruction, the speaker observes somewhat complacently: “Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.// Well, that is what life does.” As he returns to his apartment, the poem like the space around him falls into an order of four-lined stanzas. The speaker rails against the senseless destruction of a city, the “sickness of our times” (68). But Merrill will not linger in social criticism. In the end, his protest inspires a vow: “to make some kind of house/ Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.” The poem’s speaker is not interested in the more complex causes of urban devastation. The ruin simply provides a lesson for the self. The poem ends with a return to a high-Romantic mode of viewing ruins as representative of the deterioration of memory or as a model for the soul. An initially modernist approach to ruin brings Merrill to an ultimately Romantic conclusion, a way of seeing ruin that does not envision a relationship to the environment. Instead of seeing the ruin as a place from which to make connections between national histories and legacies, as does Lowell, Merrill looks at ruins as an essentially unavoidable but instructive feature of our environment.

It is not uncommon to see ruins as Merrill’s speaker does: as a symbol for the self. Unfortunately, it is not helpful to those communities plagued by corruption, crime and

negligence of municipal governments. In order to help them, one must consider the more complex causes of ruins. Modernity's insatiable appetite for development cannot quite explain the speed and expansiveness of the devastation that would overcome large swaths of the South Bronx and other urban disaster zones. It is a more intricate equation of greed, racism, and a desire to concentrate the poorest citizens in particular areas. Mike Davis writing nearly 20 years after Berman explains: "Disinvestment in the older central cities was led by the banks, endorsed by federal policies, and reinforced by ensuing local fiscal crises and the contraction of lifeline municipal services."<sup>9</sup>

A long list of causes led to the ruined blocks of the South Bronx in the 1970s—none of which seem inevitable despite Petrie's popular interpretation of the South Bronx or Berman's scholarly analysis of it. But because these ruins were seen as an American anomaly, as part of unstoppable, nearly pandemic corruption, but not something indigenous to America, I believe it was easier for politicians, neighbors, and citizens to deny responsibility for their creation. This is one of the fundamental problems inherent in America's relationship to ruin.

Writing in 1987, Berman would no longer blame an unchecked modernity for the devastation he mourned in his South Bronx neighborhood. He could see the destruction in his old neighborhood as a part of a complex, nearly criminal activity that he called: *urbicide*, the murder of a city. In an essay entitled "Among the Ruins," Berman refers to the fire storms that swept through the South Bronx in the mid-1970s:

The people caught in the fires, the *urbicide* victims, were so traumatized they simply couldn't grasp what was happening to them. They had no alphabet to 'read' it, to make it intelligible. They were prepared for grinding poverty, but not for the rupture and collapse of their rough world.



And while it was at its height, *we*, the educated public outside the fire zones, didn't understand it any better than the victims did.<sup>10</sup>

Traditionally Romantic and essentially modernist ways of viewing ruins allowed several possible narratives with which to misread the South Bronx. The “educated public” had no alphabet to read such ruins, only a series of myths and legends about a nation free from ruin, about urban blight as a kind of disease, about ruins as the unfailing companion of modernity. Only later were the ruins of the South Bronx understood to be the result of a complex and localized set of particulars: federal and government disinvestment, white flight, wide-spread insurance fraud. Likewise, the ruins of the World Trade Center must be understood as the result of a complex set of historical circumstances and our relationship to them must be seen in light of a legacy of ruin.

### **Blitzkrieg Bop and the Ruins of New York**

Some thirty years before the first actual foreign attack on New York soil, writers, theorists, politicians employed another series of metaphors to narrate a story of the ruins of the South Bronx: military analogies. President Reagan famously compared the area to a scene from the London Blitz. Journalists variously claimed the area evoked images of Dresden, Hiroshima—even Manila. Berman as well resorted to military metaphors when talking about the South Bronx, initially comparing Robert Moses to “a reincarnated General Sherman run wild in the streets of the North [who] blazed a path of terror from Harlem to the Sound.”<sup>11</sup> The comparison to Sherman is noteworthy because Sherman’s march through the South created the first “national ruins” upon which a part of this country would be “reconstructed.” The ruins of Charleston and Atlanta made it possible

for the North to consider rebuilding the South in its image. But as we remember, despite the unprecedented devastation, few monuments stand to recall the devastation of Sherman's march.

To liken the devastation in the South Bronx to a military campaign is not an unfounded comparison. It implies a strategic plan, not an inevitable cycle of destruction and resurrection, not the natural trajectory of Empire, not a reflection of a corrupt community. I want to take a moment to consider what's at play in these kinds of comparisons. When writers or politicians in the 1980s make comparisons between the South Bronx and World War II ruins, they invoke a scale of destruction as well as the idea of an enemy and combatants. Interestingly, when they recall Hiroshima and Dresden, they reference ruins for which the American government shared responsibility—and shame.

The desire to see the ruins of World War II in contemporary American ruins relates to a sense of guilt and fear surrounding that conflict. In "Fifty Years Under a Cloud," Tom Engelhardt theorizes that the images of large-scale damage inflicted on civilians in Japan and Germany created "a culture of defeat" despite the Allied victory. Thus, while ruins traditionally had served as trophies of conquest, in the post-World War II era they become shameful reminders of national barbarity and our unprecedented power to destroy or be destroyed. Engelhardt writes:

For those who fought or lived through the war, what it was like to be born into a secret culture of despair amid vistas of wealth and seeming promise, in a world filled with stories of victorious fathers, was too unsettling to grasp... Most of the wartime generation never came to grips with either the final acts of the Pacific war or the postwar view from under those desks.<sup>12</sup>

For Engelhardt, images of the post World War II devastation inspired American guilt associated with killing large numbers of civilians as well as reminded Americans of their own vulnerability in the nuclear age. War metaphors link the ruins of the Bronx to that same kind of shame and fear—without any sense of triumph.

In addition, such war metaphors can imply that ruinous destruction is the result of warring urban factions. When President Reagan likens these ruins to the bombing of London, he offers a metaphor in which destruction becomes the result of foreign forces. We are left to wonder: if the South Bronx is London, who represents the German enemy? If we are to understand the residents as the “foreign enemy,” the statement reinforces the racism already inherent in many narratives of the ruins of the South Bronx.

Mike Davis, writing in 2002, also compares the South Bronx to the German attack of London, but Davis explicitly judges the strategic attack of an enemy government as on par with the workings of federal and local governments in the South Bronx who served as aggressors against their own people through their polices. Davis explains: “In 1940-41, the Heinkel and Junkers bombers of the Luftwaffe destroyed 350,000 dwelling units and unhoused a million Londoners. In the 1970s, an equally savage “blitz” of landlord disinvestment, bank redlining and federal “benign neglect” led to the destruction of 294,000 housing units in New York City.”<sup>13</sup> For Davis, the bomb-like devastation should bring an enemy-like contempt for official policies that waged war against certain urban communities. Davis reminds us that the ruins are not the result of a foreign enemy, but of our own government policies. His indictment continues: “Nationally in 1980—one of every twenty housing units in urban centers was boarded up. Dereliction in some cities

exceeded park acreage. No civilization—especially not one so rich and powerful—had ever tolerated such extensive physical destruction of its urban fabric in peacetime.”<sup>14</sup> Davis observes that even as late as 1996—at the height of yet another real estate boom—more than 20,000 housing units per year were still being abandoned in New York City. And yet these ruins are frequently forgotten today. When the attacks of September 11 occurred, it was widely remarked that the United States had never experienced similar devastation. While we had not ever experienced a similar attack against civilians orchestrated by a terrorist organization based outside our country, the warlike metaphors that have long surrounded large-scale urban ruin reveal our awareness that such devastation has existed in American cities. Despite the fact that during the 1970s and much of the 1980s few understood the complex causes of these ruins, the “bombed-out” landscapes of the South Bronx (or Newark or Detroit) did not go unnoticed—and they were frequently described in terms that evoked carpet-bombing or atomic destruction.

What do we make of these Hiroshima-, Dresden- and London-like ruins? To look at the actual ruins from these war sites provides an interesting history. The American government banned American reporters from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Living with the ghost images of atomic ruins, Engelhardt explains, some Americans sought out ways to replay our own defeat. Engelhardt reminds us that the children of the WWII generation imaged “ashes where there were burgeoning suburbs” and sought “thrills and excitement in a developing underground culture of defeat, while at night in their dreams, the mushroom cloud rose again and again.” That underground culture of defeat existed in a film and comic book canon, Engelhardt explains, in which “monstrous beings and alien

creatures did to our cities and towns what we had done to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and crowds of Americans onscreen screamed and fled and were crushed or mangled, burned or consumed.” If, according to Engelhardt, some Americans found a kind of reenactment pleasure in science fiction films and comics, I would suggest that observers of the ruins of the South Bronx enacted a kind of projection fantasy in which they saw in American cities the bomb-blast destruction our military had inflicted elsewhere. After World War II, our images of ruin had a new symbolic meaning. The ruins of postwar America became atomic. And while ruins arose because of our urban policies, some visual artists as well as filmmakers and writers explored these images of ruin in ways that defied traditionally Romantic or even modernist representations. These post-war representations of ruin allow us to glimpse a new ruin rising from the atomic wreckage of World War II, a ruin filled with guilt and fear, a ruin that appeared in nightmares, in pop songs and on movie screens.

### **Playing in the Ruins**

Jim Jarmusch’s use of South Bronx ruins in the 1980 film, *Permanent Vacation*, provides a variation on the military metaphor for ruin.<sup>15</sup> Instead of using a military analogy to highlight our own destructive potential and urban vulnerability, Jarmusch offers the ruins as producers of war-like traumatic effects upon its citizens. And while Jarmusch seems no less pessimistic than fellow filmmaker Daniel Petrie about the society

that creates these ruins, Jarmusch's main character demonstrates a complex understanding of a ruin's symbolic potential.

The movie features a peripatetic narrator, Allie, who wanders the streets of New York City and the ruins of his family's past inventing his own narratives to explain their existence. The film opens with slow motion scenes of crowded midtown or downtown sidewalks interspersed with shots of the narrator walking through the nearly deserted streets of what appears to be SoHo. Garbage rises from the curbs. Allie (played by Chris Parker) pulls out a can of spray paint and tags a boarded-up storefront. By "tagging" the building, he demonstrates a desire to leave a mark on his environment. There is not a police officer in sight; the neighborhood appears abandoned. Perhaps as a way to explain the loose narrative of the film itself, a voice-over declares: "What is a story, anyway, but one of those connect-the-dots drawings that in the end form a picture of something." Allie's suspicion toward narrative is instructive and points to the essentially postmodern underpinnings of the film's attitude toward ruins. More than an explanation of the movie's meanderings, the statement puts forth a model for the way Allie explains his own circumstance and the landscape around him.

"The building that my mother and father lived in was blown up during the war," Allie tells his girlfriend as he stares out the window of her apartment. "I want to walk through the rubble of the building where I was born."

"What are you talking about?" she asks him. "Blown-up by who?"

"The Chinese," Allie replies. His girlfriend does not seem to understand. His answer receives no further explanation. *What is a story, anyway, but one of those*

*connect-the-dots drawings that in the end form a picture of something.* The actual “story” of the battle or war with the Chinese remains unimportant to Allie. The notion of war helps to “form a picture” of the ruins of his family home. Allie’s explanation may be indicative of a desire to see the ruins as the products of an intended, coordinated destructive force. While the movie offers no suggestion as to why Allie claims the Chinese were responsible, we may want to read Chinese as a stand-in for “other” or enemy. Allie chooses to script his own narrative to explain the ruins while the audience (and other characters within the film, such as his girlfriend) will find other explanations. In this way, the film enacts the process by which multiple interpretations of a ruin come into being.

In the next scene, Allie walks through the ruined building, stepping over rubble and peering through the frames of broken windows. Plants grow from what was once the building’s floor, the roof has collapsed. A soundtrack of jets and choppers—roaring as if engaged in battle—accompanies Allie’s exploration. How does the viewer interpret this soundscape? Do the sounds represent the workings of Allie’s imagination? Again, the movie does not offer a conclusive answer. A man in a soldier’s fatigues steps out from the behind a wall shouting warnings to Allie to get down. The soldier, too, can hear the sounds of aerial combat. The implication may be that life among the ruins feels like a battle.

Allie responds by pointing up to the sky reassuringly: “The Cong doesn’t have a chopper. You see, those are American.”

Allie offers the soldier a cigarette, tells him about a dream involving an old car parked in front of his window. He leaves the soldier with this advice: “You should get out of here, man. Get away from here. Go someplace different. That’s what I’m going to do.”

The scene suggests that the ruins themselves wield power over those who explore or inhabit them. The wartime narrative they inspire becomes so intense that viewers can hear the sounds of gunfire and artillery. When confronted with the soldier, a Vietnam vet probably suffering from some type of posttraumatic stress disorder, Allie can only advise him that he must find a better place to live. The suggestion unveils a belief in the force that these shattered landscapes exert over people, a claim that is supported later in the film when Allie confronts his institutionalized mother and as well as a deranged young woman who sings to herself on the fire escape of a crumbling building.

But Allie’s use of war stories to describe the remnants of his South Bronx home do not cast these ruins as part of a foreign landscape. Instead, they become more familiar, representative of a birthplace. Furthermore, while Allie’s war with the Chinese seems part of a personal, interior history or fantasy—it also allows for the effects of the “battle” to be more clearly and more directly perceived. Thus Jarmusch provides us with an inversion of the traditionally Romantic relationship in which a ruined landscape acts as a reflection of the soul as it did for Merrill or Petrie. In Allie’s world, the ruins do not reflect the corruption of the spirit—they seem to cause it. Ruins evidence a neglect that destroys the citizens who live in their midst. The two characters that Allie discovers amidst the ruins of the South Bronx—the soldier and a woman—appear shell-shocked. But Jarmusch depicts no conflict; there are no police, no actual soldiers, just the



disoriented vet. The only struggle exists between Allie and his surroundings: New York City circa 1980 with its bustling midtown, deserted artists' enclaves (SoHo), and ruins (South Bronx). The war-like ruins of New York create the warlike trauma in those unfortunate enough to have to live within them. So Allie warns the soldier: "You should go live someplace else." The movie ends with Allie standing on a dock like an exile fleeing his homeland of New York.

In contrast to *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, where ruins embody fantasies and fears, Jarmusch warns that ruins evidence and cause trauma. While the ruins of US cities recall the devastation of war, for inhabitants—such as those of the South Bronx—these ruins produce warlike effects; they are reminders of the quotidian traumas of poverty and racism. Unlike Petrie, Jarmusch does not put forth the possibility of renovation or reform amidst these ruins. The movie seems to offer few choices: go crazy, make art, or leave. Jarmusch rejects the Romantic representation of ruin that would use them to exemplify organic cycles of corruption. He seems equally suspicious of a more modernist representation of ruin that would see these structures as a product of a global, inevitable process. Ultimately, Allie leaves New York, seeking exile as a way to escape ruin. In *Allie*, we find a character who creates fantasies about ruin and yet never loses site of them as evidence to actual tragedy. In this, Jarmusch, like photographer Anthony Hernandez, may be providing another way of seeing ruin, one that envisions ruins as places where meaning can be personal and still inclusive of tragedy that extends beyond the individual.

Berman first begins to discern the promoters of an aesthetic that makes art from the ruins in the work of Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, and others who “use rubble as a medium in which to construct new forms and make new affirmations.”<sup>16</sup> The work of these artists, as well as Jarmusch and Hernandez, inspired me to use the phrase “Blitzkrieg Bop” in the title of this chapter as well as the title of the dissertation as a whole. The phrase comes from the title of the opening track of the Ramones first album and makes the strange assertion that World War II destruction might be danceable. For me, it seemed to embody the spirit of “play” amidst the ruins that might offer an alternative to Romantic or modernist ways to view and relate to ruins. I want to define “play” here as an activity that inspires both interaction and improvisation amidst ruin. I realize this play, exemplified by Allie’s creating a story about a war with the Chinese, can be as de-historicizing as the other ways of seeing ruin that this dissertation has considered. Still, the interaction with ruin that Allie’s story implies, as well as Jarmusch’s sensitivity to depicting the effects of those ruins, ultimately helps to integrate the ruins of the South Bronx into the American landscape instead of seeing them as aberrations. Only through this kind of interaction with and integration of ruins will the nation be able to provide an instructive context with which to see the ruins of the World Trade Center.

### **The Ruins of the World Trade Center**

The wreckage of World War II haunted the ruins of the South Bronx and other urban centers for years, but September 11 would produce the first urban ruins in America

that were the result of a planned attack by a foreign enemy. The ruins of the World Trade Center were different from those imagined through the devastation of blighted urban centers. These were not the blocks upon blocks of eerily silent residential destruction, but two skyscrapers crashing down within 90 terrifying minutes. And despite the speed with which the South Bronx was reduced to ruin, the World Trade Center's demise was cataclysmic.

In the days and months after the September 11th attacks, writers and broadcasters struggled for words to describe the events. Americans were told that they had never experienced anything like that which they witnessed on the streets of New York; media broadcasters and pundits boasted of our innocence, without giving thought to the widespread destruction wrought on American soil during the Civil War and in inner cities throughout much of the twentieth century. Oblivious to the past, initial descriptions of Ground Zero summoned up images from disaster movies and science fiction as if there were no actual referents for such scenes. Writing in *The New York Times* on September 13, 2001, Michiko Kakutani explained:

Images of the World Trade Center exploding and collapsing into a pile of rubble; images of people running for their lives through the canyons of Wall Street; images of smoke and fire billowing from the caved-in walls of the Pentagon -- these images, shown on an endless loop on every television station, were repeatedly compared to the destruction of New York and Washington in "Independence Day;" the terror of the people trapped in the twin towers to "Towering Inferno."<sup>17</sup>

We ignored our own destructive history comparing scenes of actual destruction to Hollywood productions. And the ruins themselves became a symbol for loss and grief, for nostalgia, for the end of a supposed innocence.

In late September and October 2001, a series of articles that ran in *The New York Times* argued for the preservation of the twisted aluminum remnant of the South Tower's façade. In his article, "Beauty from Evil," John Tierney called the ruin "the most revered shape in the city." Tierney saw the ruined façade as a sign of survival in which "you can image that the façade above isn't just the debris from a successful attack—it's the building hanging on, still refusing to fall, just like New Yorkers." Writing on September 25, 2001, Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art echoed Tierney's sentiments with a more forceful call to incorporate the ruins into the site's memorial plans. De Montebello explained: "A relic of destruction, it could become a testament to renewal. As a symbol of survival, it is already, in its own way, a masterpiece -- and so it should remain."<sup>18</sup> Montebello's idea has precedence in the preserved ruins of World War II devastation in cities such as Hiroshima, Berlin, and London. But the preservation of war ruins can prove a tricky negotiation.

For example, Kenneth Clark, chairman of the British War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) and director of the National Gallery during World War II, considered the ruins of London worthy of being recorded and preserved. Through the WAAC, he commissioned artists, such as John Piper, "to paint the glowing embers of bomb sites." In a letter dated August 15, 1944, he proposed that a number of London churches be preserved as ruins to act as war memorials, standing as a reminder to new generations "of the sacrifice on which [their] apparent security had been built."<sup>19</sup> Here, Clark asks ruins to perform the traditional service of war memorials commemorating and signifying the losses of war for future generations. The statement evidences Clark's own

optimism about the war's outcome and belies a traditional function of a war memorial: to explicate "the lessons that are said to lie behind a battle." But Clark had other ideas as to the value of ruins.

His *Bombed Churches as War Memorials* proposal also offers an aesthetic defense of ruins as objects of "strange beauty." Clark wrote: "It will not be many years before all traces of war damage will have gone, & its strange beauty vanished from our streets. ... Save us, then, some of our ruins."<sup>20</sup> While the Blitz continued at its devastating pace, Clark declared, "Bomb damage is in itself Picturesque." Clark's cry to preserve the beauty of war strikes me as particularly distinct from the ideological motivation behind his initial desire to preserve them as monuments of sacrifice. Christopher Woodward calls the *Bombed Churches as War Memorials* "the last great fling of the British Picturesque" summoned "to soothe the trauma of high-explosive bombs." Like Woodward, I am skeptical of beauty's potential to act as a salve for the wounds of war. The ruins that originally embodied the Picturesque were the products of conflicts that predated their admirers. It is important to note that Clark spoke as an art historian not a member of a particular church's congregation for whom the ruins of a bombed church might serve as nothing but an example of injury. I question calls to raze ruins as well as calls to preserve them, when these arguments are made before a community has had the chance to debate the significance of their creation.

Ultimately, the ruins of war can only be successful monuments, if they can accommodate the collective memories of a community—not a version of history or an idea of beauty that is imposed from outside. The debate over what should remain or be

built at Ground Zero typifies this dilemma. Does that space belong to the memory of the citizens of New York City or the nation? Should it serve the families of victims more than it serves the general public? How can what will be built as a memorial there remain beyond political ambitions and ideologies?

World War II ruins provide some insight in to community commemorative processes and the difficulties of incorporating ruins and memorials. In Dresden, East German authorities decided to preserve the ruins of the Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche) as a reminder of “capitalist warmongering.” But the people of Dresden “placed lit candles in the rubble as a spontaneous protest year after year; they did not want their children’s growth—or their old age—to be stunted by the dark shadow of history.”<sup>21</sup> And while sites such as Hiroshima demonstrate that the ruins of war can be a testament to survival, the Hiroshima ruins are incorporated into a center for peace and atomic history. They do not function as traditional war memorials.

Ultimately, officials from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the jury charged with selecting a memorial design at Ground Zero believed that New Yorkers could not find comfort in the permanent display of ruins. But the reasons they offered for removing the ruins prove insightful. James E. Young, a member of the jury, became one of the most outspoken critics of proposals to incorporate ruins into the World Trade Center memorial. Writing about the ruins of concentration camps, Young suggested that because of their nature as artifact, ruins can generate a near “mystical fascination... as if the molecules of the sites still vibrated with the memory of their history.”<sup>22</sup> Young worries that as relics they can represent an event without requiring the viewer to do

“memory work.” I take Young’s “memory work” to mean the process of creating an emotional and ideological relationship to the history of the site of memory. The problem, according to Young, is that ruins run the risk of becoming little more than “inert pieces of the landscape, unsuffused with meaning” that do not necessarily encourage viewers to reflect on the significance of their history. On the other extreme, Young also suggests that often in light of their nature as ‘relic,’ viewers can lose sight of the fact that they might be curated.<sup>23</sup> In this way, they can be used to impose a particular response (i.e.: patriotism) to an event. Young expressed concern that by preserving the ruins of Ground Zero we would be privileging destruction.

Most ruins in the United States are not part of a curated narrative but stand unrecognized. As such, they *do* provide the viewer with an opportunity to negotiate or improvise their own emotional reaction to the ruins: from shame to nostalgia for a lost community in the case of the Aliso Village housing project or from nostalgia to hope for a resurrection in the case of Asbury Park. What they often do *not* provide is a manner through which to have an ideological relationship to the history of ruin. Because the United States does not officially recognize a national history of ruins, most viewers of ruins do not have the tools to incorporate the existence of these structures into larger histories of failed social policy or conflicts. Without such a history, Americans have no place from which to contemplate mistakes or to situate destruction within a legacy of violence. Without curatorial influence viewers tend to improvise the meaning as well as the history of the ruins before them. Often this meaning comes from an archive of visual and historical associations. And the ruins referenced through these associations are as

telling as those that are forgotten. For example, Asbury Park recalls Sarajevo; the South Bronx looks like London after the Blitz. And the images of public housing ruins in places like Newark or Detroit help to condemn the Aliso Village projects to destruction. This stems from the fact that most communities do not understand their local or national history of ruin.

*New York Times* reporter Sarah Boxer's exchange with Young in the wake of the September 11 attacks exemplifies common misconceptions about America and ruins:

Americans, Mr. Young said, "tend not to know about ruins." That says something about the absence of wars on American soil, he observed, but it also "says quite a lot about the forward-looking ideology" of the United States, he added. Part of the idea of this country, Mr. Young said, is "not to be tethered to ruins, to leave the old world behind." But whether one wants to look backward or not, [Young] said, "the reality is that we will be looking back at that date." September 11 was the date Americans acquired ruins, at least for a while.<sup>24</sup>

Young seems oblivious to the fact that ruins exist in our "new world" and that federal and local urban policy has done much to create them. Young's statement and Boxer's interpretation imply that ruins are significant as sites of memory worthy of our recognition *only* when created as the result of foreign aggression. Neither Young nor Boxer includes the ruins of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City as part of their history of ruin. Nor do they mention Civil War ruins or the ruins of changing urban landscapes.

Young's comment suggests a relatively naïve and potentially dangerous assumption about the "absence of wars on American soil." While Americans did not suffer as their European allies did during World War II, the United States has been particularly skilled in inflicting devastation upon its populace beginning with Sherman's Civil War March through the South and continuing through the twentieth century,



especially in relation to urban policy that left widespread, war-like ruination on an unprecedented scale in the developing world. Instead of remaining a nation without ruin, we have become one of the most ruinous nations in the world.

What makes Young's comment on the ruins of Ground Zero even more provocative is the fact that he has been such an outspoken proponent of a memorial aesthetic that resembles ruins: counter memorials. In Young's view, traditional monuments and memorials allow us to "leave our memories behind and walk away."<sup>25</sup> In contrast to a traditional memorial that glorifies and imposes meaning, that does the "memory work" for the viewer, the "counter memorial" does not rise up as triumphant nor does it narrate or signify a conflict. Young privileges counter-monuments or counter-memorials that "articulate ambivalence" about an event, thus asking the viewer to do "memory work." The counter-monument uses "negative forms, absence, voids" to express this ambivalence. Young explains that memorials such as Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial or many of the Holocaust memorials in Europe derive their power from their suggestion of an "inability to repair" or an "anti-redemptory aesthetic." The partially sunken wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the ominous black monoliths of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin embody this aesthetic, as does the proposal for the monument at World Trade Center site.

Michael Arad and Peter Walker's plans for that memorial are minimalist, geometric, and certainly do not seek to interpret or narrate the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Entitled "Reflecting Absence," the design incorporates negative space in the form of holes in the ground that demarcate the footprints of the towers—to illustrate that which

has been lost. Consider this description from the jury that selected the winning memorial design:

In its powerful, yet simple articulation of the footprints of the Twin Towers, “Reflecting Absence” has made the voids left by the destruction the primary symbols of our loss. By allowing absence to speak for itself, the designers have made the power of these empty footprints the memorial.<sup>26</sup>

The use of “voids” and “absence” to recall “destruction” suggests the creation of a space similar to a ruin—a carefully crafted, ahistorical ruin—but a ruin nonetheless. In this, the memorial plans for the World Trade Center site strike me as yet another example of a desire to establish authority over ruin. That desire began with the decision to completely clear the site, to raise a flag over the remains of nationals from many countries, and to raise a cross over the final resting place of the Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists—in short—many non-Christians who died in the attacks. While the creation of a modernist, ruin-like memorial represents an attempt to defy the establishment of a singular narrative for the events, I wonder how many narratives might be supported if some of the ruins will be allowed to remain. Perhaps Young is correct in assuming that by preserving ruins we privilege destruction, but I do not necessarily believe that is a bad thing. It is time that American society recognizes the remnants of its violence. Perhaps by confronting—instead of eradicating—the evidence of such violence, we might be inclined to prevent such future acts of destruction. We will no longer conjure up images from disaster movies fantasies to describe our own realities. We will be able to take responsibility for our own ruins.

While the aesthetic of ruins offer a model for the memorial that will be constructed at the World Trade Center site, the role that actual ruins might play in the

memorial's final design remains to be seen. As I write this, the removal of the steel cross is just days away. The fate of the Survivors' Stairs has not yet been decided. Still, people from all over the country seem invested in their future. An article from the on-line version of *Parade* magazine describing the plight of the stairs prompted hundreds of on-line responses. I have included a few here:

**History or Economics?**

*By momsmax on 9/22/2006 10:08:AM*

I can't believe a question even exists about whether or not to save 'The Staircase'. Think about all the history textbooks you have 'read' in school - photos added to your understanding, didn't they? "A picture is worth a thousand words", right? Why are we even debating what to do with this staircase? Because it will cost more money to include it in a 'retail environment'? TOO BAD!!! This artifact is significant - to survivors, to families of those who died, and to generations to come. It is time we took some lessons from those who came before and preserve what we can. Look at the phenomenal European/Asian cultural artifacts that are part of world history...is there any doubt they are more valuable today than they were centuries ago when created or preserved? I fail to believe, in this state-of-the-art design world, that this important artifact cannot be incorporated into the redevelopment. And if it costs "too much", it is because greedy developers failed to use common sense in the very beginning of the design process. It should be given historical status and mandated that it be included!

**SURVIVORS STAIRCASE**

*By hawk74b on 9/15/2006 4:45:PM*

"THE STAIRCASE" SHOULD BE A REMINDER TO ALL AMERICANS OF WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN YOU LET YOUR GURAD DOWN. IF THE USA LET THE REST OF THE WORLD SOLVE THEIR OWN PROBLEMS AND STOPPED INTERFERING, WE WOULD BE MUCH BETTER OFF. WE HAVE BUILT MONUMENTS TO THE DEAD [FROM TERRORISTS ACTS] ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES, WHY CAN'T WE HAVE A MONUMENT TO THE LIVING, FOR THOSE WHO ARE SURVIVING BECAUSE OF THE STAIRCASE? WITHOUT REMINDERS THE PAST IS DOOMED TO KEEP REPEATING ITSELF. NEVER LET THIS HAPPEN AGAIN ON OUR SOIL!!! SAVE "THE STAIRCASE".  
HAWK74B

### **Save The Stairs That Saved Lives**

***By Live4Honor on 9/11/2006 4:14:PM***

Absolutely Yes! These stairs should definitely be saved! They should be kept somewhere as a national monument. They saved lives and helped lead people to safety. They stand for many things. They will let terrorists know that no matter what they destroy, or how many people they kill, or whatever they do that it will only bring us closer together as Americans. In fact that is the only good thing we got out of 9/11. IT BROUGHT US CLOSER TOGETHER. And that is why we remember this day so much, many lives were lost, but because of these stairs some were spared. Very similar to how our country was spared. No one can take away the unity we have so our country will never be lost. So please Save these stairs, they mean a lot! God bless the USA.<sup>27</sup>

These posts demonstrate how ruins can be used to symbolize a variety of sentiments and ideologies. For “momsmax,” the ruins fulfill a role associated with traditional war memorials by offering “lessons from those who came before.” For “hawk74b,” they support an ideology of isolationism and remind us to maintain our defenses. “Live4honor” acknowledges that the stairs “stand for many things,” but imagines that the stairs might convey a message of survival to the terrorists. These posts suggest that the meaning of the event itself has not been settled upon. They suggest, as well, that ruins might convey ambivalence about the event appropriate to our historical moment.

Despite what Young calls our “forward-looking ideology” as well as our desire “not to be tethered to ruins,” the actual ruins of the World Trade Center and the surrounding area continue to play a role in local memorials to the attacks. Within a year of the event, twisted metal girders from the site began appearing in community memorials in towns throughout the metropolitan area. In upstate New York, a memorial garden includes a small bell tower constructed with scrap metal from towers. During the

summer of 2003, two gnarled pieces of steel lay on the waterfront at Jersey City. On the day that I visited, a red-white-and-blue ribbon was tied to one. A t-shirt from the “Good Grieving” 5-K race hung from another.

Most recently, an exhibit entitled "Elegy in the Dust: September 11th and the Chelsea Jeans Memorial" opened at the New York Historical Society. The installation featured a preserved, glass-encased section of a jeans store that stood near the World Trade Center and testifies to the power of relics associated with the event (although not culled from the site). The shop closed in October 2001, but 50 square feet of retail space has been preserved exactly as it was on the day of the attacks with dust-covered shelves of jeans, T-shirts, and tank tops. The show’s organizers call it “a visceral reminder of the terror, grief, and emotional turmoil of September 11.”<sup>28</sup> I worry that these pieces will someday fall into the realm of Jackson’s vernacular past, existing as pure objects of curiosity. But I do not believe that is inevitable. For now, they remind us what it was like to be in New York on those days after the attack, not simply because they provide an example of what was selling on the street, but because they demonstrate how much was changed in a terrible layer of dust.

Some of these relics from the site will find their way into other kinds of memorials and museums. The many books published that represent the ruins constitute another archive of ruin. One of the first examples of these publications came from Jean Holabird, a children’s book illustrator who lived in Lower Manhattan. Her 2002 publication *Out of the Ruins: A New York Record, Lower Manhattan, Autumn 2001* offers

watercolors of the site with selections from poems that touch on the topic of ruin (ranging from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Seamus Heaney's "Clearances" ).



Figure 11: Holabird's "Out of the Ruins." (Reproduced with permission of the artist.)

Her images recall John Piper's watercolors of London's ruined churches in their ability to capture a beauty in the ruins.

Most recently, Joel Meyerowitz has published *Aftermath: The World Trade Center Archive*. Meyerowitz spent nine months photographing the recovery efforts at Ground Zero. While Meyerowitz photographed rescue workers, many of the photographs are studies in ruin: mountains of twisted metal, the strange filigree of the façade. The photographs were initially shown at an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, sponsored by the U.S. State Department. A web based slideshow of the exhibit featured Meyerowitz's photographs interspersed with statements from President George

W. Bush and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Meyerowitz explains in the text accompanying the images: “I wanted to communicate what it felt like to be in there as well as what it looked like: to show the pile's incredible intricacy and visceral power....”<sup>29</sup> All of these examples point to the fascination for these ruins that still exists.

I agree with Young’s and other’s critiques of traditional memorials. But I wonder why ruins have not been allowed to form a significant part of the plans for the September 11th memorial at the World Trade Center site. Ruins allow viewers to negotiate their own emotional response to the past. In their ability to support varied ideologies, they do not impose closure on the event. With a certain amount of curatorial intervention, they can be instructive about the general history of an event, as well as used as monuments to peace. Most importantly, by acknowledging American ruins and beginning to incorporate some of them into a national commemorative landscape, Americans might begin to come to grips with a legacy of violence or histories of racism, corruption, and neglect in the United States.

I wonder what kind of memorial might be created if we could allow some of the actual ruins of the World Trade Center to remain on site as part of a national commemorative landscape that also included the ruins of slave quarters and of Civil War destruction, of old factories and of abandoned public housing projects. Within this continuum of ruin, we might be able to finally break from traditional modes of seeing ruins as American aberrations and to see them as the products of localized practices, violence, and failures. We might also be able to come to a better understanding of our past and what it might teach us about our future.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Wigley “Insecurity by Design,” *After the World Trade Center*, eds. Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin (New York: Routledge, 2002) 83.

<sup>2</sup> John Tierney “Beauty From Evil: Preserving Felled Tower Façade as Sculpture,” *New York Times On Line* 25 September 2001, 26 May 2005 <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)>.

<sup>3</sup> *Fort Apache the Bronx*, dir. Daniel Petrie, perf. Paul Newman and Ken Wahl, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Canby, “Fort Apache, The Bronx, With Paul Newman,” *The New York Times On-Line*, 6 February 1981, 3 May 2006.  
<[http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?\\_r=2&title1=Fort%20Apache%20c%20The%20Bronx%20%28Movie%29&title2=&reviewer=VINCENT%20CANBY&pdate=19810206&v\\_id=18269&oref=slogin&oref=login](http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=2&title1=Fort%20Apache%20c%20The%20Bronx%20%28Movie%29&title2=&reviewer=VINCENT%20CANBY&pdate=19810206&v_id=18269&oref=slogin&oref=login)>.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Mike Davis, *Dead Cities*, (New York: The New Press, 2002) 391.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That’s Solid Melts Into Air*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988) 290-291.

<sup>7</sup> Berman 78.

<sup>8</sup> Berman 57.

<sup>9</sup> Davis 389.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall Berman, “Among the Ruins” *New Internationalist On-Line* Issue 178 (December 1987) 19 April 2006 < <http://www.newint.org/issue178/among.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 326.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Engelhardt, “Fifty Years Under a Cloud,” *Harper’s Magazine*, v292 n1748 (Jan 1996), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Davis 387.

<sup>14</sup> Davis 387.

<sup>15</sup> *Permanent Vacation*, dir. Jim Jarmusch, Cinesthesia Productions, 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 341.

<sup>17</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Struggling to Find Words for a Horror Beyond Words,” *The New York Times On Line* 13 September 2001, 20 May 2006, <<http://web.lexis->



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<sup>18</sup> Philippe de Montebello, “The Iconic Power of an Artifact” *The New York Times On Line* 25 September 2001, 20 May 2006.

<sup>19</sup> As quoted in Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (New York: Vintage Press, 2001) 212.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Woodward 212.

<sup>21</sup> Woodward 210.

<sup>22</sup> James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994) 119.

<sup>23</sup> Young 126-127.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Boxer, “A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory” *The New York Times*, October 27, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> James E. Young “Memory and Monument Before and After 9/11,” Humanities Institute Lecture Series, The University of Texas at Austin, 1 February 2006.

<sup>26</sup> “WTC Memorial Jury Statement for Winning Design 13 January 2004,” *Lower Manhattan Development Corporation Website*, 5 February 2004, <[http://www.renewnyc.com/plan\\_des\\_dev/wtc\\_site/new\\_design\\_plans/memorial/memorial\\_jury.asp](http://www.renewnyc.com/plan_des_dev/wtc_site/new_design_plans/memorial/memorial_jury.asp)>.

<sup>27</sup> Readers comments in response to the article “Intelligence Report: 9/11 Staircase,” *Parade Magazine On-Line*, 11 September 2006-22 September 2006, 27 September 2006, <[http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2006/edition\\_08-20-2006/Intelligence\\_Report](http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2006/edition_08-20-2006/Intelligence_Report)>.

<sup>28</sup> “Chelsea Jeans: A memorial of ash-covered apparel as it was last seen by the public” *New York Historical Society Web Site*, 1 October 2006, <[https://www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=whats\\_new&page=detail\\_pr&id=6585462](https://www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=whats_new&page=detail_pr&id=6585462)>

<sup>29</sup> Joel Meyerowitz, *Aftermath*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2006.)

## Epilogue

Vergara's plans for making a monument of Detroit's ruins have been largely forgotten. The wrecking ball claimed some of the structures Vergara wanted to include in his American Acropolis. Plain horizontal forms inspired by suburban strip malls and franchise buildings have come to replace the vertical, ornate architecture of Detroit's past. *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, a sprawling website featuring hundreds of photographs of Detroit's ruins as well as images of their demolition, may be the only archive of some of these structures.<sup>1</sup> Still, this virtual testimony to ruin, like the websites devoted to Asbury Park's Casino Palace, do not constitute significant sites of memory in the same way that an actual monument or memorial, such as the Gettysburg National Military Park, does. Despite websites and photobooks, an American landscape of ruin stands apart from a landscape of national commemoration; American ruins are both omnipresent and largely unseen.

In Asbury Park, the fate of the Casino Palace remains undecided as redevelopment plans continue destined to replicate the racial and socio-economic divisions that have long plagued the community. While the quest for affordable urban housing has only become more difficult in recent years, housing projects continue to stand as abandoned ruins in many neighborhoods awaiting the wrecking-ball, as did the Aliso Village Housing Project. The plight of the Survivors' Staircase remains up for debate, but it seems unlikely that they will be allowed to stand where they do now and be incorporated in the eventual World Trade Center memorial.

What would a commemorative landscape of ruin look like? What form might an American Acropolis take beyond Detroit's skyline?

Despite a prevailing disdain for ruin, a few communities have begun to recognize and rediscover these structures through official historic designation and creative localized practices. The ruins of slave quarters have already received national recognition at sites such as the Nation Park Service's Kingsley Plantation in Florida. These sites can act as a counter balance to those Civil War military parks that do not discuss slavery as a principle cause for the war. In addition, recognizing the few ruins from Civil War destruction that remain on the landscape might provide an alternative view to a sanitized version of combat and underscore the costs of the conflict on the civilian population. For example, in "Teaching History in the Backyard," historian Andrew H. Myers describes how he and his students followed a portion of the path Gen. Sherman and his army took near Columbia, South Carolina. Confederate earthworks and the ruins of a bridge stand as evidence of the destruction from Sherman's campaign. Myers explains: "Many students tell me that they have traveled past some of the remnants for years without realizing their significance. Some are outraged by the lack of preservation efforts."<sup>2</sup> Simple markers might shed light on these ruins and this history of destruction. Incorporating the ruins of slave quarters and extant remains of Civil War combat would present an opportunity to correct omissions and to expand the narratives told about the conflict through America's commemorative landscape.

With some curatorial intervention, viewers might come to a better understanding of the history in our midst allowing ruins to function as more than "inert pieces of the

landscape, unsuffused with meaning” as James E. Young warns they might be.<sup>3</sup> Young has praised the very debates over meaning that come as a result of the commemorative process through which memorials are created, recognizing that these discussions require a community do the “memory work” that Young endorses. Debates over the kind and extent of curatorial influence that might be generated in the recognition of ruin sites could be equally important to a community.

Americans might also begin to recognize ruins even when the fate of these structures remains undecided. Communities might consider creating a special historic marker status for particular sites, such as the Casino Palace in Asbury Park, that would not necessarily prevent eventual renovation or destruction but allow for ruins to be recognized as part of a continuing process of development. Imagine a simple plaque outlining the history of the Casino Palace, for example, from its initial construction as a skating rink and arcade through the economic downturns of Asbury Park to its final incarnation a failed skateboard park and its closure. Perhaps the conversations generated around the creation of that plaque might produce debates about the history of Asbury Park and the reasons for its decline. Through these discussions, residents and non-residents alike might begin to better gauge how development could affect its future.

With historic ruins recognized on a national commemorative landscape and through the efforts of local communities, even those ruins that remain unrecognized will take on a different significance in a landscape. Industrial ruins or abandoned housing projects slated for demolition might be seen as markers of change. Artists or entrepreneurs might see these as spaces of opportunity. For example, ruins from steel

mills and coal plants have been converted into a massive park featuring rock climbing (or “ruin climbing”), snorkeling, and an outdoor concert venue in the Ruhr Valley of northwestern Germany. Officials from American cities such as Pittsburg and Buffalo have visited this site in search of models for how to make use of their industrial ruins.<sup>4</sup> Germany’s ruin park offers precisely the kind of “play” amidst the ruins that might allow Americans to come to a better understanding of the role these structures can take as sites of memory and pleasure. In addition to highlighting important aspects of our industrial history, sites such as these might offer a chance at environmental recycling in an age when many worry about limited resources.

America is a nation with ruins; in fact, it is one of the most ruinous nations in the world. It is time that these structures be seen as assets instead of eyesores. Ruins can help communities to tell the kinds of stories—about racial and economic inequalities, about nostalgia and violent change—that are often not expressed anywhere else on our landscape. These stories challenge America’s image as a land of equality and opportunity; they challenge the notion of American innocence. Through a varied and expansive response to these structures on a local and national level, involving government and private investment, ruins might come to represent more than just failures. Through these sites, America might improve upon its dialogue with its past as well as give voice to those whose experiences have historically been excluded from traditional commemorative landscapes. American communities might come to understand the role that violence has played in our development as a nation, as well as to look at the

landscape for evidence of both the negative and positive process of economic development instead of looking to it only for examples of progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Lowell Forest Boileau, *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, 14 July 2006, <<http://www.detroityes.com/home.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew H. Meyers, "Teaching History in the Backyard," *The History Teacher*, Vol 35, No. 4 (August, 2002), 459.

<sup>3</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994) 126-127.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Steinglass, "The Machine in the Garden," *Metropolis Magazine* (October 2000) <[http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content\\_1000/lat.htm](http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_1000/lat.htm)>.

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