

**THE MULTICULTURAL MEGALOPOLIS:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN SUBJECTIVITY
AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY
HARLEM FICTION**

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ABSTRACT

The central aim of this study is to explore what I term *urban ethnic subjectivity*, that is, the subjectivity of ethnic urbanites. Of all the ethnic groups in the United States, the majority of African Americans had their origins in the rural countryside, but they later migrated to cities. Although urban living had its advantages, it was soon realized that it did not resolve the matters of institutional racism, discrimination and poverty. As a result, the subjectivity of urban African Americans is uniquely influenced by their cosmopolitan identities.

New York City's ethnic community of Harlem continues to function as the geographic center of African-American urban culture. This study examines how six post-World War II novels — Sapphire's *PUSH*, Julian Mayfield's *The Hit*, Brian Keith Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem*, Charles Wright's *The Wig*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* — address the issues of race, identity, individuality and community within Harlem and the megalopolis of New York City. Further, this study investigates concepts of urbanism, blackness, ethnicity and subjectivity as they relate to the characters' identities and self-perceptions. This study is original in its attempt to ascertain the connections between megalopolitan urbanism, ethnicity, subjectivity and African-American fiction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a native New Yorker who is born from two generations of Harlemites, I found this topic both personal and interesting. We in the Hip-Hop community often celebrate our geographic spaces of origin. Whether your home is the Dirty South or Bucktown (Brooklyn), H-Town (Houston) or Chi-Town (Chicago), Compton or the B-Cross (Bronx), there is a deeply personal attachment we have when representing our hometown within the culture. Our home cities say something about who we are: where we live, how we live and even when we lived.

My grandparents were part of the Great Migration, and I am the product of Harlemites from East Harlem (Spanish Harlem or El Barrio) to be specific. I was raised in the lower Soundview area of the Bronx, which some also consider the South Bronx because it is a stone's throw from Hunt's Point. Although the area names and borders continue to change, the area's history often remains the same. With gentrification efforts underway throughout the ethnic communities in most of New York City's boroughs, the people living in these neighborhoods are continuing to drastically change. Ironically, some of New York City's ethnic neighborhoods are rapidly losing their ethnicity; there are almost no Italian residents in Little Italy and there continues to be an influx of Anglo residents moving into ethnic neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick (Brooklyn), Lower East Side, Harlem, El Barrio, Washington Heights (Manhattan), and the South Bronx.

With the ethnics gone, or being erased, the soul and spirit of these communities also fades. In his song “I Know You Got Soul,” the legendary MC, Rakim, makes an iconic statement that is an inspiration for my research: “It ain’t where ya from, it’s where ya at.” True, it is not unusual to find transplants from the world’s nether-regions living among us cosmopolitan natives. Still, something about your home affects *who* you are. Another renowned MC, Jay-Z (Shawn Carter) states in his song “Where I’m From”: “I’m from the place where the church is the flakiest / And niggas is praying to God so long that they Atheist” This song is used to validate his street-credibility, and, despite his celebrity star-status, it reconnects him with the local community, his place of familiarity. Although he traverses the globe, vacations in exotic locations, and lives a life of material excess, he claims “Mentally been many places, but I’m Brooklyn’s own.” Jay-Z’s attachment to Brooklyn is a confirmation of his rooted attachment to his essence, his Self. In one of the most seminal representations of neighborhood pride, Boogie Down Productions frontman KRS-ONE proudly proclaims South Bronx affiliation, while Queens native MC Shan boisterously celebrates Queensbridge, thus sparking an historic musical rivalry between them. Staten Island is brought to Hip-Hop’s forefront when Wu-Tang Clan debuts *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers*, in which they pronounce affinity for their borough, dubbing it Shaolin. In similar fashion, several American writers are celebrated for using the locale as their inspiration. William Faulkner’s American South, Amy Tan’s Chinatown, Langston Hughes’ Harlem, Edgardo Vega Yunque’s

Loisaida or Lower East Side in Manhattan, Sherman Alexie's Spokane reservation, John Edgar Wideman's Pittsburgh, and Anzia Yezierska's Hester Street of Lower Manhattan are all notable examples of American writers and their geographic literature. For people living on the margins, it is particularly important to find and have a sense of place and belonging.

We most readily recognize ourselves by our environment. We are labeled according to where we live — “good” and “bad” neighborhoods — and our life experiences are also informed by our living environment. As any realtor would state, the location is the main advertising point. Where you live says much about yourself, what you have, and what you don't have. This, too, informs your subjectivity and identity. Regarding subjectivity, ethnic identity is itself a complicated matter, and so is urban identity. When combining the two concepts, there are multiple possibilities for consideration. Ethnic communities are special and distinct, and they are often a significant setting for building a cultural foundation. When it comes to New York City's ethnic neighborhoods, ethnicity becomes connected to a major urban center, one that is über cosmopolitan as a multicultural megalopolis. Of the aforementioned multiple possibilities, I explore only a few of these. Subjectivity is both complicated and complex; it is dependent on various factors, some of which will be discussed in this project. Ethnic identity and urban identity are two factors of subjectivity and they will be the primary focus for analysis. I hope that this information will be useful to the casual reader and the scholar, the city slicker and the rural resident.

This project has been a long-time coming. My education at Brooklyn Technical High School provided the foundation; my University of Michigan advisers Dr. Dwight Fontenot and Dr. Bruce Watkins provided the inspiration. My Syracuse University professors Dr. Susan Edmunds and Dr. Margaret Himley provided the support, as did Del Lausa, who introduced me to the lovely complexities of discourse analysis. Dr. Angela Weisl and Dr. Mary Balkun at Seton Hall University provided the training. Dr. Theresa A. Powell at Temple University provided the insight. Further, I am extremely grateful to my dissertation committee for their guidance and patience: Dr. Joyce A. Joyce, Chair, Dr. Sheldon Brivic and Dr. Roland Williams. I owe a debt of gratitude to Samuel (Chip) Delany, without whom I would've been lost. Dr. Soraya Alamdari was there from the beginning, and our love for Hello Kitty keeps us bonded. The Faculty Resource Network of New York University was an invaluable resource, and I greatly valued my time there as both a Scholar-in-Residence and a University Associate. The many precious hours invested at Bobst Library have finally ended (for now), but not without numerous sacrifices.

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Radio team provided a much-needed soundtrack during my writing sessions. I am indebted to my ancestors who paved the way, and I honor their memory and legacy, including my father, the late John Harold Mitchell, my uncle Reginald Calvin Mitchell, my grandmother Dorothy Mae Mitchell (née Bowie), and both of my grandfathers, John Henry Mitchell and George Anthony Britton, Sr. Most especially, this project is dedicated to my family who first planted the seeds and then lovingly grew them with tender care. This project is the fruit of their efforts and I believe it is now ripe for picking. And so, let's get on with it.

All praises are due to God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This project is dedicated to the Harlemites women in my life: my mother Carolyn Louise Britton-Mitchell — I cannot thank you enough — my aunt and second-mother, Rev. Dr. Mariah Ann Britton, my beloved *titi* Sarah Mitchell (née Pagan) — *te amo mucho* — and my grandmother Annie Esther Britton (née Smalls). They continue to be my beacons, guiding me through storms and moments of poor visibility, sharing their wisdom. I have indeed been blessed to be born to them! I cannot forget the people of Harlem, and the all people of the seemingly eternal Struggle, who continue to persevere despite the many obstacles placed before them. This is for my people.

One love.

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CHAPTER 1

AT HOME IN HARLEM:

DEFINING THE ETHNIC SELF WITHIN URBAN SPACE

Across the 1-1-0, my place of birth.
Harlem Hospital's where I breathed my first breath.
Ran the streets of the ghetto,
Cash money making and I never let no sucker take jack I made.
2 Black 2 Strong MMG, "Harlem"

The song lyrics by 2 Black 2 Strong MMG clearly affirm the speaker's affinity for Harlem, as a place of his origins and Selfhood. For this rapper, Harlem is his locus amoenus and his cultural center. As an urban center that is unique and unparalleled in both size and scope, New York City is a megalopolis — a cosmopolitan capital — that is home to persons of many nationalities and ethnic orientations. In *Megalopolis: the Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*, Jean Gottman examines the development and expansion of American cities: "Some of the major characteristics of Megalopolis, which set it apart as a special region within the United States, are the high degree of concentration of people, things, and functions crowded here, and also their variety" (24). In New York City, various ethnic communities exist as miniature cities — many of which are established and widely recognized — and it is my contention that ethnic subjectivity is affected by a connection to an ethnic community. For African Americans, Harlem is one such ethnic community to which their identity and subjectivity are significantly tied.

The history of New York City is based on the arrival of many people from different nations throughout the world; it is one place that served as the point of entry for millions of immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it continues that legacy now in the twenty-first century. The waves of immigrants that first arrived were of European descent; however, in the early- twentieth century, scores of African Americans were migrating from the southern states to urban areas in hopes of a better life.¹ Also, since the early-twentieth century, New York welcomed a population of people from throughout the Caribbean. By the end of the twentieth century, New York's ethnic landscape represented every continent except Antarctica. According to Louis Wirth's research *On Cities and Social Life*, regarding population density in urban areas such as Harlem,

Place and nature of work, income, racial and ethnic characteristics, social status, custom, habit, taste, preference, and prejudice are among the significant factors in accordance with which the urban population is selected and distributed into more or less distinct settlements. (74)

There were housing laws to segregate persons of different races and those laws are now defunct; yet, many racist social practices continue. From an historical perspective, in the early 1900s, Harlem was the decided location to which the forcibly displaced black² residents of Manhattan were permitted to relocate. In his 1925 essay, "New York: Utopia Deferred," George S. Schuyler writes about various attributes of African-American New Yorkers' lifestyles: "In New York (Manhattan) [the New

¹ New York City has a history in the African slave trade; however, the scope of this analysis will focus on persons who migrated by choice.

² *Black* is a racial category that refers to members and descendants of the African Diaspora.

York Negro] suffers from what is practically residential segregation” (205).

Residential segregation is still an issue in the New York City housing market, but social practices and policies tend to be the driving force rather than legal doctrine. As part of her analysis, Marcy Sacks examines the residential history of African Americans in New York City in *Before Harlem*. Regarding housing prejudice in New York City, Sacks writes, “Of all forms of prejudice evident in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century, few proved more enduring than the color line imposed on the housing market” (72). Over a century later, the housing prejudice that Sacks mentions remains an issue in New York City. After the 2010 Census data were published, the Associated Press reported: “Milwaukee, Detroit and New York were among the most segregated between blacks and whites, all part of areas in the Northeast and Midwest known by some demographers as the ‘ghetto belt’ ” (“Black Segregation”). In this sense, an ethnic neighborhood like Harlem serves a substantial purpose because it is a perceived communal safe space where African Americans are still welcome. Today, many of New York City’s ethnic neighborhoods continue to exist and thrive; ethnic neighborhoods shape the identities of their inhabitants, providing a space for cultural reinforcement and awareness.

In *Harlem on My Mind*, Allon Schoener declares, “There is an urban black culture in America. Harlem is its capital” (15). The history of Harlem as an African-American community begins in the late 19th century. “During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, African American residents were steadily displaced and

pushed northward, from the lower tip of Manhattan to Greenwich Village, to the Tenderloin district, into midtown and eventually to Harlem” (Sacks 5). As a result of housing discrimination and racial bias, Harlem became the suitable place for African Americans to reside, even with its higher rents, poorer living conditions and the lack of services. Because of its racialized status, Harlem managed to capture America’s cultural imagination as a “primitive” and “exotic” enclave filled with taboo and adventure. In *The Contemporary African American Novel*, Bernard Bell claims, “Harlem was the cosmopolitan black showcase of the nation, a ‘Promised Land’ for some and ‘Playland’ for others” (114). Even today, despite the gentrification efforts underway, Harlem has with it a connotation of difference and Otherness. The Joel Schumacher film *Twelve* which debuted in August 2010, focuses on the lives of affluent white teens of Manhattan’s Upper East Side who buy drugs from a dealer based in Harlem. In one scene, the narrator describes Harlem as “the other New York City,” a place filled with dangerous and violent black people. Still, despite the myths and stigmas associated with Harlem, as evidenced by 2 Black 2 Strong MMG’s aforementioned song lyrics, Harlem plays a significant role in the development of one’s ethnic identity and subjectivity.

But what does *identity* mean? The answer to that is multifaceted. In his treatise, “Structure, Sign and Play,” Jacques Derrida locates in language the infinite possibility of meaning. Because the interpretation of meaning is subjective to one’s experiences, there is no singular definition. Further, Terry Eagleton asserts:

language is a much less stable affair . . . like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else. (112)

Therefore, as Eagleton and Derrida suggest, there are multiple possibilities of defining identity because it is not fixed, just as the words themselves are not fixed. Language, because it is mutable, will constantly be in a state of flux as will be the connotations of the words. Lawrence Meir Friedman discusses this and other societal conditions in his book, *The Horizontal Society*. According to Friedman, a person's "sense of identity is very much dependent on time, space and culture" (4). A person's identity can change, depending on its societal meaning and interpretation, but there is a catch. In his article "Minimal Selves," Stuart Hall proclaims, "all identity is constructed across difference and begins to live with the politics of difference" (117). The song lyrics for "Harlem" also emphasize difference; Harlem's southern boundary is marked at 110th Street, and the speaker strongly identifies with life on the other side of this boundary. The song narrates the rapper's life to outsiders who are unfamiliar with life across 110th Street and the rapper uses his marginal status to validate and affirm his identity. Kwame Anthony Appiah writes about identity in *The Ethics of Identity*: "What's modern is that we conceptualize identity in particular ways. What's age-old is that when we are asked — and ask ourselves — *who* we are, we are being asked *what* we are as well" (xiv). Although an identity is mutable, its existence depends on being recognized and acknowledged as different or as Other. Whatever

bears the most significance in one's identity pertains to the matters that have had the greatest impact on a person's life experiences. Therefore, whether identity is based on something changeable, like a hobby, or something unchangeable, such as biological sex, it will likely depend on the role that aspect plays in a person's life. As with the rapper, his living environment (neighborhood, location, region, etc.) is used to help define his identity. Because Harlem is an urban community that is marked as a racial and ethnic space, geographic location and ethnicity intersect. Since ethnicity and racial classification also influence how identity I define identity, it is necessary to explore their definitions.

For Stuart Hall, "[Ethnicity] insists on difference — on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history" (118). As systems of stratification, racial and ethnic classifications are socially constructed, but ethnicity has a meaning that is connected to more than a person's physical characteristics. Although there is a connection between race and ethnicity, the terms are not synonymous and their meanings are not interchangeable. In his article "Postmodernism, Urban Ethnography, and the New Social Space of Ethnic Identity," Michael Peter Smith states, "ethnic consciousness is continually shaped and reshaped by the gestural, the ritual and the semiotic exchanges of discourse" (513). Just as language is not fixed, the meaning of ethnicity is also mutable; the social implications of ethnic classification change. Stephen Ellicott Cornell and Douglas Hartmann examine aspects of ethnicity in *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing*

World: “Ethnicity refers to a perceived common ancestry, the perception of a shared history of some sort, and shared symbols of peoplehood” (33). According to this definition, African Americans are an ethnic group — a population with a common history and legacy. The definition of ethnicity provided by Cornell and Hartmann is significant because of its connection to history and its de-emphasis on racial, physical appearance. In *Who Is Black?* F. James Davis asserts, “The immediate effect of using the African American label is simply to substitute it for ‘black’ as a designation of both racial classification and ethnic group identity” (186). The societal meaning or implication of a person’s ethnicity may change, but the narrative does not; various contexts and details *within* that narrative may change, but the narrative itself remains stable. In *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels*, Thomas J. Anastasio et. al point out: “In fact, subgroups within a society often define themselves according to a narrative (stable collective memory) that is not only unique to them but also contradicts the narrative of the larger society” (151). For example, the historical narrative of institutional racism does not change, but new revelations and discoveries about it will continue to inform and evolve its historical context and meaning. “But the major collective identities that demand recognition in North America currently go under the rubrics of religion, gender, ethnicity (or nationality), race, and sexuality” (Appiah 305). Because of competing ideologies, no person has a stable or fixed identity; for the urbanite, identity is not

only related to one's cultural affiliations or one's biological nature, but also to socioeconomic status and geography.

Urban neighborhoods are a complex web, a network of social stratifications. In New York City, it is not unusual to find sharp juxtapositions of residences in which the privileged are living among the poor, but, perhaps, on different blocks or streets within that same community, and Harlem is no exception. In Harlem there exist affluent sections within poorer neighborhoods, such as the elite areas of Striver's Row and Sugar Hill. According to Kenneth Fox in *Metropolitan America*, "the black bourgeoisie or 'middle class' separated itself distinctly from working-class and impoverished blocks or neighbourhoods" (135). Ethnic neighborhoods such as Harlem are geographic hybridized spaces that function as insular, microcosmic communities. Despite the class distinctions within these communities, Fox notes, "Life in the black community differed in part because blacks were segregated through the combined effects of white discrimination and their own desire for communal unity" (135). Because of the diversity of lifestyles within these ethnic communities, it is important to consider the ways they influence a person's ethnic identity and consciousness. Although ethnic neighborhoods are insular and autonomous, they are part of a city's cultural context as part of the larger civic and geographical contexts of the City and the State.

As with plate tectonics theory in geography, ethnic neighborhoods that share borders can be prone to eruptions of violence and tension. In these ethnic

neighborhoods, homogeneity is almost instantaneous; outsiders are often easy to identify, and they are sometimes subject to harassment and/or assault. The residents' sense of belonging in relation to the geographic space (the ethnic neighborhood) reinforces a community's identity. As a physical manifestation of collective identity, the ethnic neighborhood expresses the ethnic consciousness of its inhabitants. "Ethnic consciousness, like all forms of collective identity, does not spring *sui generis* from 'objective' conditions such as nationality, geographical origin, or racial attributes. . . . Ethnicity is socially produced largely through group-level interactions" (M. Smith 513). This relationship between the geographic space and the residents remains constant, regardless of changes in geographic boundaries and limits. For example, many of New York City's ethnic neighborhoods experienced transitions and turnovers because of the waves of immigration, so that an area such as Harlem once predominantly inhabited by Jews is now populated with African Americans. Although the geographic space is in flux, the cohesiveness of the ethnic community remains constant because of the "group-level interactions" between members mentioned earlier.

Especially for people who are first-generation American-born, the ethnic neighborhood often serves as a locus for one's ethnic and cultural values; their presence validates and authenticates the neighborhood, and the neighborhood validates and authenticates them as ethnic subjects. In the urban setting, these ethnic enclaves function as a liaison between the outside world and the resident ethnic

subject. In *Ethnic Options*, an exposition of European American ethnic groups, Mary C. Waters suggests that ethnic neighborhoods are viewed positively, “as an experience that might be enriching or rewarding” (100). Rather than labeling them with negative connotations of being hostile, isolationist or separatist, New York City’s European American ethnic neighborhoods are “sources of warmth and support” for immigrant families arriving from the Old World hometowns of Europe (Waters 101). This is a stark contrast to Harlem, which is often portrayed and labeled as a hostile, dangerous and unwelcoming place. For New York City’s black residents who had few housing options available to them, Harlem became their beloved community hometown. The New York City urban experience is one that is frequently documented from the white perspective, especially in literature, but further examination must be done regarding the literature of Harlem and its influence on African-American subjectivity.

African-American subjectivity carries with it a complex web of meaning as it pertains to the Self, ethnicity, and race. Further, subjectivity for African Americans connotes the problematic relationship of racial identity and national identity. For the sake of clarity, I am defining African Americans as an ethnic group whose ancestry in the United States often traces back to the Atlantic Slave Trade. Because the first African Americans are a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the system of chattel slavery, many early African-American writers of the nineteenth century explored their status as Americans in an institution that denied them personhood. This same

issue of personhood continued to be a point of conflict and contention for African Americans throughout the twentieth century. Donald Hall provides a useful definition and explanation of identity and subjectivity:

one's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances, that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. (1)

Hall's definition makes clear the differences between identity and subjectivity. Due to the various social constructs and institutional systems used to establish social hierarchy, persons deemed as Other will have additional constraints on their self-understanding. W. E. B. Du Bois examines the relationship between race and subjectivity in *The Souls of Black Folk*. People continue to debate whether Du Bois' well-known concept of double-consciousness is still relevant to the African-American experience, although some facet of it still lingers in African-American literature. Regarding race, I use the term *black* to signify African ancestry, but, there exist people of African descent all over the world. The relationship among race, ethnicity and subjectivity has a tumultuous history in the United States. Nick Mansfield discusses American subjectivity and ethnicity in his study *Subjectivity*: "The twentieth century opened in the West with an obsessive emphasis on race and the determining attribute of human subjectivity: you were a member of a racial group before you were anything else, according to eugenicist orthodoxy" (118). More than

just race relations, there was a national systematic implementation of racism enforced that portrayed blacks as foreign outsiders, even though African Americans were people whose families likely resided in the nation long before those of their white oppressors.

Although homogeneity is often assumed, there is no one, legitimate African-American experience; nonetheless, the laws and practices that existed for centuries do allow for continuity and experiential parallels:

Affiliations of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and politics are [important to modern society]. When *many* people decide to make one of these their whole world, it makes a difference, politically and socially. Some of these factors (race, gender, ethnicity) seem inborn, fixed, and are nothing like joining a club of stamp collectors or bird-watchers. (Friedman 6)

Interestingly, Friedman makes the assertion that there is a choice when deciding one's ethnicity or race or other social stratum. However, the miscegenation laws created and enforced in the United States were intended to enforce white racial purity. As a result, the laws assigned racial categories to people, rather than have them choose their racial designation. As a result, African Americans experienced life on the margins of mainstream society, although their experiences were not homogenous. Of course, at moments in history, those African Americans who resided in the South had a different experience from those in the North. Still, it is safe to say that issues such as acts of violence, segregation and unfair treatment affected most African Americans, if not all. Even if, for example, an African American person never

experienced mistreatment because of Jim Crow³ laws, s/he was well-aware that discrimination was a possibility and that it was experienced by others. Thus, as an ethnic group, it is possible that African Americans who reside in urban areas have a different perspective on race and society. In some instances, they have disparaging feelings about their “country cousins” or their own past-selves, the ones who emigrated from what urbanites consider as a non-progressive rural American environment. The city enchants people with visions of progress and success, and urban literature chronicles urbanites’ experiences as they explore the concrete landscape.

In *Urban Intersections*, Sidney H. Bremer states, “The intersections of urban life and literature are abundant” (2). Whether it is her architectural landmarks, her waterfronts or her famed streets, New York City continues to inspire the minds and hearts of artists. Thomas A.P. van Leeuwen’s *The Skyward Trend of Thought* is a study addressing the impact of cities and skyscrapers on the psyche:

The charm of the skyscraper has been intrinsically affiliated with the appeal of America exercised as the ideological reflection of anything inadmissible in “ancien regime” Europe: America was free, it was unlimited in space, it abounded in natural resources and in money. (3)

America’s perception of limitless bounty and opportunity exists for her cities too.

New York State is dubbed as the Empire State. Being the capital city of the Empire State, New York City is portrayed as a locus of power, privilege and progress.

³ Jim Crow laws were racial segregation laws that were enforced in a majority of American states from the 1880s to the 1960s. Its critics often labeled Jim Crow as another form of slavery.

Rightly so, literature about New York City addresses the myth and the reality of urban life. Contemporary literature about New York City is as broad and diverse as its inhabitants. Similarly, New York City's African-American population is also poly-vocal, as is the literature that represents these voices. In *Show and Tell*, Karen Christian identifies ethnic literature as "a site of ethnic subjectivity" (19). The goal of my study is to examine how representative novels such as Sapphire's *PUSH*, Julian Mayfield's *The Hit*, Brian Keith Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem*, Charles Wright's *The Wig*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* address the issues of identity and belonging within New York City's ethnic environ of Harlem. This study is original in its attempt to ascertain the connections between urban ethnic subjectivity and African-American literature. No other literary study perhaps, because we live in what some wishfully deem as a post-racial society, addresses how social, economic and cultural codes affect the way in which African Americans think about themselves and how they negotiate these obstacles in an urban environment.

My study aims to examine how contemporary African-American novels address the issue of ethnic subjectivity as it relates to Harlem and being urban. Waters' analysis proposes that the "ethnic experience" of being a member of an ethnic neighborhood legitimizes one's ethnic status (100). In the same manner, New York City's ethnic neighborhoods legitimize and acculturate their inhabitants. If that is indeed the case, what can be said of the African-American Harlem resident and of

the protagonists treated in these novels? Harlem's African-American residents continue to be very prideful of their neighborhood; yet, it is questionable whether residency in Harlem validates their blackness in the way Waters suggests ethnic neighborhoods do. My decision to focus solely on African-American characters is to establish continuity of perspective. The Harlem Renaissance, one of New York City's more famous literary periods, has laid the foundation for the literature that comes out of Harlem today. While the African-American narratives have a long-standing history in the canon, new voices express their experiences in the megalopolis. "Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control" (Hall 1). Although the African-American voice speaks of a legacy of institutionalized injustices as well as addressing racial tensions, intra-racial conflicts, generational gaps, assimilation dilemmas and identity crises, these new voices are exploring possible alternative definitions and interpretations of African-American subjectivity.

Also, for the novels examined in this study, the emphasis is the setting within the novel, rather than the authors' geographical origins. My use of the term *contemporary* refers to literature that was published after World War II, but the subject matter may cover an earlier time period. I select specific texts because of their literary significance and relevance to the continuation of the 1920s representation of Harlem in African-American literature. For African-American writers in the twentieth

century, the urban question was a prominent theme, especially in regard to issues of race and class. In *African American Environmental Thought*, Kimberly K. Smith focuses on the ways in which the environment affects the African-American psyche. African Americans were brought to the Americas to work the land, and their perception of the environment is affected by the cultural and historical contexts in which the open landscape represents freedom and captivity. The conflicted perceptions of the countryside are evocative images of tranquility and tyranny, but so is the perception of the metropolis: “The city may be a mosaic of villages, but black writers were deeply sensitive to the fact that those villages were not natural, organic communities; they were ghettos defined by race and class” (K. Smith 179). Harlem is one such village. New York City often represents progress and freedom, but there is a price to pay for living in it. Yoshinobu Hakutani writes about the role of the city for African Americans in *Cross-cultural Visions in African American Modernism*:

For African Americans the city has served as a historical and imaginative site of freedom. A crucial signifier in modern and postmodern African American literature, the city has been described in a rich variety of ways as a reflection of American life. (82)

If the city was a symbol of promise, Harlem played a more crucial role in the African-American psyche. Promises of economic and social progress lured many African Americans to Harlem, only to realize these promises were feeble and not feasible. The city may represent freedom, but many African Americans quickly became aware that the social issues they were facing elsewhere also existed in the city:

Minorities objectively occupy a disadvantageous position in society. As contrasted with the dominant group they are debarred from certain opportunities — economic, social and political. These deprivations circumscribe the individual's freedom of choice and self-development. The members of minority groups are held in lower esteem and may even be objects of contempt, hatred, ridicule, and violence. They are generally socially isolated and frequently spatially segregated. Their subordinate position becomes manifest in their unequal access to educational opportunities and in their restricted scope of occupational and professional advancement. (Wirth 245)

Because the city represented modernity and progress, Harlem was portrayed as an exclusively homogenous ethnic space in which blacks were safe and welcome.

However, because of the significant increase in population density, intra-racial issues, such as color and class bias, were also prevalent. Still, this study focuses on texts and writers that address in-depth the relationship between geographic space and ethnic identity; they do so in a way that identifies the complexities of this relationship between the subject and his/her geographic space. Whether the novel is set in the early twentieth century, such as in *Jazz* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, or if it is a novel that is contemporary in topic and subject, such as *The Hit*, *The Wig*, *PUSH* and *The Queen of Harlem*, the relationship between the protagonists and their Harlem communities is dynamic. According to E. Lâle Demitürk, “urban subjects in the ghetto construct discourses that mediate black selfhood as a social subject of the racialized urban space rather than that of the white city” (78). In this study, Harlem is the “racialized urban space” in which the protagonists examine their selfhood and identities.

While some of the characters in these aforementioned texts have a different historical context, in New York City African Americans have encountered and continue to experience marginalization and/or discrimination as an ethnic or cultural Other. Regardless of the reasons why African Americans came to New York City, their marginalized status serves as the impetus for subjectivity development and/or analysis. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng declares:

Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. Legal exclusion naturalizes the more complicated “loss” of the unassimiable racial other. (10)

To take Cheng’s claim one step further, I propose that the sense of “loss” will either function as a source of motivation or as a precursor to defeat. Therefore, the ethnic psyche can be either positively or negatively affected by society’s emphasis on race privilege, i.e. cultural capital. In the positive manifestation, marginalization functions as the catalyst for self-affirmation and/or self-determination. In the negative aspect, marginalization is the medium for madness, melancholy and/or withdrawal from society. Furthermore, marginalization reinforces the subject’s sense of alienation, which Richard Chase proclaims in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* as one of “the dominant characteristics of American fiction” (2). Although his study only focuses on white male American authors, the same can be said of the African-American protagonists I discuss. In addition, it appears that Harlem, which the

characters either choose to (or are forced to) inhabit, has a dual function — the inhabitants feel sheltered from the outside world, and they are also confined, being exposed to the conditions within the neighborhood's boundaries, such as poverty and violence. These African-American protagonists attempt to re/define their ethnicity/race, thus creating tensions within their society. It remains to be seen how the tensions are resolved, and what the authors are saying about urbanization, Americanization and ethnic subjectivity.

My interests are threefold. I explore the novels listed earlier to: (1) examine what it means to be urban, (2) investigate concepts of blackness and what it means to be African American, and (3) determine how living in an urban ethnic community influences ethnic subjectivity and urban identity. To accomplish these aims, it is imperative to explore how these authors write and define ethnic subjectivity in relation to urban identity. I believe these authors use their protagonists to create and define *urban ethnic subjectivity*, which is a combination of ethnic subjectivity and urban identity. Urbanites most-often recognize themselves as smaller fragments of the massive populace, in which they constantly encounter others different from themselves. In "Subjectivity in Language," Emile Benveniste observes, "consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast" (30). The novels discussed in this study illuminate how various social and political issues — such as discrimination and bigotry — are embedded in language and contribute to forming one's subjectivity. Consequently, the often-contrasted aspects of

race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class and gender/sexuality become essential for the urban ethnic subject. My emphasis is on relationships within the ethnic neighborhood, and how urban ethnic subjectivity is influenced by both internal and external factors. David Theo Goldberg enhances this idea in *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*: “individuals are defined and define themselves as *subjects* by way of social discourses” (57). For the African-American urban subject, the ethnic neighborhood helps to reinforce the idea that it is not just a matter of “I” and “me”; it is also a matter of “we” and “us.” This kind of contrast is also the focus for examinations of the Western culture and Eastern culture. The individuality espoused by the West is a stark contrast to the collectivism encouraged by the East. For African Americans, this ideological rift represents a deep-seated struggle or tension— arguably post-colonial in its origin and context — between the Eurocentric American individuality and ethnic collective identity. “Discourses are the intermediary between self and society; they mediate the self as social subject” (Goldberg 57). The discourse has at its core the intent focus on the urban ethnic subject; however, because of this tension between self and society, the outcomes of the discourse are quite varied. The discourse outcomes of urban ethnic identity are multiple: ambivalence, alienation, rejection, rebellion, assimilation and fragmentation are all possible resolutions. Waters’ assertion, “a second indicator of ethnic group assimilation/segregation identified by sociologists is the degree of residential segregation” (97), suggests ethnic neighborhoods are microcosmic communities that

function as transitional spaces prepare their residents for assimilation into the larger society. About residential segregation, Waters adds, “This has long been used as an indicator of assimilation of ethnic groups into the wider society,” and she cites Chicago School founders Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess, who claimed that as generations of ethnic families proliferated, the later generations would not need the “‘total environment’ of the ethnic ghetto” to cope with urban life (97-8).

The novels used in this study suggest this concept of assimilation is problematic for African Americans, who, as an ethnic minority group, are often physically demarcated and, thus, Otherized, marginalized and homogenized. Despite their centuries-old ancestral legacy in the United States, African Americans have been treated as foreigners or outsiders. Because the African-American protagonists in these novels are racialized and coded as black, they raise the question of whether African Americans can ever successfully and completely assimilate into the American homogenous pool. For Black New Yorkers, Harlem serves as the geographic space of affirmation and acceptance in which they are not Otherized or considered to be outsiders because of their racial or ethnic categorization, but instead, are the majority. In “‘All The Things You Could Be Right Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” Hortense J. Spillers discusses the psychological aspect of racial identity: “The situation of the African-American community is more precisely ambivalent than any American case we can concoct, in light of its incomplete “Americanization” even at this late date” (385). This “incomplete

Americanization” echoes Waters’ aforementioned argument regarding ethnic neighborhoods and assimilation. If, indeed, it is the case that African Americans are incompletely assimilated, or Americanized, then their identity is in a constant state of flux, and they are permanently hybridized. Interestingly, although Harlem is a geographically segregated space, it complicates the hybridization of its culturally black and African American national identities.

In the novels this study explores, the dynamics of ethnic hybridization for African Americans within the context of the urban environment of the ethnic neighborhood either resolves or complicates the protagonists’ circumstances. For example, in the case of Francie Coffin in Meriwether’s *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, her impoverished urban environment was a significant obstacle for her development. The southern rural protagonist Joe Trace of Morrison’s *Jazz* discovers his subjectivity and manhood while he is lost in Harlem. In *PUSH*, Sapphire portrays a young teen, Precious Jones, whose sole identity and self-affirmation is connected to her dilapidated Harlem hometown. She feels foreign outside its boundaries, and she prefers the familiarity of her neighborhood streets, even though they are littered with junkies, prostitutes and crime. For these characters, their ethnic identity is uniquely connected to Harlem; not only do they feel a sense of place or belonging, but also, they consciously see themselves reflected in the living spaces that define them and their ethnicity.

Critics, such as Algernon Austin, Debra J. Dickerson and John McWhorter, authors of *Achieving Blackness*, *The End of Blackness*, and *Authentically Black*, respectively, continue to raise questions and to debunk or challenge essentialist theories about African-American identity. Admittedly, the African-American experience is multiple and polyvocal (like that of other ethnic populations); therefore, it cannot be essentialized and presented as a monolith. Michael Peter Smith recognizes that debates over ethnic identity continue to persist: “ ‘the play of difference’ . . . and hence contests over the meaning of ethnic identity, also operate *within* various ‘marginal’ subcultures” (513). His claim is well-reflected in the arguments of Austin, Dickerson and McWhorter, who have differing opinions on concepts of Black identity. Their “*internal* contests over group identity” express the multiple possibilities there exist for ethnic subjectivity as it relates to African Americans (M. Smith 514). In Austin’s sociohistorical examination of Black identity, he proposes, “blackness can vary by social context” (2). The definition of blackness can vary because, as a product of socialization, it will be determined by the social networks from which it stems.

Within the sociohistorical context of the United States, the definition of blackness can be quite difficult to discern. Social and political definitions of race have long been a focal point in the national consciousness, mainly due to the powers and privileges associated with whiteness. Austin maintains, “Blackness is not skin color or biology; it is a social definition” (9), but various race-based laws, including the

one-drop rule, place biology at the center for determining blackness. Davis investigates this conundrum: “The nation’s answer to the question ‘Who is black?’ has long been that a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry” (5). Despite the idea of the lack of authorial intention, a disjunction exists between contemporary theoretical contentions of race and the exploration of it in the novels we read. The novels I examine in this study contradict the post-racial idea that blackness is elusive or at most indefinable. In “Who Gets to Say What Happened? Reconciliation Issues for the Gitxsan,” Val Napoleon discusses the ways in which essentialism can have substantive meaning: “Structural essentialism assumes that deeper patterns can be discerned from observable social phenomena. It is these intrinsic patterns, or social structures, that mould the evolution of society and individual behaviour within it” (180). My study shows that Morrison, Jackson, Meriwether, Mayfield, Wright and Sapphire place Harlem at the center in which the protagonists explore their African American subjectivity. Each character recognizes his or her family lineage; whether it is a shameful or prideful origin, the protagonists use those historical narratives to inform their streams of consciousness in developing their identities.

Friedman argues identity is inherently linked to the past: “Each marker of identity has its specific identity and drags with it its own tradition of meaning” (5). As a part of learned behavior, ethnic subjectivity is developed through social interaction and also through the historical narratives of societal response. Dickerson

acknowledges the influence of cultural context, but offers a persuasive counterargument: “In order to make progress possible, Blacks have to give up on the past. Tomorrow is their only option” (26). Dickerson’s rationale, albeit somewhat valid, is also quite problematic. Her suggestion implies African Americans should give up on *their* past in order to attain a viable future. Conversely, the cultural memories of suffering and perseverance are an intrinsic part of African-American identity and experience. Dickerson’s assertion trivializes the acuteness of the damages caused through centuries of institutional racism. To say, “get over it” or “move on” is to ignore the still-present wounds, both critical and superficial, which are always-already embedded in the psychical framework for African Americans’ existence. In *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*, authors Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett and Robert E. Hogan point out the ways in which the past informs the development of identities: “African Americans have been forced to remember the distinctiveness of their identity and of their history by the behavior of others toward them — 250 years of slavery and another century of Jim Crow” (7). Like Dickinson, McWhorter faults African Americans for depending on the legacy of institutional racism as a means for defining their racial identity. McWhorter claims that authentic blackness “dutifully takes on the mantle of victimhood as a public face” (2), which he considers both performative and false. But McWhorter’s interpretation of blackness is reductive and somewhat

myopic; the history of African-American struggle is not solely about victimhood, it is also a symbol of empowerment.

In response to the romanticized revision of the antebellum South after the Civil War, Frederick Douglass urges African Americans to give full attention to their history: “well the nation may forget, it may shut its eyes to the past, and frown upon any who may do otherwise, but the colored people of this country are bound to keep the past in lively memory till justice shall be done them” (qtd. in Blight 224). Douglass privileges the past as an essential component of African American identity. Thus, erasing history is no different than erasing one’s self; the iconic image of the rootless tree is referenced in the African proverb and in Marcus Garvey’s famed edict: “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots” (Witvliet 302). Alex Haley’s *Roots* is entrenched in the past, and the Philadelphia-based rap group, The Roots, also use the symbolic image of the root as a definition of their artistic agenda. The root is synonymous with the past and they are intrinsic to subjectivity development. In *Race Pride and the American Identity*, Joseph Tilden Rhea investigates how the past affects identity: “Collective memory is important because shared beliefs about the past provide citizens with common landmarks or examples which can be referred to when addressing the problems of the present” (2). Collective memory allows for a communal sharing and acknowledgement of the individual and the community experience. Furthermore, without having community and social relationships, African Americans would not

have been able to withstand the bitter cruelties of slavery, Jim Crow, and the other discriminatory practices.

Urban ethnic identity addresses the various concepts of blackness, and it explores *how* these concepts function within the community microcosm of the urban landscape. Stuart Hall comments in his article “Minimal Selves” about the complexity of identity: “Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture” (115). For the urban ethnic subject, the matter of identity becomes more complex. The cosmopolitan, urban ethnic subject is an *urbane* ethnic subject whose physical space greatly influences his/her concept of self and community. Focusing the lens on ethnic neighborhoods will show how urban ethnic identity adds another component to how African Americans identify themselves in relation to other African Americans, to Blacks born in other parts of the Diaspora, and to American society as a whole.

The urban novel focuses on the various complexities of city life, especially as they relate to social relationships and individuality. Novels that focus on New York City are no different. While some authors emphasize the crisis of the individual, as does Nathaniel West in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, others focus on social realism, such as Betty Smith in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and the New York City of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is filled with glamour and excitement. African-American novels about New York City and Harlem add an additional component: they not only suggest how the authors envision urban ethnic community, but in

addition, the novels also function as *reflections* of the urban ethnic community. When examining how the environment of the ethnic neighborhood contributes to subjectivity and identity it is important to realize the inextricability of the self from its surroundings. Zukin comments, “The process of deriving identity from space is . . . limited by both the material history, shape, and form of space, and the social practice of those who would try to imagine an alternative” (239). The protagonists of the novels I explore are intricately connected to and defined by their urban spaces, for better or for worse.

The authors whose texts are the focus of this study explore how historic factors influence the relationship between the African-American subject and Harlem. In “The Insistence upon Community in the Contemporary Afro-American Novel,” Elizabeth A. Schultz discusses the roles of history and community in African-American fiction. These novels present differing visions of community in which the protagonists have positive, negative or ambivalent perceptions of Harlem; despite the protagonists’ difficulties, there is resilience and optimism:

the effects of slavery and racism . . . are fully recognized in the fiction of contemporary black writers. But their vision is directed toward that miracle, toward their sense of a shared historical, emotional, and aesthetic tradition, toward their own community with its possibilities for pride, laughter and love. (Schultz 172)

For black writers to accentuate the positive outcomes of these nefarious and cruel institutions — slavery and racism — is inspiring and subversive; it strips the persecutors and transgressors of their power while highlighting the resilience and

humanity of those subjugated. Stanley M. Elkins discusses this optimism in “The Slavery Debate,” in which he analyzes the various perspectives of historians regarding slavery and the African-American social condition. Elkins notes: “Another theme that permeates all the new [sociological and historical] literature is a strong emphasis on ‘community’ ” (45). If we take Elkins’ argument further, we could argue that the creation of a black community has at its core not just the resistance to slavery, but the spirit of resistance to racial and social oppression. In *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. states: “Black American culture is characterized by a collectivistic ethos” (16). What becomes problematic is that the unified view of race homogenizes all who reside within the boundaries of an ethnic neighborhood; those striving to distinguish themselves and define themselves as separate from their African-American neighbors are left frustrated and disappointed. The inescapability of race and racial bias in the United States further complicates the attempts of the urban ethnic subject to differentiate himself from his African-American neighbors; such is the predicament of Hubert Cooley in Julian Mayfield’s *The Hit*. In many cases, the authors’ emphasis on the ethnic neighborhood forces the novels’ protagonists to re-examine their identities as subjects, or selves. During their self-assessments, the protagonists connect their self-perceptions to their observations of Harlem.

In order to present effectively the scope of this project, I divide the body of this study into three chapters according to theme: “Moving on Up,” “Paradise, Lost,”

and “Home Again.” The chapter titles reflect a progression of the protagonists’ development of self and their views about Harlem. The chapter “Moving on Up” addresses the characters’ optimism of migrating to the city and becoming upwardly mobile. In contrast, “Paradise, Lost” focuses on Harlem’s desolation and the misery experienced when the protagonists’ optimistic dreams fail. Occupying the middle-ground in-between these opposing viewpoints is “Home Again,” which investigates the characters’ attitudes about Harlem as a flawed, yet beloved community. Each chapter will discuss a pair of novels that are relevant to the thematic focus. I use a thematic approach because it allows for a clearer and inclusive analysis; the relationship between the resident and his/her town is often complicated and multifaceted. Furthermore, the novels present complex ideas about urban life that require full examination. My use of a thematic perspective allows for a more comprehensive examination of these complexities. As many people say about New York City, “you either love it or you hate it.” Nevertheless, there is another component to this binary, which is tolerance. While New York City is often portrayed as either the Promised Land or the Wasteland, there are those who tolerate its flaws and its perfections. From a psychological perspective, tolerance can be either beneficial or damaging to the subject. While contented tolerance is somewhat freeing, reluctant tolerance suggests entrapment or powerlessness. All the aforementioned units will address ethnic subjectivity as it relates to the ethnic urban neighborhood and the authors’ vision of community.

The chapter “Moving on Up” analyzes urban ethnic subjectivity in relation to notions of urban progress and modernity. In particular, this section will discuss the portrayal of New York City as a place of hope and promise and how this portrayal affects the development of identity and subjectivity. Recounting his émigré experience in, *City in Crisis*, Ralph Ellison writes:

New York was one of the great cities prominent in the Negro American myth of freedom, a myth which goes back very far into Negro American experience. In our spirituals, it was the North Star and places in the North which symbolized Freedom, and to that extent I expected certain things from New York. (7)

Ellison’s expectations of New York City, then, are no different from others who relocated to New York with the hopes of a brighter, more secure future for themselves and their families. Interestingly enough, it is the same hopefulness that inspires and fuels the immigrant’s dream of American success. As a focal space of transition, New York City becomes the platform for personal transformation as well. The novels *Jazz* and *The Queen of Harlem* present male southern characters whose Harlem migrations are motivated by their desires for progress and change. With the émigrés’ arrivals to New York, they are inclined to start anew, leaving old things and ways behind. Perhaps, though, it is because of leaving things behind that the ethnic urban subject encounters problems and difficulties. In her essay “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction,” Toni Morrison says, “What is missing in city fiction and present in village fiction is the ancestor. The advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor is imagined as surviving in the village but

not in the city” (39). Interestingly enough, Harlem functions as both a village and a city; it is an ethnic neighborhood community in which although ancestors or elders may exist, they may be unheeded. In the process of self-re/definition, one’s past can either be entirely lost or purposely forgotten. “Moving on Up” illustrates how ethnic subjectivity and identity are shaped and influenced by the subject’s hopefulness in his/her new, urban environs.

The next chapter, “Paradise, Lost,” alludes to Milton’s epic, in which Eden is lost to humanity. Similarly, the Edenic images in the first chapter are no longer existent: the bright lights and shiny glass buildings are replaced with broken streetlights, dinginess and grime. What is also lost is the promise of economic security and prosperity. As an opposing perspective to “Moving on Up,” this chapter demonstrates the intricacies of the relationship between the subject and his/her residential urban environs. As in sentiment to B.B. King’s famed blues song, “The Thrill is Gone,” the chapter “Paradise, Lost” focuses on the subject’s disappointment and disenchantment with urban living. The ethnic neighborhood is the town or village *within* city limits; the inhabitants who comprise these communities are responsible for maintaining them. The novels discussed in this chapter, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* and *The Hit*, feature melancholic characters who are disenchanted with Harlem. Functioning as a reflection of subjectivity, the fall of the city/town suggests the collapse of the Self, and vice versa. In his article “The Language of the Streets,” James Baldwin refers to the inner city as “an unmitigated disaster” (135).

Baldwin's inner city, or ghetto, is the ethnic neighborhood in significant financial and spiritual distress. Regarding the Great Migration, Amiri Baraka says, "people themselves headed North for a new life, a higher synthesis. That higher synthesis the Northern Black city of Harlem allowed to emerge was a more pronounced *national consciousness*" (146). For those who witnessed or experienced the loss of this "national consciousness," the ethnic neighborhood becomes a place of dejection, despair and depression. Rather than functioning as a platform for inspiring individual freedom and economic success, the ethnic neighborhood becomes a place of confinement, hegemony and poverty. Ethnic subjectivity is affected by this downturn, and it remains to be seen whether it is the Subject or the environment that has more influence over the other. As a closer examination of the fallen city, "Paradise, Lost" will address the problems with urban life, especially those relating to race/ethnicity and class. The social problems of the greater city community more significantly affect those residing within villages or ethnic neighborhood communities, where there is often no place for recourse or refuge.

The chapter "Home Again" is the intermediary between the optimism in "Moving on Up" and the disappointment in "Paradise, Lost." The characters in *PUSH* and *The Wig* acknowledge Harlem's flaws, but still accept it as their home. In *Science of Logic*, Georg Hegel's Positive Reason emphasizes "the positive in the negative" (35, 21.41) and is considered an important aspect of rational thought. Somewhat similar to Hegel's concept of Positive Reason, "Home Again" focuses on the tenuous

relationship between the urban ethnic subject and his/her urban residential environment; this relationship is fueled by mixed sentiments towards urban life. In this chapter, the urban ethnic subject constantly struggles with his/her role in the community and accepts his/her situation, good or bad. James Q. Wilson discusses aspects of this tenuous relationship in his essay, “The Urban Unease: Community vs. City,” saying, “what constitutes the “urban problem” for a large percentage (perhaps a majority) of urban citizens *is sense of failure of community*” (369). The term *community*, as Wilson intends it, means “a desire for the observance of standards of right and seemly conduct in the public places in which one lives and moves, those standards to be consistent with — and supportive of — the values and life styles of the particular individual” (369-370). The “particular individual,” in this sense, is the urban ethnic subject; it is his/her values and lifestyle that are in disagreement with the neighborhood’s conditions. It is possible that this kind of disagreement fosters self-analysis and a clearer, more intuitive understanding of one’s Self; yet, a disagreement of this kind can also foster introverted or deviant behavior, which forces the urban ethnic subject to disassociate his/herself from reality and possibly even the community at large. Although the urban ethnic subject locates his/herself in a space and place called *home*, it never functions as a place of respite. Instead, this home functions as a constant reminder to the urban ethnic subject of his/her remarkable difference; being home constantly juxtaposes him/her against a cast of characters with whom s/he has little in common. This chapter, “Home Again,” does not claim to

resolve those issues of tenuousness, but it does address and explore possibilities for resolution.

Though the selection spans the breadth and depth of the subject matter, because of its magnitude of scope, the chapters will not present material on *all* texts relevant to this topic. The urban struggle with modernity is prevalent within these narratives, and the layers of race and class further complicate the characters' subjectivity developments. Literary studies that approach the topic of urbanism and modernity often focus on Anglo characters. In *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey discusses the issue of modernity in African-American literature:

Even in postmodern America . . . appreciation of the distinctive culture of African-Americans tends to focus on oral and performative modes, primitivizing them as the others of Western modernity and almost justifying (or, at the very least, compensating for) their systematic exclusion from progressive narratives of modernity. (230)

Dubey's argument that "oral and performative modes" of African-American artistic and intellectual expression receive primary attention suggests that African-Americans are not serious contributions to literary study. The same can be said of the texts being used in this study. Some of these novels are out-of-print, or have limited printing. Although Morrison is the most-recognized author included in this study, and *Jazz* is widely read, *Beloved* is her seminal work. In 1988, she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* and in 1998, it was translated into a feature film. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the *MLA International Bibliography* database, which is a directory of materials published since 1988, a search for texts

that focus on *Beloved* produced 718 hits, whereas my search for texts about *Jazz* produced 172 listings. This study rediscovers and reintroduces texts that have received little or no critical attention. Werner Sollors states in *Beyond Ethnicity*, “the forms of American ethnic literature surely deserve to be treated more seriously than if they were humble and involuntary by-products of “genuine” ethnic themes or unmediated results of a minor author’s parentage” (243). Sollors’ assertion is especially true in regard to the study of African-American literature, in which texts that become canonical receive the majority of scholarly attention while others are neglected or ignored. Whereas classic Harlem novels such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Passing*, and *Invisible Man* are equally relevant to this study, these texts have received a great deal of critical attention from scholars of various academic disciplines.

Just as my premise focuses on urban ethnic subjectivity, an aspect of African-American literary study that is obscure, the texts (except for *Jazz*) used for this study are also relatively undiscovered or forgotten. While *Jazz* is not Morrison’s seminal work, the other novels used in this study are the authors’ most important and notable publications. Further, these texts are not widely received or recognized in the American or the African-American literary canon. Of these authors, Morrison is widely anthologized, and only Morrison is included in African-American literature

anthologies⁴, but *Jazz* is excluded. In *Interviews with Black Writers*, Ishmael Reed declares Wright's *The Wig* to be "one of the most underrated novels written by a black person in this [twentieth] century" (qtd. in O'Brien 171). Although the protagonists of the novels in this study have experiences quite familiar to those famed, canonical characters, such as Bigger Thomas (*Native Son*) and Celie Johnson (*The Color Purple*), their Harlem setting adds another layer of interpretation to their identities and their subjectivities.

The novels in this study introduce characters who straddle dual worlds of the Other and of the resident citizen, only to occupy the space that lies between both worlds, and the Harlem world is that space. Each of the characters aspires towards self-determination while seeing their existence as part of the American narrative, yet separate and distinct from the American ideological paradigm of the rugged individual. The rhetorical strategies each author employs indicate the variety of ways in which African Americans cope with this duality; *The Hit* and *The Wig* are satirical, while *The Queen of Harlem* is comedic, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* and *PUSH* have tragic elements, and *Jazz* is a psychological melodrama. The variety of perspective represents the polyvocal African-American literary voice. According to Bell, the

⁴ Six African-American literature anthologies were surveyed: *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2004), *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature* (1999), *Cornerstones* (1996), *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (1972), *African-American Literature* (2004) and *Heritage: African-American Readings for Writing* (2002). Morrison's writings are represented in five of these anthologies, but nonfiction, short stories, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are featured.

aesthetic debate about African-American artistic cultural authenticity, representation and ownership is unresolved:

Among other things, the fundamental truth that [the aesthetic debate] calls us to acknowledge is the continuing sociohistorical, sociopsychological, and sociocultural struggle to reconcile the tensions and conflicts of the double or, now more popularly proclaimed, multiple identities of Americans of sub-Saharan black African descent. For this reason, the distinctiveness of the African American novel derives from both the double consciousness of its sociocultural and sociopsychological content and the tragicomic double vision that informs the syncretistic contemporary African American pattern of residually oral forms and the literary conventions of irony, paradox, and parody which frequently structure that content. (253)

Bell's assertion about the unique characteristic of the African-American novel also pertains to the novels in this study. Each novel presents a series of conflicts in which the protagonist struggles with his/her individual and social situations, including the experience of being urban and living in Harlem. Further, when examining urban identity and its effect on ethnic subjectivity, we find multiple possibilities; it is my hope that this project will not only contribute to an already plentiful body of information about African-American ethnic identity, but that it will empirically add to the discourse on how geographic space, identity and ethnicity affect subjectivity, occurring in the academy among various literary critics and social scientists. In his article "Generational Shifts," Houston Baker proposes that the most effective theoretical fulcrum in which to address the study of African-American literature is an interdisciplinary approach that illuminates the social, psychological, economic, political (political science), and cultural elements of the texts (213). Thus, Baker's

concept of the “anthropology of art” (213) informs the hybridity of my study that combines literary criticism, urban studies, cultural studies, philosophical theory, and the social sciences. This study is an interdisciplinary one that encapsulates intellectual, social, political and geographic boundaries, thus contributing to a necessary discussion about ethnicity and identity. African-American identity, or any ethnic identity for that matter, is not homogenous and will never be. It is the variety of perspectives that I examine in this study. At this moment in history when the economy, academic theories of how we should approach literary texts, violence in urban spaces, new philosophies of post-racial identity, Hip Hop culture, joblessness, interracial and interethnic tensions problematize urban identity, the primary contribution of my study is to reveal how the African-American ethnic sensibility negotiates the shifting urban terrain.

CHAPTER 2
MOVING ON UP:
CITIFIED SUBJECTIVITY AND MEGALOPOLITAN MANHOOD
IN *JAZZ* AND *THE QUEEN OF HARLEM*

It's the one and only Lenox Avenue,
That's the one and only place to travel to,
Music in the air, dancing everywhere,
That's Harlem hospitality!
When you hear a welcome to your song,
You'll keep shouting "hallelujah" all night long.
You never rest when you get the best
Of Harlem hospitality!
Cab Calloway, "Harlem Hospitality"

The chapter title phrase "moving up" means progress and achievement. Both Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Brian Keith Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem* are northern migration narratives in which the male characters consider their upward mobility a sign of success. Both novels prominently feature a female counterpart, but the parallels between Joe Trace and Mason Randolph of *Jazz* and *The Queen of Harlem*, respectively, are more compelling. Joe and Mason consider their relocation to the North from the South as progress, and by migrating cityward, their upward movement is doubly significant. As with the European immigrant's reminiscence of the "old country" or the "old world," these migrants consider the South "old" and the North "new." In addition, their newly adopted urbanite sensibilities frown upon the rural and the traditional in favor of the urban and the progressive. As neophyte urbanites,

Joe and Mason attempt to recreate their identities to conform to what they believe is civilized and thus sophisticated. Further, both Joe and Mason hope to find their manhood in Harlem. Although Joe is by age an adult, the narrator describes him as someone who still has growing up to do: “But Joe has been in the City twenty years and isn’t young anymore. I imagine him as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. Inside. So even though he wears button-up-the-front sweaters and round-toed shoes, he’s a kid, a strapping . . .” (Morrison 120). Just as Joe uses the city to help him become a man, so does Mason, who flees to Harlem to delay his approaching adulthood and define his racial identity. During their assimilation processes, their subjectivity is transitive, constantly being re-examined and recreated. Thus, for Joe and Mason, moving up also signifies their psychological and their emotional transformation and development. Joe’s migration narrative is rife with emotional traumas that he tries to remedy by relocating north; ironically, his move aggravates his traumas.

Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* is a novel that features various voices and narratives that are connected to a southern couple’s exploits in their new Harlem hometown. Even though the plot has multilayered facets, one of its essential topics is the matter of subjectivity and its connections to urban identity. Each protagonist and minor character has dilemmas and conflicts relating to his or her self-perception. As rural-born orphans seeking their fortune in the grand city of New York, husband and wife protagonists Joe and Violet Trace settle in the Black Mecca of Harlem. Although

many of the novel's characters are interesting to examine, this analysis of *Jazz* will focus on the development of Joe Trace's subjectivity.

Because Joe's parents desert him, he lacks a solid foundation upon which he can establish himself; therefore, his malleable identity stems from the childhood traumas of abandonment and shame. In his youth, the only guidance Joe receives is from his surrogate father Henry LesTroy (or Lestory), who is also named Hunter's Hunter. With Henry's guidance, Joe enters manhood learning how to hunt, track and kill with great efficacy. Although he claims that he relocates to Harlem from the Virginia countryside of Vesper County only for economic reasons, the more substantial reason for Joe's migration is his desire to escape the emotional distress connected to his scandalized feral mother, who is labeled a witch: "From then on he wrestled with the notion of a wildwoman for a mother. Sometimes it shamed him to tears. Other times his anger messed up his aim and he shot wild or hit game in messy insignificant places. A lot of his time was spent denying it . . . Nevertheless, Wild was always on his mind . . ." (176). After a final search for his mother, Joe repeatedly attempts to define himself as separate from the unresolved scandals and sadness of his past. Unable to find her and have closure, Joe's obsession makes him restless: "From then on, his work was maniacal" (179) and he doffs the agrestic wildness of his past for a future in New York City's concrete landscape. In pursuit of his Self, Joe changes into a new man at least seven times, trying to refashion himself according to his environs and his new situations. Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris discusses Joe's search

for his identity in “Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and the City.” His palingenetic condition, she argues, is transitory: “Joe’s fledgling sense of self is irretrievably linked to his own conception of place” (Paquet-Deyris 223), which means that he identifies himself according to his surroundings, whatever they may be. Joe’s migration to New York City and eventually to Harlem enables his psychological and emotional transformations; thus, he is able to achieve his subjectivity and become his true Self.

In “*Who Set You Flowin’?*”: *The African-American Migration Narrative*, Farrah Jasmine Griffin says that *Jazz* “revisits the theme of black mobility and modernity” (184). Set in 1926, the Harlem of *Jazz* is one that is vivacious and vibrant with jazz music and teeming with an incessant influx of new migrants from the American Southern states. After being lured with the promises of a safer and more prosperous life, like other migrants, Joe and his new bride are “dancing all the way” (32) into New York City. John Henrik Clarke writes about these migrants’ hopes in *Harlem, U.S.A.*:

Among black communities in the United States, Harlem is unique. It is the only large community of this nature that is not on the “other side” of town. Harlem is located in the heart of Manhattan island. It is probably the most written about and least understood community in the world.

In many ways it is more than a community. It is *a frame of mind* with international implications. . . Harlem was the most desirable community for the new settlers [migrating north] looking for a better way of life for themselves and their children. . . (xiii-xiv, emphasis added)

Joe is a participant who anxiously migrates north inspired with hopes of success, happiness and a new beginning. “The wave of black people running from want and

violence crested in the 1870s; the '80s; the '90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it" (33). His and Violet's migration precedes the initial peak of the Great Migration by approximately a decade, but it is an indicator of the beginning of additional movements northward by numerous other black southerners. The condition of the American South by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was one that was replete with racial tensions and conflicts and economic despondency, including the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws. For African Americans, the disenfranchisement and dispossession that occurred as backlash to the collapse of the Reconstruction Era by the end of the nineteenth century was reason enough to leave the South.¹

Although blacks were migrating north during the late nineteenth century, the Great Migration refers to the significantly larger quantities of migrants during the period from World War I to the Vietnam Era. According to Isabel Wilkerson in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, prior to the onset of the Great Migration, ninety percent of the black population resided in the American South; however, after the Migration ends in the 1970s: "nearly half of all

¹ There are differing accounts of the actual end of the Reconstruction Era. In the *Concise Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*, Dickinson D. Bruce, Jr. lists 1899 as the end of the Reconstruction Era. However, C. Vann Woodward (*Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*), Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering (*Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement*) and Eric Foner (*Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*) cite 1877 as the end of the Reconstruction Era. W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* cites 1880. In *Creating Black Americans*, Nell Irvin Painter designates 1896 as the Era's end.

black Americans — some forty-seven percent — would be living outside the South” (10). Carole Marks analyzes the influences and effects of the Great Migration in *Farewell — We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration*. There were two waves of the Great Migration. Regarding the first wave Great Migration of the post-World War I era, Marks estimates, “During its course, from 1916-1930, over one million blacks fled the southern states to seek haven in the North” (1). The larger and longer second wave of the Great Migration occurs after World War II and continues throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Wilkerson states: “Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America” (9).

Because they were treated as second-class citizens, African Americans constantly strove and struggled to improve their social status and conditions in society, hence the impetus for migrating to the North. According to Yoshinobu Hakutani, author of *Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism: From Spatial Narrative to Jazz Haiku*, the city functions as the catalyst for subjectivity and self-determination. Hakutani comments on Morrison’s novel and examines its connection to the psyche, “Indeed in *Jazz* Morrison poignantly portrays the city of the Harlem Renaissance as a site of freedom and subjectivity, where the African American was free to think and act as a subject in his or her spiritual, economic, social and political life” (84). As the antithesis to the restrictive and oppressive

practices of Jim Crow in the South, stories and accounts of northern urban life promote the exact opposite — the freedom to pursue an itinerant, settled, or varied lifestyle that was devoid of Jim Crow racial restrictions. In *Toni Morrison*, Linden Peach asserts, “[a]lthough [the migrants] rarely enjoyed the unbridled liberties of the mythology, they could enjoy higher wages, though never as high as the stories which circulated in the South would have them believe” (129-130). Therefore, heading northward and also city-ward manifests a migrant’s upward mobility: “The cityscape . . . portrays a place of seemingly endless possibility” (Griffin 188). These migrants expected their city-ward and northward regional advancement would guarantee them more opportunities for social advancement and personal improvement.

Jazz music functions as a symbol of their personal advancement. Hakutani declares, “jazz music is a metonym for African American subjectivity” (93), and, with regard to the novel, it is evident that Joe and the other main characters are struggling to understand and identify their subjectivities. “For them, subjectivity does not simply mean freedom from racial oppression in the South; it is a sign of creation and progression, the twin actions that urban mood and urban music are urging upon them” (Hakutani 95). As a musical form that is urban, progressive, subjective, intuitive, and collective in its design, jazz music is appropriately reflected within the narrative and Joe’s process of self-discovery and self-recognition. Both Harlem and jazz music are synonymous with urban characteristics and traits. Just as Cab Calloway’s 1933 tune “Harlem Hospitality” is a song that entices people to visit and,

perhaps, relocate to Harlem, Harlem's jazz culture was also very intriguing and alluring. Actually, jazz music achieved immense popularity throughout America, but the jazz culture and lifestyle especially proliferated in urban settings such as New York City. Alphonso Hawkins discusses the appeal of Harlem in *The Jazz Trope*: "Jazz music embodied the flavor, tone, and atmosphere of postwar Harlem, specifically, which gave rise to and tolerated the new" (44). The appeal of newness, new beginnings and new opportunities continues to be an incentive for people migrating to cities such as New York. Also, the vast population and size of urban areas provide the notions of expansiveness, mobility, and freedom:

The lure of Harlem was its music, blackness, spirit of abandon, freedom from restriction, and unguarded expression. Blacks were perceived to exist on the edge of American life and were not subjected to the social codes of conduct "downtown." This escape to "freedom," indeed an ironic one, was captured in the spirit of jazz. (Hawkins 39)

The musical and performative components of jazz are also artistic expressions of freedom. Jazz music and the dance moves to accompany it—such as the Charleston, the Jitterbug, and the Lindy Hop—were racialized as African, primitive and exotic. *Harlem on My Mind* is Allon Schoener's inquiry into and analysis of Harlem and its role as a capital city of the African Diaspora. In reference to jazz music and dance, Schoener mentions that a *New York Times* article once described the Charleston dance as "a modern version of a form of primeval jungle ritual" (66). Just as jazz music is categorized as primitive and exotic, so are Harlem and its residents. In *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey characterizes jazz music and its audience as being filled with

the vices of sex, crime and violence (133). These negative associations, like the contemporary criticisms of rap music, overlook jazz's artistic merits. The vitality and vigor, the syncopation and synergy of the city environment are equally represented in jazz music:

The music of the city, the black jazz that comes to define the city and the era, serves as a source for constructing a black urban subject. It helps to create a subject in opposition to the one that the City attempts to create: in opposition and yet somehow still defined by it. Power constructs the resisting subject. Jazz music embodies *and* gives voice to their experience. (Griffin 191)

Critics and naysayers fail to acknowledge that jazz music functions as a form of individual and collective expression. In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard W. Bell claims jazz musicians “achieve their personal identities against the background of tradition” (204). Jazz orchestras use sheet music just as much as they use improvisation. Terrell Stafford is a distinguished jazz trumpeter and Professor of Music as well as Director of Jazz Studies at Temple University. In an e-mail, Stafford asserts, “Jazz orchestras find a balance between sheet music and improvisation.” Unlike the rigid order and hierarchical structure of symphony music and musical arrangements, jazz music allows each instrument to converge and diverge with the others while maintaining a consistent rhythm and melody. Depending on the emotion and talent of the players, one will assert his or her individual voice by breaking into an unscripted solo; as a fusion of the individual and collective expressions, jazz music becomes the catalyst for and symbol of African-American subjectivity.

Joe's rural and rustic persona initially prefers the familiar, so his decision to relocate to a major northern city was quite a surprise to many: "Folks thought I was the one to be counted on never to be able to stomach a city. Piled-up buildings? Cement paths? Me? Not me" (126). Although the urban allures of vastness and variety are attractive attributes for persons who migrate to cities, the drawback is that the city's density can become overwhelming. Unlike the wilderness, with its paths and trails, the aforementioned sidewalks and buildings provide no refuge or guidance to the urban pathfinder. Because Joe lacks a fixed identity, he easily becomes distracted and lost. Even though he is a hunter, he loses track of himself and of his marriage, losing touch with Violet while pursuing Dorcas. However, as when stalking prey in the countryside, Joe uses his skills as a hunter, tracker, and tracer to navigate his way through the City in pursuit of his ever-elusive target — his subjectivity. Further, he seeks his subjectivity through a woman — not his wife Violet — but Wild and Dorcas. "Joe's desire for Dorcas replaces his desire for the mother he never knew" (Dubey 136). Despite Joe's newly acquired urbane personality and his new identity transformation, he does not effectively break away from his Southern sensibilities. Ironically, his Southern temperament is his most attractive characteristic. His familiar disposition is both nostalgic and endearing to the women in his neighborhood:

[His voice] has a pitch, a note they heard only when they visited stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards and overworked fields to come to the City. It reminded them of men who

wore hats to plow and to eat supper in; who blew into saucers of coffee, and held knives in their fists when they ate. (71)

Regardless of his desire to assimilate into the cityscape, Joe's mannerisms awkwardly merge the rural and the traditional with the cosmopolitan and the progressive. He is psychologically and emotionally trapped between two worlds: the country and the city. Charles S. Johnson mentions this dual-identity conflict in his essay "The New Frontage on American Life," a selection from Alain Locke's *New Negro*. Southern migrants who desired to successfully assimilate into urban society made "an utterly conscious effort to forget the past" (Johnson 297), which was essential to do once they arrived in the North. Joe is not an exception. Although he is no longer a neophyte urbanite, Joe repeatedly recreates his identity to accommodate his current circumstances. During his assimilation process of becoming citified and sophisticated, his subjectivity is transitive, constantly being re-examined and recreated. In "Harlem on Our Minds," Henry Louis Gates examines the binary of popular portrayals of Harlem in which the portrayals are either romantic or realistic. Gates also discusses the impact of these depictions on others. He comments, "Harlem was not so much a place as it was a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself" (10-11). I interpret Gates' statement to mean that Harlem's multifaceted nature is representative of the complex identities of African Americans.

Similarly, Gates notes that *Jazz* is a rare and necessary text because it focuses on this very situation. Although myths of racial and ethnic essentialization were

prevalent in American mainstream society of the 1920s, Harlem was not the cultural and racial monolith it was portrayed to be. While some people perceived Harlem as exciting and exotic, others considered it cultivated or ordinary. In Toni Morrison's 1992 *Late Show* BBC interview with host Salman Rushdie, she comments on the psychological aspects of being urban: "you can't be urbane outside the city. You can be clever and brilliant and shrewd and a guru, but you can't be sophisticated and urbane, unless you confront the variety of difference, strong difference, the mix in a city" (Rushdie 55). The variety of difference in *Jazz* is represented in the relationships and histories of the characters. Joe's fifth, sixth, seventh, and likely eighth and ninth rebirths occur as a direct result of his living in New York City among the array of peoples. The extensive mix of social classes, ethnicities, and cultures adds to Harlem's remarkable nature, and it also influences the Harlemites' psyche. Thus, Harlem truly becomes a state of mind, a psychological condition, if you will, that changes the way Harlemites think, speak, and act. As a result, Joe's experiences as a member of this diverse community cause him to reconsider how he will construct his identity. By the time Joe meets Dorcas, he has already experienced seven reincarnations. Throughout the novel, it is apparent that their affair changes him, as does her death and his reconciliation with Violet.

Although the poly-vocal attributes of urban life are an attractive characteristic to migrants, Joe is very aware of the role race plays in the social dynamic of New York City and Harlem. The atypical attitudes and perspectives of Northerners, at

times, transcended the boundaries of race and class prescribed in the South. Unlike the overt racist proscriptions of Jim Crow laws and practices in the South, Northern prejudices, Joe observes, are sometimes enforced in an obscure manner. While reflecting on how he wound up living on Harlem's famed Lenox Avenue, he notes that, in Harlem, "a colored man could get shot at just walking around up there" (127). A significant point of information is the systematic rejection of African-American tenants in Manhattan, which forced them to settle in scattered residences in the less-desirable downtown areas of the island. There were pockets of consolidated African-American communities, but it was not until they were actively solicited for tenancy uptown that Harlem became the central location for African-American residents in Manhattan. Joe observes:

They built row houses and single ones with big yards and vegetable gardens. Then, just before the War, whole blocks was let to colored. Nice. Not like downtown. These had five, six rooms; some had ten and if you could manage fifty, sixty dollars a month, you could have one. (127)

It is historically true that Harlem real-estate was once coveted and blacks were excluded from living there; but once the proverbial flood-gates opened, Harlem became a haven abounding with Blacks. Due to the increasing racial tensions in New York, Harlem was viewed as a safe-haven for the arriving migrants. "White New Yorkers may greet migrants with violence, but Harlem seemed to offer them a safe homespace" (Griffin 188). Schoener notes that Harlem became so densely populated with Black residents from throughout the Diaspora that it came to be known as "Little

Africa” (67). Note that when Joe and Violet first arrive to New York City, they initially settle downtown in a predominantly black community also known as Little Africa (127). In *New York City: A Short History*, George J. Lankevitch describes the conditions of this area: “The black community was slowly forced to migrate from the Five Points in the 1830s to “Little Africa” in the Village in the 1860s to the west midtown areas of the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill by 1900. Everywhere, prejudice followed them, and they were often the victims of police brutality” (169). Because of the violence and prejudice, moving uptown to Harlem becomes a choice option for the City’s black residents. However, even within the conglomeration of Blacks in Harlem, there still existed tensions and biases. Joe comments on the intraracial tensions he experiences in Harlem as he acclimates to his new residence: “When we moved from 140th Street to a bigger place on Lenox, it was the light-skinned renters who tried to keep us out” (127). Joe’s reference to the “light-skinned renters” indicates that he and his wife possess a darker complexion. His comment connects to the long-standing tensions among African Americans about complexion and social status. In *The Black Man Comes to the City*, Robert Grant mentions some of the intraracial tensions that manifested during the Great Migration. From an historical perspective, Grant posits:

Northern Blacks generally welcomed the newcomers as brothers. They were welcomed in the churches and were sometimes met by organizations created to ease their way. Nevertheless, there was a hint of concern in black newspapers that the arrival of great numbers of

poorly-educated rural Negroes might harm the welfare of earlier arrivals. (41)

To be “poorly-educated” indicates social class, and both Joe and Violet are rural laborers with minimal schooling. In *Before Harlem*, Marcy S. Sacks also comments on the intraracial tensions that resulted from the mass northward urban migration. According to Sacks there were already tensions between the resident Blacks and the Black southern migrants as early as the late-nineteenth century (68). By the time the Traces arrive to Harlem, the biases are commonplace and not atypical. “Not only is the migrant victim to racial discrimination and segregation; he is also subject to the abuses of a Northern black middle class, who feel that their interests are threatened by any identification with him” (Griffin 54). The intraracial discrimination Joe and his wife experience in Harlem reminds Joe that his race and class regulate his mobility in their new urban hometown. Yet, despite these inconveniences, it is quite likely that Joe fares better in Harlem than he would in Vesper County.

Joe also fares better because he is in love. Morrison describes the “City” of *Jazz* the way one would describe a lover or a crush. The City is hypnotic and mesmerizing, enchanting and glittering, filled with excitement, adventure, and desire. Like other migrants, Joe is captivated by the allure and grandeur of New York City, which is the Empire City, and by Harlem. Joe’s comparative description of Harlem’s edifices as being like the storybook “castles in pictures” (127) evokes the image of a powerful, majestic, and mythical city. Griffin notes, “the apartment buildings of *Jazz*

seem to constitute community, hospitality, and home” (189). Evidently, Joe perceives Harlem as a land of fortune and prosperity, a kind of Promised Land. His urban psyche is deeply affected by his thinking of himself as a resident and citizen of Harlem, which James Weldon Johnson names a “black metropolis” and a “Negro capital” (4). As the cultural capital, Harlem is thought to embody the spirit and essence of Black culture, of which jazz music is, at this time, the core. Like the jazz music of Harlem, Joe’s identity-formation process is one that is unconventional and improvisational rather than mundane and calculated:

In the Traces’ City, space is reconfigured. It is willed into a fairy tale kingdom, some version of Eden complete with the characters to be featured in it. Suddenly, urban destiny is no longer a collective phenomenon. Joe comes up with his own design: If the blues functions as a site of group memory, reclaiming the cityscape as his own allows him to come up with an alternative representation of reality. (Paquet-Deyris 228)

The referenced fairy tale kingdom of Harlem is initially presented to readers via the narrator’s perspective and later reiterated by the Traces. The migrants’ high expectations were often unmet; however, some still remained enamored with the promises of a northern, urban prosperity in spite of the many disappointments city life had to offer. Regarding the expectations of southern migrants, Marks posits, “The optimism claimed for the Great Migration was misplaced” (3). As evidenced by Joe, the optimism was naïve. However, in comparison to living conditions in the American South, the realities of urban living conditions were considered a highly desirable and extraordinary improvement. Still, Joe has to sacrifice his manhood in

order to get along in his new environs. Although it allows him to keep the company of women, his job as a cosmetics vendor is not particularly masculine. Further, Sacks observes in urban environments, “none of the traditional symbols of manhood were easily available to black men” (134). The issue of manhood and identity are linked, especially as they relate to one’s work and employment. Despite Joe’s job as a peddler of women’s products, he is able to have some autonomy and independence. In reference to the Great Migration and the impetus to relocate in northern cities, Philip Page Jackson discusses Joe’s challenges and frustrations with being newly free from an oppressive environment. Jackson states in his book, *A Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison’s Novels*, “the Traces symbolize not only the millions of blacks who migrated north but also the longer history of African Americans’ efforts to join the mainstream of American culture and economic life” (160). In *Jazz*, Harlem is referred to as “a City better than perfect” (111) because of the characters’ newfound freedoms and opportunities for advancement. Also, living in a flawless city affects residents’ views of themselves; this is demonstrated by the Traces’ idolization of and affection for Harlem and city life:

Like others, [Joe and Violet] were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. As though there was never a time when they didn’t love it. The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. (33)

Joe eventually learns that his hopefulness for success and independence are insufficient for survival in the City, and so he ekes out a living by selling beauty products to women. Joe's line of work emphasizes exterior and artificial beauty. In the same vein, he is attracted to the exterior beauty of the City; however, like the cosmetics that wear off, Joe's infatuation quickly expires. As a voice of limited wisdom, the narrator comments on the realities of city life: "Nobody says it's pretty here; nobody says it's easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can't hurt you" (Morrison 8). Although this advice or insight seems wise, it is very naïve. For, as readers discover, the City *can* be hurtful when people are disappointed by the cultural norms of racialized laws and practices used to marginalize them.

Because Joe is a Black man born and raised in the segregated South, he is very aware of his racial and social status. Although he had freedom living in the wilderness and making his own way in life, he is still bound by the proscriptive laws and social practices against African Americans. By relocating with his wife to the city, "[t]hey are relatively free from social norms, free to create themselves, to experiment with identity formation and with relationships with others" (Jackson 27). As with other migrants who were newly introduced to the notions of autonomy and success, Joe's racial pride is fueled by living in Harlem. In fact, one of his later transformations or rebirths occurs during World War I while following the African-American soldiers, the famed Harlem Hellfighters, 369th Infantry: "the War had come

and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two” (129). African Americans’ involvement in the wars abroad and on the domestic front was inspired by the ideals of autonomy and self-reliance as stated in the Declaration of Independence: “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Because of their systematic marginalization, African Americans were, at the turn of the century, encouraged to aspire and achieve as proof of their merit and capability. In Harlem, these ideas and notions became the foundation for the New Negro Movement. Gene Andrew Jarrett discusses the New Negro Movement in *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature*, commenting extensively on the way New Negro ideology affected African Americans. Joe’s rebirth during the time of the Harlem Hellfighters’² fame coincides with the increased awareness of the New Negro Movement. Jarrett states, “New Negro modernism attempted to advance beyond the retrograde models of racial realism” (73), thus, highly regarded figures such as the Harlem Hellfighters play a significant role in changing the way African Americans wanted to define and portray themselves. In addition, this new sense of freedom that coincides with modernity also affects their behavior and their ways of thinking. Arnold Rampersad states in the “Introduction” to *The New Negro*: “Although the term ‘New Negro’ had been used from time to time in the late 1890s, it quickly became the term of choice to describe the spirit of the 1920s

² Officially known as the 369th Regiment, the Harlem Hellfighters were the first African Americans to experience combat in World War I.

among many black Americans” (xi). By the time Joe and his wife arrive to New York City in 1906, New Negro ideology has taken root, and it affects everyone in and around Harlem and other major cities.

In reference to the modernity, freedom, and transformation southern migrants experienced while transitioning to northern life, Jackson argues, “In the Northern cities, African-Americans had the opportunity to make decisions, including whom to love, denied them in the South” (129-30). The personal freedom Joe experiences is linked to his relationship with Dorcas. Joe’s subsequent rebirths are not only due to his relocation to Harlem, but also related to his love for Dorcas, who symbolizes the passion and youth Joe lost in his personal quest for self-recognition. Joe appreciates Dorcas’ boldness; she is a risk-taker who sneaks out of her home to engage in activities her very conservative aunt would consider inappropriate. Joe pursues Dorcas to find what is missing in himself. Similarly, he is attracted to her freedom and mobility. Since Dorcas’ frivolous actions represent the wildness of Joe’s mother, his desire for her companionship is connected to his desire for maternal acceptance and love. As a result, Dorcas becomes a figure of salvation and redemption for Joe, but she is the antithesis of her biblical namesake, who was a woman “devoted to good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36). Unlike the biblical woman, Joe’s beloved Dorcas is devoted to her own personal happiness and fulfillment, at Joe’s literal and figurative expense. As the vengeful adolescent son, Joe kills Dorcas as a reflection and expression of his desire to kill his connection with

mother, another woman who has abandoned and shamed him. Through his mourning and sense of loss, Joe achieves the subjectivity he sought. The biblical Dorcas was so loved by her community members, they implored Peter to resurrect her from the dead (Acts 9:40). Through Joe's grief for Dorcas, he is able to birth his subjectivity and restore his marriage.

As previously stated, Joe creates an alternative representation of reality in an attempt to define himself. The opening chapters of *Jazz* feature an older, seasoned Joe whose enchantment with the city has dissipated along with the passion in his marriage. "New York turns into an alien and alienating metropolis with a multiplicity of ethnic, social, and age stratifications. The original uniqueness and unity of the City seem to have disappeared" (Paquet-Deyris 225). However, Joe's affinity for the city is not entirely lost. No matter how disenchanting it seems to be, the urban environment of Harlem is essential for Joe to achieve his subjectivity. Because of the social diversity, the sophistication, and the racial or ethnic connections, Harlem and its culture are able to provide cues to Joe about what his subjectivity should be and how he can attain it. The city changes Joe into a person, but he is not the only person to be affected by the city. In *The City in Literature*, Richard Daniel Lehan mentions the effect an urban environment has on the urban subject. He writes, "The creation of an 'aesthetic' self relies on urban accommodation" (210). Therefore, it is only because of Joe's newly adopted cosmopolitan consciousness that he is able to be reborn as a whole being or subject. This new consciousness requires that he kill his

former Self — the vengeful adolescent son. Joe’s new aesthetic self becomes the man who is the loving and devoted husband and who is also the forgiving son. Rebecca Ferguson asserts, in *Rewriting Black Identities*, that Joe’s identity is quite mutable. Throughout the novel, Joe experiences a “perpetual and necessary recasting (improvising) of the self” (Ferguson 172). Like the psychological component of improvisation in jazz music, Joe constantly shifts and reconfigures his identity to suit the mood of his circumstances. Because he possesses more mobility in the north, Joe is free to explore the many possible identities accessible to him. According to Hakutani, “Throughout the story, *Jazz* is replete with images of freedom” (85). Taking Hakutani’s argument further, there are plentiful illusions of freedom as well. One of Joe’s main obstacles is his fall from bliss; he discovers that the city’s promises to many become real for only a very small few. Still, he achieves a sense of freedom unlike any he has ever known. Joe’s uncertainty of *what to do* with his freedom and his lack of an advisor leave him at a loss. “Without the maps provided by Southern ancestors, [Joe is] ill-equipped to navigate the urban landscape” (Griffin 187). Furthermore, Joe is still trapped by his past burdens and traumas. Louis Wirth discusses in his study, *On Cities and Social Life*, the many social dilemmas urban people encounter:

There is little opportunity for the individual to obtain a conception of the city as a whole or to survey his place in the total scheme. Consequently he finds it difficult to determine what is to his own “best interests” and to decide between the issues and leaders presented to him by the agencies of mass suggestion. Individuals who are thus

detached from organized bodies which integrate society comprise the fluid masses that make collective behavior in the urban community so unpredictable and hence so problematical. (76)

Wirth's assertion emphasizes the importance of community and social relationships in urban environments. By having social connections in the form of the "organized bodies" Wirth claims, the urban individual can make a positive contribution to his urban community. Because they are loners, both Joe and his wife lack this social connection. Joe has some friendships, but not the kind of support necessary to assist in his self-discovery. Regarding his affair, Joe has difficulty deciding what is best for him; he is aware of his transgression, but he believes the affair is imperative for becoming a whole or complete man. Whether it was deliberate or not, Joe forgets the second part of Henry's advice, to not kill the weak or "tender" (180). In order to find his Self, Joe has to forgo Henry's counsel. Just as the relocation to New York is necessary for Joe, Dorcas' murder is a necessary step for Joe's rebirth because through grieving for her he also grieves for his mother. By grieving for his mother, he is able to forgive her and be freed of his shame. Also, the continued pursuit of his mother leads to destruction. Peach asserts that, in *Jazz*, "priority is given to the 'internal,' the psychic dimensions of migration" (129). Another novel that explores the psychic dimensions of migration is Brian Keith Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem*. However, Jackson's 2003 novel features a contemporary migration in which the protagonist, Mason Randolph, migrates north to explore his racial status and identity.

African-American narratives about passing usually pertain to an African-American person of fair complexion who exchanges identities, living as a white person in a place far enough away so that his or her true identity will not be discovered. Often, the deceiver is fearful of being exposed and becoming an outcast by his or her white associates, and so s/he lives a life of secrecy and invention. In order to successfully assume another identity, one must perform exceptionally. Whether one is passing for another gender, social class, ethnicity, etc., it is essential that the person's adopted persona is believable and convincing. Even in reference to one's own identity, it is questionable whether one's behavior is contrived. In her book *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, Karen Christian examines the ways in which Latino identity relies on racial or ethnic performance. Regarding performative behavior for Latino identity, Christian suggests, "readings of Latina/o fiction suggest that cultural identity is not static or naturalized but involves a certain degree of cross-dressing, of drag, in a metaphoric sense" (16). Interestingly, Brian Keith Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem* is also a novel about passing and racial performance, but its emphasis is not on interracial transgression. Instead, the story focuses on *intraracial* transgressions and conflicts that emphasize matters of socioeconomic class and racial belonging. The two protagonists, Carmen England and Mason Randolph, each partake in performance for the sake of passing. Carmen, for whom the novel is named, is evocative of a Holly

Golightly³ type who pretends to be a member of the Black bourgeoisie, but she actually comes from poor southern origins. Mason, her new roommate, is a member of the Black social elite, but pretends to be of humbler origins. Although both characters are interesting to examine, this analysis will focus on the development of Mason's subjectivity because it is his psyche that controls the narrative and we enter the novel at the point of his migration. Mason's relocation to Harlem is an expression of independence in which he examines what it means to be Black and what it means to be a man.

African American Mason Randolph is an upwardly mobile Southern bourgeois who is insecure about his identity as it relates to his ethnicity and his gender. To postpone growing up and taking more responsibility, he delays his entry into Stanford Law School and takes an indefinite detour in New York, residing in Harlem, which he feels is the authentic Black space in which to undergo his personal transformation. In his book *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, Phillip Brian Harper discusses problems of racial essentialization by "positing the 'ghetto' as the site of authentic African-American culture" (98). Mason also makes this same misstep by operating under the assumption that Harlem is more racially or ethnically authentic than his Layton, Louisiana,

³ Holly Golightly is the protagonist of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote. She is a New York City socialite who forsakes her rural, humble origins with the hope of securing elite status from her wealthy lovers.

hometown. He is another southerner who migrates to the North hoping it will fill his ever-widening void; he is missing something and he expects to find it in New York.

According to Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison in *The New Urban Sociology*,

Until the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of blacks, more than 90 percent, lived in the South, and most resided in rural areas. Since 1900, however, there has been a steady movement of African Americans to the North in general and to cities in particular. (168)

Unlike his predecessor Joe Trace, who emigrated northward during the Great Migration to escape the harsh realities of the American South, Mason migrates to escape both his past, his present, and his future. In the opening chapter, Mason is in transition, crashing at his friend, Jim's, East Village apartment: "Listen, Mason, it's been cool having you crash, but if you wanna keep kicking it in New York you're gonna need to find your own place" (5). Mason is intimidated by the idea of living uptown. Like Joe, Mason also feels displaced. He goes to Harlem to find a place for himself, not just in Harlem, but also in the world and in the Black community. He hopes that living in Harlem will ameliorate his sense of disconnection and enable him to establish relationships with other African Americans. Kimberly K. Smith discusses the function of boundaries and racial integration, in *African American Environmental Thought*:

[Robert E.] Park and [Alain] Locke suggested that crossing into the city's other "little worlds" could lead to intellectual growth and interracial communication. But most blacks found the borders of those little worlds well defended; crossing them was difficult and dangerous.

Moreover, those who could “pass” found the experience threatening to their identity. (179)

Although Mason seeks a literal residence or place, it later becomes evident that Mason is also in search of himself. During an awkward confrontation with male Harlem denizens, Mason is identified as a Theo Huxtable type, “one of them uppity niggas [who is] a black boy blending” (7) and who is *unwelcome*. His identity as someone who blends in the Anglo world, he was told, has caused him to lose whatever traces of blackness he had. This rejection is doubly painful for Mason, who desires racial acceptance from “*real* Black people” (dustjacket). Mason’s categorization as “uppity” is similar to those of persons partaking in the traditional form of passing, in which the person is passing to move up in the social racial hierarchy.

Mason literally moves uptown to Harlem and transforms into an urban sophisticate. His educational and personal progresses are also signs of his upward mobility, and his alias ‘Malik’ is another example of his attempts to move up in his black urban world. Using the persona of Malik, Mason portrays what Harper calls “the more fundamental authenticity of the streetwise black man who functions as [the street’s] primary symbol” (98). Defining what it means to be Black is quite debatable and often a topic of staunch disagreement. Brian Keith Jackson leaves the reader with little choice except to examine blackness and African American identity, forcing the reader to gain a clearer understanding of its complexities and nuances. Mason’s

subjectivity is initially defined by his awareness of his Otherness, being the clichéd black friend — “the black guy” — in his white social network (216). The internal tensions he experiences are a result of his inability to articulate his desire for racial acceptance and his sense of alienation from his family heritage: “I used to think maybe if I went to an all-black college things would have been different. Maybe an all-black experience would have been better” (216). Mason is captivated by the omnipresence of Harlem’s historic images and their cultural meaning; the images are representations of the African-American struggle and are symbols of African-American perseverance. For Mason, the very personal matters of ethnicity and socioeconomic class complicate how he understands and affirms himself, particularly in relation to other blacks. He partly feels that his privilege disqualifies him as culturally authentic. Debra Dickerson discusses the intraracial tensions of socioeconomic class and ethnic subjectivity, in *The End of Blackness*: “Proceeding from a middle-class awareness entails its own problematic. A befuddled self-consciousness permeates modern black magazines; they haven’t quite figured out how to be assimilated, successful, and black” (204). In *The Queen of Harlem*, this befuddled self-consciousness is taken a step further. Mason escapes to Harlem in order to explore how he could be assimilated, successful, African American, *and* male. The hostility Mason unwittingly provokes is a consequence of the class tensions among Harlemites: “Harlem itself was fractured by deep racial and class divisions” (Smith 180).

Deeply sensitive about his class, Mason is afflicted by the accusation that he is a pretender, a fraud. The notion that it is impossible to be an African American who is assimilated and successful is false. Nonetheless, the subject of ethnic authenticity or credibility — who is *really* Black and who is not — becomes part of this discussion. The aforementioned heckler scans Mason and decries, “Brother? This nigga ain’t no brother” (7). Although Mason is African American, the legitimacy of his gender and racial affiliation is questioned. Mason states, “the familiar seemed less painful and for me the familiar was white. I knew how to deal with that” (216). His initial reaction is to flee back to the familiarity of downtown. In addition to his racial rejection, Mason’s manhood is also challenged as he is physically cast off, shoved away and told he is “too soft” for Harlem’s ruggedness (7). Despite this confrontation, Mason considers himself as “still a man” (8), but he continues to carry the pain of the insult and its connotations. In their study, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson examine the ways in which Black manhood and masculinity are constructed and interpreted:

Cool pose shapes black male interactions by helping them express strength and toughness with strict discipline and conviction. Black males do not respect other black males who fail to display a strong image. . . . If a black man does not act in these prescribed ways, others are quick to ostracize and label him as corny, lame, or a square. (45)

The cool pose reinforces Christian’s argument about the performative aspects of ethnicity and gender. As a “black boy blending,” Mason’s image is interpreted as weak and powerless. Also, as the heckler comments, Mason’s sense of racial

awareness is as the contented black person among whites: “He look like one of them niggas they always have in an ad, peeping out from behind the white boys. Like he don’t care they got his ass stuck in the back. ‘Just so happy to be here, massa’ ” (7). Evidently, the heckler’s racial awareness is one that acknowledges the functions of power as they relate to race and class. He condemns Mason for lacking racial self-awareness as the stereotyped “happy darky” — one who is content with being controlled by the white power structure. Mason is physically confronted, and he is incapable of defending himself. Further, he is called “boy,” thus diminishing his masculinity and his power. The rejection is especially painful for Mason:

He said I was a black boy blending. No one had ever said anything like that to me so I never had to deal with it, you know? Yeah, I’ve seen the looks I get from some black people and I feel [my class] . . . but when you’re walking through Harlem and you hear that, it fucks with you. (216)

Until this confrontation, Mason never had to deal with having his gender and racial identity questioned or challenged. Operating under the assumption that his existence alone provided sufficient meaning and context, he avoided examining his racial and gender identities. Calling Mason a “black boy blending” is, in essence, calling him a wannabe, and specifically, someone who wants to be white and who has forgotten his racial identity, his blackness. “From blacks, the notion of ‘acting white’ is an existential inquiry” (Dickerson 207). For Mason, this inquiry requires the examination of his whole being, his whole Self, to gain a better understanding of (and more comfort about) who he really is. In sum, Mason’s subjectivity was in need of

significant reconsideration and renovation. Like the cool pose as assessed by Majors and Billson, Mason's need to pretend is a defense mechanism. Not only does he desire to be recognized as authentically Black and masculine, he also fears rejection for being himself. Majors and Billson point out, "Being called 'lame to the bone' or 'uncool' is the ultimate insult in black teenage vernacular. Being lame means to be socially incompetent, disabled, or crippled – a sissy" (83). Mason's class awareness is in conflict with his racial awareness. Because he is accustomed to being marginalized by whites, he tolerates and expects racial rejection. However, Mason is unprepared for being marginalized and ostracized by Blacks for his *class* because the question of racial authenticity is an uncomfortable subject for him. He says at one point, "there's something more painful about being rejected from what you believe to be your own" (216).

As with Joe's disenchantment with New York, part of Mason's pain is connected to his romanticized perception of New York City and of Harlem as a racial utopian community. His idea of New York City is saturated with commercial images of corporate development: "I still focused on the jewels of the city twinkling in the night. The Chrysler Building. The World Trade Center. The Empire State. This was the world I'd always imagined when thinking of New York" (82). Mason's perception of Harlem is also idealized, akin to Joe's initial perceptions of the city. Harlem is a community that has been portrayed in a mythical, exotic, and romantic

fashion. Much to the credit of artists like Cab Calloway, Langston Hughes, and many others, Harlem has been promoted as an African-American utopian, village paradise:

The concept of the city as a mosaic of villages combined with the utopian appeal of the Beloved Community produced a vision of the urban neighborhood as a potential homeland for black Americans, where they could share in a common life and contribute to American civilization through their symbolic culture. (Smith 179)

Harlem, in this sense, is an adequate reflection of Kimberly Smith's "Beloved Community." Claude McKay's observations of Harlem in *Harlem, U.S.A.* perceive a cultural foundation and homeland for African Americans in which they have a unique common bond. McKay's assessments lead him to conclude that Harlem's residents are

fundamentally different from the other minorities that have contributed to the making of America's composite. Usually language or religion is the basic bond of other minorities. But in Harlem it is that common yet strange and elusive chemical of nature called color. (30)

This basic bond of color (i.e. race), albeit superficial, is a legitimate foundation for initiating relationships; however, color alone (or any other social category for that matter) is insubstantial for maintaining any relationship of substance. In his naïveté, Mason makes the dangerous assumption that race was an instant qualifier. Upon encountering the guys, he was "hoping to strike up a conversation. Bond with the brothers" (6). He interprets their racial similarity as sufficient for establishing a bond. Mason's pained dismissal and his continued fear and anxiety of being rejected by African Americans are what compel his transformation into Malik. To the guys who harass Mason, their differences of socioeconomic background supersede any racial

ties; thus, Mason's alienation compels him to create a persona that reconciles his class difference and his false bravado.

To avoid further rejection and humiliation, Mason significantly modifies his demeanor. "Cool pose is a carefully crafted persona based on power and control over what the black male says and does — how he 'plays' his role" (Majors and Billson 28). Mason's cool pose persona, Malik, uses verbal and nonverbal styling — he speaks in the stereotyped vernacular, drinks malt liquor, dresses in Hip-Hop style clothing, fabricates having a dysfunctional family background, and locks his hair — he hopes these racial clichés will authenticate his blackness. Regarding the connection between Blackness and authenticity, Dickerson observes, "note the essentializations: 'reality' [or authenticity] for blacks is poverty and danger, blacks don't listen to classical music, blacks sling slang, blacks are poor, blacks must seek out other blacks, however inorganically" (211). Mason's masquerade is also unnatural, but his new name, appearance and clothes make him feel powerful and masculine. He believes his attire change moves him up the blackness scale, visually transforming him from the preppy Theo Huxtable into the Harlem homeboy. Kenneth Fox mentions the fashion habits of urbanites regardless of class in *Metropolitan America*, stating, "City people dressed to be seen in public, to make impressions, to appear fashionable" (134). Fox's assertion is evident in *Jazz*. Dorcas also mentions the importance of appearing urban and fashionable: "A badly dressed body is nobody at all" (Morrison 65). Like Dorcas, Mason feels empowered that he looks the part of

an urbanite; he steps out into the city streets and passes as a native. It is not that he acquires a new costume to don on occasion. Instead, the newly acquired garments become an extension of his new Self; they are a part of how Mason redesigns himself as a Harlemiter and homeboy. Therefore, Mason's makeover symbolizes an improvement in both his urban and his ethnic sensibilities. Algernon Austin analyzes concepts of blackness and racial identity in *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century*: Cultural stereotypes can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. People often try to conform to the stereotypes of their group. Black people who consciously try to "act black" as opposed to "acting white," so that they can be seen as racially authentic or normal (196). From the opening chapter, it is evident that Mason feels racially disconnected or alienated. In an attempt to feel connected to his blackness, Mason changes part of his appearance; he adopts a natural, ethnic coiffure: "all summer I had been trying to twist my hair, trying to attach myself to something associated with black heritage" (5). Despite his markedly brown skin and features, Mason masquerades to gain acceptance. His comfort zone is the environment in which he is the minority, the only African-American person, because his racial status validates his authenticity. In *Subjectivity*, Donald Hall argues:

We are widely led to believe that we have the freedom and ability to create and re-create our "selves" at will, if we *have* the will, but at the same time are presented with a suspiciously narrow range of options that will allow us to fit comfortably into society and our particular gendered, regional, ethnic, sexual subset of it. (1)

However, in an environment such as Harlem where he is one of many, Mason discovers that belonging to a race is not enough to validate the substance of one's ethnic identity. Mason's masquerade is a reflection of racial stereotypes that are recognized as authentic representations of blackness. Still, these stereotypes are problematic and often raise concerns about what it means to be African-American. Dickerson realizes that these essentializations are not only negative but they are also insubstantial. After being ridiculed for his diction and his outfit, Mason modifies his attire and his speech to pass as racially authentic. Marcyliena Morgan analyzes African-American English in her study, *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture*. Regarding varieties of African-American dialect and code-switching, Morgan asserts, "Similar cases can be found for dialect opposition in syntax, prosody and discourse. For example, one can accomplish dialect opposition by responding to the greeting *what's up* with AAE [African-American English] *whazzup!* and *whadup!?*" (74).

Mason's appropriation of the Harlem colloquial is an essential part of his ability to pass. Although the term *code-switching* usually connects to bilingualism, it is applicable regarding variations within a particular language. Mason's code-switching to "Wassup" is his deliberate attempt to speak the language of Blackness, thus articulating *his* Blackness. Further, in accordance to Christian's theory of racial performance, Mason's code-switching is a linguistic form of performance. Christian states, "In U.S. Latina/o communities, intentional use of *caló* and code-switching

gives language the performative function of generating or reinforcing community solidarity” (171). Mason’s code-switching is informed by his desire to fit in and to be accepted. As previously stated, because Mason does not speak the perceived acceptable language, he is chastised and immediately outcast. Once he is able to articulate the Harlem colloquial, he is acceptable because he emphasizes the need to “keep it real.” Morgan points out the importance of linguistic bonds within the African American community: “African American English is important to African American people. ...African American English is part and parcel of social, cultural and political survival” (7). Therefore, if we accept Morgan’s theory, Mason’s social survival is dependent on his ability to speak the language. In order to communicate effectively, Mason must speak and act according to cultural expectation. Henry Louis Gates states, “Blackness exists, but ‘only’ as a function of its signifiers” (316), and to signify his racial authenticity, Mason uses code-switching to the African-American English as a verbal representation of his blackness. Mason’s predicament is an interesting reconfiguration of W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* discusses the complexities of race, relating to the psyche and nationality. Although its 1903 release directly addresses the social and political conditions affecting African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century — like Joe Trace and the New Negro Movement — the specific matters of subjectivity and identity Du Bois mentions remain relevant. While Du Bois primarily refers to interracial relations, both Mason and Joe have intraracial conflicts. Thus, because of

the confrontation with the hecklers, Mason views himself through the eyes of African Americans of another socioeconomic class. What is especially interesting and ironic is that Mason and his family are members of the Talented Tenth, but he does not deem it as racially authentic. Instead, Mason aspires to disassociate himself from these social confines in order to ally himself with the lower classes.

Being a member of the affluent southern social class, Mason speaks a different language than those of his working-class Harlemites counterparts. His difficult linguistic transition to the Harlem African-American English dialect is connected to his unfamiliarity with Harlem in general, other than historic and romantic notions. While acclimating to Harlem, he notes, “Seeing all the black faces was like a needed shot, but it left a reaction. I was no longer the only black person around, but even in that I felt like a curious traveler, flipping through a guidebook for direction” (28). To effectively assimilate himself, Mason wisely frequents the local soul-food diner on 125th Street and observes people to gain insight about Harlem folk culture. In his *Publishers Weekly* article, reviewer Jeff Zaleski states, “Mason resides in Harlem, but he never really lives there. The representation of this rich, storied neighborhood is no more enlightening than the view out-of-towners have from a tour bus” (74). However, Zaleski does not provide specific criteria for what it means to “really live” in Harlem. Also, Zaleski seems to devalue the internal and personal relationship Mason has with Harlem. In contrast to Zaleski’s assertion, Glenn Townes considers the “heady backdrop of the neighborhood” (40) as a highlight feature of

Mason's narrative. Although Mason is initially enamored by the historical and cultural iconography of Harlem, his presence in Harlem forces him to acknowledge his own cultural sensibilities. Further, by forging relationships with members of the community, Mason becomes more adept at communicating with them. In Chapter 24, Mason's assimilation is evidenced by his casual and pleasant interaction with the people at the same diner. He is no longer the observant outsider within Harlem; instead, he becomes a community member or insider. Despite the artifice, Mason's new linguistic ability is a sign of progress because it brings him closer to understanding his own Black identity. His challenge, like Joe's, is that he is not entirely sure what his individuality is and how best to express it.

Through his attempts to pass for Black, pass for working class, and pass for male, Mason gains a better understanding of his subjectivity. Mason also attempts to find his place in the world and within the African-American community. In the opening chapter of *The Queen of Harlem*, Realtor Diane Turner says to an older and wiser Mason, "Harlem is definitely the place to be" (3), and Harlem also becomes Mason's place to be who he is. Similarly, Joe's ability to find his voice stems from his newly discovered subjectivity. Hakutani states, "subjectivity, once achieved, is no longer a passive state of mind" (92). If reinventing one's self is what New York City is all about, then, for Joe and Mason, this is especially relevant and true. For both Joe and Mason, Harlem's mythical and iconic status is a lure for their northern migrations. Townes comments in his review that *The Queen of Harlem* is about "a

young man's less than meteoric jaunt from a privileged, albeit snooty world of refined Southern black culture to the down-home and often fast-paced world of Harlem" (39). However, Mason's experience is more substantive than Townes' reductive assessment. It is not until Mason has a day of reckoning with his mother that he gains a clearer understanding of himself. "The danger intrinsic to this view of identity as drag, as ongoing performance and impersonation, is its implication that ethnic difference has no social or historical foundation" (Christian 17). Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that ethnic difference requires a social or historical foundation with substance. Mason's masquerade lacks a solid foundation upon which to construct his new Self, which is why he is eventually exposed. While Karen Christian claims, "Ethnicity is thus located in the contested territory where past, present, and future converge" (15), in addition, subjectivity is located within this territorial convergence. In the end, *Jazz* and *The Queen of Harlem* permit fusion and harmony. For Joe, this convergence occurs when he moves to Harlem. "His presence is only understood, only exists, in terms of the play between it and his absent parents, his absent past, and therefore his absent self" (Jackson 161). Joe's past was caught in the tangles of his parents' desertion, his present was being a husband to a fatherless woman who looked to him to fill the void, and his future is fused with Harlem and Dorcas. Mason's past also traps him; it is not until he learns the truth of his parents' and grandmother's racial struggles that he is able to be freed of his racial and class burdens and confront his racial views of himself. Mason is tired of being the "only

one” who is forced to carry the burden of race in his white world. Instead, his mother informs him that he is the progeny of a legacy of social and economic struggle which provides the historical context — a tangible and solid foundation for his new subjectivity.

Once he learns this new information, Mason gains comfort with and confidence about his Selfhood. Similar to Mason’s preoccupation with his transition into adulthood, in *Jazz*, there is a “concern with what it means to be ‘grown’ ” (Ferguson 188). By confronting this mishmash of entities, Joe and Mason are able to establish a subjectivity that is free of shame and sorrow. “Identity is thus an ongoing narrative that can never be outside representation” (Christian 9). In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison explores the complexities of African-American identity. She states in an interview, “What is a black person? It seems to be that there are so many things that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an African-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions” (Rushdie 61). Jackson also explores in *The Queen of Harlem* the various meanings of African-American identity. As a walking contradiction, Mason is a character who is forced to choose between his imagined life as a working-class homeboy and his real life as a person of privilege.

Joe and Mason use temporary identities to resolve their struggles with their manhood, modernity and their ethnic subjectivity. In order to achieve their subjectivity, their future, Joe and Mason confront their pasts. “Choosing a subject is not the sole, definitive act in making or becoming a ‘self;’ becoming the reciprocating

object of someone else's choice is the other necessary connection that offers meaning or identity" (Ferguson 181). In the case of Joe and Mason, each reciprocates with a female character — Joe with Dorcas and Mason with Carmen. By relocating northward and city-ward to Harlem, Joe and Mason embark on journeys to discover their identities and find their place in the world. In her study, Smith illustrates the importance of place for African Americans:

advocates of a "sense of place" hope that a sensitivity to the dynamics and beauty of the local landscape will result in a more meaningful relationship with nature, a better sense of community, and a richer cultural life.

. . . this notion of a "sense of place" has its roots in the literary realism that also had a strong influence on black progressivism. Accordingly, both black progressives and bioregionalists emphasize the realist principle that cultural vitality rests on maintaining a close connection of some sort between nature and art. Nevertheless, the black tradition poses a challenge to the advocates of a "sense of place." (197)

Despite their rural southern ancestry, Joe and Mason find their places in Harlem. Mason's acquaintance states, "we all have a trail that leads back to the South" (79); Malik's trail leads him to discover a critical part of his heritage, and, similarly, Joe is also following a trail to escape his mother and his past. Joe finds in Dorcas a part of himself that he both despises and adores, and Mason finds in Malik the ability to understand and accept his past while embracing his future. Their parallel "quick fixes" put each of them in a fix until they are able to confront the truths and meanings of their lives. Both of them learn their idealist racial perspectives are illusory, and through their struggles, they learn the real truths of themselves. Mason surmises,

“Jazz is about the moment” (Jackson 50), but as evidenced in both Mason’s and Joe’s narratives, the moment may end, but the wisdom acquired through their experiences have greater endurance. Once Joe and Mason achieve their upward mobility in the moment of subjectivity awareness, they are able to claim their respective spaces and be firmly rooted in them while acting and functioning as men.

CHAPTER 3
PARADISE, LOST:
DEFERRED DREAMS, MEGALOPOLITAN MELANCHOLY AND
THE STRUGGLE WITH MODERNITY IN
THE HIT AND DADDY WAS A NUMBER RUNNER

When a cold wind comes, it lives in New York City,
And the street's no place to be but there you are.
So you try hard or you die hard,
No one really gives a good damn.
You try hard, and you die hard; no one gives a damn.
Here's a dime boy give me a shine, boy.
Down and out in New York City.
Ain't nowhere to be, but where can you go,
When you're down and out in New York City? . . .
Gonna' get myself together in the morning,
Gonna' leave it all like one bad dream.
James Brown, "Down and Out in New York City"

The previous chapter addresses the allure of New York City and Harlem as places filled with opportunities. Quite the opposite, James Brown's lyrics highlight the desperate situation of living in Harlem, in which pimps and drug dealers seem to be the only ones who have access to money and power. Although images of New York City portray a glamorous setting, there also exists ugliness and grime underneath the facade. As Brown laments, "no one gives a damn" about the sufferings of others; city life is quite unforgiving. While New York's skyscrapers metaphorically suggest limitless potential for success, this sense of infinite possibility

is paradoxical and false. In *Urban Intersections*, Sidney H. Bremer uses the term “skyscraper alienation” to describe the disconnection in the relationship between the urban subject and his/her urban environs (2). Despite the glittering allure of the skyscrapers, not everyone will achieve great heights of success; the structure is designed to keep few from reaching the top. In similar fashion, the design and premise of the American capitalist system is to exploit the underclasses, specifically those people marginalized by mainstream society. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng addresses this paradox: “American melancholia is particularly acute because America is *founded* on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over” (10). From an historical perspective, racial segregation perpetuated a system of marginalization. W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson discuss and analyze racial marginalization in their respective urban studies — *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *The Negro in Chicago* (1922). A fundamental ideology of the American capitalist design is to exploit the lower classes for benefit of the wealthy. The United States was built on a caste system in which blacks were the underclass, and as such, and therefore, while cities represented a possibility of achieving a better life, many soon learned that was not possible. Brown expresses that the hardships are especially plentiful in the pitiless Harlem streets — 125th Street and 8th Avenue. As Brown muses in the song, one “better quit trying to be hip and get on down” (meaning to try hard or be realistic) in order to survive. Either one keeps pace in the race, or one is left by the wayside and passed. “The poor and the

prostituted are the city's most pathetic victims" for whom there is no escape (Bremer 122). The protagonists of Julian Mayfield's *The Hit* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, Hubert Cooley and Francie Coffin, respectively, are also trapped in their miserable Harlem environment.

In the city, the struggle and competition for survival is fierce and without resources, city living will be a meager existence that leaves many people melancholic, angry and disappointed. Chen defines melancholia as "pathological; it is interminable in nature and refuses substitution (that is, the melancholic cannot 'get over' loss" (8). Urban discontentment is a popular topic in various fields, such as music and literature, and the ugliness and unattractive characteristics of the urban city environment is often the focus. In her critique of Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Joan Zlotnick says West's novel "convey[s] a sense of urban despair . . . [and] that city life itself is one cause of the angst experienced by modern man" (160). *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* also convey this urban despair; Hubert and Francie are disenchanting, melancholic characters whose dreams are destroyed. Langston Hughes' "Harlem [2]" proposes a legitimate question about life after the pitfall, asking, "What happens to a dream deferred?" (426). Hughes' question is perceptive, especially in relation to modernity and identity presented in both novels *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. In these novels, Harlem is a wasteland despoiled by the social maladies of race, social class and/or gender.

Regarding social marginalization, my study demonstrates that *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* are modern Harlem narratives whose protagonists are trapped in tragic, desperate situations. In *The New Urban Sociology*, Mark Gottdeiner and Ray Hutchison claim:

The United States has a serious racial problem that is compounded by class. The most extreme effects have been felt by African Americans . . . Through the institutions of white society, African Americans have been systematically discriminated against so that their social mobility has been severely constrained. (202)

Hubert's and Francie's narratives highlight disappointment and disenchantment with Harlem life. In his book *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* James de Jongh posits, "Harlem has remained modernity's preeminent popular image of black racial being" (2), but Hubert and Francie are alienated and isolated modern subjects who struggle against this racial image. Their identity conflicts as "black racial beings" and their personal struggles are connected to their deferred dreams and desires; their wasted and lost hopes thrust them into a melancholic state from which they never recover. In this sense, Harlem is not a welcoming home; it is a repository for deferred dreams and desires, for frustrations and failures. Hubert's and Francie's lives are characterized by depression and despair.

Underscoring the sources of the characters' misfortunes, the titles *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* refer to gambling and the possibility of fortune. Ironically, for Hubert and Francie, circumstance and chance disrupt their desires for a better life. Illegal gambling in the form of playing the numbers is the essential focus

for both characters' lives; while Hubert is the regular numbers player in *The Hit*, Francie's father is the perpetrator in Meriwether's aptly named novel. In addition, Francie helps her father by collecting bets during her school lunch break. In his essay, "New York: Utopia Deferred," George S. Schuyler comments on gambling and Harlem culture: "the chief pastime of Harlem seems to be playing the numbers. . . . Few win, and seldom" (204). Hubert's and Francie's participation in this illegal activity further marginalizes them and places them on the social fringe with a Harlem world that is neglected and ignored.

The Harlem in *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* is not the romanticized image of the Harlem Renaissance. From the early 1900s onward, Harlem was the muse for many creative works in the genres of music, literature, the visual arts, theatre and dance. Since Harlem's establishment as an African-American community by the turn of the century, its lure has inspired people to write about it and its people. "By 1910 many of the city's prominent blacks were living in Harlem, and by the twenties practically all black institutions in the city had moved their headquarters there" (Zlotnick 132). However, Hubert's Harlem is one in which many of these headquarters are gone, the prominence has faded and what remains is a mundane existence. Estelle W. Taylor recognizes Harlem's stimulation for writers:

[Mayfield] used Harlem as the vantage point from which to write about the black condition and the black experience. [Mayfield's] Harlem lies somewhere between the decadent and tragic ghetto of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of Gods* (1902) and Ann Petry's *The*

Street (1946), the haven of Rudolph Fisher's "City of Refuge" (1925) and the paradise of Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926). (174)

Mayfield writes about Harlem at a time when the literary imagination of it is both accepted and rejected; people are enthusiastic about Harlem's potential as a community of progress, but others are quite jaded because of the decline in economic and social conditions. Regarding the potential of achieving community in an urban environment, Smith notes, "black intellectuals in the 1920s remained fairly optimistic about the possibilities of urban community" (173). Because of Harlem's new status as an African-American cultural center, many writers found inspiration being part of a community that featured various new creative outlets. The literature was often a reflection of the era and Harlem continued to function as a muse. Hubert has no affinity for Harlem or its people; he is uninspired by Harlem, except for his desire to flee it.

Hubert Cooley's Harlem is set in 1953. As Taylor states, this Harlem setting is characterized as something that exists between the desirable and the undesirable. Hubert's Harlem experience is one full of deferred dreams of success and wealth. Fifty years old and frustrated, Hubert's many failures to achieve financial security and personal happiness prompt his disappointment with his life in Harlem. Like the image in Hughes' poem, Hubert's disdain for Harlem "fester[s] like a sore — and then run[s]" (426). The epitome of a malcontent, Hubert hates just about everything: he hates his race, his family life, his poverty and he hates living in Harlem. From the

beginning of the novel, it is clear that Hubert Cooley is a perpetually malcontent; his observations of others and his grandiose view of himself indicate that he is disconnected from the community of his neighborhood. He is unhappy with everyone except for himself and Sister Clarisse, whom he considers to be sexy, beautiful and worthy of his companionship (80). By winning the local lottery — the numbers — Hubert plots to escape Harlem and begin life anew in San Francisco. In keeping with the clichéd mantra “Go West, young man,” San Francisco is Hubert’s intended

Promised Land:

His thoughts turned to San Francisco, where he was going if he ever won at the numbers. Once someone had told him that Negroes had very good opportunities in the West. Some of them had their own businesses and all of them were industrious because that was the kind of city ‘Frisco was — a place where willingness to work was rewarded. The very thought of himself on the West Coast made him feel good. (6-7)

Because of his monomania, Hubert convinces himself that Harlem is to blame for his failures, and, therefore, relocating will assure his success. As Hubert says to himself, musing aloud, “It’s no good around here. You never get a chance to do any living. Babies are born here and old folks die here, but in between there ain’t no living” (152). Hubert’s melancholia specifically relates to being a modern subject who observes the world he sees around him, and he desires to participate fully in its offerings. He thinks, “I don’t believe I was born to spend my whole life on this street or any street in Harlem. I’ve wanted to be too many grand and wonderful things to find out in the end that this was all I was ever meant to be” (153). His sense of failure

and loss consumes him. “The melancholic eats the lost object — feeds on it, as it were” (Cheng 8). The bitter resignation that Hubert has towards Harlem and its inhabitants he also directs at himself. For Hubert, there has to be a place more spectacular and exciting than Harlem, and he deserves to be there. Hubert’s anxiety to relocate is a reflection of his modernity. Marshall Brennan refers to modernity in New York City as one in which “no neighborhood or environment can be anything more than a stage along life’s way, a launching pad for higher flights and wider orbits than your own” (460). As modern subjects who expect and facilitate change, residents of urban ethnic neighborhoods should view their neighborhoods as transitional spaces, places to reside temporarily until it is time to move onward and upward.

In this sense, Hubert intends Harlem to be his transitional space, but he is stuck there. James Brown asks, Harlem “ain’t nowhere to be, but where can you go?” because there is no other option available. Embittered by and disenchanted with the many misfortunes he has experienced, Hubert believes his only chance at happiness is to flee Harlem and its memories, saying as his final lament, “I gave this street too much precious time. Gave it my youth, gave it my strength. Ain’t gonna give it no more” (154). What Hubert is willing to give, however, is his last few dollars to the numbers racket. Hubert’s sense of loss directly correlates to Cheng’s claims that the melancholic ego is created because “the subject sustains itself through the ghostly emptiness of a lost other” (10). In essence, Hubert is trying to reclaim his lost

imagined Self. To accomplish this, his ritual habit of illegal gambling is his method of recourse.

Although the odds of winning are unfavorable, the possibility (no matter how small) of a big payoff keeps people committed to playing the numbers. *New York Times* writer Gibert Millstein explains the allure of playing the numbers: “For any amount, from a cent upward — if he “hits” — a bettor may get returns of 600 to 1 on his number . . . and achieve the style of living to which he would like to become accustomed” (4). Hughes asks does the deferred dream “crust and sugar over —like a syrupy sweet?” (426). For the confirmed numbers player, there is a bitter-sweetness that exists in the *possibility* of hitting the jackpot. The emotional cycle of being hopeful and disappointed affects the numbers player and leaves a scar either because he has not won or because he still desires more winnings. In an ironic twist, Hubert’s fortune of having his numbers hit and winning the jackpot for more than \$4000 leads to his continued misfortune because the amount is too high for the numbers runner to pay. Still in denial, Hubert waits in disbelief, and is left sitting on the stoop of his Harlem home.

Unlike a government-sponsored lottery, the numbers game represents social deviance; it is illegal and it is unstable. According to J. Welfred Holmes, gambling is an addiction, “the confirmed numbers player is really just as sick as the habitual drunkard or the drug addict” (236). Hubert’s gambling addiction alienates him from Harlem and from his family, whom he views as obstacles in his escape plan.

Although he is aware of the risks involved with playing the numbers, His intense desire for wealth and departure from Harlem still lures him. His desire blinds him to the hazards and risks of partaking in the illegal business of playing the numbers, despite its many insecurities and uncertainties. Charlotte Crawford Watkins asserts, “In [*The Hit*], Harlem is an image of reality” (163) in which the depictions of Harlem’s communities and people are accurate and substantial. The novel’s characters have varied lives of want and of excess, and Hubert’s life is that of the former. But for Hubert, Harlem’s gritty image disrupts his fantasy and is, therefore, unwelcome. Unfortunately, Hubert does not recognize his delusion. Instead, his gambling addiction feeds his fantasies and he “continues [to be] the prisoner of his dreams” (Watkins 163). Despite his failures, Hubert’s hopefulness compels him to keep playing the numbers. Regarding superstition and playing the numbers, George J. McCall states that there are actually two games being played:

One of the games involves man against chance for cash payoffs, with other men involved in holding the pot, recording the bets, and allocating the money. The other game pits man . . . against the supernatural [fate, luck, etc.], for a wide variety of payoffs. (369)

Hubert is playing both of these games. Not only is he deeply involved with the numbers racket, but he also challenges God and claims God owes him for his misfortunes.

Hubert is a dreamer, and to him, “the numbers racket [represents] a symbol of that most solid and persistent of all American phenomena — the dream” (Watkins

163). In addition, for Hubert, this dream has a double meaning. His literal dream tells him what number to play and his figurative dream is to assimilate into mainstream society. Although he is in New York City, he does not have full access to it. For Hubert, Harlem is not the city of dreams; instead, it is the image of his nightmares. Regarding the frustration of deferred dreams, Phillip M. Richards asks in the Foreword to the novel, “How does one find fulfillment when one is obstructed from the American promise of success?” (viii). The obstructions are manifested in institutional biases, such as laws, policies and social practices. In *Achieving Blackness*, Algernon Austin also recognizes the pervasiveness of institutional racism as a systematic obstructive force:

Racial structures refer to the practices of racial discrimination, racial organizations, and racial institutions. Racial structures can refer to social structures which are explicitly racial . . . or to social structures which are racialized because, while not overtly racial, they have underlying racial logics and discriminatory effects. Racial inequality is often the direct result of the racial structures in a society. (18)

The racial structures Austin refers to shed more light on Cheng’s perspective about melancholia and race. The racial inequality and the obstructions that Austin and Richards reference are what cause Hubert’s “psychical imprints of racial grief” that manifest in his disillusionment, his despair and his disgust with Harlem (Cheng 6).

The identity Hubert ascribes to himself is one that is in direct conflict with whom he actually is. Hubert views himself as a person who is industrious, refined, intelligent, well-mannered — one deserving of a comfortable and prosperous life;

however, his actual life is one rife with struggles and disappointments. Hubert's apparent identity conflict is in resistance to the stereotypes and conventions ascribed to his race. What he really desires to escape, then, is his *blackness* — what it signifies and its implications (both social and economic). Hubert's racial categorization is apparent, but he does not identify with African Americans. According to Austin, the matter of determining racial identity is complicated because of its sociological, psychological and cultural factors: "Blackness is about meanings and definitions, and about social practices and social identities informed by those ideas" (19). Hubert's self-rejection further alienates him and it isolates him from himself. Further, Harlem is an iconic representation of blackness and Hubert's immobility *forces* him to associate with blackness and Harlem. De Jongh notes that Harlem of the 1950s is declining; just as "younger black poets began to evoke the desperate image of the decaying Harlem ghetto as an emblem of racial oppression and injustice" (113), African-American fiction writers such as Mayfield also had this agenda. Harlem's decline, then, also functions as a reflection of Hubert's decline. Therefore, the appropriate answer to Richards' question must acknowledge that Hubert cannot find fulfillment until he accepts his reality and his Self.

Hubert's contempt for and rejection of his race are manifested in his desires and dreams of a better (and possibly whiter) life. Although Hubert never openly states his dissatisfaction with being Black, he makes it clear that he would prefer another reality — one where his race does not put him at a disadvantage. While walking

around Central Park, Hubert observes Latinos who are fairer in complexion than he is. He observes, “many of them seemed light-complexioned enough to live anywhere they wished. If [he] had been blessed with fairer skin he would have crossed the color line and never returned” (6). Is it possible that by crossing the color line, Hubert would be free from race-related stresses? His desire for disassociation with Blacks suggests more than simplified self-hate. Cheng explores this connection between race identity and melancholia:

Both essentializing and denying the deep psychological impact of discrimination are equally troubling. There are still deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be. This does *not* at all mean that the minority subject does not develop other relations to that injunctive ideal which can be self-affirming or sustaining but rather that a painful negotiation must be undertaken, at some point if not continually, with the demands of that social ideality, the reality of that always-insisted-on difference. (6-7)

Hubert’s hypothetical solution of passing or crossing the color line does not resolve his issue. Even if Hubert assimilated into white society, according to Cheng’s argument, it is likely that his pains will still linger; further, he would always remain aware of his charade. Hubert is obsessively self-conscious about his racial identity. Perhaps, what Hubert really rejects is the *social stigma* associated with being Black; he does not reject his race, but the consequences of it. The “painful negotiation” of Hubert’s racial desires is complicated by his experiences as a racialized subject — a Black man. He believes those with fairer skin are blessed; therefore, his blackness must be a curse. Also, living in Harlem is a painful reminder of Hubert’s inability to

assimilate into what he views as mainstream society, the world downtown. Although Hubert's private desire is to be white, the whiter life Hubert openly desires is a blank slate. Hubert imagines that out West, his historical context will be erased, thus allowing him to recreate his identity and his future. Jonathan Friedman examines the many challenges about recreating identity in *Cultural Identity and Global Process* and he posits:

The history of Western expansion is littered with examples of the combined destruction of cultural identity and its psychological aftermath. But the construction or reconstruction of identity is just as violent and dangerous a process for all involved. We have seen here that the emergence of cultural identity implies the fragmentation of a larger unity and is always experienced as a threat. It is often criminalized and often punished. (142)

Is it plausible or possible to recreate one's identity? The repercussion for reconstructing Hubert's identity is that unless he can become part of the hegemony, he will still be marginalized and likely rejected for disrupting the paradigm.

While redefining one's identity is one way to disrupt the paradigm of social boundaries, a more apparent method is to transgress the geographic boundaries used to designate privilege and power. In New York City, Central Park is one such geographic boundary. Hubert loiters in the ritzy hotel district of Central Park South, believing he belongs there, and is arrested for trespassing. Assuming the role of voyeur, Hubert's desire prompts his instant admiration of the wealthy white couple. His melancholia, perhaps, is the basis of his desire for racial and, thus, economic assimilation. Acquiring the cultural capital of race, specifically whiteness and wealth,

is another unattainable goal. Mayfield describes the hotels as “high glass fortresses that guard Manhattan’s sparkling midtown district” (10), but it is unclear who the hotels are deterring and what they are protecting. In *The Park and the People*, Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackman comment that Central Park South features “some of the most expensive hotels in the world” (514) thus operating to exclude certain classes of people. Therefore, Hubert’s arrest indicates that he (and what he represents) is the trespasser; it is apparent that his place is on the outside, looking in.

Hubert’s conflict with the police officer was his social experiment to see whether he was welcome in the exclusive district of Central Park South. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss asserts, “Space operates as one of the chief signifiers of racial difference here: under colonial rule, freedom of movement (psychical and social) becomes a white prerogative” (143). Nonetheless, in Hubert’s post-colonial New York City, he lacks freedom of movement. Although he verbally asserts his right as a citizen to sit on a public park bench, the police officer arrests Hubert to remind him of his vulnerability and his powerless status, and he addresses Herbert as “Pop” and “boy” (12-13), thus reminding Hubert of his already-experienced psychical trauma. Although his racial status categorizes him as an Other, Hubert’s perpetual desire is to be part of the mainstream. “Racial ideals continue to drive those most oppressed by [them]” (Cheng 6) and Hubert is no exception. Driven by his dreams and fantasies, Hubert “had but one obsession, and that was to leave family, home, and Harlem as far behind as possible” with the hopes of escaping his

condition of being both Black and poor (8). His melancholia manifests itself as a complex or multi-dimensional instance of race denial and ethnic subjectivity; he cannot deny his Blackness, but he resents it. The profound, lasting effects of institutional racism cause Hubert critical, permanent damage. In *Subjectivity*, Nick Mansfield comments about institutional racism: "In fact, the dominant and most typical racism of the twentieth century has been government policy, drawing on the authority of race science positioned not at the margins, but in the mainstream of Western thought" (118). Institutional racism is a form of symbolic violence that causes psychological trauma to its victims; they are constantly aware of their vulnerability and their powerlessness, while the perpetrators are reassured of their superior status in the social hierarchy. Hubert is so afflicted that he cannot reconcile the reality of his situation with himself; his desire is the only thing that is real to him. Although there is only one representation of racial harassment in *The Hit*, it is evident that Hubert's rationale and psychology are the result of experiences that negatively affected his perception of his ethnic subjectivity. In "Urbanism as a Way of Life," Louis Wirth writes about the complexity and dynamism of the sociological and psychological aspects of being urban. Regarding the urbanite's self-development, Wirth posits,

It is largely through the activities of the voluntary groups, be their objectives economic, political, educational, religious, recreational, or cultural, that the urbanite expresses and develops his personality, acquires status, and is able to carry on the round of activities that constitute his life career. (82)

Hubert is withdrawn from all aspects of Harlem society, including the social network of numbers players; his social disconnections reflect his alienation and loneliness. In addition, David Harvey proposes in *The Urban Experience* that there is a connection between financial status and consciousness: “The urbanization of consciousness has to be understood in relation to the urbanization of capital” (231). Hubert’s megalopolitan consciousness compels him to desire an identity that material wealth validates. His creation of an alternate reality is tied to his melancholia and the psychical trauma as an ethnic figure and subject; his desire continuously compels him to recognize and reject who he is in exchange for who he aspires to be. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the black man is “forever in combat with his own image” (qtd. in Fuss 143). The results of Hubert’s internalized combat are the irreconcilable differences that manifest in self-aggrandizement and self-hate.

For African-American like Hubert, Harlem is their home by force and not by choice; their residential options are limited because of their race and their class. Harlem is the designated residential space for those who are ignored and exploited by mainstream society; they lack resources and infrastructural support to support life in Harlem or to move elsewhere. Hubert believes that moving to the perceived greener pastures of San Francisco will provide him with freedom of social and economic movement.

The greener pastures are what Ralph Ellison discusses in his 1966 essay “The Crisis of Optimism.” According to Ellison, being in the North, particularly in a neighborhood like Harlem, is frustrating and disappointing because the opportunities expected to be available in the city do not exist for Blacks. For Ellison, social differences influence Northern and Southern racial relations:

. . . there is a basic difference between what has happened in the South, to the Southern Negro, and what has happened to people living in slums such as Harlem. . . . in Macon County, Alabama, where I attended school, I knew exactly where I could go and where I could not go . . . In the North, Southern tradition breaks down. You get to Harlem. You have expected a great deal of freedom that does not exist. Or when it does exist, you haven’t been taught how to achieve it. (8-9)

As Ellison argues, race continues to marginalize and quarantine Blacks from Manhattan’s mainstream, keeping them at bay (and confined) within Harlem’s boundaries. Hubert’s dream of acquiring instant wealth “turns into a nightmare, and, he is left a defeated, hopeless, broken “old” man” (Taylor 176). This entrapment is the part of the melancholic psychological trauma that Hubert experiences. In contrast to the cliché, Hubert has a will, but he does not have a way.

Neither does Francie Coffin have a way out of her situation. *Daddy Was a Number Runner* is Francie’s Harlem narrative that highlights megalopolitan melancholy — her disappointment and disenchantment with Harlem life. Francie’s story is a “coming of age” tale, in which a young adolescent girl matures through various stages of life’s experiences. In *Writing the Subject: Bildung and the African American Text*, Gunilla Theander Kester examines how the “coming of age” tale of

maturation functions within African-American literature. The European classical concept of *Bildungsroman*, Kester argues, “comes with a historical baggage of associations to positivism, white male superiority, and a sense of the self as a unified entity” (7). On the other hand, the “African American narrative of *Bildung* attempts to create a space for the subject of history in the world thus to enable and empower the African American double subject in the world and history” (Kester 5). The term *Bildungsroman* privileges whiteness and, in the context she describes, it is a misnomer. For a narrative like Francie’s, the concept of *Bildungsroman* is an unsuitable one to apply in African-American literature:

This doubleness of the African American narrative of *Bildung* must be distinguished from the dialectic element within the German *Bildungsroman*. . . . The dissolution of contradiction at the end of the classical genre stands in stark contrast to the African American narrative of *Bildung* in which the maturing subject learns to recognize his or her double identity and to realize that, in a sense, a divided subject has no identity. Such a double subject cannot, like the classical protagonist, be both origin and *telos* of the story and of the world it describes. (Kester 9-10)

While there are aspects of Kester’s analysis that are valid, there are also points for discussion that are questionable. Kester post-structuralist assertion claims the African-American subject is fragmented, irretrievably torn by irreconcilable differences. On the contrary, the African-American subject has a unified and cohesive identity that is *hybridized*, not riven by contending forces. Francie’s disenchantment is a crucial part of her narrative of *Bildung* and her emotional development further illustrates her conflict and struggle with modernity, but she is not fragmented. “The

African American narrative of *Bildung* . . . describes the relationship between an individual and his or her world” (Kester 5). Francie’s subjectivity is formed by and is a reflection of her society — Harlem during the Great Depression.

Francie is the modern character whose impoverished urban environment informs her sense of identity as an ethnic subject. Sociologist James Q. Wilson observes in “The Urban Unease” that in an urban environment, “Negroes [of all classes] are squeezed into close proximity, on top of one another” (377). Harlem, then, is a community that is overflowing with people who are living in very cramped, substandard conditions. In fact, within the narrative, Harlem is Francie’s primary antagonist. Francie’s struggle is to break free from the constraints of the poverty plaguing her neighborhood and her family. Meriwether writes from the interior of the Coffins’s rat-infested tenement apartment and the inner-workings of Francie’s mind. In “Race, Gender and Space: Louise Meriwether’s Harlem in *Daddy Was a Number Runner*,” Corinne Duboin says Meriwether’s writing style is “inclined to call attention to her characters and show how their predicament affects their perceptions of, and reaction to, the urban environment in which they live” (29). The novel opens with Francie’s sensory description of her neighborhood:

I raced down the stairs, holding my breath. Lord, but this hallway was funky, all of those Harlem smells bumping together. Garbage rotting in the dumbwaiter mingled with the smell of frying fish. Some drunk had vomited wine in one corner and peed in another, and a foulness oozing up from the basement meant a dead rat was down there somewhere.

The air outside wasn't much better . . . The curbs were lined with garbage cans overflowing into the gutters, and a droopy horse pulling a vegetable wagon down the avenue had just deposited a steaming pile of manure in the middle of the street. (14)

In addition to the dysfunctional violence of riots, gang fights and police brutality that litter her neighborhood streets, Francie refers to Harlem as one big garbage heap (14). Although Francie only occasionally provides details of the setting, Harlem is cast in a predominant, leading role. Duboin posits, "Far from being a mere backdrop, the Harlem setting is a key element in the narrative" (40). There are other instances in which Francie mentions Harlem as being overcrowded and dirty. Francie's neighborhood is an area where people are desperately struggling; their homes are so inhospitable, people constantly spill out onto the street and make it difficult for her to stroll on the sidewalk. "Each and every detail of Francie's inventory is a signifier that hints at the misery of her family and sheds light on their intolerable, unhealthy living conditions" (Duboin 29). Francie's perception of and reaction to her urban environment is saturated with negative emotions disappointment and despair. As night falls on her neighborhood, she observes, "darkness would settle over the avenue, hiding some of its filth, but not all" (188). She is melancholic because she is unable to change her situation; she is subjugated by Harlem and its many dysfunctional characteristics.

Set in 1934, during the Depression, Francie's Harlem life of extreme deprivation and desperation is quite different from her life of comfort in Brooklyn,

from whence the family moved. She is aware of the decline in her quality of life and she resents it. Her family's arrival in Harlem, then, suggests their loss of promise and potential. While Brooklyn represents stability and security, Harlem represents instability and insecurity. When reflecting on her life in Brooklyn, she becomes nostalgic, musing,

things were real nice there in Brooklyn. We had a telephone and one of those radios with earplugs and we would listen to it every evening and have a good time together and Mother didn't work and was always at home. But after we moved to Harlem we seemed to get poorer and poorer. (99)

Francie's desire to move back to Brooklyn, or away from Harlem, is deferred. Her mother's assertion that they will move one day is an empty, fruitless one; they have neither the means nor the vision to relocate from their Fifth Avenue tenement home. As previously stated, Francie provides something akin to a walking tour of her neighborhood, which makes the setting more vivid. "Meriwether focuses exclusively and repeatedly on somewhat repulsive details of waste — garbage, droppings — which thus become the unifying elements of the setting, more particularly collective places — indoors and outdoors" (Duboin 28). Throughout the novel, it is apparent that Harlem has declined from its past glory as a golden city.

Meriwether's accurate portrayal of Harlem during the Great Depression adds to the authenticity of Francie's experience. Nellie McKay cites the use of historical references as part of a legitimate portrayal of Black life in Harlem during the Great Depression. McKay assesses the novel as "a well-crafted work of art that captures the

essence of a historical time and place in the experiences of black people” (230). As a work of realistic fiction, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* features many controversial issues regarding sexuality (prostitution, marital affairs and harassment), poverty, violence (fighting, rape, riots, police brutality and murder) and other acts of social deviance, such as illegal gambling. “Meriwether’s graphic reconstruction of Harlem is more than the drawing of a grid map where real and fictional space merge; it implies the weaving of a social fabric in the first place” (Duboin 29). Francie’s Harlem neighborhood is one laden with deviance, decay and desolation. It is a Harlem where both people and things are for sale, but very few can afford to purchase according to their desires. Francie’s desire for a better life is disrupted by circumstance and chance. The title relates to the theme of gambling and in his study, “Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto — Negro New York, 1890-1930,” Gilbert Osofsky mentions, “the poorest of the poor sought instant riches through the numbers racket. No sum was too small to bet – starting with pennies. . . . The odds were thousands to one against success, yet the smallest hope for a richer life was better than none” (362).

Francie and her father are often gambling and taking risks. Her father plays poker and when he loses his job running the numbers, he becomes a habitual player; meanwhile, Francie often takes risks, allowing her sexuality to be exploited for pay. The tropes of gambling and risk-taking reflect the hopefulness of the players and the hopelessness of their situations. The games are designed for people to lose, but they

play anyway. Janelle Collins discusses the gambling addiction within the novel: “playing the numbers functions as a metaphor for the instability of black economic life” (50). Francie’s situation transcends economics. Whether she is being repeatedly assaulted and/or insulted by her friends, being subjected to sexual advances, being abandoned by her brother James and her father or being admonished by her brother Sterling, Francie is made vulnerable by the emotional instability of people she knows and loves. Furthermore, her family’s reliance on the welfare system is equally unstable, and the Coffins are repeatedly accepted and later denied assistance. Despite their many efforts, “none of the sacrifices the Coffin family makes gives them any stability” (Collins 56). Francie’s story is the embodiment of a tragic figure in a tragic situation. Although Paule Marshall describes Francie as “a remarkable heroine” (31), what is most extraordinary is Francie’s ability to endure and to surmount obstacles which leaves her embittered and melancholic. As a tragic, melancholic figure, Francie’s frustrated desires leave her perpetually disenchanting and despondent.

Because the Coffins are African American and poor, her family’s racial and social status marginalizes them and puts them on society’s fringe. In addition, her father’s criminal behavior puts the family in jeopardy, which makes them doubly vulnerable. Their tenement apartment is constantly being trespassed and their home functions as a battleground in relation to gender and generational differences. Both inside forces (poverty, her parents’ separation, her brother James’ departure) and outside forces (verbal/sexual harassment and assault, violence) tear at the very core of

Francie's being and force her to develop a new, singular consciousness. The story opens when Francie is eleven and quite naïve, but as she evolves, her maturity gives her insight and a realistic sense of her situation.

In *Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989*, Melissa Walker analyzes Francie's psychological and emotional development: "she matures as she learns to understand how the public arena informs private lives" (83). Too often, Francie is self-inquisitive, asking what she has done to either transgress or offend and asking what certain words, phrases and actions mean. She is apparently aware of her surroundings, but her naïveté impairs her ability to fully understand all that happens around her. As Amanda J. Davis observes, "Francie is initially both shielded and victimized by her naïveté" (29). She is confronted with adult topics and she has no choice but to acknowledge them, despite her inability to fully understand their consequences. Rita B. Dandridge proposes that Francie's "naïveté consequently permits the reader to sympathize with her as she encounters the double problem of approaching puberty and of surviving economic chaos" (84). Francie also has limited self-perception. Like others her age, she makes the terrible mistake of valuing something without knowing its true worth. Because Francie wants to have things, she allows her sexuality to be exploited as a bargaining tool. Both the butcher and the baker offer her extra goods in exchange for an opportunity to fondle her. They exploit Francie's condition, being both young and poor, and tempt her with what is otherwise a bare necessity — food — in order to satiate their sexual hunger.

By complying with their wishes, Francie devalues herself; however, because her family is in such a dire state of want, she considers the extra roll or soup bone she is able to procure more valuable. Despite her displeasure at being objectified by these men, Francie feels as if she is obligated to comply, stating, "I stood there patiently while his hands fumbled over my body. Anytime I came to the butcher and no one else was there I had to stand still for this nonsense" (Meriwether 41). Interestingly enough, Francie is conflicted with the sexual attention she gets:

Though Francie does not wittingly entice men to make sexual overtures to her, her acceptance of their favors is tantamount to selling her moral integrity in desperate moments of hunger. She is, ironically, experienced in her inexperience, old in her youth, and harlot-wise in her naïveté. (Dandridge 84)

Her naïveté cannot protect her from the "mean streets" (158) of her neighborhood, and so Francie is thrust into the turbulent waters of adulthood before she has learned to navigate them. "There, on those mean streets, all her bright promise is slowly eclipsed by the realities of ghetto life" (Marshall 31). Francie's modernity is manifest in her psychological development as an urbanite: she laments, she curses, she gambles and loses and she is melancholic.

Francie's disenchantment is also connected to perceptions of her race. She desires to be something else, pondering, "suddenly I wished I could speak Spanish, or anything, and if I had to be black, why couldn't I at least have been Puerto Rican?" (170). Being a cultural outsider, Francie envies Puerto Ricans, and is depressed that she cannot communicate with them. Thus, her melancholy is connected to her

marginalization, being Black, poor and female. Her low self-esteem is expressed in her self-description, “So I was skinny and black and bad looking with my short hair and long neck and all that naked space in between. I looked just like a plucked chicken” (15). Francie often references her skinny physique, which is a result of being underfed. Throughout the novel, it is made apparent that the Coffin family lacks resources, food being one of them. Dandridge contends, “[Francie’s] rejection of her race is obviously a projection of her own self-hatred” (85), but Cheng disagrees:

Beneath the reductionist, threatening diagnosis of “inferiority complex” or “white preference” there runs a fraught network of ongoing psychological negotiation instigated and institutionalized by racism. The connection between subjectivity and social damage needs to be formulated in terms more complicated than either resigning colored people to the irrevocability of “self-hatred” or denying racism’s profound, lasting effects. (7)

Cheng argues that labeling one’s self-hate is oversimplifying an issue both serious and complex. Because Francie is often teased, humiliated and belittled at the hands of others, it is logical that she negatively views herself and describes herself as an “ugly” girl (106) who has a “skinny butt” (13) and is “nappy-headed and black” (160). “The social lesson of racial minoritization reinforces itself through the imaginative loss of a never-possible perfection, whose loss the little girl must come to identify as a rejection of herself” (Cheng 17). The never-possible perfection Cheng refers to is, for Francie, an ideal opposite image of herself that is not dark-

complexioned, has straight hair and is not skinny. Osofsky notes in his study of adolescent Harlemites during the Great Depression:

Harlem youngsters developed a sense of subordination, of insecurity, of lack of self-confidence and self-respect, the inability . . . to stand on their own two feet and face the world with open eyes and feel that [they have] as good a right as anyone else. (364)

In addition to her self-rejection, part of Francie's disenchantment is her loneliness and powerlessness. She desires companionship and romance in an alienating urban environment. Francie is a lonely girl who feels abandoned or left behind by everyone for whom she cares; she desires inclusion and more substantial relationships. Her fantasy about the boy she likes, Vincent, expresses her anxieties:

I wrapped my arms about myself and imagined that it was Vincent's arms and we were dancing. . . . We were going steady. Not right now, but next year when he came back. Of course he would come back. Nothing could keep him away from me. "Nothing can keep me away from you, Francie, my darling," he whispered in my ear. "I'll carry you from here. To Florida or even California. Anywhere you want to go. I love you." . . . I sat there dreaming about me and Vincent and I hadn't been so happy since I don't know when. (160)

Francie's fear of rejection speaks to her insecurity of wanting to be loved; she lacks reassurance of her worth from her family and from society. Whether it is her teacher who discourages her career aspirations or her relatives who set a poor example of achievement, Francie's only reassurance is that she will have a miserable life. Her marginalization also causes psychological trauma in which she is constantly aware of her inferiority and feels angry, yet powerless about it. While surveying her neighborhood's excessively overcrowded streets, Francie observes that "there was

something black and evil in these streets and that something was in me, too” (157). In this sense, Francie vilifies herself; the evil she refers to is her anger about her life’s circumstances. In accord with to the recurring gambling theme, Francie is enraged that she has been dealt a lousy and quite likely unwinnable hand.

Francie also questions the social and economic opportunities for African Americans in New York City. The Snipes, a family of Virginia sharecroppers departs for home after a brief stay in Francie’s Harlem tenement basement; they migrated North with dreams and hopes, only to leave disappointed and disenchanted. Francie had grown attached to them and “hated to see them go” (123). The fast-paced lifestyle and demands of city life were overwhelming to many newcomers because they were unprepared for what Schuyler refers to as the “Gotham treadmill” (207). The Snipes’ departure further frustrates Francie, who is already preoccupied with thoughts of her incarcerated brother and her crush, Vallie, facing murder charges, and of her family’s struggle to be admitted into the welfare system:

We were all mixed up in something together us colored up here in the north, something I couldn’t quite figure out. But it was better up here than down south. That’s what I’d always heard people say. . . . This *was* the promised land, wasn’t it? (123)

Francie asks this question only because she is quite aware that New York City is the Promised Land for others, but not her kind. The Snipes experience the crisis of optimism as Ellison describes it in his essay. As a work of historical fiction, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* raises issues and topics that were historically legitimate; since

the American Colonial Period, there were many African-American abolitionists who cited hypocrisy in the promise of an American freedom and its direct contradiction with chattel slavery. Francie also witnesses the contradiction, and its implications for her demographic. “Francie reads newspapers, listens to street speakers, and attends the political sermons of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. She recounts events that will lead to World War II, particularly Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia” (Walker 83). The narrative is meticulously interwoven within context of the social, cultural and historical events contemporaneous with the setting. Francie’s remark about the promised land is placed in a broader, historical context because it emphasizes, “Meriwether’s graphic representation of the exclusion of African Americans from the economic, social and political fabric of American culture” (Collins 49). Francie is aware of her alienation within both neighborhood and city boundaries and she is fully aware of her place within that social structure. She often looks at Central Park and the City’s horizon skyline and thinks about what life is like downtown. Despite the City’s open and wide landscape, Francie is aware that she may be unwelcome in the world downtown:

I walked to 110th Street and looked across Central park at the lights twinkling in the skyscrapers. That was another world, too, all those lights way over there and this spooky park standing between us. But what good would those lights do me anyway? I bet they didn’t even allow colored in those big buildings. (72-3)

Her observations indicate she is realistic about race relations. Although she lives in New York City, racial segregation is status quo. She experiences skyscraper

alienation while simultaneously acknowledging the bitter realities of racial and economic alienation. According to Blanche Gelfant, the ambitious and hopeful urban girl is constantly pursuing her dreams: “She is an urban character. . . . the city evokes her desire for freedom and by its disorder — all the confusions of urban life usually considered devastating — promises her fulfillment” (25). Francie’s disconnection with and intimidation by the skyscrapers is a constant reminder of her inability to fully experience cosmopolitan life. Still, Francie is fascinated by this other world and she wonders what life would be like:

I knew what was on the other side of the bell tower, more Harlem, but way down Fifth Avenue on the other side of the skyscrapers, that was another world, and I looked and sighed and dreamed that I was way over there instead of stuck in my black valley. (156-7)

What Francie has been gazing at is the skyline, with the Empire State Building as the ultimate symbol of urban modernity and power, but she is the powerless tenement resident outsider. Perhaps, Francie desires a whiter life? Indeed she does, even though she is well-aware her presence is unwelcome. Regarding this other world that Francie gazes upon, Paule Marshall asserts: “the white world below 110th Street, which Francie can glimpse from her fire escape — remains uncaring, unmoved” (31). Her dirty, deteriorated, and dysfunctional “black valley” is irrelevant to people of this other world, as is she. E. Lâle Demitürk observes, “The black ghetto is a site that problematizes the white city because it signifies racial and social inequality” (78). Harlem is just as marginalized as is Francie and they mirror each other — both have

been forsaken by the greater New York community: both are denied resources (public funding/welfare), both are exploited and both are downtrodden.

Francie's disenchantment and melancholia are results of her disappointments, her consistent self/denigration and her emotional frustration. The pimps, prostitutes, gangs and other criminal activities of Francie's Harlem neighborhood lure young people with false promises of power, wealth and stability. Demitürk argues, "the ghetto swallows up young black boys and girls" (76), but the Coffin family's fragmentation and eventual collapse demonstrates that the ghetto consumes everyone.

According to Harvey:

[The family] provides a haven to which individuals can withdraw from the complexities and dangers of urban life or from which they can selectively sample its pleasures and opportunities. But it is a haven perpetually buffeted by external forces – the loss of earning power through unemployment, squabbles over money rights, the sheer attractions of monetized individualism compared to familiar repression, and the need to orient child-rearing practices to labor market ends are major sources of disruption in family life. (238)

Even though her mother tries to, Francie's family does not protect her. Instead, the increased financial pressures force her to venture outside the safety of her home in order to find work and a place of acceptance, thus making her vulnerable to exploitation. Thirteen years old and jaded, Francie's disenchantment is reflective of Harlem's condition. "Deeply affected by her family's disintegration, Francie perceives Harlem as a sterile, alienating place" (Duboin 36). In a disenchanted state, Francie painfully realizes "she must try to forge her own protection if she is to

survive and survive whole” (Davis 29) because no one is going to rescue her. In the Foreword, James Baldwin highlights Francie’s epiphanic moment:

Shit, says Francie, sitting on the stoop as the book ends, looking outward at the land of the free, and trying, with one thin bony black hand to stem the blood which is beginning to rush from a nearly mortal wound. . . . The wound is the wound made upon the recognition that one is regarded as a worthless human being, and further, in the case of this particular black girl, upon the recognition that the men, one’s only hope, have also been cut down and cannot save you. (8)

Francie’s foudroyant utterance, “*Shit*,” most accurately describes her present reality and her future reality (188). In addition, this word also is part of Francie’s “vocabulary of grievance” for her circumstances and for her bleak future (Cheng 6). Francie is aware of her vulnerability and she resents that she has only herself to rely on. “This coarse monosyllabic word [shit] sounds like a blunt outcry from someone who cannot articulate his/her pain. Yet it says it all: powerlessness and resignation, despair and a bitter sense of injustice, pent-up rage and resentment” (Duboin 40). Francie’s fantasies and daydreams help to remedy her disenchantment: “[She] uses the power of her imagination, sustained by movie stars and fairy tales, to escape the grim reality of the ghetto” (Duboin 37). Francie’s frustrated desire to escape Harlem is interwoven in the fabric of her dreams. Unlike Hubert’s, Francie’s escape plan has no destination, but is *anywhere but Harlem*. “Only by giving free rein to her romantic, childish imagination can Francie break through the physical social limits of the ghetto” (Duboin 37). She does not care where she is going, only from whence she is leaving. One of her Ken Maynard dreams ends with their escape to “that other

world” (157), which echoes her description of the part of Manhattan beyond Central Park that is filled with skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building. Sharon Zukin analyzes in “Postmodern Urban Landscape” how skyscrapers and the urban skyline represent power and status:

Older modern cities (built 1750-1900) and newer modern cities (built 1900-50) suggest two contrasting urban landscapes that paradigmatically express how the landscape of the powerful coexists with the vernacular of the powerless.

In older modern cities like New York . . . the political (and financial) landscape concentrated power in the centre; this power was viewed as the skyline – the landscape of the modern city itself. The vernacular meanwhile occupied wide swathes of the historical inner city, its tenements . . . nibbling at the knees of the high-rise buildings of dominant institutions. (226)

Although she is the tender age of thirteen by the conclusion, Francie does not delude herself with any possible reality other than the one she exists. Her situation does not allow her the opportunity to have much (if any) hope, and she becomes a cynic. She is resigned to her situation stating, “We was all poor and black and apt to stay that way, and that was that” (188). Her reference to her race and class indicates her unmitigated surrender to the oppressive white establishment that perpetuates marginalization and bias. Further, Francie’s statement suggests a hidden resentment towards her race and class. According to Cheng,

The pedagogy of discrimination is painfully installed in multiple stages. White preference is not a phenomenon that simply gets handed down from society to black women and then to black girls; instead it travel [sic] a tortuous, melancholic path of alienation, resistance, aggression, and then, finally, the domestication of that aggression as “love.” (18)

Francie mourns the loss of a future that has not yet materialized; her disenchantment and melancholy are connected to her hopelessness, and, as Cheng asserts, “Melancholia thus denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment” (8). Ironically, Mrs. Coffin still has hopes that Francie will have a better life, not realizing that the damage is already done.

Francie curses life; her poignant statement strongly implies hopelessness; yet, “she learns to be open to other possibilities” for her future (Walker 85). Although there is some promise due to the fact that Francie has to eventually leave her stoop, she makes it clear that her racial and economic classifications will keep her and other Blacks marginalized and oppressed. Still, despite the institutionalized and systemic biases, “both of her parents teach Francie to prepare herself to live in a better world than Harlem in the middle of the Depression” (Walker 86). Despite their current circumstances, the hopefulness her parents have is encouraging, and it is clear her mother has higher aspirations for her. Regarding children’s literature, Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl Tomlinson argue, “stories that portray adverse and discouraging social situations should permit some cause for optimism. Children need to trust that problems can be overcome or ameliorated and that the world can be a good place in which to live” (152). Their theory, however, does not apply to Francie’s plight in *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. The gritty realism of Meriwether’s novel functions as a warning to its readers that being hopeful can lead to disappointment and so it makes

one feel more frustrated and powerless. De Jongh's historical context for Harlem during the Depression era is consistent with Meriwether's:

In spite of a youthful population, the death rate was 42 percent higher for Harlemites than for the rest of the city. In specific categories (such as infant mortality, death from tuberculosis, and violent death), the rates doubled or tripled, and venereal disease and malnutrition were commonplace. . . . Schools were overcrowded, with as much as a 100 percent turnover each year . . . Quacks, healers, confidence men, loan sharks, and religious charlatans, exploiting the crisis of the community, only made the situation worse. In addition, Harlem was a 'wide-open city,' where the sale of alcohol flourished with few restrictions during Prohibition, along with vice, gambling, and narcotics. (9)

In Francie's case, she is overcome by many disappointments and she realizes that the American system is not designed for those of her kind. After considering the lives of other Black women in the neighborhood (including her mother), Francie's prediction of her future is not atypical, "Either you was a whore like China Doll or you worked in a laundry or did day's work or ran poker games or had a baby every year" (187).

In line with the burdens these women carry, Francie is aware that she will also continue to be burdened by her life on society's fringe. Her deferred dream already "just sags / like a heavy load" (Hughes 426) and Francie knows she will have more, heavier loads to carry. All of Francie's predictions involve difficult work, some of it even being illegal. Whatever her future is, Francie is certain it will not be a pleasant or an easy one.

Francie's struggles are unresolved by the end of her narrative. Despite her tragic situation, there are fleeting moments where it seems Francie may escape and

emerge triumphant. Despite her poor self-image, she momentarily accepts herself.

Watching the street below, she no longer rejects her blackness and briefly develops affection for her Harlem community:

I wanted to hug them all. We belonged to each other somehow. . . . But that sweet feeling hung on and I loved all of Harlem gently and didn't want to be Puerto Rican or anything else but my own rusty self. (184)

Francie's self-acceptance is an indicator of hope; however, it is temporary. She quickly loses her affection for Harlem and laments with disdain about what is to come of her life. Her affection directly corresponds to Cheng's theory of the "domestication of [her] aggression" (18). Her childhood and innocence are lost to distressing memories rife with disappointment and despair. She is overwhelmed by these losses, but despite her desire for individual freedom, she finds solace within her community. Georg Simmel also discusses this pattern of acceptance and rejection in *On Individuality and Social Forms*: "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society" (324). Francie's story is a narrative of *Bildung* that specifically addresses her desire to achieve an identity other than the one prescribed for her in her modern, megalopolitan Harlem world. The narrative concludes with the embittered utterance of a pubescent Francie who is no longer naïve and innocent, and who is on the verge of young womanhood. Her problems are not overcome; instead they will likely be more challenging in her

teenage years. *Daddy Was a Number Runner* presents characters whose lives are examples of thwarted desire, especially that of Francie.

Hubert's disenchantment and Francie's cynicism are connected to the dream deferred, which is a central theme in both novels. Hughes ends "Harlem [2]" asking, "Or does it explode?" (426). Although both *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* are Harlem narratives that feature volatile situations, they are still percolating to that crucial boiling point presenting melancholic characters whose lives are examples of deferred desire. In both novels, Harlem functions as a social repository that represents a microcosmic community, one in which its diverse inhabitants form close relationships with each other. The sense of community is apparent in that both Hubert and Francie have an intimate understanding of their respective Harlem worlds and their people. Both Hubert and Francie want to rescind that communal, collective identity for their personal happiness. As the exclusive setting for these novels, Harlem represents African American frustration and despair. Harlem and modernity become characters against which both Hubert and Francie struggle.

In reference to the effect of setting in *The Hit*, James de Jongh declares, "Mayfield's fictional Harlem is a world of fundamentally good-natured people whose materialistic dreams and petty infractions of law are goaded by the pinch of segregation, rather than by malice of moral decay" (88). The setting in *Daddy Was a Number Runner* is a stark contrast to that of *The Hit*. Meriwether's fictional Harlem is one that embodies and illuminates the aforementioned malice and moral decay in

addition to socioeconomic collapse. The setting is urban counter-pastoral; the Harlem landscape is riddled with poverty, tenements, destitution, drug addiction, crime, trash, vermin and sexual abuse, whereas the downtown landscape is adorned with clean streets, fancy cars, tall buildings, luxury, and safety. “[Meriwether’s] realistic treatment of space and her use of architectural imagery contribute to her dramatization of complex social relations” (Duboin 40).

While it is tempting to conclude that Mayfield and Meriwether are suggesting that there is no possibility for viable community in the African-American experience in Harlem, this contention would be quite flawed. In *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, characters “are intensely conscious of the importance of public events in their lives and the role of community in their daily survival” (Walker 82). Both Mayfield and Meriwether use their characters’ experiences to highlight the challenges of urban ethnic subjectivity. The city’s modern landscape is inhabited by racialized marginalized people who have their own individual obstacles in relation to their status as modern subjects. Discussing modernism and metropolitan consciousness, Marshall Berman asserts, “to live well meant to move up socially, and this in turn meant to move out physically; to live one’s life close to home was not to be alive at all” (459). To not be alive, as Berman puts it, suggests a deferred development, a static existence, or a loss of livelihood of the person who does not leave his or her environs. Since Hubert and Francie cannot move out, are they able to fully exist in their situations? Are they destined to be static characters?

The challenge for both Hubert and Francie is twofold: they are unable to *physically* leave Harlem because of monetary lack and from a psychological perspective; “the melancholic is, one might say, psychically stuck” (Cheng 8). Their melancholia becomes the essence of their subjectivity, and they become trapped within it. Their melancholy is specifically connected to their rejection of and resentment towards their socio-economic status as poor and their Black identity. “Underneath the pop-psychological insight of an “inferiority complex” lies a nexus of intertwining affects and libidinal dynamics — a web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility” (Cheng 17). Rather than include scenes of carnage, flames and mass destruction, the lives of Hubert and Francie occupy desolate spaces replete with disarray and despair. In *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, Harlem is portrayed as a Lost City in which Hubert and Francie are trapped melancholic figures that retreat within themselves and dwell in their fantasies of living in a place of paradise. Despite their desires and fantasies of escaping to a better place, their futures will remain in Harlem.

CHAPTER 4

HARLEM, HOME AGAIN:

URBAN UNEASE, ANXIETY, AND ACCEPTANCE

IN *PUSH* AND *THE WIG*

I'm from a part of town where clowns
 Get beat down and all you hear is gunshot sounds.
 On 139 and Lenox Ave., there's a big park
 And if you're soft, don't go through it when it gets dark.
 'Cause at nighttime niggas try to tax.
 They're sneakier than alley cats,
 That's why I carry gats . . .
 All of us from Harlem
 One three nine
 That's livin' the lifestyle of the poor and dangerous
 YouknowwhatI'msayin?
 Big L, "Lifestylez Ov Da Poor & Dangerous"

During her fantastic quest in the Land of Oz, Dorothy Gale repeatedly wishes to return home to her beloved Uncle Henry, Auntie Em, and their small house in the Kansas countryside. Dorothy's iconic statement "There is no place like home" (Baum 44) reiterates the typically American idealized notions of safe spaces, loving families, and emotional security. Despite Dorothy's disenchantment with her rural life, she is overjoyed with the opportunity to return to that familiar realm, rather than remain in the unfamiliar yet enchanting Oz with her new friends. By the end of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is more mature, and much wiser. She no longer sees her farm home to be undesirable; she accepts her rural Kansas environment for what it is, tornadoes and all. In spite of a real and present danger — the tornado — Dorothy feels her prairie home the best place for her to be. Rapper

Big L echoes Dorothy's sentiments in his song "Lifestylez Ov Da Poor & Dangerous" in which he affectionately and openly speaks about the dangers of his Harlem neighborhood near 139th Street and Lenox Avenue. Although they are not the safest of places, those Harlem streets help to define Big L and his music; they shape and inspire him. It is not that Big L condones the violence or the hard living, but as evidenced from the aforementioned lyrics, he accepts them as circumstances of his existence. As the card player's saying goes, "You learn to play the hand you're dealt," meaning, one has only two choices: play the cards to the best of one's ability or surrender the hand. Nonetheless, it takes greater courage and determination to play an unwinning hand — especially with purpose — than to fold one's hand. Just as Dorothy and Big L accept the positive and negative aspects of their homes, so, too, do Claireece Precious Jones and Lester Jefferson, the protagonists of *PUSH* and *The Wig: A Mirror Image*, respectively. However, Precious and Lester are not situated in a rural pastoral setting such as the Kansas prairie, but in the urban counter-pastoral setting of the grimy Harlem slum, a Harlem that is very similar to the one Big L identifies with and raps about. Like Dorothy and Big L, Precious and Lester identify with and accept their homeland despite its flaws and the significant dangers that accompany it. The dangers make them uneasy, but rather than give up when encountering their many obstacles, Precious and Lester struggle to create a meaningful existence and establish identities of their own choosing.

In his song, “Lifestylez Ov Da Poor & Dangerous,” Big L makes numerous references to the perils of his neighborhood. His Harlem neighborhood, located at 139th Street and Lenox Avenue, is a very dangerous and frightening place that is filled with chaos, desperation, and violence; yet, he expresses no desire to flee. Instead, he claims the neighborhood as part of *his* story, his narrative, and he identifies it as a part of himself. Why would he stay in an environment that is dangerous or undesirable? Likewise, Dorothy lives in a chaotic, violent, and desperate environment in which one’s life can be literally turned upside down and instantly destroyed. The lifeless, gray dullness of the prairie indicates the absence of life and growth in which everything is dried and withering, including her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry:

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. . . . The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else. (12)

Big L remains on his urban terrain, but Dorothy escapes the hazardous conditions of her home. However, Dorothy’s departure from her prairie home was not by choice, but by the tumultuous force of the tornado. During her adventures in Oz, Dorothy experiences many incidents in which her life is in danger, but she and her companions are able to prevail. She is repeatedly invited to remain in Oz with her new friends the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Woodman. However, despite all the colorful, vibrant, and attractive features of Oz, Dorothy remains determined to return

to her gray Kansas prairie and to her aunt and uncle. After she is questioned about her decision to leave the magic of Oz for the mundane world of Kansas, Dorothy's response is both practical and personal: "No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home" (35). Similarly, both Precious and Lester find comfort and solace in their geographic living environments despite the dysfunction and dilapidation that surrounds them. They may dislike their immediate living situation — Precious wants to leave her mother and Lester hates the rat infestation in his apartment — but they do not express a desire to leave Harlem; instead they are resolved to eke out a living within the harshness of their Harlem environments. Why do Precious and Lester choose to remain in their Harlem slum? Analogously, if Dorothy's perspective has any truth or relevance, Precious and Lester choose to remain in Harlem because of their affection for their homes and for the people in their communities or families. Further, if they are to evacuate, where will they go? As evidenced in the previous chapters, African Americans faced substantial obstacles when searching for housing in New York City. Specifically, because of housing discrimination, African Americans' options and opportunities for housing, particularly those of adequate and standard caliber, were quite limited in New York City. In his *New York Times* article, David W. Chen writes about the continuing challenges of housing discrimination in New York City:

In late 2001, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York concluded that neither the Commission on Human Rights nor the Law Department, the city's primary agencies for fair housing and human rights enforcement, had "adequately performed its jobs of preventing and remedying discrimination."

. . . A HUD study in 2002 found that New York had the highest rate of discrimination against prospective Hispanic home buyers among 20 cities, and the fifth-highest rate against African-Americans. (1)

Chen's article, written in 2004, is a clear indicator that housing discrimination continues to be an issue in the New York City. The predicaments of race and class are notable obstacles, and because Precious and Lester are both African American and poor, they can expect similar treatment in places outside of Harlem. Precious and Lester can opt to escape, but they are likely to find they are either unwelcome or are subjected to similar living conditions because they cannot afford to live in a better residence.

Therefore, like Dorothy and Big L, Precious and Lester choose to remain living in their familiar, known environment, despite its drawbacks and negative attributes. For Precious, Dorothy has an especial importance as one whose fantastic voyage is a welcome distraction and whose image symbolizes love and desirability. When recounting one of the many rapes her father perpetrates against her, Precious muses, "I wait for him get off me. Lay there stare at wall till wall is a movie, *Wizard of Oz*, I can make that one play anytime" (113). Because her reality is one that is rife with traumas and tragedies, she often escapes into fantasies promoted in films and television shows.

Although Sapphire's 1996 novel *PUSH* is a story laden with despair and sadness, Paula Woods describes *PUSH* as an "up-by-the-bra-strap success story" (1). Woods' comment suggests that Precious's narrative is a triumph, but it seems more of a testament to her ability to endure. In some ways, the plot is remarkably similar to Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. Both novels address matters of sexually abused girls who experience violence and family dysfunction. However, the adolescent Francie Coffin has some support, protection, and encouragement from her family, particularly her mother and her brother. With regard to *PUSH*, the same cannot be said for Claireece Precious Jones, whose parents are the perpetrators of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Also, both novels feature a similar Harlem setting in which the imagery of dilapidation is prevalent; the streets are causeways for the mean and the meek, and they are littered with vagrants and criminal behavior. Francie's Harlem is the slum of the Great Depression, and the story is initially set in June 1934; however, Precious's Harlem is the slum of the post-Vietnam and contemporary crack era, though the story begins in 1987.

The Harlem of the crack era is filled with blight, violence, poverty, crime and desperation. To withstand the many hazards she encounters, Precious depends on two things: her mother and the welfare system. Her only access to funds is through her mother, who has a credit card and receives welfare benefits for Precious and her daughter/sister, Mongo. The authority Precious's mother has by controlling the finances also enables her to verbally, physically and sexually exploit and abuse her

daughter. If Precious were to leave, she would have no way to survive. One of the effects of her psychological abuse and institutionalization, Precious views her children/siblings as tools for her financial gain, just as her mother uses her: “She take *my* money. Money for Little Mongo should be mine” (59). The contradiction here is that Precious can achieve financial independence by having children who are products of incest and rape. When she first thinks of this possibility, she is rather blasé and indifferent about her options: “Maybe somethin’ gonna be wrong wif this baby too. I don’t care, maybe if new baby Down Sinder [Down’s Syndrome] I can get my own check” (53). Her musings are particularly disturbing because she equates her children with money, thus perpetuating the cycle of exploitation of children and the welfare system, as her mother has done. For Precious’ mother, the welfare check is of ultimate importance:

“ . . . The welfare done called here, saying they is removing you from my budget ’cause you not in regular attendance at school.”
 . . . “I tole you I was goin’ to school today.”
 “Forget school! You better git your ass on down to welfare!”
 “I gonna get stipend for school.”
 “Fool fuck a stipend! What’s that. I said take your ass down to welfare NOW!” (58)

Precious views the stipend as a way for her to earn money and achieve independence, but her mother views it as insubstantial. In this parental relationship, there is a dependency in which monetary access and gain is the incentive. For Precious, access to funds is of primary importance, but she is told otherwise by her teacher, Miz Rain: “All I can think [Ms. Rain] don’t know to have NOTHIN’. Never breathe and wait for

check, check; cry when check late. Check important. Most important. My mama not getting no check for me, I think she be done killed me a long time ago” (66).

To her mother, Precious’s primary value is monetary and her secondary value is sexual. Precious is a sexual object whose sole value is based on her corporeal abilities to produce children and to be sexually exploited for her parents’ gratification. Precious’s mother uses her to fulfill her own sexual needs, and she knows that Precious’s father will visit her if Precious is available to him. Precious is aware of the sexual exchange and agreement between her parents: “This time she knew Mama knew [about her second pregnancy]. Umm hmm, she knew. She brought him to me. I ain’ crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Thas what he require to fuck her probably, some of me” (25). Precious resents her parents’ commodification of her and struggles to find meaning in herself that extends beyond the physical and financial. She wants to be an autonomous individual who has sole control of her whole being, but she still wishes to be accepted and desired by others. As a coping mechanism, Precious’s mind often meanders between reality and fantasy. In the article “A Cruel World, Endless Until a Teacher Steps In,” Michiko Kakutani comments: “it’s no surprise that Precious often feels as if her mind has become a television set, playing videos that offer her a brief respite from the bleak realities of her daily life. In these daydreams, she is thin, not fat; white, not black; loved, not mocked” (C29). Precious often daydreams about being desirable and appreciated, like women in the music videos; however, her mind also does this during and after the many sexual encounters she has

with her parents. In *The Politics of Survivorship: Incest, Women's Literature, and Feminist Theory*, Rosaria Champagne comments: "Because mothers are bestowed with the cultural privilege of child welfare, and because children embrace even abusive mothers as allies in early childhood, mother-daughter abuse appears to create severe dissociative disorders" (124). In Precious's case, her constant psychological escapes into the television and Dorothy Gale's world is where she can be protected, innocent, pure, and loved, just as Dorothy is. Also, the main emphasis in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is on belonging to a place, in this case Dorothy and her home in Kansas. Her attachment to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a reflection of her sentiments about her home and her place of belonging. Precious's conflicted views are not limited to how she perceives and values herself, but include the world around her and everything in it.

While assessing her socioeconomic conditions and her educational struggles, Precious comments about the standardized tests she has to take: "The tesses paint a picture of me wif no brain. The tesses pain a picture of me an' my muver — my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible" (33). Precious's sense of her invisibility is that people only notice part of her, such as her dark complexion and her large-size physique, or her poor academic performance, and they do not acknowledge her internal characteristics. She also realizes her parents do not fully recognize her either. As an incest survivor, her self-awareness has added meaning. In their book *Constructing Incest Stories: Black Women's Voices in Fact and Fiction*, Dorothy L.

Hurley and E. Anthony Hurley examine the way incest affects the identity and subjectivity of Black women:

One of the most deleterious consequences of incest is the threat it poses to self-worth, self-hood, and identity. The tragic nature of Precious's situation is aggravated by the fact that society, by ignoring and devaluing people like her, contributes to the erasure of her identity. She is painfully aware of her virtual non-existence. (106)

Precious's identity is conflicted; at times she feels pride and encouragement about herself via self-affirmation, but other times she feels inept: "I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin' " (36). She rejects what the system and others say about her, but she uses their criticism as the foundation of her subjectivity. The invisibility Precious mentions is connected to her marginalization because of her race and her economic class; she and her mother exist on society's margins, rather than as part of the mainstream. In her article, "Toward a New Learning System: A Freirean Reading of Sapphire's *Push*," Laurie Stapleton says, "to Claireece [administrative] files represent for her the idea that someone is judging her and making decisions for her" (215), thus turning her into an object. Ironically, she needs these people and she cares: "But I don't care now what anybody see. I see something, somebody" (35). She is the only one who sees herself as a person of value and potential. As a victim of abuse and as someone who is marginalized within society, Precious is aware of the dual identity she has as both object and subject: "Don't nobody want me. Don't nobody need me. I know who I am. I know who they say I am — vampire sucking the system's blood" (33).

The system Precious refers to is the social welfare system, which is connected to President Lyndon Baines Johnson's socio-political ideology called the Great Society. Presented during the 22 May 1964 commencement at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, President Johnson defines the concept of what he terms as the Great Society:

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning. The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. (American Rhetoric)

The Great Society was President Johnson's enthusiastic, ambitious domestic agenda for all Americans that focused on empowering racial and social minorities and the poor. The concept of the Great Society was remarkably inclusive and optimistic in an otherwise skeptical society that became more jaded after President John F. Kennedy's assassination just one year prior. Also, the military involvement in Vietnam was still active¹ and domestic civil rights conflicts also continued, as did the many protests, rallies, and riots. Johnson's Great Society was a rallying call that encouraged Americans to become active in their communities and the communities of others to

¹ The United States began involvement with South Vietnam in 1955 to combat the spread of communism in Asia. Until 1961, the US provided over \$1 billion in economic and military aid to the South Vietnamese government. After Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the role of president; months into his presidency, North Vietnamese airstrikes in August 1964 destroyed several American Navy ships. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 7 August 1964, approving a military offensive. As a result, this "war against the Vietcong and North Vietnam would divert resources from Johnson's ambitious and expensive domestic program, the Great Society" (Foner and Garraty 1120).

work towards common goals. However, in order to successfully accomplish these goals, it is necessary that the American public get involved and engage in community outreach activities. In reference to Precious's marginalization, Hurley and Hurley assert, "Precious recognizes that her identity and existence are threatened not only because of her experience of incest but also because of her condition as a poor, uneducated black girl" (107). Therefore, because of her race, gender and socioeconomic class, Precious has additional obstacles to circumvent. Although the Great Society aimed to extinguish or ameliorate the living conditions for people in inner-cities such as Harlem, her narrative indicates this bureaucratic agenda failed.

Precious' vivid descriptions of the Harlem streets and its people indicate there is no improvement in Harlem's infrastructure and design, and instead, decay and waste are omnipresent. The decay of Harlem was evidence of a larger national social problem; in *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*, Carlo Rotella writes about the declining economic and social conditions of American inner-city metropolitan areas:

The urban crisis of the 1960s was, among other things, a national recognition of the facts and consequences of postindustrial transformation, and the element of the postindustrial social landscape that drew most of the attention was the second ghetto.² Sometimes dramatic and sometimes almost imperceptible, the postindustrial migrations of capital and population—and policy responses to them—

² According to Arnold R. Hirsh, the term *second ghetto* refers to the creation of African-American communities during the post-World War II period: "Occupying the middle third of the 20th century, the age of the second ghetto linked the New Deal and the Great Society. . . . The original formulation of the second ghetto tied itself clearly and closely to housing policy in establishing government complicity in fostering segregation" (712).

had by 1965 produced full-blown second ghettos in American cities.
(205)

Johnson's Great Society is one of those "policy responses" Rotella mentions; cities became so desolate, that it was necessary for the federal government to intervene. America's cities were not great sources of inspiration and progress, but instead, they were the nuclei for people living with poverty, corruption, and crime. In her interview with Lisa Miller, Sapphire argues that Precious "is the object of almost genocidal neglect and genocidal assault in terms of the removal of [social] services" that are necessary for her survival and improvement. Thus, there were many other pressing issues that needed to have been addressed in order for Johnson's Great Society programs to change the quality of services Precious needs.

For Precious, obtaining her literacy, therefore her education, is of the utmost importance for her to become a whole and independent person. In her article "Sister to Faust: The City's 'Hungry Woman' as Heroine," Blanche Gelfant analyzes the protagonist's sister, Helen, in Thomas Wolfe's novel *Of Time and the River*. As the basis of her argument, Gelfant compares Helen to other female characters of American fiction:

She sets out alone to find for herself, within herself, the power of transformation. Like Faust, she believes that books will give her power, and so she reads — compulsively, looking for ways to change her life. Seeing herself as an inchoate woman, then somehow deformed, she wants to become a fully realized 'person,' someone she defines vaguely but succinctly as free. (25)

Although Precious wants to leave her mother's home and lead an independent life, she has stronger desires to obtain an education. More than anything, she wants to be able to raise and educate her children/siblings properly: "Listen baby, Mover love you. Mover not dumb. Listen baby: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. That's the alphabet. Twenty-six letters in all. Them letters make up words. Them words everything" (68). Like Helen, Precious is a "hungry woman" whose metaphoric starvation is caused by parental abuse, neglect and abandonment by the educational system. President Johnson shares similar sentiments about the importance of education in his speech; he outlines in detail the central foundation for the Great Society: "three places where we begin to build the Great Society — [are] in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms" (American Rhetoric).

If Dorothy Gale represents the American countryside, Precious represents the American city and the classroom. Actually, most of the novel is centered on Precious' learning and literacy development. Throughout the novel, she is situated in an educational setting or she is thinking about her education and literacy progress. The alternative school Precious enters is Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach

One (HEA/EOTO) based in Harlem at the iconic Hotel Theresa³. Because of its history, the symbolic reference to the Hotel Theresa is especially significant. Christopher Gray writes in his *New York Times* article about the Hotel Theresa's value to Harlem and African Americans. Whereas Hubert Cooley of *The Hit* obsesses about the swanky hotels located downtown, the Hotel Theresa brought elegance and glamour to Harlem. Regarding the importance of the Hotel Theresa, Gray writes, "it offered hope to black New Yorkers" (4) because of its function as the setting for African-American political and social affairs. Therefore, of all the famed buildings in Harlem, it is uniquely appropriate that this new opportunity for her social and educational advancement is housed in the Hotel Theresa. In addition, Gray describes the Hotel Theresa's architecture as "anticlassical" and classifies its social milieu as "anti-establishment" (4). Similarly, the HEA/EOTO is both anticlassical and anti-establishment in its curriculum and purpose.

As an alternative school, it presents an alternate to a traditional, thus classical, education setting and curriculum. In contrast, Precious' former school represents the classical model of an educational institution in which there is a hierarchy, a racial

³ Built in 1913 on 125th Street and 7th Avenue (Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard), the Hotel Theresa was dubbed the "Waldorf of Harlem" for its opulence and unique architecture. Although it was initially a segregated establishment that only employed and offered domicile to whites, in 1940, its doors opened to everyone. It quickly became a mainstay for African-American socialites and celebrities, especially for those who were refused accommodation at downtown Manhattan hotels due to segregation practices. Fidel Castro's notable residence in the Hotel Theresa, which was during his United Nations visit in 1960, garnered further attention for the Hotel and its patrons.

imbalance of power (all the administrators and faculty are white, but the students are not), and an ideology of superiority. According to Stapleton, “this traditional model censors Precious and keeps her both judged and suppressed” (215). In her review of *PUSH*, Janet Ingraham describes Precious as “Crawling from self-hatred and violent loneliness to determination and occasionally hope” (152). The HEA/EOTO is a symbol of hope that offers educational opportunities to people who exist on society’s fringes; the majority of Precious’s classmates have endured homelessness, drug addiction, abuse, and poverty. The dysfunction of Precious’s life is a reflection of the dysfunction within the welfare system and social programs. In *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey asserts: “*PUSH* contains the most scathing critique of public policies toward the urban poor” (64). In reference to Johnson’s Great Society and its failures, Dubey also adds:

Outbreaks of black urban violence in numerous cities during the 1960s had forced public attention to the entanglement of structural racism and urban poverty, and federal aid to cities had more than quadrupled by the end of the decade. The Model Cities and community action programs of the 1960s, underwritten by direct federal aid, were dismantled by the mid-1970s in favor of downtown revitalization by private developers. (58)

Because the funding is rescinded, many social programs were closed or significantly reduced. By the 1980s, Great Society programs such as EOTO are all that Precious has available to her. In her review of *PUSH*, Dinitia Smith comments: “[Precious] finds help within her own community, through the vestiges of Great Society programs, from public health to literacy, that remain intact” (C16). Precious benefits

from the programs and initiatives created to thwart poverty, but they are incapable of giving her true self-reliance and financial independence. Her relocation to Advancement House is her first step towards independence, but considering her circumstances, her advancement is questionable. Even though she is anxious about her new living conditions, she is happy to be away from her mother. As she reflects on her new station in life, Precious repeatedly comments about her love of Harlem and strongly identifies herself with Harlem and her home on 444 Lenox Avenue.

Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses Precious's attachment to Harlem in "Precious Northern Landscapes and a Lyric South." As a character, Precious symbolizes Harlem; both are neglected, abandoned, abused, mutilated, dysfunctional, depressed, and without love or care. She thinks,

It's so many different ways to walk the few blocks home. Turn a corner and you see all different. Pass 116th n Lenox, more abandoned land, buildings falling down. How it git so ugly is people throw trash all in it. City don't pick it up; dogs doo doo. Peoples wif no bafroom piss 'n shit. Ugliness grow multiplied by ten. (112)

Precious's description is one of barrenness and decay; her detailed assessment suggests that she is uneasy about the garbage, ruin and waste that clutter the streets. Her statement about the lack of trash removal implies institutional neglect as well as Harlem's invisibility within the New York City infrastructure. Despite the apparent offensiveness of her neighborhood's appearance and condition, Precious still views it with acceptance and endearing sentiments. She only sees herself living in Harlem and she views herself as a part of Harlem. In reference to the "ugliness" that Precious

describes, Simon Parker discusses the transitioning conditions of Harlem in the 1980s in *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City*:

The ‘hyperghetto’ refers to neighbourhoods where 40 per cent or more of the population lives below the poverty line. However, it is the intense concentration of poverty that distinguishes the traditional ghetto, such as Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s from the hyperghettos of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. (91)

The “buildings falling down” and “abandoned land” Precious observes are evidence of what Parker terms a *hyperghetto*. She identifies with this corrosion and decay; she recognizes the abandonment and desolation of the Harlem landscape is similar to her own. Rotella states that during the 1960s, “Harlem played the more important role in representations not only of New York’s ghettos but of ‘black America’ in crisis” (221). In addition to the ghettos, Precious’s dysfunctional family and others like hers are also representations of the crisis facing African Americans. Harlem and its people are ignored and left to decline into further abjection and ruin, but Precious remains steadfast in her attachment to Harlem.

Just as Big L has a strong attachment to his Harlem neighborhood on 139th and Lenox Avenue, so does Precious for hers seven blocks south, on 132nd and Lenox. Her subjectivity and identity are enmeshed with her geographic space, and the meaning it has to her is as significant as it is for Big L. So, too, did Harlem have significant meaning for Nettie, the protagonist of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. In their analysis of Walker’s novel, Dorothy L. Hurley and E. Anthony Hurley comment on Nettie’s attained self-awareness and freedom. They attribute Nettie’s

newly realized subjectivity to her experiences in an ethnic urban environment:

“Nettie’s account of her liberation through ‘real’ education indicates that this liberation comes through the truth she is able to confront in relation to her blackness, by exposure to Harlem and Africa” (133). Just as Harlem serves as a conduit to self-realization for Nettie, Harlem also functions in a similar way for Precious Jones.

When she describes and speaks of Harlem, it is with a sincere, deep love and affection: “I loves Harlem, especially 125th Street. Lotta stuff out here. You could see we got culchure” (57). As a central location of commerce and community for Harlem, 125th street is an iconic symbol of Harlem culture. In addition to the many department stores located there, local street vendors often sold their wares on any given sidewalk to passersby. In one of her poems, Precious observes and comments that the Harlem she knows (and loves) is “not jazzee / Harlem / of Langston Hughes” (104-5). Rotella makes a similar observation about the juxtaposed images of Harlem in its glory and its decline: “Precisely because Harlem had enjoyed the status of America’s most modern and sophisticated Black Metropolis, defined by its aspiration to cultural leadership, the casting of Harlem as one among many ghettos defined by its pathologies [poverty, crime, violence] carried particular ironic or tragic force” (223).

Harlem’s iconic statuses as both the Black Cultural Mecca and as the hyperghetto are disconcerting, the irony about which Precious writes and Rotella observes. Griffin agrees, “Precious’s city is not the Harlem Renaissance city of Langston Hughes; it is not even the Harlem of Hughes’ dream deferred” (25).

Instead, her Harlem is without dreams and exists in a comatose state. Even Precious, with all her observations, is unfazed by the blight and the dysfunction she encounters daily. Although her life experience is a nightmarish reality, she continues to be inspired, optimistic and hopeful.

African-American political leaders have been a source for Precious's pride in Harlem and her racial pride; she mentions political figures such as Louis Farrakhan and Harriet Tubman. Some of her beliefs are strongly influenced by Farrakhan, whose Nation of Islam has a strong presence in Harlem. She espouses his ideas of empowerment, especially as they relate to nation-building and conservative ideas about sexuality; however, her teacher presents a view that opposes Farrakhan's and forces Precious to reconsider her perspectives and views. For one thing, Precious is initially a homophobe and she speaks critically of homosexuals: "[Reading *The Color Purple*] sound in a way so much like myself except I ain' no butch like Celie. But just when I go to break on that shit, go to tell class what Five Percenters 'n Farrakhan got to say about butches, Ms Rain tell me I don't like homosexuals she guess I don't like her 'cause she one" (83). It is not until Precious enters Higher Education Alternative that she is able to explore others' opinions and ideas about her society. In her assessment of Precious's community, Dubey asserts, "In *PUSH*, it is never organic ties that supply psychological or cultural sustenance for the urban poor but instead contingent communities based on specific interests and practices, such as a literacy class or an incest survivors' group" (65). In her classroom community, she has a

unique opportunity to learn from the “others” she views as different or inferior. Stapleton states, “Improved literacy and collaboration with her peers inspires Precious to confront her own prejudices” (221). Precious still has her biases, but the classroom dialogue prompts her to be more discerning and critically astute, rather than parrot others’ rhetoric. Becoming a subject of reason, Precious is able to recognize her own process of discernment; however, Precious also makes a homophobic reference when she writes about her son/brother: “I don want Abdul to be a faggit or dope addick” (108), thus equating the actions of homosexuals with those of heroin addicts and labeling both as social deviants. Also, because of her experiences in the alternative school, Precious learns *how* to think, and not *what* to think: “Too bad about Farrakhan. . . . Ms Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem. It’s true. Ms Rain the one who put the chalk in my hand, make me queen of the ABCs” (83). Farrakhan uses divisive pedantic methods to promote and encourage support for his agenda, a stark contrast to Ms. Rain’s inclusive and tolerant perspective. Ms. Rain prefers Precious to make her own judgments — ones that are adequately informed.

Ms. Rain’s influence challenges Precious, who tries to unlearn the bit of information she has managed to retain. Precious states, “school never did learn me” (64) and it appears that the bulk of her education has been provided by the Black Nationalist teachings of Farrakhan, the Israelites, and the Five Percent Nation (NGE).

Formed in the 1890s, Black Israelites are not Israeli by any means, but they do claim to be affiliated with Judaism believing that they descended from the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Israelites Precious refers to is a particular radical sect that often espouses incendiary and derogatory sentiments about Caucasians (whites). According to Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcroft, authors of *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America: African Diaspora Traditions*, there are various representations of Black Israelites. The radical and often-considered lunatic fringe sect is based in several major cities, including New York (Gallagher, Ashcroft 59). Adding to the legitimacy of the novel's setting is the NGE. Founded by Clarence 13X circa 1967, the Five Percent Nation of Islam (now known as The Nation of Gods and Earths or NGE) is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Clarence 13X was an NOI member who declares Mecca is Harlem, and establishes the founding institution, the Allah School in Mecca, on 126th Street and 7th Avenue. Precious's Harlem is one that has tangible, realistic images and setting in which Black Nationalist ideology is pervasive. Oddly enough, the Black Nationalist presence is primarily ignored by critics of the novel.

More importantly, another significant aspect of *PUSH* that critics have overlooked is the impact of these Black Nationalist teachings on Precious' life and on how she views herself, other Blacks, and Harlem. Again, Precious is conflicted and thus she contradicts herself. Although Farrakhan, the Israelites, and the Five Percent Nation encourage empowerment and self-appreciation, Precious disdains her dark

complexion in favor of a lighter skin hue: “I like light-skin people, they nice. I likes slim people too” (32). Of course, Precious dislikes herself, especially because she sees her mother’s dark skin and morbidly obese physique in her own body. Still, Precious agrees with Black nationalist organizations that white entities, such as white people and drugs — crack and heroin in particular — are the demise of the Black race and Harlem: “First thing I see when I wake up is picture of Farrakhan’s face on the wall. I love him. He is against crack addicts and crackers. Crackers is the cause of everything bad. It why my father ack like he do. He has forgot he is the Original Man!” (36). Referencing her father as the Original Man⁴ is evidence of her Black Nationalist point of view. Yet, her use of the term is problematic; although she espouses the Black Nationalist concepts of self-determination and self-empowerment, she places blame on others, thus abdicating her father and other rapists/molesters of accountability. Because the headquarters for the Five Percent Nation are next-door to the Hotel Theresa, it is evident that they and the Nation of Islam shape Precious’s ideological framing. Further, Lenox Avenue was renamed Malcolm X Boulevard in 1987, and thus, in her home, at school, and literally on the street, Precious is constantly exposed to Black Nationalist views and teachings. Her comment that crack addicts “[g]ive the race a bad name” (39) indeed echoes these teachings of racial collective identity.

⁴ Three of the main premises of the NOI and NGE teachings are the following: Black people are the Original People; each one should teach one, thus educating others; the unified Black family is essential to building a strong Black nation. Ironically, Precious’s family is the exact opposite.

Precious speaks about African Americans as “the race,” an essentialized notion that also invokes Black Nationalist thought. However, it is quite ironic that she does not view *her* situation as one that gives the race a bad name. Instead, she looks outward at others’ transgressions, thus freeing her from internally examining the situations within her life and her family. Yet, on one occasion, she makes an internal observation. Although religiosity is not her prominent characteristic, she appears to have a moral foundation. When mulling about her second pregnancy she states, “Abortion is a sin. I hate bitches who kill they babies. They should kill *them*, see how they like it!” (65). She does not fault her children/siblings for the transgressions of her father, and she rightfully places blame on her father “Nigger rape me. I not steal fat bitch your husband RAPE me RAPE ME!” (76). Interestingly, Precious views babies and herself as innocent. She does not hold herself responsible for her parents’ deviant behavior and for her circumstances: “I don’t feel shamed — Carl Kenwood Jones freak NOT me! . . . I love me. I ain’ gonna let that big fat bitch kick my ass’n shout on me” (78). Even though her mother also sexually abuses her, Precious directs most of her criticism at her father. Her loneliness and isolation are the paramount causes for her prolonged abuse, and for her desire to connect with others. Inside her mother’s home, Precious is trapped both physically and emotionally:

I go home. I’m so lonely there. I never notice before. I’m so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. . . . So much pain, shame — I never feel the loneliness. It such a small thing compare to your daddy climb on you, your muver kick you, slave you, feel you up. (64)

The apartment is the place where she is safe from outsiders — the front door is secured with four locks — but she is unsafe from her parents, the people who have unfettered access to her *inside* the apartment. As posters on her wall, the Black nationalist images of Farrakhan and Harriet Tubman are the only outside forces permitted within the home; they are also Precious's sources of inspiration.

The hopefulness Precious retains is both remarkable and inspiring, but Gerald Early considers it inadequate. Much like Du Bois's problems with Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Claude McKay's *Banjo*, Early's repudiation of the novel is misinformed by an elitist bias against folk literature. Early fails to acknowledge the psychological and institutional conditions the Black underclass endure. In his article, "An Updated and Inadequate Version of *The New Negro*," Early diminishes *PUSH* and Precious as suffering from "a hard drive for verisimilitude without any underpinnings of substance" (126). Certainly abuse, survival, racial identity conflicts, sexuality, religious indoctrination, a flawed public education system, and social injustice (among the other things) qualify as underpinnings that are quite substantive. So, too, are the recurring topics of hope and love. Precious has not lost her ability to love and care for others, including herself. While in the mid-twentieth century, "Harlem was, for most observers, the quintessential second ghetto" (Rotella 220), to Precious, Harlem represents a community of the dispossessed; it is a neighborhood in which people have many

disadvantages and are still able to find sources of inspiration and blessing. In her conversation with classmates about religion, she remarks, “Sho me God” (104), and she also perceives the images of Harlem as representations of God. Even in Harlem’s many unattractive elements, Precious finds beauty and inspiration:

This
 a Harlem done
 took
 a beating
 but morning
 if you
 like
 me
 you see
 ILANATHA tree rape
 Concrete
 n birf
 spiky green
 trunk
 life. (105)

Griffin echoes Precious’s idea when she writes, “The concrete is raped, like Precious, and, like Precious, it gives birth to a new life” (24). The new life Griffin mentions is the hope and promise of a better tomorrow, a new chance, a new beginning. In the literal sense, Precious’s new life is the birth of her son/brother Abdul, for whom she desires a bright and happy future. In the poem, the life Precious sees is the essence and potential of Harlem — its hidden splendors: “It is a Harlem void of dreams, but for Precious, even this landscape has a natural beauty” (Griffin 25). Similarly,

Precious sees potential in herself. Her reluctant love for Harlem, then, is also a reflection of the reluctant love she has for herself despite the apparent flaws.

Like Big L, Precious, too, occupies a particular space in her Harlem world. She does not appear territorial, but it is evident that she deeply values Harlem and what it represents. Like most people, Precious values the familiar and she resists changing her environment, even if it is thought to be for her best interest:

They wanna send me to ½way house in Queens, immediate opening!
NO! What I know about Queens?! They got Arabs, Koreans, Jews, and
Jamaicans — all kinda shit me and Abdul don't need to be bothered
with. Here, I stay here in Harlem. (81)

The Harlem familiarity and sense of loyalty binds Precious to her neighborhood. Precious fears this dramatic change in scenery, despite the rich cultural diversity that is available to her if she relocated to Queens. Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison also acknowledge the city's diversity, "New York City is a polyglot community of many ethnic and racial groups" (238). Precious acknowledges the diversity of Queens, but she rejects it as unfamiliar and literally foreign in comparison to her Harlem neighborhood. Precious's subjectivity and self-perception is deeply connected to the blackness of Harlem; her sense of Self is reflected in the urban environs that surround and consume her. In *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, Touré asserts, "The ability to maneuver within white society — and how high you can rise within white power structures — is often tied to your ability to modulate" (11). Precious's illiteracy is an indicator that her social mobility and ability to integrate the white world of New York is limited, — she wins the poetry award — but her primary

literary subject and audience is her black Harlem community. She is aware of the various lifestyles present in her own community, and she does not always agree with these options. She writes a poem in which she discusses her neighborhood, with its “vaykent lot,” “dog shit,” “dope addicks,” and “harlm crime” (108-09). Although she emphasizes the ugliness and dysfunction of Harlem, she still asserts that Harlem the place for her and her children. In comparison to other parts of New York City, she says, “Harlem is small, but when you *in* it it look like the world” (127). Harlem is *her* world, no matter what. During her trip downtown to an incest survivor’s meeting, Precious writes about downtown Manhattan:

everything is fine
big glass windows
stores
white people
fur
blue jeans
it’s a different city
I’m in a different city
Who I be I grow up here? (129)

In this poem, Precious objectively questions the society she lives in, especially as it relates to racial and class differences between her Harlem world and the world downtown. “As she acquires literacy, Precious begins to understand her own restricted place within the wider urban system” (Dubey 62). Precious is *who* she is because of her struggles. Her status as a minority on the social fringe makes her who she is; it is the essence of her subjectivity. However, her location on society’s periphery does not prohibit her from developing into her Self.

Precious experiences a remarkable transformation; she begins to make her own decisions and follows a path that *she* has chosen, rather than walk the path chosen *for* her by someone else (her mother, her former teachers, the welfare counselors, etc.). As a result of her transformation, she is more confident interacting with others. Paulo Freire proposes in his treatise, *Education for Critical Consciousness*: “The integrated person is person as *Subject*” (4). In Precious’s circumstances, she is no longer the alienated, vulnerable, withdrawn, and indecisive adolescent, but instead, she emerges as a young woman who is assertive, thoughtful, and engaging. Through her acquisition of language, Precious gains the capacity to write and speak about herself; for the most part, *PUSH* reads like a journal or personal narrative. Hurley and Hurley state, “Precious’s identity, her existence as a person, is almost completely dependent on her ability to give expression to her experience” (106). This narrative of self-consciousness functions as a platform from which she can reveal matters personal and intimate to her; thus, she authenticates herself through her writing and by using her voice to express herself.

By using her voice to speak what she once could not say, she frees herself from the binds of deception and shame. Her swift departure from her mother’s house is a consequence of her disclosing the truth about her mother’s deceptions to the social worker, saying that she was tired of the lying and the games (69). Paulo Freire writes about truth in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only true words, with which men and

women transform the world” (88). Until Precious tells the truth to herself and to others, she is unable to achieve fully her existence as a Subject. She is able to articulate what Harlem means to her when she speaks and writes about *all* of its places and people: “Even now I go downtown and seen the rich shit they got, I see what we got too. I see those men in vacant lot share one hot dog and they homeless, that’s good as Jesus with his fish” (140-41). Precious’s comparison of the homeless men in her neighborhood to the Biblical tales of Jesus’ famed miracles⁵ is quite profound. Just as she still prevails despite the odds against her, she views Harlem as a miracle because it still exists, struggling and trying to persevere despite its many obstacles and setbacks.

However, for Lester Jefferson of Charles Wright’s *The Wig: A Mirror Image*, the only miracle (if we are to call it that) is the luxurious coiffure he chemically creates to astound and impress others, especially himself. Published in 1966 and contemporaneously set, *The Wig: A Mirror Image* is Wright’s second installment of his New York City trilogy, which includes the first and third novels *The Messenger* and *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed About*, respectively. *The Wig: A Mirror Image* is a poignant satire about socioeconomic class, race relations and identity in

⁵ The New Testament gospels of Matthew (14.13-21), Mark (6.30-44), Luke (9.10-17), and John (6.1-14), have accounts of Jesus performing a miracle in which five loaves of bread and two fish were able to feed over five thousand people who came to see him. There are also additional accounts in Matthew (15.32-39) and Mark (8.1-10) of Jesus’s repeating the miracle with a group of over four thousand people.

New York City with Harlem as the central setting for the plot. In an interview with Alan Katz, Clarence Major says about Charles Wright:

his characters are black, usually, but it isn't the totality of their identity. They're very American in their obsessions: They want to make it. They want money. They have all these American values. Or, they're very jaded and dejected and isolated. In other words, blackness isn't necessarily the most important thing about them. (53)

Major's observation points to what, perhaps, is the paradoxical and satirical focus of *The Wig*: Lester's preoccupation with his racial and ethnic origins forces him to evade the racial aspect of his identity. Just as Precious is concerned about how she is viewed and perceived, so is Lester, who believes that his chemically processed hairdo gives him confidence in his appearance and abilities and will grant him acceptance into The Great Society. Also, like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Lester lacks self-awareness and is on a quest to find it through various unconventional means.

Whereas Precious' quest begins with her enrollment at the Higher Education Alternative, Lester's begins with the chemical straightening and coloring of his hair. Both Precious and Lester deliberately choose to pursue their goals. In her article, "Charles Wright: Black Black Humorist," Frances S. Foster characterizes Lester as "the reluctant hero . . . trying to make it in contemporary society" (52). Part of Lester's journey is compelled by his racially ambiguous appearance, but the most important rationale is his life of poverty and desperation: "everyone seemed to jet toward the goal of The Great Society, while I remained in the outhouse, penniless,

without ‘connections’ ” (137). The failures of President Johnson’s Great Society alienate Precious and Lester, who yearn for acceptance. Lester’s sense of discord is due to his being told early in his life about the limitations he has, but he refuses to accept his situation. For his sixteenth birthday gift, his mentor and sponsor, Mr. Fishback, shares some wisdom, “It’s time you learned something. That Harlem skyline is the outline of your life” (242). Lester resents that Harlem is the whole of his life; he wants more and he wants out, hoping for a new chance at life: “It could happen: rebirth in this land, or was such a birth only an exit from the womb, not a door to the future?” (182). Unlike Precious, Lester tries to leave Harlem, only to return forlorn. In *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folks Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Bernard W. Bell refers to Lester as a “blind pursuer of the American Dream” (234). Therefore, The Great Society⁶ is intricately tied to the American founding ideology of prosperity and pleasure.

Lester’s goals of wealth and happiness are akin to Precious’s, but both face the challenges of being African American and poor. However, like to Francie’s father in *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, Lester considers welfare assistance an unconscionable way to achieve these goals: “Naturally, I could have got on welfare, but who has the guts to stand on the stoop, hands in pockets, chewing on a toothpick ten hours a day, watching little kids pass by, their big eyes staring up at you like the

⁶ The Great Society referred to in *The Wig*, it is a proper noun and subject that appears to exist as an insular, privileged, isolated entity, whereas Johnson’s “Great Society” was intended as a utopian model for the whole of American society.

eye of extras in some war movie? There are some things a man can't do" (138).

Lester's literal hunger from being unemployed is coupled with his figurative hunger for integration into mainstream society. Major acknowledges that although it may not always be the predominant topic of Wright's novels, there is a tension in "the relationship between ethnic identity and the American experience" (53). Lester's moldy, rat and roach infested shanty Harlem apartment is his home; he exists on the fringe of American society. The "good life," as President Johnson calls it, refers to material wealth, economic stability and social acceptance, all of which Lester lacks. What Johnson neglects to mention is the role race or ethnicity plays in one's access to this "good life"; instead, he directs his attentions on the conditions of urban life without mentioning *the people* who live in the cities.

The conditions of Lester's life in the hyperghetto of Harlem are meager at best. Until he gets his new hairstyle via the Silky Smooth Hair Relaxer, he lives a life of want. Lester had already been trying to masquerade or pass "as a silent Arab" (138), but was soon discovered as a fraud. He considers masquerading as other ethnicities, lured by the promises of immediate social improvement and material success the Silky Smooth Hair Relaxer can help him get. The vendor of the Silky Smooth hair product tells him, "With this, you may become whatever you desire" (138), and with his new "wig," Lester immediately pursues a life passing for other ethnicities that he believes are welcomed by The Great Society. Even though he cannot pass for "a nice little white Protestant" (138), he is excited by the opportunity

to pass for something other than African American. Darryl Dickson-Carr discusses Lester's wig in *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*: "His 'wig' becomes the central focus for every person he encounters, as each tries to force him into easily identifiable racial categories" (142). By passing or masquerading, Lester believes he will be able to integrate into The Great Society. However, Paulo Freire's definition of integration differs significantly from Lester's:

Integration with one's context, as distinguished from *adaptation*, is a distinctly human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his choices are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he has adapted. He has "adjusted." (*Education* 4)

Although we can argue that Lester does manage to integrate according to the Freirean definition, it is essential to note that Lester's logic is flawed. He is enthralled by the "external prescriptions" of The Great Society, and as a result, he tries to pass in order to adapt to their standards. These materialistic prescriptions — "pretty girls, credit cards, charge accounts, Hart Schaffner & Marx suits, fine shoes, Dobbs hats, XK-E Jaguars, and more pretty girls" (137) — are The Great Society's utopian symbols of success; the lack of these prompt Lester's self-conscious anxieties and materialistic fantasies.

Lester lacks self-awareness, and thus, subjectivity; therefore, he is incapable of being an integrated person. In his study, *Fables of Subversion*, Steven Weisenburger claims Lester's wig "is the ridiculous signifier of racist values that are

wholly reified and offered for sale on the screen or over the counter” (155). For Lester, masquerading is a viable solution for changing one’s circumstances. Because of his bleak situation, he decides to change them: “My mirrored image reflected, in an occult fashion, a magnificent future” (140). However, he is not changing his reality. Instead, Lester is *adapting* to his reality: “In contrast [to the integrated person], the adaptive person is person as *object*, adaptation is incapable of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaptation is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization” (Freire, *Education* 4). After straightening his hair (and claiming to others it is his natural texture), Lester becomes objectified, and others pay more attention to his hair, his wig, than they do to him. His neighbor says to him, “I hope my son has good hair.⁷ God knows he’ll need something to make it in this world” (144). Lester also objectifies himself, and he expects his changed coiffure will enable him to achieve great success, “I feel like a new person. I know my luck is changing. My ship is just around the bend” (144). Becoming a member of The Great Society is Lester’s ultimate goal, and he feels that his “anointed, beautified” (141) self will have access to it. Lester’s attempt to change his future is partially achieved with The Wig, but that, too, is a fleeting illusion.

Rotella suggests that Lester’s efforts are futile. Because Harlem and Harlemites were ignored by the Great Society: “Harlem was, for most observers, the quintessential

⁷ From an African-American cultural perspective, the term *good hair* refers to hair that is soft in texture, straight or wavy and easy to comb. In *400 Years without a Comb*, Willie Morrow comments that a dark complexion and coarse hair are considered unattractive or undesirable features (60).

second ghetto” (Rotella 220). Harlem is Lester’s place of residence and his neighbor, Nonnie, refers to living conditions in Harlem as “unchained slavery” (142). Lester identifies with Harlem in the sense that he also feels trapped, marginalized, and unwelcome by The Great Society. According to Parker, “both liberal and conservative analysts of the American underclass agree that public policy [such as Lyndon Johnson’s ‘Great Society’ reforms] bears a large degree of responsibility for the persistence of the ghetto and its concentration in the form of the hyperghetto” (93). Similarly, The Great Society as Lester envisions it is deeply invested in the underclass. Therefore, “unchained slavery” is the unending, intensified and cyclical condition of poverty and marginalization. Just as Nonnie is perpetually pregnant, Lester’s unending desire for admittance into mainstream society keeps him trying to get in. Although he is fair in complexion, he is not portrayed as an archetypal tragic mulatto, but his circumstances and characterization are quite similar.

In his seminal text, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Film*, Donald Bogle defines the archetypal tragic mulatto as a female character of mixed-race ancestry who can *almost* pass for white, but scant Black genetics prevents her from being accepted in mainstream American society (9); nonetheless, the tragic mulatto can also be a male character. The tragic mulatto is often a character who is unfulfilled, hence, the tragedy. Lester is aware of his blackness despite his deceased father’s appearance that was “the exact color of an off-color Irishman” (147) and who had “a cat’s gray eyes” (151). Having no shortage

of romantic propositions or sexual liaisons, Lester's masculinity and desirability also characterize him as what Bogle defines as a Buck Negro who aims to disrupt the social order (13). Instead of being a physically hostile to whites, like the typical Buck Negro character, Lester's uses The Wig attempting to pass; this act functions as the emblem of social disorder. He desires access into The Great Society and its accoutrements as the domain of whiteness and wealth; he also resents his parents for not altering his appearance by shaping his nose with a clothespin (151). Granted, Lester is a tragic character, the tragedy is his inability to recognize his substantive value and potential. Conrad Knickerbocker writes in his review of *The Wig*, "the worst burden the Negro must bear is not racial discrimination, but self-loathing" (18). Lester believes that his changed appearance will grant him opportunities for advancement, and thus, he too can live the good life with his good hair: "I *am* an American. That's an established fact. America's the land of elbow grease and hard work. Then — you've got it made" (156). Lester believes that his new hair has granted him the perspective and privilege of whiteness, and that he no longer has the matter of race to prevent his joining The Great Society. Lester's disposition is especially significant because of the colloquial meanings of *wig*, which correlate to chemically straightened hair and to a person's brain and its functions. So, because of his Wig (the hairstyle), his wig (thought process) also becomes altered. This instance of linguistic play is one of several within the novel. Wright effectively uses puns and other figurative elements in this satire or work of black humor; The Wig, itself, is a

symbolic artifice that embodies the tropes of fantasy and reality, magic and myth. The Silky Smooth Hair Relaxer and its effects are portrayed as magical and the American ideology of hard work is the myth.

More specifically, the Horatio Alger myth, or rags-to-riches tale, becomes more complicated with an African-American character. In her December 2003, *Newsweek* article “A New Kind of Poverty,” Anna Quindlen discusses the challenges of this American ideology: “America is a country that now sits atop the precarious latticework of myth. . . . In America we console ourselves with the bootstrap myth, that anyone can rise, even those who work two jobs and still have to visit food pantries to feed their families” (76). The “elbow grease” Lester mentions is connected to the American bootstrap myth that hard work will be rewarded. Lester has the gullible naïveté of a typical consumer who not only bought the relaxer, but, as Max Schulz states, Lester is “[s]old on the American Dream of working one’s way up the ladder of success” (151). Therefore, Lester is *buying* into the notion that hard work will be the only thing keeping him from his goals, not his racial identity. According to Weisenberger, Lester has been fooled: “The joke is on Lester for naively buying into this consumer society” (156). For Lester, joining The Great Society will mean that his humanity has been recognized:

I touched The Wig.⁸ Yes. Security had always eluded me, but it wouldn’t much longer. American until the last breath, a true believer in The Great Society, I’d turn the other cheek, cheat, steal, take the

⁸ The Wig, Lester’s hairstyle, is referred to as a proper noun and subject.

fifth amendment, walk bare-assed up Mr. Jones' ladder, and state firmly that I too was human. (169)

As an African-American subject, Lester realizes his dehumanization is a direct result of his racial and ethnic status; therefore, Lester equates being human with being white (168). Regarding Lester's attempt to assimilate, Dickson-Carr also notes, "attaining power in America's racial climate depends upon the individual's desire to sacrifice racial or ethnic identity and assimilate white standards" (142). However, Lester does not perceive his new hairstyle as making a sacrifice or as an inconvenience. The "security" Lester mentions implies he has great faith that his new hairstyle will provide for and support him: "The Wig is gonna see me through these troubled times" (144). Lester's hope and confidence in his new hair's abilities is intimately connected to the pains of his youth, when he and his mother lived a life of hardship: "The Wig wasn't just for kicks. It was rooted in something deeper, in the sorrow of the winter when I was ten years old" (148). For Lester, then, The Wig has greater significance because it symbolizes his triumph over adversity, but it cannot free him from the destitution of his environment.

Lester often credits Harlem with positive attributes throughout the novel; however, the descriptions of Harlem are remarkably grotesque. At the beginning of Chapter Four, Harlem is not so picturesque: "the heart of Harlem — 125th Street . . . has grandeur if you know how to look at it. Harlem, the very name a part of New World History, is a ghetto nuovo on the Hudson; it reeks with frustrations and an ounce of job" (157). This frustration seems to echo Langston Hughes' dream

deferred, especially the olfactory imagery of decomposition and stench. As a “ghetto nuovo,” Harlem is portrayed as a desirable place or a location that is valued, even with its inability to sustain employment. During his conversation with Little Jimmie Wishbone, Lester exclaims, “But this is home, baby! This is the only place in the world where you can have the time of your life” (160). However, Harlem and 125th Street are portrayed in conflicting types — being an environment that is infected, sterile, dysfunctional, and blighted, contrasted with “an aura of commerce, peace, splendor” (158) that houses “quaint stinking alleys” (159). The sidewalks are sprinkled with semen, which indicates barrenness and abuse; Harlem has gotten screwed by the “slumming whites” (157) who leave their emissions as evidence of their presence. The stark contrast to Harlem and its degradation is Brooklyn. The Duke, an archaeologist collector of racial artifacts — such as a charred seven-foot cross, fire hoses, and fur from a police dog — informs Lester that Brooklyn is home of the blues because its residents live in misery (180).

The Duke’s assertion is alarming, considering Blumenstein’s Department store on 125th Street vends a repulsive product: “Human-hair rugs were the latest rage. These rugs, clipped from live Negro traitors, had a lifetime guarantee. Blumenstein’s reported a remarkable sale” (158). Prostitutes are also featured as vendors of products in Harlem; they present themselves as dignified and poised women of high social standing. Regarding residential life, the housing options in Harlem are presented as both limited and of very low standard. Harlemites live “in

their photogenic tenements” (158), “a condemned residential park” (160), “settlement houses” (161), or abandoned buildings. If one’s life situation is too unbearable, Harlem features a facility to assist with suicide: “[That green house is] an electronic snake pit. When things get too tough, you just hold this electronic cord until you can’t stand it any longer. A gas. Almost like taking dope. Cheaper than the subway” (160). Despite Harlem’s state of affairs, Brooklyn’s conditions are characterized as being worse, the place where the blues are truly lived. Lester’s revitalized optimism is credited to The Wig; with his new social prospects in mind, he dreamily muses, “this was the land of hope” (170). It is quite possible that the *this* to which Lester refers is both Harlem and the United States. With Lester’s new ideological framework, he is quite optimistic. While walking through Harlem and on 125th Street, Lester admires the Apollo Theatre and the commercial presence: “Strolling briskly with my friend, I felt pride seep into my pores. I was part of this world. . . . The opportunity for Negroes to *progress* was truly coming. . . . Yes. Wiggled and very much aware of the happenings, I knew my ship was just around the bend” (158-59). Although the situations presented in Lester’s world are somewhat fantastical, his optimism coincides with the social changes attempted by New York City’s Mayor, John Lindsay, who served two terms between 1966 and 1973. He was the first New York City Mayor to appoint African Americans to positions in his cabinet.⁹ Edward

⁹ Robert O. Lowery was the first African American appointed to the position of Fire Commissioner for the City of New York. Eleanor Holmes Norton was the first African-

Rothstein comments on Mayor Lindsay's progressivism and his commitment to social change. The documentary film *Fun City Revisited: The Lindsay Years*, opens with commentary about the many challenges facing New York City in 1965, such as: "White flight and urban decay, welfare and pollution, racism, rats." Like other major urban areas, New York City was also affected by the increasing slums, housing shortages, and poverty. In *Metropolitan America*, Kenneth Fox examines the increasing poverty of America's cities and he analyzes its effects. During the 1960s and 1970s, "New York City was enduring all the hardships of metropolitan deconcentration and urban crisis" (Fox 239). Similar to the Great Society proposed by President Johnson, Lindsay's social and political ideology was also inclusive. In one of his mayoral campaign advertisements, Lindsay states:

Yet, before this very day is over, someone will be murdered, children will be bitten by rats, Negroes will be denied jobs because of their race, fifty-thousand drug addicts will need another fix, fifty jobs will leave the City, countless families will be without water, without heat, and all of us will breathe the deadly air that is the same as smoking two packs of cigarettes. (*Fun City Revisited*)

Lester's observations and remarks about Harlem echo Lindsay's concerns, in which joblessness, racial discrimination, poor housing conditions, violence, vermin and pollution contribute to his misery. New York City's social and living conditions were notably similar to Lester's and that is most likely intentional on Wright's part.

Acknowledging Lindsay's progressive political legacy, Rothstein writes in his *New York Times* article, "Lindsay's administration gave the issue of race paramount

American female Human Rights Commissioner.

importance” (C21) which was a remarkable departure from previous administrations where racial and also gender representation was notably uniform: “Before 1966 there were no black officials in the mayor’s cabinet; after 1973 it was difficult to imagine that world” (Rothstein C21). However, despite Lindsay’s efforts, racial and socioeconomic tensions continued to exist in New York City. Of course, Lester lives in a New York City not much different from Mayor Lindsay’s. In a press interview, Lindsay speaks about New York City’s plight: “The chief virus here is deterioration and decay, oppression sometimes, closed doors, discrimination or patterns of it that have existed or still do exist, uh, a feeling of hopelessness” (*Fun City Revisited*). What gives Lester hope is The Wig, that he thinks will ameliorate the effects of the virus. Not only does he believe in The Wig’s immortality, but he also uses it for sentimental reasons, “A monument to progress in the name of [his] dead parents” (175). Clearly, Lester has the same lofty goals as the Great Society and Lindsay’s social agenda. Conrad Knickerbocker argues, “[Lester’s] new wig, like every other gimmick foisted off the Negro, merely gives him false hope” (18). It is this false hope that Wright satirizes throughout the novel.

Lester’s strong faith in The Wig is a laughable delusion, especially since The Great Society privileges whiteness and wealth. He observes partygoers on 125th Street who patronize an exclusive nightclub: “These are people who can afford to escape the daytime fear of the city. Envious, I watch their entrances and exits from the clubs. I especially watch the Negroes, who pretend that the black-faced poor do not exist”

(157). Just as Precious feels invisible because of her social status, so does Lester; both desire to be seen, acknowledged and accepted. Yet, according to Lester's friend Jimmy, The Wig is an unnatural spectacle and a nuisance: "He looks like a goddam Christmas tree. Blinding everybody on the street. There was a traffic jam at one hundred and twenty-fifth. Six people injured, but they was all white" (176).

Ironically, the person most affected and unsighted by The Wig is its wearer, Lester. Victor Navasky writes in his review of *The Wig* about Wright's vision for the scope of the novel's narrative. Although Lester is quite the optimist, Navasky proposes that the novel's message is the exact opposite: "And, in a masochistic, searing climax, [Wright] seems to argue, with James Baldwin, that the Negro may be damaged beyond repair, that only through continued pain and self-inflicted suffering can he make contact with reality" (BR 12). Lester acknowledges his pain and uses it to propel him toward a different situation and reality: "I was happy like a man when a particularly painful wound begins to heal. I was no longer jockeying for position: I was *in* position" (185). Creating The Wig is Lester's attempt at breaking through the barrier that keeps him in the hyperghetto of Harlem.

But is Lester really "in position" as he perceives himself to be? He seems to be aware of the temporality of The Wig and its consequences. He appreciates the fantasy, knowing it will not last forever: "I realize people have to have a little make-believe. . . . Sooner or later, though, you have to step into the spotlight of reality. You've got to do your bit for yourself and society" (143). The "spotlight of reality"

that Lester mentions is his own idealized transition, one in which he has truly changed his situation for the better. In a wiser moment of reflection, he notes “I was definitely insane, an ambitious lunatic” (193). This comment suggests he gains the critical self-awareness necessary to create and maintain his subjectivity. Precious and Lester must engage in critical thinking that informs their subjectivity. They reflect on their respective situations and act on these reflections; their marginalization is their reality. Another part of their reality is that Harlem is segregated from the rest of New York City as another world that is shrouded from public (i.e. white and wealthy) view. Just as Precious experienced alienation when she went downtown, Lester is also aware of his “outsider” and “Other” status once he leaves Harlem’s perimeters. Reviewer HWF notes in a *Negro Digest* article, “Young Lester wastes no great amount of time worrying about storming the bastions of Madison Avenue downtown, for instance, knowing what the odds are there” (81). On three separate occasions, Lester ventures downtown to explore the world of privilege, only to hastily return to the safe familiarity of his Harlem neighborhood. He enjoys his new mobility, but he is painfully aware of its limits.

The trip downtown to the record label is one specific instance in which Lester encounters these limitations. The fearful white taxi driver is complacent, timid, and submissive despite Lester’s verbal assaults: “Sweat showed on the driver’s face. ‘Yes, sir. That’s what I am. A turd. But you people are the greatest. You have so much soul. And how you can sing and dance. You must be the happiest people on the face of the

earth' ” (182). The driver's stereotyped comments suggest that he does not see African Americans as individuals with complex lives and identities, but instead, he sees them as one-dimensional objects. The taxi driver expects Lester and Jimmy to rob and assault him and he willfully submits for them to do so (but they do not). To the driver, they are only visible according to the racist social conventions of being either crooners or criminals. However, once the taxi arrives downtown, the driver becomes more aggressive: “ ‘Shut your trap. I've had enough from you jokers.’ . . . ‘Boys,’ . . . ‘you ain't on home ground now. . . . This is my turf. We're *downtown*' ” (183). The driver's mentioning of spatial boundaries indicates that power associations exist within specific territories. These spatial boundaries correlate with Parker's observation that “social divisions in the city [are] expressed through spatial segregation” (86). His power-center or turf is downtown and theirs is uptown in Harlem. Interestingly, the racial tensions between the taxi driver and his passengers subside once they reveal their social and material value as performers for Paradise Records. Their status as celebrities, or future ones, gives them credibility with the taxi driver who uses their “celebrity” status to disassociate Jimmy and Lester from other Blacks that he perceives are substandard: “Get you away from the Harlem riffraff. I knew all along that you two gentlemen were something special. The riffraff is causing all the trouble. Making it bad for you colored people” (183). Being a Harlemit should cause Lester to take offense, but he does not. Instead, he credits *The Wig* with

his new social standing, and he concurs with the driver while fantasizing about his new prospects:

Impersonation is an act of courage, as well as an act of skill, for the impersonator must be coldhearted, aware of his limitations. I, however, suddenly realized I *had* no limitations. I felt good. . . . My new image had crystallized. An aristocratic image, I might add. The new image was based on The Wig (193)

The Wig is Lester's tool for infiltrating the spatial segregation in New York. During his second downtown adventure, Lester's new image passes as a white man. He appears so remarkably different, his godfather, Tom Lacy, fails to recognize him, and he dines at segregated (white only) restaurants. Lester revels in his deception and embraces his new situation: "Strutting down Sutton, I perhaps looked like a happy citizen of Manhattan but my real roots were deep in the countryside that had produced people like my dead parents" (200) and his surrogate father. The exclusive residences of Sutton Place South are usually off-limits to someone of Lester's social status, unless he is hired or domestic help, like Tom. His departure from The Great Society realm of Sutton Place South is prompted by his encounter with a panhandler claiming to be an escaped slave. Not only is he reminded of his situation as an outsider or Other, but he is a slave to the racist and materialist aims of The Great Society. The slavery reference is possibly an allusion to Mark Twain's character Jim. Peter R. Teachout analyzes *The Wig* and Lester in relation to the character of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "In *The Wig*, this image of the fastened-down, grotesquely masqueraded, runaway slave Jim is superimposed on the classic Faustian

legend-in the context of contemporary Harlem. The result is Lester Jefferson's story" (467). Like Jim and the runaway slave he meets, Lester is masquerading as a way to achieve his freedom, but Lester's concept of freedom pertains to things monetary and material. Although Lester thinks his masquerade is undetectable, the slave recognizes Lester's façade. Lester's denial is countered with evidence of the man's chattel status, which evokes his anxiety, fear and paranoia: "Then I turned off Sutton Place South and walked up 54th Street and up first Avenue toward home, toward Harlem" (201). Through his exchange with the slave, Lester is uncomfortably reminded of his true place and his true Self.

He is again reminded of his true place when strolling downtown via Central Park West. To his dismay, The Wig offends people, who castigate, ostracize and alienate him. According to Friedman, The Wig is "the theater mask that is a mere representation, a symbol or image of what it represents" (143). Lester eventually resigns himself to his lot, but not without a great struggle and some disappointment:

Following my own shadow, it seemed that I was taking a step in *some* direction and that The Wig was my guide. Progress is our most important product, General Electric says, and I had progressed to the front door of hell when all I had actually been striving for was a quiet purgatory. And I did not find it strange that hell had a soft blue sky, a springlike air, music, dust, laughter, curses.

I only wished I could see a friendly face. (247-48)

Lester is a pariah because of The Wig; he endures isolation for the sake of his social ambitions. Teachout comments, "the Wig means distance, alienation and impotency" (468). Lester and Precious are alienated and ostracized for being different. The

“friendly face” he eventually meets is that of a young woman whose swarthy features make her ethnic identity a mystery. In typical Buck Negro fashion, he has a tryst with her, but he hopes she is not African American: “I would die if the girl was simply a dark Gentile” (248). The joke is on Lester, because she is masquerading too, but he is so blinded by her “blue-black shiny hair” (248) he does not realize the obvious.

Lester lives in Harlem and is therefore racially marked; however, she lives downtown in a brownstone on Central Park West, which makes her racial and ethnic categorization more difficult for identify. She has the money and privilege Lester wants, but her talk of love and a future forces his hasty retreat to Harlem.

Although Lester is cognizant of his true place, the novel progresses with shifts in his psyche as progressive, regressive, stuck and mobile. Harlem’s “harsh streets” (219) keep Lester anxious about his marginalized social and economic positions. He walks them with an air of strength and confidence sporting The Wig, but his relationship with his prostitute girlfriend, The Deb, keeps him feeling emasculated and powerless. In his many attempts to impress and retain her company, The Deb reminds him of his primary weakness, his inability to pay for her: “Men. You want the world but don’t wanna pay the price” (222). He takes a job as a chicken mascot and becomes an object of ridicule, but his delusion makes him think he is a celebrity who is “part of [the] national economy” (230), and thus, a useful contributor to society. On the contrary, The Wig makes Lester a liability to society. It is supposed to make Lester strong and brave, but it weakens him. Both as a chicken and as “himself”

adorned with golden curly locks, Lester is an unnatural oddity who is eventually unmasked. As he predicts, the masquerade inevitably ends; the Deb is no longer blinded by The Wig and she says to him, “I know what you are — you’re a Nigger” (230) and ends the relationship. Lester is emotionally caught and becomes somewhat disenchanted with The Wig, because it causes a rift between him and The Deb, “my own impersonation had caused the death of a bright dream” (231). Prior to meeting The Deb, Lester only fantasized about his material success. Teachout argues, The Wig “comes to symbolize a barrier between [Lester] and fellowship and love” (468). Once their relationship began, Lester’s dream of The Great Society suggests that he and “The Deb” would enjoy a family life of security and success. Instead, Lester’s new hair becomes the thing that prevents him from being with the Deb and having the family he desires.

Harlem is home to Lester, and because The Wig has lost some of its effect, he truly sees Harlem’s dysfunction, ugliness, and decay, just as Precious sees her environs. Despite the abundant presence of children in Harlem, there is a sense of barrenness. In one notable satiric incidence, while walking down Lenox Avenue, Lester witnesses a mother kill her son because he refuses to attend a segregated school (244). Even though he wants children and a family, the mystical soothsayer Madame X’s predicts Lester is bound for an unfruitful destiny: “You are the road to self-destruction. . . . All is not lost, though. You may find the way, *despite* The Wig!” (235). In a notable contrast with Lester’s failed illusion, Precious is able to maintain

her fantasy. She surrenders the fantasies of being a beloved white child and instead adopts new dreams of being an educated and self-sufficient mother. Madame X and Mr. Fishback believe “Having children is the greatest sin in this country . . . a *very* great sin” (254). On the contrary, carrying through with her pregnancies is Precious’s expression of love for life, and their refusal to procreate embraces death and finality. Griffin comments that “there is little hope or possibility for survival or transcendence” (24) in Precious’s situation. But she manages to keep striving against what appear to be insurmountable odds. Precious hopes that her children, particularly Abdul, will have a happy life. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Lester, who, because he desires to procreate with The Deb, presents a threat that will, in turn, create more blacks who will pursue an impossible dream — the American Dream. Whereas Lester perceives The Wig as his beacon of hope, Madame X believes it will cause his demise:

“I’ll see you later, Madam,” I said.
 “No, you won’t see me,” Madam X warned, without looking up.
 “You’ll see the *portrait* of Lester Jefferson, and he’ll be *without* The Wig.” (235)

Her prophecy elicits Lester’s guilt and shame. He is attached to The Wig and feels justified in pursuing The Great Society: “But I didn’t mean anything! All I wanted was to be happy, I didn’t know to be happy was a crime, a *sin*” (241). The sin Lester mentions is connected to Madam X’s belief that happiness is an illusion that Blacks cannot afford. Although it is important for Lester to have this happiness experience so he can better understand himself, the risk is the illusion — The Wig — that exists at

its center. In *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, Jonathan Friedman echoes

Madame X's sentiments, recognizing the danger of Lester's game:

The constitution of identity is an elaborate and deadly serious game of mirrors. It is a complex temporal interaction of multiple practices of identification external and internal to a subject or population. In order to understand the constitutive process it is, thus, necessary to be able to situate the mirrors in space and their movement in time. (141)

The seriousness of the matter is connected to power structures. Just as Precious' mother is threatened when her daughter becomes literate and, thus, the mother can no longer control her, The Wig is a societal threat because it challenges the notion of that whiteness is unattainable. Lester's transgression represents "modern man's loss of individuality in an attempt to fit into life as they have been conditioned to see it" (Foster 49). Lester's naïveté is evidenced in the fact that he has threatened the natural order of things. He is bemused and he wonders whether other African Americans will follow his example and create a new social order:

At least I was the first. But soon there'd be millions of red-headed Negroes. . . . Would the children of red-headed Silky Smooth parents have red- or kinky- or mixed-colored hair? . . . Would there be a new type of American Negro? Red-headed American Negroes, a minority within a minority? An off-color elite? And would that be a good thing? Maybe not. (240)

Lester's sarcastic musing "Maybe not" suggests serious implications for disrupting the status quo. Through Lester's adventures, Wright makes a bitter and tragicomic statement about social relations in the United States. In *African American Satire*, Dickson-Carr writes: "[Lester] realizes that Americans find it impossible to function without rigidly divided hierarchies and categories. Inevitably, the desire for a strict

social order extends to African American communities” (142). Therefore, this new Harlem of Lester’s fantasy would be detrimental to Black communities because there would be additional fragmentation and segregation among Blacks. Friedman proposes, “the emergence of cultural identity implies the fragmentation of a larger unity and is always experienced as a threat. It is often criminalized and often punished” (142). Already, Harlem’s residential areas were fragmented based on color and class; adding another category would contribute to these intraracial tensions.

Lester’s return to Harlem is marked with a tragic circumstance; the Deb’s untimely but inevitable death means the end of Lester’s fantasy. Robert Sedlack discusses the termination of Lester’s fantasy in his article “Jousting With Rats.” In reference to *The Wig* and Lester as the powerful masculine figure, Sedlack posits, “Lester’s wig is shorn, not to destroy the hero’s strength, but to symbolize the self-degradation and impotence of the black man who tries to live according to white standards” (38) represented by *The Great Society*. Lester is in pursuit of the fantasy of love as well as that of racial acceptance. Madame X warns him against the dangers and perils of romantic love, which she calls “a *bourgeois* sin” (234) created by Satan to keep African Americans distracted from social progress. Because Lester “remains an incorrigible, pathetic optimist” (Bell 235), he is sterilized to prevent him from causing additional harm to African-American society, and, thus, made impotent. Ignoring his disappointments, Lester remains wishful. Despite his attempts to change his destiny, *The Great Society* is inaccessible to Lester, and he reluctantly accepts

Harlem as his fate. Sedlack argues the main moral of Lester's story is "the futility of a black man's attempt to succeed in the white world, a world that is defined . . . as exclusively materialistic and personified by The Deb, who, though black, reflects the white American world's standards" (39).

Teachout recognizes the complexity of Lester's story: "*The Wig* is a book that needs to be deciphered before it can be read" (468). Similarly, *PUSH* and Precious's cryptic pre-literate scribes must also be deciphered. A superficial reading is deceptive, for both Precious and Lester are complex characters whose narratives and experiences are the embodiment of Harlem at its different phases. As previously stated, Precious's neglect and abuse are a direct reflection of Harlem's binary condition as a hyperghetto: "The landscape over which [Precious] travels and the circumstances in which she finds herself are those of a late twentieth-century metropolis" (Griffin 23). Precious loves Harlem and she eventually learns to love herself. The end of *PUSH* is both positive and hopeful because "Precious moves toward acceptance of herself and the conditions and experiences of her life" (D. Hurley, E. Hurley 114). She has transformed from being the girl who self-effaces,¹⁰ trying to erase herself by smearing her face with her feces to being a young woman who asserts her presence through her poetry.

Self-efficacy is also present in Lester's narrative, in which *The Wig* replaces him. The suicide electrocution store on 125th Street is another option for Lester, but he kills part of

¹⁰ According to Champagne, self-effacing behavior is one of several common effects of incest (13).

himself, The Wig. In *The Urban Experience*, Claude S. Fischer examines how social relationships affect an urbanite's sense of belonging and psychological status: "People's feelings about their communities are important in trying to understand the relationship between urbanism and happiness. But more to the point are people's feelings about their own lives, their personal contentment or despair" (196). Like Dorothy, Big L, Precious and Lester are well-aware that choosing to remain within their homes creates a bittersweet existence in which there is ample opportunity for celebration and sadness. Harlem is their *home*, their locus amoenus, their place of reflection and contemplation, a place where they are always welcome and warmly received. No matter how minimal the change or limiting the environment, both Precious and Lester move from self-loathing to a self-acceptance rooted in their having coming to terms with a balance between the entrapments and beauty of Harlem. This change involves their shift from unease and anxiety to Harlem as "home."

CHAPTER 5

HARLEM WORLD:

IT AIN'T WHERE YOU'RE FROM, IT'S WHERE YOU'RE AT

Harlem is our heritage.
It is our community.
Harlem is a culture.
Harlem is Black history
From 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance,
Harlem — this is our home.
They can't take it away.
They can't take us away.
Forever we'll stay in Harlem.
IMCH, "Harlem is Our Home"

The above "Harlem is Our Home" song lyrics clearly express a cherished connection in which the speaker/resident and his subjectivity are greatly influenced by his community. As stated in the opening chapter, it is my contention that ethnic identity is significantly and intimately connected and tied to geographic space; the aim of this study is to examine urban ethnic subjectivity as it relates to African-American characters living in the urban ethnic community of Harlem. To construct my exposition, I use an interdisciplinary comprehensive approach that combines literary criticism, urban studies, cultural studies, philosophical theory, and the social sciences. This study encapsulates intellectual, social, political and geographic boundaries, thus contributing to an imperative discussion about African-American ethnicity and identity. In light of the post-racial rhetoric that continues to permeate the American social and academic discourses, dangerous conclusions are drawn that

erase and ignore the importance of ethnicity as it relates to culture, identity subjectivity. For example, the recent controversy about American history curriculum changes in Arizona and Texas suggest a post-racial agenda in which historical matters of race and ethnicity are eliminated from the textbooks, while Confederate heritage is emphasized. Quite the opposite, these curriculum changes reflect the deep-seated nature of institutional racism and the willful resistance to an inclusive society. In addition, the curriculum erasure of race denies any possibility of meaningful discourse about this social issue and its impact on American culture. We should not take for granted the significance of social definitions such as race, particularly as they relate to how members of our society perceive themselves. Discussing race is not simply a matter of highlighting tensions and conflicts, but also considering the various meanings and definitions of race and its role in the American narrative.

Because the United States was founded on the tenets of white supremacy, it is highly doubtful that this nation will ever get beyond race and truly exist as a post-racial society where racial categorization bears little or no consequence on people's lives and experiences. In *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, Touré contends with the post-racial premise and agenda of racial erasure: "Let me be clear: Post-Black does not mean 'post-racial.' Post-racial posits that race does not exist and that we're somehow beyond race and suggests colorblindness: It's a bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America" (12). This study aims to bring to the forefront the ways in which race affects how African Americans view themselves,

and more specifically, the cosmopolitan influence on their subjectivity. My interests are threefold; I am interested in: (1) examining what it means to be urban, (2) investigating concepts of blackness and what it means to be African American, and (3) determining how living in an urban ethnic community such as Harlem influences ethnic subjectivity and urban identity. To accomplish this, six contemporary Harlem novels were the focus of this study: Morrison's *Jazz*, Jackson's *The Queen of Harlem*, Mayfield's *The Hit*, Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (Meriwether), Wright's *The Wig* and Sapphire's *PUSH*. In these novels, Harlem functions as a catalyst for the protagonists' explorations of their urban ethnic subjectivity. Harlem is marked by racial, ethnic and class categories that compel these characters to reconsider their roles in society, including aspects of their subjectivity. As a result, this study was divided into three parts in which each focused on a prevailing or dominant theme.

Chapter 2, "Moving on Up," discusses the positive perspectives of Harlem in which the protagonists of *Jazz* and *The Queen of Harlem*, Joe Trace and Mason Randolph, respectively, view their urbanism as a sign of progress. Although there is a gap of over fifty years between the setting of each novel, the continuity lies within the narrative experience of each character's experience in Harlem. For both Joe and Mason, Harlem represents African-American culture and identity; because of their Harlem exposure, both characters have a newer sense of Self as ethnic figures, and they have a new outlook on their communities. Joe and Mason arrived to Harlem

feeling isolated, and throughout their narratives they gradually become integrated within their living environments. In part, it is because of their integration into their Harlem communities responsible for their growth and development as individual subjects; they view themselves as individuals, yet also as part of Harlem's greater context. By the end of each narrative, Joe and Mason achieve a positive resolution to their respective conflicts, in which they emerge as whole Beings and Subjects who have a new self-awareness.

The self-awareness expressed by the characters in Chapter 3, "Paradise Lost," examines the negative associations with Harlem, and thus, with themselves. Hubert Cooley of *The Hit* and Francie Coffin of *Daddy Was a Number Runner* are in conflict with their urbanism and their ethnicity. Also set in different eras, *The Hit* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* feature protagonists that experience hard times and harder living in Harlem. Hubert's frustrations are fraught with bitter resentment toward his failures in life in 1950s Harlem, and his desire to escape them. Francie is trapped in the turmoil of Harlem life during the Great Depression, and she witnesses firsthand the painful ease of falling into a life of despair. Because Hubert and Francie live on the margins of society, they resent the consequences of their marginalization and the causes of it — their ethnicity and living in Harlem. Unlike Joe and Mason, Hubert and Francie feel only disdain towards their Harlem residences and they express disenchantment with their impoverished lives. Hubert and Francie constantly fantasize about escaping from Harlem, and they are wishful about having a different

racial and ethnic identity; both characters believe that their blackness is the primary source of their woes. Hubert's delusions greatly influence his subjectivity, and Francie's fights and fantasies greatly influence hers. Both dream wistfully, only to realize that their misery is inescapable.

The protagonists of *The Wig* and *PUSH*, Lester Johnson and Claireece Precious Jones, are the focus of Chapter 4, "Home Again." Although Lester and Precious have an affinity for their Harlem neighborhoods, their reluctant resistance to living in the urban ethnic community of Harlem plays a significant role in their subjectivity and personal development. Lester and Precious are not oblivious to the destitution and desperation that surrounds them; they see Harlem and all its ugliness, but they recognize its importance to them as individual Selves. Lester and Precious believe they belong in Harlem; no matter where else in the city they visit, Harlem is the place to which they can and do return. Harlem is as much a part of them as they are of it, and to abandon or forsake Harlem is to do so to themselves. Leith Mullings and Alaka Wali explore these mixed emotions for some Harlem residents in *Stress and Resilience: The Social Context of Reproduction in Central Harlem*:

It is evident that the mix of emotions middle-stratum people felt about Harlem derived from their relative assessment of their frustrations with the negative qualities (which they linked to institutionalized discrimination) versus the many advantages they perceived to living in a black community. Middle-stratum African Americans in Harlem thus may have exchanged one set of stressors for another. They were willing to live under conditions of systematic neglect of community and higher levels of violence in exchange for the protective features offered by living in a black community, including the feelings of

community, access to cultural resources, and a more limited exposure to everyday acts of racism in their neighborhood. (42-3)

Like the characters discussed in previous chapters, Lester and Precious are also marginalized from the mainstream society; Manhattan's downtown lifestyle espouses elitist and exceptionalist attitudes that are elusive realities for Lester and Precious, but they continue to strive towards and desire a better situation. Unlike the optimism and enthusiasm represented in Chapter 2, or the cynicism and disenchantment represented in Chapter 3, the protagonists who are the focus of Chapter 4 have conflicted emotions about their Harlem residence. Regardless of their negative sentiments about Harlem, Lester and Precious feel a sense of place there, and consider Harlem as their personal space, their foundation and their future.

According to Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison: "The most powerful indicator of institutional racism in the United States is a spatial one, population segregation. . . . But nowhere [in the world] is the racial nature of this sociospatial effect as clear as in the United States" (202). Harlem, especially in its historic past, is one such example of population segregation in New York City. The goal of this study is to examine the how living in an urban ethnic community such as Harlem influences or affects a person's subjectivity and identity. Urban ethnic subjectivity, as I define it, is an amalgam of urbanism, ethnicity and subjectivity, in which each the two former factors influence the latter. In *Subjectivity*, Donald Hall says, "Urbanization, because of population growth and a myriad of changes in rural social organization, brought

increasing numbers of people into contact with each other, and face to face with an ever more diverse array of lives and outlooks” (17). In this study, I examine the subjectivities of African-American characters by exploring how living in Harlem as ethnic individuals affects their identities and self-perceptions.

As evidenced throughout this study, urban ethnic subjectivity is established via different processes for these African-American characters; further, social and political factors have the most influence on how these characters explore, define and express their Selves. In *African American Environmental Thought*, Kimberly K. Smith claims:

the city — or more precisely — the black urban neighborhood promises to serve for blacks the functions of a frontier: it is not only a liberating space but a place where nature’s vital energy, accessed through one’s racial consciousness, is uniquely available to black Americans. Going to Harlem is, in a sense, returning to Africa. (165)

For African-American ethnic characters that are marginalized and discriminated against, the romanticized notions of Africa and Harlem become synonymous. The iconic Motherland, Africa represents the locus amoenus of blackness, African consciousness and subjectivity. However, for someone like Hubert, Africa is not where he wants to be. Harlem, as the national locus amoenus for American blacks, is considered the cultural focal point. Africa may quite well be the motherland for African Americans, but the United States is most absolutely their homeland. An ethnic neighborhood community like Harlem offers cultural familiarity and homogeneity while also operating and existing within the American national context.

By linking Harlem with Africa, in accordance with Smith's argument, Harlem is placed at the center of African-American subjectivity and identity.

In addition, the Harlemites' subjectivity is influenced by the relationship of Harlem to the greater New York City community, the nation and the world. In the same manner, the Harlemites re/consider his/her subjectivity and individuality in relation to those within the Harlem residential community and the outside society. In *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*, Sherry B. Ortner comments, "Subjectivities are complex because they are culturally and emotionally complex, but also because of the ongoing work of reflexivity, monitoring the relationship of the self to world" (126). For the characters that are the focus of this study, their Selfhood and subjectivity are influenced by their residence in Harlem because it is a cultural and geographic hybridized space. These characters — Joe Trace, Mason Randolph, Hubert Cooley, Francie Coffin, Lester Johnson and Precious Jones — come to know themselves through the reflective portrayals and the racial perceptions of the outside world. Carole Marks' statement in *Farewell — We're Good and Gone* highlights the complexity determining ethnic identity in a multicultural setting: "Much of what initially passes for ethnic identity in any multiethnic society is imposed from without, not within" (164). Because ethnic subjectivity is influenced by internal and external factors, the outside society plays a significant role in how social categories are determined, including what consequences exist as a result of ascribing to or belonging to one of those categories.

As was the case for Hubert and Francie, their poverty and marginalization were results of their racial and ethnic categorization. In turn, Hubert and Francie believed that if they changed their ethnicity, their lifestyle circumstances would also improve. Lester also ascribed to this ideological perspective; his hope of joining The Great Society was based on The Wig and its mainstream appeal. In *Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois highlights the influence of external factors on racial identity and subjectivity:

. . . It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (16-17)

Harlem is an urban ethnic space that merges the past and the future. Much like Du Bois's concept of "two-ness," Harlem also has dual identities as American and black, as a town and a city. In its historical context, Harlem is the intimate place of respite in which its black residents feel safe and welcome in an insular community that is often shielded or hidden from public view; it is the alternative to the dispossession and rejection they experienced when living or socializing among whites. Because Harlem was a geographic focal point for key African-American socio-political eras such as the New Negro Movement, the Great Migration and the Black Arts Movement, it was

the integral setting for black self-determination in which African Americans ascertain who they are as a People and how they want to be perceived / portrayed in mainstream — i.e. Anglo — American society. As an historic site and foundation for African-American subjectivity, Harlem also embodies the future. According to Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Modern American society is predominantly urban; black and white people live and work together in the city” (72). Modernity requires the Self to encounter and inquire with the Other; urbanism is a distinct experience in which a polyglot, multiethnic society functions and exists in stark contrast to its typically homogenous rural counterpart. Hakutani’s assertion seems to imply that there is a harmonious existence among the races, when in fact, there continues to be a great deal of segregation throughout New York City’s neighborhoods.

In *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism*, Michael Keith examines the roles of race, power and privilege in metropolitan environments. More specifically, Keith explores “the tensions of between languages of belonging and forces of power that make racial subjects visible. The city is commonly crucial to the mediation of such tensions” (6). It is necessary to note that although there is greater opportunity for integration in today’s society, recent studies have shown that residential segregation in New York City continues to persist. As stated in the December 2010 Associated Press article “Black Segregation Drops to Lowest in a Century,” although national percentages of residential segregation have improved, “Segregation among blacks and whites increased in one-fourth of the

nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas," of which New York City was cited as being one of the most segregated cities. The most recent racial demographic American Community Survey census data for the borough of Manhattan, New York County, cites a total population of 1,620,962 residents. Of that total population estimate of Manhattan residents, 248,683 are of Black or African American racial / ethnic identity, whereas 928,434 Manhattan residents are categorized as White. Because African Americans are a significantly smaller percentage of the Manhattan population, Harlem plays a significant role as an ethnic community, and they experience the city as an outsider or minority. In *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, Richard Daniel Lehan states:

Impressions thus become a way of seeing the city. The city became a personal, often isolated experience, with each inhabitant caught in his or her own subjectivity. What they see — whether Conrad's Marlow, Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, or Eliot's urbanites — is an extension of themselves. And when they see more than they can accept, they disclaim reality, like Marlow lying to Kurtz's Intended; or they turn away, eyes clouded and opaque, like Nick at the end of *The Great Gatsby*; or they turn inward, locked into the self" (129).

Even though Lehan's comment focuses on characters in Euro-American novels of the earlier twentieth century, the isolation and seclusion he mentions is experienced by characters in African-American novels as well. As in the classic novels by white American authors such as Twain, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hemingway, Vonnegut, the characters of the novels discussed in this study overcome various obstacles in order to learn more about who they are; however, because these characters are marked by their

racial and ethnic difference, their process of self-discovery and self-determination is further complicated by that difference. The census demographics suggest that population density, or the lack thereof, can contribute to one's loneliness, delusion, cynicism and alienation. Hubert disclaims reality, as does Lester; both men are led by their delusions and dreams, only to experience the bitter disappointment of failed dreams. Francie and Precious view their Harlem world through jaded lenses in which they want to succeed in life, or just be able to get by, but they have misgivings of whether that goal is attainable. Joe and Mason are both lonely and lost in the City; to quell their crises and conflicts, both men must confront their Selves via an introspective examination. For rural African Americans who were marginalized by Jim Crow and other biogted legislation, the city and its ethnic communities like Harlem presented an image of freedom and opportunity; however, they quickly realize their racial, ethnic and socioeconomic status will prevent them from achieving freedoms they desired. The alienation and isolation experienced by these African American Harlemites compel them to question their identities and explore their subjectivity.

Joe Trace and Mason Randolph seek refuge in Harlem to abate their sense of loneliness and alienation, only to experience intra-racial prejudice and marginalization. Joe mentions the colorism and prejudice he experiences after relocating to Harlem. Socioeconomic class is a source of Mason Randolph's troubles, and his travails in Harlem are a reflection of the class biases among African

Americans of the economic spectrum. Joanne Reitano discusses New York's many social conflicts in *The Restless City*: "In the early and mid-nineteenth century, Gotham offered American a radical model of egalitarianism that applied beyond white men to include women, blacks, and immigrants while exposing deep fissures of class, racial, gender, and ethnic conflict" (4). These egalitarian myths, ideologies and social conflicts continue to persist, even to date. In Harlem, the lower and middle income populations are steadily being displaced as the affordable housing options continue to be replaced with luxury condominiums, co-operatives and refurbished brownstones that cater to a more affluent population. As a result, there is an increase of white residents in lower Harlem, particularly from 110th to 125th streets. Mason's return to Harlem documents this transformation, in which his realtor comments on the influx of new residents. The "Harlem is Our Home" song lyrics express protest of and frustration with the gentrification efforts and the consequences of displacing the native Harlem populace.

Harlem is changing as a result of gentrification; also transforming are Joe and Mason, who become urbanites while their gender identities develop and evolve. "Embedded in the American Dream, the myth of superman, and the image of the supercity was the possibility of transformation. Aside from work, the key vehicle for personal advancement in America has always been education through which . . . anyone from anywhere can become anything" (Reitano 216). Because cities are geographic sites for transformation, modernity and progress, it seems natural that

urbanites would also be subject to transformation; once someone relocates to an urban mecca or “supercity,” a new identity can be created or designed. Granted, education plays a significant role in personal advancement, but being urban allows for a personal rebirth in which the former life one had can be blurred, erased or forgotten — as was the case for Joe and Mason. Both characters’ personal narratives entail escape or flight from the tensions and conflicts of their respective pasts. For Joe and Mason, the city — Harlem in particular — represents their future and the foundational location of their new Selves.

For Hubert Cooley and Francie Coffin, the present is a reminder of their disenfranchisement, and the future is bleak and uninviting. Precious Jones, on the other hand, is optimistic about her future. The worst era of Harlem’s past was what Precious was born into; it was a town in which the toxicity infiltrated and contaminated everyone and everything. Whether it was by force or by choice, the leaders, who were supposed to inspire and encourage the people, were leaving and the void deepened. In *Harlem: U.S.A.*, John Henrik Clarke writes: “In the years after the second World War, Harlem became a community in decline. Many old residents, now successful enough to afford a better neighborhood, moved to Westchester, Long Island, or Connecticut. The community leaders who had helped to make Harlem the cultural center of Black America had either died or moved away” (8). However, a new generation of visionary Harlem community leaders was being established, and it was they who would see Harlem begin its greatest rebirth.

In similar fashion to the former iconic leader, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., these new leaders also derived from the pulpit. Reverend Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church, Reverend Al Sharpton of the National Action Network, and Reverend Dr. Preston R. Washington of Memorial Baptist Church were influential community leaders in post-1970s Harlem. The former community leaders, such as Congressman Charles Rangel and Percy Sutton, fell out of favor with the new political leadership and the general public, thus allowing new generation to emerge. As evidenced in *PUSH* and *The Wig*, the decimated social conditions in Harlem were abundant; therefore, Butts, Sharpton and Washington faced significant internal and external obstacles in their community improvement and outreach. As a way to resurrect former President Johnson's "Great Society" initiative, in 1994, during the administration of President Clinton, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) declared six urban communities as Empowerment Zones, one of which was Harlem. These were urban areas in which a substantial proportion of their buildings were affected by blight, and their institutions (schools, hospitals, public service offices) were significantly under-funded in comparison to the national standard. In *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America*, Jonathan Gill documents Harlem's economic recovery process. As an Empowerment Zone, Gill writes, "[Harlem] would be eligible for more than \$100 million in federal development funds and \$250 million in tax credits, as well as help in running programs devoted to job training and creation, small business assistance,

and support for cultural organizations” (439). This funding would mark the beginning of Harlem’s reconstruction, in which the blight is gradually replaced with thriving businesses and a real-estate boon. From *Jazz* to *The Queen of Harlem*, the novels in this study chronicle Harlem’s tumultuous transformations from throughout the twentieth century. The new leaders, such as Butts and Washington, piloted economic and development programs aimed at improving the outlook on Harlem’s future, and the future of its people.

By the end of the twentieth century, Harlem was experiencing an economic rebirth, rising from the rubble and ashes of its tenements and vacant lots and becoming new and chic, again. Harlem’s declining infrastructure and the volatile social conditions that were mentioned by Big L, Lester and Precious were substantial obstacles for achieving a quality standard of living. The pervasive street violence, crime and poverty established Harlem as a hyperghetto. In addition, the people living in Harlem faced a dismal fate. The children born to Precious, like the ones Lester cannot have, will not only live a meager existence, but they may also not get to live. By the end of the 1990s “[t]he overall mortality rate [in Harlem] was double that of the city’s white communities, while life expectancy in central Harlem, according to a famous statistic, was worse than that of Bangladesh. Only 37 percent of fifteen-year-old boys in Harlem could expect to reach the age of sixty-five” (Gill 424). The statistic of young black males dying prematurely is evidenced in the small boy who is viciously murdered by his mother, despite Lester’s protests. Precious’ son/brother

Abdul is a baby and given his current circumstances, it is quite possible he will become a statistic,¹ but his mother surmounts tremendous odds and prevails. Francie's teenage buddies who were arrested and sentenced to death will also die young. Big L, the MC whose lyrics are featured in Chapter 4, also suffered a tragic fate; on February 15, 1999, he was brutally murdered in his neighborhood, on West 139th Street. He was 24. Sadly, Big L did not live long enough to witness Harlem's dramatic transformation.

The Queen of Harlem provides only a brief glimpse of Harlem's future. The novel opens with Mason's return to Harlem after four years. Nearing the end of the twentieth century, the Harlem Mason is reintroduced to a Harlem under significant economic development. His realtor mentions the increased interest from white prospectors and cultural changes that it entails, such as renaming Marcus Garvey Park to appeal to the new clientele that is moving into Harlem (3). On 125th Street, it is apparent the world uptown has been infiltrated by downtown business interests:

Strains between the desire for self-determination uptown and the inevitability of downtown authority have always given rise to Harlem politicians with an often fatal streak of independence. Collisions between the quest for economic self-sufficiency and dependence on outsiders with grand plans . . . have always allowed Harlemites to define themselves not just as apart from all other New Yorkers but as the divided soul of the city itself. (Gill 463)

This divisive perspective is echoed in the "Harlem is Our Home" lyrics. The strains between the worlds of insiders or Harlemites and white affluent outsiders from

¹ In 2011, Sapphire published *The Kid*, which chronicles Abdul's life as an adolescent.

downtown and elsewhere continue. The lyrics state “they can’t take us away,” which implies a conflict between the groups. The song criticizes the displacement of the working class and poor, but reminds and affirms that Harlem is more than a geographic location, it has deeper meaning. Much like the sharply juxtaposed landscapes of Rome, Cairo, Beijing and Tokyo, in which the worlds of the past, present and the future are closely intermingled, Harlem is also caught in this generational vortex. Harlem is a distinct and separate ethnic community within New York City. Regarding matters of economics social class, Harlem is divided within its borders. Whatever the era or generation, Harlem remains a constant figure in the social consciousness of Black America and is the iconic geographic symbol of American Blackness.

In his book, Touré investigates contemporary social and political definitions of blackness within the American context. His term *Post-Blackness* suggests the multiple possibilities and meanings for black identity, one that is inclusive rather than exclusive: “There is no dogmatically narrow, authentic Blackness because the possibilities for Black identity are infinite” (5). Quite the opposite, Harlem’s recent tourism boom gives visitors from all over the world an opportunity to visit and experience Harlem’s blackness or black cultural heritage. So, while Touré, Dickerson and McWhorter argue that there are multiple meanings that define what blackness is, in the Harlem tourism economy (and the “cultural tourism” programs in other historically black urban communities), there are criteria to quantify and qualify what

the unique “black experience” is — and those activities are featured on the tour.

Although these activities may be considered as cliché, they are accepted as the status quo, and thus, help to support Harlem’s economic revitalization. Because Harlem is still considered a racial and ethnic — i.e. ‘exotic’ — urban community, it continues to fascinate outsiders:

. . . ethnicity has provided a focus for debates around both forms of consumption and the reproduction of processes of identity and identification that the spaces of the city facilitate. The emergence of Chinatowns and other *ethnic enclaves* as sites of cultural consumption has provoked important debates that have considered the changing cartographies of cultural quarters within the rubric of contemporary urbanism” (Keith 116).

What Precious loves most about Harlem is its “culchure” and her pride in Harlem’s cultural heritage is shared by countless others. Harlem’s cultural quarters are plentiful. Whether it is heckling at Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater; partaking in a soulful meal at the Red Rooster, Copeland’s or Sylvia’s; researching at the Schomburg Center; having a spiritual awakening at Abyssinian Baptist Church, The Riverside Church, Mother Zion A.M.E. Church, Memorial Baptist Church, The Old Broadway Synagogue, Convent Avenue Baptist Church, The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, or another house of worship; enjoying the legendary street basketball tournaments; listening to the public African drumming performances at the African Square Plaza on 125th and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard; or experiencing the many other cultural elements, Harlem’s African-American cultural heritage is omnipresent and will endure. In Harlem, expressions of blackness are

abundant; there are streets named for African- American icons, as well as other symbols of African-American cultural and ethnic heritage. In addition to the aforementioned restaurants and religious institutions, some of the musical landmarks remain, such as the Cotton Club and Minton's Playhouse. Today, live jazz concerts are a regular feature at the General Grant National Memorial park, where General Ulysses S. Grant is entombed. Harlem, also famous for its sports, is still the prime locale for tournaments in places like Holcombe Rucker Park and the Harlem Tennis Center. For the arts, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, the Harlem Gospel Choir, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Boys Choir of Harlem and the Harlem Opera Theater continue to welcome audiences.

Harlem's many landmarks, location names and longtime residents evoke the heritage and history for which Harlem is famous and infamous. Although the past is important, it cannot be reclaimed or changed; instead, it serves as a reminder of errors and successes, upon which Harlem's leaders and residents can reflect as they transition into a new era. In *The Horizontal Society*, Lawrence Friedman Meir examines the role of the past and its influences on power in society and interpersonal dealings:

One simple point: the past is dead. You can never go back; for most purposes, we have to work with the world we have not with the world we would like to have or used to have. The past does cast a shadow on the present; it may even *seem* to be vibrantly alive, compellingly alive, but this is an illusion. In truth, it is not the past as such that makes a difference. It is the past insofar as it had been inherited, accepted, and reworked and reconceived by people in the present. For better or

worse, we are what we are, and what we are is *where* we are, in space and in time. (ix)

Meir's assertion speaks to the temporality of identity. Harlem's renewal leans toward a new identity, a future that is rife with potential and prosperity. The song lyrics to "Harlem is Our Home" also serve as a reminder to use the past as a guide towards a better future. Granted, Harlem has great historical significance, but being rooted in history is what allows Joe, Mason, Hubert, Francie, Lester and Precious to move on, or to try to. Once Joe and Mason confront their past demons and shames, they can move forward with a new sensibility about their identities. Hubert's continued denial of his reality suggests he will be unable to fully accept who he is and where he is, but in his case, it is not only the geography of the "where" as it is the psychical location of the "where." Hubert's mind is elsewhere still; he will constantly want to escape. Francie's desire for the better days of life in Brooklyn is gone, and she reluctantly acknowledges her situation. Lester and Precious never really knew better days in their own lives, but they both ascribed to ideologies that were contested and considered passé or unrealistic. In the end, Lester and Precious know the future is all that remains, and so they resign themselves to the present and their presence in Harlem. All these characters know the past cannot be relived; however, they are all acutely aware that the unresolved conflicts of the past will linger and intrude at any point in time.

Harlem's history and heritage continue to lure black migrants wanting to improve their future prospects. Perhaps the most notable migration is the increasing African diasporic presence, thus adding to Harlem's complexity as a black capital: "More than eighty thousand Africans immigrated to the United States in the 1980s from Nigeria, Liberia, Ethiopia and Ghana and, later, Mali, Senegal, Niger, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast. Most ended up living uptown . . . making their homes around West 116th Street" (428). Bringing with them the hopes of an improved future, these new arrivals are not much unlike the multitudes of southerners and black Caribbean migrants who settled in Harlem since the early 1900s.

Also, like the migrants of the past, these new migrants face obstacles in their new home as they began to pursue their American dreams. A recurring scene in *PUSH* is of the male African vendors selling various goods from their sidewalk booths while the women solicit hair braiding services. In October 1994, after a series of protests, complaints and conflicts between street peddlers and local licensed vendors, City Hall built the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market as a designated relocation space for the peddlers; most of them hailed from West African nations. The Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market is an outdoor market, but it is accessible throughout the year, and it attracts locals and tourists alike: "This negrophilic mall, where the global economy met the universal fascination with blackness, showed that Harlem was no longer just the capital of black America but a focal point of the global black diaspora" (Gill 433). From the east end of 125th Street to the west, and

northward to 140th Street, the African presence is evident in Harlem, thus transforming Harlem into an African Diaspora capital. The influx of immigrants from these African nations reaffirms Harlem's cultural significance, and Harlem continues to draw people from throughout the African Diaspora to it. Harlem's culture is no longer only African-American, instead, it represents a global society in which people of the African Diaspora have a voice and place.

Just as people are drawn to Harlem, people will continue to write about Harlem and Harlem life. All the authors discussed in this study — Morrison, Jackson, Mayfield, Meriwether, Wright and Sapphire — emphasize the role of community in the lives of their characters. Throughout the history and struggle of African Americans, community plays a significant role for establishing relationships, developing a support system and for protection. The various representations of community are also essential to note. While some characters, like Joe, Francie and Lester are closely affiliated with their residential communities, Mason, Hubert, and Precious find their allies outside of their residences. Hubert belongs to a church community, Precious confides in her classmates and teacher, and Mason's associates are made through his social network. For each of the characters, community involvement is significant in their subjectivity development. Nevertheless, some social scientists believed that black urbanites were antisocial or disconnected from one another. In his study of black urbanites and their social tendencies, Joe R. Feagin writes:

Most of these black urbanites were tied into friendship networks, albeit small-scale and encapsulated networks. These wives, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their large families and relatively low incomes, seem to have roughly as intensive contact with friends as other urbanites so far studied. An average of nearly three friends each and of weekly contact with at least two of them suggests that some urban analysts have incorrectly generalized from a minority of residents to the majority when they have viewed the slums and ghettos as areas where individuals and families typically live in virtual isolation from one another. (307)

Although there is a sense of alienation for an urbanite whose existence is on the societal margins, there is also a sense of belonging to a larger entity. The adage, ‘misery loves company’ is especially true in neighborhoods whose resident populations are dependent on each other. “An important type of integration into the urban fabric is friendship, an interpersonal link often characterized by intimacy” (Feagin 304). Community is essential for survival, especially during times of hardship. Joe relies on his neighbors to purchase his goods and his wife also establishes relationships with her neighbors, who rely on her talents as a skilled and reasonably priced hairdresser. Francie, who constantly feels lonely, is acknowledged by her neighbors, especially when her father was the well-liked Numbers Man. To maximize the usability of the food she has, Francie’s mother trades recipes with other neighborhood mothers, and when misfortune struck a neighbor family, she offers whatever meager provisions she could spare. As with Francie’s family, the interdependency Lester and his neighbors have is a result of their isolated lives outside of The Great Society; they advise, protect, confide in and care for each other

while living in a society that considers them disposable. Mason views himself as enmeshed in the greater society, and because of his social class, he has more access to the world of privilege. However, he is the lone black character in his extended social network and this alienation compels him to search for deeper meaning in his subjectivity. His relationships with Jim, Carmen, Kyra and Malcolm help give him cues about who he is, and is not. Hubert does not seem dependent on his neighbors and community, but in actuality, his identity is formed because of them. Hubert' uses his negative attitudes about his neighbors to validate himself and differentiate his identity from theirs. Precious, on the other hand, sees herself in her classroom community; she considers her classmates and Ms. Rain her real family because they offer support and encouragement to her. Without the support of their respective communities, the narratives of Joe, Mason, Hubert, Francie, Lester and Precious would have disturbing tragic, unforgiving endings.

Instead, their narratives end with each character anticipating a tomorrow, a future, no matter how promising or bleak it may be. These narratives are distinctly American portrayals of urban ethnic subjectivity in which the American protagonist examines his or her self within the larger American societal context. As works of American fiction, each novel discusses the urban condition as it specifically relates to African Americans living in New York City. In addition, as racial and ethnic characters, they inherit a narrative and cultural context that greatly affects their livelihoods; it is a tenuous association from which they cannot disassociate

themselves. Their sense of blackness and their exploration of it is the impetus for their subjectivity development, but they are also motivated by the consequences of their blackness and their experiences as marginalized and rejected. “The forms of collective identity and the fabrication of racial subjects (or *subjectification*) that result are not necessarily commensurable one with another in any particular setting. But their incommensurabilities are mediated by the settings within specific patterns of labour and residential settlement” (Keith 6). Although Keith focuses on racial and ethnic migrant populations, African Americans continue to be perceived as foreign, outsider Subjects whose place of belonging is not the United States.

It is widely understood that racial and ethnic tensions in the United States are still prevalent; the prejudices and acts of discrimination, whether they are institutional or a matter of social practice, continue to plague American society. The American literary history also reflects these tensions, and the national canon remains heavily scrutinized for its minimal representation of nonwhite authors and their representative texts. Although the American literary canon has become more inclusive of Others’ voices, greater steps must be taken to create a canon that truly represents the nation’s multiethnic and polyvocal perspectives. For African Americans, urban life is an essential component of that perspective. New York City’s megalopolitan design is a geographic representation of ultra-modern development that promotes and encourages change. Kimberly K. Smith analyzes the African-American urban condition; part of

her study *African American Environmental Thought* examines the relationship between African Americans and their urban environs:

By 1930, nearly half of black Americans lived in cities. Accordingly, over the subsequent decades, the focus of black environmental thought would shift from the forest and the fields of the rural South to the built environment of the urban North: the landscape of skyscrapers and tenements, streetcars and subways, streetlights and nightlife. (158)

To be urban is to be modern, progressive, sophisticated, complex, ever-changing and transformative. Therefore, the African-American urbanite experiences city life through a racial lens, and as such, is affected by those encounters. The characters explored in this study perceive New York City as either a place of freedom or one of limitation. The urban condition, as it relates to Harlem, continues to be affected by acts of institutional racism. For example, the New York Civil Liberties Union criticizes the New York Police Department's "stop and frisk" practices: "about 3 million innocent New Yorkers were subjected to police stops and street interrogations from 2004 through 2010, and . . . black and Latino communities continue to be the overwhelming target of these tactics" ("Racial Justice"). Even though Harlem is one such community in which this police harassment routinely occurs, its black residents still feel a sense of belonging. According to Nick Mansfield, "In the modern world, racial politics are not merely an extension of community hostilities and mindless traditional prejudices. They are part of the disciplining of populations, gaining what authority they have from their coordination with legitimized institutions of learning and administration" (118). Like the characters in this study, the people living in

Harlem are constantly reminded of their status as outsiders whose existence is primarily invisible. They live in Harlem, which Felicia Lee describes in her two 1994 *New York Times* articles as “another America,” a place that is the antithesis of the American standard of living. As a racialized space, Harlem’s “Otherness” seems a permanent and perpetual status. It remains to be seen if there will ever be a resolution to the tension between these two worlds: the white world outside Harlem and the black Harlem world itself:

The spaces of the city are particularly important in these processes of cultural dialogue. They constitute both the stages of communication and one medium of separation: the nodal points of cultural flows and the commodified arenas of residence and performance. Consequently, contemporary urbanism can curate the presentation of ethnic difference and new forms of hybridity whilst simultaneously displacing appeals to community through processes of city transformation (Keith 113).

For these characters, a fusion of Selves is the ultimate outcome. Despite the many attempts by members of the academy to investigate the psychological, social, epistemological, cultural, and literary aspects of African-American identity, there has been minimal consideration of how megalopolitan urbanism affects African-American subjectivity. This study is literary in its focus, but heterogeneous in its design, which is essential for providing a substantial critique of these characters’ Harlem experiences and subjectivity development. The kind of struggle these protagonists experience with their individuality and subjectivity is best-explained by Anne Marie Paquet-Deyris:

How one fares in the City depends greatly on interpreting the sporadic answers one can wrestle from it. The necessary displacement/repositioning it imposes upon everyone entering its limits relies as much on the inflections of the communal voice as on the individual's capability to find his or her own voice. (223)

In the city-village of Harlem, the communal voice strongly resonates with that of the Harlemite. Whether it was by force, by choice, or a combination of both, each character discussed in this study faced a crisis of identity. These characters had to examine their Selfhood and subjectivity, and determine what it means for their understanding of ethnicity, urbanism, community and individuality. Further, through the amalgamation of their double selves, these characters become whole, not fragmented, Beings. They are hybridized, as most Americans are, so that their double selves merge to create a newer, better or more complex Subject. Through their hybridity, these African-American characters evolve into their truer selves. Their consciousness chart the ways their race and ethnicity are restricted by society and determine how they want to define themselves. Their residence in and connection to the cultural and political richness of Harlem helps them to find that definition.

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