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Washington, D.c., A Black Aesthetic, & The Politics Of Renewal

Abstract

Since 2010, Washington, D.C. has undergone major shifts in its racial demographics and property value. What was once a city that boasted a seventy percent population of black residents in the 1970s, giving it the moniker “Chocolate City,” has become an urban landscape overrun by developers, construction sites, and new residents who assist in branding the “new” Washington. What does that branding include? Not only new buildings, but an investment in an aesthetics that makes use of “Chocolate City’s” past to define its new and “authentically urban” future. I argue that despite the intentional attempt at erasure of black life and culture from the capital’s landscape, native black Washingtonians continue to produce an aesthetic birthed out of the Chocolate City of the 1970s, but decidedly invested in the contemporary focus on specificity of place. To that end, “Washington, D.C., a Black Aesthetic, & the Politics of Renewal” is an excavation of literary, film and visual artistic production as a means by which to interrogate what I identify as a new practice in black aestheticism. I articulate that black aesthetic, which I term an aesthetics of loss, as existing alongside and despite ongoing displacement and dispossession of black people and black spaces, and I enact a multi-methodological approach to get at its nuance. My work centers around black cultural curators in Washington, D.C. who use literature, film, music, and visual art to inscribe themselves and their communities as in place in the face of systemic erasure. To be clear, by “in place” I mean taking up material place, not just ideological space, on the mapping of the District of Columbia. Ultimately, this dissertation asks: What does it mean to live when you have been pronounced dead?

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Leah Barlow

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ABSTRACT

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Leah Barlow
John L. Jackson, Jr.

Since 2010, Washington, D.C. has undergone major shifts in its racial demographics and property value. What was once a city that boasted a seventy percent population of black residents in the 1970s, giving it the moniker “Chocolate City,” has become an urban landscape overrun by developers, construction sites, and new residents who assist in branding the “new” Washington. What does that branding include? Not only new buildings, but an investment in an aesthetics that makes use of “Chocolate City’s” past to define its new and “authentically urban” future. I argue that despite the intentional attempt at erasure of black life and culture from the capital’s landscape, native black Washingtonians continue to produce an aesthetic birthed out of the Chocolate City of the 1970s, but decidedly invested in the contemporary focus on specificity of place. To that end, “Washington, D.C., a Black Aesthetic, & the Politics of Renewal” is an excavation of literary, film and visual artistic production as a means by which to interrogate what I identify as a new practice in black aestheticism. I articulate that black aesthetic, which I term an aesthetics of loss, as existing alongside and despite ongoing displacement and dispossession of black people and black spaces, and I enact a multi-methodological approach to get at its nuance. My work centers around black cultural curators in Washington, D.C. who use literature, film, music, and visual art to inscribe themselves and their communities as in place in the face of systemic erasure. To be clear, by “in place” I mean taking up material place, not just ideological space, on the mapping

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Chapter 1: Introduction

HOW CAN BLACK PEOPLE WRITE ABOUT FLOWERS AT A TIME LIKE THIS.

- Hanif Abdurraqib

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,
the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"Even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."
You will be right.
For that is the hard home-run.

Live not for battles won.
Live not for the-end-of-the-song.
Live in the along.

-“Speech to the Young,” Gwendolyn Brooks

On June 5th, 2020 the words, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ were painted, in fifty-foot, yellow block letters along with the D.C. flag, in front of the White House. Formerly known as Lafayette Square, the area was renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza and a new street sign was erected officially renaming those two blocks of 16th street as Black Lives Matter Plaza NW. The new sign punctuated the clear commentary being made about exactly who this place belonged to; unlike every other sign in the city this one had a black background as opposed to the usual green. Details about the mural began to emerge in the days following its surprise arrival. The project was greenlit by Mayor Muriel Bowser on June 4th who called on local artists to complete it overnight. She and her team used the mural as a response to a series of events that had punctuated the already chaotic year that had been 2020.

A few days before, then President Donald J. Trump had used the power of police force, the National Guard, and tear gas to move peaceful protestors out of the way as he marched towards St. John's Church for a brief photo-op. George Floyd had been murdered, in broad daylight and on camera, causing an international response to the continued acts of police violence against black bodies. Expectedly, protestors showed up in Washington as they did in cities and small towns across the country. However, this was not just any city; this was the nation's capital where protestors are not novel. Trump's choice to enact police force to march through the protest for a picture in front of the church, his own attempt to send out visual cues aligning himself and his cabinet with an America whose principles of Christianity were presented as in opposition to the protests, situated themselves in a long tradition of weaponized religion thinly veiled as upholding American values.

However, Washington, the most visible and volatile frontier of America's performance of nation-making and claiming as the national capital, is not only a memorial site for the United States or home to transient political leadership. It has its own citizens and governing body whose presence, although oftentimes dwarfed by national legislature, remains a part of that national conversation simply because its space continues to take up place on the landscape of the District. While some critiqued Bowser's aesthetic installation as "performative," a flashy retort that did not and would not equate to any legitimate social or political change for Washington natives, the mural would be replicated by cities across the country over the next couple of months. Why? The street mural, accompanied by the street name change, was a reminder of the power of laying spatial claim. If you are not familiar with Washington, the mural is not only steps

away from the White House, but dead center in tourists' terrain. 2020 and the accompanying lockdowns caused by Covid-19 had seen a halt to most of that tourism, but the space remained marked for visitors. The city not only claimed the public street associated with a national idea of Washington as a site for blackness, life, and matter, but also safe space for local Washingtonians with the inclusion of the city's flag. What would seem to be a simple visual cue is one cog in what I argue is the turning wheel of a new black aestheticism birthed out of deep investments in laying claim to place.

Indeed, the mural, which is now, as of 2021, expected to be a permanent fixture on those two blocks of 16th street NW, was a visual embodiment of Katherine McKittrick's assertion that "who we see is tied up in where we see" and an attempt to decenter and then recenter what "bodies belong" and what bodies do not (xv). In other words, it was a local and national tug-of-war premised on a recognition of the "hardening of spatial binaries" brought on by hegemonic structures- a hardening that excludes black people and erases or makes invisible black spaces- by reminding those in power that those binaries are pliable.

When the mural was finished, it was not just a symbol of the fight against police violence, but also a symbol of complicated ways in which we grapple with loss for there was much at stake. The words 'black lives matter' were being written in response to very public death. The words were written up against a backdrop of the longstanding tensions between Washington's local political players and its national ones. Washington was, and is still, without the political and economic power granted by statehood- a fight that makes its story unique on the US mainland. The long history of contention between a local governing body and the power still held, unlike any other city, by federal officials, had

been a losing battle that denied Washington the government representation granted its national counterparts.

The words were also written amid the ongoing dispossession of native black Washingtonians in a city greatly impacted by the overhaul caused by hypergentrification. The D.C. flag was painted to claim not only black space, making it clear that black people and allies were safe and welcome, but a safe space endorsed by and for black Washingtonians as well. But, was it truly? I argue that the mural, as an aesthetic marker, holds its spatial weight. It is capacious enough to enclose both empowerment and disillusion- what we have and what we do not. This example of centering space and place in aesthetic production that creates an open and complex site for a serious explication of the social conditions, history, lived experiences, and identity of any given landscape is the work that undergirds a new moment in black art.

Keeping the image of the words, 'Black Lives Matter' embedded on the concrete of Washington in mind, this dissertation provides a frame, a way by which to understand, the black aesthetic that exists at the juncture of systemic loss, yet, an insistence on continuing to, to quote Gwendolyn Brooks, live in the along. I call this an aesthetics of loss and am interested in examining gentrification and its impact not as the star in the contemporary show of Washington's landscape, but as a sort of flat, and over-written villain in comparison to the robust work of black cultural curators who use literature, film, music, and visual art to inscribe themselves and their communities as in place in the face of systemic and ongoing erasure¹. To be clear, by "in place" I mean to acknowledge

¹I lean on Sabiyah Prince's definition of gentrification. She writes, "Gentrification is what occurs when communities experience an influx of capital and concomitant goods and services in locales where those resources were previously non-existent or denied" (2).

the differences between space and place; I read place as immobile and space as fluid. If space operates in a sort of abstract as what Thadious Davis calls the “felt experiential reality along with the metaphorical or symbolic undergirding,” then place speaks to the mappable locale of an event or structure.

That said, certainly, I do not mean to present this aesthetic as “new,” in and of itself, or even exclusive to Washington although I am invested in the specificity of loss of place and space in the District of Columbia. I also do not mean to evoke the term ‘black aesthetic’ to insist on one “true” black aestheticism. I lean on Margo Crawford’s conceptualization of black post-blackness to define black aestheticism which is to say that a black aesthetic can be both open to the layered, shifting, and ever-evolving presentation of black life thus no longer needing a name, and yet also, as Crawford states, live in the space of “obviously” with all of the expectations set forth by the histories of the African diasporas.

I do, however, situate the work done by the artists as in direct relation to the Black Lives Matter movement, which critiques and resists systemic black loss, and posit that an aesthetics of loss should be thought as in the lineage of a soul aesthetic, black arts movement, post-soul, and, even, post-black aesthetic that has taken up academic inquiry in the past. I argue that by focusing on black aesthetic producers in Washington who critique loss at the hands of the police with the same ferocity as they critique loss at the hands of politicians, developers, and new residents, we can begin to think through the resonances that exist between local political fights for place and aesthetic production alongside national ones. Most importantly for my work, we can examine the significant role space and place play in the ways black artists envision and then execute an aesthetic

that interrogates loss of place *and* personhood by tackling the violence wrought by dispossession.

To that end, I argue that the cultural curators whose work I examine in this contemporary moment are first, claiming the immutability of place alongside the fluidity of space. While scholars of black geography have, rightly, focused on the agency that reading geographical *spaces* allow, especially because of the histories of violence, dispossession, or exclusion that may be connected to mapped places, I am interested in how black native Washingtonians continue to lay claim to the infrastructure, both built and natural, of shifting places.

Second, I examine how black people and a black aesthetic continue to center themselves despite the brutality brought by hypercapitalism and birthed in the form of gentrification. D.C. is the perfect place to interrogate a black aesthetic because its origin, the way that native Washingtonians define the city, is as Chocolate City. Claiming the nation's capital as black space provides an entry point into shifting our idea of black spaces as imagined or futuristic, just out of reach, to real and lived experiences that shape our geographic relationship to our national identity, whether we know it or not. Any black aesthetic birthed out of Washington and in relation to its place, at this point, is birthed out of that belief in the city as black, first, and with all of the complexities that truly *seeing* a black space can offer. It erases an idealized version of blackness to help its viewer to the beautiful, messy, unidentifiable-and-yet-knowable blackness that true expressions of life will always procure. Tina Campt calls this “radical forms of

witnessing” that forces its spectator to do the necessary work to uncover, digest, and sit with whatever the black space produces².

Finally, I offer those black cultural curators are not only memorializing the history of black spaces in the District, or even only examining the possibility of black space that can in exist in a future of the city-scape/place, but laying claim to the *present* of black places and spaces. This is particularly important in combatting a gentrification in Washington that, as Brandi Summers argues, is most invested in taking up what might be seen as the quotidian:

...the current hyperinvestment in lifestyle amenities has very little to do with increasing the value of the space. A new dog spa or craft brewery does not necessarily generate more capital than a beauty salon or local drug store. This is gentrification in the age of neoliberalism: visual consumption enacted by the aestheticization of culture and public space. The gentrified landscape is decidedly urban, but with aesthetic “upgrades” as it reflects the coupling of the new economy with new urbanism. (16)

Put simply, there is a “new” gentrification in town. These more subtle shifts in the culture of community are precisely why we must read the legibility of black place and black space; both are a part of the *here* and *now* of Washington, D.C. A focus on temporality, specificity of place, and value animates my research and, as will be seen throughout, undergirds my interest in what I term Black Spatial Loss (BSL), Black Spatial Temporality (BST), and Black Spatial Value (BSV) as the three major tenets of an aesthetics of loss.

Black Aestheticism

²Campt, Tina M. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. MIT Press, 2021. (17).

The word that has the critical inquiry, history, and subsequent philosophy guiding this dissertation is, undoubtedly, the ‘aesthetic.’ Add the descriptor, black, and suddenly you are laden with determining whether you are talking about the Black Aesthetic or a black aesthetic- the former reference signaling a particular time and place and the critical layers of praise and critique that accompany it. I will situate my reading of contemporary black aestheticism up against the Black Aesthetic later, but, first, I would like to provide some context for the thinkers whose analysis of a black aesthetic I lean on most.

Sten Pultz Moslund’s work on aestheticism in his book, *Literature’s Sensuous Geographies: Postcolonial Matters of Place*, gets back to aesthetic’s root, the Greek word ‘aisthesis’, and provides the point of reference for my own reading of aestheticism. Moslund states that “aisthesis [is a reference] to that which is produced by bodily feeling or sensory experience” (10). Moslund’s approach to literature coincides with his turn towards the experience of literature; in other words, to read literature as “an event of bodily sensations” (10). I find this framing useful as I think about the interconnectedness between body and building as produced in an aesthetics exploring the loss of place.

One example would be the Black Lives Matter mural inscribed on the two blocks of 16th Street Northwest in Washington. I return there because while there was praise for the mural- the words so heavy with the political and cultural public denial of antiblackness- there was also strong critique. Some twitter users expressed immediate disdain noting the difference between what they called a performance of political power by Mayor Bowser, and the very real needs of native black Washingtonians³. The words,

³ @transhooofund tweeted, “You have terrorized Black people in DC. You consistently give money to developers while cutting funds for housing. You refuse to release people who are incarcerated during COVID-19. You refuse to invest in public transportation and you continue to increase policing budget” on

adorned by the image of Washington's flag, had called forth the physical manifestation of an aesthetic that prompted a bodily response *precisely* because it was about the body. The most glaring criticism came in the form of an unauthorized addition to the mural: a removal of the three stars above the D.C. flag and the words "Defund the Police" added on the end. The mural now read, "Black Lives Matter = Defund the Police." What I found most interesting about this interaction between local politics and federal politics, followed by local politics and local activists, was the ways in which the aesthetic was capacious enough to be both more-than-enough in its audacious presentation, and yet not enough. This aesthetic claimed place by evoking Washington's flag- making it a powerful statement- but also opened a door for the spotlight to shine on what exactly it would mean for black lives to matter in the District of Columbia.

This reorientation of the power of aesthetics tied to geography in the contemporary moment is situated in a black aesthetic tradition that has always, in one way or another, dealt with the intangible, but lived, marker of value. This occurs even the more, in a movement that declares black life, and in proxy blackness, as worthy, necessary, and life-giving. That said, as was the critique of the mural, aesthetic modes of articulating value have been highly criticized. Recent response to the announcement that Maya Angelou would become the first black woman to have her likeness on an American quarter

June 5th 2020, at 10:59 AM. @DMVBlackLives tweeted "After making our lives hell for 6 years. How dare you use Black death to co-opt a movement you've fought, attacked, devalued and dismissed since it's inception. NOT TODAY MURIEL" on June 5th 2020 at 12:25 PM.

However, this is where place-making, and all the realities of the value of space and impact of dispossession, can help to recapture the importance of the aesthetic. Lewis Gordon, known for rendering Frantz Fanon's work as forethinker to the philosophical study of Afropessimism, writes in a way I find most compelling about aesthetics in, "Black Aesthetics/Black Value." He positions aestheticism as one part of the multiple spatial terrains that make up any given place stating

A manifestation of reality disclosed through the communicative and symbolic richness of language is culture, which, too, is a dimension. As should be evident, no dimension is self-contained by instead functions as a key to the manifestations, simultaneously, of other aspects of reality. Aesthetic reality is such. It emerges as how human beings live as deserving value in its full range, from meaning to absurdity, to pleasure to disgust, joy to sadness, and imagination to ritualized repetition. Aesthetics is not, then, the dessert we have after our nutritional needs have been met but instead, as perhaps also dessert should be understood, part of the entire constellation of meeting such needs. It is as central to what it means to live a human life as the various other converging dimensions of human existence. This means not delinking aesthetics from freedom and metacritical reflections on reason." (24)

It is Gordon's work that opens the possibility for a geographic terrain *as* aesthetics. This profound implication of aesthetics thusly foregrounds cultural production as a site by which one can claim true value and, I would argue, meaningful cultural change.

Paul C. Taylor further concretizes this point with the assertion that

"Insisting on agency, beauty, and meaning in the face of oppression, despair, and death is obviously central to a tradition, if it is that, that counts people like Toni Morrison, Aaron Douglas, and Zora Neale Hurston among its participants.

[...] reflecting on this activity is central, I will also want to say, to the philosophical study of black aesthetics." (2)

I separate these sentences intentionally- they are a part of the same paragraph- to highlight the importance of Taylor's words. For Taylor, the aesthetic is "agency, beauty, and meaning" despite, and in spite, of "oppression, despair, and death." These, Taylor

states, make up a philosophical study of black aesthetics. This point lends itself to another that this dissertation relies on from Taylor: an aesthetics foregrounded by “agency, beauty, and meaning” is best thought of as an assembly⁴.

In order to understand The Sixties, Taylor explains, one must consider that the period is a conglomerate of varied intimate memories, historical moments, and origin narratives. This denies the possibility of one, central aesthetic that can be understood as “authentic” to blackness, but instead an aesthetic that, as he states, is best understood as “essentially philosophic preoccupations that routinely animate and surround the cultural work of black peoples” (2c). While Taylor’s philosophy of black aesthetics certainly informs the way I approached writing about the literature, film, festival, and visual art that lies at the heart of this work, it also informed how I approached the dissertation, itself.

The multi-modal approach that I chose for this work stems from the belief in aesthetics as an assembly of various modes of artistic production that constructs the whole. This dissertation attempted to attend to the literature, film, visual art, and festival site as separate aesthetic sites, to harken back towards Gordon, but as needing an approach that embodied the theoretical claims. For that purpose, the excavation of an aesthetics of loss *should* feel both fractured and, yet, still undoubtedly conjoined in the connections made across departmental lines, modes of meaning making, and forms of

⁴ In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Alexander Weheliye describes assemblages as, “inherently productive, entering into polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on” (46). Assemblages will always produce although, Weheliye reminds us, production as liberatory is not guaranteed. There is, however, a possibility for liberation and it is that possibility, alongside Taylor’s use for assembly, that makes, ‘assemblage,’ a worthwhile entrance into black aestheticism on contested landscapes.

articulating black life and thought. It should challenge, in the way that assemblages must, our ideas of who or what belongs together- who can be housed under the same academic umbrella- when expressing black aesthetic thought.

Alongside Taylor and Gordon as anchors in my approach to black aestheticism, I also rely on scholars who take particular interest in blackness and the black gaze as a way by which to approach aestheticism. Gentrification's specific work is to erase black people, to refuse to *see* black people even as it takes up and consumes blackness, so bringing forth the theoretical necessity of interpreting who and what a black gaze creates, imagines, and calls forth is central to a black aesthetics produced by native black Washingtonians. It is even more so for a work that is interested in the aesthetic navigation of loss. Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* provides the language needed to that effect as it pays "careful attention to visual practices of black artists and the psychic and affective domains of seeing and doing black" (15). Fleetwood challenges scholarship that is only interested in critiquing black people as the object of a white gaze, and instead suggests a turn towards exploring how black artists "challenge scopic regimes" by "presenting the black body as a troubling figuration to visual discourse" (17-18). In other words, what is the intentional and deliberate work done by black artists who use the "troubling" location of the black body in the visual production of white supremacy? How do those artists decode, reposition, and reproduce art rooted in the experience of being black, and seeing through that positionality, within the African diaspora? For an aesthetics of loss, this gets at the repositioning of black aesthetic producers as central to the dialogue about gentrification.

Tina Campt lays out similar stakes in her work, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, where she argues that there is a group of contemporary black artists who posit a new query

rather than looking at Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to see oneself through the complex positionality that is blackness- and work through its implications on and for oneself? (7)

Campt offers that this new way of seeing is meant to challenge a passive engagement with black art. As she states: “their work requires labor- the labor of discomfort, feeling, positioning, and repositioning- and solicits visceral responses to the visualization of Black precarity” (17). To work for the meaning in what you see, rather than to assume its meaning, refuses the flattening of old stereotypes or the rehashing of exhausted themes. Like Fleetwood, Campt offers that those artists are taking control not only of the presentation of their own images, but how the viewer sees those images as well. Black artists are constructing sight with the same veracity that they construct the art itself. In fact, that construct is built into the art production.

Most importantly, though, Campt argues that shaping sight is also about sitting in the “disorientation and unease [and] implication and vulnerability” that comes when we recognize our own involvement in the precarity of black life (18). The artists who amended the Black Lives Matter mural in Washington, D.C. to include “= Defund the Police” are one such example of reshaping the visual to include a direct message and indictment of local D.C. government. Ultimately, black artists’ interpretation of contemporary Washington, which is not only about the visibility of black Washingtonians but about their vision of the city, provides the framework necessary for reading black aesthetic work in the place of Washington, D.C.

I build on Gordon, Taylor, Fleetwood, and Camp to think through aesthetics, but diverge in two places: my specific focus on place and space and, more broadly, how I align an aesthetics of loss with the political moment defined by the Black Lives Matter movement. I situate this dissertation as an intellectual descendant of Marc Anthony Neal's ruminations on the post-soul aesthetic, Greg Tate's post-liberated black aesthetic, and Margo Natalie Crawford's inquiry into the production of art considered black, post-blackness⁵. All three attempt to define black artistic production following the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movement that must grapple with the realities of black life post political movement. Neal's *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* is a critical exploration of a black aesthetic that refuses the "respectability" of the sonic or visual often deemed necessary by a former Civil Rights movement. Neal is interested in an intraracial conversation about black art that can diverge away from heteronormative conceptualizations of blackness and towards those who are consistently marginalized in black communities. The black artists that Neal explores are

folks born between the 1963 March on Washington and the *Bakke* case, children of soul, if you will, who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarrative on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past (back in the days of Harlem, or the thirteenth-century motherland, for that matter), but firmly in grasp

⁵ Besides Neal's soul babies, Greg Tate describes those post-liberated folks born in the 1960s and 1970s in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* as babies born with all the civil liberties fought for and won by those during the Civil Rights movement, and yet operating under the realization that those liberties were, still, not fully extended to black living. The art produced out of this moment is interested in defining blackness in new ways that trouble the absoluteness of race, think Trey Ellis' "The New Black Aesthetic," yet still grappling with blackness in late 20th century America. Margo Crawford describes post-blackness in *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts movement and twenty-first century aesthetics*. Crawford is interested in contemporary black artists who bring forth elements of the Black Arts Movement into their work to explore black aestheticism. Both Crawford and Tate, as well as Ellis and Neal, recognize the importance politics play in defining black aesthetic production- especially that aesthetic production that is so tied to defining black people up against a nation-state that denied their humanity at the onslaught. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement has provided a new political artistic point and particularly around loss.

of the existential concerns of this brave new world. (3)

Neal's arrival at this group of artists, and those artists in relation to the Civil Rights movement, offered a foothold for my own growing suspicion that there was an artistic tradition following the Black Lives Matter movement that needed to be attended to as well. This group had adopted and even expounded on the work done by their artistic forepersons. Challenging notions of respectable blackness (think the popular festival, Afropunk) by not only centering queer and black women's voices but taking on the project of querying conceptualizations of blackness in totality, is directly tied to imagining the various value-place (or mattering-places) that blackness inhabits in the presumable post-blackness.

Even further removed from the first-person memories recalling the Civil Rights movement, the group of artists in Washington's contemporary moment are millennials who had experienced the contradictory nature of *this* black experience. Former President Obama's election embodied what some of their elders may have considered the pinnacle of Civil Rights success, yet there was the growing terror that no laws or class status could save or rescue them from antiblackness. Add to that the ever-circulating images of black death accessible and often suggested via social media sites at any place or time, and you have the fertilized grounds for artistic voice to ferment. That fragmented reality, and I mean in both the literal sense- Obama would be followed by the election of Donald Trump- and in the meta-experience of the digital world, had no choice but to produce a new aesthetic movement.

Black Geography

My interest in aesthetics, as I have stated, is rooted solidly in place and space. The work of scholars in black geography certainly sits at the helm of not only my theoretical foray into an aesthetics of loss, but my methodology as well. There is a way one must read black place and space, and black geographical scholarship has cultivated an analytic blueprint. Camilla Hawthorne's, "Black matters are spatial matters: Black geographies for the twenty-first century," claims that the importance of Black geographical study in the twenty-first century is its ability to counteract "the deadly entanglements of white supremacy, capitalism, settler colonialism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity today call for careful attention to the connections between place, space, and power" (2). I stand firmly in her assertion. The "entanglements" of power that have long histories of erasing the voices of marginalized people, and specifically those whose bloodlines are in the African diaspora, also have a rich set of interlocutors who unpack and deconstruct its intentions⁶. In fact, those conversations preceded the formal introduction to black geographic studies that exists today; the geography of blackness is foundational in black studies. You cannot think about diaspora without navigating space, place, and the hegemonic forces that construct the two.

⁶ Sadiyah Hartman's *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America* and *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route* are the intellectual forethinkers to my work, in this capacity. While my focus is not on the Atlantic slave route, or its resonances explicitly, the scholarship done by Hartman to evoke philosophical and historical thought around the intersection of (dis)placed people and (de)humanized black bodies enlivens my approach to recognizing the ways native black Washingtonians use art to think about the intersections between place and time, place and space, and place and value.

Yet, as I think about this contemporary aesthetic moment as in direct response to a political and social climate defined by the valuing of black bodies in relation to those “entanglements,” I also think about how we might locate an, as Neal terms it, “aesthetic center” that claims a place and all the nuances that claiming a place entails. Before we see the visual artist in action on a reel uploaded to social media site Instagram, watch a film via our favorite streaming service, or listen to the book through an application service like audible, what does our preconceived knowledge about the place of that cultural production do for how we see the aesthetic? Certainly, this is one of those questions that makes its expected rounds in any basic English course, but black geographical studies asks us to acknowledge the deeply rooted histories of capitalism, racism, and sexism that molds everything mappable from the rivers to lakes, paved to dirt roads, and sidewalks to skyscrapers.

The stakes, then, of a black aesthetics that intersects with the intricate layers that make up place and space calls forth the expectation of what a mapped aesthetic, an aesthetic deliberate about claiming place, is expected to tell us about who or what should be allowed or produced on that landscape. In *Geographies of Exclusion*, David Shibley writes about the history of casting “imperfect people” to the edges of geographical spaces. He says

There is a history of imaginary geographies which cast minorities, ‘imperfect’ people, and a list of others who are seen to pose a threat to the dominant group in society as polluting bodies of folk devils who are then located ‘elsewhere’. This elsewhere might be nowhere, as when genocide or the moral transformation of a minority like prostitutes are advocated, or it might be some spatial periphery, like the edge of the world or the edge of the city. [...] Thus, values associated with conformity or authoritarianism are expressed in maps which relegate others to places distant from the locales of the dominant majority. (49)

The power of the “imaginary geography” often results in the realized displacement of large groups of people. For the purposes of this work, the most obvious culprit is gentrification, but, as I will parse out further, the function of consistent exclusion for communities like the Anacostia community of Southeast Washington, D.C. exists beyond the current push for the displacement and dispossession of working or underclass black people.

It is also important to remember that the “imaginary geography” of Washington includes the infrastructure of Americanness. D.C. is a shrine for who and what it means to be included in the national dialogue with memorials for Presidents and national heroes, alike. The collision of the production of Washington as a space for defining America, the nation, and the citizens who locate and define Washington, the local homescape produces what Davis refers to as “collective shaping” that “links power, politics, and articulations with race and space” (12). While Davis’ scholarship is southern facing, confronting the notion of “the South” in literature, their framework for pivoting towards black Southern writers who “use their spatial location to imagine, create, and define new and unproscribed subjectivities” provided the framework for my own investments in combatting the further marginalization of black aesthetic producers by proclaiming them dead, and thus unable to speak towards, for, or about their own positionality as black Washingtonians (13).

Katherine McKittrick also makes a compelling, and discipline-guiding, claim about the possibilities of space for reclaiming black women’s subjectivities. At the conclusion of *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*,

McKittrick argues for a poetics of landscape as a vehicle by which black women's geographies can be wrested from the assumption of the "natural" map. She says

Our environment, our cities and towns, our borders, our maps, continually render the world around us a simply given; we move through and around its familiar and unfamiliar and unchanging arrangements: space just is. To challenge something that "just is," as many subaltern subjects have, can be a very threatening geographic act; it is punishable, erasable, and oppositional. (145)

Still, she offers that there is possibility for the "alterability" of space and place if we recognize the possibilities of geography imbued by humanness- a theoretical claim that would force us to consider the tensions between "black women's geographies and geographic domination" but, still, find ways of making new meanings that will illicit "new geographic practices" (146). While I do not specifically focus on black women, like with Davis, I use McKittrick as a frame by which to imagine geographic possibilities for native black Washingtonians who are aesthetic producers. I evoke what McKittrick terms 'communicative expressions' for that reason; there is much that artistic practices can tell us about life outside of the map-as-given. Even the more, than, I argue that the geographical identity, the map, that matches the United States' propensity for anti-black practices must be unpacked in the terms provided by both aestheticism and black geography.

Where I diverge from Davis and McKittrick's framing of black geographical practice, is in my insistence on place as the critical site that offers a way by which to parse out the theoretical terms that can define black aestheticism in this contemporary moment. Henri Lefebvre's idea of representational space, "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols," informs my reading of space and place as separate locales requiring separate inquiries. As Lefebvre states, "[space] overlays physical

space,” what I am calling place, by conjuring symbols and images that are tied to what he terms the “underground” of social life (33, 38-39). Indeed, space, as I have already discussed, is what structures Washington, D.C. as memorial site in the national imaginary. It is also, though, what gives black artists in Washington room to cultivate and express a counter-map. That said, it is the seemingly *unalterable* place, to lean on McKittrick once more, that is integral to this dissertation. I am interested in how black artists navigate the materiality of the streets, alleyways, bridges, and sidewalks. In what ways do they express the realities of place- including the reality of dispossession- but still lay claim to the built environment?

Displacement & Dispossession

The scholarly interest in gentrification is broad and ever-growing. The literature is a direct reflection of the number of cities across the country which have, at different times, experienced the onslaught of developers looking to capitalize as early as possible on urban centers. The goal? Purchase properties for the lowest possible investment but gain a greater return. Of course, that simple refrain is depressingly complex. A story map produced through ArcGIS titled, “Mapping Gentrification in Washington, D.C.” revealed that between the years 2000 and 2018 the majority of Northeast Washington saw between a 15% and 70% decrease in their black population⁷. The increase in home population topped 360% with the study reporting that housing around Howard University had

⁷ Golash-Boza, Tanya. “Mapping Gentrification in Washington D.C.” ArcGIS StoryMaps, Esri, 31 Oct. 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/009773cc5c224421a66d1ce9ff089849>.

reached 354% in home value as compared to the median increase of 91%⁸. These statistics all point to a “back to the city movement,” a reference to the influx of residents back into the center city as opposed to the historic “flight” into the suburbs that took place decades earlier, that Derek Hyra recognizes as having “social consequences for low-income residents able to remain in place as more affluent populations enter their community” (1754).

Hyra focuses on political and cultural displacement to imagine the impact of not only residential changes, shifts in home ownership or rates that attract affluent renters, but changes in local political power and communal priorities for the community of native black Washingtonians who remain in the District. The displacement of the Metropolitan Baptist Church gives one example. Hyra describes the church’s attempt to maintain presence in the community where it was founded during the Civil War. Political players, new residents now in positions of power, were working overtime to remove the longstanding community pillar and ultimately succeeded. Parking, among other issues, was used to force the church to find a new home as the grassed open area attached to a local school that church members had used prior was now being argued by new neighbors as the necessary space for a dog park⁹. While Hyra does not call this spatial violence, I must pause to emphasize the deeply problematic and traumatic impact this sort of cultural colonization does to an existing community. Statistics break down into the lived

⁸ Golash-Boza, Tanya. “Mapping Gentrification in Washington D.C.” ArcGIS StoryMaps, Esri, 31 Oct. 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/009773cc5c224421a66d1ce9ff089849>.

⁹Hyra, Derek. “The Back-to-the-City Movement: Neighbourhood Redevelopment and Processes of Political and Cultural Displacement.” *Urban Studies*, vol. 52, no. 10, Sage Publications, Ltd., 2015, pp. 1762-1763.

experiences of residents fighting to maintain homescapes that include the social and cultural centers instituted to undergird black communal experience.

Those who have used spaces formerly constructed as undesirable to find affordable housing are priced out of neighborhoods now being marketed as prime real estate. If not priced out, new communal norms are fortified to squeeze past the last of who is deemed unable to comply with the culture of the upgraded cityscape. In “The Capital of Diversity: Neoliberal Development and the Discourse of Difference in Washington, D.C.,” Justin T. Maher describes the response of longtime residents in the Capital Heights community of Northwest Washington. He captures the all too familiar praise and critique that follows community amenities meant to attract the tenants that would occupy overpriced high-rises. Black residents who once made up the majority of the Capital Heights population were now being reframed as a part of an old community that could not overcome disinvestment- despite the decades of activism demanding the capital needed to add economic value to the neighborhood (981)

That historical cooptation is part of a larger process that contorts and erases the “old” Columbia Heights and the longtime residents of color that populate(d) it in order to make room for the “new” Columbia Heights. Narratives of revitalization tend to underplay the existence of the thousands of residents that stayed in Columbia Heights and fought for resources during major disinvestment, instead focusing on incoming residents’ and developers’ more “successful” attempts to redevelop a neighborhood. In this narrative, the agency and resistance of longtime residents disappears, making it easier for incoming residents to assert rhetorical and material over a space once defined as hostile. (986)

By bulldozing over, literally and figuratively, the presence of active community members who had already marked their place as valuable, residents can initiate Columbia Heights as blank space. Blank spaces have no need for incoming residents to take social or economic responsibility at the singular level leaving room for what Sonya A. Grier and

Vanessa G. Perry call a “faux diversity.” This faux diversity, or fabricated interest in the “authentic” diverse cityscape, is supported by marketing research, according to Grier and Perry, and suggests that these “diversity seekers’ invest in diversity-related activities and environments and proactively seek out products, services, and experiences of cultures different from their own” (26). This interesting group of residents emphasizes the importance of considering gentrification’s impact at “street level,” so to speak. The local processes of gentrification bring with them a layer of consumption beyond the newly bought homes that statistical evidence about gentrification often foreground. This is an enacted, everyday level of gentrification.

The practice of hypercapitalism elicits a vast array of responses across academic disciplines, but I am most interested in responses to gentrification that think about the local processes of dispossession. In other words, I am interested in scholarship that examines the quotidian response to gentrifying locales. Alex Werth and Eli Marienthal point to this practice in their article, “Gentrification as a grid of meaning: On bounding the deserving public of Oakland First Fridays,” where they argue an ethnographic approach to understanding the process of gentrification- gentrification as a “grid of meaning”- that considers the way “actors draw on and produce locally specific constellations of meaning and memory to construct political communities that make legible particular identities and claims” (720). This approach to gentrification, or what I prefer to refer to as dispossession to highlight the minutiae of loss of place, is interested in how systemic inequity is navigated, day-by-day, by those who are most impacted. It gives life to statistics by exploring the contours of a “deserving public.” They argue

By deserving public we mean a commonsense notion of the legitimate political

community that, spanning every day and institutional settings, orders relations of rights and responsibilities among different actors and agencies. While it draws on historical notions of community [...] the deserving public is not a stable formation. Instead, it is continually adopted and rearticulated to demarcate rights and responsibilities in ways that affect the transformation of the city. In other words, we argue that gentrification is not only the sum of political-economic practices [...] ‘gentrification’ is also a prominent, if not primary, means through which a wide array of people experience and perform their relational identities and claims. (721)

Situating ourselves as readers of the *process* of gentrification, rather than assuming a result, preempts any argument that would displace native black Washingtonians as active interlocutors in their own communities. Documenting the work of active interlocutors, as I have chosen to do, is an act of defying the assumed and pre-scripted “commonsensical” of gentrification’s insidious practices that define who is “deserving” of life on the land. It is also, though a way of reading the mutability of humanness and geography that McKittrick ultimately argues is necessary for the work of unpacking “ungeographic blackness.”

John Jackson provides more depth to this point in his book, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* where he queries the parameters of real and ideal spaces in Harlem, New York. Jackson argues that their interest lies in, “the realisms and idealisms of everyday forms of African Americanness, everyday forms sometimes obscured from ethnographic view as a function of their taken-for-granted proximity and visibility” (39). Jackson takes up the “privatization of public space,” the sidewalk, as a site for intraracial class tensions and site for claiming place for black residents in Harlem on the outside of middle-class privilege. He argues

Whether or not poorer Harlemites are being displaced from their homes, there are very obvious examples of the ways in which middle-class uses of space (and a concomitant Disneyfication that evacuates all conspicuous class differences from the public sphere) accomplish a certain social displacement from public view,

imposing an obviously class-inflected loss of access to certain public locales. It is a displacement that, coupled with “quality of life” policing, fuels the fires of antagonism that rage along the cement sidewalk spaces of many urban cities. (54)

The sidewalk, then, becomes the place for “individual ownership [...] an ownership of space that money cannot actually buy” (54). Jackson’s framing of the sidewalk as its own nuanced locale for a reclamation of ownership and thereby a publicly claimed ‘private’ by some Harlemites, and the sense of self engendered by this spatial negotiation, comes into direct theoretical play with my own tendency towards recognizing the ways that those most impacted by gentrification are challenging the loss of place, the built environment, as much as the space.

Although my ethnographic work may, on the surface, seem to elide the everyday practice of place-making by native black Washingtonians in its focus on aesthetic production that disrupts, or erupts as I will argue, gentrification’s narrative of a Chocolate City, I contend that the literature, film, festivals, and visual artist who defined the theory that this work sits within, were deeply invested in enacting the “sidewalk” in their aesthetic production. The direct challenge to what Jackson calls, the “reprivatizing [of] public space” is rooted in acknowledging the distinct aesthetic production that highlights the built environment of place. I argue that alongside critiquing the built spatial environment, the cultural ways neighborhoods are constructed to promote a specific idea of the city, the opportunity for seeing black people as active resisters to deconstructing and reconstructing the physical place of Washington is to, at the quotidian level, recognize the critical importance of the materiality of gentrifying locales. What is the experience of a gutted-out building? What is the experience of seeing the manifestation

of years of developer's planning come to fruition in the form of a demolished community landmark? How do artists articulate that experience while still communicating value?

There are a few book-long studies on gentrification in Washington, D.C., specifically, that inform this work. The first is Derek Hyra's *Race, Class, and Politics in the Cappuccino City*. Hyra's focus on the redevelopment of the U Street/Shaw neighborhood in Washington gives further credence to Summers attempt, which was referenced earlier, to help readers to shift how they may think about contemporary gentrifying practices.

Shaw/U Street's redevelopment processes are much more complicated and complex. For instance, several White newcomers proclaim that they sought this particular community because it represents an opportunity to experience and participate in an "authentic" Black space. [...] Inner-city real estate developers name their new luxury buildings after celebrated African Americans, such as Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington. Area restaurants mimic this African American naming game: Marvin, which acknowledge DC-born Motown sensation Marvin Gaye, is one of the most popular eateries along 14th Street. Thus, as the neighborhood redevelops it retains part of its African American identity, and this identity is critical to the making of the gilded ghetto. Rather than abandoning its Black history, Shaw/U Street's revitalization is closely tied to the community's African American past. (9)

Hyra goes onto examine what they call "micro segregation," segregation practices at the community level of a seemingly "model mixed-race, mixed income" neighborhood, in the U Street neighborhood claiming that surface diversity does not equate to equality in political or cultural power. Ultimately, they couch their findings in the analytic frame of a "Cappuccino City"- a direct ode to Washington's widely known nickname of "Chocolate City"- and a means by which to grapple with the history of racial and economic shifts in an urban neighborhood defined, formerly, as black space.

Hyra also coedits a volume on gentrification in D.C. with Sabiyah Prince titled, *Capital Dilemma: growth and inequality in Washington, D.C.* that I find important to my

work¹⁰. Unlike, *Race, Class, and Politics in the Cappuccino City, Capital Dilemma* features scholars whose work covers multiple neighborhoods, and multiple aspects, of a gentrifying Washington. Most salient to this research was the work on aestheticism by Summers who further expounds on the “neoliberal aesthetics of cool” in their book, *Black in Place: the Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*. Our shared interest in aestheticism, black geographies, and Washington, D.C. makes this work closest to my own and, certainly, should be read as in direct conversation. Pivoting away from U Street, Summers work tackles the increasingly popular H Street Corridor. There, Summers’ work teases out the aesthetic turns made by incoming businesses and developers that directly appeal to the popular tone of urban blackness but is disinterested in black people.

Theorizing “black aesthetic emplacement,” Summers argues blackness is deployed in the neoliberal city to “fortify public order, organize landscapes, and foster

¹⁰ Sabiyah Prince’s *African Americans and Gentrification in Washington, D.C.: race, class, and social justice in the nation’s capital* is another scholarly work on gentrification and D.C. that thinks about the impact of shifting economic, political, and cultural tides in Washington, but, unlike others, her ethnographic exploration of Washington is centered around the lives and voices of black Washingtonians most impacted by gentrifying locales. In addition, she is interested in the activist work done to push back against gentrification. Similar to Jackson, Prince is interested in intraracial class dynamics; she highlights the voices and experiences of poorer black Washingtonians along with those who are economically middle-class. Most importantly, Prince writes about the (im)possibility of dispossession, or more broadly capitalism, to save communities in economic peril. They write

A focus on power relations has concrete implications for social justice. Real people exist behind the statistics of growing inequality in Washington, D.C. and many advocates for these populations do not see gentrification as the solution for extricating people from the dire economic conditions that confront the poor daily. This debate rages at a time when anti-poverty, grassroots activists are going up against developers, politicians and their surrogates to mitigate gentrification’s effects. Conflict is occurring with local governmental officials, leaders in commerce, and the beneficiaries of gentrification who have emphasized the importance of growing the city and its tax base and marketing profile. On the other side of the argument are organizers and activists advocating to increase budgetary allotments for children’s education and recreation, job training, affordable housing, and other needs for working class residents. By conducting field research I learned how and why social justice advocates do not envision gentrification as the vehicle through which more equitable conditions in this city will be achieved. (4)

Examining the city’s investments in developer capital as one way to increase the viability of the cityscape for all people opens the door for critique. The voices of critique, then, are the voices that I build from within Prince’s work.

capital” (4). Blackness becomes a tool of antiblackness that “obscure[s] the processes and practices of excessive policing, predatory lending, evictions, and increased tax burdens that accompany gentrification” (4). I build on Summers’ conceptualization of the work of black aesthetic emplacements in gentrifying locales, by thinking about how a black aesthetic is recaptured, and wielded, by native black artists to push back against those emplacements. Summers’ focus on how an aesthetics is scripted onto geographies only further solidifies the important cultural work of aesthetics to define and, in my case, defy locales predicated on making certain bodies invisible. Quite simply, rather than focusing on the work of a black aesthetic to further culturally and politically alienate black people from the District, I contend that there is room for an exploration of the aesthetic work that turns neoliberal ideas of black urban life on its head.

The final book-length scholarship that informs this dissertation is Cameron Logan’s *Historic Capital: Preservation, Race, and Real Estate in Washington, D.C.* Logan pays attention to the unique composition of a city that privileged its “monumental identity” over the needs and desires of its residents. He states

...while the stage set of the federal area might prove satisfying for tourists and amenable to the functioning of the federal government, it obscured the interests and ideals of the city’s inhabitants, consigning them to a menial, if not invisible position (2).

The cultural identity of Washington- or the long-constructed lack thereof-, he argues, has as much to do with the lack of local political power as does any actual legislation. That said, Logan focuses on the role of neighborhood-level historical preservation to ensure communal identity as worth memorializing. His exploration of historic preservation as a

means by which to protect black communal spaces and black memorializing in Washington provides a blueprint for my own interest in the ways native black Washingtonians take control of the places that are upended by major shifts in capital investments.

Blackness as Life/ Blackness as Value

The crux of this dissertation lies within the assumption that blackness is live-giving, like-creating, and life-circulating. It is a choice to acknowledge the world's conceptualization of blackness- what afro-pessimism, the philosophical child of Frantz Fanon, has illuminated yet, still choose to argue blackness through the theoretical lens of optimism.

Catherine Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness as Being* asks questions that are central to that point:

The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it is the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities are rupture might be opened? What happens when we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we to attempt to speak, for instance, an "I" or "we" who know, an "I" or "we" who care? (7)

Sharpe asks the kinds of questions that help me to think through the possibility, need for, and existence of black aesthetic production in, what many argue, is the dying Chocolate City. Antiblackness lies at the root of the violence of dispossession because constructions of blackness, the commodification of race, are wholly responsible for the construction of American capitalism- again, it is capitalism that births gentrification. Yet, as Sharpe

postulates, there is an insistence on black living, or, as she terms, an insistence on “living in the wake” despite the feedback loop of black death and trauma¹¹.

To define blackness as separate from the persistent narrative of losing, a necessary difference from loss, is to deny losing as the only possibility for black life. It is a recognition of the impacts of chattel slavery as bringing to bear long-term and stagnant narratives of black life. There is no “fast-forward” to the contemporary, in this sense, there is only a deliberate invitation to admire and *live* black life, presently. The temporal aspect of black living, especially within current digital practices, is an important aspect of my aesthetics of loss as it challenges Western notions of “forward movement” otherwise known as the ever-slippery term, modernity¹². Foregrounding black death in western modernity begs readers to rethink expectations of futurity, and still acknowledge the beauty of new birth. Only aestheticism, I argue provides the space to explore these questions while acknowledge the multiplicity of power relation.

In addition to Sharpe, Kevin Quashie’s ruminations on aesthetics and aliveness resonate. He, like I, opens this chapter by arguing the importance of aestheticism to the study of black people stating

The terms of aesthetics seem antagonistic to racial matters, as if blackness itself were formless, as if aesthetic discourse were contrary to the political contexts of black arts. [...] Simply, as performance studies has shown us, attempts to segregate aesthetics from politics misunderstand the mutual conditions between lived life and art [...] This is aesthetics as a form-of-life, aesthetics as a schema for considering the aliveness of phenomena and the phenomena of aliveness...(57-8)

¹¹ Sharpe, Christina. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press, 2016. (11).

¹² Mignolo, Walter D. *The darker side of Western modernity*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Quashie uses these terms to continue to unpack poetic form, as he does throughout the remainder of the book. Of course, I also interrogate poetry as a means by which to understand an aesthetics rooted in articulating black place. That said, I use Quashie to think about ephemerality in terms of aliveness or what they call ‘experience’

Experience, then, is a state of suspension in the intensity of presence and possibility, a state of readiness and surrender. This framing of subjunctivity- as relational surrender, in regard to the thrall of experience- reaffirms aliveness as a call toward dispossession. That is, following the work of Fred Moten and others, I think of aliveness as an inhabitation that runs counter to possessive investments of subjecthood. The alive one does not possess herself, even as her aliveness animates her being in the world. (Think again of Sula.) In a black world orientation, we could countenance risk and threat as if one were free to be suspended in human happening. (66)

The ephemerality of a subject’s experience, not the possession of subjectivity itself, is where aesthetic power that upends hegemonic systems is held. The ephemerality of moments and arts both avoid and ecstatically claim mapping. They do this by operating in completely different spatial-temporal fields and, in the case of the artists I focus on, using experience to concretize a map that runs counter to the one presented by new city plans.

Besides Sharpe and Quashie, Alexander Wehiliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* interrogates the form and function of blackness in black studies. In doing so, he queries the role of the ‘human’ in Western ideology and how that role assisted in constructing race in such ways that blackness has been defined as outside of the bounds of humanity. Wehiliye’s work provides guidance though potential pitfalls, which I no doubt still land in, as I navigate black aestheticism in Washington not as a given due to the author’s racial background,

but as born out of a similarities in experience, communal understanding and belonging, and the loss of place as directly tied to constructions of race and class.

Weheliye's work also provides boundaries for the ways in which one may think about the practice of studying black people and/or blackness in black studies. Relying on Sylvia Wynter, Weheliye invites his reader to think through the category, Man, and the ways we can become "unshackled" from its limited possibilities. In many ways, I chose to explore literature in the first chapter of a dissertation wrapped up in the place of man's existence by (re)placing humanity in the fantastical worlds of fiction and poetry. Of course, when I say fantastical, I do not mean fantasy, although the works I choose do engage with fantasy spaces in one way or another, but I mean fantastical in the Weheliyen sense- what they call "ceaselessly shifting relational assemblage that voyages in and out of the human" (21). They offer a sort of let us not call it freedom from the particularity of dispossession, but certainly reorientation of not only the subject-position of blackness, but the position of the subject, themselves offering a philosophy to totally shake what Wynter calls the genre of the human. That shaking- which is a shaking of all "-isms" might also be applied to how one may think through place.

In other words, rather than simply offering black aesthetic voices *in place of* white ones, and considering that a rebuttal to the cultural work of gentrifying spaces, might we think of black aesthetic voices as having the ability, not to change, but to *renew* maps that attempt to replace them.

Methodology

The methodological tools I use to get at the implications of an aesthetics of loss are literary analysis, film critique, a blend of digital and “on the ground” ethnography, and historical analysis. I introduce black aestheticism in Washington with a first chapter that uses literary analysis, and particularly with a book of poetry and work of fiction, to make the attempt at wresting place from the literal confines of reported statistics. The work of literature allows, like many artistic forms, for a reclamation of landscape that, in the spirit of assemblages, makes space for layering of all of the various historical and sociological facts and figures and breathes the life into them needed to understand black life-worlds and black life, living. The film critique that frames my second chapter has similar impulses as the first although with film comes the added layer of unpacking sonic and visual cultures.

I read the film, *Residue*, through the lens of *film noir*, or black noir, and the critical attention paid to *film noir*'s powerful use for black film and black filmmakers to articulate the experience of racialized bodies in America¹³. *Residue*, a film written and directed by native Washingtonian Merawi Gerima, provides a pointed critique of gentrification, and a recentering of native black Washingtonians narratives, through visual and sonic cues. However, in the vein of *film noir*, this critique is employing the viewer to explore their assumptions, both conscious and sub-conscious, about how

¹³ Dan Flory offers that black noir films, “function philosophically in the sense that they either provide or promote serious and systematic consideration of preconceived ideas in ways that make possible the fundamental alteration of our senses of self as well as the world in which we live. Their makers have directed noir’s capacities to trouble us and make us think toward matters of race and at times raised it to the highest level of reflective thought. By shaking white viewers in particular out of their ordinary modes of thinking, these films encourage the development of alternative systems of cognition that challenge dominant forms of moral knowledge as well as cinematic perception. Perspicuous representations of such matters are critical because they make clearer where we really are, morally speaking, and what we need to do in order to fully put ideals such as justice and equality into practice.” (xiii)

dispossession works to upend community. For example, instead of having characters discuss major structural changes in the city, the film shows tight shots of crater-like holes left by the demolition of buildings.

Rather than tell you the insidious ways racism sneaks into everyday conversation, the film allows you to overhear the brunch conversation of four white people, we might assume are women, discussing the “leftovers” from the old D.C. Both of those scenes are peppered in alongside scenes of police force, communal gathering, and fireworks. This is an interesting mix of scenes that reveals the precarity built into assumptions of racial logics. Dan Flory, whose scholarly study on black films and film noir titled *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* is the backbone of my film critique, argues that these films, “demonstrate how racist oppression deforms African-American life even as the majority of white Americans perceive it as nothing out of the ordinary” (4). These aesthetic demonstrations call for a “redirection of aesthetic perception as well as moral thinking,” but, I would argue, the film does not stop at critiquing whiteness. To gesture back towards Tina Campt, *Residue* is also asking the viewer to consider themselves, as main character Jay considers himself, by opening up the possibility for critiquing intraracial communal formations. The multiplicity of visual and sonic locations for exploring precarity made this film’s critical voice needed in this study.

My third, and final, methodological approach is a mix of digital and on the ground ethnographic practices. Like other scholars, 2020 brought my ethnographic plans to a halt. The closure or cancellation of businesses, churches, festivals, and concerts was coupled with the social distancing that made in-person interviews impossible. As a caregiver to young children, and partner to someone with underlying health conditions, I

needed to pivot my ethnography plans so that myself and those I had the closest encounters with remained protected and healthy. That said, I began to think through the ways to get at the eruptive moments of futurity I was seeing occurring in real time, despite pandemic, but could not attend in person. This is where I began to think through the possibilities of digital ethnography, and the theoretical implications of consuming aesthetic practice, online. For example, I experienced, and express, the festival/activist event, Moechella, digitally. I utilized the video footage and twitter discourse that showed up in social media spaces to think through Moechella as a core festival site for aesthetic expression. Digital ethnography, then, was necessary in this moment, but also opened the door for possibility to understand aesthetic possibilities in the future.

The chapters that follow will explore how black cultural curators imagine new possibilities and futures for black people and black spaces through the use of art as a form that runs alongside resistance- an enactment of a politics of renewal. The result of my choice to weave together historical, literary, film, and ethnographic analyses is birthed in these chapters which one might think of as overlapping spaces of philosophical exploration. The first chapter focuses on Thomas Sayers Ellis' book of poetry, *The Maverick Room*, and Morowa Yejide's novel, *Creatures of Passage*, as two literary explorations of Washington, D.C. in the 1970s and 80s. I read these two works as providing a literary blueprint for the construction of Washington as the Chocolate City and examine how a black D.C. landscape allows for the consideration of blackscapes that move beyond the "underground" or "other world." This first chapter sets the foundation for my exploration of an aesthetics of loss by redefining black space in the contemporary moment.

Thusly, the second chapter presents my first tenet in an aesthetics of loss: black spatial loss. I focus on the film, *Residue*, to examine what I call places of loss. I identify those places as residue and residual spaces- the former, is the place left by the physical and social waste produced by gentrification while the latter is the layered encounters of spatiality that are left and explored by native black Washingtonians who continue to take up place beyond displacement. The film is the homecoming story of Jay, native Washingtonian and filmmaker, who returns to his D.C. neighborhood to capture the community before it is completely overtaken by gentrification. The film becomes an exploration of not only Jay's exterior place of loss, his old neighborhood, but also an interior exploration of the loss of his childhood and the place his boy-self has taken up. Both of these, the exterior and interior spaces, open the conversation up to a complex view of black spaces, homescapes, and what, exactly, is the residual left in a gentrifying community.

Chapter three is my second tenet in an aesthetics of loss and brings to bear the use of the temporal as a tool by which native Washington aesthetic producers claim space despite displacement. I call this tenet black spatial temporality and focus on three festival sites as, what I term, eruptive locales of futurity as I think through the way those sites evoke an afro-presence. In other words, a temporal claim on not only the future of black space in Washington, but the present of black space as well. Through ethnographic research, I read each site as not only taking up sonic space, but completely shifting the city's rhythm through its performance, public art installation, and open dialogue. The term "present-futurity" is meant to solicit a recognition of the sites of eruptive blackness

that happen daily in Washington, and to think through what those sites may be trying to tell us about the future of black space despite displacement.

My final chapter is the third tenet in an aesthetics of loss and examines value. Black spatial value, in similar form to its two predecessors, challenges the idea of who and what is valuable in the District of Columbia by providing a close reading of and interview with local artist Terrance Sloan. Sloan, the creator of Art We Understand, uses his canvas paintings to chronicle black life. For his hometown, he chose to dedicate several gallery showings to paintings to places in the district that only native Washingtonians would be able to identify. I read his paintings and use his interviews to think through what a politics of renewal, alongside resistance, might offer to a conversation about the everyday practices and choices made by aesthetic producers to leave their mark on the city.

Ultimately, my work sits at the intersection of black geographical studies, black aesthetic studies, and the recent and critical work of Sharpe, Quashie, and others who have theorized the beauty and brilliance of blackness as living in spite of it all. I enact a politics of renewal as a sheer cover for a politics of hope and use this dissertation to serve as a signpost for the continued possibilities of inscription in the face of erasure.

Chapter 2: To Claim a Black Geography: Black Space in Washington, D.C.

Cultural translation, like any other translation, is always involved with loss, the untranslatable, the indecipherable.

-Glenn Ligon

Behold! The soul shall waft
Away,
When'er we come to die,
And leave its cottage made of clay,
In twinkling of an eye.
-Jupiter Hammon

Funk group Parliament Funkadelic's *Mothership* swoops down and lands squarely in the nation's capital. Their 1975 album, dedicated to Washington D.C. and aptly titled, *Chocolate City*, declares the use of the name "white house" as just a "temporary condition." Set against a backdrop of political, racial, and economic turmoil in the 60s and 70s, Parliament Funkadelic's album would fit within the national-local dialogue dominating Washington. Its dedication to themes of black nation-claiming, black citizenship post-Civil Rights, and afro-futurism as political tool was the sonic shadow to a city already planning its new identity. The Washington that P-Funk would stamp as *the* Chocolate City boasted a black population of over seventy percent, had recently won home rule over local government (a limited but necessary victory) giving Washington its first black mayor, and would soon install a political giant whose local fame would only be rivaled by his national infamy.

When the *Mothership* swooped down, then, the afro-futuristic philosophy of P-Funk was not sending you to an "other"-world. No, the Funk was calling you to ride on a

sweet chariot to Washington D.C.'s *above-world* and *above-ground*; this black space denied being othered or undered. Dr. Funkenstein, otherwise known as Parliament Funkadelic's band leader George Clinton, sat behind the rototoms, tapped the cowbells, and called out for a response not only within halls that housed that night's performance, but beyond it—laying claim to the cubic volume of space up to infinity and down to the earth's core.

I evoke Parliament Funkadelic as a way by which to set the parameters for black space within an aesthetics of loss and on the landscape of a contemporarily gentrifying Washington, D.C. If, as I argue, there is a new black aesthetic prompted by the political birth of blackness, life, and mattering, then there is also a need for a new black spatial analytic. The 'above' is where I locate this analytic. I replace the oft-used and theorized "other world" and "underground"—signifiers attached to blackness that can be productive in making place for black spatial realities—with *above-world* and *above-ground*. These terms gesture towards the vitality of a black aesthetics' relationship to land, its infrastructures, nation-making and claiming. They also, I will argue, force a consideration of black place as a *locale of present-futurity*, a term I will more fully engage later in this chapter, invested in the 'here' and 'now' of place rather than the 'there' or 'then.'

For that purpose, I provide a close reading of *The Maverick Room*, a book of poems by Thomas Sayers Ellis, and *Creatures of Passage*, a novel by Morowa Yejide, both, I argue, as literary descendants of the lyrics created and instruments used by Funkadelic group members George Clinton, Glenn Goins, Bootsy Collins, and Clarence

Haskins¹⁴. Beyond their geographical ties, all are interested in telling the story of Washington, D.C. as it is *becoming* Chocolate City. Any intention to define an aesthetics prompted by gentrification, I argue, must include a reading of the construction of Washington as a black space, so defined by the aesthetic producers that lived and visited there. I choose to do that through literary analysis.

Ellis and Yejide's fictive explorations of the topography of Washington open the literary door needed to consider the ideological underpinnings that deny erasure and contend with loss-while-living as characteristics of black space. I argue that the 'above' operates in both texts by making space and holding place for not only black expressions of geographic loss, but also what is/can be/will be still there. On one hand, Ellis and Yejide interrogate the story of D.C.'s landscape- its validity, its truth, and the way it has been concretized in the national imaginary- through the aesthetic production of narrative but also the production of form. On the other hand, though, they both offer an opportunity to ask powerful and generative questions about the ways in which we can merge black futures *beyond* this world with black futures that are *in* this world.

To that end, my method of close narrative analysis for Ellis and Yejide's work rests heavily on Kevin Quashie's assertion in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* of, "embracing the luxuries of black thinking with and through the materiality of texts. That is, in a black world, in whatever manifestation of black worldness texts create, blackness (not antiblackness) is totality; in such a world, black being is capacious and right- not more-than-right just right-as-is. Life-as-is" (10). I read both texts as producing black

¹⁴ While there are many other members of P-Funk, I highlight these four maintain parallelism between my work and Ellis' book of poems. These are the names that he mentions in *The Maverick Room*.

worlds that are deliberate about the spaces they cultivate for their reader and unapologetic about their audience's presumed knowledge of blackness and the textual landscape of the nation's capital. I argue Ellis and Yejide's poetry and novel respectively as, as Quashie so eloquently writes, exemplars of "the freeness of a black world where blackness can be of being, where there is no argument to be made, where there is no speaking to or against an audience because we are all the audience there is... and, as such, the text's work can manifest an invitation to study and to becoming for the black one." The literature acts as an usher into reading the seemingly untranslatable and indecipherable of black space and black aestheticism in Washington from the perhaps radical belief that this cityscape is one birthplace for a *realized* black worldmaking. Rather than *imagining* black life as the center, I will explore how both of these texts present and excavate, through their use of the landscape of D.C., what black, centered life, and thus black space, *is*.

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Above-worlds and *above-grounds* operate in Washington out of what Alex Zamalin calls critical black publics situated within black utopian political thought¹⁵. Zamalin argues that the publics that people both live in and produce, "[need] to seize a space of imagination from which they [are] barred and imagine a new humanity from

¹⁵ Zamalin explains black utopian political thought as a possible "fruitful site for political theory ... precisely [because] it lives on the precipice of human imagination, beyond the border of the possible. Utopia is a laboratory for our most radical desires and mines the recesses of our deepest longings" (5-6). He traces black utopian political thought, specifically, from Dubois on through Sun Ra and Samuel R. Delaney in the 60s and 70s, but, most importantly for this work, he provides some historical and political context to an idea that has been overshadowed Afrofuturism. He says: "Black utopia was never a transhistorical idea. This is because its meaning had everything to do with the existing social conditions of a given moment. But its specific concern was always with the black diaspora. By taking up ideal solutions to the specific problems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, lynching, mass incarceration, deregulation, and war, black utopia was in conversation with prevailing political realities, crises, and social trends" (10). I argue that black utopian political thought informed the post-Civil Rights vision of Washington, D.C.

which they [are] excluded”¹⁶. In other words, these black critical publics operate to allow for a counter-publics to the nation-state’s insistence on blackness as loss. However, instead of only *imagining* a space free of racial and economic subjugation, as Zamalin suggests, I offer that black Washingtonians engage, fully, with dominant public discourse and public space refusing to only be allowed existence in the imaginary outside of their own community. No, black critical publics are not just imagined in place—they are embodied.

Using “above” as opposed to “other” or “under” is about articulating geographical stakes that I argue are integral to understanding a 21st century rendering of black space in aesthetic production. Above-worlds and above-grounds grapple with the everyday violence wrought by institutionalized and topographical racism by actively rejecting its demands for silence and invisibility. They make place for living despite losing certainly confirming Richard Iton’s assertion that “...the excluded are never simply excluded [...] their marginalization reflects and determines the shape, texture, and boundaries of the dominant order and its associated privileged communities”¹⁷. Both operate under a condition I call “present-futurity;” they claim the future as present, in the temporal sense, but also claim a geographical *presence*. It is the geographical presence, the act of being present, that I focus on in this chapter (we will think about temporality later on in the dissertation) and from which I argue Ellis and Yejide claim afro-futures, while exploring what it means to produce an aesthetic in the place of an afro-presence.

¹⁶Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia*. Columbia University Press, 2019. (12)

¹⁷Iton, Richard. *In search of the black fantastic: Politics and popular culture in the post-civil rights era*. Oxford University Press, 2010. (3)

The Groove: An Above-World (Afro-Futurism Actualized)

Afro-futurism, black Washingtonians, and the music that wraps itself around dark alleys and weaves its way through metro station crowds are inextricably tied in Ellis' world. Readers are ushered through the go-go culture of the 1970s and 80s in Washington D.C. His words bump and grind, groove and shutter, be-bop, and hop before finally settling in the musical and political pocket. That pocket is the ideological heart of America—the land bound by Maryland to the North and Virginia to the South. Never given the status of statehood, and never granted any voting power in Congress, Washington is land loaned by the two states that sit at its northern and southern borders. In 1881, that means that D.C.'s population is majority black; Maryland and Virginia were two of the slave-holding states with the highest population of enslaved Africans¹⁸.

Almost immediately, black people become shareholders in land and infrastructure; enslaved black labor was needed to build the capital city¹⁹. This position as shareholder, whether acknowledged or not, is in fact the grounds upon which the aesthetics of loss begins to take shape. The land and its infrastructure holds and then tells the history of those who have walked on its soil. Yet, black people have always been investors in geographies that, from their instantiation, worked against blackness.

Katherine McKittrick describes this thusly

Geography's and geographers well-known history in the Americas, of white masculine European mappings, explorations, conquests, is interlaced with a different sense of place, those populations and their attendant geographies that are concealed by what might be called rational spatial colonization and domination:

¹⁸ Asch, Chris Myers, and George Derek Musgrove. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*. UNC Press Books, 2017. (21)

¹⁹ Lusane, Clarence. *The Black history of the White house*. City Lights Books, 2013.

the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and land.²⁰

The word, “profitable,” is key here because gentrification, as we discussed in the Introduction, is about capital, and exclusion is tied to who contributes to profit margins. Erasure in the moment of gentrification, then, is about the inequity of the fracturing of people and place within the context of capitalism as the central signifier. Erasure as a key component of gentrification is not only interested in who or what is deemed valuable, or who or what takes up valuable space, but also how to make those terms geographically and historically legible so as to seal those fractures caused by unequal displacement. This knowledge sets the scene for reading the textual landscape of Washington.

Ellis’ *The Maverick Room* does not explicitly tackle gentrification, but it is for that reason that it is the perfect text to begin a dissertation that engages with gentrification as a subscript; to consider gentrification, to borrow from Parliament, a temporary condition. This condition, because of its ability to regather and reformulate itself over multiple generations of black Washingtonians, is also one that black people have seen before and lived before and therefore, they believe, will live through again. Ellis provides an opportunity to excavate black space, fully, that can see both its imaginings and its realities. This is an opportunity to read black space as an above-world which is to read black space as always in *transitory motion*. If black space is to survive erasure, than that survival relies- and has always relied- on its ability to transition not necessarily from one place to another, but between real and imagined spatial planes. It is a grounding of philosophy. This is what I call the above-world.

²⁰ McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. U of Minnesota Press, 2006. (x)

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The opening poem of Ellis' *The Maverick Room* embodies the mobility between real and imagined spatial planes and sets the tone for Ellis' Washington in his book of poems. Written for Garry Shider, the musical director of Parliament Funkadelic, the poem titled, "Starchild," describes the body as its own rocket ship headed straight for the infinity space of the universe:

Newborn, diaper-clad, same as child,
That's how you'll leave this world.
No you won't die, just blast off.

Legs for rockets, bones separating like boosters.
Guitar: a lover, slanted in a hug, plucked,
Scratched, strummed. You will raise

One finger, on the one, for the one,
Then lift like a chorus of neck veins,
All six strings offering redemption

The black hole at the center
Of the naked universe will respond
With a flash of light: comets, whistles,

Glowing noisemakers, bang, bang.
Roofs everywhere cracking, tearing,
Breaking like water.

The poem is describing Shider's death as ascension into outer space in the textual place of Northwest. The first two make use of the second person- the pronoun "you"- to punctuate the poetic voice. The author is intentional about the poem's direction towards an audience of one. This first poem, unlike many of the others that will follow, wants its reader to direct their attention back to the epigraph- "For, Garry Shider." Shider, the poem tells us, will leave this world, "newborn, diaper-clad, same as child." There will be no death, just a blasting off. The tone is definitive, and the use of simile and metaphor to

describe who we presume to be Shider in this collection of tercets mirrors the same certainty we often associate with the dead²¹.

For those familiar with Parliament Funkadelic, the poem's description is more than metaphor- this is an allusion. Shider was known for wearing a diaper during his performances with the group where he was lead guitarist. It may not be a far jump to imagine Shider joining the outer spaces he was a part of creating musically. The syntactic choices made in the poem's second stanza only further substantiate the surety of the tone in the first. Shider will go to "The black hole at the center/Of the naked universe..." Legs become rockets, bones become boosters, neck veins become the strings of the guitar that is held: "a lover, slanted in a hug, plucked." Shider will not ride on a ship, nor is he like a ship. Shider is the rocket ship.

This mesh of body and object headed to the outer spaces where it will ultimately be housed is thematic throughout the book of poetry in what I argue is, on one hand, a writer's paid homage to an iconic group, but, on the other hand, a gesture towards the above-world that characterizes Ellis' conceptualization of blackness as claiming space both in, and beyond, Washington. P-Funk is a means by which to traverse the natural and built landscape of D.C and the black bodies of those whose relationship to the land is still

²¹ Starchild's mix of end-stopped and enjambed lines telling the story of Shider's (un)death is in fact a way to draw the reader's eye to his rebirth. Each end-stopped line mirrors the finality of life ending (That's how you'll leave this world./No you won't die, just blast off.) while the lines marked by enjambment mirror the possibility of life beginning after the "blasting off." The enjambment opens up the space for imagining new futures (The black hole at the center/Of the naked universe will respond). Interestingly, those futures are written as personification; Shider becomes a rocket, but the musical object of the guitar is also used to describe Shider post-earthly being. In fact, the poem follows the final line of the third tercet, "All six strings offering redemption/" with "The black hole at the center/Of the naked universe will respond/With a flash of light: comets, whistles,/" I argue that the choice to transition Shider to the "naked universe" through musical object and in enjambed lines is a choice to point the reader towards the new, open possibilities of outer spaces. By (re)placing Shider through musical object the poem also lays claim to the "thingness," the materiality, of life after- refusing mythical ideas of rebirth.

paramount. It is, I argue, the foundation for a black aesthetic particular to Washington for its most obvious successor, go-go music, but for its linguistic, performative, and visual expressions of art as well. Ellis begins this book of poems, which are divided by each quadrant of the District-- Southwest, Southeast, Northwest, and Northeast-- by blasting off into an above-world to reposition the reader's ideological understanding of the geographical ties of black personhood to Washington's double-scape. I use the term, double-scape, as my conceptualization of active citizens of a landscape that is both federal and local. He riffs, poetically, on George Clinton, Parliament Funkadelic's band leader who, "created a philosophy that promoted freedom through musical, physical, spiritual, sexual, and [...] intergalactic release..." to take a strong political stance: afro-futurism, birthed out of black utopian political thought, as a realizable political tool is built onto the geographic fabric of Washington D.C. and enacted by its black constituents.²² Ellis is gesturing towards what local political players in the 1970s call their, "Dream City"²³.

I argue that, particularly after the promises of the Civil Rights movement, the turn towards an "other world" or other worldly productions of black art was an attempt at claiming the space that had yet to be claimed. If an Eurocentric eye had defined this

²²Wright, Amy Nathan. "A Philosophy of Funk: The Politics and Pleasure of a Parliafunkadelicment Thang!." *The funk era and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008. 33-50.

²³ Harry Jaffe's, *Dream City: race, power, and the decline of Washington, D.C.*, chronicles the political history of Washington post-Civil Rights. The idea of a "dream city" is the central thematic for their scholarly work and for, they argue, a "new" Washington led by mayor Marian Barry. While they offer a sharp critique of the political leadership, they provide insight into the ideological expectations of a city often claimed as national memorial with no local identity. D.C. was strategized as a new "black space" that would serve as an example of democratic change and black leadership. The term, "dream," for me is, however, also an aesthetic signal and speaks to our earlier dialogue about black utopic spaces. For my argument that a new black aesthetic is less concerned with imagined spaces and more concerned with making change happen in concrete place, I use the "dream city" ideal as a means by which to argue the pragmatic attempts at creating the imagined future or ideal place, in the present.

world, perhaps an Afrocentric eye could define another. For Ellis, however, the Chocolate City also-known-as Washington, D.C. also-known-as the nation's capital is both here (defined within the boundaries of a state-not-quite-state), but also there (an aesthetic transcendence that is boldly lived which creates its own governing body, complete with rules and regulations, and sets a new standard for what is deemed real or appropriate or commonsensical). While the black space of a Chocolate City keeps its feet planted, it lives at the juncture of the fusion of immaterial and material, the utopic and dystopic, and the ability of that fusion to thrive in fractured places. It is where transcendence occurs; it is where the particularity of its black space is birthed.

We see this in Ellis' third poem, a mix of second and first person narration, still located in the textual space of Northwest, and titled, "A Baptist Beat." This time, "The black hole at the center/Of the naked universe..." is replaced with an unnamed space where, "A mixed congregation: sinners, worshippers,/Hustlers, survivors." all gather because "nothing comes closer/To salvation than this" (5). The reference to salvation is matched by dictive choices that guide the reader to Christendom- a replacement of the intergalactic with the spiritual although both take up the same "other world" spaces. Silk-robed choir, uninformed gods, a divorced crucifix, a collection plate, and, most obviously, a pastor all gather in this poem steeped in imagery that ends with the Baptist beat.

A mixed congregation: sinners, worshippers,
Hustlers, survivors. All that terrible energy,
Locked in, trying to blend. Such a gathering
of tribes has little, if any, use for a silk-robed choir.
Members bring their own noise, their own souls.
Any Avenue crew will tell you: nothing comes closer
To salvation than this. Here, there is no talk of judgement,
No fear. Every now & then, an uninformed god

Will walk in, bear witness, and mistake Kangol
For halo, and all those names for unwanted bodies
Being called home, arms raised to testify, waving

First, it is important to note that Ellis builds the place he invites his reader without ever actually describing the physical elements of the building. Where are we? Is this a concert? Dance hall? A club? The mix of verbs, adjectives, and nouns used in free verse to construct this above-world leaves clues. The place, we can assume, is like a church, but those same verbs, adjectives, and nouns situate Ellis' place in contradiction, and perhaps even as a critique, of what one can assume is not a Baptist church's sanctuary even as it pulls on its imagery. Members do not need the guidance of the choir- they bring "their own noise, their own souls," and the use of the adverb "here" tells its reader that this places holds "no talk of judgment/No fear" as opposed, we can assume, to the "there."

Similar to "Starchild," this narrator the body, the flesh, travels between spatial planes. The body is your own, and so as the "they" in this poem bring their own noise and their own soul, you are invited to bring yours as well. Except, you have to understand a few things before you can be invited into the "we" - if you are invited at all. Do not, like the uninformed god, "mistake Kangol for halo" or "all those names for unwanted bodies/Being called home" -these bodies are wanted and here to stay. Calling the names of those who are no longer physically present in this earth is a way by which to bring them there- to that space even if they are not in place.

One thing the reader can know for sure about Ellis' place is that there is music guiding the congregation.

Above the snare: two sticks make the sign
Of the cross then break-a divorced crucifix.

The tambourine shakes like a collection plate
 This pastor wants to know who's in the house,
 Where we're from, are we tired yet, ready to quit?
 We run down front, scream & shout, "Hell no,
 We ain't ready to go!" The organ hesitates,
 Fills the house with grace, good news, resurrection
 & parole, a gospel of chords rising like souls.
Up, up, up, up, down, down. Up, up, up, up
Down. Up, up, up, up, down, down.
Up, up, up, down. The cowbell's religious beat,
 A prayer angel-ushered through dangerous air.

The introduction of music marks a tonal shift in the poem. It also marks a physical reorientation for the reader. The sign of the cross signals this poetic movement, but as has been the case throughout, the reader should not confuse the choices of rhetorical device made that gesture towards the performative aspect of the Baptist church with the church, itself, as the main character. Ellis relies on parallelism to prove this point

Above the snare: two sticks make the sign
 Of the cross then break - a divorced crucifix.

Later,

Up, up, up, down. The cowbell's religious beat,
 A prayer angel - ushered through the dangerous air.

In both second lines, a dash is utilized to show the break away from the religious symbolism. There is a sign of the cross, but then the cross breaks creating a "divorced crucifix." There is a prayer angel, but they are "ushered through dangerous air." The use of figurative language- in both diction and syntax- is simply a way to bring the body and soul together. A reminder that the spirituality evoked by Ellis to describe this space is not a denial of its rootedness in the material place. It gives the reader a ledge, so to speak, to hold onto and climb as Ellis explores the spiritual nature of what we now can confidently say is the experience of attending a go-go.

The tonal and physical reorientation occurs alongside the turn from the “they” of the poem to “we” as the crowd “[runs] down front” towards a stage. This is where our second notation has to be made. The “cowbell’s religious beat” is preceded by poetic echo. There is repetition in the *movement* of the cowbell rather than the sound, “*Up, up, up, up, down, down. Up, up, up, up/Down. Up, up, up, up, down, down.*” Why choose to illustrate movement over sound, here? Would onomatopoeia not have been the most obvious rhetorical choice especially since the reader has already been introduced to a snare, organ, and tambourine? I might argue that choice goes back to the groundedness of an above-world. To highlight the movement of the cowbell, rather than the sound, is to bring the reader back to the importance and necessity of materiality in the experience of this musical landscape.

The go-go space is funky, but its also spiritual. Both require your entire (being) to gain access to the space where they flourish--the place that you might hear as fractured with its “shakes and breaks” and “twists and turns” along the planned but unexpected interactions of body, with instrument, and with sound. Funk won’t let you forget your flesh, and, in many ways, spirituality will not either. Perhaps, then, it might be useful to see Ellis’ metaphoric use of the Baptist church not as purely a critique. Instead, we might think of it as grappling with the complicated relationship that politics have always had to religious structures in the black community, but more importantly to how that complicated relationship still birthed a yearning for the relationship to a higher power- a higher geographical plane- offered by spirituality.

This is described by Barbara Savage in, *Your spirits walk beside us: The politics of black religion* as she writes about the history and criticism of the black church in all of

its “mythic, metaphorical, and literal manifestations” from the period of Reconstruction to post-Civil Rights (18). Savage rightly parses out the religious and spiritual aspects of African American engagement with Christianity, particularly politically but also- as she shows- personally, to help her reader better understand the nuanced ways in which religion lives in the black imaginary

One constant [...] is people’s faith in the emancipatory potential of spiritual belief, and their conviction that such belief is politically essential. Yet instead of a simple search for a Promised Land, there has been much talk of Pentecost, of a time when the peoples of the world will be able to gather in peaceful coexistence, bridging differences of language and nationality, as well as those of religion, gender, and class.

It is this Pentecost, the joining together of the world’s people, which I read into Ellis’ work as his congregation is filled with both saint and sinner, “Hustlers, survivors.”²⁴ The Baptist Beat is the go-go beat and vice-versa, both promising to merge flesh with the spiritual. Ellis’ spiritual plane and outer spatial plane both offer the reader an intimate invitation to see Washington from the lens of the above-world. His next set of poems will stay in the above-world, but directly addresses the political landscape of Washington.

-

P-Funk claims sonic space and place as its own as it “[challenges] [...] hierarchies and Western dominance by smashing together different styles and treating all influences as equally “legitimate”²⁵. The how, what, and who of musical ownership, and any rules

²⁴ Alison Martin writes about the connection between the experience of a church and go-go in her book chapter, “Black Music Matters: Affirmation and Resilience in African American Musical Spaces in Washington, DC.” In an interview with Michelle Blackwell of the What Band 2.0 she recounts Blackwell’s assertion that a go-go is like a church in that people go there to heal, but also to foster community. Birthdays, neighborhoods, and community events are woven into the go-go performance in the same way that those things are woven into a church service (77).

²⁵Wright, Amy Nathan. "A Philosophy of Funk: The Politics and Pleasure of a Parliafunkadelicment Thang!." *The funk era and beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008. (38)

that may have accompanied it, are thrown out in a move that is mirrored in Funk's daring to plant a flag in Washington D.C., also challenging who owns the nation's capital. You will not send it, only, to the outer galaxies. It will not be marginalized in that way even as it frees itself. Instead, you will face the fact that those galaxies have touched down right in your center, and in doing so have control of your greatest commodity: the land.

In the poem titled, "*The Chocolate Jam, R.F.K. Memorial Stadium, Washington, D.C. (1977)*," Ellis deconstructs the ideological moorings of American culture and capitalism by literally traversing the dollar bill and evoking a black aesthetic that resituates America, the Beautiful. This poem is included in a set of poems titled, "That Fuss Was Us," and also, as the others I have explored, in the Northwest. A reader can imagine Ellis wandering over the landscape found on the back of a dollar bill. Body and material merge again. He tells his reader that the "eye atop the pyramid" really means "peek-a-boo" and "we've been watching you" and is a reminder to "guard up" and "defend yourself:"

means

we shall
overcome,

means

you go
tell it,

we've
already
been to
the mountain
top,

no need
to reinvent

humps,
means

we paid
for the flying saucers,
extraterrestrials
and maggots
our damn
god selves

One of the few poems that gives a time and place for the reader to situate themselves within, “*The Chocolate Jam*” relies on line placement- particularly enjambment. The first word of the poem is capitalized, and the reader does not encounter a break until the period used at the poem’s conclusion. The word “means” is isolated as a stanza unto itself; it is a chance for the reader to breath, but also to provide the necessary space for emphasis²⁶. “Means” is repeated seven times, and each time a new clause is introduced that defines the “eye atop the pyramid:”

means
peek-
a-boo

we’ve been
watching
you,

defend
yourself,

we shall
overcome,

you go
tell it,

²⁶ The word, “means,” might also be thought of as an architectural anchor. If we can imagine the poem as a separate structure, then means is the foundation to uphold the poem’s form.

Perhaps these clauses could be independent unto themselves, but the choice to use “means” is the connector setting the tone of the poem in alignment with the author’s voice to make clear that these clauses are happening in relation to one another. This is a poem of defiance. As the poem moves, what the “eye” means shifts along the lines of the narrative voice²⁷. Like, “A Baptist Beat,” there is a transition from second to first person narration. What the eye “should mean” to an unidentified “you,” is now, assuredly, what the eye “does mean” to the “we.” Now, the phrase “we shall overcome” is set up in contradiction to the “you.” You can “go tell it,” a reference to the gospel song, “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” but the “we” has already been to the mountaintop and has decided that

IN FUNK
WE TRUST
NO ONE

except

THE ONE.

The choice here is meant to signal towards the phrase printed on each dollar bill, “IN GOD WE TRUST,” that is also capitalized. Ellis is, again, moving the poem forward by forcing the reader to pay attention to line choices. This poem ends with “THE ONE,” its own stanza, but is preceded by the knowledge that the “we” is in “FUNK” and that “we” trusts no one. The use of the word, “one,” here is operationalized to form several dictive tasks. “One,” is a reference to the dollar bill- the sub-landscape of the poem. “One” is

²⁷ The ever-seeing “eye” is, in actuality, listing out the various forms of white hegemonic control and surveillance, a white hegemonic gaze, that the poem is illuminating. The gaze pivots at some point, from second person, “you,” to personal, “we,” to reposition the reader’s relationship to the gaze, but, still, to remind the reader that the gaze still structures this world in this capacity.

also a replacement for and disavowal of a singular god. Finally, “one” is in reference to the funky one, the soul one, and even the post-soul one- its the musical “one.” For Ellis, it is the only “one” to be trusted²⁸.

This poem reflects the post-Civil Rights skepticism of the Civil Rights Movement. Ellis blends some of the final public words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his speech “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” with the more militant tone and stance of the Black Power movement. Of course, we know that if we listen to the totality of King’s speech, he questions America’s commitment to black equality and freedoms, and Ellis is speaking to and extending those ideas, but instead of seeing God’s glory, Ellis is headed to the above-world where extraterrestrials and flying saucers have already been bought and paid for, but with

not an
album cover penny
From
Casablanca,

Not a
Folded dollar bill
From
Westbound

For Ellis, moving beyond the mountaintop (we’ve been there already) rejects the American Ideal- the American Production of Itself- and the investment in the value of the American dollar and aesthetic. The reference to major Hollywood films Westbound and Casablanca circles the reader back towards the epigraph

Notice! Stop! Help Save the Youth of America!
Don’t Buy NEGRO RECORDS. The screaming,

²⁸ It is also important to note Ellis’ choice to capitalize “IN FUNK/WE TRUST/NO ONE” as a mirror to the dollar bill’s bold claim “IN GOD WE TRUST.” Ellis matches the form of the poem with its meaning to further substantiate the message the poem is attempting to relay.

idiotic words, and savage music of these records
are undermining the morals of our white youth
in America. Call the advertisers of the radio stations
that play this type of music and complain to them!
Don't let your children buy, or listen to these
Negro records.

*from a poster reproduced
in front of the Parliament Tour book*

Ellis' response to the call to end capital support of "negro records" in order to "Save the Youth of America!" is in his declaration that the extraterrestrials and maggots are already paid for, yes, but also in the way that this new movement needed no "folded dollars" or any "penny" from the mainstream aesthetic. I might argue that his use of the penny and the dollar- rather than larger bills- is a way by which to prove the absolute rejection of American capitalism. By choosing the smallest American tender, he is making clear that capitalism simply does not work in this black space no matter the amount.

Ellis makes clear the terms by which the "we" will not comply through the use of parallelism. Both of the stanzas that mention Casablanca and Westbound are syntactical mirrors of one another. The "album cover penny" mirrors the "folded dollar bill." I argue that he references Hollywood for two reasons. First, it is the site of America's capitalist investments in constructing an aestheticism up against the formlessness of blackness. It is synonymous with presenting an "ideal" American woman or man and boy or girl. Ellis not only rejects that ideality, but also the terms by which that ideal can be purchased.

Ellis also references Hollywood to set up the juxtaposition of the site that produces a white aesthetic, and the site of Washington that will produce a black one. This poem is given place (Washington D.C., R.F.K. Stadium) and time (1977) for that reason. Ellis gestures towards the importance of not only devaluing the dollar in a black aesthetic imaginary by conquering its geographical landscape, but also devaluing the site from

which the aesthetic is birthed. This poem reaches up and anchors black aestheticism by mapping P-Funk's above-world along the geographical lines of Washington. This above-world lays claim to the nation-state.

The Chocolate City

Of course, it only makes sense that he makes this move. This is more than just a poet's hope for black space; it is his reality. As mentioned earlier, Washington is over seventy percent black in the 1970s. With the advent of home rule, it is also the first time DC residents are in complete control of their local governing body²⁹. Asche and Musgrove describe the 'new' Washington

Out of the ashes of the riot, in the void created by white flight, against an inefficiency and often indifferent city bureaucracy, D.C. residents sought to shape a new, racially egalitarian, and economically just city. (Asch, Myers, and Musgrove 392-93)

And there would be many urban communities who felt similarly. Certainly, Parliament had ushered in the aesthetic which would reflect the black space that was a post-civil rights, urban America, but it was not the sole proprietor. The Funk was simply a translator for the multiple chocolate cities sprouting up across the nation following, on one hand, the consistent stream of white (and black) middle class homeowners who left the city centers and moved to the suburbs, but also, on the other hand, Civil Rights'

²⁹“With home rule, many in the community-both blacks and whites [...] hoped that the city would become a model for an alternative American future, one in which African Americans could shape their own destiny.” Ruble, Blair A. *Washington's U Street: A biography*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010. (227).

leaders move into local politics³⁰. Marion Barry, the mayor at the time of Parliament's "Chocolate Jam" concert and album release, *Chocolate City*, was one such leader.

While a cursory reading of Ellis' work might lead one to focus on the national or federal politics he critiques, the underlying history of Washington, what makes it a "Chocolate City," is at the core of Ellis' poetic political story. Barry and his constituents are described as a "political machine" by Hyra; a name given, in part, because of his ability to navigate the debt left to DC after its first mayor, but also because of his ability to build and maintain the political base that would ultimately allow him to win four separate mayoral terms

On one hand, Hyra writes, "Barry was a pragmatic machine boss," who, "understood DC's tax revenue shortfall and strategically formed relationships with elite downtown business leaders to redevelop parts of the city's central business district."³¹ His hard-nosed approach to tackling the city's tax issues would result in an almost double increase in the city's budget and the installation of thousands of black workers into DC government positions.³² On the other hand, Barry knew, simply, how to talk to people, and build a voting base that was often overlooked and undervalued as class divisions followed black Washingtonians into this new era of possibility.

The migration of the black middle class to the DC suburbs in Prince Georges County provided the opportunity for a charismatic leader to corral the city's Black urban underclass as a political base. Barry successfully mobilized the low-income Black populations in communities like Shaw/U Street by exploiting racial mistrust between Blacks and Whites, but he highlighted his nonacceptance by elite African Americans as well. [...] Barry understood DC neighborhood norms. While the city

³⁰ "Barry was representative of the cadre of "civil rights" mayors, which included Detroit's Coleman Young, Gary's Richard Hatcher, and Atlanta's Maynard Jackson..." Hyra, Derek S. *Race, class, and politics in the cappuccino city*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. (34).

³¹ Hyra, Derek S. *Race, class, and politics in the cappuccino city*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. (35).

³² Hyra, Derek S. *Race, class, and politics in the cappuccino city*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. (35).

is a mix of southern and northern political cultures, southern political values predominate (Hyras 36).

Although I might challenge the use of the word “exploit” in Hyra’s explanation of Barry’s ability to capture and hold the attention and loyalty of his base, Barry certainly was adept at navigating the choppy political waters of a city with a well-educated and wealthy black population. Barry was born and raised by sharecroppers in Tennessee, and his “southern sensibilities” were appealing to first or second generation black Washingtonians who carried their traditions with them..

Most significant, Barry and his “political machine” represented a political new guard. This coming-of-age story, similar to Ellis’ poetry, can be traced alongside the Black Power Movement. Barry and many of his associates were on the ground activists who saw Washington as the perfect opportunity to create black spaces where they could show up in power to shift policy.

SNCC veterans filled Barry’s administration, including Press Secretary Florence Tate, Minority Business Opportunity Commission Director Courtland Cox, Assistant City Administrator for Planning and Development James Gibson, Karen Spellman as director of Resident Services in the Housing Department and [...] [Ivanhoe] Donaldson, who served as general assistant. Nowhere else in the country had a black protest organization so thoroughly come to dominate major city government. Asch, Myers, and Musgrove (393-94).

It is this political playground that animates Ellis’ work even if it is not in the foreground. It cannot help but to influence not only the poetic expression of Ellis, but the aesthetic expression of the city. D.C., like other cities around the country, would be the baby birthed by a Civil Rights dream. That dream, naturally, would birth an aesthetic that would reflect it.

The Pocket: An Above-Ground

Centered between Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast Washington, D.C. lies “The Maverick Room” in the textual landscape of Ellis’ Washington. The only poetic section to begin with an image, “The Maverick Room” pays homage to go-go music with a badly torn flyer, pinned to a pole, atop other badly torn flyers; the remnants of events already passed. This flyer announces a performance from the band, Rare Essence, featuring “Go-Go Mickey” who joined the group in 1984 as the feature congo player. \$15.00, seemingly the cost of entrance is seen at the top of the flyer, and at the bottom, “No Refu-” which we can assume is “no refunds” were we able to see the full document. Although the address on the bottom of this flyer takes us out to Baltimore, Maryland, the real Maverick Room was located in Northeast Washington on 4th and Rhode Island Avenue.

Unlike Ellis’ other groupings of poems, all the poems in “The Maverick Room” are “*for* The Whole Damn Crew,” a distinction he makes after the image as an epigraph, and before the definition of go-go is given:

Go-go (n) I. to go for it [Fr. early Motown; poss. Yoruba “agogo”] I. A vernacular dance

music unique to Washington, D.C.; a non-stop, live party music in which a pulsing bass drum beat blends with African rhythms and the sound of timbales, cowbells, and conga drums as trumpets, trombones, saxophones, and synthesizers belt out licks from Jazz, Funk and Soul, punctuated by rapped greeting to the local crews and ongoing dialogue between the dance floor and the band;

2. A music/dance even featuring Go-Go bands, generally at a community center, skating rink or dance hall frequented by teens and young teens “hooked up” in the latest in casual wear; (verb, int.) I. To go for it.

The first and second definition begin and end with, “To go for it,” respectively. To go, to keep moving, frames both definitions as verbs that activate go-go music even while go-go

is itself a noun. These- the picture, the epigraph, and the definition- are the precursors to Ellis' textual "pocket," and where I locate the above-ground in the text.

Musically, the pocket is the space where musicians settle in and "groove." Alison Martin explains a bit of the history of go-go music and the pocket:

Go-go music was pioneered in the 1970s by bands such as Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers, Trouble Funk, and Experience Unlimited. The title of the genre comes from keeping people going and going on the dance floor, because the beat, commonly known as "the pocket," continues between songs. Because of this continuous performance style where music can go on for an hour or more without a break, go-go music is best experienced in a live setting. (75)

The "pocket" is an improvisational space, but it still has its own structure, boundaries, and limits. Ellis builds his pocket into the text to illuminate the pocket built onto the landscape of D.C. Bound by neither Southeast, Northeast, Northwest, or Southwest, Ellis' sonic mapping of go-go of the 70s and early 80s has its own terrains, bodies of water, and infrastructures. I lean on Moslund's assertion that reading an aesthetic is also about "getting at the sensory experiences of geography [in the literature]," and is just as important as reading the literature itself (10). The pocket of Ellis' text is actually the point of poetic break and exemplifies geographical fracture. It is at the break point that a black aesthetic reveals itself. But, and this is key, the break point is not suspended in an above-world as I have shown exists in Ellis' poems outside of this textual pocket. An aesthetics of loss reveals that the fractured space still has a ground, and it is in that ground that the aesthetic is rooted.

Of course, this is not new. The tradition of seemingly underground blackness (not just black aesthetic) operating in plain sight extends back to this country's beginning. Black people have always lived out art that is hidden and yet still in plain sight. However, the black aesthetic that translates space within an aesthetic of loss as an above-ground

forces what “should” remain “underground,” to claim place and space, loudly and for all to see. It is always there, has always been there, and will always be there denying, even, the hypervisibility that will render it an empty signifier, and instead laying claim by imbuing *blackness* with exuberant black lives.

Ellis centers “The Maverick Room” to reveal a “not-present”-yet-always-present black space. It is an underground brought above ground, but not by Ellis’ poetry; go-go has always been right in your face if you know where to look. Yet, that’s the slip-of-hand- because you can’t look. You must be able to hear the call. While a portion of Ellis’ poems position Washington D.C. as the above-world in “outer” space- the idealized place touched by blackness in all its magic and fury and expectation outside of the national imaginary- I argue that this portion, these poems set in “The Maverick Room,” are solidly located in the above-ground. The location is still magical, but exists beneath the mythology of P-Funk’s black aesthetic in the above-world. It takes the reader on a walk through the back alleyways, hole-in-the-wall clubs and sharp corners of the capital city’s black space- and, in doing so, engages the text-as-landscape as its own funky infrastructure. Moslund’s theory of aisthesis speaks further to the project of Ellis’ textual landscape

Literature is a linguistic medium and to deal with place in literature is to study how place is produced by language. Literature is often said to forefront the ways in which language forms and shapes, indeed produces the worlds we live in. Accordingly, literature affords analyses of how language produces or constructs places socially, culturally, and politically (as we see very clearly in the predominant postcolonial approach to literature- and to place in postcolonial literature). But literature is more than a discursive medium only. It is also an aesthetic medium. Literature invites or produces experiences of beauty, in the classical sense, but, as the central argument will run in the current experiment, literature is also aesthetic in the sense of the aesthetic as *aisthesis*. (10)

The experience of a “pocket” black space, a space untouched by the place making and shaping of an American body politic, is best understood through a lens that takes into account Ellis’ choice to present it as not only a literary experience for the reader (one could argue poetry in and of itself could always be read as operating at the point of aisthesis), but also as sensory experience. If the entire project is named and organized by the quadrants that divide Washington- northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest- than to introduce, “The Maverick Room,” is meant to introduce the reader to a particular mode of reading that brings them into the “place within the place.” Or, as Moslund would describe them, “*Other geographies*” that “open other perspectives from which to challenge the ways in which we are habitually caused to relate to the world we live in: the logic, the logos, the principal modes of relation that shape and govern our realities.”

It is the “*Other geographies*” that Moslund describes as operating in literary works that informs my above-ground. However, I make one critical shift. I offer that such terms create the theoretical space for exploring what a black space looks like that produces an aesthetics which remains as the center of a black world with black people who take up place not as the Othered, underground, but above it. By centering “The Maverick Room” on his textual landscape, Ellis is forcing his reader to encounter that place- at the intersection of black space/aesthetic/world/body - as the primary logic by which they should come to understand the rest of the text. In doing so, I argue, he refuses the all too easy reliability of presenting blackness and black space as beneath the surface of the “true” city of Washington.

In “II Cowbell,” Ellis describes the instrument that speaks to those who have an ear to hear.

You’re how we found The Maverick Room,
The Cave Yard, The Black Hole and block parties
In hard-to-find inner-city neighborhoods
With names like Congress Heights and Valley Green.

You’re the Real McCoy,
What we used to teach timid beginners to hit back.
When the power went out you gather kin,
A family discussion of percussion.

Tambourine, vibra-slap, ratchet.
We met reaching into the same pocket,
Agreed a crowded one is equivalent to sin.
Sticks can’t harm the real you.

You’re what gets heard,
A prayer above crowd noise and soul.
Down-to-earth, hardheaded, hollow, loud.
I know your weak spots. You know mine.

Not to be confused as simple metaphor, the cowbell is a vibrant and integral part to the sound of go-go. “II Cowbell” lets you know that places like The Maverick Room, The Cave Yard, and The Black Hole, places that house go-go performers and their audiences, could be found by the sound emitted in the middle of “hard-to-find inner-city” neighborhoods. Not to be left as empty descriptors, Ellis names two of those neighborhoods, Congress Heights and Valley Green, and in doing so juxtaposes the naming given by government, and the naming given by community. Language like “Maverick” and “Cave Yard,” which we might assume is a play on graveyard, and “Black Hole” seem like distant cousins to the height of Congress and the green of a valley on the urban landscape of D.C. All three of the performance spaces identify

themselves as counter to the narrative of Washington as only a memorial ground for the ideas and ideals of United States democracy and as site devoid of blackness.

What is interesting is that the cowbell is neither a silent medium nor an exotic one. There are no “other-wordly” qualities. In fact, Ellis describes the cowbell as decidedly “down-to-earth.” The cowbell makes room in the space of Washington D.C. because it calls out blackness- life and aesthetic. I lean on Bill Brown’s work on thing theory to further think through the cowbell’s use here not as a symbol of blackness, but as a disruptor on behalf of it. Brown describes two ways one might encounter the thing

We begin to confront the thingness of an object when they stop working for us: the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, no matter how momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

The negative feedback loop between thing and human is one way we might read the cowbell. Between the lines of Ellis’ poem we might find that the cowbell is actually only acknowledged because of its ability to fill the white noise space left by loss. Maybe it is, itself, a sort of white noise; always in the background and always holding the beat of the displaced city. A displacement that extends beyond and before the heightened interest in gentrification of 21st century scholarship. I, however, prefer to think of the cowbell through Brown’s second idea of the thing

You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects- their force as sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). (5)

For Ellis, the cowbell maps D.C. as it lives beyond the music and actualizes black space. It takes on the form of excess merging the transcendent experience of go-go music, within the framework of Ellis' Afrofuturistic world, with the "Down-to-earth, hardheaded, hollow, loud" groundedness-in-place provided by the cowbell.

This "temporal before and after" that Brown describes is written as an intimacy of tone and use of second person voice. The relationship between person and thing is a theme throughout *The Maverick Room*, but this is the first poem where the thing is assumed to have its own voice even if it is one that does not speak directly in the poem. By Ellis "talking back" to the cowbell- "You're the Real McCoy," - he introduces the object as metaphor, but this metaphor is not meant to only illuminate the living. It operates as its own character in his story of Washington's sonic landscape where Ellis describes meeting the instrument while "reaching into the same pocket" and "agreeing a crowded one is equivalent to sin." Of course, Ellis is reaching into the same musical pocket and his conversation with the cowbell, the point where they agree, is about the "sin" of an oversaturation of instrumentation there. An important note, here, because while the cowbell is symbolic, it does not lose its purpose as object. Or, rather, its "thingness" shifts it from object to "excess."

The cowbell then gathers and creates a "family discussion of percussion." This is an impactful syntactic choice as the use of internal rhyme draws our attention to the third stanza's percussive focus. It is the "tambourine, vibra-slap, and ratchet" that the cowbell calls forth, sonically. I might argue that the choice to highlight those particular instruments speaks to the ways in which Ellis wants the reader to dive beneath the surface of go-go music- to hear past the conga drums or rototoms. Besides the cowbell, these

percussive instruments play the background in go-go music and yet, like in the nature of any band, their presence still defines the contours of go-go's musical expression on stage. Indeed, Ellis is mapping the multiplicity of above-ground places. The poem forces an even deeper dive into specificity of place, and in this case sonic space, that I argue is particular to aesthetic production of black space in contemporary black art production. You, reader, must encounter the object, the *thing*, to understand the above-ground landscape in the same way that you must encounter the human-beyond-humanness in the above-world.

The above-ground and above-world operate in Ellis' text as spatial anchors that tell the story of Washington. He maps his city and provides its own political narrative that speaks directly to the national narrative that often excludes Washingtonian voices. Ellis's D.C. solidifies itself as black space, less because its population numbers, or Parliament Funkadelic, decide it to be so, but because of its distinctive voice that is invested in troubling place with a gaze decidedly steeped in the cultural nuances of black life.

Yet, Ellis also engages death and it is from this point that, besides their placement in Washington he, and my second literary interlocutor, Yejide, cross paths.

The Life of a Chocolate City: *Creatures of Passage*

In Yejide's *Creatures of Passage* a dead black man named Osiris walks past the Big Chair in Southeast Washington, D.C. He has come out of the Anacostia river where his not-quite-fully deceased body was dumped, post-death and post-"unbecoming," and is reentering the world not with, but as, fire. Like the rest of the characters in Yejide's work, he is not traversing an unknown, unnamed, or even fictional space. The *place* of his living and dying is anchored by what everyone in the community has called, simply, the Big Chair since its erection in 1959. By 1977, the year the book is set, the furniture store that was gifted the chair built as a marketing tool is gone, but the landmark remains. This is a historical fact the book omits. A gesture, I argue, towards the ways in which Yejide masterfully presents the real landscape of Anacostia, a community located in the southeast quadrant of Washington, as its own character in her fictive work. For all the (perhaps) magical realism that *Creatures of Passage* embodies, the Big Chair is a real landmark that still stands in Anacostia, today. In fact, every street, bridge, and body of water that Yejide mentions is real- still holding place and able to be mapped onto Washington's landscape.

It is this geographical and temporal scene, one of the many iterations of Washington community dynamics, that the reader steps into as they follow Nephthys, Osiris' living twin sister. She acts as a trusted but troubled narrative guide through the book; her character ferries souls, both the living and the dead, in an old Plymouth that she uses as a taxi. The novel tells us she is not the first to take on this work- moving souls

through the physical and spiritual places that exist as both one and the same on Washington's terrain. Yejide writes

...there was one of her kind in each epoch. The last one was an enslaved woman who hailed from the Ashanti Empire. She once lived on the campus of Columbian College (which later become George Washington University) with the wealthy college steward who owned her. And she too looked in the fog and heard the cry of wandering hearts. For in that low visibility of the fog's atmosphere, where the living felt around as if blind, the fog tried to help men realize that they were but creatures of passage, pointing the way from one destination to another... (49)

The epoch of the novel's past and present sets the tone for the above-worlds and above-grounds that Yejide constructs. Immediately, the blending of life and life-beyond-death are at the forefront of the narrative through the vision of black women who create another map for Washington.

As its name suggests, *Creatures of Passage* is about passing- from life to death, from death back to life, through time, and finally through space and place ultimately for black communal reckoning and healing. It also, I will argue, provides a way for us to continue to explore black spaces; transcension of humanity, expected space placements, and overly simplified temporal knowledges as above-worlds and above-grounds in literature. To that end, I begin my reading of *Creatures of Passage* as an above-ground and in the most fantastical geographic thing-turned-place the book describes: the Big Chair.

Described by Osiris as "that infamous structure on the corner, empty as if awaiting the return of the king of ogres from a night of man hunting," the Big Chair serves as a topographical placeholder for the characters who weave in and out of the novel as deftly as they weave in and out of what is concretizing as a majority black neighborhood in the 1970s (86). It is also a placeholder for the contemporary local-

turned-national political dialogue around dispossession that includes Southeast Washington, D.C. by the time Yejide's book is published in March of 2021. For all the attention given to the more popular, and more maturely gentrified spaces, of H Street corridor and U Street, Anacostia had begun to see the physical birthmark of decades-long plans by 2019.

Like Ellis, however, gentrification remains a subtext- only recognizable when one considers the novel in its entirety which is to include the place and time of the book's publication. Yejide wants us to understand the birth of black space in Washington before we chart its destruction. She describes Anacostia thusly

But in 1977 Anacostia was still the New World, an isle of blood and desire. It was the capital's wild child east of a river that bore its name, a place where much was yet discovered. Anything was possible in that easternmost quadrant, where all things lived and died on the edges of time and space and meaning. It was a realm of contradictions, an undulating landscape of pristine land and dirty water, of breathtaking hills and decimated valleys. Crab apple and cherry trees flourished in the yards of abandoned houses and centuries-old oaks flanked run-down corner stores. Pushers stood watch for cars when little kids were crossing the street and junkies held doors open for old women. Paroled men played basketball and chess with fatherless boys. The unemployed sat in windows and kept tabs on the injustices of the land. I'll tell your mama was the universal threat, because next to God there was none more powerful. And the damnation and glory of man was forever intertwined in Anacostia, since all who lived there were faced with the unconquerable presence of both... (17-18)

The language used to describe place - as isles, kingdoms, and fiefdoms - throughout the novel is one way geography is highlighted as its own primary character, but also a way in which we might wrest place out of easy oversimplification. In fact, it would seem part of the books work is to reestablish the ways a reader might traverse the literary landscape- a particularly salient point since Yejide is writing about a "real" place, not fictive, whose identity has never included statehood and has almost always refused to include the people who live within its boundaries.

Which is why we must return to the ‘thing’ of the Big Chair as we turned to Ellis’ cowbell. If the “thingness” of the cowbell is evocative in Ellis’ work, a harbinger of black aestheticism in the District, then the thingness of the Big Chair, is the consummation of the *ability* of a thing to elicit “metaphysical presence.” We know that things are in fact as much about our perception of them as they are in and of themselves an object. Things, then, offer an opportunity to taste, not just see, the layered construction of black space even within a larger, more widely known place-narrative. This is especially important in Washington, D.C. where black spaces remain insulated, and the place-narrative of the city is already written as outward-facing.

Ultimately, like Ellis, focusing on the “thingness” of the cityscape gives Yejide the space to invite the reader into the multiplicity of Washington D.C.’s above-ground places. Unlike Ellis, however, Yejide’s places are translated through a first-person narration that breathes life into multiple characters’ voices. Even minor characters are given the opportunity for an internal excavation that makes the continued presence of the landmark of the Big Chair, and various other landmarks throughout the city, particularly intriguing. Focusing on these landmarks as things gives an opportunity to understand the black geography of the city. The chair is a meeting/thinking/” just there” place, but also a living and breathing part of a community’s infrastructure.

To that point, later on in the novel, Gary Higgins, a young man suffering from the mental illness and breakdown wrought by the unspeakability of sexual assault, would be found by Nephthys “perched on the Big Chair, a nineteen-and-a-half foot Duncan Phyfe dining room chair on the corner of V Street..” looking out over Anacostia (152). For him, it was “kind of like a lighthouse, an eye fixed on the happenings of that isle of blood and

desire” (152). Indeed, for those who may have never seen the Big Chair the thought of its placement, and its size, seems odd. The chair has no special markings making it specific to Washington or to blackness, for that matter. Yet, to erect that oversized chair in that place in 1959 was meant to be a signal of value and expected economic prosperity in, what was then, a majority white neighborhood.

Like the monuments along the Potomac river, the Duncan Phyfe-styled monument was a champagne glass raised to the promise of capitalism. It was intentional about the narrative for the neighborhood defined by its proximity to the Anacostia river. Phyfe was a renowned cabinetmaker in the late nineteenth century whose work in mahogany wood became iconic in American furniture production. His chairs, tables, and various other major decorative pieces have been called the “epitome of American high style...enshrined in some of the nation’s elite historic houses and museums” including the White House (Kenny, Phyfe, & Brown 17). This particular style of chair, then, was meant to define value for a community of white Washingtonians who were geographically cut off from the rest of the city. The Big Chair is excessive in its presentation but also excessive in its rendering of value not only tied to capital, but also tied to the assumption of racialized notions of space and consumption in southeast in the 1950s.

Those notions, structured by whiteness, shift by the 1970s. Rosetta, a fifteen-year-old Anacostia resident in the novel, reveals the ways in which Anacostia becomes geographically defined

Getting a ride from Nephthys Kinwell meant she didn’t have to worry about the bus driver ignoring her standing at the stop around the corner. or the cabdrivers expecting a blow job for their fare instead of money. Besides, when she told them where she was going (Anacostia) they often said they didn’t go “other there.” Oftentimes, the farthest they would take her, especially in those wee hours, was the corner of 11th and M Streets in the southeast quadrant, near the Navy Yard,

and from there she had to get out and walk across the bridge. (138)

Ye Jedi refrains from giving us Anacostia's statistical, demographic, or economic biography so the reader cannot know for sure why the taxi drivers might stop before crossing a bridge into southeast Washington. She does, however, use parallelism in the text- between character and place- to offer some clues. Rosetta's presence, one that causes bus drivers to roll past her and taxicab drivers to make assumptions about her mode of payment, produces a certain value expectation not only of Rosetta's body, but also of the ways in which she is defined by, and defines, the land of her place-making. In this case, the encounter of the bridge- Rosetta's way home but others, outsiders, stopping point- is an encounter with the thingness of the bridge. It illuminates the value system that might make both Rosetta and the land deemed untouchable, but is also one of the ways the reader might come to understand the uniquely insular nature of the community's geographical presence.

One example of this comes after the bridge is defined by the gazes of outsiders. The novel pivots to show how the bridge is defined by Rosetta's whose mistrust of the stability of the bridge's structure only further illuminates its place as thing rather than object. There is no assumption of its use as a 'given' part of the built environment. Instead, its ability, its very purpose, is written as a possibility rather than a conclusive ending

And she suffered a certain distress on any bridge. She hated the trust she had to put in the structures not to break as she walked across them. because she'd learned that anything could collapse at any moment, split or crack or crumble and take her with it. (138-39)

To punctuate this point Rosetta recalls an encounter she has with a young man with blue eyes on her last trip across the East Capital Street Bridge over the Anacostia River. The

man begins to cite the pledge of allegiance to her as he is sitting on the bridge's edge. A third person narrative voice steps in to explain their encounter as both seem to be toying with the idea of, as Rosetta describes, answering the call of the water's beneath them.

"I thought it mattered," said the young man.

Rosetta looked at him with the innocence of one doomed animal to another.

"What?"

"This place."

What the young man meant was the dream of the territories. For he hailed from the distant Kingdom of Iowa, where from his elementary school desk he changed the Pledge and believed it to be true. And when he arrived at the capital gates, he was driven inside by the magic that images of amber waves of grain can invoke. That the colors of the flag can inspire. But instead he found himself steeped in the filth of covering and uncovering the deeds of his superiors and coworkers: drug-fueled nights in the brothels of 14th Street and Georgetown; bribery at the Hay-Adams hotel and the Mayflow; theft in the appropriations committees; data manipulation in the national laboratories; report bias in the think tanks; informants on the payroll. There was the pointless support and sabotage of legislation-each in equal measure- based on shifting and sliding interests, and a game of wits and thrones. There was the pointless wheel of win lose draw. (140)

It is in "this place" of the East Capital Street Bridge that two different worlds collide in the form of the young man from Iowa, and Rosetta who is from Washington. The instability of a bridge (again, even as an infrastructure often assumed to be completely stable) is where this young man must grapple with the true instability of the ideas of a nation he has believed to be stable.

Rosetta meets the young man's instability of space on that bridge from the *place* in which she was living- "a world away even from the one the young man imagined and could no longer face-" What is the difference? She is fully aware of the weight of her black geographical presence as a black girl, in the Anacostia community, within the boundaries of Washington, D.C. While he has come to D.C. with the promise of what he

imagines as a space of impactful policy makers and power brokers, she has forever lived under the shadows of those promises which has only birthed instability for her and those who look like her. That is why she can acknowledge that she lives “a world away” from even what the young man is able to imagine. Her’s is not one of imagining.

Through the interaction with Rosetta and the young man the bridge transitions from symbolic to excess. The meaning of the structure shifts to the black space that resides in the above-ground. The ‘thingness’ of the bridge does double work. Readers encounter the bridge through the eyes of the characters who bring their own meanings to its place, but they also must encounter the bridge in broader historical context because it is a ‘real’ place. Mapping the East Capital Street Bridge, now called the Whitney Young Memorial Bridge, as black space means considering the bridge as specific to the place and time it is in *alongside* the spatial constructions of those who encounter it.

We see a similar literary move with the bodies of water that Nephthys hopes her brother’s ashes reside in after his death. I argue that water as a trope used throughout the novel can also be read as ‘thing’ because of the various infrastructural meanings to the real place of Washington. In other words, the reader cannot map their own idea of what it means to engage water onto the characters in the text without, first, acknowledging the implications of each of the bodies of water for the Washington landscape and the meaning of the built environment that defines them. I use Nephthys’ desire to imagine her brother beyond the Anacostia river where his body is found as an example

It allowed her to think of him living in other bodies of water instead, moving through other currents that gave him passage to better places: the cherry blossom-flecked currents of the Tidal Basin; the shallow majesty of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool; the slushy inflow of the McMillan Reservoir; the black tranquility of the Georgetown canal; the rolling deep of the Potomac River. (20)

The Lincoln Memorial, McMillan Reservoir, and Georgetown canal are built up as desirable against the Anacostia River. Their meanings are tied not only to the properties that make up the water, but also to their location in the city. We have already established what Anacostia may mean to those outside of the community according to the novel. Those other locales shift to placed things, embody their thingness, when the meaning of the infrastructure that is tied to the water supersedes the actual body of water.

The Georgetown community, tied to the canal, houses the elite Georgetown University and the homes of politicians and power brokers in Washington. The water reflects the neighborhood that it is connected to; it is kept pristine. The McMillan Reservoir, located by Howard University, provided filtered water for Washington up until the 1980s. Lincoln Memorial's Reflecting Pool sits on the National Mall. All three bodies of water carry value with them resituating their literal work, providing the sustenance that water provides, as cultural work. The Anacostia River does the same, but its value- tied to blackness- is diminished. Again, an above-ground, here, allows us to think through and complicate the relationship of value, blackness, and spatial positioning within black space.

A Black Place/ A Black Loss (Above-World)

Loss operates in both the physical and metaphysical throughout the book. It marks its spot as not just fantastical or as memory, but instead as imbricated in the materiality of the above-ground, even as its very substance is above-worldly. To that end, Yejide presents above-worlds as one of many operating at various moments in time and place. Those worlds, knowingly or unknowingly, intersect with each other as systems of motion

thus lending itself towards what it means for space, people, and time to live in the place of the passage. For example, Nephthys and Osiris hail from the Gullah islands of South Carolina; almost immediately those islands become an echo in the geographical terrain of Anacostia.

The alcohol she'd been drinking moved slowly through the slack passageways of her veins, a seething current of heat searing her nerves. In that state she could sail an ocean of her own making, tepid and stagnant. She could block out nearly everything, except the image of her brother's broken body and fog that carried the call of other wandering hearts. Through the haze of the early-morning hours (late-evening?) she felt her half finger throbbing as it always did in dampness, the tip now dark and bereft of the topaz light it had when she was a child. The half finger didn't glow anymore. Not as it did in the casket-black nights back on the Sea Islands, where she and her brother once played in the wonderland of the Gullah marshes, when they glared at a dark world through the fearless, hopeful eyes of children. The fact that she and her brother had somehow managed to move from one island to another kind of island was not lost on her, and she placed this on the long list of things she found darkly ironic. (20)

The long history of black space that is definitive of the Gullah islands and peoples in South Carolina is situated up against the long history of Anacostia. It includes the passage of "ghost tribes of the Nacotchtank Indians" whose name was taken and then misconstrued by European settlers to name the Anacostia River. It also includes a history of the demographic and ideological *construction* of a Chocolate City by its black residents, but also the possibility of its deconstruction- another passage. Yejide writes

They rode on, the colonel's wife now silent in the backseat as she gazed out the window at the quadrants. Over a century before, from his controversial appointed post, Frederick Douglass had signed the deeds of Washingtonians still believing in the dream of owning something that had already been taken out of so many hands; places marked by the blood absorbed and bodies buried beneath the quadrants. Many years later, the quadrants would be consumed by a neoplasm of surveyors and developers, a superstate of cranes and constructs. Neighborhoods and vestiges of other eras would vanish in to the folds of time. Little old ladies and cane-walking men would amble the city in a state of stupefied grief, pointing at unrecognizable places made more unrecognizable by the Lego-block stacking of pricey loft apartments and the sprawling offices of government agencies and their contractors. (57)

This is where time and space converge in the novel and where we can again think about black geographical presence and passage. I lean on Herman Beaver's conceptualization of scale to explain how the space and time of South Carolina's Sea Islands converge with the place and time of Anacostia- a theorization he uses to read the work of geography in Toni Morrison's novels. He argues

Our ability to have a meaningful attachment to place has much to do, then, with the ways scale often pivots on the symbiosis that inheres between systems of exclusion and systems of evaluation. (7)

Beavers goes on to state that by “[moving] outward from how the individual engenders a sense of place, to the ways place is manifest on a neighborhood scale, to how place signifies on the scale of the town, and finally to how place reflects social relations on a global scale,” the full scope of place-making for black life becomes illuminated (7).

Although South Carolina's shores are the most consistent in recurring, other islands are referenced including one character's homeland of Ireland.

...Brandon Riley thought of how his family had left the blood-soaked lands of Ireland for better places, and how now he felt that one faraway island had merely been traded for another. Anacostia used to be all white and full of the promise of fortunes, and this point was never lost on him whenever he heard the songs of Earth, Wind, & Fire pouring out of car windows or smelled soul food cooking on someone's stove. He once prided himself on having survived, thrived even, when so many others had left. Over the years he had tried to smile at the black children around the neighborhood but found it increasingly difficult to do so as they grew older and bigger, for each one of them meant more encroachment on the spaces of his mind, his sense of position and property. (74)

The locational perimeters of the narrative interrogate the story of Washington's black spatial legacy. Black land ownership, whether through Frederick Douglass in the early 20th century or a Washington reforming into the new version of itself post-Civil War, the construction of whiteness in place rather than the surety of it by immigrants, or islands

cast away as undesirable and unvaluable in the South, allows us to read the impact of place's social relations at the global and national scale. The historical underpinning of these two places is entangled by the nation-making, ownership, constructions of race, and the budding capitalism built on the backs of enslaved Africans in America, but also of course, brings to bear the African slave trade and thus diaspora.

On the other hand, by focusing in on the place at the neighborhood scale, the Gullah islands of South Carolina are offered as a rendering of the black spatial dynamics of southeast Washington. In this way, black space begets black space. It is knowable in the novel, in part, by knowing the loss of another landscape. In the same way, black loss begets black loss- only knowable within the blackness and lossness defined by those within the community. As Nephthys remembers her homescape, she has a singular thought

It's all gone now

It is the third person narrator who accelerates the reader into the future of what is 'gone' on those islands off of South Carolina, a consistent thematic element, by revealing the ultimate birth of "gated communities and resorts and time-share flats" that are built on top of what were once vibrant black life-worlds.

And the few living who remained would be unwitting stars of a sort of human nature preserve, where tourists came to smile and point as if looking at the last of a species. (21)

This foreshadowing is one of the moments that ties itself to the contemporary iteration of gentrification taking root in Washington, the city, but beginning even more so in the southeast quadrant. It also calls forward the assumption that a black loss of space will inevitably lead to the loss of black living. To be clear, this loss of black living, if not

necessarily black life, interrogates the layered ways value- who is gone, why they are gone, and what replaces them in the space they leave behind- comes to be understood within black community. The space of black loss, both of land and people, sits at the center of *Creatures of Passage* as its own livable and lived place.

It is at this point that I must highlight the necessary and unexpected turn the novel takes, and that my explication of the novel must take along with it. Interestingly, although Yejide calls forward the impact of external power structures on black space, the work of the Gullah Islands is not meant to keep the reader focused only on the capitalistic shifts and gains that define black land accrual and loss. These, no doubt, force passage, but their power is not at the center of the story. No, the reader is instead asked to encounter the black loss within the above-world, what I contend grows out of what Beavers calls a “tight space,” as a function of intraracial dynamics in Anacostia’s black community³³. This story’s heart reveals that the true excavation of loss in the text, the true fact of its place, is in the loss of the community’s children. Their loss of childhood, voice, and place as a result of the continued sexual assault by an intracommunity predator is interwoven into the fractured places of Anacostia. Until the characters within the community acknowledge that space, there can be no communal healing or renewal in black place.

To be clear, the scale at which Yejide invites her reader to ask global and national questions about white supremacy, capital, and the value of black space remains, but she does not allow those questions to strip or overshadow the black characters of their voice

³³Beavers, Herman. *Geography and the political imaginary in the novels of Toni Morrison*. Springer, 2018. (163).

and place. Those are facts of existence, but not definitive of existence for the black spaces she curates in the novel. For example, Osiris is killed by his white boss, Brandon Riley, after Riley's wife accuses Osiris of attempting to rape her. The accusation comes because of Amy Riley's inability to "set her value against his desire to obtain what was beyond reach, what she had been told in a million ways was forbidden and therefore superior to all," when Osiris denies her attempt at sexual advance while her husband is out of town (73).

His denial is subtle, but just enough to cause Amy to question her ability to operate in the world as the peak of femininity and desirability, certainly by the Other- the black man.

Despite her unfortunate circumstances and the disappointment that life had brought her, she believed (knew?) that she represented the ideal women in the kingdoms of the land. For the television, radio, movies, and all the magazines had told her so. There were history books brimming with pictures i her image and museums filled with paintings of wars fought over women who resembled her. And were riches made and lost with jewels snatched form dark people in dark continents and bestowed on the pale décolletages of centuries past. (71)

Yejide gives the reader a chance to digest Amy Riley's assumability of placed value, and the effect of that placed value on the innocence of her Other's. Her husband calls on friends to assault and ultimately kill Osiris for his perceived affront, and he is thrown into the Anacostia river.

His story and the story of the white men who kill him, however, do not become the center of the narrative. Osiris' is introduced in the novel at the point of his "unbecoming," the way Yejide explores life after death, and is only the beginning of his being- what the novel calls the "living out [of] the rest of [his] death" (93). His loss is the place of his existence and one of the story's black above-worlds. This is important to note

because it foregrounds my articulation of black space in the novel. Almost immediately after Osiris' dying, he goes about the work of revenging his murder by killing the three men who took his life. He also finds and tortures Amy Riley until, "reconsidering all the possible ways to murder her held less excitement, and the satisfaction of knowing that she would go on suffering and decaying held more" (90). Although Yejide gives time to the realities and resonances of white violence against black bodies it does not become the job of the other characters to carry out his revenge for him. Nor does it become the lens by which the reader should stand by and analyze the black characters whose names and stories take up the text. By giving that work to Osiris, and having him complete the job quickly, Yejide reorients the center of the novel, and the power, back towards the black man who is killed. Death does not foreclose his agency. In doing so, *Creatures of Passage* reorients the center of the novel back towards blackness.

Osiris acts as his own judge and jury, for himself and others, over the course of decades; the place of his loss exists at a different temporal and spatial plane even as it runs parallel to the those whose being still resides in the space and place of living. The "Twelve Hours of Night," where "each hour was a day year decade, and time moved forward and back according to its own reckoning" marks a literary shift in the novel that has been building, but claims the reader's full attention by the time it is presented as a fact of place (85). Why is this important? It reveals the mode by which we should consider above-worlds, and is a direct example of what I refer to earlier in this chapter as an above-world's need for transitional motion. We are to read the moments of losing in this black community of Anacostia not as a fact of ending, but a fact of existing. I refrain from a full reading of the text temporally, here, since the third chapter of the dissertation

will do so in more depth, besides to say that time is used to assist the reader in the recognition of the different spatial planes that black geographical presences takes up in the novel.

For example, when Nephthys asks Rosetta to read a local newspaper, *Afro Man*, Rosetta knows she wants to know what has been published about death. Not death that has happened already, but death soon to come. Osiris' daughter and Nephthys's niece, Amber, is a seer whose dreams are printed in *Afro Man* and titled as "the Lottery." The news of the lived present is juxtaposed up against the news of the future.

Rosetta knew that Nephthys did not mean for her to read the ongoing commentary about the Hanafi siege that happened three months before, where twelve black Muslims took control of three office buildings, held 150 hostages, shot and killed a twenty-four-year-old reporter and a security guard, and were responsible for the bullet that barely missed Councilman Marion Barry's heart. Nor did she mean for her to read about Benin adoption its constitution or the coup attempt in Angola. Rosetta new that Nephthys wanted her to read the Lottery, Amber Kinwell's unmistakable proclamations of death. People were afraid of her but they still wanted to know what she dreamed, for there was much to know and much to fear in 1977. *What did she see?* (147)

Amber's foreknowledge is printed alongside the local and national happenings of black places and people as fact, because those who claim the Anacostia of *Creatures of Passage* walk through loss as a foreground, not background, of living. The nature of losing is the nature of a present-futurity that allows for both the existence of what can be reported as past and what can be reported as future. Both are recognizable.

The newspaper prints Amber's placement of loss as, perhaps, an answer to the centuries-long yearning for prophecy as can be evidenced by the consistent printing of daily horoscopes in news and magazine publications. However, her visions do not hold the promises of fortunes lost one day and gained the next. The two characters whose voices are the only ones we have to offer an opinion on Amber's visions outside of her

family both seem to accept those visions as part of their own above-world knowledge, and so the reader is invited to accept that knowledge as well. Rosetta reads

1. *Police raid. Green house with the big philodendron on the porch. Body in the closet.*
2. *Pink pacifier and bottle. Box buried in the yard. Frederick Douglass. Study cottage in the back.*
3. *Red, white, and blue beads on the ends of braided hair. Train tracks. Washington Bullets T-Shirt. Kingman Lake.*
4. *Wires on fire. Apartment on Dotson Street. No numbers on the door. Windows nailed shut. Woman can't breathe.*
5. *A mother. Five children. A man named Wilson holds his arm and loses his heart.*

Four of the five premonitions give specific place to the possibility of loss, and although they are not what Nephthys is looking for, they speak to the novel's emphasis on loss as both placed and timed. I use 'place' in the past tense, here, to highlight Yejide's exploration of the ephemerality of loss as it collides with the materiality of natural and built landmarks and infrastructures. Amber's visions are textually and contextually fractured. The list of moments that describe death, the periods in between each short phrase, and the tone taken (these deaths are factual and therefore unescapable) mirror the fractured places of Anacostia. Ultimately, the reader is to assume a communal familiarity with loss. Or rather, to recognize loss is to mean that it is knowable, and knowability, for this novel, is in its landscape.

Throughout the book Yejide makes reference to the knowability of loss through the voices of various characters who are all attached to the Anacostia community. Lulu, Rosetta's younger sister, is told that, "there are were two kinds of people in Anacostia: hunter and prey" (36). After thinking about how she ended up, a dead woman whose spirit lives in the trunk of the Plymouth that Nephthys drives, the nameless young woman who is only identified by her place in the car, defines her relationship to loss and

Anacostia: “What she knew- as all who find themselves in Anacostia do- was that dreams come true even when people don’t want them to” (165). Finally, a third person narrator filters Anacostia through the eyes of Dash- Nephthys’ nephew, Osiris’ grandson, and Amber’s son- describing his home as a world of contradictions

He walked on, hastening his stride through the spectrum of positives and negatives that places like Anacostia wrought: mother handing treats to toddlers in strollers; policemen roping off alleyways with yellow tape; men waving to friends in passing cars; SWAT vehicles parked in front of the buildings... (33)

These renderings of the southeast Washington neighborhood spaces show the dichotomies of good and bad that define any place taken up by the human. However, it is in this way of using characters that define loss both from the position of the living and the position of those who reside beyond the metric of the ‘human’ that the novel is able to bring to bear the crux of the story: there are lost black children whose voices are silenced.

Some of these children speak beyond the grave- but others simply leave the place of their loss with the possibility of their living. All embody what Ashon Crawley describes in their critical piece “Stayed | Freedom | Hallelujah,” in the edited volume, *Otherwise Worlds*, a vibration.

Everything living and dead, everything animate and immobile, vibrates. Vibration is the internal structuring logic of matter. Because everything vibrates, nothing escapes participating in choreographic encounters with the rest of the living world. It’s a reality of thermodynamics, of kinesthesia. Everything has a ground state kinesis that cannot be fully evacuated. (29)

The geographic presence of the children of Anacostia, what I call the place of their loss, resonates throughout *Creatures of Passage*. The attempt to “fully evacuate” the stories, voices, and ultimately life of those who have experienced sexual assault at the hands of elementary school janitor, Mercy Ratchet, by Ratchet but also by the community must be

reckoned with before the characters in the novel can find peace. Those vibrations within the places of loss remain. Ratchet describes the insidious way he preys on the young

And since he was the handyman, groundskeeper, caretaker, and provider of all things great and small (tissues, lost wallets, missing watches, choir robes, and more), no one noticed him leading the girl out of the banquet room and down the hall. While they were all consumed with the business of planning trips to heaven, he walked right by. There were six more Sundays of cream soda, eyes, and bliss after that Mercy remembered. He later heard that the girl was sent to Chicago to stay with an aunt. Or was it Detroit to stay with her grandmother? Somewhere, anyway. (126)

The loss of childhood and place are intertwined. The loss of place, for the young girl, becomes the *place of her loss* - the space left with the vibration of her being. In this way, the novel adds another layer to its exploration of humanness-beyond-the-human with the empty spaces left by children, not dead, but living as present outside of their *presence*. In other words, attempting to live with the tragedy of the unspeakable. By not placing the girl (maybe she's in Chicago or maybe Detroit) there is an attempt to stifle the truth of her vibration and thusly the truth of her geographic presence.

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I offer that the place of loss is where Washington's story of aesthetic production despite losing, what I call an aesthetics of loss, must begin. Ellis and Yejide, both, recognize this. Tackling the intentionality of choosing to be geographically *present* in the black space of an above-world or above-ground- as a community- begins with the understanding the construction of that community along deep political and historical lines. For both authors, it also means tackling the complex nature of intracommunal relationships. The investment in grappling with the beautiful but messy texture of spatial relationships that then shape community, is where the second chapter will begin.

Chapter 3: To Claim a Place of Loss: Residue, Residual, & Black Spatial Loss

When i can't express
what i really feel
i practice feeling
what i can express
-Nikki Giovanni

Did you sense that our obliteration was right around the corner?...
...or, did you see yourself as an archaeologist? Coming to unearth our bones from the
concrete.

-*Residue*

Two black men sit across from each other in a dimly lit room. One is accompanied by the rattle of ankle chains; the sound is paired with the sight of an orange jump suit. The camera shot is tight so the viewer must rely on what they know but also what they hear- the call of a guard, the slamming of doors, and, again, the rattle of ankle chains when the man shifts, ever so slightly, in his seat.

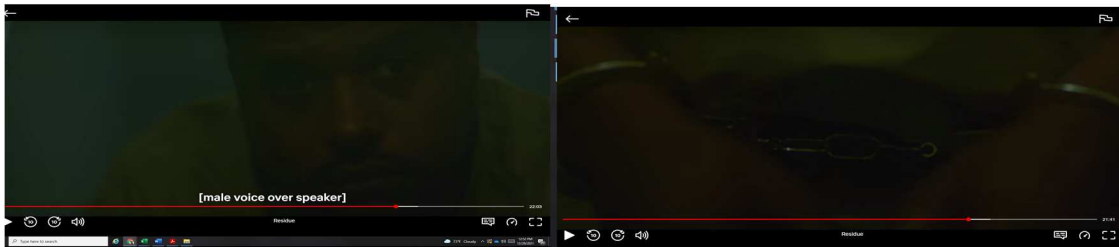


Figure 1. Residue

The second man cries. In the scenes prior, we watched him practice what he would say to his old friend when they reunited as he drove to meet him. The words are replaced by the emotion of the moment. His tears capture all that is unsaid before the scene breaks and the two are transported to the green, lush terrain of trees, weeds, and various other plants that gather around bodies of water. They are standing by a creek.



Figure 2. *Residue* Film

The men laugh, talk, and reminisce while the film cuts back and forth between the visitor's room of the jail, colored grey, and the shades of olive, sage, and emerald that make up the forest where they are (re)placed.

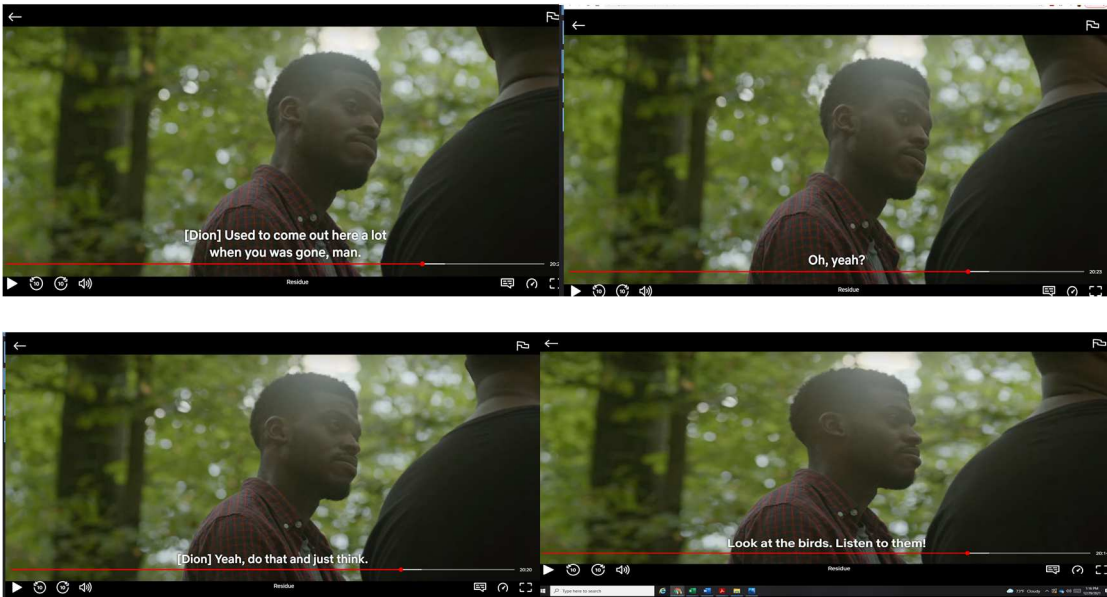




Figure 3. Residue Film

Dion asks about Jay's grandmother who he says he felt like was his own. They discuss their relationship and laugh and reminisce some more before Dion asks, again, how Jay's grandmother is doing now. The scene returns back to the prison visiting room as Jay shares that his grandmother has passed. The conversation does not seem to go on long before the sounds of the jail return- a loud banging on the door is the signal that the visit is almost over. The shot cuts back to the jail for a moment before the two men say their goodbyes in the forest. They embrace and one man walks away, still in the forest, although the viewer knows his true destination- back to the jail cell he has been allowed to leave just for this visit.



Figure 4. Residue Film

One of the final scenes of the 2020 film, *Residue*, and one of the many powerful takes on loss and losing, the interaction between main character, Jay, and his childhood friend and pseudo “big brother,” Dion, is evocative. Although *Residue* is largely marketed for its commentary on gentrification in Washington, director and writer Merawi Gerima bring to bear the many places of loss that their characters must encounter. The

weight of the loss of Dion to the prison system is revealed through his (dis)placement in the jail cell, a sight that brings Jay to tears, and (re)placement in a space that is familiar to both men. The place of his loss, on the forested terrain that both Dion and Jay visited as children, is also the place of his humanness despite the dehumanization brought by imprisonment.

It is from that point that this chapter begins. If the first chapter was meant to define black space in Washington, arguing that blackness which exists above ground and above world as opposed to in an underground or otherworld is key to understanding the contemporary black aesthetic impulse to examine black geography, then this second chapter is the first tenet used to sift through that which shapes the aesthetic sitting on the above world or above ground. I call on Nicole Fleetwood's definition of blackness to think through the ways aesthetic producers examine black spatial loss in their art. As Fleetwood states

Blackness [...] circulates. It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, although it has many histories and many associations with people and things. Blackness feels in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It feels in the void and is the void. Through its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds those attachments. (6)

Of course the circulatory nature of blackness does well-documented work in a gentrifying Washington, DC. The ways in which blackness, itself, takes up space operates beyond the lived experiences, ideals, and realities of black people, and yet it also takes up black people for the purposes of constructing its narrative. That history in Washington is critical, but I build on it to shift from reading blackness through a lens that focuses on how it is wielded in white space to how black people produce art, about their own experiences, *towards* and *for* black spaces. In other words, to quote Tina Campt: "what

would it mean to see oneself through the complex positionality that is blackness—and work through its implications on and for oneself?” (7). That question opens the door for a more nuanced exploration of how, as she states, “we are implicated in the precarity of Black life in the contemporary moment” (18).

Following Fleetwood and Camp, I am interested in how black cultural producers concretize and trouble blackness, even while acknowledging its positionality in a logic of race, and offer that black spatial loss allows for those producers to resituate themselves beyond the fluidity and emptiness of blackness as an idea by anchoring themselves in place. To extend Fleetwood’s conceptualization of black self-portraiture towards black place-making, I explore how the film, *Residue*, “[creates] critical genealogies and archives” that “serve as counternarratives to cultural and discursive meaning associated with blackness and black bodies” (113).

I ask, how do black aesthetic producers build their art up against a recognition of blackness not as an authentic site in and of itself, but as site tied to the specificity, rhythms, and histories of a particular place? And if we take that to be true, how might we define loss as a place, and what productive work can that serve in aesthetic productions of black space? How might we read blackness not as taking up space in between the matter, but as, the matter? Finally, can I borrow the term, residue, the film’s name, to enact it as an analytic by which we can read the place of loss? I intend to read the aesthetic that gives voice to loss and losing not as only articulating a negation but also articulating an affirmation of living. With that in mind, I come at these questions from my first tenet in an aesthetics of loss which I call black spatial loss and use two phrases to think through the work of the film *Residue*.

Black spatial loss is simply the ability of the aesthetic to locate loss in place. I borrow Gerima's titled term, 'residue,' to define how a place of loss is articulated within an aesthetics of loss, and use this chapter to explore how losing space encapsulates not just the loss of land, as in gentrifying space, but also the loss of the ability to *take up* space. The terms 'residue' and 'residual' are my anchors for such an exploration, because the terms, while similar, have differing meanings. I locate those meanings in agricultural communities who define 'residue' as the dead matter left after animal grazing, and 'residual' as that which is left that will live or allow for something else to live. Residue spaces, then, are the dead matter left by the processes that allow for and hold up gentrification. Residual spaces are those people, places, memories, and aesthetic productions that continue to live even after the process of losing occurs.

I will argue that this film, although titled 'residue,' is actually about residual spaces and explores them as *layered encounters* with places of loss. *Layered encounters* is an idea I will parse out later in the chapter, but it gives way to understanding the location of a place of loss within the aesthetics of loss.

Residue

What does it mean to return to a home that no longer exists? This is the question that drives main character and burgeoning film writer, Jay, as he returns from California to Washington DC. Jay is hoping to capture the people that made up his old neighborhood on Q Street for a film project, but is met with pushback. New white neighbors, who now occupy the homes he remembers as belonging to the mothers and grandmothers of

childhood friends, meet him with thinly veiled apprehension. Some older black neighbors, the ones he can find, meet him with suspicion. Jay's relationship to the neighborhood is complicated and the film does not shy away from navigating his position as insider/outsider. The duality of his perspective is used to identify the residue and residual places that exist in Washington.

The residue place built up, in part, by that ever evolving project of constructing whiteness, conflates black people and black place as extinct spaces or spaces of negation. This conflation is integral to the work of gentrification and, at first glance, might confuse the viewer by having them to identify native black Washingtonians as taking up residue. I argue that residue places, however, are left by attempts at systemic erasure- these are the places created by the unseen/unspoken waste the film invites its viewer to consider. There is something discarded by the project of capitalism in cities that eject the least profitable from its boundaries- and it is not its least profitable. Perhaps the film is speaking to the ways the project of redevelopment is constantly taking up new ground; never fully satisfied in its engagement as it claims territory and then leaves. The residue left by the constant motion of wealth-obtainment- gutted buildings, broken concrete where sidewalks once were laid, the large marketing billboards of developers taped to fences covering the transitional period of a building or block, and skylines decorated with the large cranes of construction machinery- leaves a visual impression on the land that this film provides a critical lens for from the perspective of longtime residents.

To that point, the word, "residue," is only mentioned once in the film although it resonates as a common thematic throughout. Jay's mom, Lavonne, confronts a white couple who allows their dog to defecate in the front yard that is Jay's childhood home.

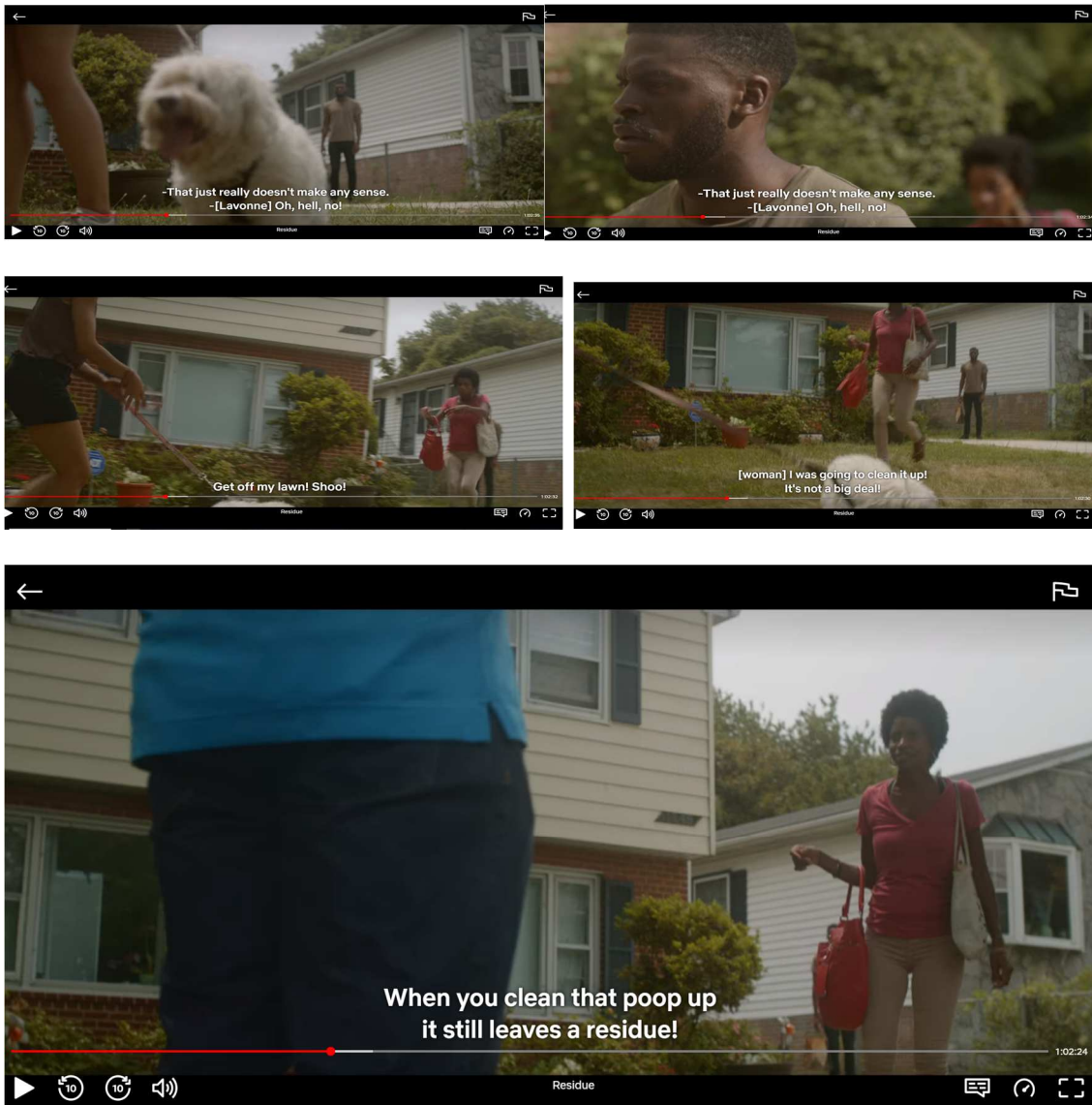


Figure 5. Residue Film

The white woman is both indignant and entitled; she responds to Lavonne’s requests to leave the yard by stating that they, she is accompanied by a man, were going to clean it up anyways. Lavonne says, “even after you clean it, it still leaves a residue.” This is one of a few times where the characters of Q street directly encounter new white residents, but the only where those new residents are, even adjacently, thought as the residue themselves. This undesired byproduct, or the remnant, left by the dog feces is, itself, a

place that Lavonn argues will never be fully removed. The film's choice to make this the one scene where the word 'residue' is used signals the intention and weight of the title. The microaggressions that accompany places of loss, the residue places, in gentrifying cities are amplified, but most importantly the sort of re-centering work that I have already noted an aesthetics of loss is intentional about is able to occur.

We also see this through the film's cinematic choices about how and where white people are positioned on the screen. While we are introduced to multiple black characters who are clearly recognizable even through the hazy and grainy lens of Jay's memory, the voices, but never full faces, of white gentrifiers are always either completely off screen or shown in a blur. Although the movie tackles the displacement of native black Washingtonians and the racialized notions of space that undergird that displacement, the film is pushing back against the assertion that native black Washingtonians sit on the periphery of Washington. In one scene, the camera focuses on the loafers and blurred faces of white women. They are talking over mimosas, a sure sign of brunch, about living in Washington and the "crack house" that one woman claims she lives across from although her building is nice so "that's okay."

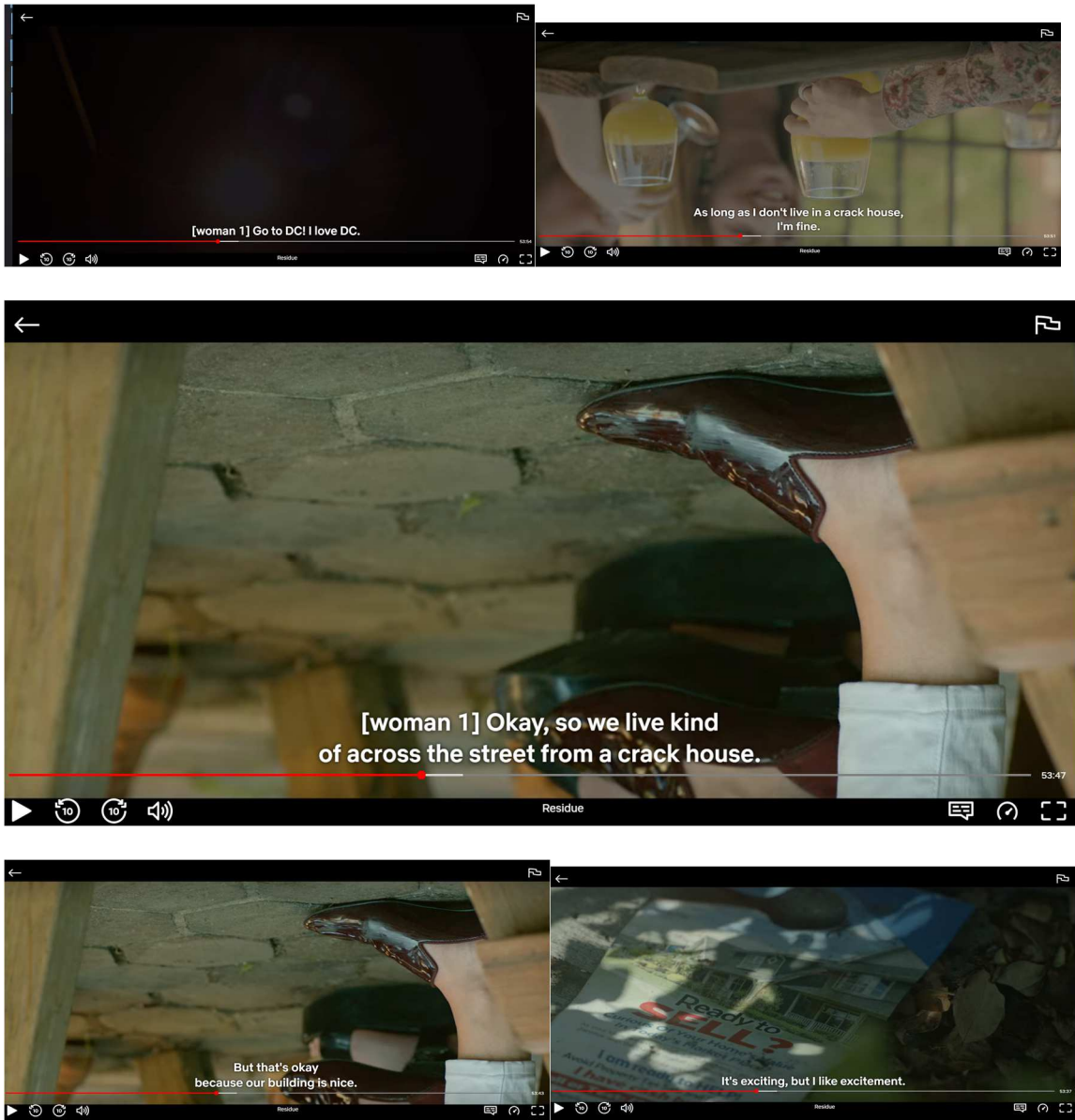


Figure 6. Residue Film

The camera shot turns upside down and then right side up, creating an instability of place. As the women talk, describing their neighbors as a part of the “old DC,” blood begins to come both up from and down through the bricks that pave the ground.

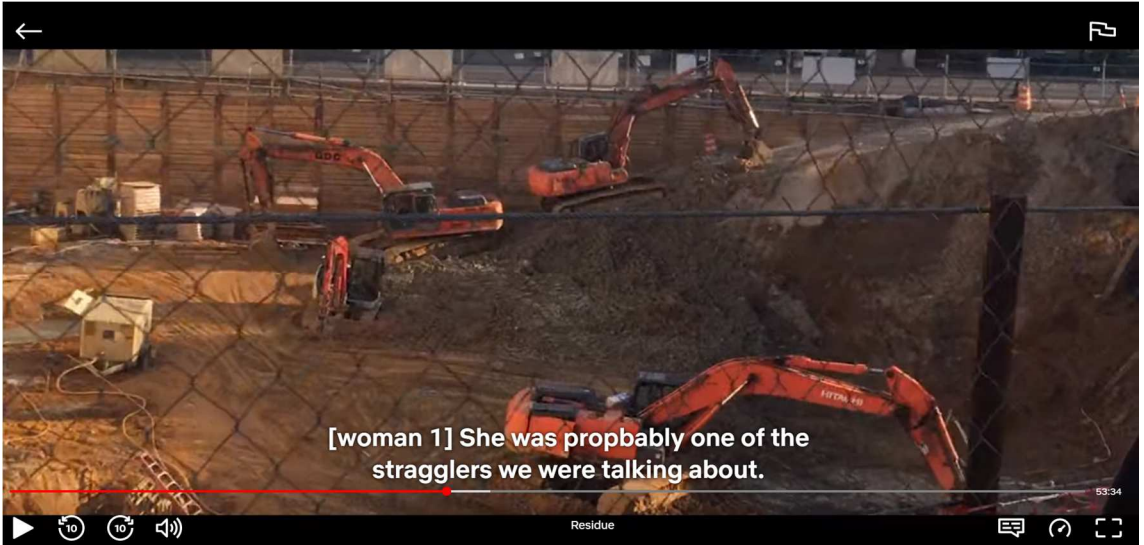




Figure 7. Residue Film

The scene is intentionally disorienting so as to make the ground its own character in this story and the women's voices as a sort of backing track. I say backing track rather than soundtrack here because the voices are meant to emphasize the violence of residue places. Their voices aid in the tight shots and sounds of not only the brick paved road or sidewalk, but also the shots of fireworks, sparklers in little hands, black children laughing, and older black men offering advice juxtaposed up against police sirens, Jay being robbed in the present, and a young Dion arrested by black officers in the neighborhood.

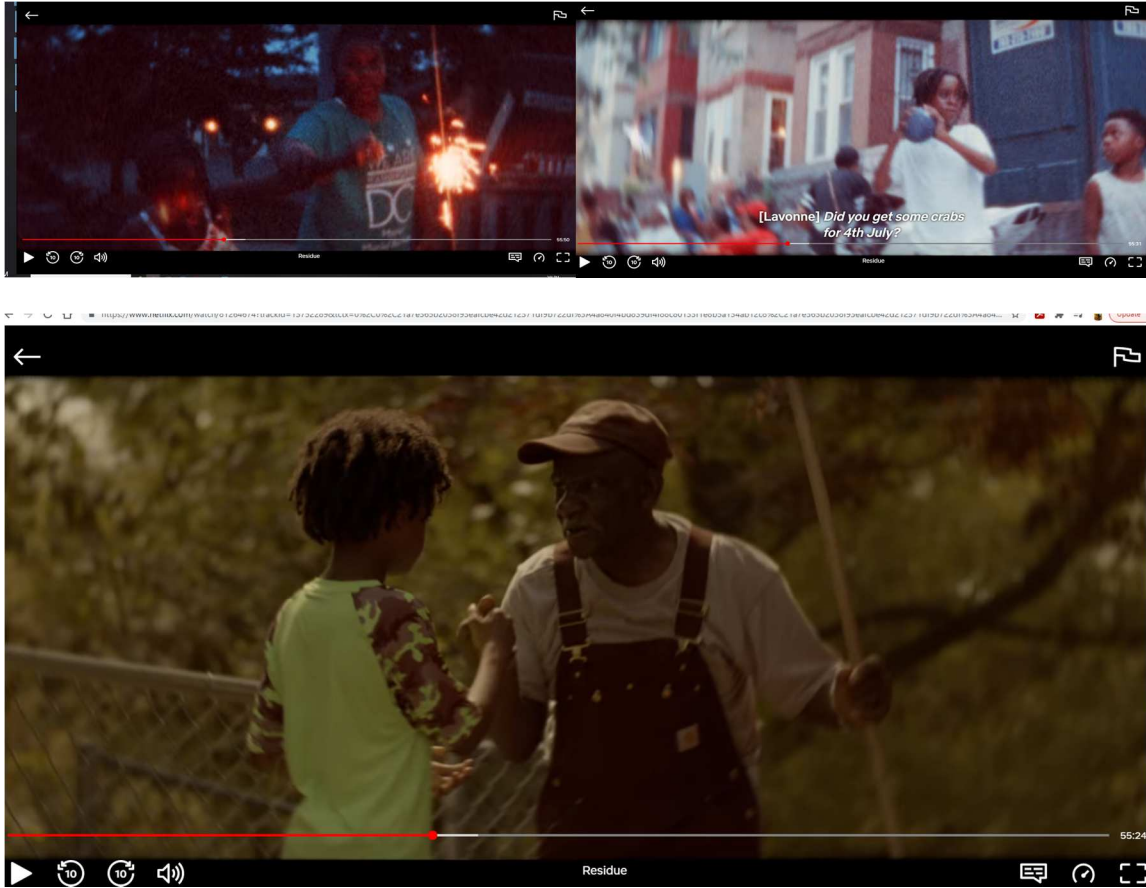


Figure 8. Residue Film

These are the fragmentations of memories, experiences, and spaces that construct the black spatial aesthetic and the residue places. There is violence being done to this place, but its violence is multi-faceted.

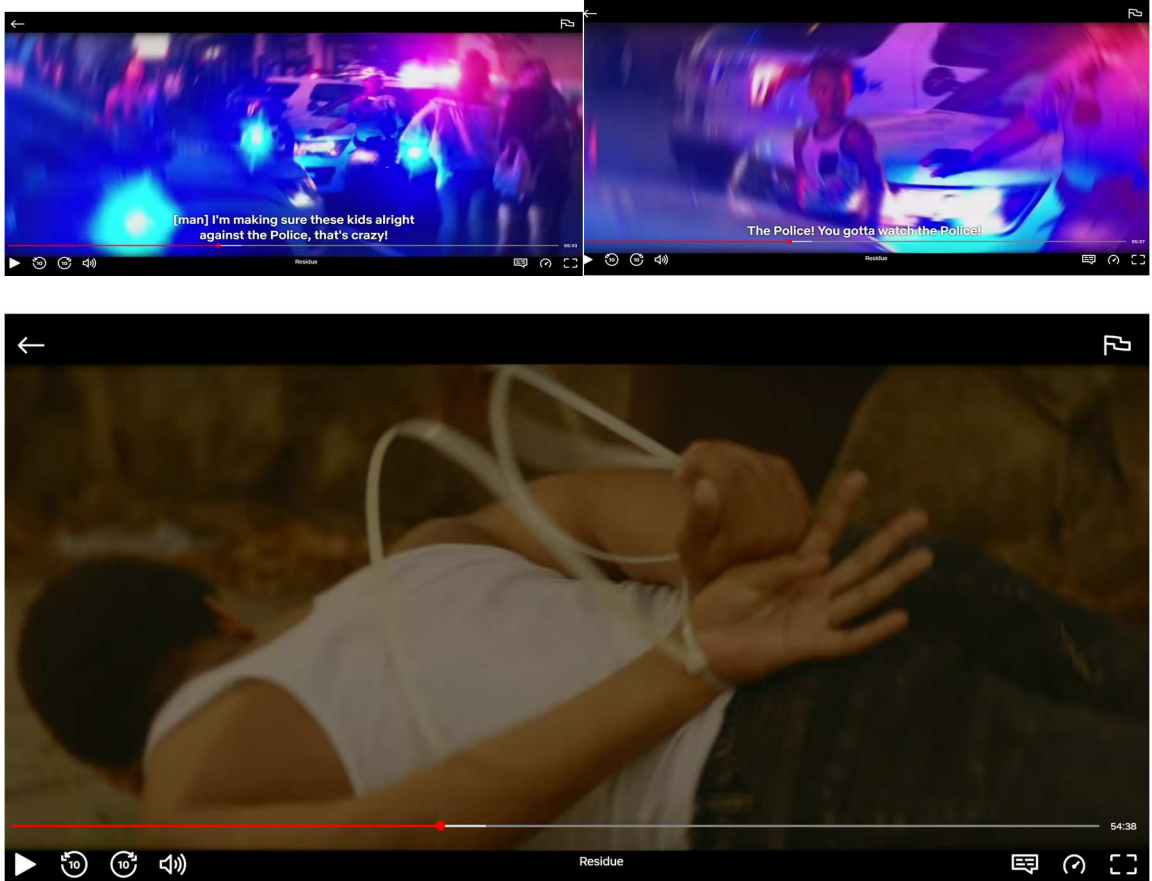


Figure 9. Residue Film

Its construction of the residue place requires the varied lens that is comparable to shining white light through a prism. What appears to be one simple light path is actually multiple. To that point, the scene of blood seeping up from or down through the ground depending on how the camera positions you continues on into a back alley as the screams of a black man, being held down by several police officers, becomes the backing track.



Figure 10. *Residue* Film

The place, this place of loss, is bleeding from its core, and while the backing track of Jay's memory is doing one work, the film's musical score, go-go, is doing another.

It is important to pause my exploration of the visual manifestation of the backing track of residue places, here, to consider the sonic manifestation- *Residue's* compiled score. Compiled scores, a sonic form in film that Guthrie Ramsey discusses in his article, "Muzing New Hoods, Making New Identities: Film, Hip-Hop Culture, and Jazz Music," are put in use to encourage "perceivers to make external associations with the song in question ... these reactions become part of the cultural transaction occurring between the film and its audience" (313). Building place in any film becomes as much about the aural bartering that occurs when viewer and film are introduced, as it is about the visual cues that may mark places as recognizable to those who know it.

Ramsey further builds on this point by illuminating the ways musical scores can be organized. They are either diegetic, music "produced from within the perceived narrative world of the film," or nondiegetic, "that is, music produced from outside the

story world of the film [that] serves the narration by signaling emotional states, propelling dramatic action, depicting a geographical location or time period...³⁴ Go-go music shifts between both forms of musical score using go-go as a sonic-spatial anchor. The aural, sometimes with lyrics and sometimes without, stabilizes place even as the visual destabilizes it. For Jay, go-go is used to solidify the truth/real/authentic of what he knew of his former neighborhood despite the residue places. In three separate moments, go-go shows up to remind both Jay and the viewer of the Chocolate City he remembers.

The film opens with Moechella and the popular song, “Roll Call,” by go-go band Critical Condition Band also known as CCB. Moechella is a protest movement I will discuss in the next chapter, but which transitions in the film from festival site to Jay, alone in his truck, listening to go-go as he enters back into the city and parks in his old neighborhood. Jay looks over and notices what will be a constant scene throughout the film: his younger self, standing behind a car, watching as he enters into what we later learn is their old family home now used as a rental property.

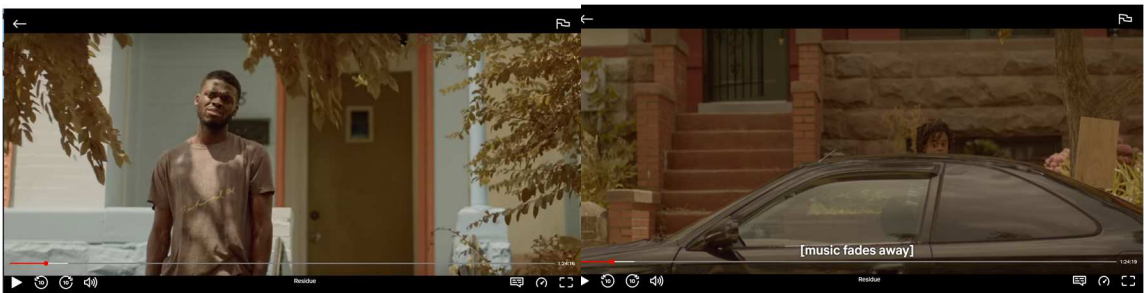


Figure 11. Residue Film

The scene is ruptured by a white neighbor who visually and sonically interrupts. The neighbor tells Jay to turn the music down and that he is double parked. He follows this

³⁴Ramsey, Guthrie P. "Muzing new hoods, making new identities: Film, hip-hop culture, and jazz music." *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002). (314).

with, “don’t make me have to call the cops.” Jay asks, “who are you?” to which the white man replies he is neighbor, Jake. This is a shift from the non-diegetic to the diegetic almost immediately upon the film’s opening. In fact, this is a sonic representation of Beavers’ recognition of scale in any understanding of a political imaginary in black geography that we discussed in the first chapter.

Residue brings attention to the sonic-spatial construction of Washington. First, broadly, through Moechella, a protest movement against gentrification set up against the musical score of a song that literally “roll calls” various Washington neighborhoods. Then, specifically to the place of Q Street with go-go playing in Jay’s truck. The music stops and does not pick up again until Jay is walking down a dark street, deep in his thoughts and memories, and gets robbed. Another scene that repeats throughout the film begins again, childhood memories of Fourth of July celebrations, although this time it is accompanied by go-go band Black Alley’s song titled, “Kemosabe.” Again, in the moment of Jay’s instability, and the film’s choice to merge together various scenes that depict the instability of the city itself woven through images of community, go-go music as a soundtrack to the film, but, also, a soundtrack to Washington’s landscape, is used as the stabilizer.

The final scene, which I argue gets at the heart of the movie and Jay’s quest for the Washington he knew not the one he has returned to find, occurs when Jay once more visits the space of his memory that I can now argue is the visual stabilizer for Jay’s Washington as go-go is the aural. The viewer sees a young Jay being taught to play the drums although this time, there is silence. There are no background voices, go-go beat, narration, or even the natural sounds of the scene. There is no sound until present-day Jay

begins to replicate the beat we see him learn as a child. As he taps out the beat on his chest and thighs another character enters the scene. A young Demetrius, the childhood friend Jay has been searching for throughout the film, enters into Jay's present-day basement apartment, sets his bike to the side, and says to Jay: "I've heard you've been looking for me."

The diegetic score opens the film up to, finally, bringing together the Washington Jay wants to come back home to- which could be understood through the non-diegetic- and the place he finds exists when he returns. This critical turn in the film relies on what the viewer hears and much as it does what the viewer sees. After spending the entirety of the film experiencing Jay's memory of Washington alongside a non-diegetic score, the choice to silence that moment in this final memory and only introduce it as diegetic- and as a sonic production of Jay rather than consumed by him- reveals the interconnectedness of residue and residual places. You cannot understand residue places, in fact that cannot exist, without a direct confrontation with what exists in the residual.

Pivoting back towards residue places, in one of the concluding shots of *Residue*, and one of the final moments that shows black space in direct relation to whiteness, the camera captures a rooftop conversation between two white gentrifiers who respond to seeing what may be Jay, running from the police, down the street. The disconnect between this place and that place, this Washington and that Washington, is brought to bear in this scene. The moment is set after Jay, who by the end of the film feels the weight of his displacement, has responded to two white men who see him looking through a fence out over McMillan Reservoir located in Northwest Washington. Once they see him, both men cross the street. It is this small moment, a reminder of the

violence wrought by so many of those seemingly small moments, that triggers Jay who runs after the two men yelling, “This is my home!”

He begins to accost one of the men which leads to the other calling the police. This is where the rooftop conversation comes into focus. After seeing black men running down the street followed by the sound of helicopters, the two speakers- whose faces are only seen in dark profile- express shock at what they are seeing.



Figure 12. Residue Film

They go on to talk about the differences between the old Washington and the new.

Man: Whoa

Woman: Jesus

Man: Holy Shit

Man: What the fuck

What are they doing?

Are those...

Woman: No fucking way!

Man: Does that happen a lot?

Woman: No. No. Not really. I mean apparently it used to be like that all the time
But... the neighborhood has been cleaned up since then, I guess.

Man: What is this neighborhood anyway?

Woman: NoMa? It's NoMa but it used to be Eckington.

But, NoMa

Man: What's NoMa?

Woman: North Massachusetts Ave

So it's like how they abbreviate stuff in New York like SoHo

The content of the conversation begins with a concern for the safety of the neighborhood- the separation of an over-policed old Washington and better protected new city- and ends with a light-hearted banter around changing the names of neighborhoods already established.

It, like the other scenes I have described in this chapter, contends with the violence brought on by gentrification up against what is often viewed as innocuous dialogue. The point seems to be that the two are intertwined, and the man and woman's continued back and forth confirms the ways that the violence of displacement is not limited to any particular place.

Man: Or have you heard WeHo?

West... that's West Hollywood

Woman: Yeah, exactly

Man: Yeah that's so horrible.

Woman: SoHa? SoHa? Do you know?

Man: No...

Woman: South Harlem

The two speakers begin to rename other places that have historically minority populations. The film seems to signal towards the practice of capitalism and the residue places it creates. This place, and that place, and that place can all be renamed. All can be taken up and laid claim to by transient residents and developers whose relationship to the community is limited to a truncated version of history.

Residual Places: Chocolate City Life Worlds

There is an important difference between the residue places and residual places. The former interrogates the waste left by hypercapitalism. The latter identifies, reconstructs, and then makes legible the spatial presence of places that no longer exist *in the ways most relevant to those who remember them*. While Q Street still exists in Washington, its meaning for Jay and the neighbors who continue to call it home no longer exists. Yet, despite the present loss of community and place, the past construction of its space as a site for black life and living continues to lay claim to the present space. Not just in memory, but in the aesthetic production and lived experiences of the black people and cultural curators who still claim Washington as a homescape. This is a residual place, a place of loss, but it is important to note that the realities of losing do not make it a losing place. There is a difference. The place of loss can acknowledge both the loss and the living. Who has died but also who is giving birth. A place of loss procures possibility for imagining how one might live in this new space or, at the least, remind those who are taking up the new space of the continued existence of what they have deemed the old.

The backing track to *Residue*'s narrative includes the voices of white gentrifiers, as I mentioned above, but also the sounds of an intricately embodied black communal life on Q Street. Jay is constantly returning back in his memory to the space of Q street he knew as a child even as he takes up residence in the basement apartment of his old house as an adult. As we can assume is the case in a gentrifying community, these are two different spaces even though they occupy the same place. Jay's entrances back to his old childhood neighborhood through the valves of his memory are always accompanied by his need to find best friend, Demetrius. From the very beginning of the film Jay is looking for Demetrius who, ultimately, only shows up in the present day space of Jay's

mind as, still, a child, but whom Jay never can actually find, physically. Demetrius is often accompanied by scenes of the other young boys in the neighborhood riding bikes, wrestling on the sidewalks, and all piled up in a car waiting to go somewhere.





Figure 13. Residue Film

The only time they leave Q street in the version of Jay’s memory the audience is presented is to go to a forest, the same forest he and Dion “meet” at the end of the film, where the boys all swim in a creek. Jay sees the two, the street and the forest, repeatedly as he is walking through his old neighborhood in the present. In fact, the forest becomes a recurring place as another construction of Q street.

I argue that this forest/street should be read as a residual place- one that affirms the livability of blackness despite losing. Its dichotomy is in both its landscape and in what each landscape represents to aesthetic constructions of blackness and black boyhood, in particular. On the cityscape, the concrete and bricks of sidewalks and rowhomes, are shown through the hazy eyes that nostalgia creates and the film reproduces. This is a homescape where community members act as grandmothers and mothers to all of the children in the neighborhood. Dion asks about Jay’s grandmother when he visits him and they laugh at how Dion claimed Jay’s grandmother as his own. Jay remembers Demetrius’ grandmother and how her home felt like his own. Those

moments of intracommunal claiming, familial ties beyond biological ones, speaks to the knowability of place, but also stand in contrast to the new place of displacement caused by gentrification.

The green space that accompanies the cityscape in Jay's mind, the wooded area with the creek, is also a homescape but it (re)places these young black men. I use (re)place as a means by which to assert critical inquiry that examines the power of visualizing blackness outside of, yet alongside, the urban landscape. The viewer is able to see black boyhood beyond the infrastructure of Washington, and, quite simply, enacting black joy in a new black space. For a film that tells its story primarily within a few DC blocks that make up Jay's community, (re)placing blackness by claiming new black space, and new black space that cannot necessarily be mapped, is radical work. The same can be said of the repeated look back at the Fourth of July celebration, or multiple celebrations, that Jay returns to in what I argue is the film's exploration of rememory as a residual place itself. Rememory, to pull on Toni Morrison's conceptualization of memory in her novel, *Beloved*, and to define Jay's engagement with his past in the film, also denies mapping. Or, perhaps, it would be better to say rememory in *Residue* denies a certain "common sense" mapping to pivot towards Kara Keeling.

First, let us tackle what I mean when I say 'rememory.' Donna Decker Schuster offers one way to think about rememory by considering how to teach the concept to students. They use the elegy, and particularly elegiac repetition, to work through rememory as a process by which revisiting moments in the past "reasserts the loss that the mourner has suffered and is central to the mourner's ability to come to terms with loss

and survive it³⁵.” The interiority of rememory is its own place to deal with trauma and reclaim healing. It is important to add that rememory denies time and place by being “forever present, accessible to all.”³⁶ Rememory is its own black geographical site operating in a film that specifically grapples with making, remaking, claiming, and reclaiming place to shift our understanding of memory from psychoanalysis to spatial analysis. The place evades mapping by existing in both the interior and exterior space of the people who engage it, always.

Now, we can turn towards Keeling who uses the phrase “common sense” to describe the ways film, in part, taps into a “collective set of memory-images that includes experiences, knowledges, traditions, and so on that are available to memory during perception” (14). These “common senses” shape how we expect characters to act, where we expect them to be, and how we expect them to engage on screen. *Residue* is intentional about its disruption of a “white bourgeoisie North American common sense” and it does so not by simply creating another map for its viewer to follow along- but by denying mapping altogether (19). The *memory* of Q Street is fluid in that it can (re)place itself. It can move with Jay or whomever knows it.

To that end, when I say rememory is used in the film I am taking into account the role of flashback as a cinematic technique. In “Understanding Retrospection: Blended joint attention and the multimodal construction of film flashbacks,” Adriana Gordejuela

³⁵Schuster, Donna Decker. "Teaching" Beloved": Interrupting Cultural Logics and Defining Rememories as Elegiac Strategies." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 39.1 (2006): (131).

³⁶Jablon, Madelyn. "REMEMORY, DREAM MEMORY, AND REVISION IN TONI MORRISON'S" BELOVED" AND" ALICE" WALKER'S" THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR"." *CLA Journal* 37.2 (1993): (143).

dissects the analytic aspects of a viewer's relationship to flashback scenes. In other words, what makes a flashback scene 'work' in a film? She states

Blending theory proposes a hypothetical explanation of how human beings cognitively deal with a variety of phenomena. Many situations in everyday life call for the activation of several *mental spaces* [...] These packets of meaning are then projected into a single new mental space (a blended space) that integrates ideas from all the input mental spaces of meaning. Those projections are selective, meaning that not all the content from every mental space is transferred to the blend. Also, there are meanings that emerge in the resulting blended space that were not present in any of the input mental spaces. (121)

It is this seemingly simple, yet complex mental work that humans do, everyday, that "shape new spaces" (122). Maureen Turim makes a similar point in *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History*. She argues that, "By suddenly presenting the past, flashbacks can abruptly offer new meanings connected to any person, place or thing" (12). *Residue* relies on flashback as a way to both highlight the collision of past and present Washington for Jay- what it once was and what gentrification has brought with it, contemporarily- but also to cultivate a completely new space with new meanings for the viewer. Jay's homecoming, and the tension between him and his old neighborhood, allow for the viewer to see residual places in action.

The encounter with Washington and the story of gentrification in the film is loaded with broader commentaries on Washington as homesite not memorial place, the violence of microaggressions, black people, black spaces, and the ever-presence of police surveillance. The flashback, and its occasional merge with the present space of Washington, is where viewers can consider the vibrancy of residual places as complex sites of human interactions situated in particular place but creating its own space. I discussed one example of this earlier. Jay's present-day reunion with a young Demetrius at the end of the film is an invitation to the viewer to, as Gordejuela and Turim state,

create those new spaces of meaning for the Washington we experience through Jay's eyes.

The narrative device that the film uses to open up that residual space, called an 'eyeline match' structure, shows up twice in the film (Gordejuela 118). I might argue the two operate as bookends. The first example shows Jay seeing himself across the street from his childhood home. The second example depicts the residual space embodied by Demetrius and Jay's loss of place- what is left of the Washington that only lives in Jay's memory- finally coming together.

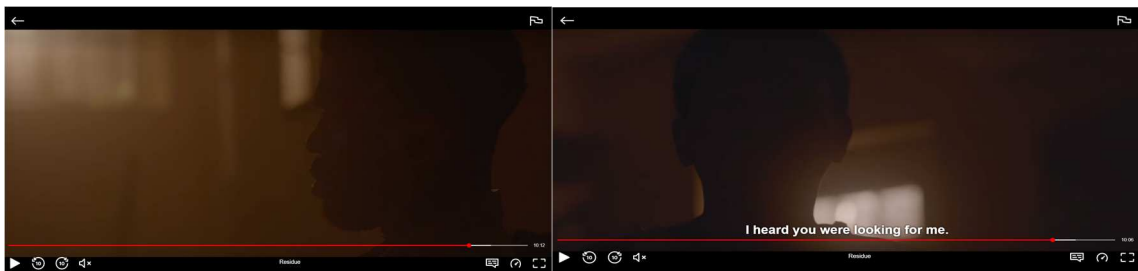


Figure 14. *Residue* Film

Demetrius and Jay never take up the same filmic space- we know the characters are in the same room, but the film never places them on the screen together in this scene. We only know they are in the same room before they speak to one another because of the 'eyeline match'. This is meant to represent the temporal distance that remains between the two, but perhaps an acknowledgement by Jay that *this* place, the here and now, of DC and *that* place, the there and then, of his memory must co-exist. These two sites are occurring simultaneously and therefore are experienced simultaneously as the residual space.

If Jay, and the viewer by extension, is on a journey to tell the story of Q Street, to make sure its space is not forgotten, then he must confront his childhood placement by reconciling the complexity of his position as an adult and an outsider. While residue

places interrogate the systemic inequality gentrification replicates, residual places are an interrogation of Jay's role as storyteller to a home we come to learn he has been disconnected from not just physically but mentally, for years. By finally placing a young Demetrius, the childhood friend of his past, and a present-day Jay in the same room, *Residue* acknowledges and highlights the ways residual places are in constant conversation with one another. They invite the necessary familial bonds that communal relationships procure as well as the communal critique that only familiarity allows. These residual spaces are fluid- they exist across space and time and therefore must be understood as *layered encounters* with places of loss. The blended modalities that define loss in an aesthetics of loss, then, are articulated in the film through the collision of Demetrius and Jay.

We see this again in the second example of a layered encounter with place when Jay first arrives back on Q Street at the start of the film. As I discuss earlier this is the first time we, as viewers, are introduced to Jay's boy-self. That character stands behind a car, as he does in several other flashback moments, but it is the singular time we see the two in the same cinematic moment mirroring the final scene with Demetrius. His young self welcomes him back home setting the tone for how Jay must face the present Washington alongside his yearning for the past, but also an early clue that the past is never really disengaged with the present. The place that his boy-self occupies, always in the exterior space of the street and never in the interior of his home, as a young Demetrius is, is an invitation to consider the importance of interiority to residual space. It also begged a few questions as I watched the film for the first time: Why is Jay's boy-self never invited in? Why is there not only a street, but a car that separates Jay's present and

past? Why does the final reconciliation between Jay's past and present occur with a childhood friend rather than a young version of himself? I might offer that the layered encounter of a place of loss provides a few answers to those questions.

Jay's boy-self is really a confrontation with Jay's memory of his home- not his homescape as it was or even as it is- but the rememory of it. I posit that Jay's boy-self is encountered on the street to position Jay as solidly in, not apart from, the place that has been lost. The street and the self are one, and, yet, while Jay can be reminded of his young self, in order for him to grapple with the loss of his homescape Jay must talk to someone outside of himself. Let us not forget that this movie is just as much about Jay's homecoming as it is about gentrification. That story structure gives the viewer an opportunity to think of Washington as a homesite. This is a significant turn from the memorial place that the city often is placed as in the national imaginary and gives Washington the ability to have the same claims of complex spatial interaction as any other city. This simple choice adds texture to the aesthetic exploration of Washington's place. Jay moves as a kid, leaves to go to college, and seems to have never looked back. The film begins with a narrative voice highlighting what would seem like the contradiction of Jay's return to capture his hometown before what he once knew completely disappears:

Somebody told me, when you went to LA you said you wouldn't ever come back to this place... that you hated this place. This place where you was born. So why did you come back?

His return is necessary but also complicated, and *Residue* does not shy away from those nuances. Demetrius is invited into Jay's apartment as a sign of Jay's own reconciliation with Q street as apart of himself. It is a final merging of the exteriority of place and

interiority of personhood- a layered encounter of a residual place. A part of his childhood is finally invited into the interior spaces of his mind to reconcile the loss that is equal parts Jay's self and Jay's space.

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Excavating residue and residual spaces in the place of above-worlds or above-grounds does the first job in the three-pronged consideration of space and place in an aesthetic of loss. By parsing out the differences between what is left for a community to sift through as a result of capitalism's investments in wealth accrual and the places of loss impacted by it, we can begin to imagine loss as its own site. This site makes way for aesthetic producers to claim loss as a place that they then can explore and articulate through artistic form.

Chapter 4: To Claim Black Presence as Black Future: Black Spatial Temporalities

Let it be said

while in the midst of horror
we fed on beauty-- and that,
my love, is what sustained us.
-Rita Dove

I am so tired of waiting,
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
-Langston Hughes

The very first scenes of the film, *Residue*, are a mix of on-the-ground and aerial shots of Moechella. Held on May 7th, 2019, what I would initially call a concert-as-protest to friends who needed a description of the event evoked a name that would play on the slang term “moe,” a word used by young Washingtonians to describe a friend or associate, and Coachella, an annual music and arts festival held in the Colorado desert. Moechella’s festival site would spill over the corner of 14th and U Streets. The popular Big G and Backyard Band, a local DC go-go band, would headline the event along with various other DJ’s and go-go bands as black Washingtonians took up sonic, artistic, visual, and physical space from the corner onto the street, and into the surrounding city blocks in celebration of culture but in protest.

The subsequent book published early 2021 would capture images of black Washingtonians in joy-as-protest; local artist Joseph Orzal called it “the [people’s] document of their participation”. The movement of performers, dancers, sign carriers, and observers, all coalesce in photographs submitted to form the beginning of an

aesthetic archive. Images of signs that read “We Want Healthcare Access in Wards, 5,7, +8” and “I bet you know where the nearest Starbucks is what about the nearest homeless shelter” were placed beside the raised hands, phones, and smiles of attendees enjoying music those who purchase the book cannot hear. The still shots of members of the band captured notes and voices that are illegible to the viewer of the photographs, yet, it is their illegibility that makes the images worth searching. You need clues to translate this spatial landscape; a fact that speaks to the power of its ability to recenter the narrative, its language, and its place-making as paramount.

If nuance is the preferred word of the academy, than this archive is visual nuance. Not only because the photographs captured the energy of the moment, but also because of what it could not capture. This was a black festival site beyond protest, and, as such, the ephemerality of it, the “you just had to be there” of it, could be felt in the images precisely because they meant for it to be so. What could not be captured-the frames left outside of the photographer’s lens- were just as important as what was.

To be clear, Moechella’s inaugural event would not be the first in this movement. LongLiveGoGo, an activist organization led by artist and activist Justin “Yaddiya” Johnson, had already begun doing the work of highlighting not only the loss of go-go in the city, but the inequities that birthed that loss. Moechella, however, would represent a significant turn in the ways in which protest had been imagined in the past two decades of local Washington’s fight against displacement. Here, the most important speaker, the one chosen to galvanize the people, was the music, itself. The fight against the possession of land and infrastructure was led, not by any individual, but by a communal investment in

the energy given and take, given and taken, through a shared sonic expression of black personhood and black place.

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Just two months earlier, Washington made national news when residents pushed back against the silencing of go-go music on the corner of 7th and Florida Avenue in the Shaw Neighborhood of Northeast. A collision of digital and ongoing “on the ground” activism, and an example of the everchanging definition of critical public spaces, the hashtag #DontMuteDC started making its rounds on twitter and an online petition of the same name signed by over 80,000 people soon followed. Residents in a nearby, newly developed Highrise, described as “luxury” by national news publication, The Washington Post, wanted, and temporarily received, the end of the go-go music that had played by speakerphones outside of a Central Communication MetroPCS store on that corner since 1995. In response, Julien Broomfield, a senior at historically black Howard University located just about three blocks from the store, had created the #DontMuteDC hashtag. Ultimately, T-Mobile headquarters would agree to allow the store to continue to play music on the corner, but the encounter would bring national attention to the ongoing cultural genocide that was attempting to erase the imprint of black Washingtonians on the nation’s capital.

Certainly, the call to silence meant more to DC’s cultural actors than just a new neighbor’s entitled request in a community with a long history of public black aesthetic production. For many, it represented just one in a series of overt and subtle slights

intended to interrupt and subvert black Washingtonian's existence and participation in communities where they often represented a majority. In the same month that Broomfield would create the #DontMuteDC hashtag, new residents would have to be asked to refrain from walking their dogs, and allowing them to defecate, on Howard University's campus. A year earlier the local publication, Washingtonian Magazine, launched a social media campaign to promote their new t-shirt line. None of the people featured on their social media accounts, dressed in "I'm Not a Tourist. I Live Here." t-shirts, were black³⁷. Black people still made up almost forty-seven percent of the population in 2018.

In response, community organizers created their own campaign featuring black Washingtonians and started a movement that turned into a celebration of black people and culture in Washington they called, simply, "Native". However, these ongoing calls for action against and resistance to erasure were not only steeped in a belief in maintaining the history and legacy of black people, black space, and black aestheticism in the nation's capital. This was a continued insistence on blackness as inhabiting geographical *presences*- as being active participants in a city-scape. It was also an indictment. The eagerness to announce that Chocolate City was dead contradicted sharply with the people and culture that were still very much apart of the present and intended to be apart of Washington's future.

This chapter, then, is a meditation on black geographical *presences* which, I offer, is the temporal sister to my first chapter's explication of black geographical (physical)

³⁷ <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/324599/washingtonian-apologizes-after-botched-im-not-a-tourist-i-live-here-tshirt-campaign/>

presence. It is the second tenet in an aesthetics of loss and reads black festival sites as *eruptive* locales of futurity birthed out of an insistence on the space produced by a black aesthetic as present-futurity. I build on Lefebvre's concept of rhythmanalysis to maintain that eruptive locales of futurity wield ephemerality as a tool; a black aesthetic procures power alongside of, not just despite, precarity. I identify these moments not as a *disruption* of gentrification, but rather as pockets of *eruptive* presence(s) that push for futurity to make two theoretically necessary claims. First, to center the black aesthetic in these moments by keeping in mind that to position black aesthetic production as a disruption, even if the intent is to signify the ways in which the rupture is a call for social justice, may be to unwittingly dismiss these sites as homescapes for black Washingtonians and therefore decenter their narratives. New residents, in fact, are the disruptors of a city that already has a specific identity and, as I will explore, a rhythmic flow built into its place and space.

To that point, my second intent is to make clear that these sites are erupting from an existing and already ongoing mode of artistic expression. These sites are not birthed, exclusively, out of response to gentrification, but instead erupt out of a consistent claiming and reclaiming of present-futurity through aesthetic expression. I will investigate how time, as both noun and verb, operates as an interrogating agent that forces whoever comes in contact with those eruptive presence(s) to rethink notions of linearity (chocolate city is dead and past, while modern, "diverse" Washington is alive and future) presented as pre-scribed, that is already scripted onto the topography of Washington, by gentrification's narrative. In other words, I examine how the black festival space takes ownership of not only place, but also time, subsuming and then

making legible the terms of its existence as in the “here” rather than the “there” and in the present rather than the past alongside the steady march of gentrifying neighborhoods and neighbors. I call this afro-presence, and offer that it is the radical belief that the future, and all of its promises for black spatial freedom, is now.

With that in mind, I contend that localized festival spaces, which I identify as festival sites that may be government sanctioned but whose “deserving public” remains a native black Washingtonian, are the vehicles by which we can understand how a black aesthetic, rooted in unstable soil, grounds itself in geographical futurity³⁸. I lean on Sharon Zukin’s concept of “authenticity [as] power” in urban spaces to work through the doubled place of the festival site in Washington³⁹. On one hand, the festival site is used to aid in a configuration of the cultural leverage that Zukin argues follows those with the greatest capital in the shifting aesthetics of a city⁴⁰. This curated festival site is meant to create an ‘authentic’ space for new residents with those residents shaping what makes the landscape authentic. This reciprocal and circular relationship writes the text of the landscape, and all of its accoutrements, as simultaneously static and fluid. It is static, in that this “authentic” landscape is presented as a site where community spaces- the places where people gather to eat, listen to music, celebrate, etc.- are mapped, as Zukin argues, from the outside because they are judged up against preconceived notions of authenticity.

³⁸ Werth, Alex, and Eli Marienthal. "'Gentrification' as a grid of meaning: On bounding the deserving public of Oakland First Fridays." *City* 20.5 (2016): (720).

³⁹ I read Sharon Zukin’s work alongside John Jackson, who also explores concepts of authenticity and the “real” to think through the practice of displacement on the urban landscape. What I rely on in this chapter is Zukin’s belief that authentic places have shifted from a “quality of people to a quality of things, and most recently to a quality of experiences” (3). It is the “quality of experiences” that informs my exploration of eruptive sites of futurity.

⁴⁰ Zukin, Sharon. *Naked city: The death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford University Press, 2009. (4).

They are also fluid, though, in that they mutate to meet the terms of topographical change. To that end, the festival as an authentic site is a necessary component of spacemaking on the gentrifying cityscape.

On the other hand, I am interested in, to borrow from Jackson's conceptualization of racial sincerity, the opportunity for considering another sort of festival space. I am interested in adding a layer of complexity to my rendering of an aesthetics of loss by thinking alongside the embeddedness of 'things' in reading the landscape of Washington. This is the chapter dedicated to thinking about the proper place of people's relationship to people, place, and then to aesthetic. Jackson's 'sincerity' as opposed to 'authenticity' opens the door for what he argues is a recognition of "social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, interiority, and subjectivity" rather than seeing interlocutors, and their spatial production, as object meant to studied and then defined (15). I intend to deploy this idea of sincerity in my reading of the intersection of place and people's rendering of time. By rethinking the festival site as a 'sincere' site I can better imagine the ways in which eruptive locales of futurity are operationalized by Washington's residents on the cityscape.

To that end, the three festival places I have identified in this chapter are annual in Washington although some have a longer history than others: Chuck Brown Day, the D.C. Funk Parade, and Moechella. From there, the questions that guide this chapter are based on an excavation of the importance of Western conceptualizations of time--past, present, and future--as being integral to an aesthetics of loss. I ask, how does the logic of eruptive presence(s) lend itself towards a reimagining of the place of loss? What power exists in the fleeting moments of aesthetic production presented vis-a-vis the festival site,

and how does that present expression lend itself to futurity? How do we deal with the instability of place that is inherent in the festival site, but the concreteness of space that remains? For that matter, does it remain, and what are the terms by which we can think about the power of that ephemeral holding? Finally, how can an exploration of black geographical temporalities help us to better understand what aesthetic production looks like at the intersection of space and place?

Like other musical genres that rely on instrumentation, streets, parks, sidewalks and alleyways are just as important to the tradition of black aestheticism in Washington as are performance venues. Telling the story of black geographical presences within the space of a gentrifying district means centering not only the value of, but also the cultural work of music to cement black space and place in past, present, and future versions of terrain of the Capital City.

Chuck Brown Day: Present

It was hot. The early August heat and humidity of D.C. in 2016 was only aided by the cloudless sky. Almond, and café, and cocoa colored skin glistened on the sidewalks, in the streets, and under the trees inside and around Chuck Brown Memorial Park. We had just made it back to my mother-in-law's house and squeezed through traffic to park in her alley. Being late meant on-street parking was not an option, but it didn't matter much. One of the benefits of calling the neighborhood a second home was having access to the always visible yet seemingly hidden labyrinth of alleyways that take up space between houses and yards.

As often as I had driven those streets and parked in that alley I had never seen so many people packed in Northeast. Policemen and women, mostly black, directed traffic ushering throngs of festival attendees across Franklin Street and keeping cars moving as they searched for available parking spots or slowed down to try and figure out what exactly was going on that day. I couldn't help but be amused by the few who thought ahead enough to offer five dollar parking behind their homes and joked with my husband that we needed to make a quick sign and earn a few dollars before we followed everyone else to the festivities.

I also couldn't help but be amused at just how "alive" a "dead" Chocolate City actually was. For all of the articles, think pieces, and transplant conversations I had seen or had among black scholars and friends since 2013 when I first moved to Washington, everything I had come to know about D.C. in the years after said that not only were native Washingtonians still there, but they were continuing to push forward as neighbors in communities that worked overtime to bleach the surface. Local vendors lined the sidewalks in the park named after the "Godfather of Go-Go" as men, women, and children gathered to watch, listen, dance, play, and laugh to the go-go bands that performed various hits from over thirty years of music. This was go-go swing, crank, and bounce, the three most popular types of go-go, all blended into one as go-go bands across generations were represented in the free concert lineup. It was a huge family reunion; this was partially because most who were there had some ties to go-go music and D.C., but primarily because people knew each other. Whether by name, or nickname, or parent's name, a large portion of the snippets of conversation I heard as we walked through the crowd were people identifying family and friends who were like family. This was not the

normal festival scene set to help neighbors meet one another. This was a scene for those who were already in the know.

Yet, and only a few blocks down off of Rhode Island Avenue, there were reminders of the gentrification that was quickly making Northeast or, “Brentwood” as a new neighbor called it, its next stop. Reminders that could almost be missed under the hustle and bustle of black people still walking to the bus stop or train station or CVS—but they were there. One stood out, though, because it was so stark. It was an old strip mall, “mall” being used liberally here as it was only a few stores and maybe a daycare, but it was now closed. The grey metal gates that circled the property may have been there before but they seemed to become even more visible now. The parking lot was empty. It was clearly marked for demolition and yet the aesthetics of the infrastructural loss that was about to take place were interrupted. The surface of the building was painted, beautifully. For almost a full block, there was art, and at the end of that art there was a simple phrase: “NE.” We drove by that building for close to a month before it was completely gone and in that month we watched as, piece by piece, the artwork left as a portion of the building left. By the end of the month, all that remained was a little bit of stucco-covered building enshrouded by the one phrase that stuck out “NE.”

The fracturing of that infrastructure— now owned by whoever would replace it with no doubt a shinier strip mall, newer and subsequently higher priced housing, or overly expensive bike shop (it never failed to surprise me at how en vogue specialty bike shops were in freshly renovated areas)—and the art that someone deliberately painted even in knowing that this memorial would not last made me think about go-go and its own relationship to infrastructure. Here was a literal expression of the ways in which

music appears, disappears, and reappears elsewhere. Here, and I use “here” to refer to that present time as its own place, captured the power of ephemerality in aestheticism; it was intentional, uncontained, and loosed from the strictures of power. So what do we make of claiming the ‘present’ as its own claim to place?

The sixth annual Chuck Brown Day would have to be held virtually in August of 2020, but the year was significant. In February, Mayor Muriel Bowser signed Law 23-0071 making go-go the official music of Washington and “requiring the Mayor to implement a program to support, preserve, and archive go-go music and its history.”⁴¹ D.C. government’s rhetoric around go-go music was making critical a shift. It was only ten years earlier that local police prioritized what they called the “go-go report” -- a focus on and increased surveillance of go-go’s live music performances as a decisive site for violence and prosecution⁴². This report was coupled with an ongoing narrative that go-go performances, and thusly the music, represented everything that was “wrong” about Washington. What was, in fact, the effects of systemic economic, educational, and health inequities in a city whose government was still fighting for voting representation in Congress, was put on the back of the musical expression of its citizens. Despite all of this, go-go music, and events associated with go-go, lived in the District, in Virginia, and

⁴¹ (<https://lims.dccouncil.us/Legislation/B23-0317>).

⁴² Martin, Alison. "BLACK MUSIC MATTERS: AFFIRMATION AND RESILIENCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICAL SPACES IN WASHINGTON, DC." *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection* (2018): 80.

in Maryland as a purveyor of D.C. culture. Sometimes it appeared under the same title and banner, sometimes it had mutated to a different place with newer bands, but, always, go-go survived.

The same was true for this day. Normally Chuck Brown Day's free live music event, which featured go-go bands EU and Sugar Bear, Suttle Thoughts, and the Chuck Brown Band in 2020, would have been held at 20th and Franklin Streets Northeast. The children's playground, tree-lined hills, and covered food shelters would transform into a concert arena for black Washingtonians who brought family members from two to eighty-two out to set up chairs and coolers under the shade of park trees. All was in anticipation of go-go performances.

A visit to this sacred gathering of black space would explain why go-go music and the space it curates and procures would be at the helm of a revived national interest in D.C. culture. It had always existed in the underlying currents of conversations about black geographical futurity, and, yet, displacement. Although the critical inquiry into go-go music, a genre that has remained a primarily live performance experience despite popular music's transition to a singular DJ, is not extensive, the music is recognized across historical social, and archival research as a site for geographical exploration. In *Beat: Go-Go Music from Washington D.C.* authors Kip Lornell and Charles Stephenson lay out the stakes of go-go for native Washingtonians:

go-go is more than music; it's a complex expression of cultural values masquerading in the guise of party music in our nation's capital. Like their counterparts in Ghana who play ju ju music, go-go musicians unite people within

the black community, providing the otherwise voiceless a forum in which to speak. Go-go reflects the concerns of black citizens in D.C... (29-30)

Natalie Hopkinson speaks about go-go similarly in her book, "Go-Go Live," as she writes that the music itself is "an authentic *place* to communicate and share the reality of life in Washington, D.C." (11). Thus, the intersection of dialogue around public space, aesthetic production, and infrastructural intimacy that followed those speakers on the corner of 7th and Florida Avenue in 2019 would open already dilapidated floodgates. Collective eyes had turned towards the music that memorialized and defined black space and culture in a city whose identity is so marked as national memorial. This time, though, those eyes were being invited to see go-go not only for the what it meant to native Washingtonians in the past, but for the larger conversation it would spark about what it means to be a native black Washingtonian in this present-future.

Here was the enactment of a long history of the black space-making that, according to Camilla Hawthorne, "[has existed] in formal academic environments, political struggles, and everyday practices" (3). Hawthorne says to study Black Geography is to push back against the tendency of geographical studies to enact a "transparent space" --in other words geography that explores no relation to the practice of racism or race-making as necessary actors in the construction of place (5). This investment in transparent space, she argues, opens the door for blackness to be positioned as inherently and always "out of place" (5-6). Its "out-of-placeness" also disables its ability to speak in a capitalist system that displaces it as, if anything, another form of capital. By shifting the focus on blackness as not only emanating from the body, a biological reading of race, we can begin to think about possibilities for black life in other

arenas including space and place. These readings provide the nuance necessary to examine what Caroline Knowles calls the “spatial character of race” (81).

Certainly, gentrification brings life to theory. In the process of space and place making, gentrifying neighborhoods consume their own version of blackness while simultaneously working overtime to date who and what is “old” or “new” in the community, and therefore who and what is displaced. In fact, I might argue that cultural genocide is as much about deciding who is “out of time” as much as it is deciding who is “out of place.” I use “time” here as a verb that is just as mutable as race and space and lean on Knowles’ conceptualization that “space is etched by time”⁴³. If capital, in a capitalist society, bequeaths power, and power configures space, then we must also assume that power requires, in fact demands, those in its space to ascribe to its constructions of time.

Lefebvre speaks to this point by explaining the ways we have come to think about time, or rather ‘rhythm,’ through the lens of capitalism:

The commodity prevails over everything. (Social) space and (social) time, dominated by exchange, become the time and space of markets; although not being *things* but including **rhythms**, they enter into **products**. The everyday establishes itself, creating hourly demands, systems of transport, in short, its repetitive organization. *Things* matter little; the *thing* is only a metaphor, divulged by discourse, divulging representations that conceal the productions of repetitive time and space. (6-7)

Of course, Lefebvre’s idea of commodity and the role of things could circle us back to chapter one; I might argue that Ellis turns this theory on its head by centering the “thing” of the cowbell. He reconstitutes the symbol, tool, and instrument outside of its proposed use in product creation, labor, and ultimate sell. I am most interested in the way Lefebvre

⁴³ Knowles, Caroline. *Race and social analysis*. Sage, 2003. 82

explains time as constructed, simply, alongside its ability to assist in exchange value. The quotidian, he argues, hinges on labor defined by products and therefore the rhythm of people (in our case in the city) is defined as such.

In Washington, gentrification's aesthetic, newly renovated buildings and themed restaurants in a "hipster-approved" take on black Washington's culture, specifically deploys racialized identities in the service of not only displacement but what I will refer to as de-spacing. The stakes? Aesthetic markers determine who exists in the future. In "Race, Class, and Politics in the Cappuccino City," Derek Hyra writes that whereas earlier iterations of gentrification saw redevelopment as being directly tied to a complete removal of black people, U Street, a popular street in Northwest DC lined with bars, restaurants, and a mix of rowhouses and luxury high-rises, saw gentrifiers attracted to the markers of an "authentic" or "old" Chocolate City:

The general perception has been that when a neighborhood was coined or labeled Black, it stimulated White flight. Nowadays, in some circumstances, such a designation stimulates a White influx. Inner-city real estate developers name their new luxury buildings after celebrated African Americans, such as Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington. Area restaurants mimic this African American naming game. Marvin, which acknowledges DC-born Motown sensation Marvin Gaye, is one of the most popular eateries along 14th street. Thus, as the neighborhood redevelops it retains part of its African-American identity..” (9)
This construction of gentrified space relies on harkening to a specific racialized time.

Notice, the black legacy evoked is historical in nature. Undoubtedly this performance of identity is completely disconnected from the surrounding, and longstanding, *present* neighbors and neighborhood. It exists only for its ability to make the place more economically consumable even as it lays waste to the existing community. Blackness is treated as a hollow signifier --sold and resold as capital that signals nostalgic places even as it plays on the systemic inequalities of present people.

What Hyra describes is the “interactional and relational” nature of race and space that authors Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura explore in their theory of “racial space:”

Meanings of race and space are continuously made and remade through interactions between groups and individuals at both the macro- and micro- levels. Moreover, meanings of race and space are always created and recreated in relationship to an ‘other’ (Said 1974) [...] space and race involve ‘other-ing’ processes that establish and maintain particular racial and social positioning. (1944)

Indeed, the ways we understand race and space are in fact symbiotic. Both race and space are social constructs built up in service and maintenance of power. To need an ‘other,’ is to, as Neely and Samura point out, create and maintain social inequality. As they state, “Space is [...] often a more tangible manifestation of systemic racial inequalities...”

(1940) A theory of “racial space,” then, is characterized as having overlapping investments in four key issues: political struggle over their meaning, shifting meanings over time, always birthed out of relational and interactional processes, and defined by inequality and difference. While I agree with this theory, I also believe treating time as static in any reading of space does not allow for a full mining of the power of temporality, or, more specifically what I have referred to as the use of black festival sites to enact and live within “present-futurity.”

Chuck Brown Day, as one example, is a reminder of the solidity *and* fluidity of blackness-as-other in gentrifying places. More than just a reclamation of the ‘new’ racially and economically defined space of Washington, or a momentary nod to a Washington that no longer exists, Chuck Brown Day signals ownership- but an ownership that redefines spatial timing as its mode of place-making despite erasure. A black aesthetic takes control of the present by challenging the linearity of spatial change and displacement.

This is where, once more, I must pivot towards Lefebvre and his definition and ultimate conceptualization of rhythm to best articulate how a “present-futurity,” geographical presence in racial space, and eruptive locales of futurity meet to navigate the uncertainty of gentrifying places. He defines rhythm, thusly

Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by regulated laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human beings: the lived, the carnal, the body. Rational, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms superimpose themselves on the multiple natural rhythms of the body (respiration, the heart, hunger and thirst, etc.) though not without changing them. (9)

The unpredictability of the irrational human is what takes the repetitive nature of rhythm, as Lefebvre explains, and interjects it with difference or, what he later calls, contradictions. These contradictions are what make room for silenced voices to ‘erupt’ and dialogue with time. In other words, the act of being ‘present’ or ‘here,’ in the same space where one’s being has been deemed a ‘past’ and ‘gone,’ is to take advantage of “social time’s” ability to “disclose [the] diverse... possibilities” built into rhythms that are constantly attempting to merge regulated time with the lived body and experience of the human being. Lefebvre goes further

Historical times slow down or speed up, advance or regress, look forward or backward. According to what criteria? According to representations and political decisions, but also according to the historian who puts them into perspective. Objectively, for there to be *change*, a social group, a class or a caste must intervene by imprinting a **rhythm** on an era, be it through for or in an insinuating manner. In the course of a crisis, in a critical situation, a group must designate itself as an *innovator* or *producer of meaning*. And its acts must inscribe itself on reality. (14)

Geographical presence, or what I will refer to now as an afro-presence, becomes less about the temporal *moment* at which the festival site takes place, and more about the way that moment produces meaning. Presence as a mode of resistance in some instances, celebration in others, or a mix of both, pushes back, but not just against the aesthetic or

expectation of blackness in gentrification as is Washington's case. It pushes back against a larger system of history and futurity that can flatten *present* black citizens, *present* black moments, and *present* black aesthetics. Chuck Brown Day, and the many other days of community celebration that lived before it, exist at the crux of production of meaning. Their ability to claim afro-presence denies erasure or invisibility by relying on presence as a decisive tool against precarity.

Let us look at another example. Much of the work of activists who intend to not only keep go-go music and culture alive but to challenge socioeconomic inequality in Washington has occurred, like many other movements in the last ten years, on social media. After the success of Moechella in May and the Million Moe March in June (on Juneteenth, in fact) in 2019, among other events, Long Live GoGo activists put together a protest event called, "We Keep Us Safe: Go-Go to the DOJ," in June of 2020. The event would invite attendees to march from 14th and U Street Northwest to the Freedom Plaza where the Department of Justice is located. The group would be led by TOB and Suttle Thoughts, both go-go bands in full live performance on the flatbed of a 3-axel truck bed, and would include signage that would call for an end to police brutality, demand Washington's ratification as the 51st state of the United States, remind that Black Lives Matter, and call for justice for Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade among others. This was a Black Lives Matter protest, but it was narrated by the recognizable voices and music of this city.

The call for "No Justice, No Peace" was chanted over a go-go beat as protestors would, every few blocks or so, stop to dance. Some beating their feet, some twerking, some simply responding in whatever way their body was led to the music, here was

festival-as-and-beyond-protest embodied in the afro-present. These were native Washingtonians, some by current addresses and others by former, who were not only inhabiting mobile black space, but were pulling the city along with them as they marched to federal stomping ground. In the afro-present, the group would draw together past and future. At the only site where local and national imaginaries clash in tangible place, the District of Columbia, music and dance animated infrastructure as a form of protest as potent as the words emblazoned on t-shirts and on signage.

These eruptive moments of aesthetic production are not only examples of decentering capitalism's deep investments in production or even a counter-narrative to the story of gentrification. On that Chuck Brown day in August of 2016 or in June of 2020, like many other days throughout the City, the center, the narrative, was black. Although seemingly fleeting, these moments shared their ability to lay claim, across multiple times, and throughout place. For those who lack political or economic power, the ability of time, as an interrogating agent, works to resituate space within place when it spills out beyond the memorial and claims the ephemeral. An aesthetics of loss does not live despite being deemed out of place and time- it lives not only by claiming a place in the city's history, but by challenging the certainty of its removal from the city's future.

DC Funk Parade: Past

Chuck Brown Day was not the only event to have to take its talents digital in 2020. D.C.'s Funk Parade, described as a "Celebration of the Spirit of Funk," was another annual festival that needed to pivot in the wake of the global pandemic. Ongoing since

2014, the Funk Parade invites participants from all across the District to celebrate the history and culture of the U Street Corridor located in Northwest Washington.

U Street remains a unique composite of black people and black history. A melting pot of college students, native Washingtonians, urban professional transplants, new and old business owners, and everything beyond and in between- all ranging in age and socioeconomic background- U Street was a meeting place of sorts. For me, U Street was where you gathered for drinks at Ben's Next Door, a small bar and eatery located beside the famed Ben's Chili Bowl, could stay for dinner at Eatonville, named for Zora Neale Hurston's childhood hometown, where more than likely I would run into groups of people that attended the historically black University I did, and then finish off the night jumping between a range of small clubs and bars, my favorite of which was stuffy reggae spot called Patty Boom Boom. It had also become a hot spot for high-rises, restaurants, and businesses targeting the new inhabitants of these locations. To put it in more context, though, the noise complaint that would launch #DontMuteDC protests was less than ten minutes away from that reggae spot I frequented. Ironically, the name of the high-rise was "The Shaw" -a nod to the name of the Northeast U Street neighborhood that this neighbor had a complaint about.

The 2019 iteration of the Funk Parade would come just a month after the complaint against go-go music and a few days after Moechella. Led by the all-women, Afro-Brazilian percussive band, Batawa Washington, the band's colors, red, black, and white, stood stark against what was starting off as a grim day. The samba-reggae beat that the international band is known for, of which the DC chapter is one branch, set the tone for a parade that prides itself on being a true reflection of Funk. Whether or not most

parade attendees knew it, this musical expression of Afro-diasporic and Latin American culture runs deep in the history of Washington, and U Street, in particular. Shelee Haynesworth, local historian, filmmaker, producer, and Executive Director of Black Broadway on U, a multi-modal online archive of information about black life and culture on U Street between the 1920s and 60s, and native Washingtonian illuminated this fact for me in an interview:

When you look at the Godfather of Go-Go... his music was infused with Latin Music. Before he started Soul Searchers he performed with many Latin groups on U Street. Of course I can't say for sure, you know I never talked to him about it, that he was inspired by those groups but you hear those intersections coming from Cuba, coming from Brazil. Obviously the percussive drums... but yes, there were some very important Latin groups performing [on U Street] in the 50s and 60s.

I was reminded of the ways in which black cultural expression challenge a static exploration of blackness in the discourse of a Chocolate City.

One picture capturing the parade participants was of members of the Trinidadian Coalition. Taken in 2018, the picture shows two young men, dressed in the traditional elaborate and colorful feathers associated with Carnival. The red and white of costumes set stark against the backdrop of the sky in the picture which would be cut by a tall light post. The interconnectedness and impact of not only national, but international, expressions of black culture in this particular space and at this particular time speak to the fluidity upon which the black festival space exists. Here, strewn along the sidewalks, sides of buildings, mailboxes, and people were the long historical and musical tentacles of jazz, Carnival, Trinidad & Tobago, Brazil, New Orleans, Alabama, West Africa, and black space in between. Other performers in that year's parade would include Eastern Senior High School's Marching Band, Soka Tribe, Phelps Ace High School Band, the

Wild Anacostia's Band, and a host of other performance groups representing the multiplicity of blackness that U Street has come to be known for.

This is surely why although music and performance lie at the heart of the Funk Parade, the three-day festival, and its backing non-profit organization, The Musicianship, invests in city, cultural, and musical education as well. Justin Tribble, executive director of non-profit group, The Musicianship, Chicago native, and Howard University alumni, describes the Funk Parade, thusly, "We wanted the DC Funk Parade to be reminiscent of South by Southwest, right? You have these great performances, but you also have these compelling panels and so you have to choose. We wanted to make it hard to choose." The day festival, night festival, photography gallery, panel presentations, and various other performances and presentations offer community members an opportunity to engage in both the history and present of U Street in a way that is thought-provoking and relevant. This format proved to be especially salient for 2020 as the panels and annual photo gallery, presented under the title, "Funk U," were able to continue to push the conversations about U Street, both historically and in the present moment, forward despite the necessity for social distancing.

Even in digital space, though, what intrigued me about the DC Funk Parade from the first time I attended, persisted. As 2020 conference panel moderator Candace Carrington expressed, the parade and its subsequent events including the panel she hosted titled, "If U Street Could Talk," was a "love letter to U Street and its legacy as Black Broadway." To term an event a love letter to a moment and space in time seemed powerful. Or, rather, it did not only seem that way, it was. What at first, I had defined for myself and others as a multi-dimensional celebration of the history and legacy of U Street

and the multiple ways blackness takes up space on the landscape of Washington D.C. and its surrounding areas, was actually a very spatially specific and centered honoring of black economic power and aesthetics. This festival was, at its core, about acknowledging and making legible the history and relevance of the place that was formerly known as Black Broadway. Indeed, the extent to which this chapter can interrogate afro-presences as a tool by which an aesthetics of loss articulates blackness depends on the ways the history of place is first crafted and constructed to center black stories. Historical time must shift before present or future time can follow.

“I’m not sure how much you know about Black Broadway,” Tribble would say over our Zoom call, “but U Street was a hub of economic and intellectual power in the early part of the 1900s. Howard University’s professor and students, black-owned businesses, black-owned bars and entertainment, and black government officials were all a major part of this community. What we do today is an extension of that.”

Black Broadway, a name referring to the period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an era that saw the U Street community explode with black literature, theater, and music produced by the rich array of residents who occupied the area. Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, and Jean Toomer were just a few of the recognizable names who occupied the area although prominent businessmen and women, professors, artists, and giants in local politics also called the neighborhood home.

I and every other attendee had experienced a festival not birthed out of a history that began in the 1970s Chocolate City. This history extended further back. The Funk Parade’s insistence on being a celebratory locale that includes music, performance,

economic empowerment, history, and guidance for ways forward as members of the U Street community in particular was both critical and necessary, but also in historical tradition. The land we celebrated on- the sidewalks, the buildings, the infrastructure itself- was, in fact, its own navigation of black spatial temporality through a rendering of history's geographical resonances.

“You know there was an uprising right on that very intersection?” I had asked Ms. Haynesworth about any possible connections between #DontMuteDC and Black Broadway and the temporal connection was even stronger than I had expected. “You’ve heard of the Red Summer Riots? Yea, in July of 1919 a group of black men had been accused of attacking a white woman. They came down with guns to that intersection and there, waiting, were the black men of that community, many of whom were World War I veterans, with guns to protect their community. In the crowd that gathered at that intersection was Howard University professor Alaine Locke. The story goes that as he looked at that crowd, he in that moment termed what was happening as the New Negro Movement. For me, as we talk about historically what has happened, to be here in 2019 dealing with that same psychosis of white people trying to enact an uprising against black culture it only furthers my belief that we must use preservation as a tool.”

The moment Ms. Haynesworth was referencing happened on July 18th, 1919 following the end of World War I and the influx of veterans that would return back to a “District [that] was financially strained postwar [...] many veterans, white and black,

[would come] home to recession and unemployment”⁴⁴ . Of course, Washington was not the only city to experience this. What would become known as the Red Summer was marred by vicious, often deadly, attacks on black people and black spaces across the country.

Although white supremacist attacks on blackness were deeply embedded in the fabric of the United States’ national history, the difference by 1919 was that the experiences of the black men facing these attacks against themselves, their communities, and their families was colored by what many African-American writers and scholars would call the expectation of the “New Negro:”

When Black fighters arrived home from World War I, they returned to a country still unwilling to share freedom and privilege on the basis of skin tone. The praise and honor soldiers of color experienced overseas for defending democracy alongside foreign comrades was very different from the welcome war veterans received when they marched back onto U.S. soil. The racist policies of Wilson were still in effect, discrimination was still at large and, concerned that Black veterans had returned with a new self-confidence, white people were ever more threatened by the idea of Black progression. [...] Their suspicions proved true. America’s Black defenders were awakened by their experiences abroad. (99)

When white mobs began to attack Black residents in downtown Washington following an alleged series of attacks on white women in the city, a Call to Arms by the Washington Post to “clean up the city” that seemed to be intended for white men and specifically veterans, also awakened black men who immediately began to prepare themselves to protect their communities also. By the time white mobs had made it to U Street, they

⁴⁴Thomas, Briana A. *Black Broadway in Washington, D.C.* The History Press. 2021. (99)

were met with Black residents ready to defend their neighbors and neighborhoods against violence.

Close to one hundred years later, a similar merging of political and aesthetic shifts would define that U Street corner. Whether or not the story of Alain Locke's recognition of a New Negro Movement on that particular corner and that particular time is something we may never know for sure, but what we did know was that he and many other artists that populated U Street would go on to define a aesthetic and spatial "new birth" of sorts. The rhythm of the neighborhood had changed.

The recent move to harken back to Black Broadway by local aesthetic producers, then, is a critical site of spatial reorientation claiming U Street by evoking a temporal interjection as embodied aesthetic placeholder for native black Washingtonians. Anchoring black people, including the former power of black businesses, in that place requires those who encounter U Street to consider its longstanding afro-presence as invested in entertainment and capital to construct a self-contained community. The consumer-producer relationship on the former U Street is used to propose a particular symbolic economy and invites that economy onto a contemporary landscape. To reference back towards Lefebvre's theorization of rhythm, it is this history-laden afro-presence that is the vehicle by which aesthetic eruption takes hold.

The Funk Parade's virtual photo gallery would, in part, speak to this temporal relationship by juxtaposing images of U Street from the early 1900s up against

contemporary images with similar resonances. One image, credited to John Collier shows a young boy selling flowers at an Easter stand on U Street in 1942. The young man is in the middle of either placing bouquets into newspaper-lined cardboard boxes or picking them up for what may be patrons waiting nearby. The picture captures the bottoms of long coats, stockings, and shoes no doubt perfectly placed for Easter Sunday service. That picture is paired with a contemporary photo by Miki Jourdan and features three young boys with bass drums. They are not yet in motion, but look as if they are preparing to perform. Obviously, the picture carries the importance of music to U Street, but it also summons a capturing of history as presence. Both images are on the street, bringing in the concrete for its own role to play as an active and consistent member of the neighborhood's narrative, 'then' and in an, assumed, 'now.'

Another set of photos compares a barbershop on U Street in 1942 with two images of single black barbers with their clients. While the barbers in the 1940s photo are inside of a barbershop, the second set of photos places barbers outside- complete with barber chair and styling station to hold clippers and various other tools. The temporal juxtaposition becomes even more clear as the collision of interior and exterior place making claims both spaces as 'funky' but sets the historical precedent as black space.

The capturing of everyday, black life in those early pictures showed how U Street would become a safe haven for black thinkers, artists, and musicians for much of the early 20th century. Ms. Haynesworth called this a "city within a city"

We created our own black business district. Really it became a tale of two cities, which it continues to be. Due to segregation, not only to survive but to thrive we maintained our own spaces. Many of the elders that I interviewed didn't feel the backlash of segregation because they had everything they needed on the U Street corridor. They were insulated in a way. Yea, we had our own little city within the major city.

The history of that ‘city within a city’ lives on through the work of Washington’s historians, artists, and activists. Haynesworth’s Black Broadway on U and the Funk Parade both allow for the construction of a new rhythmic center. I contend that this rhythmic center comes through reading black spatial aesthetics through a geographically present lens that attends to certain historical precedents. By enacting a lens of temporality, the modality of black space invites an encounter of the minutiae of place. Similar to Ellis’ turn towards a centered Maverick Room in his book of poems and Yejide’s focus on Anacostia, the minutiae of place centers its actors by drawing the attention of those who encounter it, those who may be on the ‘outside,’ to the intricate details that make black space formation possible even in gentrified space.

Focusing on U Street, and particularly the temporal period that included Black Broadway, as its own ‘city within a city,’ undoes the festival site on that landscape to reveal multiple spatial planes. In a place where local spatial identity is so enmeshed with national identity, the stakes of the localized festivals become high. Here, the act of anchoring the space of U Street in a particular time is the critical act of taking back and restoring a co-opted narrative- but also dealing with the complexity of that narrative.

Much had happened in the century between the glitzy jazz clubs of the 1920s and the bars and restaurants of the soon-to-be 2020s that made, as one New York Times article called it, “the corridor cool again”⁴⁵. One major event, the 1968 collective public response to Martin Luther King Jr.’s murder, is often marked as the start of the Shaw neighborhood’s decline leaning into a narrative of “unwarranted black violence” that

⁴⁵http://www.wrenncom.com/majestic/archives/2004-06-14%20article_NYT_U_Street.pdf

ignores the consistent and unwavering violence on black bodies. Blair Ruble's, *Washington's U Street: A Biography*, describes the moment thusly

The seemingly downward spiral accelerated after the physical devastation of massive communal violence following the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. A crack epidemic during the 1980s and a decade of highly disruptive subway construction continued the decline. [...] A casual observer driving down U Street in the mid-1980s might easily think of urban decline. (174)

Although Ruble is not wrong in his assessment of U Street in the 1980s, the journalistic and even scholarly dialogue insists on marking the history of the land as only a spectacle of urban (black) death. It is enlivened by the new influx of capitalism that comes with developers' investments in a contemporary version of U Street. Instead, aesthetic producers push back by using time as a means by which to root themselves even deeper into the landscape, forcing a recognition of black space, and aesthetic produced out of that space, as more than revitalized wasteland⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that while black businesses represented black spatial control, economic growth, and upward mobility on U Street, they also signaled towards a particular black middle class positionality as well. This positionality was steeped in well-documented intraracial class tensions. Colorism and classism found their familiar foothold as black communities experienced the, "failure of Reconstruction" that would regulate the lives and livelihoods of even those who considered themselves the most elite#. In turn, "skin color, personal and family histories, education, and wealth" would be used to not only distinguish the wealthy and lighter skin toned of black people in D.C., but to also distinguish longstanding black Washingtonians from new migrants from the South.

The geographical divide was intricately tied to divisions along class lines. Southern migrants not only brought with them their "dated" ways of dressing, communing, and living, but they also represented all that those who were well education and well connected had come to decide would need to be changed, and quickly, if the race were to move forward.

Divisions of class, color, and culture undermined the short-lived sense of shared purpose among black Washingtonians that marked the 1919 riot. Even as black pride surged with the New Negro movement, elite black Washingtonians took pains to distinguish themselves from the working class, and light skin remained a marker of social status. Wealthier black Washingtonians attended different schools - usually the college preparatory Dunbar high school, rather than Armstrong, which focused on industrial training. They prayed at different churches- refined congregations such as Fifteenth Street Presbyterian rather than the boisterous Baptists.

[...]

The lower income black community that many elites scorned [...] grew significantly as Southern migration to Washington increased during the decade. By 1930, the city was more than 27 percent black, and the vast majority of residents were poor or working

Moechella: Future

class. Many migrants were women who came not to pursue their own dreams but instead to fulfill family obligations. (Ruble)

The intraracial differences were steeped in what we now call a politics of respectability, but also in a politics of geography. Grammars of spatial acceptability read the south as backwards, stuck in the past, and thereby lacking the means by which to engage the modern black cityscape. Thusly, who could and could not be defined as an aesthetic producer- an important part of U Street's identity as we can see by the use of the name "Black Broadway" rather than a "Black Wall Street"- was also read along their geographic sensibilities and the symbols of culture that marked those sensibilities.

Long after the decline of Black Broadway, those same sentiments- etched along spatial lines- mutated but remained and would show up in the election of D.C.'s black mayors, a point I illuminate in chapter one, the relationship between native black Washingtonians and new black transplants, and in how go-go music and culture would be perceived for decades.



Figure 15. Washington, D.C. Taken January 20th, 2020



Figure 16. Washington, D.C. Taken January 20th, 2020

A pop-up shop in Union Market, a “revitalized” food, beverage, and merchandise market in Northeast Washington, would start selling go-go alumni sweatshirts, t-shirts, and other merchandise related to go-go music and its cultural antecedents in February of 2021. It was only by chance that I found out about the shop; I was planning on interviewing the pop-up shop’s owner, Justin Johnson, also known as Yaddiya, and so had been keeping track of the Long Live Gogo Instagram page where much of the activist work he and his team do can be found. I was not in DC, but my husband was, and so I asked him to stop by Union Market with the intention of purchasing, *Long Live GoGo: The Movement*, the book that commemorated Moechella and the activist work done to push back against gentrification, political violence, and systemic oppression. The

moment had become a cultural and political signpost setting a new standard for the tone of protest in Washington and beyond.

I would visit Union Market the year before Moechella's pop up shop was installed. I decided to take a few pictures of what I thought was an interesting spatial dichotomy. Across the street from the side of Union Market not yet "revitalized" were what I assumed to be a mix of retail, office, and living space. The architectural facade of those buildings looked fairly similar to most other new buildings around the city, but what struck me was the ironic placement of the advertisement truck next to the popular grocery store line, Trader Joe's. The mobile billboard's large red letters state that "Everyone counts and everyone needs to be counted," and is printed alongside a picture of a black man and black child. Both are smiling, seemingly caught in the middle of a moment of shared joy. The advertisement was for the 2020 census, and I could not help but to assume that, in a city still so defined by blackness, the choice to add a picture of a what could have been a black father and his son was meant to speak to the area's demographic.

It's placement, however, also spoke to the sharp divide between the iconography of the region and its gentrifying reality. The Trader Joe's that sat in the background of the marketing for that year's census carried its own cultural weight. Like the advent of bike shops and newly painted lanes, Trader Joe's has come to represent the onslaught of a particular type of new resident. Hanif Abdurraqib references this phenomenon in his poem, "THE GHOST OF MARVIN GAYE PLAYS THE DOZENS WITH THE POP CHARTS,"

your mouth so wide
it swallow a whole city in one bite

your mouth so wide
all the black people in Detroit don't remember what they parents danced to

you think you so black
you paint the stars on your chest

you think you so black
you got a bed in everybody house

you take the last chicken leg
& leave meat on the bone

you think the tea
just got sweet from the sugar

you so ugly
the mirror trembled at your new
white face & then you walked
into the mirror
& then you became the mirror
& then you tore the skin from anyone who stood before you
& then there was a trader joe's in the lot where we
used to
have the block party & then everything you drank
from became a whisper

Like in the film, *Residue*, Abdurraqib shines a light on the mundane ways in which racism shows up in gentrifying spaces. The visual disruption of a new Trader Joe's was not bad in and of itself, but what it represented in the picture I took was the irony of displacement. As a grocery store chain that tends to market itself as an "authentic" site for fresh produce with a farmer's market experience, its placement across the street from the remnants of the old Union Market seemed drenched in its own critique.

Another image I took shows the gutted face of more new construction along Florida Avenue. Again, I captured the marketing truck, and its bold claim that everyone counts and should be counted, in the shot.



Figure 17. Washington, D.C. Taken January 20th, 2020

I share these images and my reading of them not to make them the focus of this section, but to frame Long Live Gogo’s shop placement. Indeed, part of Yaddiya’s claim on futurity is directly tied to his ability to lay claim to spaces that identify themselves as the “future” of Washington. Once more, time and space are interlocked as tools for aesthetic producers laying claim to black space in this present-future.

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“So you got your husband up here as the muscle,” Yaddiya joked as we met up via FaceTime five months later to discuss his role behind the scenes, but also as the face of what had become intensified interest in what exactly go-go music meant to the

District. What I learned was that long before #DontMuteDC, Yaddiya had begun the work of artist-activist in Washington after returning back to the DMV and seeing the impact of gentrification on the the city as a whole, but it's musical scene in particular. He and his team would be the driving force behind protests against legislation that would directly impact street performers, including the Amplified Noise Amendment Act, in 2017 and would continue that work by spending 186 nights protesting in front of the White House using go-go as what he describes in the Introduction to "Long Live GoGo: The Movement," as a "political weapon".

"I will always believe that the power belongs to the people. During the time I spent in front of the White House I had a chance to learn just how powerful we actually are if we understood the way legislation works. The position of the artist as activist is to be that voice. To provide that knowledge. To make that space. When we were thinking about how to start the protests, way before we called it Moechella, I realized what I brought to the table. A lot of people don't know the entertainment part of it. I had the connections to make that work so that's how we did it."

The marriage of protest and music has deep roots in African diasporic history. Black people as repositories of that history, through music, has deep roots as well. As Daphne Brooks states in her comprehensive work on what she calls the revolutionary musical practices of black women critics, thinkers, writers, and, of course, musicians, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, "the revolution that they waged was one in which the articulation of "more life" could, for a disposed people, be sounded out in many registers and tied to the core meaning and vision of liberation itself" (2). Her excavation of liberation's sonic multiplicity through

the cultural production of black women is the lens by which Brooks argues we must think through the histories that have defined American music. *Liner Notes* goes on to argue that if we think of black women's work as sonic curation within culture making, we might be able to imagine, "practices that aesthetically engage and invoke the historical, social, and political ideas and conditions that inform the musical work in question"(14). Those practices open up the space for black women musical curators to engage "multiformalistic expressive modalities" that then shape the ways musical performance and sound are presented to the audience.

I might offer that a similar reorientation of the intellectual and philosophical moorings that attend to the contours of black space and displacement would make for a useful analytic in reading Washington, D.C.'s musical production in the layered political moments of the 2000s, 2010s and early 20s. With eruption in mind, meaning my argument that the musical production of these festival sites is birthed out of already existing modes of scripting blackness onto the cityscape, situating Moechella as inhabiting a particular political moment gives us the necessary tools in order to understand its multi-pronged claim on black futurity.

Brooks examines black women musicians, and black women who think about black women musicians, as the cornerstone of her work. For all, music has acted as the common thread that narrates the stories of a nation's disenfranchised people. Not all have been sorrow songs, though, this sonic "making [of] the modern" has done the job of telling the whole story. Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," can be heard in concert with Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and the listener can know that these are not mutually exclusive expressions of the black experience. They feed into one another as

parts of a collective rendering that depicts the ways black people have lived in a country where blackness continues to be utilized as a foil by which whiteness is constructed. Similarly, to engage go-go music as political tool and part of an aesthetic tendency is to do so in historical tradition, but it is also to engage with, as Yadiyaa told me, “bringing go-go to the future.” It is, to pull from Brooks once more, to claim the sound as liberation, itself.

“I was speaking at the #DontMuteDC rally and the next thing I was just like, ‘Fuck it,’ we’re protesting tomorrow.” Moechella would be birthed on a foundation of activist work aimed at undoing the capitalistic assault on black cultural expression. The production of sonic eruption was intentional about its aim. Here were black Washingtonians- in black space, expressing black joy, engaging in black dance, and black music- at the temporal center of the District. The expectancy of history to be made, the right to exist, and a reclamation of the space of U Street were implicit in the spatial inscription made by those who participated in the moment. By placing literal and symbolic stakes around the corner of 14th and U Streets as a festival site Moechella also said something important about its protest. This was go-go as a site of present-futurity grounded in the localized concerns and demands of native Washingtonians who were not claiming U Street for what it *was* to black Washingtonians, but for what it *is*.

Jayna Brown discusses this phenomena in her book, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, stating

Dominant social formations have denied African diasporans the rights and freedoms associated with being defined as human. My claim is that because black people have been excluded from the category *human*, we have a particular

epistemic and ontological mobility. Unburdened by investments in belonging to a system created to exclude us in the first place, we develop marvelous modes of being in and perceiving the universe.

The mobility that Brown references provokes the rhythmic keeping of the landscape by native Washingtonians. While, Moechella does, in fact, deal with the burdens of *being* in the system created to exclude black people even if it does not belong (a point I want to emphasize because it is exactly why I focus on an above ground as a starting point for black space), it does so from that place of mobility. Movement through place is tied to the nature of a belief in being in place.

More than just the sound of the music, **here**, in both the temporal and geographical sense, was a place for dance, for speaking, for simply *being*, for living as protest. **Here**, was blackness, life, and matter in full action and on full display. In this way, this dissertation harkens back towards the first chapter and its conceptualization of black space. I pair a temporal-spatial reading of black music production as holding not just the eruptive moment, but the histories of space and place, with an afro-futuristic rendering of placed possibility. Moechella embodied both an above-ground and above-world, simultaneously in that present.

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I read afro-presence, eruptive locales of futurity, and the practice of being in the geographical present in this third chapter as the second tenet in the aesthetics of loss. I add Black Spatial Time to Black Spatial Place to provide a soundtrack for the aesthetics of loss that imagines how time might be reshaped and retooled for the ultimate goal of

curators of this aesthetic: a politics of renewal. The next chapter will imagine how the final tenet, value, can get us from resistance to renewal.

Chapter 5: To Claim a Politics of Renewal: Black Spatial Value

Wealth is unattainable with their currency.

-H.E.R., Lord is Coming

I wanted to create a space where black art can live and appreciate and it can be recognized and it doesn't have to be stamped by outside entities in order for it to be valuable.

-Terrance Sloan, Art We Understand

The final tenet of a black aesthetic in the 21st century's iteration of loss is its ability to rethink or rework a definition of value. This reworking, which I call black spatial value, occurs as artists reconfigure/reconstruct worlds and ideologies to center marginalized voices that lay claim to the "here and now" of black life and aesthetic production in *this* gentrifying place alongside the "there and what was" in *that* now gentrified, yet still reverberating with the lifeworlds of blackness, place. For example, what P-Funk and Yaddiyah have in common, besides artistry as their mode of resistance, is their insistence on claiming the *value* of black spaces as central to their individual works. More specifically, by staking out the boundaries of black spatial value in the nation's capital they explicitly claim black spaces and places beyond the process of gentrification and, to that extent, I will argue as also beyond the bounds of capitalism.

This move is both philosophical and political in nature since, as we know from Cedric Robinson's seminal work, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, what he terms "racial capitalism," relies on the deeply rooted processes of racialization that sorted peoples and commerce long before blackness became its central signifier⁴⁷. To deny capitalism yet claim value, then, is to shift the very foundations upon

⁴⁷ Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism, Revised and Updated Third Edition: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. UNC Press Books, 2020. (2,9)

which curating space and ‘worth’ is often set. This chapter is a deep dive into the ways in which black people build and negotiate black spatial value alongside resistance, but with a logics of renewal. It is this politics of renewal, which I identify as black aestheticism’s agency that denies, to the extent that it can, being sucked up and used as capital itself while still creating new worlds, new ideologies, and new philosophies that it operates through on the built landscape despite the system it lives within, that I will explore in this chapter. Contrary to resistance, or the act of resisting, I use renewal as a play on the oft-used “urban renewal” terminology and subsequent rhetoric that argues gentrification is the only saving grace for ‘making new’ the deteriorated spaces it occupies. A politics of renewal argues the everyday, ‘renewed,’ life of black people and thus black space defines its own terms of value.

To that end, I center the work of artist, Terence D. Sloan, whose artistic platform, *Art We Understand*, is based in Southeast Washington, DC. I will explore the ways in which Sloan thinks about racial capitalism in relationship to space, how that informs the making of new worlds animated by value systems that directly oppose hyperconsumption, and what that world looks like through the lens of Sloan who articulates a particular ideological view on wealth and value that inform his art. To explore those ideas, I couch my close reading of Sloan’s artistic production in an analysis of black space, racial capitalism, and value. Additionally, I explore the history of the Anacostia River which is what I identify as a central character in the work of Sloan that we will explore in this chapter, and the long-suffering, but more public 2019 fight for Barry Farms Dwellings and other places around Southeast to remain a part of the community as plans were already in place to remove those community landmarks.

The construction, continued maintenance, and expansion of racial capitalism to build the modern nation-state moves me, as I have throughout this dissertation, towards the ways in which black artists in Washington push back against this system of values. I ask, in what ways does an artist actively engage and disengage the meaning of value in conversation with place or space? To what extent do questions renegotiating value require a renegotiation of capitalism itself, and in what ways are black spatial values within an aesthetics of loss articulated in art? Finally, and most importantly, how does one articulate life among places left for dead?

An aesthetics of loss is only one iteration of black people's aesthetic production in response to, but more importantly despite, black trauma in a United States context. However, I do contend that the specificity of this aesthetic, birthed, in part, by the Black Lives Matter movement, is in its commitment to articulating the particularity of its place-making and place-claiming. Black spatial value as a tenet of an aesthetics of black loss takes into account the ways in which black artists reflect blackness, life, and matter- the literal "matter" of the spaces and places (sidewalks, buildings, and roads) they inhabit and thus value- as a central thematic in their work. Importantly, the specificity of place is operationalized as a means by which to critique the distinct impact of racial capitalism on black people's space- physical displacement, economic inequity, etc. By taking up place as its major co-conspirator, I argue that artists disrupt white supremacy's desire to construct blackness as empty signifier. Rather than thinking exclusively about the *use* of black aestheticism and blackness to further enbolder hypercapitalist practices, black spatial value shines the spotlight on an aesthetic that talks back to and with racial capitalism. This lays the groundwork for a black aestheticism that takes afro-futurism and

places it on the ground, at the bus stop, and near the corner-turned-musician's stage. This is the new world.

Black Space, Racial Capitalism, and Value

There is no way to discuss value as a key tenet of an aesthetics of loss without discussing the meaning of 'value,' and the system that continues to define who and/or what is valuable in the United States. Let us begin with the latter. Capitalism, the economic and ideological backbone of America, is argued by Robinson as the result of a European feudal system already enamored by grouping people along class lines based on ethnicity⁴⁸. While a free-market system congealed around the selling of goods by merchants was starting, stopping, and then starting again in a Europe that was struggling to determine its own national identity, there still needed to be signposts of difference to make the case for the novel construction of class. When the early seedlings of a capitalistic society were beginning to take root, the necessity of an "other" became evident if the bourgeoisie would be able to continue to present itself as the ruling, and wealthier, group.

The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate- to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones (26)

Robinson identifies this pattern citing the use of Slavs as slaves in the Middle Ages and the use of the Tartars in Italy- ultimately, "Race became largely the rationalization for the

⁴⁸Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism, Revised and Updated Third Edition: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. UNC Press Books, 2020. 24

domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non-”Europeans” (including Slavs and Jews)”⁴⁹. The process of racialization is also discussed at length by Sylvia Wynter who critically analyzes the necessity of the Enlightenment period to provide a logic of race in Europe that will carry forward into the United States⁵⁰. As Wynter makes clear, the shift from the “earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction” to a “secularizing” and newly formed “human/subhuman” distinction is the very shift that makes colonization justifiable.

“Race” was therefore to be, in effect, the non-supernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the reoccupied place of the traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are (264).

It was critical that the former working definition of “Christian” as occupying the space of the man in a theocratic society, be replaced with the secular “Man.” In order for this shift to happen, “Man” needed a new contrasting figure.

While, if this new descriptive statement [...] was also to be effected on the basis of a parallel series of discursive and institutional inventions, there was one that was to be as novel as it was to be central. This [...] was to be that of West’s transformation of the indigenous of the peoples of the Americas/Carribbean (cultural classified as Indians, indios/indias), together with the population group of the enslaved peoples of Africa, transported across the Atlantic (classified as Negroes/negros/negras) into the physical referents of its reinvention of medieval Europe’s Untrue Christian Other to its normative True Christian Self, as that of the Human Other to its new “descriptive statement” of the ostensibly, only normal human, Man (265).

I read Wynter’s theorization alongside Robinson who posits the construction of the “Negro” in America, Robinson further posits, is insistent on de-spatializing any member

⁴⁹ Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism, Revised and Updated Third Edition: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. UNC Press Books, 2020.27

⁵⁰ Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3.3 (2003): 257-337.

of the African continent for the purposes of further eliminating the possibility of humanity and thereby justifying labor exploitation while actively concretizing the debasement of enslaved Africans:

The construct of “Negro,” unlike the terms “African,” “Moor,” or “Ethiopian” suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilizations, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity that might demand consideration. Like his eastern, central, and western European prototypes, in their time, and the French peasants, the Slavs, the Celtic peoples, and more recently the American “Indians,” the Negro constituted a marginally human group, a collection of things of convenience for use and/or eradication. This was, of course, no idle exercise in racial and moral schemata since it directly related to a most sizable quantum of labor disciplined and applied in a most extraordinary way. Slave labor in the New World, as we have seen in the precapitalist societies of Europe, was an inextricable element in the material, commercial, and capital development that took place. (81)

By the time capitalism has concretized, value is read along the lines of labor structures, in other words who should or could work at the bottom or top of the economic food chain; racialized notions of intellectual superiority to ensure the labor structure not only stayed in tact, but became the rational point of departure for a capitalistic society; and last, but not at all least, place. All “othering” had to occur at the national level only further solidifying nationalism as a key component of selling the possibility of a “free market” where everyone could reach success to those who were able to call their dominant nation, ‘home.’

I bring up Robinson’s work, alongside Wynter’s, to make clear the process of racialization as critical for the growth of capitalism long before Blackness, Africa, or the United States enter the conversation. Wealth is accrued, in fact can only be accrued, as Robinson argues with some stand-in identity to justify capitalistic violence and erasure. Charisse Burden-Stalley’s conceptualization of racial capitalism within the context of the

United States as it begins to solidify its hold as a world economic and military powerhouse during the first World War, further speaks to this point⁵¹:

...the nation perfected its techniques of accumulation through its vast natural wealth, large domestic market, imbalance of Northern and Southern economies, and, importantly, through its lack of concern for the political and economic welfare of the overwhelming masses of its population, least of all the descendants of its enslaved. Modern U.S. racial capitalism is thus sustained by military expenditure, the maintenance of an extremely low standard of living in “dependent” countries, and the domestic superexploitation of Black toilers and laborers. (11)

It is this, the “domestic superexploitation of Black toilers and laborers,” that gives solid footing to the expectation of hypergentrified spaces. What is that expectation? That black people, space, and production can and are always already solidified as what Burden-Stalley argues to be contradictory--“value minus worth”-- through the process of anti-blackness and anti-radicalism⁵². In a world where money sets the concrete boundaries US citizens utilize to judge who or what is worthy of life let alone equality, Blackness, according to Burden-Stalley, is given a particular “structural *location* at the bottom of the labor hierarchy” (4). This makes way for the superexploitaton of black laborers.

Labor superexploitation can be understood as an economic relationship in which the intensity, form, and racial bias of exploitation differs little from slavery. Its effects are so extreme it pushes racialized, particularly Black, labor effectively below the level of sheer physical subsistence [...] In effect, superexploitation results from white supremacy, racialization, and the “badge of slavery,” which exacerbates the conditions of exploitation to which white working classes are subjected (9).

⁵¹ Burden-Stelly defines modern U.S. racial capitalism, thusly: “Drawing on the intellectual property of twentieth-century Black anti-capitalists, I theorize modern U.S. racial capitalism as a racially hierarchical political economy constituting war and militarism, imperialist accumulation, expropriation by domination, and labor superexploitation.” (3)

⁵² Burden-Stelly, Charisse. "Modern US racial capitalism." *Monthly Review* 72.3 (2020): 12.

Although Burden-Stalley is not making an argument around black geographies, she provides the theoretical language by which we can articulate the multi-layered realities of gentrifying communities and black place-making. In Washington, the superexploitation of black labor is best understood through the consistent denial of statehood rights, the use of black histories as a means by which to cultivate “new” communal spaces in black communities that are being displaced, and the literal placement of the city’s most underserved communities along the banks of a dying and isolated Anacostia River bank. The spaces constructed as black are valuable in so much as they are a necessity for the capitalist system, and yet are also required to be rendered as worthless for that system to work.

Dustin Jenkins and Justin Leroy further amplify the consistent friction of the high visibility/deep invisibility of race as built into the fabric of capitalism in their book

Histories of Racial Capitalism:

...racial capitalism is the process by which the key dynamics of capitalism--accumulation/dispossession, credit/debt, production/surplus, capitalist/worker, developed/underdeveloped, contract/coercion, and others--become articulated through race. In other words, capital has not historically accumulated without previously existing relations of racial inequality. This process functions in two ways. First, the violent dispossessions inherent to capital accumulation operate by leveraging, intensifying, and creating racial distinctions. Second, race serves as a tool for naturalizing the inequalities produced by capitalism, and this racialized process of naturalization serves to rationalize the unequal distribution of resources, social power, rights, and privileges. (3)

The naturalization and rationalization of dispossession and inequality, the “side effects” of capitalism- or as Robinson would argue the essence of capitalism- through the “tool” of race asks us to consider, yet again, the contradictory nature of racial constructs which is both centered and yet erased as it enters into the spaces and places that it overtakes. It is important to note here that a disconnect of black people from spatial value, in my work,

is not only about dispossession- what we might describe today as the process of redlining in Chicago in the 1950s, for example- but about the literal refusal of black people as having *a place* to survive in that system, at all. Those at the bottom must remain there for capitalism to work.

In, “The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital,” Bledsoe and Wright argue that wiping clean geographical stakes can be traced back to the global project of the transatlantic slave trade and leaves “locations associated with Blackness open to the presumably “rational” agendas of dominant spatial actors. Black populations, then, serve as the guarantor of capitalism’s need to constantly find new spaces of accumulation” (12). If enslaved Africans were, themselves, seen as landscapes of value without worth-material solely useful for transaction as a means by which to expand American capital production and burgeoning national ideology- then we know that for populations of black people to operate within this system is to operate not from, but at, a deficit. Bledsoe and Wright write

...the openness of Black people to violence and the assumed a-spatial nature of Black populations remain constitutive factors of the modern world. The logics underpinning anti-black violence are inheritances of chattel slavery. These logics cast Black geographies as empty and threatening, open to occupation, and subject to surveillance and assault.

The critical function of race in, or as, capitalism not only supports but undergirds the frenzied pace of gentrification. The devaluation of black people and their spaces is indeed an ideological battle, that, as I have shown in earlier chapters, relies just as much on critical belief systems about the value of black geographies as it does on forced removal and dispossession. If, capitalism can allow us to rely on the assumption that black spaces are simply non-existent, black holes in need of revitalization projects to add cultural

currency to a deadened cityscape, then the violence of gentrification is never read as violent. Here, then, we find the birthplace of value systems in an American context, and what better place to read value systems in America than in the very place that the nation-state has taken up as its own geographical moratorium.

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While scholars of racial capitalism, black radicalism, and anti-blackness as simultaneously an output of and embedded in capitalist structures aid my thinking in determining the form and function of the systems that define value, leading scholars of afropessimism lay the scaffolding for reading the essence of the value of Blackness-constructed only for its use as a site of abjection⁵³. This theoretical turn lies at the center of defining both racial capitalism and what is deemed “worth”. I leave the word “worth,” here, hanging in the balance because it is as empty of a word as is “black” or “white” in and of themselves. “Worth” as always in need of a qualifier- you or your place or your material possessions are worth “something,” “nothing,” “much less than you anticipated,” or “much more than you anticipated.” Lindon Barret gets at the dynamic of race and value by thinking about how both must be seen as “doubled” or “doubling” because their antithesis is built into the very genesis of their definition. He states

...value operates by fashioning and refashioning relationships across boundaries

⁵³ Saadiyah Haartman, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and Brian Wagner are most notable in this dialogue. I use Wagner’s definition of blackness, however, to ground afropessimism, and then Wilderson’s to amplify. Wanger states: “...blackness indicates: existence without standing in the modern world system. To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange. Being black is belonging to a state organized according to its ignorance of your perspective- a state that does not, cannot, know your mind (1). Wilderson states: “Black people embody (which is different from saying are always willing or allowed to express) a meta-aporia for political thought and action.” (13). If, as Wilderson argues using Jacques Derrida, that an aporia is the point at which an argument undermines itself, then black people’s position as meta-aporia for the purposes of political tooling means black people become, more or less, a giant abstraction in political talk (110-111).

and borders. Oddly, it provides both calculus and symbol, calculating a boundary then signifying itself in terms of that boundary. It specifies a relation defined above all by diacritical marks (or remarks), yet occludes that relation in order to figure itself in the singular and discrete terms of the boundary. There are multiple perspectives from which to view every boundary; yet in signifying itself by means of the apparent singularity of a boundary and the singularity of an accompanying narrative, value attempts to occlude or, at least, overmaster those multiplicities on which it is premised. (19)

This doubling relies on the Other, and, as Barret goes on to say, “denotes domination and endurance in a space of multiplicity [...] altering, resituating, and refiguring of the Other, or many others, in margins, in recesses...” (19).

To even the playing field in thinking through these two concepts and what they mean for my conceptualization of black spatial value, I choose to think of the somewhat abstract notion of ‘value’ from Barret’s concept of doubling, but also in terms of matter. This is an obvious nod to the Black Lives Matter movement, but also an opportunity to explore the juncture at which physical *matter* and philosophical *matteing* meet. Why is this important? Because at the intersection of physical matter and philosophical matteing has been the framework by which current scholarship on gentrification and its impact on black Washingtonians has been articulated.

For example, the process of naturalizing a devalued blackness is, in essence, the “cappuccino” process in Washington that Hyra describes:

On several levels, the cappuccino is a metaphor for important social and spatial processes and their outcomes occurring in twenty-first-century Washington, DC. A cappuccino is nothing more than a refined, refurbished regular cup of coffee with milk. It essentially contains the same ingredients as a coffee with milk, but is upscale and more than double the price. A coffee is dark in color; a cappuccino is lighter in hue, because steamed milk foam is added to espresso, which is the result of boiling water pressed through finely ground coffee beans. In DC, the formerly low-income, Black working-class communities-the coffee-have begun to experience a White influx-the steamed milk-and these neighborhoods have become both lighter in hue and more expensive. In the 2000s, as Whites entered DC at a rapid pace, median home values increased from \$212,000 to \$445,000.

Rather than attempting to completely scrub DC of black people, black history, or black aesthetic contribution, Hyra's "cappucino city" instead works overtime to blend the new and the old so seamlessly as to also make the process of displacement seem invisible. This invisibility of displacement is a manifestation of the a-spatiality that Bledsoe and Wright identify as creating a logic for the "openness," and therefore necessary conquerability of not only devalued, but unable to ever *be* valued, black space.

Who or what philosophically matters is based on dominant discourses. Hyra and others uncover and explore this fact fully within the boundaries of hypergentrification in Washington. However, while Hyra is not wrong- certainly the value minus worth of Blackness is on full display in the cultivation of "diverse" spaces by developers and city planners- I also argue that another conclusion lies at the matter/mattering juncture. It is the inherent problem a construction of Blackness within an anti-black system consistently faces: *black people, live*. The blankness of Blackness can never be fully realized because the 'blank' space continues to create, produce, and operate, publicly, within landscapes of their own value- what I identify as black spatial values. This is where Burden-Stelley's conceptualization of a contradiction of the value minus worth written onto black bodies can be thought about in concert with Henri Lefebvre's recognition of the qualitative vs quantitative function of space. Black spatial value operates with a qualitative 'center' in mind that is aware of but lives beyond, not despite, the dominant 'center's' value system. In other words, black spatial value theorizes an insistence on a refusal to play the role of the marginalized/invisible and fully embodies both its place in matter and its state of mattering by simply continuing to live in the spaces that have prophesied it to be dead.

John Jackson articulates this point in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* as he thinks about the private/public dichotomy of poor Harlem, New York residents and their use of a “counter-privatization” of space to counter the “exclusive publicness” that social programs require- social workers entrance into homes, proof of income or lack thereof for food assistance, not to mention the conversations deemed appropriate in the most personal of interactions namely during pregnancy and childbirth:

Residents’ path to and from, say, the laundromats and corner bodegas, Chinese or Senegalese restaurants, their children’s public schools, and so on, become vain attempts at tiny patches of peripatetic privacy within an overdetermined landscape of market-based privatization and accompanying state-sponsored public expansion. [...] These intimate and idiosyncratic paths through public space are not equivalent to individual ownership in any simple sense. If anything, this is an ownership of space that money cannot actually buy. (54)

The ‘counter-privatization’ of Harlemites is firmly steeped in a reorientation of value. Money cannot buy the ownership that these residents are evoking by, simply, refusing the corporate privatization of their public spaces.

Sidra Lawrence makes a similar argument although she focuses on Detroit, Michigan. Black masculinity, sonic counterpublics, and an exploration of Afropolitanism lie at the center of Lawrence’s work as they lay out a, “theory of an Afropolitan sound aesthetic based on an ideological positioning in relation to the theatricality of power and the subversion of racialized spatial regulation.”⁵⁴ Lawrence is interested in how counterpublics, a concept we parsed through at length in the third chapter, in Detroit work to push back against the regulation of black bodies as a result of gentrification. These regulations, it is argued, “preclude full engagement in social and political systems

⁵⁴ Lawrence, Sidra. "Afropolitan Detroit: Counterpublics, sound, and the African city." *Africa Today* 65.4 (2019): 19-37.

and displace locals, both physically and intellectually, from the resources and benefits of the current “renaissance.”⁵⁵ Ultimately, public performance, what they call “sonic modes of creative placemaking” by local artists rather than the work of activist groups, is used to think about the “new narratives emerging out of Detroit” from the “locally grounded, alterative, and diverse ways that individuals work within social movements”⁵⁶. The everyday operationalization of place to subvert dominant discourse and production, then, is in and of itself and everyday opposition that deserves further attention.

I am in conversation with both Jackson and Lawrence as I argue that black spatial value is an aesthetic tool used to document the daily refutation of capitalism’s tedious and insidious processes. There is a decidedly above-ground/above-world, if I may borrow from my first chapter, characterization of the world of dispossession through the lens of those who continue to take possession. However, black spatial value is a framework by which to read artists’ claim of *place* as the central figure in their aesthetic production. The place, not only the claimed space, becomes just as central to black aesthetic production as are the people who animate it. In Washington, DC this is a particularly important distinction as the national and international identity of the city is composed as a love letter to place with its monuments, streets, and government agencies. In this way, I argue, there is both a qualitative *and* quantitative claim being made about the value of black space within black aesthetic production in the nation’s capital, and it is precisely because of local citizen’s ability to claim the nation-scape as home-scape. The

⁵⁵ Lawrence, Sidra. "Afropolitan Detroit: Counterpublics, sound, and the African city." *Africa Today* 65.4 (2019): 19-37.

⁵⁶ Lawrence, Sidra. "Afropolitan Detroit: Counterpublics, sound, and the African city." *Africa Today* 65.4 (2019): 19-37.

quantitative value of the nation-home-scape remains at the center of any discourse about ownership because the value of the land cannot be disentangled from the value of its proximity to the seat(s) of political and economic national and world power. As one native Washingtonian told me, “we never believed for one second that white folks would let black people take over the capital of the United States. We knew they’d be back.”

Of course, black Washingtonian’s recognition of the quantitative value of place within a framework of black spatial value is not to be confused with a complete investment in black capitalism which black people have always attempted to enter into as robust participants, for better or worse. A large part of my conversation with Sloan was about the artist as laborer and the economic realities of that choice. Unlike the festival sites, and people, I interviewed in chapter three, Sloan has no large financial backing whether through government agencies, private investors, or board members. For him, the value of his artistic work is in its appreciation over time- but that does not take away from the realities of the value of appreciation.

I didn’t choose this journey. Art honestly chose me; it captured me.. you know its a very emotional road its very unforgiving.. It’s so very hard to explain the level of fortitude you gotta have to continue to get up and do something every day knowing it might not be appreciated until you’re dead. I’m really living just to leave something behind for the ones I love. Even the ones I love don’t even understand what I’m doing. They’re like you need to go get a job. The artist’s mind --I live it, I’m so deep into it a regular job I’m not going to be able to do it. I know this is the path God has chosen me for. I know its God because every time I want to give up he puts something in my face to keep me going.

I had asked what motivated Sloan to start, *Art We Understand*, and he had expressed the need to build the “connection” to art among black people- he wanted his community to understand the value of art. This led to a discussion about the ways in which the choice to

become an artist was a decision not often understood in many ways because of its lack of economic stability.

Sloan and I began to talk about entrepreneurship in our socially distanced FaceTime call precisely because the necessity of financial support came up in multiple conversations with other artists, freelance documentarians, and non-profit leaders. Although Sloan and I discussed the more practical ways he put himself in position to earn some income from his work, he stated that he had learned that as an artist that art may not be lucrative for you to live on so his goal was to make himself an asset to whatever situation he encountered come into studying to keep his finger on the cultural tempo and inserting his craft and intellect if possible, I also learned that a philosophy of value informed all of his artistic production.

Money is a tender- a means to an end, but value is a collection of things that appreciate. So that's what I try to put into the world. What value is. We're caught in this web where we think that money and clothes and finer things make you valuable, but even a rich man can be poor. I know that when it's all said and done I'll be able to live beyond my expiration date. I'll be able to live thousands of years from now because of the places in my mind people kept me.

This is setting my children up for -- you don't have to go work for somebody. All you have to do is be educated and be able to explain dad's legacy. That's the plan; that's the goal. I'm not working for me. Every day is waking up to ensure they can at least be able to have enough resources and enough time to be able to learn themselves and how to be an asset to the world.

Our conversation laid the groundwork for what I would ultimately learn, and what I will discuss in a few moments, about the how and why behind Sloan's artwork that highlighted some of the spatial casualties of gentrification. As an artist, Sloan identifies money as "tender- a means to an end" while the art is what is of real value. Both of these work hand-in-hand to produce Sloan's philosophy of value.

Certainly, this dissertation is not meant to make major claims in black political science or urban studies. However, I do argue that to fully understand black spatial studies and modern black aestheticism, the two areas this dissertation does mean to interject into, framing *value* as a key tenet of an aesthetics of loss allows us to think in fuller ways about how artists, in music, poetry, or otherwise, situate themselves not up against, but beyond, a backdrop of both devalued personhood and place. If the “here and now” of a modern black aesthetic production is important, as I suggest in my third chapter’s analysis of place and time, then the *meaning* imbued into the “here and now,” the intentional attention spent on the value of the specificity of place and space, becomes the anchor by which an artist offers up redefinition.

Black is the Future: A Conversation with Terrance Sloan of Art We Understand



Figure 18. (Instagram: @artweunderstand)

A few of the paintings featured on Terrance Sloan’s website share a common theme: a UFO is painted, slightly tilted and off to the side, in the background. It makes sense that the oil-on-canvas portraits of black men and women that gesture towards afro-futurism he has painted might include a UFO in the scene. What, though, might one make of a UFO flying over Rhode Island Avenue Shopping Center in Northeast Washington? Or Barry Farms, a historically black community in the Anacostia neighborhood of Southeast

Washington? What can we make of the seemingly disjointed nature of representational space that these UFO's, universal symbols of outer space seems to suggest when we situate those symbols up against a backdrop of places that are landmarks to black Washingtonians, but in the midst of gentrifying transformations? How, as I ask earlier, can the living survive among what has been constructed as dead?



Figure 19. (Instagram: @artweunderstand)

I can admit I was drawn to Sloan's work from his 2019 showcase titled, "Mind of a Crook: Soul of a City," which I encountered on a millennial's version of an art gallery, Instagram, precisely because of the powerful juxtaposition between the mundane and the futuristic. The actual showcase took place over two nights at the Anacostia Arts Center. Many of the places he painted, Rhode Island Avenue Center in particular, were a part of my personal reintroduction to Washington as I transitioned from viewing Washington as a playground for young black (often transplanted) professionals, to seeing the city through the fresh eyes of black Washingtonians who had the depth and breadth of place-knowledge that can only come from calling the capital city home. Sloan painted monuments that could be easily overlooked; only those who could *know* D.C. would recognize their layered importance to the story of black Washington.

The Rhode Island Avenue Center, for example, sits essentially adjacent to two major landmarks within those two or three blocks: Greater Mount Calvary Church and the Rhode Island Avenue Train Station; two sites that defined my first interactions with the capital city I would call home. The intentionality of Sloan's artistry, then, is not lost. He is drawing attention to the mundane, the everyday, and imbuing it with the vein of a tradition I follow throughout this dissertation. The UFO in each picture is a reminder of the above-world and above-ground- the present-futurity that consistently marks black space's ability to "bet" on itself. Because the use of afro-futurity intrigued me in Sloan's work, one of the first questions I asked was about his gesture towards futurity in his work specifically focused on local monuments in Southeast and Northeast Washington:

The black person is the emblem of civilization; without us there's no future. I always try to project us in the future and i always invest in future. [...] We are stuck in this space of now [...] I really try to get the people around me to think in 100 year increments because this is how they think and this is how gentrification happens so easily because they

already had this place-- the powers that be had already determined what was this that was going to be done. And we were selling mommy and them house for a couple of hundred of thousand because we needed it now.

I always try to think ahead especially as a black man. That's one of my duties is to build something for the future. Its masonry. That's what true masonry is. We can't complain about what's going on if you're not trying to help build something to keep us in the future.

To keep our plans futuristic. Because the most uncivilized thing that you can is be unprepared.

Indeed, the juxtaposition of past and future reverberated in each piece. Some of the places that Sloan painted were still standing but soon to be demolished if the rapidly changing areas around them were any indication of city and developer plans. Sloan was in direct conversation with the ongoing wreckage left by gentrification.



Figure 20. @artweunderstand

“That was a tumultuous time for me. I was seeing the city be bombarded with people that didn’t understand the level of rarity DC is especially for black people. I didn’t see white people until i really got out of high school... It was a culture shock. And then they come in here implementing things and changing things and that is violence. I just wanted to show (in that show) the disappearing of our native land culture and language; the nostalgic things that we like. The value is in our identity [and] our souls are tied to our identity. We had our own style. It was Chocolate City. Howard is the Mecca; now Howard is almost half white. Where is the value? Everything has been somewhat watered down. I think that show offended a lot of people.”



Figure 21. @artweunderstand

The violence of displacement and the denial of black spatial value that Sloan identifies in his art has a long historical arm in the communities of color he commemorates. One specifically, the Barry Farms neighborhood known by its first settlers as Barry Farms-

Hillsdale, sits on the east side of the Anacostia River and was established after the Civil War⁵⁷. Newly freed peoples of African descent who were, “determined to remain in the city, [...] pushed not only for temporary aid, but for land of their own”⁵⁸. Indeed, the Freedman’s Bureau, led at that time by General Oliver A. Howard, was scrambling to find adequate jobs for the “between forth and fifty thousand African American refugees who came to Washington during the Civil War” for federal protection but also for economic security (Amos 25).

They were also scrambling to deal with the insistent and deeply embedded structures of racism that would persist despite the Civil War’s end and slavery’s abolition. Washington was, still, a site created following the merging of portions of two of the largest slave-holding states in the country. Freed people were labeled as contraband by some marking a distinct and important emphasis on the ways in which the idea of the value of black people- in a reestablished government- was being reconstructed.

The solution was job placement outside of the District for many, but for those who had established DC as home, ownership was the focus:

Freedpeople’s desire for land, combined with the bureau’s own interest in developing black self-sufficiency, pushed officials to create programs that encouraged black land and home ownership. [...] In 1867, Howard used Freedmen’s Bureau funds to purchase 367 acres from the family of a deceased slave owner, James Barry. Given local hostility to black landownership, a white intermediary purchased the land, and the family had no idea that it was to be turned into a black settlement. The bureau divided the are into roughly one-acre plots and sold the m to former slaves for \$125 to \$300 per acre, including enough lumber to construct a two-room house. Residents had two years to pay. [...] Within two years, 266 families had moved to Barry’s Farm, and resident soon

⁵⁷“The St. Elizabeth’s tract, the area where the postbellum settlement of Barry Farm was built in the nineteenth century, was ancient land once occupied by the Nacotchtank indigenous people who lived in villages and towns along the Eastern branch. The river was later named Anacostia River (a corruption of the name of the original native inhabitants).” (Amos 17)

⁵⁸ Asch, Chris Myers, and George Derek Musgrove. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*. UNC Press Books, 2017. (138).

built a school, a church, and other community institutions. Officially renamed Hillsdale in 1874, the area formed the nucleus of what would become the city's largest black community.” (Asche, Myers, & Musgrove, 138)

The Barry Farm-Hillsdale neighborhood, and the surrounding Anacostia community, would become one of the most prominent self-contained African-American communities by 1880. Not only had black homeowners established schools, churches, parks, recreation centers, and various other meeting halls that would host civic service events as well as community celebrations, they had also created a thriving business district⁵⁹. Unable, and often unwilling, to do business with the neighboring white settlement in Uniontown, and geographically cut off by the Anacostia River from handling daily business in downtown Washington, the construction of a black owned pharmacy, several barbershops, hair salons, grocery stores, and confectionary shops would more than sustain black Washingtonians who called the area home. Additionally, residents utilized their one-acre plots to grow a small amount of crops, raise animals to eat, sale or share amongst neighbors, and plant orchards

Archaeological research at the Howard Road Historic District in Barry Farm-Hillsdale in the 1980s, before the construction of the Anacostia Metro Station, found the remains of the consumption of edible animals [like] pork, cow, sheep, squirrel, rabbit, and chicken. [...]

These activities not only contributed to the nutritional well-being and the financial security of the families (with the sale of the excess crops) but also allowed for the

⁵⁹“By 1880, the community was settled, the houses were built and their anchors- the churches and schools- were in place. An examination of the census taken that year in June gives us a snapshot of what was happening within the settlement. [...] There were many men identified as farmer and gardeners. Those identified as gardeners were probably planting truck gardens. They or their wives sold produce in the markets across the river. Center Market on Pennsylvania Avenue would have been one of these venues, as well as Eastern Market on Capital Hill. This activity was a way of earning money at a time when formal employment was hard to come by, especially for African Americans. [...] There was an abundance of male ministers and grocers [...] Jobs in the government were not as prevalent as they would become in later decades. Besides Solomon G. Brown, who worked at the Smithsonian Institution, there were a few men employed as laborers at the navy yard, the Treasury Department, the Capitol and the U.S. Post Office. [...] Most of the younger children, both male and female, were attending Hillsdale School.”(Amos 48-49)

establishment of a pioneer recycling system well before the practice was widely known. (Amos 57)

Despite the hostility of white neighbors and despite the need for intermediaries that could secure the land on their behalf, black people had successfully laid claim to place and defined its border and boundaries as home. Still, the waterfront property of Southeast, once desirable as the “commercial lifeline of Washington and the upstream port of Bladensburg, Maryland,” was already beginning to grind to an economic and environmentally sound halt by the time black landowners would settle there⁶⁰. In fact, the Anacostia River would become a major spatial actor in Washington’s long history of racial inequity and inequality over the next century and a half. The victory of the built landscape, black spatial value enacted, would have to fight the denigration of the natural landscape.

East of The River

The Anacostia River is a value-marker in the capital. I argue that a fight for place in 2019 should be understood as an extension of not only a socioeconomic but also environmental crisis that has been long fought in the southeastern portion of the city by its black residents. Put simply, the neglect of this water source over the course of 150 years is stunning in its breadth. A 2003 critical review of the area, and the Anacostia Water Initiative put in place that same year, lays out the full extent of the river’s deterioration.

The river’s watershed is the most densely populated sub-watershed in the Chesapeake Bay and it has been identified as one of the bay’s three primary toxic hotspots. The river’s water quality has been described as one of the most

⁶⁰This was due to “erosion and siltation by the time of the Civil War” (Brandes 414)

endangered in the nation. Primary sources of contamination are 1) “legacy” toxics concentrated in the silt at the bottom of the river; 2) “non-point source” contaminants born in urban stormwater runoff throughout the watershed; and 3) direct discharges of sanitary sewage and discharges of combined stormwater and sanitary sewage that overflow into the river an average of 75 “events” per year. (Brandes 413-414)

More specifically, pollution is caused by “outfalls from industry and small sewage plants, leaking sewer infrastructure, landfills, fertilizer runoff from lawns, gardens, and atmospheric deposition” (Solomon, Jackson, Gilbert 265). It is the recognition of those deeply rooted environmental issues that Mayor Anthony Williams, elected in 1998, rallied under to create the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, or AWI:

Two major rivers flow through Washington, D.C., the Anacostia and the Potomac, and the contrast between them is sharp. Whereas the Potomac became known as the home of famous landmarks and is cherished by tourists and locals alike, the Anacostia, also known as the “forgotten river,” became a local symbol of environmental degradation, severe contamination, and disinvestment. Decades of exploiting and engineering the Anacostia’s natural environment turned it from a rich ecosystem to one of the United States’ most polluted rivers. Over time, the river became a symbolic dividing line, separating the District’s wealthy west from the disadvantaged east, and reflecting the stark racial and socioeconomic divisions of the city.” (1787)

The AWI was created as a solution for not only the deeply rooted socioeconomic issues on the Anacostia, but also as a solution for the ideological problem. Phrases like “growth corridor,” “market-driven development,” and a belief that “[reinvigorating] the underinvested waterfront area with new and diverse uses” would “ultimately bring economic development and social equity to the city’s deprived areas” all pointed back towards an influx of capital as the way by which the Anacostia River could be made apart of the city’s narrative of success. In order to *sell* the value of the river and its residents, one only needed to make sure developers, government officials, banks, and investors understood that the river was on *sale*.

This sale would, according to Williams and his team, also hinge on making the Anacostia River and its waterfront desirable for recreational and cultural activity- an important aspect of any city planning that intends to increase location desirability. This was particularly critical for a revitalization project along the Anacostia, however, because city planning from the 1940s onward had essentially cut off the river from most access points to local residents. By the 1960s, and before the District of Columbia Home Rule Act was put into place, what was left as housing options for poor and low-income African-American residents was at the behest of developers whose bottom line was cash flow. Anacostia's eastern shore and its residents would feel the brunt of capital greed.

East of the river development occurred to sloppily and fast, scrapping L'Enfant's careful plan, stuffing people next to military bases, and skewering their communities with highways that blocked them from access to the river and each other. (Williams 421)

In the AWI plan, the river would become a central figure in the multi-player game of gentrification. It would mirror the Potomac, but it was argued, instead of being largely in place for tourists, this would be for residents of the District and surrounding areas. However, creating this melting pot experience would require more than cleaning up litter. The reconfiguration of the river's edge as "civic space" that is open to the public and the subsequent recreational and cultural activities hosted there needed to be intentional and would be largely city-funded and ran. These events are meant to engage the new Washington; an array of economic, racial, and otherwise backgrounds of the people who live in the newly updated multi-income housing being built. That investment in and of itself, of course, is not wrong in theory. It's limitations, though, begin and end at what many would argue is the enactment of green gentrification.

Of course, investing in the narrative of the city of Washington through its built landscape, or any city for that manner, for place-making is not new. The major difference is that no other major city in the United States carries the burden of embodying all of the various ideals, desires, and investments made in nation-building as it simultaneously constructs its local identity. Over one hundred years before the AWI would be implemented, the turn of the twentieth century saw D.C. begin an extensive “beautification project.” The “natural engineering” that would take place would only further geographically isolate the already disconnected eastern side of the Anacostia River. The McMillan Plan, named for Senator James McMillian, would be the blueprint for the topography of the contemporary Capital City. Still an agricultural “small town” in the early 1900s, the McMillan Plan would add the Lincoln Memorial, tree-lined National Mall, Federal Triangle⁶¹.

Although they had built their own business economy, churches, parks, houses, and schools, black residents of Barry Farms-Hillsdale did not have access to basic city-funded resources including “electricity, running water, sewage system, or paved streets” into the 20th century (Amos 81). And while the streams that ran through the community were used not only as a water source but also for recreation and play at the very

⁶¹“At the turn of the century, Senate’s McMillan Commission began a long campaign to beautify the central core with a mall for museums, integrated parkways, and national shrines” (Williams 417). Initially, the Anacostia River, alongside the Potomac, was slated to be apart of the city’s new, improved, and futuristic-the McMillan plan is credited with the birth of city planning- for its time architectural plans. That would never be realized, but what was realized would become critical to the United States’ national identity:

It was a triumph for [...] boosters who saw Washington primarily as a capital city that would serve as a national monument, rather than a living city for local residents. It was a triumph of buildings over people... (Asche, Myers, and Musgrove 200)

The triumph of place-making by city planners would take decades to come into full effect; the impact of the investment in engineering national ideology over cultivating the communities of the people within the capital’s boundaries would follow.

beginning of the 1900s, an ode to the early days of the settlement, public and private wells were deemed polluted and the cause of typhoid fever by 1911 (Amos 82). Sewers were not installed until 1926 and a majority of the homes, even in the 1940s, still had no running water for bathing or to utilize a toilet (Amos 82). Slaughterhouse sewage and a water system that could not keep up with the consistent growth of Washington were to blame for the increase in contaminated water from the 1930s onward although the pollution of the Anacostia river had been a longstanding issue (Wennerstein 138-139). As early as the end of the Civil War, sediment began to settle at the bottom of the river- a result of a halt to shipbuilding at the Navy Yard:

From forty feet deep earlier in the century, the river now bottomed out at 8 feet, much too shallow a depth for large vessels. [...] Centuries of erosion and deforestation had bred a spread of mud-bound flats covered by dense grasses, wild rice, and bushy little islands. [...] To make matters worse eight outfalls dumped ten million gallons of raw sewage everyday from its junction with the Potomac to where it drifts into Bladensburg, Maryland. When the tide fell during these years, sewage choked the thick aquatic grasses, bubbled and fermented, and welcomed malarial mosquitos especially during Washington's oppressive summers. (Williams 416-417)

What would bring better infrastructure to the community would be a result of the continued impact of the deep hold of segregation in the nation's capital, and would also cause a first wave of displacement in that community. Spearheaded by the National Capital Housing Authority, the removal of African-American landowners in Barry Farms-Hillsdale would be the result of one of many iterations of an "urban renewal" project, another expansion of the McMillan plan, in the 40s and 50s. Thirty-two houses would be destroyed and land obtained to build Barry Farms Dwellings, a public housing development constructed for African-Americans in 1942 during World War II and as a result of housing shortages for low-income native, newly displaced, and migrating black

Washingtonians. The government would no longer rely on military force and violence to eliminate the makeshift housing of poor people as they did against a Bonus Army encampment on Anacostia Flats in 1932⁶². Instead, the head of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Ulysses S. Grant, III, and John Ihlder, who was later named head of the Alley Development Authority would enact the “legal power of eminent domain to destroy a community,” (Wennersten, 130).

The replacement of one form of violence, swords and guns, with another, the violence of dispossession via eminent domain, was not by accident. Forcibly removing African-American populations on both the eastern and western side of the Anacostia, as well as in other areas around DC, in service of city “renewal” and to continue the McMillan Plan’s vision of the capital city was an intentional placement of black citizens, deemed “blighted” by Grant, into the most undesirable, most barren, most desolate areas of the city (Wennersten, 141-142). Of the “urban renewal” that took place during and after World War II, Williams writes

In a burst of abusive state power they purged Washington’s central core of black people, rigged zoning and fire codes, threw up highways and bridges to transport commuting workers into a congested 9 to 5 downtown, lined the Anacostia River with warehouses for the poor, and mutilated the area east of the River. [...] Developers required the assistance of the state in reclaiming the densely overcrowded and deteriorated central core. (419)

⁶² Twenty-one camps had set up around Washington, but the largest was on the Anacostia Flats across the river from the Capital. The headquarters and center of the encampment was on an old recruiting and parade ground on a District-owned field adjacent to Bolling Air Field. Called Camp Marks in honor of a friendly local policeman, it promptly became one of the largest shantytowns in America. Unlike Washington proper, the camp was racially integrated, and black veterans were given a respectful hearing at the organizational meetings for demonstrations in the capital. [...] Fear of communism colored the army’s perception of the veterans on Anacostia Flats, a fact reflected in MacArthur’s decision to bring tanks, a T-4 armored car from Aberdeen Proving Ground, and a 75mm. Self-propelled gun from Fort Myer in case trouble erupted. [...] On the theory that armed men on horseback were useful in dispelling mobs, a troop of sabre-wielding horse cavalry was also brought to Pennsylvania Avenue. (Wennersten 133, 135)

Most importantly, developers “needed state powers of condemnation, eminent domain, and write-down...” to first, redetermine the boundaries of valued place and then to wrest out of the hands of those who could not meet the terms of its value structure (Williams 419).

To that point, Barry Farms-Hillsdale was not the initial focus of the National Capital Housing Authority for building the housing development. According to the official report by the NCHA relating to the building of Barry Farm Dwellings, they had wanted to build the housing development at another location. Due to the resistance from White residents who lived nearby and from a real estate developer, the NCHA then turned its sights on Barry Farm-Hillsdale. Although not specified in the NCHA report, it seems that the area where they initially wanted to build was in Congress Heights, on Alabama Avenue between 13th and 15th streets (Amos 95). Outcry from the primarily white community of Congress Heights, who wanted to maintain the segregation that had been long apart of the District’s housing practices, would stop the project development plans there.

The land, homes, and businesses were deemed far too valuable to exist adjacent to housing for poor or low-income African-Americans. On the other hand, the land owned by African-Americans along the eastern side of the Anacostia was described by NCHA surveyors as underdeveloped. The community’s value up against city plans would not hold. Ultimately, homes and land were forcibly taken, and then utilized for what the city all but described as its human waste.

It is this early definer, the conflation of desolate landscape and black personhood as one in the same, that is reminder that blackness is not even given the distinction of

value without worth as Stalley argues anti-black public rhetoric and policy continue to do in her piece on racial capitalism. What is to be done when neither value or worth are assigned to black space? Or black personhood, for that matter?

The present-day devaluing of the Anacostia River and its eastern waterfront as a natural wasteland only mirrors its historical socio-positionality as consistently “[suffering] from political neglect, economic deprivation, and social isolation” (Ashe & Musgrove 5). Put simply, “the river itself reflects the area’s stagnation,” where Wards 7 and 8, its eastern neighbors, boasted 95% of the African-American population of Washington and 1 of 4 households with “concentrations of poverty in select neighborhoods” in 2003 (Law 6) (Chocolate City 5). Again, the intentional place-making of black people as situated alongside a neglected water source was simply one part of the narrative of a renewed Washington for city planners. This city-as-memorial was not meant to be anyone’s home; certainly not the home of the poor and disenfranchised. The river would ultimately be used to create a “literal barrier between the city of culture, politics, and wealth, and the area east of the river residents believed to be contaminated by the very rocesses that displaced them” (Williams 422). That barrier would extend to the exclusion of the southeast community on tourist maps, in history books, and in the carefully curated identity of Washington effectively attempting to completely scrub the imprint of black life (Williams 427).

It is the tension of value and waste- rather than value and worth- that defines the Anacostia River in Washington and defines the aesthetic production birthed from that place.

Constructing Landscapes of Value/Making a World: A Politics of Renewal

A politics of renewal, which I identify as black aestheticism's agency that combats the various ways blackness is devalued by choosing the daily project of creating and maintaining new lifeworlds despite loss, lies at the heart of black spatial value. I use renewal as a play on the oft-used "urban renewal" terminology and subsequent rhetoric that argues gentrification is the only saving grace for 'making new' the deteriorated spaces it occupies. What Sloan and artists around the District are able to create is an aesthetic that tells the story of that renewal by doing the work of, what Sloan termed, masonry. It is his wording that I think can more accurately get at a politics of renewal, because it automatically brings up the image of the builder. Building, naturally, requires new ideas and new materials. Those who wield those new ideas and materials stand not only as a part of, but at the helm of ushering in, in Sloan's case, a new landscape. In other words, the power the cultural curator holds as builder and thus value-maker and holder still remains.

Sloan's art carves out space for rememories and maps, through its strokes and on its canvas, the Washington that has been built by those who call it home. While his work can certainly be read as resistance, it should also be understood through the powerful lens of renewal, one that, I argue offers greater possibilities that can include resistance, but do not require it. Within renewal, black joy and love and living are as mundane and expected as it is to breath- they do not have to do the extra labor that attaches itself to the recognition that one's work is combatting overarching and deeply embedded systems of oppression.

A politics of renewal does the work of allowing for a black aesthetic, an aesthetics of loss that says “obviously” and “of course not” about its work on black space and place, because it simply choosing to build and keep building. Ultimately, black spatial value is a recognition that the only way out of capitalism’s need to define value by one’s ability to produce capital, is to operate, everyday, as new masons, building and producing and securing the artistic production that is proof of life.

Conclusion

Before I moved to Philadelphia in 2013, I was told Greater Mount Calvary was *the* church to attend; I grew up in the Church of God in Christ, a denomination within the Pentecostal tradition, and Greater Mount Calvary was Holiness, another denomination in the Pentecostal tradition. This matchmaking was essential. More importantly than that, my “word of mouth” recommender let me know that Greater Mount Calvary did not just “play church.” The Word of God was ‘applied and lived.’ I researched how I might attend Greater Mount Calvary without the use of my car and found out it sat right on the Red Line. It was a straight shot from the Tenleytown Station, the station nearest to me, and Rhode Island Avenue Station. Later, over dinner with another transplant- a woman from my hometown who had graduated from my alma mater and moved to Washington to practice law- I asked about the church. She cosigned all I had heard before but added an important fact after she learned I planned on taking the train: this church was in ‘the hood.’

What she really meant, of course, was that the community that surrounded Greater Mount Calvary did not look like that which was around the recently opened restaurant we were meeting at in Dupont Circle. The difference being that the latter had, many years ago, been established as a place where only the city’s upper middle class or wealthy could afford to buy and transient graduate school students or new professionals could afford to rent, while the former was occupied by economically-diverse, although certainly not wealthy, and primarily black neighbors. With those thoughts in mind, I hopped on the Red Line each Sunday, figuring that an 11 am service couldn’t be too dangerous of a

commute. Over time, I learned that not only was the church a longstanding member of the community, but it also owned prime real estate right by the train station. The blue buildings that housed the church's school and community center, among other things and stood alongside and in front of the sanctuary were, smartly, bought long before real estate investors would take interest in this particular area of Northeast Washington and rename a portion of the community "Brentwood." A year after my first church service at Mount Calvary, I would meet my now-husband, a third generation native Washingtonian, at a club in Northwest DC. Ironically, he lived right off of Rhode Island Avenue and only a three minute drive from the church that we would both ultimately join. Contrary to my hometown acquaintance, he called his neighborhood, "the suburbs."

The image of Rhode Island Avenue Center, then, that Sloan paints is an image that resonates because it includes more than the Center where a beauty supply store, Safeway, and Subway were just one of the many shops that occupied its space. It was also where church members parked their cars if they could not find a spot along the street; where the people who lived around it could find affordable clothing, groceries, and other odds and ends; and where Carolina Kitchen, a popular soul food restaurant, stood across the four-way intersection in Rhode Island Row along with food chains, Chipotle and TKO Burger. By the time I moved to Philadelphia three years later, I had come to know the neighborhood that my acquaintance described as a "hood," with all of the negative connotations associated with that phrase, as simply, decidedly, and unapologetically regular ole' black space. Black people, most of whom had long and deep familial and spatial ties to just about every quadrant of Washington, lived, worked, gathered in front yards to catch up with neighbors, laughed on corners, held cookouts,

and waited at bus stops, here. The difference was that this place was not shiny in the way that the new, often garish “modern” homes and businesses that popped up tended to be. There were no markers of gentrification to deem it “safe” for outsiders- black or white. That would not last for long, though. Gentrification was already beginning to change the contours of that neighborhood.

It had been about four years since I had driven down Rhode Island Avenue when my husband and I, along with our one-year-old, decided to visit his old neighborhood to see what we heard had changed. Right before moving to Philadelphia in 2015, he had attended a church meeting where members were told that developers had offered the church an undisclosed amount to move to Maryland. They wanted the land. The church was not willing to sell, so they had started the process of convincing the city to add bike lanes to the road around the church. These bike lanes would, inevitably, keep members from being able to park on the street the idea; was to force the church to move. At the time, we laughed at the irony of new bike lanes. Bikes, I had come to realize, were a major signpost for gentrifies moving into an area. Not to mention that bikes had always been a form of transportation here, and anywhere else in the city, but the safety of Washington’s residents simply was not important until real estate developers decided there was money to be made.

I showed up with my camera outside of Greater Mount Calvary Church and was shocked at the amount of change that was happening.



Figure 22. Washington, D.C. Taken January 20th, 2022

Greater Mount Calvary was no longer flanked by row houses, public housing developments, or even the portions of Rhode Island Center that were just behind it. The skyline behind the church was covered by cranes and the guts of construction ready to be given new skin for incoming residents. The story of redevelopment tends to lean on the idea that the urban spaces it inhabits are lawless deserts in desperate need of renewal. Yet, here in Northeast I witnessed the black spatial value Sloan and other mirror in their work through the lived vibrancy of the people who took up its blocks, alleyways, and corners. I share this story because the undertone of this dissertation is, quite simply, life. The verbiage of a “dead” Chocolate City, no matter its context, is harmful not only to the people who remain in the District, but to the continued cultural, political, social, and activist work that people of color and allies continue to do. The reality is that capitalism cares not at all about skin color outside of its ability to wield race to the furthest extent that it can continue to create more opportunities for wealth obtainment. Yet, the lived experiences of black people provide the evidence of the very real sting of social constructions. Despite all, the art remains, and so to Washington, I say continue to live and produce despite it all.

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