

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Performative Returns and the Rememory of History: genealogy and performativity in the American racial state

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/41g7k4pg>

### Author

Kokontis, Kate Menninger

### Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Performative Returns and the Rememory of History:  
genealogy and performativity in the American racial state

By

Kate Menninger Kokontis

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Performance Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Chair

Professor Catherine Cole

Professor Richard Cándida Smith

Professor Laura Pérez

Fall 2011

Performative Returns and the Rememory of History:  
genealogy and performativity in the American racial state

© 2011

by Kate Menninger Kokontis

## Abstract

Performative Returns and the Rememory of History:  
genealogy and performativity in the American racial state

By

Kate Menninger Kokontis

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Chair

I argue that contemporary Americans of many ethnoracial backgrounds have, in the past forty years, negotiated the painful consequences of a form of multiculturalism that rewards otherness with cultural capital and punishes it with structural and symbolic abjection, through mechanisms of what I call “performative return”: genealogical invocations of legitimating and mythologized origins, particularly ancestral homelands and fraught narratives of arrival to the United States, that become mobilized in performances to a range of ideological and political ends. Some of these performances are local to specific cities and some take place in a discursive realm; some are mobilized for purposes of truly liberatory democratic ends, and others to redraw the boundaries of exclusion. In the context of this dissertation, I turn my attention in particular to two narratives of transatlantic arrival to the U.S. – the Middle Passage, and Ellis Island immigration. As transatlantic arrivals to the U.S., the groups of subjects implicated in these narratives have tended to have had relatively permanent stays here – more so, for instance, than im/migrants from elsewhere in the Americas, who are more likely, on account of proximity, to navigate transnational back-and-forth relationships with their home country. But more significantly, these narratives are the purview of racial subjects in the U.S. who are implicated in a pernicious and reductive black-white binary conception of race. Resultantly, these narratives – particularly in the context of post-civil rights multiculturalisms – are articulated in relation to one another in a variety of ways.

Ratifying origins shores up legitimacy, which is to say, it shores up the felicitousness of the performative. And performativity is a deeply temporal concept – while a performance takes place as a discrete event in a bounded moment in time, performativity is the repetition and revision over a long expanse of time: it is the *longue durée*, the mechanism by which social and power structures are formed and upheld. Performative return is central to the process of creating usable histories to various and sometimes deeply conflicting political and ideological ends: origins shore up legitimacy so that the narratives they invoke become articulated as reality. I establish a comparative framework of racialized histories and groups, of defining moments in the construction of an American racial state, and the ways in which their consequences register and are negotiated in the present through representations that slip into various worldmaking activities. And the project is comparative and relational not only because the racial state produces its subjects relationally within the framework of slavery, genocide, conquest and imperialism, and immigration, but also because I want to demonstrate the across-the-board nature of the ways that the past, ancestral homelands, and narratives of arrival are invoked as a means of negotiating racialized subjects’ exclusion and legitimacy. The

performative returns that I examine articulate the racial state, as well as ground-up negotiations of groups' and individuals' own racialized experiences or categorizations, in terms of the relational context of the U.S. in the world. That is, the performative returns are produced within a historical consciousness and transnational imaginary that brings spatial and temporal causes to bear on one another and takes seriously the constitutive potential of memory, the uses of narratives, and the calling into being of re-constituted "elsewheres."

When we return to our ancient land  
 Which we never knew  
 And talk about all those things  
 That have never happened  
 We will walk holding the hands of children  
 Who have never existed  
 We will listen to their voices and we will live  
 That life which we have spoken of so often  
 And have never lived.

-- Daisy Zamora

The key to understanding how performances worked *within* a culture, recognizing that a fixed and unified culture exists only as a convenient but dangerous fiction, is to illuminate the process of surrogation as it operated between the participating cultures. The key, in other words, is to understand how circum-Atlantic societies, confronted with revolutionary circumstances for which few precedents existed, have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others. They could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not.

--Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.

In everyday usage, nostalgia has come to signify the longing to return to a past that probably never existed and to places that have changed irrevocably. But 'wounds of returning' suggest something more complicated – that the past itself may return, inflicting new wounds and reopening old ones.

--Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning*

"Did you find something?" Father Gennaro asked me as he adjusted his thick glasses – he is nearsighted – and flung open the door to the church. "Yes," I answered. And it is true. Precisely because I found neither Federico nor Vita. Her existence has not been entrapped in those merciless registries. She has escaped the registry of death, the aged pages, the ordered archives of time and memory. One spring day, with a clear blue sky just like today, she gave Diamante her hand and followed him out onto that far and elusive sea, which she must have seen every day from her window, and which she must have looked upon as a promise. They dove headfirst into the only gap in the net, and together these two fugitives invented another story.

--Melania G. Mazzucco, *Vita*

To believe, as I do, that the enslaved are our contemporaries is to understand that we share their aspirations and defeats, which isn't to say that we are owed what they were due but rather to acknowledge that they accompany our every effort to fight against domination, to abolish the color line, and to imagine a free territory, a new commons. It is to take to heart their knowledge of freedom. The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken; it wasn't something that could ever be given to you. The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back. Freedom is the kind of thing that required you to leave your bones on the hills at Brimsbay, or to burn the cane fields, or to live in a garret for seven years, or to stage a general strike, or to create a new republic. It is won and lost, again and again. It is a glimpse of possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished.

The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs – an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?

--Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<i>iii</i>
<b>Introduction.</b> Performative Returns and the Rememory of History	1
 <b>SECTION ONE</b>	
<b>Chapter One.</b> Excavating the Blanks of Unknowingness: genealogy, temporality, knowability, and the politics of African American performative returns	26
<b>Chapter Two.</b> To Call My Indian Red: felicitousness, magical realism, and autochthonous/diasporic genealogies of displacement in New Orleanian blackness	60
 <b>SECTION TWO</b>	
<b>Chapter Three.</b> Open Signifiers of Immigration, Italian-ness, and the Port-of-Entry: on the possibilities and limitations of liberal multiculturalism	113
<b>Chapter Four.</b> Made In/No Such Thing As America: conjuring Manichean ghosts and haunting grief in Italian American performative returns	156
<b>Conclusion</b>	195
<b>Bibliography</b>	199

## Acknowledgements

The conception and seeing-through of a book-length project is a grueling endeavor, full of hope and despair and intersubjectivity; it is never, in spite of a single author's name appearing at the beginning, the work of any one person by herself. Many individuals played formative roles in my intellectual development and/or were instrumental in helping me see this process through, and they deserve acknowledgement here as well as my very deep and sincere thanks.

First and foremost, Brandi Wilkins Catanese not only chaired my dissertation committee (and my master's thesis committee, and served as my primary advisor and a major interlocutor throughout these years), providing invaluable advice on this project at every stage of its development, but has also been an incredible mentor, advisor, and friend throughout a long and difficult process. She is a rare gem in the academy – a profoundly dedicated and caring teacher first and foremost, she is ethical, decent, and generous, *and* is a rigorous intellectual and scholar. My gratitude to her is bottomless, as is my respect; she is someone I will always seek to emulate. My committee, Richard Cándida Smith, Catherine Cole, and Laura Pérez, have been generous and rigorous in their feedback and advice and humane and patient in their exchanges with me, and I am grateful to have had such exemplary scholars and teachers to go to for guidance.

Other professors I have had over the years have had formative roles in my intellectual and political development and thus in the development of this project. Joseph Roach, my mentor and advisor from my undergraduate years, was the guiding light who helped me find my way to and through performance studies, and has offered his unfailing support and unparalleled vision over many years. His work is also one of the reasons I found my way to New Orleans, a city we both love, grieve for, are inspired by, and have called home, and that fact alone deserves a profound debt of gratitude. Robin Bernstein, Jill Lane, and Brian Herrera all nurtured my interest in performance studies while I was at Yale, and pointed me toward theories in gender and racial performativity that I found mind-opening then and have continued to engage with to this day. Professors Angela Harris and Rebecca Hall taught a course in 2007 on Critical Race Feminisms at Boalt Hall, which has had ongoing resonance for me and has been a tremendously formative influence on my worldview, my teaching, and the framework of this project. So have the discussions I have had with Frank Wilderson through the University of California Multicampus Research Group on International Performance's Graduate Student Retreat in 2007 and a course on state violence at UC Davis in 2010, and with members of the working group on Transnational Methodologies at the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics in Buenos Aires in 2007. Thanks to my colleagues in those contexts, as well, for their insights and generosity. Celia Rodriguez, a brilliant artist and Lecturer in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, generously allowed me to audit an undergraduate course on the politics, art, and spirituality of Dia de los Muertos in 2006; her thinking and the embodied work we undertook in that class has been extremely influential on how I have theorized performative returns. Mark Griffith gave wonderful and generous advice on a chapter draft, and Peter Glazer, Shannon Steen, and Shannon Jackson have also been important interlocutors over the years. Finally, I might have turned my back on professional academic pursuits had my faith not been restored by what I saw from the good people I met at a conference in New Orleans in 2009 organized by *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, who are committed to bringing their ethical and political visions into a praxis that is at once scholarly and artistic, *and* deeply rooted in serving their communities.



I have been indescribably lucky to have extraordinary colleagues, who have been wonderful to work with as well as steadfast friends and brilliant interlocutors. My dear friend the social/legal historian Katie Turk, a fellow Madrigal Singer from Lyons Township High School many years ago, has in the last decade become one of my most trusted, respected, and beloved colleagues and comrades. I am also grateful to and constantly amazed by my exceptional cohort (and the cohort above us) of badass, brilliant women, whom I respect as scholars, teachers, and friends: Nilgun Bayraktar, Kate Duffly, Charlotte McIvor, Emine Fisek, Joy Palacios, Kelly Rafferty, and – especially – Michelle Baron. Michelle and I were inseparable for a number of years of graduate school; her thinking has been integral to my intellectual development and thus to the development of this project. I will be forever grateful for the members of the UC Berkeley Center for Race and Gender's dissertation writing group from 2008-2011, especially Kemi Balogun, Lia Bascomb, Michelle Branch, Aileen Cruz, Sang Lee, Alia Pan, and Petra Rivera. These women offered humor, friendship, fantastic insights, tremendous patience and generosity in their feedback, and solidarity and strategies to get through the bizarre process of writing a dissertation while thinking through challenging and urgent questions: they helped make the process much less isolating. I am also certain that the scholarship produced by each of the women I refer to in this paragraph will make the academy a better place. Finally, Omar Ricks has been a stalwart comrade, dear friend, and rigorous interlocutor.

It would be difficult to imagine conducting field and archival research in New Orleans and New York with any kind of success if not for the guidance, assistance, feedback, support, and insights of many, many people over a number of years. I am grateful to the staff of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's Manuscripts and Rare Books Division, to the staff of New Orleans Public Library's Louisiana Division, and especially to the staff of the Amistad Research Center, where I spent months pestering Andrew Salinas and Chris Harter, who in return gave their time, patience, insightful suggestions, and assistance in making useful connections. Many conversations with New Orleanians over the years, especially those with Roberts Batson, Rachel Breunlin, Joel Dinerstein, Margery Freeman, Keith Medley, Cherice Harrison-Nelson, Catherine Michna, Helen Regis, and have been humbling and enlightening, and have taught me many things about that place. In New York I am humbled by and grateful to all of those people who were willing to let me interview them and so generously trusted me with their stories and ideas. My aunt Carolyn Tucci, my grandmother Catherine Menninger, my grandfather Edward Menninger (who will always really be Tic Toc), my cousin Annamaria Giordano, and my great- (and great) uncles Frank and Vito Giordano were particularly instrumental to that process.

The most compelling reason to do any of this work has always been my students. I was fortunate to cut my teeth as a professor at a public institution where I was constantly challenged and enlightened by dedicated, curious, critical, bright, and passionate students. Moving to New Orleans to teach history at a public arts conservatory high school, the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, has been, contrary to what some might imagine, an entirely lateral move intellectually in terms of both the intellectual freedom offered by the position and the conversations I am privileged to have with colleagues and students: my freshmen in the Academic Studio are brilliant; Ivy League undergraduates have nothing on them. I am appreciative of my colleagues, impressive scholars and artists and committed teachers, for their patience throughout this fall when I have been doing double time, working there to start up the Academic Studio *and* finishing the dissertation. And I am especially grateful to Spree MacDonald, a fellow critical race and performance theorist, with whom I co-teach Integrated

Humanities, to my exceptional Domain Partner, Mike Wallace, and to Kyle Wedberg, President/CEO of NOCCA, for their support. They are true friends and comrades.

Finally, my family and friends deserve my eternal love and thanks. It's been a long hard ride these last six years, and they didn't give up on me – they were kind, inspiring, and supportive. In addition to the dear friends who double as colleagues whom I mentioned above, special thanks go to Ashley Amery, Sarah Chihaya, Anthony Cotton, Lizzy Gore, Kelly Guzmán, Leslie Stellwagen, and my NOLA crew, Bernie January, Grace Morris, Mark Tobler, and Joe Roach. My uncle Carl Menninger has always been someone I've gone to in order to think through artistic, intellectual, and personal questions; a conversation about making art that we had one summer day in Evanston when I was a Theater Cherub was instrumental in giving me courage and permission to strike out on uncharted courses of all kinds. My family, especially my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my sister Megan, and most especially my badass, amazing, intelligent, and incomparably kind parents, have always been my rock and my role models. Thank you, and much love.

## INTRODUCTION

### performative returns and the rememory of history

In 1976, Alex Haley published his epic family saga *Roots*. Its publication and adaptation to a TV miniseries catapulted Haley to fame, and inaugurated a genealogy craze among Americans of all backgrounds. As his celebrity grew, the story of his quest – moving from some family stories and genealogical records to linguistic sleuthing to a visit to the Gambia, near-operatic in its dramatic qualities, where the African version of his family’s oral history was recited to him and he was greeted with tears and open arms by his long-lost brethren – became as well-known as the story of his African ancestor Kunta Kinté and his progeny in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I quote Haley at length, because the sensibility of his prose and the structure of his narrative are extremely influential to a wide range of genealogical projects that followed in his wake:

“In Henning, Tennessee, throughout my boyhood, Grandma drummed and drilled me “—about your folks, boy!” [...] It always went back to our original African, “—he said his name was “Kin’te.” Stressed always was his passion for infusing his oral history into his daughter. Afresh, I heard of our African “Kin’te’s” native home; of his capture; his terrifying ocean trip; his four U.S. slave escape efforts. And then of the subsequent developing family – in a generational wending amidst cotton and tobacco plantations, overseers, masters . . . into Civil War, Emancipation, and then freedom.

“The drama, the challenging intrigue, kept tugging at the writer me. And so, during 1962, I began, at every chance, between other work, following the oral history’s trail. In plantation records, masters’ and mistresses’ wills, slave schedules; in 1700s and 1800s U.S. Censuses, I documented bits here, shreds there. Now Grandma was dead; repeatedly I re-visited my other close oral sources, most notably encyclopedic matriarch “Cousin Georgia” Anderson (in Kansas City, Kansas, where last month, 87, she died). I was often as I could be in Washington’s U.S. Archives, and Library of Congress, and D.A.R. Library; and in sundry relevant state and county 1700s and 1800s records.

“When finally last year, I felt I had the U.S. side documented – seven generations, I found an African linguistic expert, to whom I repeated the phonetic phrases that our family’s oral story always had included. The sound “Kin’te,” he said, without question was a Mandinka tribe surname. And “Cambia Bolong” had to be the Mandinka dialect for the Gambia River. So I went to The Gambia, West Africa, to the capital city, Bathurst. Gambian Government officials there, hearing my search, became emotionally interested. A committee volunteered to help me search. And via their communicational ways, word was set circulating of the Negro from America seeking his African family roots; of his story of a slavery-era Kinte, collecting wood near his village, when four other Africans overwhelmed and captured him, and sold him to Toubobs, whose ship took him into U.S. slavery. I was back in New York when the contact so vital was made. A Mandinka workman visited a member of the Committee. Up in the Juffure village, the worker said, the Alkalo (leader) told a forefathers’ account of four slavery-era Kinte brothers. The eldest among them once had gone for firewood – it occurred about the time British soldiers came; but he had disappeared, and was always assumed to have been taken by slave-raiders.

“The Committee asked me to return. Virtually a small safari was assembled for my travel upriver, to visit relevant villages, to present myself directly to Kinte elders. And ultimately – first in that village called Juffure, the African-side lineage extension was narrated to me, by Kebba Kangi Fofana. The three-centuries-old village’s Alkalo for a decade, his age seventy-two rains, he is (by Omoro/Lamin/Madi II/Jallang) the family-founder Kairaba Kunta’s great-great-great grandchild. In the Arabic-African face, the keen, deep eyes searched my sincerity. And then: “Mbu beh ma molu la kibaro foh yeh isa moy ma dala. Nuh fah la kibaro lemu ateh ya moy ah fama la. Ala fama la kibaro lemu yo yah moy famal minul tambita natoh—.” Mr. A.B.C. Sallah translated the Mandinka. A Gambia Radio soundman recorded it for me: “I will tell you by my mouth this family’s history. It is my father’s word to me. It was his father’s word to him, and that father’s word from fathers before —.” Juffure’s robed other Elders, the total village assembly, listened intently. And then, in the Land Rover, our party of twelve [Committee, interpreters, native minstrels, photographer, and Radio Gambia soundman] visited other Kinte-family villages: Kinte Kundah; Marong Kundah; Kinte Kundah-Janneh-Ya. At each village, the interpreters conveyed to them my long search, and my specific Kinte-lineage clues – that meshed with their own history family oral history. Once comprehending, en masse the grasped and pumped my hands. The women began a dancing, singing, chanting – And in every village, I would be presented the fat cockfowl, the symbol of the honored guest: “Kuma! Kuma! Kuma pur ntul!” They demanded of me, considering the historic occasion, some rhetoric: “I am seeing in African faces the faces that I have seen, in America, all of my life—“ is what, essentially, I said to them.

His story, told in heightened and sentimental language, exudes at once an air of incredulity – perhaps even impossibility – at the odds of connecting the dots; and a sense of inevitability, a telos of access and success that is implied even from the beginning. It is characterized by a sense of slipperiness of time and space – Haley jumps from his childhood, hearing stories from his grandmother, to researching as an adult, to the important touchstones of African American history, to ancient oral history traditions, and his travels reflect the migrations of his ancestors. It would seem that his point of origin is inseparable from the historical context that produced its significance – the origin itself is only animated by the understanding of the tribulations of being black in America and by stories of yearning and searching for connection. His return is met with an outpouring of emotion, and it seems that in this unfathomable moment, all the losses, absences, and gaps in the narratives and subjectivities on both sides of the Atlantic are filled in or made whole by this reunion. Haley’s roots, now connected, grant him new forms of legitimacy: as a writer, yes, but also as a black man, as someone whose African ancestors triumphed over unspeakable odds, and were redeemed – and as an American in a nation of im/migrants, where everybody’s forebears (nevermind the American Indians) came from somewhere else.

The emotional appeal of this narrative is not to be underestimated. Indeed, the structure and rhetoric of this narrative became a blueprint for other “returns” to ancestral homelands staged by other Americans. My time researching in New York in 2006 fortuitously coincided with a production called *My Italy Story*, a one-man play by Joseph Gallo, directed by Frank Licato and performed by Vincent Sagona, which was playing at a small community theater in New Jersey; it staged a narrative reconstitution of a journey to the South of Italy in order to reunite an Italian-American family in New Jersey that has been estranged by a family feud.<sup>2</sup> Thomas is visited by a vision of his grandmother after a family picnic, which has been plagued by family drama with respect to the guest list. At the picnic Thomas and his cousin Louie reminisced about the good old days when everyone was invited and decide to take steps to bring the family together, and Thomas interprets his grandmother’s appearance as a directive to go back to the Old Country to meet the family who still remains in the tiny town from which their relatives emigrated. He is surprised by how little support or information his mother is willing to provide him, but takes several photographs with him, and after an arduous journey, which involves getting lost and being misdirected, experiencing mutual illegibility due to linguistic unfamiliarity, having to rely on strangers and fragments of knowledge to put together an itinerary, and making impossible treks up steep mountains in rattling buses, he is rewarded with a glorious “re”-union with a kindly gaggle of relatives who welcome him, despite language barriers, with open arms and kill the proverbial fatted calf once he shows them the

---

And I said that this was pounding upon me, hard, how it was nothing but caprice which had decided which forefathers went out on those slave ships, and whose had not.

“I had tape-recorded, altogether, about three hours of that African-side testimony of my family’s 260 years – spanning from a Mauretanian – into West Africans, of the Mandinka tribe – into Negroes in America. Specifically, as well as subjectively, it is my own family. But I have reflected, heavily, that the story tells fundamentally, too, the history of all African slave-descent peoples. For only the slaver ships, and the African-thence-American (or Brazilian, or West Indian) names would differ. So the book I now am writing has a hope to help render a better perspective to the black present, through presenting a black past that is a true, inherently deeply-moving human drama. [...] And my book’s chief goals include something which our total international society has long badly needed: a buoy for the self-esteem, and for the esteem all others hold for, the slave-descent peoples. (The Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, Alex Haley Papers, Box 2, Folder 30 – “Working Report: ‘Before This Anger’ (Evolution of Roots)”).

<sup>2</sup> *My Italy Story*. By Joseph Gallo. Dir. Frank Licato. Perf. Vincent Sagona. Mile Square Theatre, Bloomfield, New Jersey. May 28, 2006. Performance.

photographs that prove his identity and belonging. Particularly significant to his experience is encountering an older relative from his grandfather's generation; this flesh-and-blood surrogation suddenly seems to catapult his deceased loved one back to life, and effects a dramatic collapse of time, space, memory, and reality. Significant, too, is the confirmation, in epic scale, of everything he has taken for granted about being Italian-American as having its roots in this other place, and being practiced in an uncannily familiar way by people whom he has never met, who live thousands of miles away; a taste of the family's homemade wine, which tastes just exactly like that which his grandfather used to make, functions in the same way as Proust's *madeleine*.

It is the perfect performative return, playing out in an ideal and idealized manner. The journey is strewn with hazards and challenges – as it ought to be, because it represents a yearning, searching pilgrimage that seeks to enact a kind of time travel as well as spatial journey. But the difficulty pays off when the protagonist finally reaches his destination, which is configured as knowable and accessible, populated by a loving, welcoming crowd of living “ancestors” that take him in and legitimate him as belonging to them and to this place: he finds a second home and learns something profound and additive about himself, his people, and his home, emerging from the experience with a newfound sense of purpose and authenticity both as an individual and as an embodiment of the operations of history and generations. After he returns home, Cousin Louie dies suddenly from a heart attack, and at the funeral, all the family comes together, including a cousin from Italy, which is a fitting honor for the deceased who had longed for just that.

A curious but extremely important revelation comes very close to the end of the play. Thomas discovers that he has been adopted, and indeed that the politics and disagreements around this decision were significant factors in the initial feud. Although the play's resolution takes this revelation into account, the adoption is treated as almost an after-thought, discussed only briefly at the end, without expanding upon it – or its ramifications – extensively. The addition of this adoption to the otherwise very tidy narrative poses provocative questions of ownership, as it detaches notions of “roots,” “heritage,” and “ethnicity” from bloodlines and ontological givens, asking instead for a consideration of family, belonging, and even ethnic identity as something that is learned, inherited through embodied gestures, behaviors, and beliefs, instead of something predetermined. That is, even this idealized return is haunted by imperfection and radical instability, with destabilizing implications for genealogy that reorient it toward invention as they suspect the viability of access, knowability, and blood.

Taken together, we learn from these endeavors – structurally very similar, though undertaken forty years apart – that the context of your arrival to the U.S., and what you can find when you “return” to your ancestral homeland, are narrativized as a way of exemplifying, or serving as a touchstone for understanding, the differences in access and belonging, the paradoxical benefits and tolls of racial and ethnic difference. The argument of this dissertation is essentially this: contemporary Americans of many ethnoracial backgrounds have, in the past forty years, negotiated the painful consequences of a form of multiculturalism that rewards otherness with cultural capital and punishes it with structural and symbolic abjection, through mechanisms of what I call “performative return”: genealogical invocations of legitimating and mythologized origins, particularly ancestral homelands and fraught narratives of arrival to the United States, that become mobilized in performances to a range of ideological and political ends. Some of these performances are local to specific cities and some take place in a discursive realm; some are mobilized for purposes of truly liberatory democratic ends, and others to redraw the boundaries of exclusion. In the context of this dissertation, I turn my attention in particular to two narratives of transatlantic arrival to the U.S. – the Middle Passage, and Ellis

Island immigration. As transatlantic arrivals to the U.S., the groups of subjects implicated in these narratives have tended to have had relatively permanent stays here – more so, for instance, than im/migrants from elsewhere in the Americas, who are more likely, on account of proximity, to navigate transnational back-and-forth relationships with their home country. But more significantly, these narratives are the purview of racial subjects in the U.S. who are implicated in a pernicious and reductive black-white binary conception of race. Resultantly, these narratives – particularly in the context of post-civil rights multiculturalisms – are articulated in relation to one another in a variety of ways.

The legacy of slavery rears its head in structural disparities between black and non-black Americans, in African Americans' fraught relationship to civil society, and in the notions of abjection and impossibility that are often associated with blackness. These factors are often discussed, more specifically, as being part of the fallout of the Middle Passage, the hellish forced migration in which Africans were chained up in coastal dungeons and then in steerage on ships and brought to the Americas; this experience is understood to be symbolically crucial to the transformation of humans into slaves, as there was a concerted effort on the part of the Europeans to divest these Africans of their homes, mother tongues, memories, cultural practices, families – in short, of any shred of their humanity. Of course, the success of this transformation is debated, and is indeed the explicit or subtextual subject of many performative returns. Either way, this momentous alchemical event is rhetorically positioned in contradistinction to the relative knowability<sup>3</sup> and the elective nature of *immigration*, and as a lynchpin in discussions of whether and how structural and psychic access to citizenship is available or is barred. The comparison to immigration (“there *is* no Ellis Island for the descendents of slaves to go to in order to learn about their ancestry,” goes a popular refrain) is taken up by optimists (who claim that things are getting better and they can pull themselves up, can be like the immigrants and transcend) and pessimists (who claim that there is a fundamental if not ontological – political, structural, and psychic – distinction between what is possible for blacks and non-blacks) alike.

Likewise, many ethnic whites<sup>4</sup> are very committed to the Ellis Island narrative of having left their home countries under duress, traveled in steerage to America, experienced an invasive and arbitrary inspection at the immigration station, suffered through some time here with a lack of language proficiency and were considered to be located in an interstitial racial category, had nothing, and made something of themselves, rising up eventually (by virtue of having “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps” without any sort of assistance, or so many telling the story would have it) to become fully incorporated citizens. This narrative, too, can be mobilized to a variety of ends: from an assertion that the mythic bootstrapping of yore means that contemporary immigrants and black Americans ought to be able to pull themselves up as well and do not deserve a public safety net. That is, the Ellis Island narrative is used to justify the psychic exclusion of and the (ongoing) withholding of resources from non-whites. Or it can be mobilized in a more generous and self-reflexive memory of having suffered, and having been offered various forms of assistance from communities, mutual aid societies, the government, and other entities, and this interpretation extends to an assumption that everyone

---

<sup>3</sup> That is, the capacity to know who you and your ancestors are, where they are from, the circumstances of their departure, and other information that can forge a sense of connection and shared history.

<sup>4</sup> That is, those Americans who are considered unambiguously white as of the mid-twentieth century, but who came to the U.S. from areas of Europe – Ireland, Southern Europe, and Eastern Europe, in particular – whose denizens were considered racially ambiguous; often these Americans came through Ellis Island later than Anglo, Nordic, and Germanic Europeans, and retained some of both their ethnic traditions and their racially-ambiguous/undesirable status well into the twentieth century.

else needs and deserves a safety net as well. Too, the Ellis Island narrative's emphasis on suffering and racial interstitiality apparently compels an inevitable and ambivalent dis/identification with blackness: many ethnic whites use blackness as a Manichean metaphor to describe the ways in which non-white or off-white immigrants were and are positioned upon arrival to the U.S. in a racial order in which they are interstitial subjects, suspended between whiteness (which is configured as citizenship, American-ness, and belonging) and blackness (which is configured as abjection, impossibility, and otherness). And many ethnic whites not only disavow the ways in which they benefit from structural and psychic manifestations of racial preference, but go so far as to borrow the rhetoric of grievance from the civil rights struggle, often indeed turning this language around to assert that it is ostensibly ill-deserving *blacks* who are responsible for the grievance of depriving ostensibly well-deserving whites of their entitlements through programs like affirmative action!

Given the imbrication and conflicting stakes of these narratives, investigating the extent to which the descendents of these im/migrants have or have not had access to American civil society – and the ways that this disparity is reflected in each group's performative returns – reveals some important aspects of the ways that the racial state enforces its terms.

But performative return is a powerful explanatory framework in a broader context than only these two narratives. The practices and desires of “returning” and roots-seeking form a cornerstone in defining ethnoracial identification and difference, by articulating a relationship to multiculturalism in the American racial state. Routinely hailed as a “nation of im(/)migrants,” the U.S. has been constituted by often-violent transnational encounters and the incorporation and racialization of multitudes who arrive from extranational locations. Genealogy, broadly conceived, is often the form taken by efforts that attempt to make a place for ourselves in multicultural America; it is a powerful means of claiming ownership of the past, and of constructing very clear boundaries around the communities with which people choose to identify. Genealogical practices produce provocative new cartographies and conceptions of temporality, often creating expansive and surprising networks of connectedness and affiliation: they generally probe beyond the immediately remember-able past, and lead to “originary” homelands beyond the United States. This is intrinsic to their seductive appeal. I posit that in many circumstances, notably for people who have historically been marginalized or excluded within structures of citizenship and belonging – both affective structures of feeling, and concrete, institutional structures produced by legal, political, and economic apparatuses – laying claim to America requires rewriting or re-imagining what America *is* in order to make space for oneself, and sometimes it cannot be claimed but rather is rejected through a stringent and often painful critique. I also posit that sometimes these actions can only be accomplished by referring to the particular circumstances through which one's racial or ethnic group came to be in America.

Part of what makes homelands, genealogical practices, and stories of nativity such rich and powerful fodder for staging battles of belonging and inclusion is the unique ability for origin myths to confer legitimacy (and thus, to confer ownership and entitlement to whatever resources are at stake, including rights, power, land, structures of feeling, and claims of belonging) by way of the associations and narratives of sacrality and religiosity – when they are secular in nature as well as when a religious worldview per se undergirds narratives of progress, suffering, redemption, cultural nationalism, etc – that attend them. Moreover, by conferring legitimacy with the authority of truth on those who are “native” or “original” or “authentic,” they exclude those who are not. In my dissertation I attend to the relationship between official national origin myths that purport to be specifically about freedom, democracy,

inclusiveness, and civic nationalism, but that in fact a) are predicated on histories of genocide, slavery, exclusion, oppression, and social death, and b) enable jingoism, violence, and ongoing exclusionary tactics – *and* those origin myths that are told in the name of historical revisionism, as ways of including the experiences, stories, and critiques/rejoinders of those who are excluded implicitly or explicitly from the prevailing official narratives, and from full participation in accompanying structures of citizenship, belonging, and civil society.

These performances expose to their audiences the ways that the US functions as a racial state – indeed as a racist state – and they call the bluff of the American Dream. One of the important things they argue is that it is crucial to look relationally at the ways in which 1) slavery as well as *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and 2) immigration and nativism or xenophobia have been enforced and are consequently re-membered and performed – through self-conscious performances and in unbidden structural residues. These transnationally-oriented racial projects are fundamental constituent elements of a specifically American racial/racist state. I attend in this dissertation to two differently-racialized groups of Americans whose historic processes of racial formation situate them as unique, prominent, or especially useful representatives or inheritors of the consequences of those two state-sponsored racial projects. But the second chapter in particular, which revolves around the symbolic functions of the Black Indians of New Orleans, and parts of the third and fourth chapters, which address silences and blindspots in the immigration narrative, invoke subjects that force our attention to the erasures in these histories, and to the history of conquest, imperialism, and genocide as *also* mutually constituent factors of the American racial state.

The dissertation is divided into two sections, the first on African American performative returns, and the second on those of Italian Americans. Each section has a chapter about returns that are discursive and another about returns that play out on the ground in cities and neighborhoods charged with historic and mythic significance. I deploy a combination of discourse analysis, archival research, and fieldwork to analyze objects that circulate broadly (film, television, novels, plays) and in many cases constitute and consolidate the popular discourse of that group's genealogical practices. I also attend to a site-specific network of events (in New Orleans and New York, respectively) that involves heritage tourism, neighborhood revitalization projects, and street performance/festivals that address the racial state's unfinished business relative to these groups' places in cities that have been recruited into diasporic cartographies, as ports of entry and points of dispersal and major sites of ethno-racial self-articulation, whose resonances circulate nationally. These chapters function as a tour of real and imaginary cartographies: a tale of two cities, and an excavation of the imaginary, transnational, criss-crossing, and diasporic maps that are implied when we look at these performative returns in a relational manner. By focusing on these cities, I hope not only to point out the significance of these particular locations on the diasporic maps I explicitly discuss, but also to establish an approach to thinking about literal locales as nodes within multiple diasporic, political, and/or symbolic cartographies so that it begs the consideration of these same cities within *other* groups' cartographies, as well as the consideration of *other* locales' (cities, neighborhoods, non-urban locations in the U.S.) situatedness in politicized transnational imaginaries. Meanwhile, we need the widely circulating discursive engagements in chapters one and four because they help to establish the terms and stakes of the cartographic imaginaries that sweep up the cities I look toward in my site-specific analyses. The two site-specific chapters, which are located in the middle – chapters two and three – speak largely to social justice-oriented endeavors that respond to grief by asserting and struggling against grievances. The two chapters about broadly-circulating objects – chapters one and four, which bookend the



previous chapters – discuss artistic works that respond to social and legal grievances with sensibilities, and sometimes surprising manifestations, of grief.

Section One, comprised of Chapters One and Two, analyzes instances of African American performative returns. My project in the first chapter is to parse how and to what end slavery and the Middle Passage are endowed with explanatory power: to evidence survival, redemption, and progress; or to remain structurally entrenched and reconfigured continuously across the monolithic persistence of antiblack racism. I could not theorize the framework of this dissertation without referring to *Roots*, the granddaddy, certainly, of African American roots-seeking as it is configured in terms of possibility and access, and of American postwar performative returns more broadly. I do precisely this in chapter one. But in the time since *Roots* first emerged on the scene, there have been a number of momentous shifts – in the technology that enables genealogy research, as well as in the sociopolitical Zeitgeist – and in the last half-decade or so alone, there have been two major engagements with and reconfigurations of his project. One case, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS series *African American Lives*, stands as a confirmation of Haley's project, and purports to finish the story using empirical genealogical and genetic evidence. The other, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* by Saidiya V. Hartman, functions as a rebuttal of Haley in light of the failures in the implementation of the freedom struggle's gains. In Chapter One I posit that the three works in question constitute a heated dialogue in which the political ramifications of genealogical practices and the perceived ontology of contemporary American blackness are at stake. They diverge with respect to how genealogy, a means of furnishing evidence and filling gaping blanks, is construed: as a mechanism to facilitate successful reconstruction, or a processual investigation that points to the fundamental but generative nature of impossibility and loss. I develop my discussion of this divergence into definitions of genealogy as an object and genealogy as a process.

As Gwendolyn Midlo-Hall famously stated, New Orleans is the most African city in the U.S. Its performance traditions have strong diasporic resonances, and Congo Square – the marketplace during colonial times and up through the middle of the nineteenth century where Africans came together on Sundays to practice their cultural, religious, and performance traditions – is largely responsible for diasporic retentions and inventions, and occupies a central role in narratives of Black struggle and freedom. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed the ways in which blackness has a powerful and contradictory currency in this country: it signifies abjection, but also commands substantial cultural capital and is called upon in explanatory metaphors by black and non-black people alike. In chapter two, I discuss the ways that Black New Orleanian street performance traditions are at once deployed by their practitioners as mechanisms to survive centuries of displacement and provide a safety net for their own in the face of the failure of any official one to catch them, and as mechanisms by which to offer and perform a public verdict on these failures, protesting and critiquing them and asserting their entitlement to resources and recognition. I also analyze the way they function in a common rhetorical and representational move, whereby Mardi Gras Indians and second-lines are mobilized in representational practices at once as specific people and important cultural practices in their own right, and in order to stand in as metaphors or metonyms for larger processes of social change and flows of power. The origins articulated within these self-consciously Afrocentric performances are about loss, absence, and violence; about retention and invention, creating something new; and about being embattled and oppositional. They provide, at once, narrative proof of the right not to be excluded, and narrative proof of having always been excluded, and therefore provide the terms of critique: namely, of the delusional and

narcissistic white supremacist fantasy that has come to pass for reality and has garnered the power and clout to arbitrate the terms of others' realities.

Section Two, comprised of Chapters Three and Four, signals the change in focus to Italian American performative returns, although the specter of mostly-imaginary blackness and its complicated semiology still lingers. Whiteness is also a pivotal category in an American racial schema, and Matthew Frye Jacobson has recently claimed that "Ellis Island immigrants" have become what whiteness, and therefore American-ness, has come to mean.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is necessary to examine *why* the immigration myth has such purchase, and how it is mobilized in relationship to the Middle Passage, by both blacks and whites. It is useful to look at how whiteness is and isn't successful/unmarked, and how certain white ethnic categories may be constructed as specifically ethnic. That is, they may be constructed as exotic or authentic (but only after whiteness – with its accompanying lack of specificity and access to power – is achieved), or as undesirable, unshakably other – namely, through associations with criminality, anarchy, and un-American-ness. Italian-American-ness is compelling on account of the particular ways that it both echoes and diverges from other forms of white ethnicity: unlike Judaism, Italian Catholicism was not figured as a racial category but was potentially regarded as un-American, subject to anti-Papist nativism; Italian Americans were also categorically associated with organized crime. But equally noteworthy are the ways in which Italian Americans, who were legally white from the start, made choices to become white in other ways, and have structurally and psychically ascended to this position in the last half-century – in part by disidentifying with blackness and ultimately often building their racial advancement by degrading people of color. Engaging with Italian American performative returns underscores the ways in which whiteness is configured in a Manichean and structural dialectic with blackness and the ways in which white privilege and power are evaded and redirected as topics. At the same time, the centrality of tropes of loss in Italian American performative returns helps to shed light on the ways that the full promise of the American Dream is not available, even to those who seem positioned to be able to access it, and thus these performances enact a stinging indictment of the construction of these myths.

If New Orleans is the most African city, New York is a kind of mythic hub of American immigration. This chapter is an examination of the well-meaning and convenient narrative of the nation of immigrants and the centrality of Ellis Island to its construction, its generative potential as well as the blindspots and problematic assumptions embedded in its rhetoric. It is imperative to turn to Ellis Island's tourism programming in order to fully explore the ways in which the idea of it is perpetuated, but my observations revealed that the ideological work the tourism operation does to try to interrupt the potentially insidious interpretations of its narrative are often themselves interrupted by the ways in which the discourse circulates far beyond the site itself. From there, I examine several other major sites in New York – the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and "the *Real* Little Italy in the Bronx" – where immigration and Italian American ethnicity are performed and negotiated, made consumable for tourists, ultimately with very different arguments. In some respects each site validates the bootstraps myth, and in others it proposes a more inclusive notion of a city or neighborhood as a port of entry that welcomes all newcomers into a genealogy of social welfare. My analysis of highly visible tourism operations and the oral histories of neighborhood residents examine the widespread, liberal-multiculturalist notion that the immigrant narrative can serve as an "open signifier" which functions as a one-size-fits-all mechanism for approaching and engaging with

---

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Roots Too* (2006), which I will discuss at much greater length in chapters three and four.

ethnic, racial, national, and religious difference in the United States; I consider the role of genealogical thinking and performative acts in the spaces that emerge with this ostensibly open signifier. I argue that what occurs on the ground in practice (in sites sanctioned by the authority of museums as well as between individuals and in neighborhoods) is often more complicated than a tidy theory or politics might account for – and yet, some of the uncritical elements of the discourses of multiculturalism and immigration circulate and overshadow the best intentions of both individuals and institutions, and are often what decisions and policy are based around.

David Chase's *The Sopranos* is one of the major cinematic events in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it in turn builds off of Mario Puzo's and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy*. While *The Godfather* established some of the tropes of the Italian American gangster as a complex tragic figure marginalized-yet-defined by a cruel and corrupt American capitalist and racial order, *The Sopranos* builds on this and has a very particular and savvy negotiation of racial anxiety, of the malaise of white upward mobility at the end of American empire – and also of grief. They are also some of the most visible representations of Italian Americans in the last half century, and set the terms for how Italian American performative returns – both by way of actual journeys to Italy, and by way of the ethnic performativity of *italianità* – are understood. But even as this chapter is largely concerned with an analysis of these two works, I frame the discussion with a work of feminist historiography, Melania Mazzucco's novel *Vita*, which problematizes the ways that America rises shimmering for immigrants as a promised land, and position them as interstitial beings – between racial categories and between nations – plunging them into a series of disappointments. By reading these works I establish an interpretation of the American Dream as a polyvalent entity that is at once structurally available to some and not others, and affectively deferred almost universally, even for those seemingly best positioned to be able to access it. *Vita* the narrative invention and *Vita* the novel works as a kind of book-end to the other work of feminist historiography that opens and in many ways guides the stakes of this dissertation – *Lose Your Mother*: I close on a note similar to the one I started on, with works that take seriously invisibility, haunting, conjuring, and grief.

### **the crucible of the racial state**

In this section, I discuss my formulation of how performative return is engendered or compelled by the racial state and by various multiculturalisms that are, themselves, compelled by the racial state. Although I attend to the specific ways that the performative returns engage and define multiculturalism by chapter, it is necessary here to define and distinguish a few of the genealogies and definitions of this term that I will be referencing in my analysis. I draw upon this vocabulary because it situates the work in conversation with several interarticulated discourses, which include recent strands of critical race theory as it has been formulated in the social sciences and humanities (with an eye toward how it has been formulated in legal scholarship), transnational American studies, particularly studies of diaspora, empire, performance theory, and critical/comparative ethnic studies. But the theorization of the dissertation also takes its cues from the theorizing that those who enact the performative returns I analyze do themselves. That is, the projects I examine propose definitions of what I refer to as the racial state, manifested through their concern with the functioning of the state, the relationship between individuals and structure, and the ways that a racial order is imposed by the history of the U.S. and by its contemporary politics.

I argue that thinking of the racial state as being constituted by acts of performance and genealogies of performativity enables us to understand the ways that change occurs and also how entrenched structures and discourses persist. This formulation also helps to illuminate the

ways in which the racial state and multiculturalism are implicated in one another. The state is that sovereign entity which possesses and rules a territory within which functions an economy; it does the material work of engineering, legislating, and regulating its insides and outsides, and is composed by “*institutions*, the *policies* they carry out, the *conditions and rules* which support and justify them, and the *social relations* in which they are embedded” (Omi & Winant 83, emphasis theirs). We can think of *performance* as a series of discrete acts, explicit ways in which the state enacts and manifests its policies or in which these policies or enactments are contested. We can think of *performativity*, in turn, as the *longue durée*, the “acts sedimented over time”<sup>6</sup> that are naturalized and layered upon one another, somewhat akin to Foucault’s theory of governmentality, which provides a useful way of understanding how the state’s operations are carried out in a manner that far exceeds the state itself. His theory accounts for the production and maintenance of ideal or appropriate citizens, whereby power is capillary and the workings of the government/state are carried out at multiple levels – not only from the top down or the bottom up in some sort of binary structural arrangement, but on the part of citizens spread throughout an extensive network of influence who carry out and enforce “normative” and “appropriate” behavior in a variety of contexts. This network therefore enables the sphere of influence and surveillance, as well as that of potential “revision,” to be quite extensive. This formulation is important in order to understand performative returns as performances that engage with the state’s discourses, policies, and manifestations, that often seek to challenge the discourse, but that also are often circumscribed by the ways in which the state’s discourse is formulated; thus they sometimes cannot succeed in making the changes they seek.

The “racial state” is a term that I borrow from Omi and Winant and from David Theo Goldberg. Goldberg writes,

“In [the book] *The Racial State* I seek to comprehend the co-articulation of race and the modern state. I argue that race is integral to the emergence, development, and transformations (conceptually, philosophically, materially) of the modern nation-state. Race marks and orders the modern nation-state, and so state projects, more or less from its point of conceptual and institutional emergence. The apparatuses and technologies employed by modern states have served variously to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation.”<sup>7</sup>

His work points to the mutual constitution of race, democracy, and the modern nation/state and the institutional production of narratives and material realities of inclusion and exclusion. Like Omi and Winant before him, he argues that one cannot separate the development of the modern state from racial formation; that “the state *is* inherently racial” (Omi & Winant 82, emphasis theirs). Though not every racial state is a *racist* state, those that are – including the U.S. – may operate, in Goldberg’s terms, according to “naturalist” or “historicist” racisms; respectively, “governmentalities and subjectivities predicated upon assumptions of inherent superiority and inferiority” and “claims of historical immaturity and un(der)development” (12). The law is embedded in and instrumental to the manifestation and maintenance of both forms and may be either/both permissive and restrictive in its enactments. Multiculturalism, in turn, both enhances and challenges the racial state, but is always implied by it, if, as Goldberg defines it, the latter is an entity whose function it is to produce and maintain homogeneity and manage

---

<sup>6</sup> See Butler 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Goldberg 4.

heterogeneity, to replicate itself and patrol its constitutive margins and ideological borders, and is predicated on racial thinking and awareness.<sup>8</sup> That is, the racial state is undergirded by difference. The performative returns in question here engage the problem of what difference means, how it is defined, and what is at stake in how it is meted out – and they negotiate the problem of being situated relative to other (and Other) subjects of the American racial state. In some cases, as in many of the tourism operations in New York and New Orleans such as Ellis Island and Jazz Fest, those who stage performative returns mobilize the specific vocabulary of doctrinal “multiculturalism” *per se*: critiquing or affirming its definition and/or its politics. In others, such as the New Orleans street traditions or *Lose Your Mother*, multiculturalism as a *description* is implied, even as its authors may disidentify with multiculturalism as a doctrine.

But the racial state goes to great lengths to make itself appear not to be racial – that is, to hide its racial workings – and it can do so in part because it continues to invest in an American Dream (the notion that anyone can succeed: can start in America from nothing and can “rise up” to accomplish economic success and psychic incorporation solely on the basis of their positive attitudes and hard work) that is ostensibly available to anyone who strives to reach it. However, this Dream is predicated on assumptions that meritocracy, capitalism, and doctrinal colorblindness are felicitous systems. (Colorblindness, a seemingly-democratic conceptualization, is in fact part of a conservative backlash that denies the historicity of oppression and of racially-organized disparities of power and resources, and insists that any mention of race is discriminatory.<sup>9</sup>) They are only felicitous for those who are already positioned in opportune ways on account of their economic or educational standing in the middle and elite classes, and/or on account of their racialization. And this means that structurally, access to realizing the American Dream has been blockaded from most people throughout much of the nation’s history – particularly people who are not white.

In part, this barring is a function of explicitly exclusionary state policies, such as laws that have counted certain groups of people as being, categorically, ineligible to vote, or immigration quotas and statutes that state that people from certain parts of the world are “racially ineligible” for naturalization and citizenship. But this lack of access to the promises of the American Dream for many people of color is also attributable to the ways in which what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness” – and what Cheryl Harris calls “whiteness as property” – is enforced through less overt but no less deeply entrenched mechanisms. Lipsitz argues that

[w]hiteness [...] accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through

---

<sup>8</sup> Goldberg 2002: 10.

<sup>9</sup> For trenchant critique of notions of “colorblindness,” see, among other things, Post, Robert C. et al, *Prejudicial Appearances: The Logic of American Antidiscrimination Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Brown, Michael, et al, *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Sexton, Jared, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, third ed, 2009); Alexander, Michelle, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Wise, Tim, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (San Francisco: City Lights Open Media, 2010); Catanese, Brandi, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations,

and that “white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity” (Lipsitz 2006: vii). Whiteness is figured as property; and property is figured as power and “the settled expectations that are to be protected”.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, symbolically, America connotes racial and Manichean whiteness, an equation that can be found in a variety of writings that theorize from a critical race perspective. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison writes that “[i]t is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their ‘Americanness’ as an opposition to the resident black population. [...] Deep within the word ‘American’ is its association with race. To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective ‘white’ or ‘black’ or ‘colored’ to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white.”<sup>11</sup> Writing on the invention of the idea of “national origins” for purposes of creating the quotas of the 1920s immigration restrictions, Mae Ngai points out that “[t]he law stipulated that “ ‘inhabitants in continental United States in 1920’ does not include (1) immigrants from the [Western Hemisphere] or their descendents, (2) aliens ineligible for citizenship or their descendents, (3) the descendents of slave immigrants, or (4) the descendents of the American aborigines. [...] In other words, to the extent that the ‘inhabitants of the continental United States in 1920’ constituted a legal representation of the American nation, the law excised all nonwhite, non-European peoples from that vision, erasing them from the American nationality.”<sup>12</sup> And nearly a century after these quotas were constructed, Nicholas De Genova’s ethnographic research about Mexican migrants in Chicago “expose[s] the workings of U.S. nationalism itself as a racial formation for which ‘American’ national identity is inherently racialized as white” and reveals how people he spoke with negotiated their own racialization “always in relation to both a dominant whiteness and its polar opposite, a subjugated and denigrated Blackness.”<sup>13</sup> This psychic and structural Manicheanism – whether implicit or explicit – and the desire, grief, and ambivalence bound up in it lies at the heart of each return in this dissertation, because it is so intimately woven into the constitution of American notions of humanity and freedom. This tension is acknowledged perhaps most directly in chapter one, when the ontology of black subjectivity and social death is theorized in the returns, and in chapter four, when the real and imagined lurking otherness of Italian-Americans is perpetually described in proximity to blackness.

What does all that mean for an analysis of how performative returns are engendered by the racial state? The losses and bitter disappointments in terms of access and/or abjection compel, in many cases, efforts on the part of Americans to re-articulate the terms of belonging, and in other cases, like *Lose Your Mother* and all of the works discussed in chapter four, an outright repudiation of the American racial state. And the fact that the U.S. has been constituted by ongoing and fraught transnational encounters implies for many who trace their ancestry outside of this country that beyond this place there is another homeland. In the post-

---

<sup>10</sup> C. Harris 1993: 1778.

<sup>11</sup> Morrison 1992: 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ngai 2004: 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> De Genova 2005: 8.

Civil Rights, post-*Roots* era, performative returns are shaped in very specific ways that reflect the contours of freedom struggles and their repression, as well as the rise of multiculturalisms whose potential bite has been dulled at once by policy, by capital, and by discourse. Moreover, during this period of time increasing disparity has made the infelicitousness of the American Dream increasingly evident. Genealogy and roots-seeking apparently become urgent during times of real and imagined displacement and loss: inventions and conjurations of origins constitute efforts to claim sufficient legitimacy so as not to be cast out – considered an outsider, left without resources, power, or possibilities. Narratives of homelands and arrival seem to have the capacity to suture dispossessions and fill in the gaps in incomplete narratives. *Roots* depicts a homeland and a story of access. It evinces a faith in knowability – that even the descendents of slaves can access their homeland, can locate their ancestors, and that genealogy makes possible reunion – and faith in the American Dream, in the notion that racial hierarchy can be transcended and Americans of all stripes can succeed against the odds. These notions, this sense of optimism and promise of access, may have seemed possible in the heady moment in which he was writing, and may be a particularly appealing dream in the wake of disappointments and disillusionment in its aftermath.

Staking claims on origins outside of the U.S., as both critical and uncritical multiculturalisms often espouse, insists on the transnational tethers of a U.S. that was formed in the context of global processes. At their best, these practices are part of an effort to challenge the constitution of America as it is articulated in white/colonial/antiblack/xenophobic terms: they acknowledge the U.S. as a racial state and a postcolonial state that carries the legacies of genocide and slavery into the present through the policies it enacts and the psychic structures of exclusion and abjection it reproduces. In cases like *Lose Your Mother*, New Orleans street traditions, neighborhood revitalization projects in New Orleans and the Bronx, and *Vita*, looking to these origins can be part of a radical reconceptualization of whose humanity is to be considered viable, a staunch analysis of power, and a critical interrogation of how difference is valued. When blindspots prevail, power and politics are not part of the analysis. Sometimes, as in the more frustrating moments of most of the large-scale tourism operations, the blindspots are a matter of embracing a form of unmarked liberal humanism in which difference is aesthetic and insignificant rather than the result of power relationships, and such projects espouse a notion that America shares a “common culture” – in this case a “multicultural” one – that does not acknowledge the vicissitudes of power and privilege. And at their most blind moments, claiming origins outside of the U.S. through performative return is about claiming the supremacy or superiority of some group or another, which evinces a more straightforward investment in re-drawing the lines of exclusion – perhaps around slightly different insides and outsides, or perhaps in precisely the same place. Genealogy and performativity are neither inherently liberatory nor inherently insist upon domination; either way, appealing to origins is a powerful mechanism for claiming legitimacy.

### **genealogies: performativity, returns, and performative returns**

In the context of charged, haunted physical locations and histories of systemic violence, these appeals to origins and bids for legitimacy have high stakes and are mobilized in order to attend to temporality’s slipperiness, to power, and to the construction (and destruction) of evidence and knowledge. I acknowledge these stakes by situating this project within discourses of historiography, cultural memory, and cultural geography, and within critical race feminist and performance studies methodologies that turn toward what is invisible and hidden, but which nonetheless demonstrates evidence of its presence through other means. And situating

the inquiry within these discourses gives traction to my effort to examine the power – that is, both the appeal and the danger, as well as the force – of the always-already implicit presence of notions of “return” and genealogy within notions of performativity and performance. Such a consideration, I believe, is crucial if a framework of performance and performativity is used in order to theorize the potential for “revising” oppressive structures as well as the often-invisible means by which they persist.

Across a broad range of performative returns, origins appear as flexible, open, non-teleological, and processual, containing not only the distant place of origin but the range of events that gives the homeland – and group members’ status as Americans – their particular nuances and significance. The origins that are sought in these genealogy projects are temporally and spatially slippery narratives that often include the homeland itself, ancestral figures, the process and circumstances of arrival to the United States, and an account or history of the terms of racialization and racial formation. Genealogy – the literal practice of constructing family trees and tracing family lines, *and* the poststructural definitions of genealogy in the humanities and the study of history – eschews origin myths: genealogies are unruly and infinite, constructed of accidents and chance, reproduction and replications riddled with revisions. Indeed, the structures of genealogy and performativity are very similar in this respect.

That is, paradoxically, both genealogy and performativity are always in search of a falsely conceived original – the defining moment of beginning or the primary ancestor in the case of genealogy, an ideal or a model after which enactments are styled in the case of performativity. The genealogy that emerges in performative returns, then, is at once obstinately and perhaps delusionally invested in origins, *and* persistently more open, fluid, processual, and non-teleological than it first seems. What genealogy and performativity have in common, and which makes them apt and useful frameworks for understanding these projects, is their structural fluidity and the centrality of accident, chance, the unbidden and invisible, and the openness that the aspect of “revision” lends to the operations of repetition. Each performative return offers an interpretation of what genealogy means: for Hartman and Mazzucco, genealogy is a methodology for historiography – a Foucauldian and Roachian process of excavation; for keepers of tradition such as Mardi Gras Indians or residents of Belmont as well as tourism operations such as Ellis Island and Jazz Fest, genealogy is figured as the development or heritage of a social or political organization, or of an artistic or spiritual practice. For Haley and Gallo genealogy speaks to a notion of family; while for Puzo/Coppola and Chase, ethnic performativity is a mechanism for genealogy in multiple senses – excavation as well as heritage. Meanwhile genealogy also lends itself to considerations of blood, descent, and inheritance all of these cases. I argue that there are, consistently and across the board, surprising and unruly openings in these genealogies that call for invention, improvisation, and potentially unexpected inclusiveness. However, at the same time that those “genealogists” who stage performative returns are working to expose the blindspots in official origin myths of the U.S. that do not include them – a process which is bound up in debunking these myths’ truth and their legitimacy *as origins* – the oppositional narrators of performative returns are deeply invested in their *own* origins, which in turn produces noteworthy blindspots.

Genealogy and performativity is language that describes a long and fluid temporal expanse, and the temporal movements it speaks to flow in multiple directions at once. In her work on the persistent social, aesthetic, and commodity structures of the antebellum plantation that linger in any number of postbellum cultural formations, Jessica Adams states that the title of her book, *Wounds of Returning*, is the literal translation of nostalgia, and her explanation of



the title's layers of significance contains a powerful articulation of what "returning" means when traumatic history and memory are at stake. She writes:

In everyday usage, nostalgia has come to signify the longing to return to a past that probably never existed and to places that have changed irrevocably. But 'wounds of returning' suggest something more complicated – that the past itself may return, inflicting new wounds and reopening old ones" (Adams 5).

I follow her in this formulation, and suggest that even as performative return is the genealogical practice of engaging with a real and/or imagined origin, *it is also that which returns* – perhaps repressed and reformulated, perhaps unbidden, perhaps by being wrested into view against the odds – from the past to be reckoned with in the present and future.

Certainly one means by which the "wounds return" is through incomplete forgetting haunted by unfinished business. Both memory and forgetting are imperfect, and often what gets substituted in for traumatic histories is a refurbished, tidy, often teleological narrative that elides and violently erases precisely that which made it possible to be invented. But material and intangible traces of the past, felt in the lives of people affected (affectively) by violence done on others long ago, don't go away. Toni Morrison is a key interlocutor for me in this dissertation: not only does her work provide an extremely powerful analytic for understanding the myriad uses to which notions of blackness are put by black and non-black people alike – a recurrent theme in American performative returns – but her work theorizes the lurking, seething nature of the invisible, the past, ghosts, *and* marginalized segments of population. In *Beloved*, this problem finds its way into a vocabulary of "rememory." In that novel, the formerly enslaved Sethe tells her daughter Denver about the inexorably lingering presence of the past, tangible and seething, in the physical (and metaphysical) present. This she defines as *rememory*:

"If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. [...] Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you," (35-36).

*Beloved*, who becomes the most concrete manifestation of rememory in the novel, constitutes a manifestation not only of the past, but of the ways in which those who are still alive in the present are constantly reliving, reinventing, and negotiating it. The rememory that is *Beloved* is simultaneously constituted and governed by, and independent of – even dictatorial of – Sethe's own memory. Rememory is defined not only as that which leaks through, but as an agentic re-configuration of the past, one that attends not only to *what* has been elided and silenced, but to *how* this has been accomplished, and attends, also, to the affective effects of this silencing on those implicated in the playing out of the past.

Indeed, it is important to understand the process of "return" as being a push-pull between that which emerges of its own volition or by the force of what is unfinished, and that which is reconstructed: that is, how and to what end the past is actively interpreted and represented, and what sorts of manipulation or alteration occurs in the active mobilization of narratives, the production and dissemination of discourse. For instance, in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, James E. Young insists upon the importance of a deep understanding of traumatic historical events themselves, but

focuses his attention on analyzing the ways in which the subject of the Holocaust has been put to political, ethical, and memorial use. That is, Young attends to how its history and effects have been and continue to be narrativized and represented, *and to what ends*. What has been included and excluded from its representations? What memories, experiences, and present and future practices does it justify or account for? What is at stake in his study is action. The ways in which the era and its horrors are made knowable, how this knowledge is framed and represented, become the basis for the ways in which it becomes usable, and therefore become the catalyst for and framework within which further action in the world may be taken. By turning the focus toward the meaning and experience of the event rather than or in addition to what “really” happened, writers like Young who recognize the consequences of interpretation relocate the focus of the object of analysis from being solely a reconstruction of events, to being an acknowledgement and critical engagement of the constitutive powers of representation.

The returns I analyze are works of “public history” in many ways: they circulate broadly or are seen by large numbers of people, and thus have considerable pedagogical and discursive sway. Some make pronouncements about the nature of the past and are backed up by the imprimatur of scholarly or museum authority, while others are “public” in the sense, also, of being staged by “the folk.” These performances of history allow us to see how the past is used and understood, and what is missing from other narratives of the same events, irrespective of whether these performances tell us what “actually” happened. And this is how public memory is created: through the production of discourse, its repetition or return, and the sacralization of these narratives. This citational feedback loop of consequences circulating and being *re*-played, *re*-membered, *re*-vised, *re*-produced, *re*-presented is fundamental to the guiding tenets of the discipline of performance studies and the relationship between performance and performativity – which, as Joseph Roach argues, may be powerfully expressed by attending to that between performance, memory, and surrogation.

Performative return is linked to rememory as well as the uses of narrative insofar as it hinges on the ways in which people manipulate narrative, how history is understood, and the extent to which people do or do not exert control upon the ways that events are shaped and represented, and thus upon how they are able to be remembered, reckoned with, and granted importance and power. And it also hinges on that which remains, unbidden, unnoticed, but has material consequences anyway, and exerts force upon and may even be dictatorial of actors in the present. The ‘return’ is performative, then, in that it may operate in the realm of representation more easily than it does in the realm of the literal; but it is also performative in that what returns and how it does so is entangled in the same complex and delicate push-pull between agency and compulsion, naturalization and visibility that characterizes performativity.

Another way to understand this push-and-pull of agency and compulsion is to use the vocabulary of conjuring and haunting. Theophus Smith defines conjuring as “a magical means of transforming reality,” and magic as “ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses.” He then states that “[m]ore familiar and pertinent here are the three related meanings: (1) to invoke or summon (up) a spirit, as in sorcery; (2) to effect by the use of ‘magical’ arts; and finally (3) to summon up an image or an idea as an act of imagination.”<sup>14</sup> That is, according to Smith’s formulation, conjuring is a performative speech/act, one that actively seeks to transform reality or to instantiate a new one. Theophus Smith’s work on conjuring has specifically to do with African American theology and spiritual practices. This dissertation does not deal with conjuring in terms of a particular theological tradition or spiritual practice, but is primarily concerned with the third of his three related meanings, the

---

<sup>14</sup> T. Smith, 1994: 4-5.

summoning of an image or idea as an act of imagination – although I contend that the force and circulation of these imaginative acts begets a more material invocation or summoning, such as in his first meaning – not by sorcery, but by collective ideological persuasion. The agency or force, then, does not stem from the entity being conjured, but by the one doing the conjuring.

Conversely, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon tells us it is the ghost, or “the lost subjects of history – the missing and lost ones and the blind fields they inhabit” (195), “the lost beloveds and the force that made them disposable” (205) that re-appears to haunt the present; in her configuration the agency is on the part of the ghost rather than on those who are being haunted. She attends to traumatic pasts that don’t go away, but linger in the subtext of the present, in cultural artifacts, enactments, relationships, and architectures of power. She tells us that “[i]f haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place” (Gordon 8). The nonlinearity of haunting as a framework stands as a powerful counterargument to and interruption of the linearity of historicist constructions of chronology and cause-and-effect, substituting a different kind of logic, one that is able to take seriously that which is repressed, that which comes unbidden, the ways in which memories function. It allows for excavations of traumatic memory in which the boundaries between public and private, official and oppositional, that which is spoken and unspoken, institutions and their subjects, are blurred. Threads that powerfully but not obviously connect geopolitical sites, traumatic histories, and constructions of alterity are made visible, making it possible to look at them relationally and understand how they haunt one another.

In chapter one, haunting manifests through both the persistence of Haley’s narrative of certainty and access, and through Hartman’s counter-discourse, her epistemology of the invisible, where unknowability and absence characterize the ways we can access the losses of the Middle Passage. In chapter two I consider conjuring in terms of magical thinking and magical realism: the conjuring of a hateful fantasy into a felicitous reality that circumscribes people’s lives; as well as the magically real qualities of street performances vesting them with the power to persuade. In three we see how exclusionary qualities of the immigration narrative haunt well-intended efforts to conjure other counter-narratives into being, coupled and contradicted by the persistence of the memory of social welfare and inclusive ports-of-arrival that complicate this discourse. And finally in four I attend to the ways in which specters of (imagined and imaginary) blackness haunt ethnic whiteness; sometimes conjured infelicitously as evidence of grievance, and sometimes emerging spectrally alongside histories of Italians’ racial otherness. Across the board, I demonstrate evidence of discourse and psychic structures haunting social practice in spite of people’s intentions and wishes, and thus the force of discourse to conjure realities into being.

Both conjuring and haunting characterize the past’s manifestation in the present. This language is analytically valuable because it underscores the significance of what is invisible and somewhat mysterious to the ways in which power is consolidated, manifested, and redirected. It also announces an affinity between the ways in which transformation is understood to occur in realms as ostensibly distinct from one another as critical theory, magic, and memory.<sup>15</sup> And

---

<sup>15</sup> I also wanted to find a vocabulary to theorize the invisible that didn’t depend on psychoanalysis or on religion/spirituality. Both of those frameworks are extremely valuable and have highly significant resources to offer to the study of power and invisibility – they have each developed a vocabulary for doing so that has proven widely productive. Indeed, Morrison, whom I look to in part because she circumvents the use of an obviously psychoanalytic vocabulary for theorizing race, power, and psychic life, employs this language quite explicitly in her introduction to *Playing in the Dark*.<sup>15</sup> And, of course, spirituality and spiritual life are necessary to sustain

just as importantly, I wanted to write a theoretical framework that emerges from the works themselves: the works I discuss are, in fact, engaged in substantial and sophisticated theorizing. By invoking the theoretical frameworks suggested by these works, while also engaging scholarly interlocutors, I have tried to write a theoretical and explanatory framework that listens to what these artistic and political projects have to say and that also illuminates something new about them. I intend for this project to participate in an ongoing and profound refashioning of the epistemology of the invisible,<sup>16</sup> which is as fundamental a component in struggles toward freedom (and the persistence of structures of domination) as is verifiable evidence of oppression. This project advocates for the excavation of psychic structures and historical silences to replace both positivism and (implicit or explicit) faith in a divine logic governing the (racial) order of things, whether those certainties stem from a disciplinary perspective, a teleological one, or a set of nationalist ideologies. The theoretical framework that these performative returns draw upon and establish is one that calls for a re-evaluation of the ways in which power operates, because only then can a truly liberatory engagement with the terms and stakes of a freedom struggle take place.

Invoking the language of conjuring and performativity, though, means having to deal with the issue of repetition and revision and the ways that performativity has been used to describe agency, or the capacity to transform reality. Especially in a project that calls upon the language of “worldmaking,” I need to qualify my use of this language a bit. That is, as long as I am engaging in an extended theorization of performativity, it is crucial to rigorously theorize the limits of social change and mechanisms of power as they are taken up in these practices. The Austinian notion of felicitousness is tremendously helpful to this end.

Felicitous performative acts interpret reality: they interpret its significance, the ways power is consolidated within it, and what is and is not reproduced/carried over, by filtering it and by re/producing and constituting it through action. All language performs something – a set of relationships, power dynamics, subject positions, and objectives – but performative speech acts enact the thing they name. “I beg you”; “I promise”: a transaction is made. But, as J.L. Austin warned, an effective, completed speech act must take place under the proper conditions. Only under “felicitous” circumstances can potentially performative speech actually ascend to performative *action*, and change the world – or at least, change some circumstance in the ostensibly bounded world of the speaker-cum-actor. My goal in introducing a discussion of speech act theory is not only to focus on speech acts, although those are part of it. Rather, my investment is in the notion of felicitous contexts/circumstances being able to render something (an act, a meaning, a role) *real*. For instance, discourses and disciplines of authority – science, the law, “common sense,” the academy, “nature,” etc – function to ratify and naturalize state performatives such as the law, along with people’s conception of racial, gendered, sexualized

---

people, can provide ethical maps that stand as alternatives to dominant corporate secularism, and, analytically, I also find that the language of sacrality and faith are extremely useful to understanding and describing the ways that power and social orders come to have a hold on people – the ways in which collectivities put their faith and belief in a particular vision of what reality is and how it works, or a particular hierarchical arrangement, or worldview. However, I am unsettled by the prospect of poaching a language that suggests the structures of and investments in religious belief and sacredness and then is deeply critical of them; I do not wish to disrespect or blur the lines of what is truly sacred for people. That is, although this dissertation traffics in the realm of faith and in the realm of *sacrality*, it does not touch “the sacred” and is not theological in nature. And I wanted to move away from psychoanalysis first because if we are attending here to the ways in which genealogies and origins are invoked as legitimating narratives, I didn’t want to end up at Freud; and moreover, I wanted to imagine a framework that privileges and theorizes a long view of temporality and historiography.

<sup>16</sup> Following Avery Gordon, Joseph Roach, Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Melania Mazzucco, M. Jacqui Alexander, Frank Wilderson, and many others.

categories, nationalities, and other subjectivities and permutations of citizenship and belonging or exclusion.

While the question of felicitousness pervades the entire dissertation, that specific terminology comes to the fore in the New Orleans chapter, where I consider the formation and existence of communities that have their own rules and realities, meted out on their own terms, even as they're also disciplined, structured, and circumscribed by the racial state. I examine how felicitousness is constructed in these contexts: where these communities are capable of arbitrating of the terms of reality that they occupy, where they are limited or circumscribed by the racial state, *and* where they in turn operate to restructure other people's reality. Lynnell Thomas has also theorized the public negotiations of New Orleans's anti-blackness – specifically, the prominent exclusion of black people and history from most New Orleanian tourism – in terms of felicitousness. Thomas posits that Austin is concerned only with the external functions of performative speech acts – those aspects that all can see and agree to, rather than being concerned with intention or interiority; and she characterizes his discussion of the conventions that are invoked by speech acts, wherein he articulates the idea of felicitousness, as being oblivious in its assumption that social conventions affect everyone equally. Thus, she argues, felicitousness is not a useful category for understanding how speech acts operate under the radar and/or as acts of implicit resistance, and invokes Fanon's as an alternative framework.<sup>17</sup> My project, while related in its intentions, differs in its execution: while I too am deeply invested in the techniques of survival and resistance that occur under the radar in spite and because of the repressive conditions enforced by the dominant conventions, I find Austin's notion of felicitousness useful in terms of understanding the reach and the limits of those conventions: it speaks directly to those parameters of legitimacy and authority in a given social context that exist whether or not all parties agree to them, and that are often established precisely in order to maintain conditions of oppression and disparity. Indeed, my goal in introducing a discussion of speech act theory and felicitousness is to take up the notion of felicitous contexts/circumstances being able to render something (an act, a meaning, a role) *real*.

Part of my investment in this notion of felicitousness is a disciplinary one: Austin's speech act theory is one of the primary texts that Judith Butler invoked when she theorized performativity – or the way that reality is produced by behavior and its discursive ramifications. Butler famously theorizes gender as “a stylized repetition of acts” that has been “sedimented over time”; it is neither “natural” nor inevitable, but is naturalized and taken for granted.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, because gender is constituted by acts, it is capable of being modified, and indeed is always in flux when people do their gender in ways that break from what is expected of them, just as it is also reinforced and policed by acts – for instance, people are punished (by their families, by laws, by acts of violence) when they do not perform their gender “correctly.” This notion of repetition with revision is central to the theory that undergirds performance studies, and it can be extremely productive. But it also often results in performance scholars giving an enormous amount of credit to “revision” – attributing the

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas describes how Fanon focuses on interiority, intention, and how, under repressive conditions characterized by profound power disparities, people on the margins not only do not have access to the full spectrum of conventions that their other more powerful counterparts do, but are usually not perceived within those conventions in the ways that they perceive themselves. She gives the example of Fanon's discussion of the meaning of the veil in Algeria, and the radical ways in which it was resignified, unbeknownst to the French, who interpreted its meaning (i.e. what it conveyed as a speech act) in a much more limited manner than did the Algerians. Likewise, the tour guides she interviewed engage in practices of subtly changing the narratives they tell when employed by white tour companies, and engage in other practices of code-switching. See Thomas 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See Butler 1988.

agency or potential to enact substantive changes to acts that, while meaningful on certain scales, do not have an impact on larger forces, positionalities, or structures.

This work, then, is an effort to think disciplinarily about our desire for agency, and the capacities and limitations of real-ness and legitimacy: how it is produced, what constitutes it, and how it is actually many things at once – imaginative, spatially and temporally slippery, affective, magical, historical, and capable of being re-imagined and altered – *and* – *but* – it is also deeply entrenched, material, structural, and not easily available for change.

### **significance of the work**

While a number of studies have been done by scholars attending to one specific racial group's roots-seeking projects (James Campbell's *Middle Passages* and Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Roots Too* come quickly to mind), this project is unique in its comparative framework, and in particular, in situating late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century American roots-seeking projects across ethnic and racial groups as similar endeavors that seek to negotiate the unfinished business of the racial state. It differs drastically from these projects as well on account of its theoretical framework – a careful and extended theorization of the interrelationship between genealogy and performativity – which is informed by my interdisciplinary invocation of genealogies of performance theory, critical race theory as it has been shaped in the humanities/social sciences as well as in the legal academy, transnational American studies, cultural geography, narrative theory and theories of memory, among other fields.

Although the objects I attend to in this project are all quite contemporary, I am cognizant of the problem in performance studies to have become blindly presentist. I align myself with Joseph Roach's and Diana Taylor's contributions to the field, as they underscore the urgency of attending to the past as both a viable object of analysis and as a seething presence in contemporary lived reality. This is not a presentist project, as it is attendant to the ways in which the present is produced by the past – namely, popular historiography and the uses to which it is put. And I do so with the understanding that these uses are directly in service of a commitment to social justice in present and future temporalities: as Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, “To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?”

Additionally, I wish to further Omi, Winant, and Goldberg's analyses of the racial state – first, by attending to the ways that the racial state has been produced by transnational engagements; and furthermore, while bringing to performance studies a necessary attention to the “cold hard facts” and historicity of legal-economic apparatuses that are often ignored in analyses of arts and “soft” cultural practices, I also complicate the focus on institutional structures stemming from social-science critique with valuable insights from performance studies that take seriously how performance and performativity shape social reality, and that attend with gravity and commitment to the ways in which the invisible is powerfully important. I have used an analytic vocabulary that reflects the polyvalence and complexity of these political, ethical, and disciplinary problems, and which demands a nuanced look at how oppressive structures persist, aided through performance, *and* at what performances can and do disrupt. In its unwavering structural analysis of how power operates, is contested, and is consolidated, my project is not as cheerfully certain of performance's capacity to enact change as many other projects in my discipline. However – on account of my application of concepts of scale, borrowed largely from cultural geography, as well as the project's emphasis on the embeddedness of many of these performative returns in social justice movements – it is carefully attuned to the particular ways in which change *is* enacted.

In terms of methodology, throughout the dissertation I employ forms of discourse analysis germane to performance and cultural studies: close reading performances, films, novels, works of art, and theoretical texts, and engaging with secondary sources that are in conversation with those works. Indeed, in the first and last chapters, when I examine objects that circulate broadly and in many cases constitute and consolidate the popular discourse of a given group's genealogical practices, discourse analysis is the primary mode of argumentation. It is crucial to me that the work of artists and cultural producers be taken seriously as theory, as it is comprised of carefully constructed discourse with a position and an argument, often shadowed by unintended meanings; my readings reflect this stance. For some of my analyses, I have also conducted archival research. In part this process was intended to help me piece together an historical narrative, particularly in New Orleans. But I have also made use of the archive in order to analyze the political and ideological work that historical documents do – often quite subtly – by way of their rhetoric and in the context of their reception.

Additionally, the dissertation is deeply indebted to the process of and fruits of participant observation. I went to New Orleans and New York with an open mind and my ear to the ground, haunting the archives and a range of cultural and political events, museums, art exhibitions, festivals, and tourism operations, attending everything I possibly could during my research time that I thought would help me to understand the place I was researching and its histories of performance and performances of history, genealogy, racialization, and freedom struggles. I had a pretty good idea of the questions I had and the types of sites, works, and people I thought would help me to answer my questions, but I went in assuming there was a lot I didn't know, and spent my field work endeavoring to understand how those histories and performances are connected according to people on the ground who actively create/d or inhabit/ed them and live out their consequences. At the same time, my effort to listen and take seriously the voices I encountered was accompanied by the inevitable and necessary process of analysis, as I integrated these ideas within the network of theoretical concepts, a critical race analysis, and the wider context of the other performative returns that I analyze; which is to say that I assume responsibility for any discrepancies in my own analysis and the analyses on the part of people on the ground.

The value of letting people speak for themselves instead of being overwritten, silenced, and reinvented by “experts” is obvious, I hope, particularly in instances in which people's voices have been marginalized on account of their racial, gender, and/or class position, as is the case of many of the voices that materialize in my dissertation. Moreover, there is a complexity and nuance that occurs on the ground that can often be lost in abstraction and theorizing, particularly when it is inflected by a staunch political critique. These are the elements of first-hand accounts that I feel are particularly crucial, and that I did not want to lose in this project.

On the other hand, the ethics of ethnography are complicated, and New Orleans in particular has a long and painful history of very presumptuous outsiders who come in seeking something exotic or romantic or tragic, poaching from but not listening to or taking seriously indigenous knowledge and mores. At the same time that I found many people to be quite open and willing to engage with me, of course others were not, and I respect both of those positions. I wanted to find a way to do work that listened to what people on the ground had to say about the ideas in my dissertation, but that attempted to avoid as much as possible the ethically ambiguous position of the researcher and the “researched,” to find a mode of inquiry that acknowledged my position as an outsider (even as I am now a permanent resident of the city at the time of the completion of this dissertation), which is to say that there was simply information that I couldn't and/or shouldn't have access to. In the end, I chose to rely largely

on analysis of materials that are publicly available, through archival records – interviews, oral histories, and written documents (where people have given permission to have their words reproduced by being interviewed by representatives of archives, or where records are largely of events in the past or of deceased individuals), through analysis of secondary sources and widely circulating representational practices in which the performance traditions I am interested in are portrayed, and of course through public displays and performances by the people who keep those traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, in the New York chapter I reproduce content from many of the oral history interviews I conducted in 2006. This has to do, in part, with access as well – I had an ‘in’ because of my relationship to the neighborhood (my mother’s birthplace, which I visited regularly as a child and where I still have a number of relatives) – and with the fact that as white Americans they are less structurally embattled than other groups.<sup>20</sup> But this decision was complicated in its own right – largely on account of the necessity to balance the tension that exists in some cases between my own politics and beliefs and those of my interviewees, and my desire not to either betray them by earning their trust and critiquing them wholesale or to smooth over the facts to make them look more critical than they are. The decision was also about acknowledging what I stated before, that what happens on the ground between actual people in actual places is often more complicated and ambiguous than we might expect; for instance, the oral histories help to contradict our expectations of how and why the immigrant narrative is used. Perhaps in time, when I have been teaching high school students, developing curriculum, and living in New Orleans long enough to have established myself as a member of the community, I can look toward a revision that includes more interviews that I conduct myself. In the meantime, my methodological decisions for the researching of these two chapters were and are at once grounded in theoretical/conceptual and in political/ethical values.

There are clear reasons why this project is timely – indeed, urgent. At a glance, genealogy projects proliferate: all of my objects of analysis came out in the last few decades, and indeed, in the time since I first conceived of and started working on this project as a graduate student in 2005, more and more fodder has emerged in a range of contexts. It is everywhere. These emergences in the last half-decade or so have included Gates’s miniseries, Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, *Roots* thirtieth anniversary republication, a play about Italian American performative returns staged in New York, the Tenement Museum’s acquisition of a new building that would enable it to include the stories of (African-descended) immigrants from the Caribbean in their site-specific tours – just to name a few.

My hunch is that this is not coincidental: rather, these emergences speak to a widespread and urgent reflection on America’s history and present. It has been approximately forty years since the formative moment of 1968-1969. Today’s moment in time compels a look back at the spirit, efforts, improvements, and setbacks since that revolutionary moment in the past when the reinvention of society seemed not only possible, but inevitable. It compels looking back at Vietnam from the vantage point of yet another seemingly endless imperialist war (on Terror, manifested in the ostensibly finished War in Iraq, the ongoing War in

---

<sup>19</sup> I will also say that the months I spent in the archives – primarily the Amistad Research Center at Tulane and the New Orleans Public Library’s Louisiana Division – listening to the voices and wisdom of elders taught me a great deal about the complexity and richness of the local knowledge and has taught me to be a great deal more humble, and to encourage other researchers and transplant-social-justice-entrepreneurs to be so as well. As a researcher and as a community member, it was time exceptionally well-spent.

<sup>20</sup> Although there are class considerations that complicate even the veracity of *this* statement.



Afghanistan, and the new War in Pakistan) that has now lasted longer than that of Vietnam, but which has been met with considerably more complacency not least because of who is and isn't doing the fighting. This vantage point is from a time where we have elected the first Black president and claim to be not only post-civil rights and post-Black Power but even post-racial – but from where hateful white reactionaries are forming “Tea Parties,” where the Southern Poverty Law Center has documented that participation in white supremacist “patriotic” hate groups who threaten and enact particular violence on brown and black people, presumed to be criminals and aliens, has risen 54% since 2000,<sup>21</sup> where the prison industrial complex is booming, and where the Border and now entire Southwest are increasingly militarized in concert with Draconian new immigration policies on the part of many states that follow Arizona's infamous SB1070 (it is not shocking that one of the groups that worked on this bill and others like it was ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), “a powerful front group that helps corporate representatives craft template legislation for state lawmakers, funded partially by the private prison industry”).<sup>22</sup> This is a vantage point from where, in contrast to Third World Liberation Front protests in favor of African American and Ethnic Studies programs in universities, now education in the humanities and many social sciences (not to mention actual science, as opposed to faith), critical thinking, and “identity politics” seem quaint and passé, if not downright embarrassing, and we favor underfunding, instrumentalizing, and privatizing “education,” if not functionally eradicating it altogether.

And this moment provides a vantage point that is in the wake of two extremely crucial, formative, catastrophic disasters that took place in major US cities (New York and New Orleans, which also happen to be the diasporic hotspots in which my project is situated) – 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, ten and six years ago respectively – whose consequences are dire not only on account of the loss of lives but on account of what they engendered – jingoism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, open and unabashed racism, and state violence (imperialism, war, torture, racial profiling, police brutality, and “urban renewal”/forcible displacement, among other things) – and the questions they revealed as urgent: *What are the consequences of our contemporary international engagements – our foreign policy and image of ourselves and ways we conduct ourselves at home and abroad (politically, economically, ethically, etc), and ways in which we incorporate others from elsewhere into the fabric of our society, our relationship to power and influence and imperialist practices – and how do they fit into a centuries-long tradition of racial-(nation-)state-building? Who are our others, our constitutive margins? To whom are American freedom, democracy, and civil liberties guaranteed and from whom are they stripped, if ever they were granted in the first place? To whom does the safety net extend, and whom does it allow to slip through the cracks and drown?*

This historical consciousness provides the backdrop of the performative returns that have been enacted of late. This project cannot solve the structural or psychic problems that these returns speak to, although it is certainly undertaken with the above questions at its heart. And it does, I hope, illuminate the network of historical events and resurfacings that connect individual acts of performative return, the grievances they cite and the grief they express; I hope that it weaves together the disparate and opposing genealogies into a fabric – rough

---

<sup>21</sup> This statistic is according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, as of 2011. See <<http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/hate-and-extremism>> - accessed October 3, 2011

<sup>22</sup> This is according to Lee Fang of *Think Progress*, published on 9.16.2010 on the website “In the Public Interest: A Comprehensive Resource Center on Privatization and Responsible Contracting.” See <<http://www.inthepublicinterest.org/article/prison-industry-funnels-donations-state-lawmakers-introducing-sb1070-bills-around-country>> - accessed October 3, 2011

perhaps, but not easily riven - that portrays the inextricability of those italicized questions from these performative undertakings, and of these undertakings from each other.

Implied in those questions enumerated above is the further question of what we will do with the answers to them. I argue that the revisionist histories embedded in performative returns are articulated in service to worldmaking endeavors that articulate and/or contain the seeds of what Robin D.G. Kelley has called “freedom dreams”: social justice projects with the implicit or explicit goal of manifesting or working toward structural change at various scales. This project, then, is bent on examining visions of what kind of world we want to struggle for, on looking at the ways in which those worlds have been striven for. It is bent on identifying the pitfalls in the vision, philosophy, and politics that collude to redraw the lines of exclusivity, but also to identify the generative potential of these visions as they are articulated discursively through representational practices: to identify and take seriously, following Kelley, the kinds of futures that are envisioned by those dissatisfied with the structures of the racial state and engaged in practices of critique. I examine the political implications of these projects, as well as the question of what efficacy means in each instance: what sort of change is trying to be accomplished, and what sorts of efforts, coalitions, actions, and representations must be made? To what extent do those engaged in these endeavors, particularly the local ones, choose to, need to, and/or are prevented from collaborating with various agents of the state, and to what extent do they choose to or are forced to work “under the radar”? To what extent are these options created or limited by the ways in which race and class in particular intersect? Do genealogical practices, the conclusions they draw and the worldmaking they do, work to *undo* or to *reinscribe* oppressive patterns, habits, worldviews, available roles of and categories for historically marginalized groups of people? It is important, when considering these questions of futurity, efficacy, change, and the way in which the state is understood or engaged with, to note that despite or alongside their investment in social justice, most narratives, even of those groups which have ostensibly achieved security and belonging, exude a deeply felt sensibility of grief, loss, and impossibility of access: access to the full range of guarantees that living an idealized American Dream life would entail; and access to history, ancestors, and the distant homeland that itself often becomes configured romantically as a lost and inaccessible alternative to the dehumanizing ravages of racist American capitalist modernity.

**SECTION ONE**

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**Excavating the Blanks of Unknowingness:**  
**genealogy, temporality, knowability, and the politics of**  
**African-American performative returns**

“The [Ghanaian] taboo on revealing someone’s origins extended back to the seventeenth century. Ndewura Jakpa forbade people to refer to their own or anyone else’s origins. It was said that tracing genealogy destroyed a state. Those who defied the law risked the punishment of death. Everyone who had ever mentioned the law to me had explained that it was intended to protect those of slave origin. In practice it prevented the enslaved from speaking of a life before servitude and it abolished their ancestry. The slave existed in the world, but without either a history or an inheritance. Robbed of their kin and denied their lineage, slaves were a *tabula rasa*. It was as if they had just appeared in the world without ever having been born, without ever having known a mother or father. Like Topsy, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who, when asked about the parents she had never known, replied, ‘I jes grew.’” -Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, pg 193-4

**introduction**

As most Americans know, *Roots* – which traces the story of Alex Haley’s maternal ancestors – was an unprecedented and momentous project: it begins with the African ancestor, Kunta Kinte, who was captured and brought to the United States, depicts his growing up in Africa, and works its way from Kunta’s childhood, capture, Middle Passage, and enslavement on a plantation in Virginia, to his progeny and their own surviving, and eventually being freed from slavery, and living through segregation. And of course, it ultimately wends its way through the past to the author himself in the late twentieth century. The work’s significance was enormous. When *Roots* was published as a novel in 1976, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, was translated into more than 26 languages, and had sold over five million copies in paperback by 1980; when it was subsequently produced as the first television mini-series in 1977, more than 130 million viewers saw at least some part of the series when it first aired. By invoking Africa as an ancestral homeland, it participated in constructing a category of ethnocultural specificity and self-identification for African-Americans; it was a means of providing historical and cultural affiliations that demanded to be taken seriously, that historicized and grounded racialized identity. This deep engagement with a real or mythic Africa could be deployed to combat racist assertions which had circulated for centuries that Africans and their descendents lacked history, were rootless, and had no traditions, let alone any that had survived the Middle Passage and generations of slavery.

Moreover, *Roots* brought to light the brutal history of slavery and the profound strength and ingenuity that enslaved and free blacks had employed in order to survive centuries of abomination, and did so in a way which argued that slavery – its history and its present ramifications – is everyone’s business and therefore requires accountability. In doing so it points to the significance of the past and the importance of understanding and being responsible for history in order to be responsible and ethical fellow-citizens in the present. Yet instead of pointing fingers, Haley shaped a narrative that was inviting and sympathetic enough for it to become widely interpreted as having “universal lessons including survival through faith, strength through family, and wisdom through forgiveness,” to quote the Memorial Story

Wall Plaque on the Kinte-Haley Foundation Memorial.<sup>23</sup> That is, it became synonymous with the quintessential, triumphalist immigration narrative that entails migrating, suffering and exclusion, and finally prevailing in becoming American, all the while retaining a sense of debt and connectedness to where one's ancestors came from. Given all of these factors, perhaps especially the latter, it is no coincidence that *Roots* engendered a new and widespread interest in genealogy – certainly among black Americans, who were presented with both new tools and new possibilities for pursuing a long-silenced past, but also among Americans of many other ethnic backgrounds – an occurrence which corresponded strikingly with the development of a variety of doctrines of multiculturalism, from the celebration to the commodification of ethnic, racial, and cultural specificity and difference.

Thirty years later, in 2007, *Roots* the book and *Roots* the mini-series were re-released in commemorative editions that offered exposure of the epic to a new generation in time for a number of anniversaries significant to the histories of both slavery and black self-determination: the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Roots* airing on ABC was, as Saidiya Hartman and Tavis Smiley point out in an interview on his show in January of that year, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ghanaian independence, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dred Scott decision, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, and 400 years since the Jamestown Settlement, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in what would become the United States. That same year, Hartman published *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), which recounts her travels through Ghana – a West African pilgrimage she too undertook in search of the meaning of her displacement. But she rejoins,

Neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence in Ghana, only the path of strangers impelled towards the sea. There were no survivors of my lineage or far-flung relatives of whom I had come in search, no places and people before slavery that I could trace. My family trail disappeared in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Unlike Alex Haley, who embraced the sprawling clans of Juffure as his own, grafted his family into the community's genealogy, and was feted as the lost son returned, I traveled to Ghana in search of the expendable and the defeated. I had not come to marvel at the wonders of African civilization or to be made proud by the royal court of Asante, or to admire the great states that harvested captives and sold them as slaves. I was not wistful for aristocratic origins. Instead I would seek the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas and who fashioned themselves again, making possibility out of dispossession (Hartman 2007, 7).

Alex Haley and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, whose recent PBS mini-series *African American Lives* (Part I aired in 2006; Part II in 2008) connects black celebrities to their ancestors through genealogy research and DNA tests, exhibit unflinching faith in empiricism, "legitimacy," and triumphalist teleological narratives: using the master's tools to tear down the master's house, all the while remaking themselves in the image of that house. But Saidiya Hartman's interest is in the fact and consequences of the Middle Passage and, in trying to locate clues as to the existence and meaning of the lives of those irreparably lost as well as those whose displacement ontologically recast them, she rejects both the master's tools *and* his house, suspicious of the desire to engage either one. Instead she employs a radically different methodology: rigorously

---

<sup>23</sup> The Kunte Kinte – Alex Haley Foundation, Inc. <http://www.kintehaley.org/>. Accessed February 15, 2009. This concept is reflected more widely than by the Foundation, but that it is significant that this (rather than a specifically black-centric version) is how the Kinte-Haley foundation rhetoricizes and markets the work.

well-informed storytelling that both sutures, and underscores the inexorability and generative nature of, absences and loss.

What follows is, first, a discussion of *Roots* and *African American Lives* in which I analyze the normative narratives and values they embody and that they have helped reinscribe, which have come to constitute to a large extent the public discourse around African American performative returns to Africa. Then I will return to analyze more fully the considerable significance of the alternative that Saidiya Hartman offers in *Lose Your Mother*, which radically critiques the assumptive logic underlying Haley's and Gates's redemptive teleologies, and the consequences of that logic. Methodologically, I rely primarily on discourse analysis in this chapter – close reading of each text, film, or performance as well as a close engagement with secondary sources that are also in conversation with it. Because *Roots* has been situated as a(n inaugural) node in the discursive formation of roots-seeking for over thirty years, more research materials exist surrounding it, and therefore I make use of archival documents in its analysis as well. But my attention to these genealogical endeavors is not as an historian, per se: rather, my investment is in analyzing the political and ideological work they do – often quite subtly – by way of their rhetoric and in the context of their reception.

Through these analyses, I posit that the three works in question constitute a heated dialogue in which the political ramifications of genealogical practices and the perceived ontology of contemporary American blackness are at stake. By attending to the differences in approach across these works, I develop a polyvalent definition of genealogy, arguing that the political and theoretical implications and differences of each approach hinge on several interlinked things.

First, they hinge on whether slavery is historicized as the cornerstone of an essentially racist and unethical state, or an aberration within an America that is essentially democratic in its conception and essence, if deeply flawed in its practices; and consequently, whether the project espouses an investment in the assimilation of African Americans into a normative, middle-class American dream of progress.<sup>24</sup> However, the works in which slavery is figured as an aberration lean heavily, if implicitly, on deep-seated black Christian narratives that promise a telos of redemption in the form of racial justice and harmony; thus, Hartman's work, which emplots slavery as constitutive and ongoing, confronts and rebuts a long intellectual and theological tradition that "chooses America."<sup>25</sup> This confrontation correlates with the quest for certainty, which manifests in the African American Exodus narrative as a deep faith in God's alliance with enslaved black Americans and their progeny as well as the inevitability of their ultimate redemption in the "Promised Land" of the future. But this quest for certainty seems to be displaced, in more secular contemporary African American performative returns, by faith in "legitimate" scholarly or empirical methods to reveal a hitherto unknowable past and thus to present the potential to discern it. Thus, secondly, if the implications of each approach hinge on how deep the belief is in the possibilities of empirical access to, and certainty about, the ancestral past for purposes of rewriting the narratives of impossibility and loss that emerge from the rupture of the Middle Passage, they also hinge on the faith each author has for redemptive and implicitly theological teleology. This question, in turn, folds into the way that the knowability of the past and inevitability (and thus knowability) of the future are conceived

---

<sup>24</sup> This distinction might also be articulated as a disjuncture between ways of conceiving of slavery's relationship to temporality: the "aberration" view of slavery I describe tends to conceive of slavery as an historically discrete event, while the "cornerstone" view tends to articulate it as a temporally fluid paradigm that bleeds into the present in various psychic and socio-political-economic structures to circumscribe black life.

<sup>25</sup> See Glaude 2000 pgs 97-98 and 164-65. I suggest that Hartman may well see this choice as being one between American hegemony and the well-being of actual black Americans.

in each project. The three works diverge with respect to how genealogy, a means of furnishing evidence and filling gaping blanks, is construed: as a mechanism to facilitate successful reconstruction, or a processual investigation that points to the fundamental but generative nature of impossibility and loss. I develop my discussion of this divergence into definitions of genealogy as an object and genealogy as a process.

Ultimately I argue that the projects that exhibit strong conviction in certainty and knowability tend to reflect conservative values and normative yearnings that contain some potentially antiblack undertones, while performative, critical race studies methodologies that acknowledge and seek to render productive absence and loss – and suspect notions of inevitability and teleology altogether – lean toward a more rigorous analysis of the persistence of antiblack racism, as well as of black liberation struggle, its failings, and its urgent necessity. I demonstrate in this chapter that the formal structural resonances between the idea and practice of genealogy and the theoretical framework of performativity, defined most basically as “repetition with revision,” help us to understand both the radical possibilities embedded in inclusive visions of freedom and futurity *and* the oppressive reification of exclusionary discourses of authenticity. These qualities in turn characterize origin myths, lending them their seductive appeal and constitutive power in variously racialized Americans’ efforts to negotiate their fraught relationships to America and the terms of their racialized marginalization, in this case antiblack racism and the legacy of slavery.<sup>26</sup>

Although as many different approaches to genealogical projects exist as there are individuals undertaking them, nonetheless each group to which I attend in this dissertation has a specific history of racialization that underlies and, to some degree, unifies – at least, as a discourse – the efforts of individuals who identify with that subject position. Genealogical undertakings by African-Americans take place against the backdrop of the Middle Passage, slavery, limited access to citizenship, Jim Crow, Civil Rights and Black Power, and systemic anti-black racism, as well as the histories of other groups – and there is a lengthy, multi-faceted, and deeply entrenched history of institutional and state-sanctioned meddling in and compromising black Americans’ subjecthood: their legal and citizenship statuses; their socially- and legally-recognized degree of humanity. This occurs by way of law, medicine, public policy, science, and “common sense,” among other arenas, and affects a multitude of issues – ranging from reproductive freedom, to the documentation of enslaved people as nameless property, to, quite simply, the powerful collective awareness of this past – all of which results in a deeply intertwined, highly fraught relationship between blackness, the state, and genealogy projects that take both literal and conceptual forms. These performative returns are undertaken with the goal of being able to stake a claim that feels concrete, legitimate, and personal on one’s heritage. And place plays an important role; frequently a central objective is to establish a connection with the relevant “homeland,” in this case Africa, that is often configured as a kind of “return” to this point of mythologized origin. In *Middle Passages*, James Campbell examines a genealogy of literal journeys to Africa taken by African Americans over nearly two and a half centuries. He argues that these journeys

---

<sup>26</sup> I should be quite explicit that this is a U.S.-centered project, in the sense that even while the artists and scholars I look to claim a relationship to elsewhere, it is in service not to a truly transnational orientation but to a contemplation of an American racial caste system. As such, the orientation toward slavery that is expressed even across enormously different ideological projects is characteristic of a uniquely American understanding, whereby it is narrativized in much African American scholarship, religion, popular culture, etc as having a formative role not only in the past but in the present psychic, social, political, and economic order. My project in this chapter, then, is parsing how and to what end it is endowed with explanatory power: to evidence survival, redemption, and progress, or to be structurally entrenched and reconfigured continuously across the monolithic persistence of antiblack racism.

illuminate African American history in two seemingly contradictory ways. Most obviously, they highlight Africa's abiding presence in black political, intellectual, and imaginative life. Even as direct memories of the continent faded [...] African Americans continued to look to Africa, seeking in its dim outlines a clue to the meaning of their often bitter, bewildering history. Needless to say, they discerned different things. [...] Yet whatever the individual motives and aspirations, every African American has confronted the question that Hughes's contemporary, Countee Cullen, posed so eloquently in his 1925 poem 'Heritage': 'What is Africa to me?' [...] As paradoxical as it may sound, Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society. To put the matter more poetically, when an African American asks 'What is Africa to me?' he or she is also asking 'What is America to me?' (Campbell 2006, *xiv*).

These journeys entail excavations of the hyphenated space between African and American; a sustained meditation on the contemporary ramifications of the long-ago circumstances of arrival: the process by which one/collectively has gone from being African to being American and the distance between those categories; the distance that that particular hyphenization leaves between full and partial American-ness. Campbell illuminates the enormous variations in African-Americans' visions of Africa, which are usually directly correlative to their visions of their own and their fellow African-Americans' role and possibilities in the present and future *as Americans*.

Obviously and crucially, centuries of systemic racism as well as of resistance, resilience, and successful efforts to access American citizenship provide the backdrop for all African American "returns." But perhaps the cornerstone of this process, that which makes it at once the purview of a collective transnational diaspora and a haunting exception to other American migration/assimilation trajectories, is the Middle Passage, which signifies the rupture of a massive-scale forced migration that dislocated millions of Africans from their homes and attempted to eradicate any connection to their native land, people, language, culture, and religious practices as they were shipped throughout the Americas, treated as property, and subjected to extreme forms of physical, emotional, and epistemic violence. The Middle Passage and the rupture that it symbolizes continues to have resonance not least because in the demographically and doctrinally multicultural society of the contemporary United States, a narrative of voluntary immigration has come to constitute, in large part, the stuff of the American Dream, of American exceptionalism: the route to citizenship and belonging.<sup>27</sup> The rupture of the Middle Passage is a critical rejoinder to a narrative of agency, progress, and democracy, standing in sharp contrast both to the voluntary nature of certain other migrations and to the knowability and close ties with an ancestral home that is at least presumed in the prevailing immigration narrative: there is no Ellis Island for the descendents of the enslaved, as many of Gates' participants are quick to point out.

In *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, Eddie Glaude writes:

By the mid-1840s the metaphors of Exodus had [...] sedimented as the predominate political language of African Americans. The analogy had been diffused into the popular

---

<sup>27</sup> See the introduction as well as chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation for a more thorough historicization and analysis of the consequences of this grand-narrative turn, which builds in part on the important insights of Matthew Frye Jacobson in *Roots Too*.



consciousness of black America. The ritual emplotment of bondage, liberation, and nationhood had been elaborated: the middle passage, slavery, and efforts to achieve freedom were understood within the narrative frame of Egyptian bondage, the wilderness, and the promised land. Exodus, in effect, was no longer the story of Israel but an account of African American slavery and eventual deliverance – the taken-for-granted context for any discussion of slavery and freedom (Glaude 2000, 56).

The Exodus narrative has, for nearly two centuries, had a particularly central place in African American cultural and religious history as an explanatory framework for black suffering and liberation, even while it has been reconfigured to suit a variety of different theological and ideological projects.<sup>28</sup> However, in virtually any form its characteristics include the narrative elements Glaude discusses above, which are predicated on a deep investment in the Biblical narrative in which the suffering Israelites endure slavery in Egypt, years wandering in the wilderness, and are delivered by the efforts of the human Moses and the divine Yahweh. The characteristics of most interpretations of Exodus also share a charged relationship to temporality, whereby the past, present, and future circumstances of black Americans are performatively mapped onto, animated by, and constitute a resurfacing of Biblical history – and built into this is a teleology that is driven by the certainty of redemption and of a future of improved race relations. According to Glaude,

The movement from beginning to end is central to the historical significance of the Exodus story, particularly when we consider the fact that the end is quite different from the beginning. The journey forward – the promise that where we are going is radically different from where we are – marks the transformative aspect of the narrative. Unlike ancient tales in which the journey begins and ends at home, the narrative structure of Exodus describes a progression, the transformation of people as they journey forward to a promised land (*ibid*, 5).

But the conviction in certainty and the teleology that undergirds it is taken up as a central question in recent scholarship. Placing *Roots*, *African American Lives*, and *Lose Your Mother* in conversation reveals the extent to which the Middle Passage is, at once, folded into a deeply citational narrative of inevitable redemption and theological meaningfulness, and simultaneously, the extent to which it stands as the lynchpin in others' convictions that the past is unknowable and that the future has no predetermined or divine outcome.

### **disinterring the roots**

In *Roots*, a concrete connection to a specific place and people in Africa is achieved by way of a literal genealogy project – Haley traces the family line to the ancestor who was captured and brought to the U.S. – which bridges the African past and the American future with oral history and self-conscious diasporic retentions that results in a triumphal narrative of heritage

---

<sup>28</sup> Glaude argues that black religion, and the Exodus story more specifically, was central to the emergence of a language and conceptualization of a black “nation” in early nineteenth-century America, and that it “was interpreted in this-worldly and historical terms as a model for resistance and, perhaps, revolution” (Glaude 2000, pg 3); he is one of many scholars and theologians who have emphasized the liberatory and activist potential in the narrative (see Glaude, T. Smith, Selby). Others have criticized the ways in which it has sometimes been deployed with a focus on otherworldliness which breeds passiveness and complacency: if God will reward well-behaved blacks for their suffering in this life with eternal bliss, then there is no incentive to improve conditions in this life (see Moses, Cone).

and belonging. That is, the African past is configured as connected, knowable, and accessible – and it can be accessed through various leaps of faith, ranging from conventional empirical to experimental performative research methodologies. *Roots* played a prominent role in drastically increasing public awareness about slavery’s brutality and making it everyone’s business, thus holding *all* Americans accountable for its history and legacy – which might imply a fairly stringent critique of the country that maintained this institution. Thus the extremely normative, conservative, mainstream, and middle class aspirations embedded in the work may appear contradictory. However, this paradox makes sense in the multiple contexts in which it occurred.

On one hand, it corresponds to a pluralistic, multiculturalist, revisionist *Zeitgeist* of the 1970s that animated cultural histories of slavery and of American life more broadly. For instance, in the introduction to *The Slave Community*, John Blassingame wrote:

Rather than identifying with and submitting totally to his master, the slave held onto many remnants of his African culture, gained a sense of worth in the quarters, spent most of his time free from surveillance by whites, controlled important aspects of his life, and did some personally meaningful things on his own volition. This relative freedom of thought and action helped the slave to preserve his personal autonomy and to create a culture which has contributed much to American life and thought. (Blassingame 1972, *xii*).

Such a narrative, which privileges retention and agency, has recuperative value in terms of asserting the complex humanity of a group of people who have historically been – and continue to be – dehumanized within an antiblack paradigm; at the same time, it garners criticism for its tendency to downplay the evil of slavery, portraying it as not really so bad, after all, certainly not capable of or responsible for decimating forms of sociality and agency that make human life recognizable.<sup>29</sup> Haley’s family epic is also inflected by his Christian faith, and Exodus, though nowhere explicitly invoked, surfaces through his optimistic teleology. He portrays blacks as quintessentially American, participating in and even constituted by a legible narrative that invokes the American Dream. At the same time that the familiar Exodus story – the African American trajectory of enslavement, middle passage, and systemic racism – is the explicit subject of Haley’s story, it adheres to a less racially-specific American Dream trajectory: im/migration under compromised circumstances, initial racialized marginalization and repudiation, and eventual assimilation, based on the hard work, meritoriousness, and deeply American aspirations of the original enslaved migrants and their descendents. That is, Exodus emerges through a kind of sacralization of the (idealized) national drama which is able to come to fruition by way of a respectable, normative family structure that retains and transmits moral values and demonstrates blacks’ capacity for participation in American civil society. Haley implicitly posits that a resistant-yet-respectable history, which can be made knowable through its cultural retentions, constitutes evidence of the theological certainty that the history of African American suffering is meaningful insofar as it will be redeemed in a racially just future – and his apparent ratification of the mainstream status quo implies his belief that it has arrived by the time of his writing. In this section, I will elaborate on these claims I have just made about Haley’s work; these claims serve to scaffold the next two sections, which will treat the

---

<sup>29</sup> See Moses Wilson’s essay “Inventing a Happier Past,” which argues that *The Slave Community* and other works of the era “[allude] to the heritage of folklore, religion, and community feeling, and [attempt] to emphasize slavery’s less bitter aspects, to endow their history with some redeeming meaning and dignity” (Wilson 1990, pg 45).

other two works. As we shall see, Gates more or less tacitly builds off of this logic, while Hartman critically questions this particular epistemology of the invisible as well as the viability of construing culture to stand in for political ends or amount to freedom.

A brief synopsis of the epic may be in order. The first third of the book, and first installment of the series, focuses on Kunta Kinte growing up and learning the ways of his people in a village in The Gambia called Juffure. As a teenager he is captured by whites and brought, fighting, to the ship. The Middle Passage is represented in great detail, and after the spirited Kunta survives the horrible voyage he is sold to a plantation in Virginia; he tries running away several times and is punished with increasing violence. Eventually he marries Bell, and they have a daughter named Kizzy, which is, according to Haley's family lore, a word in the Mandinka language that means "stay put," in an effort to persuade fate to allow his family not to be split up. He blesses Kizzy in precisely the same ritual in which babies are blessed in his home, and as she grows up, he teaches her African words and tells her the story of his own childhood and how he came to be enslaved. A brief section of the book takes on Kizzy's childhood and early teenage years. She has secretly learned how to read, and is sold as punishment for having forged freedom papers for her sweetheart; she never sees her parents again.

Her new master Tom rapes her on a regular basis, though curiously the only progeny is Chicken George, so-called because he is a favorite of Tom who teaches him how to breed and fight roosters competitively – and he too is also well-schooled in his African roots. Approximately the middle third of the book is devoted to George's story; fun-loving and incorrigible, he marries the devout Matilda and sires many sons – each of whom receives the by-now-familiar Afro-centric lessons. He is sent to England to pay off a debt, and when he returns he tricks Tom into giving him his freedom papers and sets off to find his family, who, despite having been sold off, has in the interim (as is depicted in the majority of the last third of the book) been thriving due to one of his eldest son's blacksmith talents and diplomatic leadership. When emancipation is finally put into effect, the whole family moves *en masse* to land in Tennessee that George has purchased. The last fifty or so pages of the book swiftly recount the lives of the last few generations that finally lead to Alex Haley's birth, the stories he learns of his ancestor "the African" which have been passed along orally, though with less and less specific data as the generations pass, and his journey to researching and writing *Roots*, which culminates in a journey back to Juffure to meet with griots and distant Kinte cousins to verify the story of his family's heritage.

*Roots* is rightly credited for having significantly altered the national conversation about history, slavery, democracy, humanity, and ancestry. I quote Michael Eric Dyson's introduction, written for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, at length. He argues that

no flaw or shortcoming in Haley's tome could dim the brilliant light he shed on the black soul. Haley's monumental achievement helped convince the nation that the black story is the American story. He also made it clear that black humanity is a shining beacon that miraculously endured slavery's brutal horrors. [*Roots*] immediately changed the course of our conversations around school and provided a powerful lens onto a period of history that few of us really understood. Until Haley's book, there was little public grappling with the drama of American slavery. Of course, the epochal television series that grew from Haley's text seized us in its thrilling exploration of chattel slavery's vast and vicious evolution. The book and television series also sparked the phenomenon of black self-discovery. For too long, slavery had been an American terror that left the lives of black

folk scarred by memories of pain and humiliation. Haley's book brought black folk out of the shadows of shame and ignorance. It also spurred many of us for the first time to speak openly and honestly about the lingering effects of centuries-old oppression. If the black freedom struggle of the '60s had liberated our bodies from the haunting imperatives of white supremacy, Haley's book helped free our minds and spirits from that same force. *Roots* also prodded white America to reject the racial amnesia that fed its moral immaturity and its racial irresponsibility. As long as there was no book or image that captured slavery's disfiguring reach, the nation could conduct its business as if all racial problems had been solved when it finally bestowed civil rights on its black citizens. But Haley helped us to resist that seductive lie with a tonic splash of colorful truth: that the nation had yet to successfully negotiate its perilous ties to an institution that built white prosperity while crushing black opportunity. *Roots* was a soulful reminder that unless we grappled with the past, we would be forever saddled by its deadening liabilities. Since it was published during the nation's blithely romantic celebration of its bicentennial, Haley's book provided a touchstone for alternative history. Haley's book helped conscientious citizens to challenge the self-image of America as an unqualified champion of democracy and freedom. The true impact of Haley's book is that it started a conversation about black roots that continues to this day.<sup>30</sup>

Dyson, another pop academic/public intellectual with a similar level of publicity to Gates (a radio talk show, many books, public persona, academic as well as more popular/populist publications and language), is someone who has been very much attuned to the social, economic, and political structures that keep African Americans, and in particular the working/poor, at the bottom of the heap: for instance, he is famously a fierce critic of Bill Cosby's hateful and ahistoric railing against the black underclass, and has also written a scathing critique of the government's racially- and class-inflected actions that both helped produce and failed to respond appropriately to the disastrous effects of Hurricane Katrina. This is to say that he does not espouse a belief that slavery is an aberration, as, I argue, Haley does. Yet Dyson's introduction passionately defends *Roots*' contributions – which he characterizes, implicitly, as radical in their ability to cause Americans and others around the world to recast our understanding of, and willingness and ability to talk about and accept accountability for, slavery, its brutalities, and its ongoing repercussions. Meanwhile, others have been critical of omissions similar to those that I point out: that the historic trajectory of African Americans is characterized as a typical immigrant story, whereby slavery is a hardship – not a constitutive economic, political, and ethical structure – to be overcome.<sup>31</sup>

In general, *Roots* has come to be discounted as history, having more of a place as literature, as a result of the plagiarism lawsuits and a number of instances of critical scholarly attempts to reconstruct his genealogical process that has proven his research to be faulty. Yet *Roots* is also left out of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, and Henry Louis Gates, one of the editors, has stated that there is general doubt about Haley's having actually found the village of his ancestors, referring to *Roots* as "a work of the imagination rather than

---

<sup>30</sup> Haley, pgs ix-xi.

<sup>31</sup> See Tucker, Lauren R., and Hemant Shah. "Race and the Transformation of Culture: The Making of the Television Miniseries *Roots*." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (Annandale, Virginia), 1992. This article specifically treats the transformation – in the hands of white producers – of the book to the miniseries, a transformation that yields a much less incisive critique of slavery and racism. My analysis discusses the impact and rhetorical qualities of both, and argues that neither is as radical as it seems at first glance.

strict historical scholarship.”<sup>32</sup>

Haley was accused over the years of both plagiarism and inaccurate research. In 1978, a year after *Roots* aired as a mini-series and two years after publication as a book, Harold Courlander, author of *The African*, sued Haley for plagiarizing significant passages of his book. Haley settled out of court and admitted that substantial sections of Courlander’s book had, apparently inadvertently, appeared in his work. He was later taken to task by genealogist-historian team Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary Mills for poor genealogical research; when these scholars tried to replicate the research to create the family tree, they discovered that the ancestry didn’t line up. In the latter case, if the work had been a novel, this imaginative interpretation of historical fact would have been subsumed under the heading of creative license; however, as a work that Haley claimed was non-fiction, and whose momentous nature and ability to inspire hope hinged on its truth-value, these accusations threaten to seriously undermine the value of the work. It is noteworthy, then, that despite these criticisms and others *Roots* continues to stand as the lynchpin in and granddaddy of African-American and American genealogical projects.<sup>33</sup>

The epic’s significance is considerably greater as a social phenomenon – that is, the catalyst for a significant discursive shift – than as an instance of literature or historical scholarship. The legacy that Dyson describes is one of *Roots*’s two simultaneous but somewhat contradictory popular legacies: the first being a fairly radical historical revisionism, in which contemporary Americans of all stripes are implicated in assuming collective responsibility and accountability for the brutal and oppressive history of slavery. The second, however, is a dream of middle class access that is understood as taking the best of (perceived, romanticized) African and American notions of freedom, dignity, and civil society, that honors the notion of African ancestry and the heritage of African-American resistance, but is mainly characterized by a set of American middle-class values that emphasize the (Christian, evangelical) church, service to one’s country, the ownership of property, and participation *and belief* in the American Dream, in which anyone who works hard can overcome one’s obstacles and succeed within and according to the abovementioned framework.

Moreover, the particular trajectory of Haley’s success, the ways in which he was interpellated, and the ideological choices that he made in terms of how to align himself (or *who* aligned themselves with him) are quite revealing in terms of understanding the complexity and contradictory nature of how *Roots* registered as a cultural symbol, and what kind of ideologies and affiliations it engendered. The Roots Foundation was heavily involved in projects that celebrated and strengthened what Haley perceived as the greatest American resource, what he believed ought to be the very foundation of American life and culture: the Family<sup>34</sup>. Haley

---

<sup>32</sup> Beam, Alex. "The Prize Fight Over Alex Haley's Tangled 'Roots'", *Boston Globe*, October 30, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> The uncanny power of origin-yearning to produce convincing archival discoveries is also noteworthy, and is echoed by a considerably more qualified and legitimate historian-scholar than Haley: in the prologue of *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman writes: “I happened upon my maternal great-great-grandmother in a volume of slave testimony from Alabama, while doing research for my dissertation. I felt joyous at having discovered her in the dusty tiers of the Yale library. [...] Years later when looking through the Alabama testimony, I was unable to find her. There was an Ella Thomas in the volume. Had I confused one great-great-grandmother with another? I reviewed my preliminary notes, desperately searched for the interview I had never copied, scoured five volumes, the two from Alabama and the adjacent ones, but there was no Minnie or Polly or anyone with a name similar, nor did I find the paragraph stamped on my memory [...]. It was as if I had conjured her up. Was my hunger for the past so great that I was now encountering ghosts? Had my need for an entrance into history played tricks on me, mocked my scholarly diligence, and exposed me as a girl blinded by mother loss?” (Hartman 2007, pgs 15-16).

<sup>34</sup> Memorandum from James Dyer to Alex Haley; March 15, 1979, Alex Haley Papers, Box 2, Folder 34, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

went about making public speeches advocating certain tactics of oral history preservation, including interviewing family elders, preserving family heirlooms, and holding reunions, the latter of which saw special efforts from the foundation in order to popularize, financially support, and document them. Indeed, the rhetoric of The Family entered a particularly central place in Haley's public persona: the points just mentioned were broadcast in a major speech at the Kennedy Center on June 14, 1977<sup>35</sup>, and he delivered numerous other speeches about the importance of the family.

His affiliation with Christianity and the military were sources of great pride that motivated his priorities in both where he spoke and what he spoke about. Two letters from the early 1980s neatly sum this up: a letter to Sheriff O'Steen in Ripley, Tennessee reads "I gain that you're a solid Christian, and I'm intrigued that you spent 31 years in the military! Both of these things run parallel to two of the things I'm proudest of within my life: that I was reared as, and today remain a good member of Henning's New Hope CME Church; and that I spent 20 years in the U.S. Coast Guard [...]." A letter to some ministers in 1984 states "Being myself Methodist, and believing that the Church plays a paramount vital role in the positive interests in our society, I am quick to accept all possible invitations to speak for church, or church-related events." I linger on these details because they help to contextualize the rhetorical moves Haley makes in *Roots*, as do some rather telling overtures made to him on the part of political parties. Although in 1987 Ron Dellums, the Democratic congressman from California, wrote to thank Haley for agreeing to serve as an Honorary Committee Member for his fundraising event, other documents in the Alex Haley Papers speak to affiliations with the Republican Party<sup>36</sup>. One is a fascinating letter from a group of Republican congressmen trying to mobilize support for a moderate Republican candidate to challenge the far-right ideology/candidates they feared were threatening the character of the party and the nation<sup>37</sup>. The other is a brief newspaper article from the *Cincinnati Post* from August of 1989, that reads: "'Roots' author and Tennessee native Alex Haley scotches Republican hopes that he might challenge White House-minded incumbent Sen. Albert Gore, a Democrat, when Gore runs for re-election next year. Haley's socko performance at a Tennessee GOP dinner in May brought a call for Haley from the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. Haley says he's not interested."<sup>38</sup>

Are Haley and *Roots* so important and fluid that they are simply legible to everyone, available as open signifiers or empty receptacles to be filled in by the needs of their interpellators? Or is Haley in fact sending clear, if implicit, signals about his notions of the appropriateness of various visions of America in a genealogical worldview – nationalistic and Christian messages that, on account of the massive popularity of the work, have become

---

<sup>35</sup> Text of speech by Alex Haley presented at the Kennedy Center, Smithsonian Institution – June 14, 1977, Alex Haley Papers, Box 5, Folder 3, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Ronald V. Dellums, Eighth District, CA, House of Representatives, Dec 9, 1987, Alex Haley Papers, Box 12, Folder 4, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Alex Haley/Kinte Foundation, from Bill Green (R - NY), Congress of the U.S. House of Representatives, Alex Haley Papers, Box 12, Folder 1, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

<sup>38</sup> Clipping from *The Cincinnati Post*, Saturday, August 19, 1989: "Panama maneuvers too close for comfort", compiled by the Washington staff of Scripps Howard News Service Washington, Alex Haley Papers, Box 12, Folder 10, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

embedded in the powerful discourses of genealogy and roots-seeking that have emerged from *Roots*'s gargantuan success?

One of the most striking patterns in the book in particular is the centrality of the nuclear family, the primary importance and inevitability of coupling (and specifically, of coupling through marriages that are sanctified and officiated within the Christian<sup>39</sup> plantation community even if not recognized by the state). The ancestral line beginning at Kunta and ending with Alex is depicted as being a hallowed entity; their birthright cloaked in the trappings of spiritual, if not quasi-religious, significance, manifested through the very explicit application of foreshadowing that produces a teleological sense of inevitability as the generations roll toward the present players. The coherence of a familial line, of course, serves an important ideological and evidential function in Haley's portrayal of a theologically and politically determined imperative of progress; if Kunta Kinte's/Alex Haley's family formed under slavery and survived intact through to the present – and indeed that their time in the U.S. made them into good Christians and if not instilled, then nurtured American family values – then its triumph over slavery can be compellingly extrapolated to a trajectory for African Americans in the U.S. more generally.

Beginning early in Kunta's childhood, Haley presents interior monologues in which the young boy displays a preternatural awareness of his place in an ongoing cyclical process of birth, aging, death, and birth. As he gets older and becomes a caretaker for his younger brothers, he meditates more frequently on someday having children of his own. It is noteworthy that there is an abundance of generational awareness on the part of Kunta, and care taken to make allusions to Kunta's future as being enslaved in the United States. In part this device functions to patently demonstrate how "civilized" and advanced Africans were long before engaging with Europeans, and thus to deflate racist presumptions about an ahistoric and savage Africa. But in its unapologetic and somewhat heavy-handed orientation toward the American future that everyone knows is waiting, the narrative simultaneously gestures toward what is surely a very unintentional argument: that there is something inevitable and fated about Kunta's – and by extrapolation, other captured Africans' – trajectory that lands him in the slave-holding United States.

Haley follows a precedent of the "Fortunate Fall" doctrine in eighteenth and nineteenth-century black thought, which construed slavery as a great evil, but the fact of enslaved Africans coming to receive Christianity, and coming into contact with European and American civilization and democratic ideals, to be a great boon, and that through divine providence the suffering of enslaved Africans and their descendents would prove redemptive and a blessing. Wilson Moses points out that "[t]he element of nationalism present in early black writing was the chosen people doctrine, a belief that the providence of God singled out certain peoples for special suffering and tempered them in the process, so that they would be better fit to carry out world-historical missions. In the case of African Americans, the missionary or messianic destiny was to advance the enlightenment of Africa and ultimately the elevation of all mankind"

---

<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that Haley goes into a great deal of detail about Kunta and his Gambian family's strict observance of Islam in Juffure; through Kunta's repulsion at and disbelief in many American and Christian habits Haley gestures toward an argument that the American mandate to observe Christianity was an imperial and racial project characterizing the dehumanizing attempt to be turned from humans into slaves. That Juffure was peopled by Muslims – as opposed to Christians, but also as opposed to adherents to an indigenous West African religion – is at once a reflection of a historic reality, and a reflection of Haley's rigorously – even heavy-handed – strategic narrative construction. The Gambian practice of Islam is a point not likely to have been lost on a generation that had inherited Malcolm X's various Islamocentric visions of racial improvement, and was also still working to dispel associations with racist myths of devil-worshipping, cannibalistic African religious idolatry.

(Moses 1990, 145). He cites passages from various black intellectuals, including the poets Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley and a number of African-born intellectuals who were enslaved and/or educated in Europe and the U.S. who express condemnation of slavery but relief and gratitude at their having found their way out of Africa, and the certainty that this turn of events was the work of God. He describes one of these testimonies as “an apology for the slave trader, which argued that the Dutch Company had brought Africans ‘out of the land of bondage’ to heathenism, and that the trade was to be praised as an agency for the saving of souls and the civilizing of savages.”

But a significant difference between Haley’s conception and these older versions of the “fortunate fall” is that by the time Haley was writing, there were narratives of African empires and cultural greatness to complicate the ever-entrenched heart-of-darkness discourse that animated previous iterations of the “fortunate fall.” Indeed, even as the disturbing teleology of inevitable-and-good American-ness emerges, another move counters it, one that seeks to connect all new babies born into this family in the United States to the African ancestor Kunta and beyond to his forebears. Starting with Kizzy, each new baby receives what most closely resembles a kind of baptism – secular in that it is not part of an organized religion, but deeply sacred nonetheless – wherein the child is told about their ancestry that is recounted in a litany of “begats” and features oral history lessons in certain African words. Kunta is depicted as the heroic patriarch, the bridge between an idealized Africa and the hope for the (American) future – one indebted to a happy marriage of African-rooted and American-born conceptions of freedom and democracy – that these children represent. Haley starts out by advocating a fight against the unethical society in which they find themselves,<sup>40</sup> through Kunta Kinte’s acts of resistance – but Kunta stops fighting once his daughter is born; he chooses his wife and family, or resistance through generations, rather than continuing to actually fight.

Moreover, since the line from Kunta to Alex is the inevitable conclusion, any form of love that does not ultimately end in childbearing and hallowing the family is impossible in this narrative. Additionally, although the book and mini-series both deal very explicitly with the brutalities of slavery, families are not separated in a way that undoes the ancestral line. Not only do the generations persist all the way to Alex without being disrupted or ended, but more significantly, there is no disruption to the narrative that came down to him. Yet as Haley knows well, as is evidenced through his detailed attention to the many brutalities of enslavement – including rape, whipping, dismemberment, and the separation of families – much of what characterized slavery was the impossibility of a normatively functioning family.

Indeed, scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson, and others have gone so far as to argue that, thanks to the ontological condition of social death, predicated on fungibility and accumulation and engendered by the conversion of black Africans into slaves and Africa into a source for slaves, the notion of a “black family” is impossible because family members do not belong to one another, first and foremost, but rather are tacitly understood under white supremacy to be, and treated accordingly as, the property of the state.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> The radical black theologian James Cone’s perspective is that black Christianity has historically made itself irrelevant by aligning itself with what is in essence an unethical (e.g. disobedient to Christ in its antiblackness and white supremacism) white church and white society instead of advocating the fight for black liberation, which he sees as the gospel, and instead, advocates following the national law and seeking approval from the white church and society. Cone sees this as an unethical stance.

<sup>41</sup> See Hartman 1997, Spillers 2003, Sexton 2008, and Wilderson 2008 and 2010.



What might today be understood as formations of queer kinship structures<sup>42</sup> were both violently imposed by the conditions of race-based, matrilineal, chattel slavery for life, and were the creative and resistant response to this form of oppression. Slavery produced a world in which marriage rights for slaves were not recognized by the state, allowing families to be separated and breeding matches to be made and enforced at the masters' will; it also meant that unbridled access by men to enslaved women's bodies was perfectly legal and did not constitute rape, as she did not possess her own body and subjecthood (see Hartman 1997, especially chapter three, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" for a detailed discussion of the legal vicissitudes of this configuration). From this realm of social death<sup>43</sup> emerged a context in which the norm for enslaved families in many places was a non-nuclear network composed of a variety of chosen and forced sexual partners (in various slave/free and black/white statuses, who may have been scattered across multiple locations paralleling one's trajectory of displacement) and children from these multiple unions; children who in many cases had died or been sold away with no further contact but had begun families of their own; and fictive kin, including other slaves, often members of the masters' family, and sometimes other free people of color (see Stamp 1956, Blassingame 1979, Genovese 1972, Patterson 1982, and Hartman 1997 and 2007, among others). Because of the heavily circumscribed possibilities in this upside-down social order, love was transgressive, unintelligible to dominant culture and the law, and therefore a number of common forms of loving relationships – including fictive kin; non-reproductive forms of sexual love (including heterosexual romantic relationships past child-bearing years as well as same-sex relationships); and in this context, even acts of love and consensual sexual encounters between enslaved men and women, or one free and one enslaved, constituted an important affront to the order.

To be sure, Haley does not shy away from these realities, which is part of what made his work revelatory and important for America's collective and public process of confronting slavery. But just as slavery is posited in many conventional narratives as being an aberration in an overall narrative of progress, rather than constitutive of the circumstances that always already circumscribe both the production of the nation and any "progress" it has made, this non-normative landscape is posited as something that, too, is an aberration in a (hetero)normative, American, generational, patriarchal narrative – rather than as constitutive of the unique and fraught situation that laid the groundwork for and continues to affect the position of African Americans.

Paradoxically, it is in precisely the same ways that *Roots* participates in furthering a repressive (hetero)normative agenda steeped in moralizing value judgments that it also works to disrupt – in a profoundly public venue – the sorts of blame-the-victim exercises in racist sociology that characterize, for instance, the Moynihan Report on the failure of "the black family." *Roots* provides a representation of a dignified, proud, hard-working, patriarchally-structured family line that offered a positive example of a close-knit family in which fathers played central, active leadership roles, mothers were loyal and capable, and children were deferential and helpful, an example that, moreover, was presented as an archetype for all of

---

<sup>42</sup> By "queer" I specifically refer to a designation put forth in contemporary queer theory that refers not only to sexual preference, but more broadly, to an orientation toward the world that is critical of, often illegible within, and stands self-reflexively in contrast to normative structures of gender, temporality, spatial use, kinship, sexuality, death, and other structures governing perception and experience. Judith Halberstam puts forth a particularly useful discussion of the stakes of this orientation in her book *In a Queer Time and Place*.

<sup>43</sup> In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (13). (It is, perhaps, noteworthy that queer studies is another prominent realm in which notions of social death are theorized and taken seriously.)

African-America. However, it does so in a way that engages in liberal individualism, a pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality that, even as it offers a humanizing account of enslaved individuals, might be interpreted as tacitly devaluing families that were less fortunate than the American Kinte clan.

His espousal of these values reflects an appeal to the role of the social gospel in the longstanding tendency for African American Protestant activists to “appeal to the progressive tendencies in the Protestant tradition, and [call] on the American people to renew their supposedly democratic and egalitarian covenant” (Moses 1990: 180). In his larger argument about the ways that African Americans have actively drawn on the imperfect separation of church and state in the United States to frame their struggles for civil and human rights, and the ensuing “civil religion” that this imperfect separation engenders,<sup>44</sup> Moses argues that the overwhelming Protestantism of African Americans positions them “relatively advantageous[ly]” for “communicating their spiritual and material aspirations” and agitating for antiracist social change (*ibid*). However, part of the grounds for the legibility and success of these appeals, when they are indeed legible and successful, is the fact that they are predicated on relatively conservative, mainstream, often highly moralistic American Protestant values: he states that “black religion does not always conform to [a model of] ‘the religions of the oppressed.’ It does not inevitably challenge mainstream American Protestant values: it seeks, in the contrary, to demonstrate that it is a legitimate part of the mainstream” (*ibid*: 180-181). Moses describes the extent to which the Moynihan Report, which presupposes that black Americans would be saved from their “pathologies” only if they could enact the behaviors and modes of sociality that was associated with the white middle and upper classes, was “based on the same principles [of the social gospel] that had motivated the NAACP and the Urban League at the time of their founding fifty years earlier,” and met with enthusiastic approval by both Elijah Muhammed of the Nation of Islam and by Martin Luther King, Jr., but of whom “also accepted the conservative definitions of family normalcy to which Moynihan subscribed,” including directing government funding and policies toward “making the black man a warrior and a provider” and “making the black woman a mother and homemaker” (*ibid* 193).

Strange bedfellows, these operations; yet unlikely alliances and surprising outcomes are a deeply embedded aspect of negotiating the contemporary ramifications of the racial state’s unfinished business. Or perhaps they are not so strange after all: while some performative returns are liberatory, by no means are they necessarily so. In breaking down the exclusive narrowness of official narratives of American-ness, citizenship, and belonging, these genealogical practices seek to offer other articulations of belonging: in some cases, it is not a radically re-charted map of the United States that is sought, but rather, a map and narrative

---

<sup>44</sup> Wilson writes: “I understand the term civil religion in America to signify the assumption that all Americans worship the same God and that they enjoy a special covenant with Him under which He will lead the nation towards an exalted and prosperous future, so long as Americans retain their devotion to principles of liberty and justice for all. The American civil religion is characteristically contradictory; it is tough-minded as well as soft-hearted. While it holds on the one hand that God is a god of the oppressed, it also holds that worldly success is pleasing to God and a sign of divine favor. It holds that every individual must work out his or her own salvation, but it also includes the idea of community and civil rights. Black American civil religion – which must be distinguished from the more emotional and escapist forms of folk worship – has not deviated significantly from the civil religion of the society at large. It was never enough for black Americans to argue that God watched over a long-suffering people simply because they were oppressed, for if God was in some special way on the side of the weak, He also seemed in some special way to be looking out for the interests of the strong. They did not assume that the progression from weakness to strength must necessarily be accompanied by a diminution of favor in the sight of God. Thus, black religion does not always conform to Vittorio Lanternari’s model of ‘the religions of the oppressed.’ It does not inevitably challenge mainstream American Protestant values; it seeks, on the contrary, to demonstrate that it is a legitimate part of the mainstream” (*ibid*).

that is more progressive in its new forms of inclusiveness yet equally conservative in its adherence to certain forms of nationalism, moralizing, and exclusivity. Even as the project of claiming full American-ness is a crucial one, genealogical practices that privilege dominant-culture family structures reinscribe the status quo, which replicates forms of normativity that have historically contributed to the success of the racial state's ability to compromise the rights and subjecthood of its marginalized citizens, particularly people of color. It is dangerous to buy into promises of sameness – not that equality in the eyes of the law, etc should not be striven for, but that it is dangerous for the future as well as untrue in the present to collapse narratives of assimilation together so that an African-American one is undifferentiated, and not to settle for the belief that exercising legal rights is equivalent with an eradication of structural racism. I am not arguing for an assertion of difference for the sake of difference; instead I posit that it may be productive to stake a claim on difference because the foreclosure of equal subjecthood, belonging, and citizenship has not ended. Haley's genea-logic risks uncritical participation in the social and power structures that have disenfranchised similarly marginalized people for centuries, and that have reproduced that marginalized status. Curtis Evans points out that "James Farmer, a civil rights activist, complained that Moynihan failed to suggest that there may be 'something wrong in an 'orderly and normal' white family structure that is weaned on race hatred and passes the word 'nigger' from generation to generation.'"<sup>45</sup>

In *Roots* Haley characterizes slavery as a discrete historical phenomenon that was not utterly over-determining: (temporarily) dehumanizing, yet finite, unsuccessful in annihilating a whole people and their history. He posits that human on-the-ground agency was nearly as powerful as the structural circumstances of historical production, and implicitly, that these human efforts are backed up by divine providence. In order to demonstrate this, he represents his characters as emerging successfully according to dominant political and ethical structures: indeed, he makes them legible within a context espousing sameness and ascension to middle class ideals. Critique of dominant paradigms is not only foreclosed, it is undesirable and dangerous: even as he invokes a theological narrative that promises that blacks are chosen people who have endured exceptional suffering under slavery, his project also makes a number of narrative moves that imply an equivalence between African American and other American relationships to one another and to the nation and state. His project radiates a desire to quell fears about black radicalism, to assure white people of the safeness of black people, to assure black people of their sameness with white people, and to advocate a mutual aspiration to the same middle class values. The American Dream that is articulated here is as one of progress and access, in which slavery was constitutive, condemnable but redemptive; it is not a vision in which the conditions of slavery cannot be transcended as freedom is predicated on its maintenance.

All of these moves amount to an engagement with genealogy that is predicated on faith and/in revelatory knowability. The same narrative elements that Haley mobilizes to advocate a non-threatening, legible, and moral American-ness (i.e. a tight-knit, intact, patriarchally-structured family) are identical to the elements of Haley's family history that allowed him unusual access to the distant African past – a triumphant retrieval that laid the groundwork for the project's and subsequently the broader public's prevailing belief in, and certainty about the value and possibility of, knowability. On one level, this knowability consists of using "legitimate" and legible research methodologies (tracing the clues found in oral histories through a series of archives and experts) to learn the factual specifics about one's ancestral

---

<sup>45</sup> Evans 270.

African past. On another, this knowability is predicated on faith. Some of this faith manifests in the creative license Haley took with the facts in order to produce a usable personal and collective past, as has been pointed out by many critics of the factuality of work; some of it manifests in the more creative aspects of his research methodology (for instance, in several interviews as well as in an excerpt from a speech Haley gave that is reprinted in the back of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *Roots*, he tells a powerful story (a fascinating performative return unto itself) of breaking through his writer's block and uncertainty in the viability of his project by booking passage on a ship from Liberia to Florida, channeling the spirit of Kunta Kinte by lying on rough wooden planks in steerage in the middle of the night, and being confronted by the spirits of his ancestors one night when he was considering throwing himself into the ocean, who told him his work was worthwhile and not to give it up). And some of it manifests through the parallels in Haley's family saga with various strands of African American theology. In Haley's configuration of it, this is exhibited through a faith both in the state to solve, rather than to exacerbate, social and political problems, and in divine providence on behalf of black Americans – which come together in 'a kind of providential historicism that assume[s] that race relations must inevitably improve' (Moses 1990: 195).<sup>46</sup> The relationship between temporality, genealogy, and knowability is crucial here: Haley's certainty – his faith – in linear, literal, and knowable genealogy is inextricably bound up in the theological implications of his work. His faith in a divinely determined future runs parallel to his faith in a knowable past, so that the meaningfulness of the former is reflected in the inevitability of the latter by way of a redemptive teleology. Haley's work was massively appealing to the public in general and to many African Americans in particular in spite of the striking political conservatism of much of his approach, perhaps because of the magically redemptive narrative and the promises it made through its teleology to answer nagging questions about the unknowability of the past *and* the uncertainty of the future.

Despite spawning major controversy, Haley's certainty about his lineage is largely the base on which *Roots*' success was built – and from which some of its most important impacts continue to emerge (opening a discussion about slavery, insisting that race in America is everyone's business, and inspiring genealogy research for lots of Americans). But many more contemporary projects find themselves at a loss for the certainty of knowability itself: the concrete information about his family's past to which Haley had access – carefully-preserved linguistic retentions and oral history – were highly unusual for many black Americans, and his chronicle proved to be a difficult template to follow. Other prominent roots-seeking projects originate from dissatisfaction precisely with the taunting absence of this sort of information.

### **the seductive ruses of empiricism**

Recently, Harvard professor and public intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Jr. collaborated with PBS to produce another mini-series that connects contemporary African Americans with their long-lost African roots. Self-reflexively made in the wake of Haley's opus,<sup>47</sup> the documentary series *African American Lives* (*Part I* aired in 2006, *Part II* in 2008), tracks the

---

<sup>46</sup> In this passage Wilson is referring to "the major black organizations – including the Urban League, the NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – bas[ing] their programs on progressive Christian teleologies" during the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>47</sup> Gates as well as his guests specifically mention *Roots* – a number of times, in fact – and they do so in generally quite glorifying, teleological ways, namely rhetoric that amounts to a notion that the DNA tests constitute a kind of destiny fulfilled, that Alex Haley would be so proud and that the guests have the sense that he is standing over their shoulder watching and cheering as haplotype matches are made, that this is the next logical step in his quest and now *we – anybody*, not just those who have access to the kind of family oral history that he did – can finally realize the search for our ancestors.

genealogies of twenty black American celebrities.<sup>48</sup> Like *Roots*, it starts from a premise of certainty, with confidence that it is possible to fill in the gaps of the unknown, and that the information that fills them will contribute in important and positive ways to the self-concept of those who seek it. However, it uses different tools: instead of privileging oral history and linguistic retentions and/or explicitly theological narratives, Gates recruits an interdisciplinary team of professional scholarly researchers, and employs the ostensibly unimpeachable “truth” of the sciences – social sciences bolstered by “hard” science – in order to arrive at a specificity that is denied by other, “softer” forms of research. Yet Gates configures a narrative whose redemptive qualities and implicit ratification of middle-class normativity and integration bespeak a similar and unremarked providential historicism quite similar to Haley’s, as he goes about promising answers to impossible questions about the past by way of a kind of faith-based empiricism.

In both parts one and two, each of which features a different group of participants and thus a completely different collection of stories, reactions, and family histories, the four-episode cycle employs a similar trajectory, which works backward chronologically from the present into the deep past. The first three episodes make use of genealogical research in order to learn as much as possible about the guests’ family trees back as far as they’ll go, usually only until the mid-nineteenth century. The fourth and final segment is intended to deliver on the one desire that, for African Americans, is most likely to be impossible to follow through: all of the participants provide samples of their DNA to labs and historians who analyze it in order to determine each individual’s own specific ancestry all the way back to their African roots.<sup>49</sup> But although much is made in the series of its potential and success, employing genetics to peel back the veil on a historically opaque, unyielding unknown proves to be a strikingly complex operation.

Academic reception has generally been critical: from sociologist Troy Duster taking Gates to task from the perspective of the frightening legal, medical, pharmaceutical, criminal justice, and sociological implications of the use of racial science in the series, which he sees as successfully, if unintentionally, reinscribing false notions of racial purity and of race as a biological phenomenon despite the unacknowledged fallibility of its empirical certainty<sup>50</sup>; to Eric Lott lambasting Gates’s endeavors through the series and its offshoots – the documentary and book *Finding Oprah’s Roots* and a genetic testing agency dedicated to increasing the number of African Americans who submit to genetic ancestry testing. Lott takes issue not only with their tendency to rhetorically reify racial essentialism (which he sees as a relatively unsurprising extension of what he perceives as Gates’ career-long effort to “elevate the race in the most fashionably sophisticated forms of the day” (Lott 1522), even if his uncritical

---

<sup>48</sup> With one exception – an average, everyday citizen, Kathleen Henderson, who was selected from a long list of applicants for this privilege, is included in the roster of participants to attempt to democratize the process.

<sup>49</sup> Curiously unacknowledged in any part of Gates’ series is the precursor for the fourth segment that focuses on genetics: in 2003 – airing on almost the same date as part one of *African American Lives* three years later – the BBC aired a feature-length documentary called *Motherland: A Genetic Journey*. Directed by Archie Baron, this film focused on three Afro-Caribbean Britons who were offered similar genetic research options in order to help them locate distant relatives in West Africa. The two projects employ not only the same genetic strategies and a similar narrative, but the very same genetic researchers at Penn State, who both perform research and are interviewees and minor “characters” in both documentaries. One of the revelations that *Motherland* yielded – and that made international news – was that one in four black male Britons possessed a European y-chromosome: suddenly it became necessary to confront the extremely high rate at which, under slavery, white men had impregnated black women. Notably, most of these news sources sidestepped discussing precisely why this might have happened, and thereby sidestepped any sort of accountability for race-based sexual violence occurring in profoundly uneven power relationships.

<sup>50</sup> See Duster 2006a and b.

acceptance of documents at face value in the genealogical projects is an unexpected turn for Lott), but on account of Gates' "class-bound complacency and his undialectical understanding of the class fraction E. Franklin Frazier subtly studied in *Black Bourgeoisie* [...]; from his lofty perch, Gates has taken to extolling the merits of self-help and property acquisition as counters to structural racism in the United States" (Lott 1524). However, the show's circulation on PBS as well as its strategic inclusion of celebrities who serve as icons not only for African Americans, but for a non-racially-exclusive audience, have led to the show's considerable popularity. Oprah is a particularly notable player in popularizing the series, its offshoots, and its rhetorical perspective. And the discursive work that it accomplishes on this broadly popular scale is, despite many of Gates' and his guests efforts to expose race as an historic and social construction, to reify it as a phenomenon tied to biological imperatives.

As viewers are shown in the fourth episode of each *Part*, the genetics process looks something like this: each participant's genetic material, taken from a buccal swab, goes on to be analyzed in two different ways. The first is something called an "admixture test," a process that is never very well explained in either part of the series, but that compares sequences – of the SNPs (single-nucleotide polymorphism) found on the .01% of human DNA that contains our genetic differences from other individuals in order to analyze an approximate breakdown of geographic/"racial"<sup>51</sup> components: these sequences often show some patterns of similarity across geographic regions of the world<sup>52</sup> – and these are interpreted for such tests as being indicative of "racial" heritage. These broadly-rendered components consist of European, sub-Saharan African, Native American, and East Asian, and surprise ratios abound for anyone who undergoes this test, including for many of the participants in Gates' series. While Chris Tucker is gratified to learn that his admixture is overwhelmingly Sub-Saharan African, Henry Louis Gates himself (along with other participants such as Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and Quincy Jones) discovers to his shock and dismay that he has 50% European ancestry (it seems that some of the others who share similar genetic stock experience less substantial crises of identification).<sup>53</sup> The processes of "racial mixing" that underlie the logic of this test are implicitly portrayed as being a uniquely American phenomenon (rather than acknowledging the fundamental nonexistence of genetic "racial" "purity" anywhere in the world, at any moment in time, brought about by the migrations and intercultural/inter-genetic encounters that have occurred across many continents and over centuries<sup>54</sup>), a suggestion that contributes to notions of American exceptionalism, a move which is particularly odd in the context of a

---

<sup>51</sup> I use the term "racial" in quotation marks in this discussion and not others because of the danger that tests such as these reinscribe notions of racial purity on a genetic basis; the way that "race" is deployed here refers to entire geographically- and phenotypically-based groups of people in terms that are in fact contradicted by the profound genetic diversity among, for instance, sub-Saharan Africans, which is greater than any other genetic diversity worldwide. Conversely, when I use the same term outside of quotation marks I refer to historically and spatially contingent, socio-cultural constructions that have very material consequences with respect to the distribution of resources and privileges and that are thus "real."

<sup>52</sup> Note that it is *some similarity* that they share, rather than overwhelming sameness.

<sup>53</sup> Oddly, and perhaps revealingly, despite his initial affective display of distress at his ostensibly diluted blackness, in the first two mini-series following *African American Lives Part I* (i.e. *African American Lives Part II* and *Faces of America*, a new series (2010) which features Gates' tried-and-true format of genealogical research coupled with genetic testing applied this time to a bevy of mostly non-black American celebrities who are also in search of their roots (Eva Longoria, Stephen Colbert, Mario Batali, and Malcolm Gladwell, to name a few), Gates spends the majority of his own fairly extensive face-time and family historiography pursuing his whiteness, in the form of his comparatively easy-to-access Irish ancestry (which conveniently includes a famous king!).

<sup>54</sup> This is a lacuna I do not attribute to Gates and his team alone: instead this is a failure of both the rhetoric and enactment of contemporary genetic science

project that advocates a transnational approach to the slave trade and, by extension, the global processes of economic, cultural, and religious imperialism that surrounded and bolstered it.

We see as the episode progresses that the second test involves comparing DNA with codes from genetic samples that exist in a constantly-expanding computer database of genetic information from sources around the world, and matches with these samples<sup>55</sup> are analyzed for their similarities to the genetic codes of indigenous people around the world. World maps are printed for each of Gates' participants that feature clusters of dots that indicate the places with the greatest number of matches; these are interpreted by historians, geographers, and anthropologists to try to make sense of how this data fits into the context of ancient migrations, the slave trade, and so forth, in order to best guess roughly where the participants' ancestors would have been living in Africa when they were captured and taken to the Americas.

The limitations of the science involved in this process begin to be patently clear even in this brief description of the methods, yet in the series they remain obscured. Only two ancestral lines – the matrilineal (via the mitochondria) and patrilineal (via the y-chromosome) – are available to pursue, which means that of the sixty-four great-great-great-great-grandparents everyone has, only two of them have passed along genetic data that is legible and interpretable. Therefore, determining for certain what one “is” or “isn't” is already largely ruled out.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the data in the genetic databases is insufficient to be able to draw conclusive evidence of matches. Simply not enough genetic material has been gathered from a large enough sample of a great enough number of populations for all possible matches to be able to be perceived<sup>57</sup> – leaving in some cases, including Gates's own, a more disturbing missing link than before: he can locate his European, but not his African, matches with certainty and precision. But if the genetic component requires making educated guesses, more traditional genealogy research is by no means exempt from that necessity. They both require putting definitive facts into conversation with hypotheticals and missing links to make the best guesses possible about what happened, given severely circumscribed data.

Uncertainty is not the same as unknowability: to be certain is to lack doubt, it is to believe; un/knowability is about what is ultimately *possible* to discern or not. They affect one another but are not reducible to one another. And yet, when a process – say, genetic experimentation or genealogical research – is labeled a science it is capable of masquerading behind empiricism and passing as unimpeachable “truth.” It has the power to contradict and trump other forms of “truth” ranging from oral history, to mythology, to affective experience, to theology; it is able to foster belief and function as evidence in a way that most other genres cannot, even if it is ultimately speculative, incorrect, incomplete, or otherwise limited. Faith undergirds empiricism in more ways than one: empiricism may be counterfactually employed in

---

<sup>55</sup> These samples are taken from people worldwide; some of the data comes from individuals (cosmopolitan subjects who, it is implied, are “less pure” and “more modern”) who voluntarily undergo genetic testing, such as those in this series; and other data comes from concerted scientific missions to collect genetic material from “traditional” indigenous populations worldwide, in order to be able to chart genetic and migratory patterns over the past 20,000 years. Although this is gestured toward in the series, more attention is given to it on Gates' website, [www.africandna.com](http://www.africandna.com), and in a fascinating public relations publication by Dr. Spencer Wells, *Deep Ancestry* (2006). It is the large-scale, interdisciplinary, transnational endeavor produced by the National Geographic Society, funded by IBM and the Waitts Family Foundation, and led by geneticist, Project Director, and National Geographic Society Explorer-in-Residence Spencer Wells, called the Genographic Project, that lays not only the technological and intellectual groundwork for, and tacitly points to many of the problems inherent within, the events staged (and promises made) in part four of *African American Lives*.

<sup>56</sup> See Duster 2006a.

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

order to generate and/or serve as evidence of deeply felt narrative outcomes. Perhaps it is the nature of performative returns undertaken to fill impossible gaps and heal continuously-reopened wounds of historical trauma to compel a kind of religiosity and an unbidden and perhaps uncritical faith (in science or in divine intervention), or maybe it is their nature to inspire *intentional leaps* of faith, knowing and creative suspensions of disbelief that are demanded by the force of desire. Such conjurations may or may not be entirely credulous, but defer to the longing for redemption that accompanies impossibility and loss. In these ways, just as scientific or other forms of empirical “truth” foster belief, they also foster and feed desire: desire and faith in the ability of a scientific process to be able to be seen through, for it to succeed in producing the expected results. And in this case, the expected results are a newly definitive peopling of one’s ancestral line that flies in the face of prevailing notions of the impossibility of knowing this part of the past.

Anticipated with great yearning, and received with enthusiasm and poignant sentiment, nonetheless the participants received the revelation of specific information with mixed emotions; for many of them this information provoked more complicated questions rather than simply providing answers. As the new information based on genetic “evidence” is being revealed, Gates asks various participants about what the blank of not knowing has meant for them; many of them find that it registers very differently in the wake of suddenly having the opportunity – or threat – of filling it in. While each is learning about whether or not they have Native American “blood” in their admixture results in *Part II*, Chris Rock reflects on the role and efficacy of “the Indian Myth,” the lore that is frequently circulated among African Americans that a family member a few generations ago was Native American; he points out that in explaining light skin color, “it’s easier to say that we got a little Indian in us than to say we got raped a few times” (*Part II*, episode IV). Yet it was not only those who, according to admixture tests, have “no Indian blood” who suddenly were faced with a crisis of identification and historical understanding: Don Cheadle was surprised and disturbed to learn that his ancestors had been owned by the sovereign Chicasaw nation, and so were kept enslaved until 1866, after slavery had already been abolished in the United States; even after they were finally freed, having been members of a nation that did not provide (however ineptly) for a new population of freeman, they had no citizenship, country, or legal status until the Dawes Commission redistributed communally held land in the 1890s (*Part II*, episode II). As Peter Gomes points out in episode IV, “There’s a strange sort of security in not knowing a great deal. There’s a sense that it’s all sort of mystical, and lost, and nobody will ever find it so you can sort of invent any past you wanted to. Well, you can’t do that now.”

But even if the prospects of new data with a patina of empirical certainty threaten to undo the inventions that have sustained people through generations, they prove to be too compelling to pass up because of what they have the potential to provide: if not an improved individual family history, then an improved collective narrative of belonging, one that articulates more consistently in a larger American multicultural landscape. At another point in *Part II*, episode IV, Gates asks Gomes, “Why do you think our generation, Peter, is so interested in our African past, more than any other generation of African Americans?” To which Gomes responds, “Everybody’s interested in their own past, and I think we have bought into that, and so we want to know more about where our people came from; and not in order to return there, but in order to say, you know, we are connected to something other than this American experience. Nobody wants their history to begin here, because in our case, if it begins here, in general, it’s not a very happy history.” It is as though, despite the specific narratives’ potential not to be the triumphant or noble ones the participants had projected in their prior state of not-knowing, the desire to connect African Americans’ history and



experience to pre-modern<sup>58</sup> Africa emerges from a fervent hope that a different origin myth – of life rather than of death – can engender a different ontological narrative that promises, even if it does not enact, the possibility of structural change.

And in order to most effectively play on and seek to fulfill all of these yearnings, surely it is not coincidental that *African American Lives* is both a thematic heir of *Roots*, and a generic one, playing on the emotional investment the audience is apt to make in a compelling mini-series that gratifies its viewers with a lengthy and emotional narrative, a satisfying catharsis, and the pleasure of identifying with characters that they come to know well. Unlike *Roots*, *African American Lives* is a docudrama, which is not only lent the credibility of both scientific empiricism and of the documentary form – ratified by the didactic, public-education-minded Public Broadcasting System and a Harvard-affiliated host, no less – but lent powerful affective appeal (and the persuasive power that accompanies it) by the dramatic arc and unapologetically sentimental qualities of the narrative framing, which, building off that of *Roots* and off of its guests' stories, is operatic in its high stakes, emotional appeal, and marketing strategy. And significantly, the latter points in particular are driven home by the reliance upon celebrities, namely actors and media personalities, as central characters. Iconic celebrities' endorsements provide general guidance as to aesthetic and cultural tastes and affiliations as well as a moral rudder, and in this case, these are particularly powerful endorsements, as each celebrity is an "upstanding" and righteous person who has "made it" in such a way that s/he is legible to a wide audience, including middle and upper class blacks and whites. Think, for instance, of Don Cheadle's commitment to using his celebrity status to fund and initiate anti-racist and anti-genocide activism, or of Oprah's book club and ravishing talk-show, magazine, and movie successes and thus the profound influence that she has not only on black women but on middle class women of all stripes.

But simultaneous to the significance of their *specificity* as individual celebrities, there is also something important about the function of actors to take up and play roles, to serve as empty vessels: this function makes them particularly appropriate and effective as the entities given the responsibility in the series of embodying history by providing the links to historic personages, but it also allows the viewer, presumably a "layman," to identify with them in a way that s/he might not with the academics, doctors, preachers, or other rarefied elites who comprise the remainder of the cohort of celebrity guests. That is, despite their wealth and celebrity rendering them untouchable and inaccessible in certain ways, nonetheless we are accustomed to *identifying* with actors when they play characters. This in turn enables viewers to see not the resource gap that allows these celebrities to benefit from a significant investment of time, money, and data that is poured into researching their genealogy and to which most individuals do not have access, but instead to see and imagine themselves in the role of the returnee to one's distant ancestry; to empower them to envision themselves worthy of these resources and their histories worthy of and capable of being excavated. In short, they incite and personalize desire.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps this, in turn, helps to fuel the sales of DNA test kits that

---

<sup>58</sup> That is, prior to the instantiation of the slave trade, if we take the latter to be one of the defining inaugurations of modernity.

<sup>59</sup> It is well worth noting that – in spite of my academically conditioned critical stance and skepticism and despite their shortcomings – the experience of reading/viewing both *Roots* and *African American Lives* is powerful and compelling. It is very difficult to watch these series and not be drawn into the desire and yearning that they are built on, to want to buy into the ostensibly unimpeachable truth of the history and science presented to us, to feel triumphant and tearful with, and deeply sympathetic to, the guests as the discoveries about their families are unveiled. They are compellingly and strategically crafted, certainly, but they also tell profound stories, and the investment in the questions that this dissertation seeks to answer stems most intimately from a shared belief in the power and compulsion of genealogical undertakings such as these.

Gates also sells, despite the high price tag (\$200-\$2000 per test, depending on what services you choose to include).<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, for the most part, Gates' guests – as well as many of the members of the general public who have helped fuel a new genealogy revolution by demonstrating interest in and purchasing the many books, DVDs, test kits, and other tools that have proliferated in the wake of the series – appear to be satisfied with and moved, if not by what they learn about their specific ancestry, then with the search itself and the opportunities it offers for African Americans to access their heritage, and thereby, to make important strides toward accessing affective citizenship and belonging. Because, of course, part of what happens by way of airing these series on television, and in particular on stations that do not require paying extra for cable, is to activate the collectivity that emerges from media experiences shared across an imagined national community(s). As we have seen, when *Roots* aired and attracted an unprecedented number of viewers, suddenly a discussion was opened up – information was circulating about slavery, history, and accountability – without the viewers themselves having to be responsible for bringing it up. And both *Roots* and *African American Lives* mobilize the affective, sentimental power of their narratives to garner the empathy of their viewers in order to produce self-consciously “humanizing” representations, that is, efforts to extend our notion of humanity and democratize our ability to interpellate our “others” as fellow humans. (Of course, this process has its own attendant complications: *Roots* humanizes its black characters by flattening difference, knitting them into an American immigration-and-access narrative, rather than seriously undertaking an effort to understand how difference is meted out and maintained through ongoing disparities in resource distribution. *African American Lives* complicates the narrative of overarching humanity by essentializing and biologizing racial categories.) *African American Lives*' participants and the viewers who purchase the DVDs, test kits, books, etc, express faith that knowability is both possible and fundamentally desirable; that using a variety of sources and types of knowledge to slowly fill in the chasm of the unknown is a valuable step toward producing a new vision of American inclusivity, toward legitimizing a claim on American-ness by verifying that a positive narrative (of progress, achievement, dignity) is possible: that black people not only emerged from a dignified heritage, but have been able to achieve against the odds.

Significantly, the distant past from which they emerged is represented in a triumphalist manner – not wholly dissimilar from Haley's approach to the African past – in the one instance in which it is concretely articulated. Gates takes Chris Tucker to Angola, where, after visiting the National Museum of Slavery, he takes him to the National Historical Archive, where records of the slave trade are kept. There, an archivist/historian explains how it would have happened that Chris's Mbundu ancestor would have gotten to the U.S., which would likely have been in the context of the war in 1785 between colonizing Portuguese forces and the kingdom of Matamba. According to Gates, who translates, Chris's ancestor probably fought with/on behalf of the African queen, but when they lost, he would have been captured, enslaved, and shipped to America. Next they take a plane east, to where the kingdom would have been. When they arrive at the region's capital Melange, which has been destroyed by a recent civil war. Gates narrates, “[t]he Mbundu fiercely resisted. That battle fits within a long tradition of resistance, dating all the way back to the early 1700s, when people here fought the Portuguese forces, who were trying to subdue them” (*Part I*, episode IV). As we shall shortly see, this approach is in very sharp contrast to Saidiya Hartman's, among others; *Lose Your*

---

<sup>60</sup> See the fascinating website, “AfricaDNA” to learn more about Gates' project, launched, appropriately, in 2007. <http://www.africandna.com/News.aspx>

*Mother* operates according to her well-documented conviction that those who were sold into slavery by other Africans or captured and shipped to the Americas already occupied fungible, “disposable,” or otherwise outcast social positions: they belonged to defeated or less powerful tribes, were slaves or servants, lower class, etc; she argues that there never was a triumphal past that can assuage the pain of not belonging or happily fill in the blanks of unknowingness.

The fluidity of temporality and the processual nature of origins that the formal construction of the series suggests both tie into the overriding function in this context of Africa as a symbolic field, that acts as both a reflective device in which Americans can look at and for themselves, and as a kind of open signifier, filled in according to the viewer’s needs and desires. Gates and his guests frequently cite and discuss their own and their families’ recent pasts, as well as the *long durée* of ancestral and historical past. In all of these configurations, the past is crucial to forming the present and familiarity with history is crucial to unpacking it; both genealogical and genetic links – as well as the temporal context that connects them – are represented as being network-like and expansive, full of surprises both good and ill. And the origin to which all the labor and yearning is oriented is more processual than simply a distant place as it existed in a different time – the “motherland,” pre-contact or even contemporary Africa, itself: instead, or in addition, the crucible of a uniquely African American identification is a centuries-long genealogy of events, beginning most crucially and formatively with the Middle Passage and slavery, and continuing through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas *Roots* starts in the past and works up to the present, articulating temporality as strictly chronological and depicting Haley’s return to the “distant past” to connect first and foremost with a very specific and bounded place of origin – forming a kind of loop or circuit, *African American Lives* starts in the present, working slowly backward to examine the entirety of the process of becoming, and the ways in which that process changed over time, especially those parts of the process that continue to have the most urgent consequences in the present – forming a non-linear network of relations. The search is not only for the most distant relatives or even specific people in Africa, but rather offers an opportunity for participants to concretize a claim to an elsewhere, outside of America; to a larger past from which they were separated, in order to more productively and positively engage with being American. After all, every last one of the participants is reacquainted with multiple American ancestors over the course of the series, who significantly affect their conception of their family’s and their own American-ness; but only one of them – Chris Tucker – actually makes it to Africa in either *Part I* or *Part II* of the series, despite the fact that the amount of information they have for his African genetic compatibility is not particularly different from that which they have for other participants. It is awfully tempting to think that this ratio has as much to do with ideological, narrative, and affective *priorities* as it does with scientific limitations.

### **processual and performative genealogy: toward a freedom dream**

While both Haley and Gates utilize genealogical strategies, on account of the above characteristics of *African American Lives* it is Gates’ project that perhaps more closely resembles genealogy in its most literal form: tracing families through generations and identifying the web of ancestors that precede any individual. Although many enactments of this process function to underscore dearly-held notions of the centrality of origins, more or less obscuring the editorial process of tracing only a certain line in order to identify in a certain way, using empirical “truths” to legitimate that claim, in fact genealogy is an untidy process replete with discomfiting surprises. Tidy origins are impossible to locate, as the branches keep branching infinitely; unexpected connections and ancestors show up, and problematic othernesses

(national, cultural, religious, racial, ethnic, etc) disrupt and render impossible “purity” of any sort. Genealogy, defined even in this most literal manner, is a business of unruly excess and frustrating slippages, ultimately always haunted by unknowability. It is fitting, then, that genealogy is the term selected by Michel Foucault, and Joseph Roach after him, to describe the study of the relationship between the past and the present according to a methodology whereby teleology and origin-myths are eschewed, privileging instead the centrality of accidents and unruly substitutions.

Roach begins by arguing that

culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can best be described by the word *surrogation*. In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure, I hypothesize, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates. Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds. The process requires many trials and at least as many errors. The fit cannot be exact (Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 3).

Surrogation is a deeply citational process: it is a process of constant re-invention; of repetition with revision. He goes on to explain the significance of surrogation to what he calls “genealogies of performance,” which hinge on citationality: Roach doesn’t argue that the present is *determined* by the past, but he argues that memory operates by replacing a pre-existing idea or figure with a current one; that these identities palimpsest and create a composite, larger-than-life figure/role; and that the past shows up in the present in the things that are expressly and intentionally carried over, as well as in the gaps and fissures of forgetting, intentional or not. He eschews origins but points to the centrality of them in these processes: all acts of substitution are attempts to restore a falsely conceived original. Surrogation is about an ill-fit, the massive significance of the space in between the mold and the filling, but it indicates something continuous, too; something fluid whereby the mold (and concept of the original) is constantly in flux, altered as it is differently inhabited. Roach, borrowing from Foucault, theorizes the study of this process as a method of genealogy. But in theorizing surrogation, he also theorizes the means by which people enact genealogies: the acts of substitution that constitute the production of these chains of citational borrowing, inventing, and replacing; the means by which they emerge. The genealogical projects to which I attend here are somewhere in between, using the tactics of certain aspects of genealogy to search for an origin – the antithesis of a “true” genealogical project.

Projects such as those described in this dissertation enact a very particular process of surrogation, one that involves a search for a new, elective origin myth, namely that of ethnic or racial roots, to expose the fallacy of, and ultimately supplant, an insufficient or non-inclusive yet officially prevailing dominant national origin myth in which those who are searching cannot find themselves. The “genealogists” patiently follow chains of connections, attempting to understand the production of nation, ethnicity, or family before it was constituted the way it is now. Some are willing to settle for a concept of origins that are pure, and a privileging of “retention” rather than “invention”; others are more invested in pursuing a “genealogy of performance” in the sense of tracking changes and accidents. All perform critical genealogy by exposing the accidents, missteps, and systemic inequities that have been obscured in officially prevailing American origin myths. Yet they are also always attended by a search and yearning for their own origins, which are invested with belief that by nature forecloses complete

criticality. Such origin narratives may be afforded deep belief precisely because they are expected to stand in for and mend or legitimize a fraught claim on citizenship.

When it comes to these genealogical quests for origins, what do the blanks of unknowingness – that get filled in variously with imaginary narratives and frenzied searches for “evidence” – have to do with the spaces and slippages in surrogation? Both are acts of variously willed and unbidden memory and forgetting. Both are acts of survival, and performative acts of worldmaking. All of these acts of surrogation, in which a process of genealogy functions to produce evidence that serves to fill in the blanks of gaping unknowns – whether they are constructed of imaginative efforts (myths, lore, fiction) or of empirical “facts” (genetic data and genealogical documents) – exist as imaginative efforts to furnish forth new worlds, realize new possibilities, travel to the past, re/constitute the origin. Although arguably the point of genealogy is ultimately to make the origin knowable, it is not necessarily to render it static or teleological. Once an origin has been identified – especially when it is signified by a place that is collapsed into the point of departure – it becomes a generative site with flexible functions: it allows you to go there, physically or imaginatively; to mourn properly and/or to put concrete place to abstract musings, concrete people and faces to imaginary and abstract kin; to unite past, present and future; in some cases, to confer spiritually with ancestors or literally with long-lost kin; to stand in the place where your individual or collective history began which allows you to look at history from a precipice, to wonder what might have happened instead under different circumstances, to re-experience the rupture, to imagine different endings. An origin that is as fluid as this is configured as having the ability to allow for healing: not forgetting, but making use of the past as a way of productively envisioning and shaping the future. The origin is supposed to hold the key to the past, and the past is supposed to hold the key to the present and future. In this sense it is misleading to construe the origins in question as necessarily teleological, as they are, in fact, to the contrary: they are performative, which is to say they are generative and contingent upon action and interpretation.

It is in this vein that Saidiya Hartman suggests in *Lose Your Mother*<sup>61</sup> that despite the failure of empirical data – and even the failure of journeying to a place associated with the originary site of enslavement, the portal between an African past and an African-American present that began with the Middle Passage – to disclose anything concrete about either origins or ancestors, or to provide a fulfilling means to come to terms with a traumatic past, the inevitability of unknowingness can itself be productive. Hartman’s narrative is centrally concerned with the figure of the stranger and with what can be gained from looking to the ultimate *unknowability* of the past and one’s ancestors: the book’s title comes from a West African etymology of the term “slave,” which is understood as one who has forever lost her or his kin. She attempts to fill in the gaps in untold histories with a keen grasp of data

---

<sup>61</sup> With *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman appeared on a book tour which brought her primarily around to many universities as well as to some bookstores, mostly in urban areas and/or in university towns. Another form of circulation was her appearance on the *Tavis Smiley Show* for an interview that aired on PBS on January 26, 2007 (and which continues to be available in transcript form on the website, which can be accessed at [http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200701/20070126\\_hartman.html](http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200701/20070126_hartman.html)). The book has become required reading on a lot of college campuses, in a way that *Scenes of Subjection* was not on account of its difficulty. This indicates, I think, that it is in the process of assuming a notable role in an *educated* American public’s conceptions of the discursive framing of difference, race, and multiculturalism. Yet it is paradoxical that this work is, of the three discussed in this chapter, perhaps the most inclusive in its vision of humanity (that is, it is more cognizant of multiple axes of oppression, and is more devoted (at least in theory) to global freedom dreams rather than national ones), but is also the most sequestered in its circulation.

supplemented by sheer imagination – which is never set forth as anything other than speculative but fictional storytelling.

*Lose Your Mother* charts Hartman’s journey from coastal Ghana, where Cape Coast and Elmina Castles – which were used as dungeons for millions of captured Africans en route to the Americas – are located, up into the Northern territories, where the slave route begins and where many of the enslaved were captured, and is interspersed with reflection and contextualization that weaves between a variety of genres – from standard academic history-writing (or Foucauldian genealogy), to fictional literary prose, to confessional autobiography. Certainly, all three projects discussed in this chapter grapple with the effects of slavery in the present; they draw a direct line using generations as a kind of metaphor, but also a literal manifestation, of the legacy that gets passed along and has unfinished consequences. But while no narrative claims that racism and the consequences of slavery are a thing of the past, the others do tend to focus on progress. Hartman, on the other hand, does not see the present in such rosy terms. Indeed, her configuration of temporality – which she sums up with the provocative phrase “the time of slavery is now” – acknowledges the deep disparities that persist in the United States, as well as the larger post-colonial world, and the particular debt they owe to slavery: namely, the foreclosure of social and legal subjecthood by way of converting human beings into commodities and non-subjects, a status that, she perceives, remains constitutive of black subjects globally, even into the present.

Skeptically but hopefully, she goes looking for a solution, a way out of this narrative and identificatory dead-end, by turning to the originary site of wounding. But she doesn’t find it. As she states in the passage quoted in the introduction of this chapter, she travels to Ghana thinking that she can see past the romanticism and faith in origins upon which Haley and others have acted, intending to excavate the rupture and seek the lost. However, she discovers in the process just how compelling the fictions of reunion and restorative discovery are, how desire for them comes unbidden and against one’s better judgment, and finds herself at once wishing for them to deliver a sense of closure and betrayed by their inability to do so. Following a discussion of her arrival at Elmina Castle, at which time she was accosted by young teenagers and children clambering for her attention, calling her a lost sister, she meditates on the etymology of the Akan word closest to what slave connotes in English, which in that language is bound up in love and loss. This meditation leads to a network of associations, ranging from analysis of how and why black people in the U.S. have an untenable detachment from “home,” to a historic reconstruction of a slave revolt on the island of St. John in 1733, which offers disarming contradictions about what return to the homeland might mean: always an act of imagining, it is in some cases an effort to envision a more just future, but in others is an attempt to restore a reality or fantasy of an equally unjust past. Concluding the chapter, she writes:

Standing in the dark recesses of the holding cell for female slaves, I felt both the pull and the impossibility of gaining the country lost. It has never been more clear than it was then: return is what you hold on to after you have been taken from your country, or when you realize that there is no future in the New World, or that death is the only future. Return is the hunger for all the things you once enjoyed or the yearning for all the things you never enjoyed. It bears the impress of everything that has been taken from you. It is the last resort of the defeated. It is the diversion of suicides and dreamers. It is the elsewhere of insurrectionists. It is the yearning of those who can ‘summon filial love for persons and places they have never known.’ Like the myth of the mother, the promise of return is all that remains in the wake of slavery. If you close your eyes, you can imagine

yourself once again safe in her arms. With a rifle pointed at your chest, you can travel home. [...] The hope is that *return* could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home (Hartman 2007, 99-100).

She turns to storytelling, the production of a deeply researched but speculative fiction that acknowledges itself as such – and acknowledges its limitations – as a way to manage irreparable loss, most notably when she has no choice but to grapple with the dissatisfaction of unknowability: instances in which the forgotten are deprived of a voice. For instance, one chapter begins from a transcript from an unusual trial, in which a slave ship captain was tried for the murder of one of the female slaves during the transatlantic voyage; he flogged her nearly to death while she was hanging from a mast and left her to expire shortly after cutting her down. “Everything else depends upon how you look at things or where you were standing when her body was suspended from the slaver’s mast. No one saw the same girl; she was outfitted in a different guise for each who dared look. She appeared as a tortured virgin, a pregnant woman, a syphilitic tart, and a budding saint,” (Hartman 2007, 136). Hartman excavates the circumstances surrounding the trial, telling the story from the vastly different perspective of several men who had stakes in the outcome (the captain, the ship’s surgeon, and an abolitionist), all of whose narratives succeed only in eclipsing her subjection and instead overwriting them with their own subjectivity and desire, and finally, tells the story from the perspective of the girl herself – in Hartman’s narrative she is staging a hunger strike, choosing death over enslavement. Her narrative efforts to fill in the gaps do not pretend to be restorative – they are self-reflexively incomplete: Hartman theorizes, fully and courageously, the devastating dissatisfaction of hitting a brick wall in an impossible reconstruction project. Nor are they hopeless: while the narratives can’t bring back the girl, let alone the millions of others who violently lost their lives to social and/or physical death, they humanize her and point to how her life still casts a shadow, as reflecting on it provides an opportunity to flesh out and contextualize a situation that illuminates the violent operations of both racialized gender under slavery, and the often-exploitive uses to which narratives of it are put, that are at once historical and persistent, while also pointing to the contingency of historical narrative and the situatedness of knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Critical race feminist scholarship attends to the silenced, to the non-subject, to the absences, to the power structures that mete out inequity. It therefore often insists on the legitimacy of scholarship that attends to what appears not to be empirical or verifiable – often because the forms of evidence, knowing, and relating that support these ways of knowing are not likely to grant access to the silenced, impossible, and unrecorded, and/or because such forms have generally given rise to reproductions of oppressive power/knowledge regimes. Hence the necessity for scholars like Hartman as well as Toni Morrison, Avery Gordon, M. Jacqui Alexander, and others to insist that “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence” (Gordon) and imagine radical ways of conducting “research” in order to gain access to the impossible. The imperative of certainty produces a tyranny of inheritance, rather

---

<sup>62</sup> Hartman is, even in her unsentimental and even *anti*-sentimental approach, deeply reliant on the strength of *feeling*: hers is not solely an intellectual approach; the three projects discussed in this chapter can’t be separated in terms of some being affective/emotionally driven and others being only intellectual and intentional. Gates and Hartman, while having very different politics and approaches to their material, are both self-aware about both the intellectual and emotional aspects of their projects.

than the taking stock of loss and fragmentation and building something new from its ashes, in communion with others who are similarly dispossessed.

In *Lose Your Mother*, genealogy as a literal endeavor is impossible; unknowability rules the day; but unknowability is generative, it is a thing unto itself, because it is a loss/rupture that produces a positive space – not as in something good, but as in something present and real, as opposed to the negative of negative space, an absence. For Haley, with his idealized Africa, vision of American progress, and teleological narrative implication that the displacement of the Middle Passage was inevitable so that an idealized hybrid of African nobility and American democracy might arise, a genealogy project is an expression of belonging. His narrative suggests that America is home and so is Africa; there is shared and resonant history in both places, for both Africans *and* African Americans. For Hartman, neither America nor Africa proves to be home: both are too embroiled in loss, violence, betrayal, and unrealized emancipation and decolonization.

Her critical and unromantic stance relative to Africa, a stance which is a notable lacuna in the triumphalist narratives of Haley and Gates, contributes nonetheless to the book's biggest shortcoming: an approach that comes off as uni-directional. Although the book and her voice are self-aware, her voice and opinions are highly critical of Ghana/ians and their intentions for much of the work, rather than taking either an approach toward "scholarly objectivity" (which would, of course, be mitigated by the fact that it is partially a memoir, and by the fact that a postmodern radical feminist-of-color work of any genre is necessarily suspicious of notions of "objectivity") or an approach that would look consistently more generously or sympathetically at the conditions that underlie Ghanaians' avoidance of slavery except as part of a tourist economy. Even as she contextualizes the circumstances, she is often not accepting of them, setting them up as an explanation rather than an excuse. In short, the effort to grapple with the unknowability of the past produces a different kind of unknowability, that of the present of others who have been formed by different or opposing historical circumstances. This orientation ultimately privileges an American perspective that to some degree reinscribes American privilege in global contexts.<sup>63</sup> However, the end of the book comes much nearer to negotiating the complexities and/or coming to more of a sense of peace with and understanding of the differing stakes each party has in the fact of slavery *as well as* the continuity of the circumstances that produced slavery and its structurally racist aftermath in (the) America/s, and those that produced the coloniality of past- and present-day West Africa.

A significant aspect of Hartman's project in this book is to demonstrate evidence of the slipperiness of temporality: *Lose Your Mother* is a carefully researched and historically-conscious work about the past, indeed, but it is primarily a work about blackness – and

---

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, a generally very positive review that makes note of this shortcoming, by Kwame Essien of the University of Texas at Austin's history department: "If Hartman's intent was to show aspects of "fractured" Diasporan identities created out of the Middle Passage experience, she was remarkably successful in this personal endeavor. However, there are minor concerns about Hartman's book. She criticizes Ghanaians and foreign institutions for taking advantage of returnees and the historical monuments for profit making just as Bayo Halsey's does in *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (2008). In Hartman's words, 'Every town or village had an atrocity to promote—a mass grave, an auction block, a slave river...equivalent to a fried chicken franchise...for petty traders, it was an expanded market for their goods' (163). Hartman continues, 'So the descendants of slaves were welcomed with the red carpet treatment. They mourned their ancestors in great public ceremonies where chiefs assembled to atone for the past and to collect alms' (164). Part of her expressions seem patronizing but elucidate her frustration. Obviously, Hartman set out to fill a historical void about slavery in Ghana, but in some ways she provides a single-focus lens that ignores ways returnees also profit from sites of slavery, especially entrepreneurs that appropriate the Middle Passage to amass wealth through tourism, in some of the hotels and motels where Hartman stayed during her visit." This review was published in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.2 in September 2009.



antiblackness – in the present and globally, which argues that “[i]f slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems inaccessibly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times. If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison” (Hartman 2007: 133). The prose of the book is constructed to flow between temporal moments, and between geographic spaces, with sinuous fluidity and at nearly every turn. Ethnographic or novelistic thick description of Hartman’s experiences in Ghana, discussion of the historic backdrop of these sites and situations from the 1960s or the 1700s, anecdotes about her family’s history (her Caribbean grandparents’ fraught relationship to the American Dream or the impossibility of tracking down her enslaved forebears’ records in archives, say) or her childhood memories of racism, factual analyses of the role of the slave trade in the rise of capitalism and of the acts of violence that enabled this, and theoretically inflected ruminations on contemporary American black life are interwoven with eerie seamlessness. Her discussions of being black in the present U.S. include a description of her mother’s racial profiling by a cop; of black New Orleanians in the Lower Ninth Ward trapped on the roof during Katrina, holding signs and American flags yet being “cast away” according to a newspaper caption and the federal response; of the bullet-shattered bodies of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark and the end of the Black Power Movement. Simultaneously, the past is impossible to know and inescapably present: the unknowable aspects of the past present further evidence of what has been decimated, what has not triumphantly persisted or been redeemed, while the knowable aspects of it present evidence of how the past flows into and informs the present and of what practices, what social and power structures, resurface or have remained in some way intact. Yet she writes:

History doesn’t unfold with one era bound to and determining the next in an unbroken chain of causality. It is “without providence or final cause,” writes Foucault. “There is only ‘the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance.’ “ So the point isn’t the impossibility of escaping the stranglehold of the past, or that history is a succession of uninterrupted defeats, or that the virulence and tenacity of racism is inexorable. But rather that the perilous conditions of the present establish the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized (*ibid*).

The spectacles of antiblackness she describes and the narrative construction of the book reject the teleology of the “progressive social gospel” that assumed that “race relations must inevitably improve” (Moses 1990:195): there is no “march,” no “linear progression” (Glaude 2000: 5) from suffering to salvation. Such a linear and clear progression from the past to the future is the temporality that Haley implies through the narrative and directness of the family line; Hartman, instead, rejects teleology – whether theological or ideological – and advocates a Foucauldian and Roachian vision of time. But in terms of temporality, this rejection of teleology works in multiple directions: the unrealized future of a presumed inevitability that has been proven false provides evidence of the absence of a telos in overdetermining the events of the past. If events in the past have not been governed by inevitability, they cannot be knowable by looking to teleologies to divine them. And the unknowability of the past speaks to the unknowability, which is to say the speculative and opened nature, of the future.

African Americans, for her, are homeless, rootless, motherless, and created by the rupture of the Middle Passage. What *is* home, as she discovers along the course of her journey, is the act of searching, and the subjectivities and places – real and imaginary – that emerge from this processual act of becoming and invention. The last chapter of the book, “Fugitive

Dreams,” reaches toward a kind of resolution and understanding, as Hartman and her compatriots travel far north to a town called Gwolu, a walled city, settled by commoners in danger of being stolen and sold who traveled far north seeking refuge from enslavement, and fiercely protected from marauders. The denizens of this and similar cities that emerged as bastions of hope called themselves by the name “Sisala,” which means “to come together, to become together, to weave together” (Hartman 2007, pg 225). Hartman writes:

They had fled slave raiders, predatory states, drought, and exhausted land, and they desired never to know any of it again in this sequestered niche of the savanna. Each one had a different dream of what might be possible when you didn’t have to look over your shoulder, or answer to the name ‘barbarian,’ or hand over your daughter or nephew as tribute, or forget your ancestors, or abandon your gods, and when you didn’t have to wake each day worrying that you or someone you loved might disappear by dusk. For all this, they were willing to begin anew. Knowing that you don’t ever regain what you’ve lost, they embraced becoming something other than who they had been and naming themselves again.

Newcomers were welcome. It didn’t matter that they weren’t kin or that they spoke a different language, because genealogy didn’t matter (most of them couldn’t go back more than three or four generations, anyway), building a community did. If the willingness to receive new arrivals and foreigners was what it took to make a world different from the one they had left, then so be it. So they put down their roots in foreign soil and adopted strangers as their kin and intermarried with other migrants and runaways, and shared their gods and totems, and blended their histories. ‘We’ was the collectivity they built from the ground up, not one they had inherited, not one that others had imposed.

And the dreams of what might be possible were enshrined in the names of these towns and villages founded by fugitives: *safe at last, we have come together, here where no one can reach us anymore, the village of free people, here we speak of peace, a place of abundance, haven*. Like communities of maroons and fugitives and outliers elsewhere, their identity was defined as much by what they were running from as by what they were running toward (Hartman 2007: 225-226).

She is describing African Americans in the present, and contemporary Africans negotiating the terms of coloniality, and marginalized and displaced peoples worldwide, even as she describes the Sisala of the eighteenth century. Her orientation, now, is toward the future: what can be cobbled together and fused into something new, against the odds, by way of building a collectivity with others similarly robbed of their past and displaced. If what is inherited is a history of loss and no definitive genealogy, then the imperative is toward invention: of a critical understanding of the past – of what *is* knowable and of *why* what is unknowable is as such – and of a future that is not overdetermined by false teleologies.

If genealogy is unknowable, it means that the past and the future – their events and meaning – cannot be divined through theologically-based teleological narratives. Thus in writing against the viability and value of certainty, Hartman also writes against the viability of a religious typology that promises an inevitable redemption and reunion at the end of, and to wrest meaning from, a history of tragedy and struggle. The significance of this move is profound, as it radically subverts the assumptive logic of dominant “common sense” about African American history.

On one hand, she addresses the literal politics that the theological narratives espouse. There is a long tradition of deploying the Exodus narrative toward the pursuit of social reform.

That is, instead of appealing to it in a way that focuses on the next world, “[t]hrough biblical typology, particularly uses of Exodus, African Americans elevated their common experiences to biblical drama and found resources to account for their circumstances and respond effectively to them. [...] Exodus history sustained hope and a sense of possibility in the face of insurmountable evil. The analogical uses of the story enabled a sense of agency and resistance in persistent moments of despair and disillusionment.”<sup>64</sup> But even these efforts have – not exclusively, but often – relied on a particular iteration of the social gospel that presupposes a set of moral and institutional imperatives (for instance, the ideal of training racial, religious, sexual, social, or institutional “deviants” or outliers to behave according to an ostensibly correct set of moral principles) that run counter to a radical critique of the underlying terms of the state and civil society which tend to ratify, naturalize, and invisibilize antiblackness and/or policies that adversely impact black people who are not part of the middle class, rather than to critique or subvert it. Hartman, on the other hand, does call for, and mount, a radical critique of the terms of the state and civil society: for her, they are inherently unethical rather than redeemable, having engendered centuries of black social death and historical unknowability, and thus any struggle toward freedom demands an unflinching critical analysis rather than an implicit or explicit ratification of these institutions and the terms on which they are predicated.

But more fundamentally, she addresses the political implications of the assumptive logic of a theological teleology. I interpret Hartman to posit that there is a kind of freedom that can be predicated on not-knowing: if there is no predetermined future, there is no divine imperative that might encourage an investment in the moral prescriptions of a conservative social gospel: a toppled faith in the redemptive possibilities of the struggle has the potential to open the door to invention, speculation, refashioning, and cobbling together something from nothing, presence from absence. I interpret her to posit that a viable freedom dream necessitates the acknowledgment of loss and absence and the history of processes of dehumanizing antiblackness, the acknowledgement of the wound and its psychic, social, political, and ethical causes – as well as an acknowledgement of its persistence – rather than being deluded by tidy or optimistic but under-analyzed narratives of progress or redemption. Only then can any realistic stock be taken toward re-imagining the world and the possibilities and imperatives of a black freedom struggle. While Haley and Gates draw on narratives that say that the past, including its suffering, was meaningful, Hartman offers what might appear to be a much bleaker interpretation that insists that it is meaningless insofar as it is not folded into any sort of teleology. But in that is a kind of freedom / dream, because the subjects of *her* narrative are free from a predetermination of the *terms* on which liberation is possible, the structures around its enactment.

What she calls for is a profound refashioning of the epistemology of the invisible, which is as fundamental a component of the black freedom struggle as is an epistemology of verifiable evidence of oppression. That is, she advocates the excavation of psychic structures and historical silences to replace an implicit or explicit faith in a divine logic in the (racial) order of things. Genealogy cannot connect with the unknown, so it becomes a ghost story, an excavation. The term might then be interpreted less as a means of accessing literal ancestors, and more as a process toward understanding. Hartman constructs, in her text, not a genealogy of anyone’s family, but a genealogy of the stranger, of the slave; a genealogy of loss, of the lost, of searching. Projects that make use of imaginative, performative, quasi-fictional or poetic devices can’t rest with not-knowing: the imaginative devices emerge, in fact, from attempts to piece together or construct/invent evidence from its lack. They all insist on the importance of

---

<sup>64</sup> Glaude 2000, 162.

knowing, whether because of some large-scale sense of collective responsibility, or because of personal yearning, or both. The imaginative devices don't exist for the sake of being imaginative; they exist for the sake of survival. But in being imaginative, they allow for radical possibilities to emerge that literality forecloses.

Part of what performance might offer the study of history is a) different keys to be able to fill in the gaps, that aren't so heavily reliant upon explicit, legible empiricism, and b) not only permission for, but encouragement of what uncertainty can yield. Genealogy, broadly understood, is what furnishes evidence: it is the key to filling in blanks that are impossible to fill. One version of it is capable of being profoundly literal; of making reconstruction possible; it is used to fill in the blank that has been lost to us – whomever the 'us' is: the dispossessed, displaced, marginalized – providing an object to slip into a gaping negative space. This I would call *genealogy as an object*. A different version is used in order to understand the gaps, to underscore or illuminate the negative spaces and ask how they came to be, and filling in the context around the blank spaces, inheriting the loss, becomes the way to trace the relationship between the past, present, and future. This I would call *genealogy as a process*.

What, then, is or could be critical or even radical in roots-seeking genealogy projects? There is something inherently conservative about nostalgia, according to most interpretations; but not if a notion of "radical nostalgia," such as that offered by Peter Glazer, is pursued: such an enactment of nostalgia engages in worldmaking and invention; the definition takes for granted that nostalgia is for worlds and times that never existed, and that therefore it is not conservative (i.e. about returning to an idealized past), but that it is creative and always seeking something new. Performative returns are inevitably projects of yearning, of wishing for a past that was imagined to be better than the present (which has devolved in some way) or a future that has promise and potential. The mythical Aztec homeland Aztlán that was made popular during the Chicano Movement is a very elegant example: it is a wished-for, utopian space, acknowledged as being impossible to realize, but always animating the spirit of the concrete efforts of its adherents toward social justice and structural change (see Anaya and Lomelí 1991). Hartman writes:

"To believe, as I do, that the enslaved are our contemporaries is to understand that we share their aspirations and defeats, which isn't to say that we are owed what they were due but rather to acknowledge that they accompany our every effort to fight against domination, to abolish the color line, and to imagine a free territory, a new commons. It is to take to heart their knowledge of freedom. The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken; it wasn't something that could ever be given to you. The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back. [...] The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs – an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?" (Hartman 2007, 269-270).

But performative return is not necessarily critical, and part of what I demonstrate throughout this dissertation is how such projects are always more complicated than they seem; they work to challenge *and* bolster the racial state; they are in some ways radical and in others extremely conservative. And this question of criticality has precisely to do with normativity: do genealogical practices, the conclusions they draw and the worldmaking they do, work to

*undo* or to *reinscribe* oppressive patterns, habits, worldviews, available roles of and categories for historically marginalized groups of people?

All three of these projects attempt to re-write the terms of America, such that the circumstances of African-Americans are configured as being integral instead of outside the dominant narrative; constitutive rather than an aberration. But they waver between trying to write that as a narrative of progress, in which we have left slavery behind and have ascended to a space of constitutive normativity; and trying to underline the fundamental and unending nature of slavery – a kind of rejoinder to uncritical narratives that not only attends to the subjective space of social death that it has yielded but the possibilities and necessities of invention that have flourished in its wake. What they have in common is that they present the necessity of grappling with the past instead of ignoring it, allowing African-Americans' movements and reinscriptions of migration to trouble the waters of complacency, forging a broader awareness of the fraught position they have historically occupied. Each contains kernels of great possibility for an inclusive vision of the future as well as more or less significant red flags. Hartman's vision, however, seems to espouse a particularly liberating articulation of freedom, because it does not try to deny or occlude the presence or significance of ongoing disparity and loss: while Gates' and Haley's subjects and implied audience have already succeeded, gained access to civil society, and have implicitly ratified the fundamental terms on which it is predicated, Hartman's are still struggling to make something from nothing; they have an urgency in attending to disparities, and no investment in a status quo that excludes or violates their well-being. What she claims or advocates is not a victimized stance, but rather a staunch activist one that is inflected by a rigorous and unflinching structural analysis, and a sensitive and equally rigorous understanding of desire, yearning, and the possibilities for reinvention and reconstruction that emerge when faced with profound absence and loss.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**To Call My Indian Red:**  
**felicitousness, magical realism, and**  
**autochthonous/diasporic genealogies of displacement in New Orleanian blackness**

**introduction**

The Big Chief emerges from the dark night; initially he is visible only as a massive shadowy form, an eclipse against a street-light edged in glowing feathers. Then he comes fully into the light, an eight-foot vision of golden and blood-red feathers and complicated beadwork, moving rhythmically and elegantly, bobbing and turning, the tall feathers keeping the rhythm. Then he begins chanting – a language that is at once familiar and mysterious, moving between English and something barely unrecognizable. Albert Lambreaux, the Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, has been trying by more secular, conversational means to entreat his friend Robinette to clear away debris from the neighborhood bar that he wants to use as a temporary home and headquarters for his tribe’s music practices, since his return to New Orleans three months after Katrina revealed that his house was wrecked beyond immediate salvation. When Robinette refuses, Lambreaux comes to him in full regalia. Robinette’s protests, which are entirely reasonable given the material and structural circumstances with which they are beset (working-class Black New Orleanians whose homes, communities, and families have been devastated in the storm), are rendered meaningless by Lambreaux’s stern appeal, which is clearly imbued not only with the power of the seemingly magical spectacle of his ghostish nighttime appearance and transformation from an ordinary man to a Black Indian Chief, but with the power of the history and precedent of ferocious perseverance in the face of overwhelming impossibility and subjugation that he cites when he dismisses Robinette’s concerns with the refrain: “Humbah. Won’t bow. Don’t know how.” Robinette, moved, agrees to help his friend. Lambreaux disappears into the darkness and mist with another street-light eclipse that mirrors his arrival.<sup>65</sup>

Although Lambreaux is a fictional character in HBO’s television series *Treme*, created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, the Guardians of the Flame is the name of a real tribe (or “gang”) of so-called Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans. Mardi Gras Indians are usually working-class Black men, from primarily Black neighborhoods, who participate in a longstanding carnival tradition that involves sewing profoundly beautiful and intricate “suits” each year – replete with complex hand-sewn beaded patches and hundreds of feathers, that evoke a certain vision of Plains Indians warrior attire, and also resemble other invocations of indigenous costume in carnival traditions throughout the Caribbean and the African diaspora – in time for Mardi Gras Day. The Indians “mask” in the streets together as tribes on certain days of the liturgical calendar – Mardi Gras and St. Joseph’s Night – according to routes only they know; they are not publicized or announced ahead of time. The performance of the Indians on the street involves the call-and-response recitation of a number of old and, in some cases, sacred chants in a combination of languages including but not limited to English, French, and Creole, accompanied by drums, tambourines, sometimes sticks hit on bottles, which are played by members of the tribe – some in feathered suits, some in street clothes. The tribes are trolling the streets in search of other tribes, with whom there will be a showdown, between tribes and ultimately between Big Chiefs. These battles are, to some degree, ritually choreographed, in that there are designated roles in these encounters (“Spyboy,” “Wildman”) that tribe members occupy and perfect, but each encounter also plays out spontaneously: the

---

<sup>65</sup> *Treme*, created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, Season 1, Episode 1.

object is to demonstrate superiority, to make the opposing Big Chief “bow down” and acknowledge the other’s dominance. In the past, this might have been accomplished with violence; in recent decades it has become an aesthetic competition. Members of the community follow these processions in a second-line, supporting their Big Chief in his ritual battles.<sup>66</sup>

The Mardi Gras Indians, also known as Black Indians, belong to “tribes” whose names reference a network of conceptual touchstones beyond American Indians, including masculine warrior identities; ideas and events associated with Africa, the Caribbean, and Southern Louisiana or New Orleans; and histories of conquest, resistance, and creolization.<sup>67</sup> For Black Indians, the references to Native Americans reveal a deep sense of solidarity with the indigenous people of this continent and the islands of the Caribbean. This reference asserts, first, that the African/-Americans and Native Americans were the two groups subjected to the most stunning, complete, and calculated forms of state violence: genocide and enslavement. It also recalls the history of maroonage/*maronnage* in Southern Louisiana, the Deep South, and the Caribbean, whereby slaves escaped and were sometimes harbored by Native Americans, forming communities, sometimes staging or assisting organized rebellions, and often intermarrying. Both of these widely-recounted interpretations speak to an affective and political affiliation with this history of social death and struggle, and of a vision of fierce resistance coupled with an ethic of collectivity.

However, the above descriptions rely on the presence of a community. Three months after the storm, *Treme’s* Lambreaux is back in the city without the rest of his tribe, and indeed the beginning of the season centers around his efforts to locate the other members – which proves difficult, as many are displaced, and others have died in the storm. Later in the season the plot that pertains to Lambreaux details the few tribe members’ preparations for Mardi Gras and St Joseph’s night, but these are interrupted by the jail time that Lambreaux serves – on Mardi Gras, a profound slap in the face – as punishment for protesting the closure of public housing by way of occupying a unit for several days and refusing to leave.

*Treme* tells a story about post-Katrina New Orleans at a crucial moment – it begins three months after the storm – in a way that narratively blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, and such that specific characters stand in as metaphors for larger social forces, cultural practices, political and social realities. It demonstrates several phenomena that this

---

<sup>66</sup> The “second-line” is a reference to the group of people who follow behind musicians or the club that is sponsoring a parade, which is sometimes known as the “Main Line” or the “first line,” keeping the beat and constituting a throbbing, physical, and often spatially expansive extension of the music by way of dancing. It is at once a general description of any New Orleanian instance that reflects this arrangement of dancers following musicians, a verb (“to second-line” is to participate in this sort of parade, and/or to dance to the second-line beat), and the name of a specific type of parade that happens on Sunday afternoons in the city during eight or nine months out of the year, honoring a tradition that is centuries old. These Sunday parades nowadays are hosted by Social and Pleasure Clubs, contemporary offshoots of the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, or mutual aid societies, that have been a central aspect of Black New Orleanian life for well over a century. They can be described as giant rolling block parties where hundreds and sometimes thousands of people from a neighborhood or neighborhoods (usually the same historically black neighborhoods in the city from which the Mardi Gras Indian tribes hail) can catch up, see one another’s families, and party together; but they are also deeply spiritual and political demonstrations of presence and perseverance. While anniversary second-lines sponsored by S&P clubs and the second-lines that accompany jazz funerals are events that demand participation and exist for the benefit of the communities that emerge around the loss of a loved one or community leader or around the social club or the community in which the parade is held, other second-lines contain explicitly political commentary. These take place in public streets, where sympathetic outsiders may participate in solidarity, and antagonistic outsiders who find themselves present or hear of the parades are forced to witness the dissent that they offer.

<sup>67</sup> For instance, some of these names are the Guardians of the Flame, Yellow Pocahontas, the Creole Wild West, the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi Mandingo Warriors, the Golden Eagles, the Ninth Ward Hunters, the Wild Magnolias, and the Wild Tchoupitoulas.

chapter will take up in its analysis of how Mardi Gras Indian and second-line practices function as performative returns on their own terms, and how they function when mobilized and cited within others' performative returns. For instance, Simon and Overmyer provide a particularly well-researched example of a common rhetorical and representational move, whereby Mardi Gras Indians and second-line practices are mobilized at once as specific people and important cultural practices in themselves (and indeed, *Treme's* narrative reflects the fact that these groups provide and/or advocate for their own communities under the radar), *and* in order to stand in as metaphors or metonyms for larger processes of social change and flows of power. This move is made again and again by scholars and artists who have represented New Orleans in efforts to demonstrate to outsiders its uniqueness and importance and/or to expose the race- and class-based exclusionary practices that have resulted in the displacement and death of thousands of – often Black – New Orleanians. *Treme* foregrounds the ways that these practices are at once deployed by their practitioners as mechanisms to survive centuries of displacement and provide a safety net for their own in the face of the failure of any official one to catch them, *and* as mechanisms by which to offer and perform a public verdict on these failures, protesting and critiquing them and asserting their entitlement to resources and recognition. Through these strategies, the show speaks to many of the challenges facing New Orleans residents in the devastating aftermath of the storm – how deeply the problems are entrenched systemically, and how they impact everyone but especially those without access to official avenues of power. Simon, Overmyer, et al portray the street practices in *Treme* as, at once, possessing magical, genealogically potent qualities – which generate distinct affective and performative power – *and* as revealing the structural location of those who practice them, and thus the limits of these powers. At the same time, the appeal of their magical qualities, as well as the compelling, damning critique they enact, in turn lends the critique made by the show greater rhetorical power.

The previous chapter ends by discussing the creation of “freedom dreams” and the act of articulating difference – i.e. political opposition and/or/in response to a sense of ontological rupture, versus a more surface-level or aesthetic articulation of difference that masks structural inequality – as means of survival. These themes carry over into this chapter, which, too, is about how displaced and dehumanized Black Americans negotiate the terms of their dislocation. The act of creating a new whole from disparate and marginalized parts that Hartman describes at the close of *Lose Your Mother* is reflected in the popular notion that Southern Louisiana is some sort of defiant “gumbo,”<sup>68</sup> and is manifested in this context in the alternative infrastructures, revisionist histories, and critiques of the terms of reality that are created or leveled by Black New Orleanians. These enactments provide an example of how we might understand the concepts I discussed at length in chapter one – rupture, absence, and loss – to be generative. Where the Middle Passage functions for my interlocutors in the first chapter as either a hardship to be overcome, an episode of divine typology, or a deep ontological rupture that forecloses recognizable humanity, Mardi Gras Indian and second-line practices negotiate the terms of ongoing African-American dislocation and marginalization in New Orleans through self-consciously diasporic practices that articulate a fluid, agentic, and site-specific conception of origins and a political, ethical, and spiritual commitment to difference rather than assimilation.

---

<sup>68</sup> The idea of the “gumbo” is different from the melting pot or salad bowl; rather the components mingle and stew and bring out one another’s flavors. Additionally, each of the thickening agents that characterize gumbo originate from the major cultural groups who have influenced the region: okra from Africa, roux from France, and gumbo file (ground sassafras root) from local indigenous Americans.



In this chapter I unpack the frequently-invoked origin stories about Congo Square, Maroonage, the “birthplace of jazz,” and political and spiritual solidarity and resistance among oppressed people that animate Mardi Gras Indian masking and second-line parading traditions. The origins articulated within these self-consciously Afrocentric performances are about loss, absence, and violence; about retention and invention, creating something new; and about being embattled and oppositional. They provide, at once, narrative proof of the right not to be excluded, *and* narrative proof of having always been excluded, and therefore provide the terms of critique: namely, of the delusional and narcissistic white supremacist fantasy that has come to pass for reality and has garnered the power and clout to arbitrate the terms of others’ realities.

The narrative of origins thus provides the fodder, as well as the blueprint, for resistance – a long genealogy of it – as well as the evidence of its ongoing necessity. And the public articulations of these origins perform a rigorous structural analysis of power in the face of the failures of civil society, through mechanisms whose form and critiques, I posit, are similar to the literary genre of magical realism. Such “magical realist” operations offer a way to replicate some formal or recognizable aspects of reality while also exceeding and critiquing it: denaturalizing it and calling attention to what is unsettling, uncanny, super-natural, or unjust about it. I also posit that J.L. Austin’s notion of felicitousness helps us understand the ways these performances successfully arbitrate the terms of reality on one scale, while on another larger one, are circumscribed by state violence, white supremacy and the specter of slavery, entrenched power structures, and a broken infrastructure. I employ this framework to examine the origin myths that circulate through these practices, and the ways that the practices and their semiotic resonances are appropriated by both insiders and outsiders to conjure up certain effects.

\* \* \*

Public manifestations of Indian masking and second-lines are able to accomplish something very different from and complimentary to what other, more apparently efficacious, forms of organizing or structural change can do. This is so on account of the critiques that these practices launch, of the ways they make themselves at once publicly accessible (and therefore available for interpretation and appropriation), *and* difficult to fully know, impossible to contain. It is so, too, on account of the ways such practices speak at once to concrete and empirical facts of historical, economic, and sociological import, *and* to what is at stake in these facts, for those who live them.

In an article revealingly titled “Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals,” anthropologist and long-time New Orleans resident Helen Regis states that although there are “stunning visual elements” – “ostrich plume fans dancing through the air; vibrant, color-coordinated lineups of club members in purple silk suits; the diamond-studded tiara of the queen riding in her Rolls Royce convertible, raising her glass to the admiring crowd” – the second-lines cannot be known visually to be fully apprehended: they must be experienced bodily.<sup>69</sup> She cites the way that moving through a neighborhood with which she was unfamiliar during a second-line educated her about the place, its social

---

<sup>69</sup> Helen A. Regis, “Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14.4 (1999): 472-504. Joel Dinerstein also writes: “Participation is the rule – not spectating or just walking – although often that is what people do. On larger second lines [...] the mass of people extends for a third of a mile; on smaller ones, for two blocks or so. [...] [I]f you want to be near the band, you need to dance or get out of the way. On occasion, an aggressive chant by older black men can sometimes be heard: ‘If you aint gonna roll/ if you ain’t gonna roll/ get the *fuck on* ... out of the way.’” Joel Dinerstein, “Second Lining Post-Katrina: Learning Community from the Prince of Wales Social Aid and Pleasure Club,” *American Quarterly* 61.3 (2009): 615-637.

structure, its significant nodes. I can vividly recall the first second-line I attended, expecting that I was going to observe a parade, and being called out and indeed moved from the sidewalk by the swell of bodies moving rhythmically. It is a kind of social, physical, and spiritual communion to move with hundreds of other people through a city and interact verbally and through dancing with them and with the space, colonizing major boulevards and stopping traffic that likely consists of many drivers who benefit from the racism and classism that the existence of these groups and parades work to resist. And coming to understand some of the political and spiritual aspects of a second-line through bodily knowing is, of course, far different from being a member of one of the social and pleasure clubs that put them on. As an outsider to Indian culture, many of whose participants plainly state that no one outside of it can know anything but the very surface about what it means, I suspect the analog might be that without being a member of a tribe, engaging in the lengthy, meditative, and costly process of sewing a suit each year or assisting with other members' suits, practicing on Sunday nights, masking in the streets, and other phenomena central to its operation – that is, without engaging in the demanding and secretive spiritual, physical, musical, and communal aspects of the culture – it too is unknowable. Many would say: as it should be.

These facts are crucial to distinguishing between the ways that these practices operate as internally-oriented survival mechanisms and spiritual practices, and how they function as critiques and public practices. In the former, performance is an action undertaken as a way of knowing. In the latter, performance is an act being done before an audience. The “performative” in the performative returns under consideration in this chapter manifests itself in a variety of ways – from performance traditions to a consideration of performativity, felicitousness, and worldmaking. Explicitly performative genres (i.e. music, dancing, parading, drumming, masking, and publicly embodying and performing fictional roles of warriors, Indians, royalty, etc), often in combination with one another, play a particularly significant role in a wide variety of public practices that emerge from histories of performing ownership of certain neighborhoods, streets, histories, traditions, cultures, and power relationships. They also, almost without exception, evince an uncanny and somewhat magical relationship to temporality – that is, to history, ancestry, and death – that is cyclical, “re”-oriented;<sup>70</sup> perpetually engendering references to, and representations and invocations of, one’s ancestors – that is, to one’s family’s, culture’s, genre’s, or tradition’s forebears.

Against the backdrop of a haunted, crumbling, and beleaguered city, these colorful, often bawdy, sometimes playful, and frequently eerie or even threatening displays (giant feathery beings covered in exquisite beadwork appearing out of the darkness, or a parade of thousands of people, including brilliantly dancing club members in matching colorful suits waving feathered and ribboned fans and lanterns and umbrellas, whose participants use as their ground the pavement, cemetery mausoleums, and rooftops alike) appear to be nothing short of magical: they invert what we might think of as reality, calling reality’s ostensible boundaries and tenets sharply into question.<sup>71</sup> I invoke the term “magic” very intentionally. In both psychology and literature there exist notions of the magical – “magical thinking” and “magical

---

<sup>70</sup> I am referring to terms like *rebirth*, *renew*, and *rebuild* that have been bandied about post-Katrina, but also the prevalence of repetition with revision in the context of local rituals, traditions, notions of inheritance, and genealogical enactments such as Mardi Gras Indian traditions passed along within families and neighborhoods, dynasties or generations of family members active in music, politics, tribes, carnival krewes, etc.

<sup>71</sup> To some extent and in some manifestations, “magic” in New Orleans is conjured for escapist ends (the notion of Mardi Gras generally, especially all of the craziness of “official” Mardi Gras, the krewe parades, or the year-round debauchery of Bourbon Street) and putting reality on hold is part of what makes survival in a hostile world possible. However, reality often is inescapable, pressing down hard on people even though it does not make sense, particularly the profound injustice that structures many people’s lives, and particularly along racial and class lines.

realism,” respectively – that constitute, to various ends, narrative interventions into reality. The heart of my theorization in this chapter brings these engagements with magic into conversation with one another and with the notion of felicitousness drawn from J.L. Austin’s writing on performative speech acts. This chapter considers power – namely, the power to arbitrate the terms of one’s own reality and the realities of other people, which is to say, the power to render circumstances and acts felicitous or legitimate – and its relationship to “magic” and to “reality.” Certain qualities of magical realism illuminate some of the ways in which the street practices present themselves as performative returns – and make themselves available for others to appropriate into their own performative returns. The magical displays of the Africanist street performances conjure up – that is, they make visible and manifest – alternative realities. They re-place displaced parties at the center of the historical and political narrative, privileging the narrative of their displacement rather than one of transcendence. These performative returns denaturalize the legitimacy of this reality and replace the implied racist and complacent origins that underlie it with an alternative ensemble. Additionally, the slipperiness of temporality that is often characteristic of magical realism permits the returns to various origins, real and imagined; and the privileging of the “folkloric” that is often implied or employed in magical realist representations, and that is also an important part of the visual rhetoric and the autochthonous/diasporic claims, forms a type of performative return in the ways that it mobilizes the desires, language, and specter of the myth of authenticity.

This chapter will attend to some of the ways that New Orleans street traditions work as a critique and public practice, both in terms of the ways the participants stage themselves for public apprehension and the ways in which they are staged by others. Analyzing these performances *as public practices* reveals how the cultural bearers curate and control the ways they are apprehensible to audiences of insiders and both sympathetic and antagonistic outsiders. This in turn puts up a barrier that renders complete knowability by outsiders impossible, while employing a vocabulary and practice that makes the appearance of these performances extremely appealing – thus producing a pedagogical or instructive display that makes visible and legible the terms of critique. I argue that the magical and magical realist qualities of the street practices are part of what enable them to enact the critique of two interlinked things: first, the literal, physical, empirical facts of displacement, racism, poverty, the prison industrial complex, a broken infrastructure, and other manifestations of the structures of antiblackness in contemporary New Orleans and the U.S.; and second, the terms on which reality is based – the white supremacist and capitalist fantasy that undergirds these facts.

I acknowledge that there may appear to be an awkward ill-fit, or even a kind of etic ethnocentrism,<sup>72</sup> implicit in speaking about the street traditions in relation to their putatively “magical” qualities or to magical realism, as opposed to using a term that emerges, emically, from them. Therefore it is important to clarify several points from the start: first, I am not categorizing the traditions *as* magical realism, in some sort of generic or ontological sense; rather, I am employing the critical framework of the genre in order to theorize some of the ways in which the street practices produce meaning to onlookers. This brings me to my second point: that this chapter deals quite specifically with how the practices function as public and pedagogical displays – as *performances*, which derive their power from from their *performative* and citational qualities – rather than focusing on their secret and spiritual aspects. My study elaborates on the citational elements of public street performances that are evident to those in

---

<sup>72</sup> For instance, Toni Morrison has famously rejected the genre as a description of her work; see also Wendy Faris, “The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism,” *Janus Head* 5.2 (2002): 101-119.

the know, then turns to consider how these practices function for their own stakeholders while interfacing with and negotiating displacement and appropriation, and finally moves to the ways they are appropriated and flipped by outsiders. This trajectory, in turn, moves from an engagement, in parts one and two, with the question of what blackness means for (some) black folks, to an engagement, in part three, with that of what interpretations of blackness mean for (some) white folks. As I will demonstrate, several key narratives – of Congo Square, diasporic retention and invention, and black self-determination amid an ongoing barrage of racist efforts at annihilation – are the basis of the political, ethical, and spiritual framework of those engaged in practicing and preserving the street traditions. But these powerful messages – and the site-specificity of the origins that are articulated – makes these practices seem both attractive and relevant to others, which engenders their appropriation as aesthetic or ethnographic objects, and/or as metaphors in narratives of social and structural injustice within representational practices that (especially post-Katrina) have goals of social justice and critical analysis, though sometimes miss their mark. It is important to me to note, too, that it is an ethical position not to reveal people’s secrets, but rather to attempt to work through the question of why and how the public manifestations of these traditions are so widely appealing – historically and in the present – that they have been recruited into symbolic cartographies well beyond the threshold of their own control.

Part of my interpretation of what the street performances are citing and what other practices cite them was influenced by the archival record: upon spending several months at the Amistad Research Center casting a wide net to search for issues relevant to Black New Orleans and its history of resistance, and to its dazzling street performance traditions, I found them interlinked, converging in particular in response to urban restructuring and ongoing histories of displacement. I found them intertwined, too, during the course of participant observation since the beginning of 2009, especially concentrated between February and May of that year, but also ongoing and year-round. This bundle of associations is, in my interpretation, intimately and persistently linked, and is difficult to disassociate, too, from the ideas of freedom and Black suffering and redemption that are imposed by the “third line” of documentarians, scholars, and artists about whom I write, whom I by turns admire and criticize, and of which I, like it or not, am one. The striking nature of this combination of self-identified and imposed meanings, which produce a feedback loop of influence and interpretive resonance, explains the disparity of my sources, which include archival sources and accounts of people speaking for themselves, a prevalence of white scholars speaking about and sometimes attempting to speak *for* Black New Orleanians, a feedback loop of secondary sources that often cite one another, and my own ethnographic eye/I.

The street practices invoke authenticity, grievance, and resistance: the twinned genealogical claim on autochthonous and diasporic<sup>73</sup> legitimacy that maintains a memory of violent displacement as well as of belonging. When performed by the communities themselves, this move references or performatively returns to Africa and the Caribbean, to idealized moments in the past, such as the flourishing of American Indian, Creole, or Latin cultures, and to a traumatic genealogy from slavery and genocide to twentieth and twenty-first century displacement, ethnic cleansing, and white supremacy. That is, the distant past is invoked or

---

<sup>73</sup> Roach writes: “By performance of origin I mean the reenactment of foundation myths along two general axes of possibility: the diasporic, which features migration, and the autochthonous, which claims indigenous roots deeper than memory itself. These myths may coexist or compete within the same tradition; indeed, they often do. [...] As evocations of the past, both myths of origin – the diasporic and the autochthonous – also suggest alternatives for the future” (42-43).

performatively returned to in the name of structural analyses and a social justice agenda. These references are echoed and made explicit by those such as David Simon and many scholars who are engaged in social, political, and cultural analysis, while also standing in for the travails of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and for the operations of racism and poverty in general. That is, in the social-justice-oriented representations that sweep up Black New Orleanian street traditions as metaphors, the reference point gets larger, and the focus is less on the “return” to a diasporic past and more on the importance of culture and/or on the ways that those who invoke it are situated structurally in a contemporary racialized urban landscape. In the case of the endeavors that recruit these practices in order to display and celebrate their aesthetic qualities, such as Jazz Fest and Prospect.1, the street traditions’ foreignness *and* locality, as well as an imagined temporal distance, are foregrounded as the Indian and second-line practices are rendered ethnographic and art objects, while their critical edge remains obscured to greater or lesser degrees. As the representations fragment and decontextualize the street practices from the terms of their critique and/or from the neighborhoods in which they serve a community function, the power of these practices and of their practitioners is sapped, and the felicitousness of the performative is threatened.

The way that the Mardi Gras Indians are situated in contemporary New Orleans reveals how reality is at once slippery and malleable, subject to spiritual and imaginative transformation, *and* is hard and fast, reinforced by laws, infrastructures, and the threat of violence. I posit that one can understand this tension and the ways that it is negotiated on the ground through a framework of the “magical” and of “felicitousness” and the interplay between them. The framework of felicitousness also demands the question: who gets to call the shots – the state and dominant culture, or the people on the ground? What makes a given situation felicitous? When these men become chiefs in the eyes of so many people, there’s a not insignificant transformation of how race, class, and status are articulated; yet they are hounded by the police and deprived of access to their homes and to the safety net on one hand, and exoticized and misrepresented by people who mean them well on the other. The notion of felicitousness raises questions of efficacy, resistance, and domination: in what contexts do words become acts and do those inhabiting social roles become agents of change? What makes a context felicitous or infelicitous; and if a context provides the potential for an act to be rendered felicitous, are all acts and actors granted the same access to the power and precedent that makes it so? Allison “Tootie” Montana was the Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, known as the “Chief of Chiefs”: profoundly respected, he was not only a leader in his community and a descendent of the Big Chief of the first Mardi Gras Indian tribe that is known and named, but an unusually brilliant artist – indeed the recipient of an NEA National Heritage Fellowship in 1987. But he died of a heart attack on the floor of the city council chamber just one month before Katrina; he was there to protest the police department’s ongoing violent harassment of Mardi Gras Indians. In what ways do Big Chief Tootie Montana’s chieftaincy count when the police raise their billy clubs against his tribe, and his power cannot protect them? In what ways does it matter if community leaders create even the most admirable infrastructures under the radar when they are enmeshed in larger structures that leave them and their constituents behind?

### genealogies

In this section I present and contextualize the Mardi Gras Indian masking itself, as it occurs in the streets, and lay out the terms of the origin myths that underlie its performative returns. I begin by providing what appears to be some history about New Orleans and the emergence of these practices. That is: I discuss some of New Orleans’s affinities with the

Caribbean, and with Afro/-Caribbean diasporic retentions, especially as they emerge through the myth and history of Congo Square, and I situate Black New Orleans – providing an overview of the significance of several historic black neighborhoods and of the contours of New Orleans’s tradition of black self-determination, political activism, and cultural and artistic innovation in the nineteenth- and early-to-mid-twentieth-century – eventually turning to address some of the white supremacist practices and beliefs that seek to undermine the legitimacy of these origin narratives and the street practices that cite them. However, this apparent history is in fact an excavation of what is cited by, or embedded within, the Mardi Gras Indian street performances, rather than something ancillary to them, and in order to evoke this embeddedness I provide in this section the through-line of an analysis of the work of Tamborine and Fan, Tootie Montana and Jerome Smith, and several specific parades. I should pause to clarify again that this embeddedness is my interpretation of Indian street performances: there is a bundle of associations (made by things that practitioners say and do in various contexts, and by ways that the practices are represented in the archival record and in historical analyses) that include all of the histories that I lay out here, but the street practices do not always explicitly or literally refer to all of the elements of this history.

However, such a reading-between-the-lines or a looking-in-the-negative-spaces of the street performances is necessary because the histories I present here give the street practices their meaning as well as their *power to make things happen*. And as we shall see when I discuss various representations of these street performances in the following sections, the power that these performances muster is intimately linked to how strongly situated they are in, versus how fragmented or displaced they are from, their geographic and historical context. The discussions in this section build to an elaboration on the street performances’ magical realist qualities, and the modes of critique they offer. This section deals specifically with what blackness accomplishes for black people, on their own terms, and suggests that the particular genealogy and narrative of blackness that the street performances theorize is at once 1) powerful discursive, experiential, and cultural fodder for black people’s survival, and 2) the primary threat to their survival from outsiders.

Tamborine & Fan (T&F), an organization created by community organizer and civil rights leader Jerome Smith and Big Chief Tootie Montana, was and is an important vehicle for cultural preservation; it created opportunities for young people to be involved in constructive activities that included sports and, as part of one of the primary missions of the organization, the transmission of and participation in the African American performance traditions of Mardi Gras Indian masking, second-line, and brass band music. T&F has organized a second line club, the Bucket Men, and inaugurated an intertribal St. Joseph’s Day parade, whereby many of the Indian tribes come together (now in daylight hours on the Sunday nearest St. Joseph’s Day, though originally on St. Joseph’s Night itself) to display the artistry of their suits and their prowess as performers to one another and to the greater community. On the day of the Uptown parade in 2009, hundreds of people (mostly black, some white) crowded the neutral ground and applauded (and in many cases photographed) the Indians, who traversed the street together by tribe, performing their roles of Chief, Queen, Spyboy, or Wildman. In the parade, in full regalia, were able-bodied adults but also small children, some of the latter riding in a wagon decorated with feathers, and even an old man in an electric wheelchair, which was bedecked with the apron and crown to incorporate it into the suit. Because it was broad daylight and the Indians were in close viewing range to the adoring crowd, the splendor and detail of the suits was plainly visible, and indeed, in the words of Joseph Roach, “heart-stoppingly beautiful”: there were intricate abstract designs, suits crafted to resemble or depict

eagles and peacocks or other birds, patches depicting figurative imagery, especially scenes featuring American Indians, and Afro-centric suits with shorter feathers, raffia, geometric beadwork, and masks over their faces.<sup>74</sup> The latter suits, created by Big Chief Victor Harris and the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi, were animated by his and several tribe members' controlled and rhythmic movements which interpreted African ritual dances instead of the plains Indian warrior personae that many tribes interpret in their movements.

In an interview with Tom Dent in 1986, Smith describes both the difficulty of bringing the tribes together, and his sense of the imperative in doing so:

I started [trying to bring all of the different tribes together to meet as a group and eventually to parade] in 19...60. '60, '61. And I got them together around 1970-something. [...] And it took a lot of hassles, a lot of confusion. First you had to, sort of, reduce the hostility. [...] And um, then you have to speak to a higher commitment. And my thing was, we had obligations, we had obligations to the children, of all the neighborhoods, so they could see us come together. And the different neighborhoods could look into the creativity of the other neighborhoods.<sup>75</sup>

Certainly, the parade functions as an opportunity to impress upon youngsters the desirability and significance of participating in these traditions themselves. But if Smith and Montana's investment is in cultural preservation and transmission, what exactly is being preserved? For whom, and why? It is not only the moves, costuming traditions, and rituals that are being transmitted, but a much more complex semiotic web: the street performances contain an important affirmation of the value of these traditions in terms of their exceptional beauty and artistry, an affirmation of them as political assertions of collectivity in the face of a longstanding struggle against antiblackness, violence, and displacement, and the assertion of an ethic of "won't bow, don't know how." I believe that the genealogies that these practices cite are an integral part of what they mean and how they operate, and that "persistence" or "retention" has as much to do with this history of struggle as it does with a narrative of temporal and spatial transcendence.

Mardi Gras Indian masking is at once a practice that has resonances with other circum-Atlantic and circum-Caribbean performance cultures, and a practice that emerges from specifically North American and Southern Louisianan circumstances. Most accounts of Mardi Gras Indian origins refer to a long history of Black New Orleanian costumes that feature feathers and Indian iconography. The years of 1884-1886 saw a number of Wild West Shows visiting New Orleans, most famously the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, and Michael P. Smith points to the links between the Plains Indians imagery, the names of tribes, and the oral histories of New Orleanian Black Indians with the moment of these events.<sup>76</sup> However, as

---

<sup>74</sup> Although the enactment of the Indians' street tradition is referred to as "masking," The Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi is the only group whose members' Afro-centric suits cover their faces: traditionally the suits cover virtually every part of the body *but* the face.

<sup>75</sup> Audiocassette, "Jerome Smith on St. Joseph's Day, 2.21.86. Tom Dent Collection. Amistad Research Center.

<sup>76</sup> See Smith, Michael P. *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994). See also Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Smith writes: "Shortly after the Civil War hundreds of freed slaves had been enlisted in New Orleans to join the U.S. Ninth Cavalry Regiment (the 'Buffalo Soldiers') and were shipped West to fight the Plains Indians. Many of these soldiers returned to New Orleans in later years, some probably as cowboys and roustabouts employed by the numerous Wild West shows and carnivals then circulating through the South. Blacks working in these shows would have become friends with the Plains Indians, and both would have communicated their experiences to each

Breunlin and Lewis point out, most Indians and a number of documented events also speak to the fact that feathers and Indian imagery were in play long before; Breunlin cites the *Acts and Records of the Cabildo* from 1791, which includes a prohibition during carnival season of, among other things, “all kinds of masking” and “the wearing of feathers” by “the negroes.”<sup>77</sup> As Robert Farris Thompson and others have amply documented, the proliferation of West African performance traditions throughout the Americas on account of the transatlantic slave trade resulted in a great many syncretic cultural practices that share characteristics with one another and with practices in West Africa, particularly in those places where concentrations of Africans from the same region were located.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the centuries-long tradition of Indian imagery and feathery costumes in New Orleans’ Black performance traditions is generally discussed by both Indians and scholars in relation to the extensive interculturalism between local indigenous people and people of African descent in Southern Louisiana, as well as in the diasporic connections to others in the Caribbean and in West Africa who employ Indian iconography in their performance and ritual. Black Indian masking traditions are found throughout the hemisphere and some are as old as the colonization of the Caribbean; “[t]he hybrid masking tradition seems to be both a continuation of Old World African traditions and a natural merging of native African and Native American masking traditions.”<sup>79</sup> For instance, the beadwork resembles that found among Yoruba people in Nigeria as well as that found throughout the Caribbean, including in Haitian Rara festivals, some of which honor the Tainos genocided by Columbus, and in Afro-Trinidadian carnival practices honoring the Lakota leader Black Elk.<sup>80</sup> Smith synthesizes the range of this phenomenon:

*Escolas de samba* and *capoeira* in the Brazilian Nordeste, the Haitian *Rara* celebration, the *Canboulet*, *JuJu Warriors*, and *Black Indians* of the nineteenth-century Jambou Carnival in Trinidad, the *Jonkonnu* or *John Canoe* celebration in the West Indies, the *Sociedad de los Congos* in Panama, the *Rumberos* and *Abakua* groups in the Cuban ports, the *Garifuna de Honduras*, the sport called *l’agya* in Martinique, as well as the Cuban *Cabildo* groups all share with the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans features preserving African ethnic identity and culture. These African-American [sic] societies all have antecedents in the tribal music and culture of West Africa, such as found in the Mokolo and Jola dances, the Mandingo [sic] “Jambabongo” and Aku groups, and Fula processions, for example [...].<sup>81</sup>

---

other and, in turn, to underclass black and Indian populations in each community visited. Army experience on the Western frontier would have hardened the Indians’ and blacks’ perceptions of what might be expected from ‘American’ rule. Both might well have concluded that only through joining forces was there any hope for freedom. [...] The New Orleans 1885 Mardi Gras was extraordinary. On the streets were large numbers of international visitors connected with the [World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial] Exposition, several Central American Indian groups, and some fifty to sixty Plains Indians from the Wild West Show, including four chiefs, all of whom were likely on the street in their native dress. [...] The oral history of present-day Mardi Gras Indian gangs begins at just about that time. The first such gang normally considered to be in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition was named the “Creole Wild West” – presumably after the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. This gang is said to have been founded sometime around 1885 by Becate Batiste, a Seventh Ward Creole of African, French, and Choctaw descent (Berry, Foose, and Jones, 211)” (Smith 1994: 95-97).

<sup>77</sup> Breunlin, Rachel, Ronald Lewis, and Helen A. Regis. *The House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum by Ronald W. Lewis*. (New Orleans: UNO Press for the Neighborhood Story Project, 2009), 66.

<sup>78</sup> See Berry, Foose, and Jones 2009, Evans 2011, J. Johnson 1995, Midlo-Hall 1995, Roach 1996, M. Smith 1994, Sublette 2008, and Thompson 1983, among many others.

<sup>79</sup> M. Smith 1994: 108.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid* 66.

<sup>81</sup> Smith 1994: 108.



Michael P. Smith and Ned Sublette have each also written on the significance of the circum-Caribbean and Latin American trade routes, which included New Orleans, up through the twentieth century in engendering “considerable cultural cross-fertilization, or reinforcement of African heritages”; Cuba was of particular import as a lynchpin in genealogies of musical performance until it was cut off from American trade routes during the Castro regime.<sup>82</sup>

It is apparent when witnessing Indians masking in the streets and examining the narratives surrounding it that any individual person or tribe is citing a range of origins and narratives on a continuum of scales simultaneously: although many tribes’ suits have traditionally cited American Indians through the images they depict as well as through the shape of the headdresses and other features, others – notably Big Chief Victor Harris and The Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi – quite self-consciously cite indigenous African ritual and imagery in the way they design their suits and perform on the street. I have also seen Afro-centric designs that include literal fashionings of things like the pyramids and sphinx at Giza. Many suits include references to contemporary and historical events on personal and global scales: patches with portraits of loved ones who have passed; panels depicting the Middle Passage and a scene of the Ku Klux Klan lynching a black man.

But additionally, as Rachel Breunlin, who runs the Neighborhood Story Project<sup>83</sup> and is also an ethnographer, writes in the introduction to the chapter on Mardi Gras Indians in *The House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum* by Ronald W. Lewis,

When asked about their history, most Mardi Gras Indians agree that they are honoring Indians for their resistance to U.S. invasion, their support of African Americans, and their ability to hold onto their culture under policies of forced assimilation. In beaded patches, many of the images tell stories of Native American history that often have a secondary, most contemporary meaning for indigenous and African American struggles. For instance, Alonzo Moore, Wildman of the Ninth Ward Navajo, beaded an American Indian praying on top of a mountain as part of his 2006 suit to symbolize his hope that people would come home after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>84</sup>

That is, as much as the New Orleanian practices are situated in larger global and diasporic traditions, they are also deeply local. For instance, while there is some similarity in dress style across tribes (if you ran across a Black Indian in full costume in the street, it would be impossible to misrecognize him as such), the multiplicity of meanings and the site-specific nature of the tradition is revealed by comparing individual tribes’ own costuming traditions and styles. Historically, Uptown tribes created suits with figurative imagery – beaded patches featuring pictures (i.e. of people, objects, and scenes, especially involving Native American warriors) – while Downtown tribes created suits with abstract designs. Although this is no longer a hard and fast rule, and indeed specific skills, techniques, and styles of beading are often

---

<sup>82</sup> Smith 1994:106. See also pgs 106-108, as well as Sublette 2007 and 2008.

<sup>83</sup> The Neighborhood Story Project is a non-profit organization that publishes books that are written by New Orleanians and/or based on oral histories that they collect. There is a series centered around different neighborhoods, some that are based on the histories of certain second-line organizations, some that are created by high school students and are thematically based, and recently they have published an exhibition catalogue for Ronald Lewis’s museum in the Lower Ninth Ward, *The House of Dance and Feathers*, which is dedicated to second-line, Black Indian, and other neighborhood traditions. This catalogue is filled with photographs, oral histories, and essays written by Ronald Lewis, Rachel Bruenlin, and anthropologist/community activist Helen Regis.

<sup>84</sup> Rachel Breunlin, “Introduction: Mardi Gras Indians,” in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009: 66.

passed along within a tribe and generationally,<sup>85</sup> this level of specificity demonstrates just how small the scale of “local” can be. Many of the tribes are named for neighborhoods or local landmarks – the Ninth Ward Hunters and Seventh Ward Hunters, the Wild Tchoupitoulas (the name of a main street in the city, which was named, in turn, for a local indigenous group), or a tribe Tootie Montana once led in the 1940s, the Monogram Hunters. He explains:

Before I turn into Yellow Pocahontas, [...] I masked one year as an Eighth Ward Hunter [...], and then from the Eighth Ward I created another tribe, which was the Monogram Hunters, and we used that name because of the Monogram Wine, you remember we used to have the Monogram Wine [...], that place on Lafitte and Claiborne was their warehouse, so like my daddy used to tell us, said, why are you calling yourselves the Monogram, that ain't no Indian name; that's a wine name. So we had an open house one Sunday, fact all the customers, all the people was passing their opinion. So like a good friend of mine, who is dead now, he told me, said, you know look, your daddy used to be a Pocahontas, he said, but you, the Monogram Hunters, that's something you create, you don't destroy what you create, he said, cause Yellow Pocahontas, somebody else created that, and that's true. Said, The Monogram Hunters, if you be dead and gone, and all the Monogram Hunters be out there, you're still in your grave be getting credit for the Monogram Hunters.<sup>86</sup>

Later Montana switched to the Yellow Pocahontas, but I interpret this explanation of the creation of his own group to speak both to a tension in the genealogical aspect of the tradition between passing down and preserving particular styles and group names, and distinguishing oneself from one's forebears; and to the significant role of an individual neighborhood – its landmarks and its community – in influencing the way in which a given tribe operates. Additionally, at the same time that the abstract designs on Montana's suits reflect his particular artistic philosophy, which is grounded in valuing individual invention and creativity,<sup>87</sup> they reflect the skills that he honed through his profession as a plasterer and lather, trades that were at once accessible and respectable within the racist structures in which he and his forebears came of age. The spatial, geometrical, and sculptural skills that he put to use on his suits in a similar way that he put them to use on the houses on which he worked reflect the particular possibilities and restrictions that circumscribed his and his family's experience as African American Creoles of Color in New Orleans. Local-ness matters because it stakes a claim on belonging, asserting that Africans and their descendents have been in the New World, in New Orleans, and in the neighborhood for a long time, which constitutes an important element of a critique of displacement.

But perhaps the most significant element in the panoply of origin narratives of the Black street performance traditions is Congo Square. In an interview through the Tremé Oral History Project in 1993, Ronald Chisom, the co-founder of the Tremé Community Improvement Association, and later the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB), entities devoted to organizing New Orleans communities and training organizers nation-wide in anti-racist analysis and action, cites the music, the street traditions, and – crucially – the origins to which they refer as being the *raison d'être* and lifeblood of many New Orleanians:

---

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>86</sup> Tape #38, labeled “Toudy Montana I 3/11/84”

<sup>87</sup> Amistad Research Center, Jazz and Heritage Oral History Collection, Interviews with Alcide “Toudy” Montana, Beginning February 5, 1984, Tape #42, labeled “Toudy Montana I – 2-5-84”

I think the music and a lot of other things that come with the music, the music is one part of the culture that kept people alive, culture is a way of life and culture is also for survival – music is survival in the midst of all the oppression coming down on people. That’s why Tremé is one of the most significant black communities in the city, and in the country. [...] It’s more of a beat that’s in us. They blew us people away [...] [but] it’s a beat that keeps us connected. That’s why Congo Square is so important: Congo Square kept us connected to Africa. New Orleans was the only city in the United States where drumming was allowed – people who were slaves here were drumming on Sunday; in every other state it was outlawed. So that’s why keeping us connected to Africa, the music keeps us connected, the Congo Square thing, the Tremé thing, the Caribbean, voodoo, friends of dance – it’s the beat, the movement keeps us alive. That’s why when you see second line, people dancing in the street, dancing all over cars and all that, [...] you’re getting something from it.<sup>88</sup>

“Congo Square” – a term I use to refer to both the actual exchanges that occurred within the eponymous physical space which today is understood as more or less sacred ground, as well as the convergence of cultural, social, political, and legal forces that enabled it to exist in the ways it did – is a significant part of why New Orleans can be credited with being “the most African city in the United States,” as Gwendolyn Midlo-Hall called it, or the “cradle of jazz”: it allowed for the perpetuation – and revision under new circumstances, with new circumscriptions and new resources – of African and Afro-Caribbean practices in New Orleans, some of which would remain fairly isolated within the city and surrounding region, some of which would then spread throughout the U.S. with the musical styles that emerged from it. The circumstances that enabled Congo Square, which was unique in the United States, to emerge included several factors. First, Louisiana’s French and Spanish colonial period,<sup>89</sup> during which New Orleans developed in similar fashion to, and established mutual influence with, other colonial Caribbean cities, especially in Cuba and Haiti.<sup>90</sup> This colonial past also means that New Orleans and Southern Louisiana inherited such unique cultural and legal practices as Catholicism and the Code Noir. Secondly, these colonial factors in addition to the city’s geographic location meant that New Orleans saw several strong waves of Africanization between 1719 and 1810. These instances entailed large groups of Africans or African-descended people from the same region settling in the New Orleans area at once; these groups shared – and retained and subsequently disseminated – similar cultural practices. Such a situation stands in sharp contrast to the more typical situation in the U.S., whereby enslaved Africans usually found themselves separated

---

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Ronald Chisom, conducted September 23, 1993 by Cheryl Kramer, Tremé Oral History Collection, Amistad Research Center.

<sup>89</sup> Louisiana, specifically a site seventy miles downriver from New Orleans, was first settled by Europeans on Mardi Gras Day of 1699; it was a French colony until 1762, then a Spanish one until 1800; then French again briefly before being sold to the United States.

<sup>90</sup> Ned Sublette writes: “During the years when the Spanish governor of Louisiana reported to the Spanish captain general of Cuba, the rules in New Orleans regarding slaves were much like those in Havana. There was a large population of free people of color. Slaves were treated badly, but enslaved people had some liberties – most important, they had the right to purchase their freedom. That was more than black New Orleanians had before, and more than enslaved people in the United States would have. [...] As New Orleans grew, it would do the same [as Havana had], inhaling and exhaling music [...]. [It was] a valve through which commerce and culture entered into and embarked from the United States,” (Sublette 2008: 5). See also Gill 1997, J. Johnson, Midlo-Hall, Roach, Sublette, etc.

from others from their region or cultural group.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, the emergence of Congo Square was stimulated by a longstanding practice of intercultural exchange and intermarrying between the indigenous people of Louisiana and the settlers, including the trade and cultural expression that occurred at the marketplace that would become known as Congo Square. However, in spite of the formative nature of the region's colonial foundation, the Louisiana purchase came to pass, and the American era began insidiously for the region's black denizens, both free and enslaved. Beginning in 1806 a series of new regulations were put in place to rearticulate the operations of slavery and to restrict the movement and rights of all blacks in the territory. And yet, in spite of the crackdown, and in spite of the fear of insurrection that was fueled by the influx of Haitian refugees and the 1811 slave revolt just north of New Orleans, the largest in the United States,<sup>92</sup> New Orleans continued – from the 1730s or sooner up through 1835, and on and off until 1851 – to harbor an opportunity for enslaved black residents to gather on Sundays, in a swampy open area near the cemetery, outside of the city's ramparts.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of Congo Square. Joseph Roach describes it as “the only plot of ground where slaves could act as if they were free to remember who they were.”<sup>93</sup> It was ostensibly a sort of unofficial public marketplace where slaves could sell produce and other goods on Sundays, the holy day: under the 1724 Code Noir, slave owners were required to baptize their slaves as Catholics, and as Catholics, they were required to “strictly observe” “Sundays and holidays” – indeed, “all negroes found to be at work on these days [were] to be confiscated.”<sup>94</sup> This provision “was interpreted (or ignored) to allow the

---

<sup>91</sup> As the city and surrounding territory was switching hands as colonial regimes changed, these changes inaugurated not only different rules, languages, and customs, but also different influxes of African and Afro-Caribbean people, each bringing their own skills, languages, religions, customs, and musical practices, and contributing to a significantly black population. During French colonial rule, twenty-three slave ships brought a total of 5,951 slaves primarily from Senegambia; during the Spanish reign, the largest numbers (the details of which are disputed) came from the Kongo-Angola region; when the United States was virtually given the Louisiana territory by Napoleon – who was eager to be rid of it at a low price in 1803 given the recent Haitian Revolution, which overthrew his rule – Anglo Americans brought American-born slaves from elsewhere in the South, many of whom were Protestant, in contrast to the primarily Catholic Creole population. And approximately 10,000 free people of color and white refugees from Santo Domingo arrived with their slaves in tow between 1803 and 1810. This latter wave infused the city with, among other things, a drastically-increased Francophone population, a new group of reactionary slaveholding whites, and a rekindled anxiety over the possibility of slave insurrection. See Gill, Midlo-Hall, Sublette.

<sup>92</sup> While insurrection was a fear that had haunted planters and slaveowners throughout the years of slavery, it became particularly strong in the wake of the Haitian Revolution's success. And indeed, the example was a powerful one; the largest slave uprising in the United States (which, in historical accounts, has not even been graced with a name), occurred upriver from New Orleans in 1811. The uprising, led by Charles Deslondes, involved between 150 and 500 slaves who, assisted by maroons living in nearby swamps, managed to wound the owner of the plantation on which Deslondes was enslaved, kill the owner's son, and seize weapons; they then headed along the river toward New Orleans, accumulating more slaves as they went (Many historians have claimed Deslondes was born in Santo Domingo and participated in the Revolution, but Gwendolyn Midlo-Hall insists he was Louisiana-born (see Midlo-Hall and Sublette, as well as *The Louisiana Purchase: A Heritage Explored – An Online Educational Resource* from the LSU Libraries Special Collections (January 5, 2011) <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/purchase/history.html>). As they marched toward the city, burning plantations along the way, they were intercepted by troops from the U.S. Army, local militiamen, and civilians, who massacred at least sixty-six of them on the spot and sentenced twenty-one more to a brutal death; their remains were displayed as warning to any other potential rebels (*Ibid*, see also Sublette 2008: 261). Nor was this act of terror in the name of maintaining order and preserving slavery a unique one.

<sup>93</sup> Roach 1996: 68.

<sup>94</sup> “Louisiana's Code Noir, 1724,” article V, available on “Blackpast.org: Remembered and Reclaimed” (January 5, 2011). <<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/louisianas-code-noir-1724>>

slaves to work part-time for themselves”<sup>95</sup> rather than laboring for their masters. Thus, in plain sight and with a sanction from the state, and yet largely under the radar, Africans in New Orleans could come together, along with free blacks and American Indians (and sometimes a crowd of white onlookers, who commented freely and abundantly on the spectacle in ways that have been extremely useful to processes of historical reconstruction, yet also reveal the extent to which they – quite fortunately – remained oblivious to the significance of what was actually going on), to communicate in their native tongues and participate in spiritual and religious activities, dancing, drumming, and singing.

Congo Square accommodated, accumulated, and absorbed the various layers of linguistic, cultural, religious, and musical contributions made by the different waves of African and Caribbean people into those forms that were already there, which had in turn absorbed influences of Africa, Europe, and America.<sup>96</sup> Roach characterizes the significance of Congo Square thus:

What [Benjamin Henry Latrobe, a white visitor to the city who documented the goings-on in Congo Square] had seen and heard was a convergence of dance and musical forms, clustered feats of daring and invention, which were deeply indebted to Africa yet no longer of it – livings proofs of its impermanence and unforgettability. They emerged from the margins of circum-Atlantic performance culture, from ‘in the back of the town,’ a displaced transmission, rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of diaspora and genocide on wings of song.<sup>97</sup>

These elements of its diasporic importance, musically and culturally, are cited explicitly by Mardi Gras Indians and second-liners, community leaders invested in the well-being and self-determination of its black residents, New Orleans music aficionados, and scholars alike.

Additionally, and sometimes more implicitly, Congo Square’s importance lies in – and stands in for – the tradition of freedom (at least, relative to what was possible for most blacks in the United States during the times of slavery), self-determination, knowability, and the threat of assembly that the fact of Congo Square, and confluences surrounding it, enabled. One of the most fundamental and insidious functions of slavery is to engender what Orlando Patterson calls “social death,” or what he characterizes as being “naturally alienated and generally dishonored”; *to force enslaved human beings to become slaves* is to divest them of all ties to their homes, families, mother tongue, and the practices that sustain multi-dimensional human life.<sup>98</sup> Certain elements of New Orleans’s history, and the confluences of Congo Square, constitute a radically different precedent: it is a precedent in which a free black society flourished and was

---

<sup>95</sup> Roach 1996: 64.

<sup>96</sup> Indeed, when local historian, theater artist, and tour guide Roberts Batson describes Congo Square, which is the climactic endpoint of his “Cemetery and Voodoo Tour,” he cites the familiar “gumbo” metaphor for describing Southern Louisiana – the three thickening agents of gumbo contributed by African, Native American, and European culinary traditions and stand for the larger contributions of these groups of people mixing together yet retaining the distinct flavors and qualities of each. He also cites the physical proximity of Saint Louis Cathedral and Congo Square as being at once crucial to the marriage of European melodic structures and African rhythms that would contribute to jazz and the roots of every other purely American musical form that emerged from New Orleans, and symbolic of this larger process of diasporic retention and New World invention. I attended Batson’s “Cemetery and Voodoo Tour” through Historic New Orleans Tours on February 27 and May 4, 2009, and engaged in personal communication with him on May 9, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Roach 66

<sup>98</sup> Patterson offers “a preliminary definition of slavery on the level of personal relations: *slavery is the permanent, violent domination of naturally alienated and generally dishonored persons*” (13). See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), especially pgs 1-101.

left, until the American takeover, comparatively unmolested; and in which slaves were perceived as having souls (hence the requirement for baptism) and could purchase their freedom. It is one in which a vortex of cultural transmission and reinvention existed to keep the past tangibly present (perhaps even down to an oral knowledge of familial lines of descent, which were often otherwise preserved in the fastidiously documented sacramental and property records kept by Catholic clergy). And it is one in which a centuries-old tradition of assembly exists – in a city where Blacks have almost always outnumbered whites, no less – whereby hundreds of Black people congregated and could quite easily communicate by way of language, gestures, drumming, or spiritual practices illegible to those in power and yet under their noses, which could, ostensibly, lead to organized and successful rebellion (and which has continued up to the present day by way of the Sunday anniversary second-line parades). Such a context provides a potentially revolutionary genealogy of self-determination and organized dissent.

Indeed, the history of Black New Orleans is characterized by a long genealogy of activism and resistance. Prior to Emancipation, by far the largest number of free people of color in the United States lived in New Orleans.<sup>99</sup> Although members of this interstitial caste – between Black and white, free and slave – did not in every instance work to facilitate the liberation of non-Creole African Americans, the existence of this propertied, educated, not-enslaved class of people is often pointed to in New Orleanian narratives of genealogies of Black freedom. The free people of color, for instance, fought on both sides of the Confederacy, having in many cases owned slaves, among other forms of property and wealth, and at various points in time have distanced themselves from Anglo/Protestant Blacks; but in other instances have a record of radicalism and solidarity in fighting antiblackness and white supremacy. The Creole of color newspaper, *L'Union*, established in the early 1860s, advocated voting rights for propertied, educated black men, thus excluding the Freedmen; later, during Reconstruction up until 1870, *La Tribune* replaced *L'Union* and advocated the solidarity of all classes of Blacks to work for civil rights. The *Tribune* was widely read outside of New Orleans, including in the U.S. Congress as the representative of the voice of Southern Blacks. During the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods Black and Creole-of-color New Orleanians protested, advocated, rioted, and died for voting rights on local and national levels; they also registered and organized voters who installed Blacks in local and state governmental offices, and protested, organized, and sued against legal segregation and discrimination. Most famously, the *Comité des Citoyens* (Citizens' Committee) organized a light-skinned Creole of color, Homère Plessy, to ride a segregated train car and sue for desegregation upon his pre-planned arrest; the Supreme Court, however, infamously ruled for segregation.<sup>100</sup>

Much of this organizing was centered in these years within the old downtown Black neighborhoods, including the Tremé (or Sixth Ward) and the largely-Creole Seventh Ward.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> The *gens de couleur libre*, as the French called them, were generally well-educated, French-speaking, Catholic, and wealthy. They were called Creoles of color after the Civil War and later the term was shortened simply to Creoles. The term Creole causes some confusion; there are also white Southern Louisianans who call themselves Creoles and claim a different genealogy than the Creoles of color. "Creole" technically means those who were born on American soil rather than in a foreign land, and was used at one time to distinguish those born in France or Spain from those born in colonial Louisiana, and in other contexts, to distinguish the Latin (French and Spanish) from Anglo Europeans in Louisiana.

<sup>100</sup> See Mary Gehmann, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction* (New Orleans: Margaret Media, 1994) and Rudolphe Lucient Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, trans. Sr. Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

<sup>101</sup> However, although these neighborhoods are subject to the most name recognition and myth-making, the Claiborne Avenue Design Project proposal recognizes the Eighth Ward and the Third Ward as equally

Slaves and free people of color had been living in – and in many cases owning property in – those two neighborhoods since the eighteenth century; Tremé is considered the oldest African American neighborhood in the United States. They contain significant landmarks such as Congo Square and St. Augustine Catholic Church, founded in 1842 by free people of color for themselves and for enslaved Blacks to worship. This area is also where Storyville was located; most New Orleanian Black musicians of the day (Jelly Roll Morton, Buddy Bolden, Danny Barker, Bunk Johnson, Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, to name a few) played, and in many cases got their start, in this zone in which prostitution as well as racial integration (and, more insidiously, sexual slavery) were effectively legal between 1897 and 1917, and in which jazz is credited as having truly crystallized. In these neighborhoods there was also a preponderance of significant music halls, mutual aid and neighborhood clubs, important historic homes, and a booming business district full of longstanding black-owned businesses.<sup>102</sup> As we will see in greater detail in the next section, these neighborhoods along the North Claiborne corridor were the specific targets of the CADT proposal, instigated by the Tamborine and Fan membership, and were cited as being particularly central to Black New Orleans’s history and memory. Tremé in particular has been mythologized in a rather profound way.<sup>103</sup> In part, this may be because of the associations with musical contributions and with Black achievement that people have with the neighborhood, which come to signify much of “why New Orleans matters” (as renowned chef Leah Chase said, “when you think of Tremé, the first thing in your mind is Congo Square. You think of music, you think of the street parades, and then you think of food”<sup>104</sup>) – and perhaps it is because this area was particularly violently and permanently ruptured by urban restructuring in the late twentieth century.

That is, the memory of this triumphal history is inseparable from a memory of its violent suppression and displacement; this past is documented in oral history interviews, the cultural preservation organizations, and the media, precisely because the present is haunted and characterized by its loss. I believe that there is a way in which this place operates not only as a fount of identity, but of *power*: that is, the significance of the local, the site-specific, and the neighborhood in the narratives and origins that the street practices cite is a claim on legitimacy, authenticity, and grievance. Located within the community, the history of achievement as well as the history of displacement, the claim on a traceable, intact, and resistant genealogy as well as a grievous history of social death, are legible and urgent, and it becomes apparent that these genealogies – of resistance and displacement – are inextricable from one another.

But there is precious little public acknowledgement of the nuances and details of this history – Black New Orleans has been conspicuously absent from most mainstream (white) accounts of the city, its attractions, and its history, although that has changed somewhat post-Katrina. This may be due in part to the fact that Black people and Black poverty have been

---

significant; moreover, many other neighborhoods, such as Central City, are also historically significant in similar ways.

<sup>102</sup> Emile LaBranche Jr., 10-8-93 – Tremé Oral History Collection – gives excellent and detailed account of the black-owned businesses in this district during the first half of the twentieth century. Additionally, the Claiborne Avenue Design Project proposal has an extensive map of the North Claiborne Corridor, including this area.

<sup>103</sup> Recently, for instance, the neighborhood has been monumentalized in the 2007 film *Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, by Dawn Logsdon and Lolis Eric Elie; David Simon’s, Eric Overmyer’s, and HBO’s *Treme*; in 1993-1994, the Treme Oral History Project was conducted by the Amistad Research Center and funded by the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation to document the musical heritage of the Treme community.

See Amistad Research Center’s Oral History Subject Guide (May 25, 2011), <http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/index.php/search-the-collections/216-oral-history-subject-guide>.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Leah Chase, Tremé Oral History Collection, Amistad, June 14, 1994.

treated structurally in New Orleans, in Louisiana, and in the U.S. more broadly as invisible, subhuman, or criminal and undeserving of support and attention, but it may also be related to the fact that the history of Black self-determination in the city appears to have frequently been (and continues to be) perceived as a serious threat to the (white) status quo.

Whether the St. Joseph's Day Ambush, as the police disruption of the Indian masking ritual in March of 2005 has become known, is an example of the racist disregard for the tradition which is too often reflected by agents of the state, or (and) was a reaction against the perceived threat of traditions of Black freedom, the state's response to the masking tradition has, for years, been one of violence. In her essay in memoriam to Tootie Montana, Louisiana's Poet Laureate Brenda Marie Osbey quoted one of the attendees of the City Council Hearing at which Montana suffered a heart attack: "He was at the podium, surrounded by all of the other chiefs, looking the council and police brass in the eye, totally composed, as he recounted more than a half century of police abuse and harassment... Tootie died ever a warrior, speaking truth to power [...]." <sup>105</sup> This history is *also* cited in the Africanist street practices, and therefore I turn next to detail some of the ways that the resistant histories I described above have not merely been ignored, but actively squelched and repressed by the powers of white supremacy. The street performance traditions cite and narrate a struggle, and the context of white supremacy and antiblackness defines a significant part of that struggle.

In New Orleans, although there are plenty of means that have been employed to maintain "order" and keep people in their ostensible places, one particularly time-tested one is Mardi Gras. The white, official Mardi Gras spectacle is predicated on performing, enacting, and displaying how power is consolidated, demonstrating proper roles and that dissent will not be tolerated. In journalist James Gill's book-length study on Mardi Gras and the politics of race in New Orleans, he traces the intimate relationship between the public parading traditions and a tradition of white male elite power-brokering, as well as the city councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor's and other Black politicians' efforts in 1991 to end racial segregation among the elite carnival organizations (the so-called "old-line krewes"). The first of these, the Mistick Krewe of Comus, was founded in 1857, comprised of wealthy white men who occupied positions of power within the city, to produce a parade spectacle for the city on Mardi Gras, and accompanied by exclusive balls.<sup>106</sup> "Comus was above the law from the beginning,"<sup>107</sup> exempt

---

<sup>105</sup> Brenda Marie Osbey quoted Jacques Morial in her essay "Requiem for a Chief: Allison Marcel Montana, 1926-2005," published on her website "Brenda Marie Osbey," <http://www.osbey.com/id39.html>, accessed 27 August 2011.

<sup>106</sup> Some of the public indications of their deep-seated (and self-identified) white-supremacist tendencies emerged in parade themes that depicted hateful images of Union (and later Federal and Reconstruction) officials and blatantly racist, anti-black interpretations of evolution, depicting blacks as apes. And certainly, these demonstrations were intended, and operated, to inspire fear and consolidate power. But their power was also consolidated in much more far-reaching public displays. The Battle of Liberty Place, a bloody coup staged in 1874 by the White League to overthrow the Republican governor's rule, was organized by members of and in the halls of Comus's luncheon club. Although President Grant intervened and restored Republican William Kellogg to his rightful governorship, most white citizens of the city were considerably more sympathetic to the White League, and it required federal enforcement to maintain a precarious order. Moreover, prior to Liberty Place, New Orleans had implemented a desegregation of public education, but "regardless of the conciliatory announcements made by the White League [i.e. that they had no intention of depriving black citizens of any of their rights], the battle had deepened racial mistrust, and when a few parents tried to enroll their children in the city's high schools, riots broke out" (Gill 1997: 119). Indeed, throughout Reconstruction, the carnival elite manipulated the structures of governmental power to make sure they were the ones to wield it. "Louisiana's Democratic Party, dominated by the Carnival elite, made no attempt to restrict the black franchise, but was not above a little fraud and intimidation on election day. In 1888, Louisiana had 127,923 black voters and 126,884 white, but the Democratic Party had a firm



from an ordinance that forbade masking, parading, or similar festivities. Over the years Comus continued to be populated by men in similar positions (membership included businessmen, mayors, politicians, policemen, legislators, judges, luminaries of the Confederacy, and many were members of the Klan and other white-supremacist organizations such as the White League and the Knights of the White Camellia), expanding as well to comprise luncheon clubs that met year-round and to give lavish private balls, while also influencing the structure of similar carnival/social organizations that subsequently cropped up. As councilwoman Taylor pointed out in 1988, “There are persons meeting, operating under the guise of private clubs, that are conducting business. Business decisions are being made, and yet there are those of us who are denied that opportunity for discussion and input before those decisions are being made.”<sup>108</sup>

Momus and Rex (formed in 1872), Comus, and Proteus (1882), were still in operation in 1991 and did not admit Blacks, women, Jews, anyone of Italian heritage, and even elite whites whose forebears had been sympathetic to the Union during the Confederacy and Reconstruction. A bitter struggle occurred in 1991 when city councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor attempted to bring about legislation to desegregate carnival krewes in general (aimed specifically at these super-powerful and ultra-reactionary organizations) at a time when the former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi David Duke’s campaigns for U.S. Senate and state Governor had brought about chilling support amongst whites in Louisiana and the greater New Orleans area. In the end, when the legislation passed, Rex integrated rather tokenistically, and the other three shut down rather than admit any members of these groups.

Mardi Gras and related public displays have consistently been a site where policing of social and racial boundaries has taken place, with structural and psychic ramifications that far exceed holiday festivities. On one front, the regime of antiblack and white supremacist thought is not limited to white people: Indian masking and second-lining have historically and often met with enormous disapproval and/or embarrassment by many middle-class and elite black and Creole New Orleanians: they are perceived as being base, coarse, overly Africanist, associated with poverty and with caricaturish, folkloric, violent, and overly sexualized tropes of blackness. In an interview with Leah Chase, who grew up in the Creole Seventh Ward, she was asked: “Any members of your family Mardi Gras Indians?” and she replied:

No way, no indeed, that wasn’t the Kosher thing to do – no Creole or so-called Creole in their right mind would be a Mardi Gras Indian, my dear! No! That was a no-no! You didn’t even stop to admire the beauty of the costumes in those days! You didn’t even look at them in those days; that was a disgrace to that side of the community! But come up here in the Tremé, [...] some of them were Mardi Gras Indians. [...] Yeah, there were no second-line clubs in the Seventh Ward! No indeed! You dressed all prim and propah!<sup>109</sup>

Perhaps, then, given the powerful reaction against the ostensible threat of Blackness, the concerted suppression of Black Mardi Gras traditions is no surprise: another of these battles was waged on the territory that had been the center of the important, historically black communities along North Claiborne Avenue that I referenced previously.

---

grip on power, and the governor, with the disproportionate power conferred by the 1879 constitution, was always white” (Gill 1997: 142).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid* 46.

<sup>108</sup> Cited in Gill 1997: 17.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Leah Chase, June 14, 1994, ARC, Tremé Oral History Collection.

The central area of the avenue – which, elsewhere, is referred to as the median, but in New Orleans is called the “neutral ground,” – was planted with tens of beautiful live oak trees, plants, and grass, and it served as a very important gathering place for the adjacent (Black) neighborhoods on a regular basis, but especially during Mardi Gras, when Mardi Gras Indian tribes, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club (a Black carnival krewe of founded in 1909 to critique Rex through a blackface spoof on both white supremacist stereotypes of blackness and the absurd pomp and circumstance of Rex and the Carnival cotillion rituals), women masking as Baby Dolls wearing baby bonnets and short dresses along with fishnets and heels, and the Skeleton Gangs with their papier maché skulls and ‘blood’-covered aprons wielding giant bones and shouting “You Next” would parade on Mardi Gras Day. In the early 1960s, the first of two devastating urban restructuring projects occurred: the construction of the I-10 N. Claiborne overpass, which uprooted trees and ruptured the community. Notably, the overpass was built in Tremé in light of white citizens’ councils’ organizing in response to a proposal to cut through the French Quarter – the latter therefore received the protected status of an historic site, developed for tourism and preserved, while the Black neighborhoods fell into disrepair. The beautiful gathering place was reduced to piles of dirt, trash and both air and noise pollution, and many of the shops along the avenue shut down; it ultimately engendered a good deal of blight. As I will elaborate later in the chapter, this was not accepted passively by the communities: it was protested through various means over time, through organized grassroots efforts to take back control of urban “renewal” decisions and propose a blueprint for new land usage, as well as through cultural reclamation projects. But the highway was built and it ravaged the communities, regardless. Then, during the early 1980s, Armstrong Park was built, claiming to pay tribute to Louis Armstrong while displacing hundreds of residents in order to build a park, which is often locked, and a cultural center complex, which primarily serves white residents and tourists, and has generally been exclusive of the interests of the people who live in the surrounding community.<sup>110</sup> Post-Katrina, these same communities suffered further displacement when those who were not able to leave prior to the storm were evacuated from the city haphazardly, often individually rather than by family, and spread out through the country so that many did not know where their loved ones were, whether they were alive, or how to reach them. Then the public housing projects, built during the WPA era and largely intact and habitable, were closed to residents and eventually knocked down.<sup>111</sup> What was generally interpreted as an affirmation that these citizens were not welcome to remain, was reinforced by the fact that Charity Hospital – a Downtown public hospital that has served New Orleans’ poor and uninsured since 1736, which sustained flood damage in Katrina but was scrubbed immediately thereafter to medical-ready standards and remained structurally sound – has at the time of this writing still not reopened, and is slated to be replaced with a major medical complex several years down the road, whose construction will in turn necessitate the displacement of more (largely black) communities.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> See Michael Crutcher, “Protecting Place in African-American Neighborhoods: Urban Public Space, Privatization, and Protest in Louis Artmstrong Park and the Treme, New Orleans” (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2001) for in-depth discussion of the planning process, the implementation, and the protest efforts surrounding this project.

<sup>111</sup> Many have since been replaced with attractive new complexes whose architecture reflects traditional New Orleans neighborhoods’ aesthetic; however, it took over half a decade since the storm to get many of these built and habitable, and they are mixed-income communities, which at the date of this writing have not yet accommodated all of the people who were displaced from the units that were destroyed.

<sup>112</sup> The website “Save Charity Hospital” puts it this way: “The leaked Kaufman Hall report certainly helped ram home the point that the proposed hospital - weighing in at \$1.2 billion instead of the less than \$900 million cost for a Charity retrofit - is unsustainable. The cost analysis lines up with the intuitive sense that it's smarter to

This infrastructural damage to Black communities and their traditions is accompanied by explicit, physical acts of state violence: as I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Tootie Montana, the Chief of Chiefs, died while protesting the treatment of Black Indians by police. A blogger for [neworleans.indymedia.org](http://neworleans.indymedia.org) who was present at the city council meeting reported the following on his comments at the meeting:

The “Godfather of the Chiefs,” the Chief of Chiefs, Chief Allison ‘Tootie’ Montana was called forth to speak. With 83 years under his belt, this man came to the podium and reviewed interactions with the police over the past 52 years he’s been involved. Tootie astutely blew holes in all of Mayor Nagin’s exhortations [i.e. that police violence against Mardi Gras Indians would not occur on his watch] by describing the police violence he has seen and experienced over his many years as Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Tribe. He spoke about police tightening their billy-club straps as the Indians approached and his tribe’s strategy of simply walking through lines of police attempting to block their path. He spoke about a cop repeatedly trying to swing a club at his 10 year-old relative’s head and the young boy just barely missing a brutal skull injury. His last words were “This has got to stop,” and he turned from the podium, slumping towards the floor.<sup>113</sup>

It did not: one month later, Katrina hit, and as investigations conducted far too long after the fact have demonstrated, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, state-sanctioned shootings of black people, and especially black men, were rampant.<sup>114</sup> And then, despite the rhetoric of promises of improvement and platitudes about the value of New Orleanian culture, in 2006 the fee increase for purchasing a permit to hold a second-line parade jumped from \$1,200 to nearly \$4,000, and police began harassing people during the parades by herding them with their cars and with police horses.<sup>115</sup>

---

reuse an existing building shell that meets all the programmatic needs...than to go through the trouble of destroying a historic neighborhood, displacing hundreds of people, and hurting scores of small businesses by forcing them to relocate.” See <http://www.savecharityhospital.com/> - accessed May 25, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> “Chief ‘Tootie’ Montana Dies of a Heart Attack at City Council Meeting,” by blogger “Kate,” on [neworleans.indymedia.org](http://neworleans.indymedia.org). Posted June 28, 2005. Accessed January 7, 2010. <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2005/06/3515.php>. In an interview on March 11, 1983 with Tom Dent, contained in the Jazz and Heritage Oral History Collection at the Amistad Research Center, Montana recalls the details of the incident with his stepson, who was masking as Wildman in the French Quarter one Mardi Gras Day: “They were bringing little babies, taking pictures with the kids in my arms hugging me, and then two [inaudible] police on horseback, and my little stepson, he wasn’t bothering nobody, just going along on the street just doing his thing like the Wildman supposed to do, he wasn’t bothering nobody, and this guy’s running by on that horseback, and riding that horse to come by at a [gallop], and he swung that billy [club] at his head, you know, I’m looking at this, and swung at his head as if trying to kill him, and he swung at him two or three times but he missed, it so happened when he swung that my little stepson he happened to be moving, and I stood up in my full [height] and I said Now why? What is this for?” (Tape #38)

<sup>114</sup> The investigative reporting group ProPublica, in conjunction with PBS and the *Times Picayune*, uncovered important facts that shed light on the police murder of Henry Glover and massacre on Danziger Bridge in the days after Katrina as well as the NOPD’s elaborate and gruesome coverup of both instances. Later the department was investigated by the FBI and officers were convicted. This process took six years. The documentary film *Trouble the Water* (dir. Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, 2009) presents footage taken by Black residents of the Lower Ninth Ward being held at gunpoint by the National Guard when they tried to seek shelter. These are only a few of many instances of quite blatant antiblack violence that took place as stranded residents awaited rescue and a federal response.

<sup>115</sup> This change in permit cost occurred after a rare incident when someone was shot by a civilian (i.e. as opposed to a cop) at a parade. The cost went back down to \$1,800, but only after the issue went to court in a trial, at which point it was deemed unconstitutional on the grounds of free speech (Dinerstein 2009: 634).

When black residents of New Orleans (and those that stand in solidarity with them) refer to a history of antiblackness and displacement or ethnic cleansing, these are but a few of the events specific to New Orleans being referenced. And despite the fact that white supremacist magical thinking is far from *critical* thinking, is not empirical, is not analytical, and thus relies on its adherents making (usually without realizing they are doing so) a profound leap of faith, these ideas mobilize a great deal of fear, and are promulgated by those in power. This narcissistic delusion has become “reality” with the capacity to designate felicitousness because that is where power lies and has been consolidated; it has the history and precedent to back it up. But that does not make it less delusional.<sup>116</sup>

The performative returns embedded in Black Indian masking are not singular – they do not stake a claim only on Africa, nor on indigeneity, Caribbean-ness, or a local neighborhood – and one of the genealogies that is repeatedly and explicitly called upon in the discourse surrounding these enactments is one of centuries of violent displacement that build on and echo one another, from the Middle Passage and the Trail of Tears to post-Katrina ethnic cleansing. In this context, staking a claim on indigeneity – not only on an affiliation with American Indians, but on being indigenous to a place, and having a central role in creating or transmitting the contemporary culture – narratively protects against further displacement, or at the very least, calls attention to and makes apparent the egregious violence and injustice of its persistent nature. At the same time, the act of claiming a definitional relationship to elsewhere that is germane to a diasporic sensibility, marks, in this case, a deeply spiritual and deeply political and ethical commitment to difference: one that acknowledges historical and ongoing oppression, collective struggle, and a self-conscious unwillingness to fully assimilate. All of this is to say that the genealogical claims reference, at once, a long history of violent displacement and also of belonging. And although to an uneducated observer they may appear to be fantastical, supernatural, impossible, and themselves manifestations of magical thinking, and although they may only be felicitous on the much smaller scales of the tribe, the neighborhood, or the community, the magical displays exemplified through Mardi Gras Indian masking and second-line parades, among other public articulations of dissent that are manifested through self-consciously Africanist means, provide a much more accurate, rigorous, and incisive analysis of power structures, exploitation, and the costs of – as well as the survival mechanisms that are pressed into being by – displacement and social death. Such magical *realist* interventions into reality are ways of grappling with and performing, displaying, and critiquing the consequences of the arbitrary realities that come into being by way of centuries-long regimes of rationalization of power that is maintained by encouraging delusional, narcissistic, ignorant, and hateful magical thinking.

Even in instances where it is *for* their own, operating on its own terms and as a spiritual and highly private/secretive practice, the street traditions lead a kind of double life. That is, because they take place in public space, this public-ness – their location in the city’s streets,

---

<sup>116</sup> A privileging of redemption narratives is also a form of magical thinking (see Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-sided* for a devastating and important warning about some of the profound havoc that the delusions enabled by unbridled optimism can wreak) that, while not hateful, is not necessarily rigorous. It can be self-congratulatory rather than properly acknowledging the agency and labor of those who actually did the work, as in the white-liberal-helpmate-of-poor-and-helpless-and-hapless-black-people complex that has characterized much of the cultural production *and* social justice projects that have sprung up in post-Katrina New Orleans. It also potentially breeds an uncannily similar complacency: if not blame-the-victim, then glorify the victim, look for a happy ending, and when the story is narratively over, then turn blindly away from the ongoing and persistent suffering, oppression, displacement, exploitation, and disparity.

their engagement with and within these spaces – gives them their particular meaning. In taking place within these streets the performance traditions cite the neighborhoods, the social patterns and struggles that produce them, the ways in which space and resources are allotted and denied. They comment on and are situated within these social and spatial architectures, from which they derive their urgency and relevance. And they *appear* in public, which renders them available for interpretation, and existent as a form of critique even when they are only intending to speak to their own communities; the scenes of resistance to displacement and social death are pedagogical. In keeping with a consideration of these practices *as visual, apprehendable, and pedagogical public critiques*, I suggest that some of the rhetorical ways that these narratives are manifested as public critiques are through formal and conceptual mechanisms that call to mind the literary genre of magical realism: “a mode of narration that naturalises or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, it is unique among other literary genres in its assertion that the supernatural, fantastical, and magical carry weight equal to the ostensibly rational and empirical realm of recognizable reality; other genres in fact seem to make use of fantastic and supernatural elements in order to bolster their reader’s belief and trust in empirical reality; to validate its legitimacy by contrasting it with a devalued, curious or frightening, alternative configuration.<sup>118</sup>

“As a basis for investigating the nature and cultural work of magical realism,” literature scholar Wendy Faris suggests five primary characteristics of the mode of magical realism:

First, the text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity.<sup>119</sup>

“The irreducible element” refers to the idea that there is something happening narratively that cannot be explained within the “bounds of Western empirically based discourse” (7); it is described as thoroughly and in the same manner as, and against the backdrop of, the recognizable phenomenal world. “Merging realms” builds on the “irreducible element” and the presence of the phenomenal world, and refers to the way that a narrative takes its readers between two or more distinctly different realms: “In terms of cultural history, magical realism often merges ancient or traditional – sometimes indigenous – and modern worlds. Ontologically, within the texts, it integrates the magical and the material. Generically, it combines realism and the fantastic” (20). The magical or supernatural or uncanny qualities of the “irreducible element” juxtaposed against another recognizable phenomenal realm force the

---

<sup>117</sup> Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3.

<sup>118</sup> Literature scholar Christopher Warnes illustrates this distinction by citing Amaryll Chanady’s taxonomy of literary modes that also make use of the fantastic: science fiction and fantasy “de-privilege codes of the real” (3) – a move that has the potential to be escapist rather than critical – by setting narratives entirely in otherworldly or unrecognizable spaces; the uncanny, some horror, and the Gothic represent natural and supernatural side by side but make it apparent that the supernatural is an imposition, existing in disturbing tension with the natural; narratives that position the supernatural as explicable – for instance, “it was only a dream” or hallucination – also privilege the real (3).

<sup>119</sup> Wendy Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 7.

reader to experience “unsettling doubts” as to how to perceive the world that is represented: its both/and quality may be disorienting for readers whose belief systems do not allow for what is impossible and invisible to be accounted for. Indeed, while not all magical realism is produced in relation to colonization or state violence (although much of it does engage a critique of historical conditions in some way), that which is explicitly engaged in a decolonial project and/or one that reflects postmodern and postcolonial realities often draws on imagery based on some combination of inventions and bricolage that reflects the conditions of cultural syncretism or colonial violence, and the mobilization and fleshing-out of symbols, images, cultural expressions or practices, and worldviews that have been socially, culturally, and politically marginalized or repressed. Hence the worlds created by writers such as Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Gabriel García Márquez that combine banal and recognizable elements from the modern contexts in which they take place; plausible and magical narrative elements that function as metaphors for the conditions of violence or unnaturalness in these worlds; adaptations and appearances of elements that are “ancient,” “traditional,” “indigenous,” or “folkloric”; and ghostly or supernatural elements that, too, reveal something affectively true but invisible. These juxtapositions and coexistences conspire to disrupt the ideas that readers are conditioned to accept about time, space, and identity: each is slippery, more open-ended, more bounded, or more multiple than what is familiar.

The “marvelous real” that the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier describes and inaugurates (in both a theoretical and a literary capacity; that is, he defines it in the preface, and enacts it in the body, of the novel *The Kingdom of This World*) is the very condition of the Americas, where “our marvelous real is encountered in the raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace and was always commonplace.”<sup>120</sup> He writes:

Because of the virginity of the land, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje*], American is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?<sup>121</sup>

*The Kingdom* portrays the bizarre, sometimes gorgeous, often brutal juxtapositions found in daily life during pre- and post-Revolutionary Haiti (a collection of actual and painted skulls in a marketplace; the staggering decadence and violence of the colonial planters and the subsequent decadence and abuse of power (and of his fellow Haitian blacks) that the revolutionary Henri Christophe exhibits during his brief tenure as king; or the way a revolutionary servant finds his former deceased lover, Pauline Bonaparte, in a Roman statue and loses his mind), and it also depicts not flights of fancy or imaginary monsters, but the moments that demand a sense of marvel or seem magical but that reflect the beliefs and the faith of his characters (the collective faith on the part of the people assembled to watch the execution of the leader of the resistance, a faith which apparently impelled the miracle of his shape-shifting and transporting himself to safety; vodou incantations with felicitous power).

---

<sup>120</sup> Carpentier, Alejo. “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real.” Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. *Magical Realism: History, Theory, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 102-104. Print.

<sup>121</sup> Carpentier, Alejo. “On the Marvelous Real in America.” Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. *Magical Realism: History, Theory, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 88. Print.

Magical realism, then, works to call into question the ethics and explanatory power of realism as a narrative mode; this possibility is often evident in the genre's deployment by writers seeking to highlight and critique postcolonial or other conditions that are characterized by political upheaval, profound social and/or economic disparity, and/or proliferations of violence. Realism, then, does not only represent a literary mode, but a way of knowing: the faith in "rational" and "empirical" regimes of knowledge underlying modernity have made possible the practices of, for instance, "racial science" and forms of capitalism that have justified slavery, conquest and colonization, and other forms of subjugation based on notions of how human difference is to be valued, measured, and policed. The significance of this distinction, and the reason that I see this narrative mode to be a useful explanatory framework in understanding the representational operations of New Orleanian street performances, is that it helps to illuminate the ways that these practices do not only suspect the ethics of *realism*, but rather the ethics of what has come to pass for *reality* – revealing it to be a strategically manipulated narrative, and narrative strategy, as well. Indeed, if realism ratifies a set of oppressive false *teleologies*, magical realism is a representational practice that takes seriously and enacts *genealogy* – a mode of excavation that acknowledges the centrality of accidents, chance, juxtapositions, and invisible or seemingly impossible connections; that lays bare the curious and unlikely coincidences and myths that add up to a reality whose inevitability and legitimacy are called seriously into question.<sup>122</sup>

How does this actually manifest itself on the streets of New Orleans? Perhaps the best way to begin to convey these magical qualities, and the ways that these characteristics rhyme with many of those that define magical realism, is in a series of sketches.

--There exist many overlapping social spheres and strata – different realities – in New Orleans, as in any city, which may seem irrelevant or absurd to one another, but probably not impossible or supernatural. Yet there is, amid these layers, the fully-fleshed-out world – the cosmology, relational structure, transmogrified identities, aesthetic and spiritual juxtapositions – of the Indian tribes. Among much of the Black and white middle and upper class, it is reviled, and it is often violently pursued by the state when it makes itself visible; in many spheres it is ignored entirely; and in the world of WWOZ, the Jazz and Heritage festival and foundation and other elements of the non-profit industry, and some journalism and scholarship, is accepted and indeed celebrated somewhat unquestioningly. Even the transmogrified identities – black and Indian, American and Creole, human and spirit or ancestor, working class black man and Big Chief – are accepted in this latter context, taken up in performative speech and interpellative acts.

--Although New Orleans has particularly beautiful architecture, and its decay is often considered to be picturesque, atmospheric, and somewhat Gothic, the neighborhoods through which these parades usually traverse are often (particularly since urban renewal in the later twentieth-century and post-Katrina) ones that have seen particular blight, deterioration, and urban restructuring and displacement: what you see is buildings' paint peeling, burned-out, falling-down, and abandoned houses, and even amidst colorful buildings, a sense of grittiness. Against this backdrop are juxtaposed the second-line parades, jazz funerals, and Mardi Gras Indian processions: beautiful, festive, colorful, mysterious, vibrant, spiritual, and profound images. Nor is the juxtaposition of one aesthetic against another merely a question of *aesthetics*: it's about the gritty reality of a neoliberal and antiblack system leaving its most vulnerable citizens out to dry in cities across America, next to a realm of beauty, spiritual depth and specificity, color, and a political and ethical stance that distances itself from the corruption of

---

<sup>122</sup> For an extended theorization of genealogy, see the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation.

capitalist and racist values. These realms lie next to each other but are intertwined: the latter is enmeshed and trapped within the former, overdetermined and circumscribed by American political and economic disparity, even as it exceeds and critiques it, existing prior to and beyond it.

--The florescences of parades are mirage-like – if you are participating in one, you follow the parade; you are part of the magical carnival recalibrating the streetscape. If you are nearby witnessing it, however, it passes, ephemerally, occupying the street only briefly (in a cab on Mardi Gras night on the way home, we saw an Indian emerge suddenly out of the darkness, turning the corner and hurrying along in full regalia down the street in the opposite direction, unaccompanied and silent – then he was gone). The impermanence and ephemerality bestows certain qualities: 1) they seem more magical, not least because there is a sense of danger, the inevitability of disappearance, the oddness of being left standing wondering if what you saw was really there, as it left no permanent mark; and 2) they seem like ambulant memory machines, a kind of saturated concentration of a million pasts crammed into a single image (Black Indians are described as “spirit figures” in *Up from the Cradle of Jazz* – a footnote states that “[o]n a research trip to the Gambia, [historian Samuel] Charters encountered a group of masked villagers, parading to music. ‘Where had I seen it before? It was in New Orleans, on a Mardi Gras morning in the 1950s. It was the first time I’d seen the ‘Indians.’...What I saw in New Orleans was this same procession of a spirit figure, only in New Orleans the spirit had become an ‘Indian’ [...]”<sup>123</sup> – and their disappearance makes them seem like spirits indeed, even while their erstwhile presence charges the space with a lingering heightenedness). Ned Sublette describes the suit as a “power object” – it becomes such an entity because of the time, thinking, meditation, conversation, and intention that goes into its production: it becomes a sort of indexical palimpsestic shadow, imbued with the spirit(s) of its maker(s).<sup>124</sup>

--In New Orleans, the dead show up all the time. The city is unique in the U.S. for the centrality and matter-of-fact banality of ancestors, saints, and ghosts that appear in the ways that myths are spun about them and the city and tourism industries gobble these stories up (so many tour companies offer sincere or sensationalized ghost, vampire, haunted site, cemetery, plantation, and “voodoo” tours), and in the way they are woven into the language and landscape – and through the physical presence of architecturally magnificent but often crumbling cemeteries, often called the cities of the dead, in the middle of and interspersed throughout the city of the living. The dead appear through the omnipresence of Catholicism and its pantheon of saints, some of whose liturgical days are still celebrated with gusto (the saints, too, are echoed by the name of the football team, not to mention having been reconfigured by voodoo practitioners into a West African religious framework and pantheon of spirits). Too, the dead are invoked by way of old buildings, old customs, the names of families involved for generations in music or in politics showing up in both the Yellow Pages and in dusty records from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all of which invoke a slipperiness of temporality. The city is haunted by the ghosts of slavery and genocide; the street traditions testify to these pasts and presences as well as to that of their legacy of social death. Moreover it is haunted not only by Katrina but by a centuries-long history of fires and floods and epidemics destroying the physical landscape and killing thousands of people, and by the perpetual tenuousness of and threat to its physical being, made ever worse given the precarious levees, wetland erosion, closeness to sea level, the effects of the

---

<sup>123</sup> Samuel Charters’s *The Roots of Blues: An African Search* (London, 1981), pp. 68-69, quoted in Berry, Foose, and Jones 2009, pg 334; the footnote is to a sentence on page 229 – the chapter, appropriately, is “In Search of the Mardi Gras Indians.”

<sup>124</sup> Sublette 2008: 295.



BP drilling disaster. The city's being is predicated on loss, and so must the urgency of its celebrations be, too.

And these magical qualities are not lost on observers – indeed, they are echoed, amplified, and reconfigured by the “third line,” to various narrative ends. On one extreme, there is the sensationalism of ghost and vampire tours, of films like *Interview with the Vampire* (1994, dir. Neil Jordan), and of the antiblackness that surfaces in the caricaturish and abundant representations of “voodoo” in the tourism industry (from tours to shops full of kitschy paraphernalia) and in films such as Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009, dir. Ron Clements and John Musker).<sup>125</sup> On the other extreme, David Simon's and Eric Overmyer's structural critique in *Treme* is complimented and magnified by the magical resonances of the practices themselves, for instance in images like the one I described in the opening of the chapter, where Big Chief Lambreaux emerges from the darkness and creates that eerie eclipse, speaks in a mysterious language, and is transformed and heightened by invoking the origins (Congo Square, black self-determination, ethic of collectivity) that I have described in this section. Lambreaux's effectiveness, his literal capacity to command results, and his affect and spiritual weight and emotional appeal echo Berry et al's likening of the Indians as “spirit figures” and Sublette's of the suits as “power objects.” The end of the same initial episode features a jazz funeral, which invokes the sort of mystical juxtaposition of “merging realms” between “irreducible magic” and the detailed “phenomenal world”: the jazz funeral starts with a very unromantic – indeed, pragmatic – view of it, when the musician Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce) shows up to play the gig at the last minute because he is desperate for the cash; he doesn't know whose funeral it is and has to ask. But when the funeral actually begins, the music propels the portrayal to a spiritual place, and then the camera lifts, moving eventually to a birds-eye view of the procession, and in this process the image becomes a portrait of a place, then a landscape from above, instead of an intertwined series of biographies and sociological contexts, and gains a kind of cinematic visuality and clarity, a metaphoric quality. At this point we as viewers have begun to see the destruction and wreckage that Katrina has wrought upon the lives of the characters and are beginning to understand the reasons it has been allowed to occur – and amid crumbling houses, there is this horse-drawn hearse, men in tuxes; it seems to indicate a temporal slippage, like a ghost parade, haunting 2005 from another era. The cinematic moment evokes a timeless, threatened, delicate, alien, and inexorable quality, which attaches to the events depicted, to the neighborhood tradition, and the city itself.

The culture that is preserved through the intentional efforts of Tamborine and Fan and various tribes, second-line and community organizations has a deeply citational relationship with the origin narratives of displacement and belonging, Black resistance and struggle,

---

<sup>125</sup> The film demonstrates a concerted, if stilted, effort to be politically correct in its portrayal of African Americans, and as a result the protagonist Tiana and her family are caricaturish in their middle class striving and serious work ethic, tempered with some predictable sass, but are nonetheless fairly innocuous representations. It is in its engagement with voodoo that the film reveals its antiblack anxieties. Against the backdrop of a friendly and good voodoo queen who lives in the forest, regales them with messages of love and wisdom, and saves them from their amphibious fate, there is the villain, the Shadow Man, who collaborates with the evil spirits who reside in demonic-looking African masks which send out scary shadows to steal the blood of the prince who has been turned into a frog. Because of the obvious visual rhetoric of primitivity and African-ness that's associated with this very frightening and evil version of voodoo (which is a good deal darker (pun intended) than the good witch's version of it, though ultimately somewhat impotent), the film, despite its anxieties about and lavish attempts to get black Americans “right,” ends up reinscribing longstanding associations of the source of blackness with the hart of darkness, which is extremely troubling.

diasporic retention and invention that I discussed throughout this section. Acknowledging this embeddedness is important to understanding the particular ways that performative returns occur through these traditions for those that are familiar with their context: the street practices are genealogical, polyvalent, palimpsestic memory machines that citationally conjure up references to urgently real and mythologized pasts. The magic that this critical engagement with reality works is intimately related to felicitousness and power; the backdrop of the social and spatial architectures against which the displays are set gives them their meaning and power – that is, the element of juxtaposition (in terms of wealth and in terms of ethical or unethical history) is particularly important to their semiotic crystallization.

Of course, the presence of people in costumes on the streets is not inexplicable; it does not require a mystical act to conjure up their presence, at least not literally. They belong to the same phenomenal world that the rest of the city and country and world does, and indeed are severely circumscribed by its material realities. Any doubts about whether a surprised visitor did indeed catch a glimpse of a feathery person who looks like an Indian warrior in a twenty-first century urban center can be dispelled with a quick trip to the library, or by turning on the radio to the community radio station WWOZ, where there is ample explanation of who they are and what they are doing. The juxtaposition or merging of different realms of experience, spiritual practice, or political stance is at once an inevitably banal urban reality and an imaginary conceit. However, the visual and conceptual dissonance created by the visual apprehension of New Orleanian Black street practices gives pause, and with this pause comes enormous critical leverage and pedagogical possibility. And, as I will discuss in the following two sections, such pedagogical opportunity is predicated on the presence of “students” – in some cases community members and in others, outsiders.

### against the burning house

**Lolis Elie:** As I recall, segregation [in the 1930s and ‘40s] [...] consisted mostly of a series of petty mean-nesses [...] that [were] calculated to an effort to seek to deprive us of our dignity. [...] And of course, this effort of controlling black people and trying to deprive us of our dignity was the business of the police, which was not really organized as much to prevent crime, as it was to quote keep us in our places, to deny us of our – to *attempt* to deny us of our dignity. Of course, they couldn’t succeed of depriving us of our dignity, because it was not them who bestowed our dignity on us; it was our parents. So their efforts failed.

**Jerome Smith:** There is, at one level, the tremendous evils of segregation. There is factors that, in 1988, I think our people must reclaim, things that we possessed during segregated periods. We had a greater sense of ourselves. We had a value of togetherness and openness, and a value for each other that’s been lost in our struggles to enter the mainstream. [...] and there’s a spiritual quality that’s lost, that we possessed. And I think at times we get isolated into the isms of betterment and tend to lose the, our spiritual, the tremendous richness of our spiritual presence, in an effort to be better and an effort to become. The other thing that we had [...]: we could reach down [...] in the gutter and touch our brothers, wherever they may stand. [...] So we, in the process of

integrating, until like Lorraine Hansberry once told me, integrating into a burning house, we done lost a lot of ourselves that's of detriment.<sup>126</sup>

\* \*

While integration was at the heart of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, its implementation left quite a bit to be desired. The losses that civil rights and community leaders Attorney Lolis Elie and Jerome Smith speak of in the epigraph above pertain specifically to those accrued through the failures of the Civil Rights Movement's implementation and the processes of assimilation that followed it, and subsequently, the community's manifold losses under urban restructuring from the 1960s to the present. This section speaks to both the specificity and the larger implications and resonances of these losses by examining the ways in which the origin myths I describe in the previous section (of Congo Square, diasporic retention and invention, maroonage, Black-self-determination and resistance, and an ongoing history of displacement) are mobilized in the performative returns that take place when community members, who are affected by the displacement that impacts their neighborhoods, deploy representations of the street traditions in self-determined projects designed to create alternative infrastructures under the radar, in place of official ones that are lacking. That is, it is about how the discourses, practices, and meanings of the street traditions show up in internally-oriented projects – for the people, by the people – geared toward “survival and beyond”: a neighborhood revitalization project in the 1970s proposed in the wake of the construction of the I-10 overpass, and cultural institutions in the present day. However, just as the narratives of Black resistance that I described in section one are situated as critiques of the dominant power structure that was responsible for the ruptures and violence that *required* these acts of resistance and solidarity in the first place, the alternative infrastructures that are proposed in these returns engage extremely critically with the dominant power structure even as they interface with it and/or appeal to it for the resources necessary to survive.

The stakes attached to the losses that Elie and Smith describe are multiple, and articulating them here helps to situate the issues that are implicated in the performative returns that I address in this section. First, there is the narrative of the loss of specificity: through their efforts to assimilate, Smith claims that black Americans, and specifically New Orleanians, have lost a sense of self located in the properties or characteristics that differentiated them as a group, because what existed in their own community simply does not exist within the larger structures, which are represented in this radio discussion as being culturally deficient or bankrupt. Assimilating into that mainstream, then, amounts to assimilating into loss, blankness, and absence, but also, as is indicated in the reference to Malcolm X's warning against “integrating into the burning house,” into political and ethical bankruptcy. This speaks to the second point: that in Smith's et al's understanding, the infrastructure does not – and is not intended to – cover or include them. Third, then, is the stance Elie and Smith each articulate of refusing to receive – or at least, of working to undo the adverse effects of having been receiving – their collective racial sense of self from elsewhere; they espouse a rejection of the patronizing condescension *and* implicit consolidation of power that is implied in the act of the mainstream or state *deigning* to include, by way of “integration,” its previous undesirables, to interpellate them – however ineptly or incompletely – as suddenly appropriate or welcome. Although occupying a different temporality, this stance is akin to what Hartman claims is the definition of freedom according to the enslaved, who “knew that freedom had to be taken; it

---

<sup>126</sup> Jerome Smith, WWOZ MLK program, 1989. Tom Dent and Keith Medley interviewing Jerome Smith, Lolis Elie, Doris Castle, and Henry Mitchell. Amistad Research Center, Tom Dent Collection.

wasn't something that could ever be given to you. The kind of freedom that could be given to you could just as easily be taken back."<sup>127</sup> However, as evidenced by their words as well as by the fact that they were both leaders in the movement for equal *civil* rights and that Jerome Smith was centrally involved in proposing a more democratic use of the North Claiborne corridor to the Louisiana Department of Highways, they also acknowledge and work to strategically engage the fact that what structural power they have is circumscribed from above.

This section, then, deals with interfacing: I examine how community members who are deeply invested in Black self-determination make appeals to the mainstream for some of its resources. These appeals manifest here in a land use proposal and two museums devoted to the "backstreet" traditions and culture. I argue that references to the origin narratives and Africanist street traditions are leveraged in these appeals to several related ends: 1) in order to make an argument about the displaced Black communities' autochthonous relationship to these neighborhoods, and thus their legitimacy in seeking, and entitlement to, resources; 2) to demonstrate grievance: to publicly assert who has been displaced and why it is a travesty; 3) to demand reparations – that is, to garner the necessary resources from the mainstream power structure that are necessary for the Black New Orleanian communities to be able to survive and provide for their own; and 4) in order to claim the historically Black neighborhoods as significant founts of community power and memory, and the backdrop to a history of resistance. Indeed, these appeals are constructed in such a way that they quite explicitly offer a critique of the very entities to which they appeal for their role in divesting the communities and neighborhoods of the resources they once possessed (i.e. their roles in engendering displacement, neighborhood blight, joblessness, etc). That is, the appeals themselves are inextricable from, and indeed constitute, demonstrations of grievance and an assertion of both cultural and ethical difference: rather than staging a bid for integration or acceptance, they stage a critique of an unethical system.

\* \*

In 1976, a group called the Claiborne Avenue Design Team (CADT), which had been organized by Tamborine and Fan membership, namely Jerome Smith and Tootie Montana, proposed a multi-use study of the I-10 corridor between Poydras St. and Peoples Ave. that "focused on potential social, economic, recreational and cultural developments of the corridor right-of-way in order to help meet community needs in the area."<sup>128</sup> This proposal was a proactive attempt to respond to the rupture of the North Claiborne corridor – the historic Black neighborhoods I described in section one – by trying to restore the area to its former glory -- or, perhaps, to produce a new and better present neighborhood in the image of a romanticized past. It was informed by empirical information gathered from urban planning and social science research by people whose priorities lay with the neighborhood rather than with the city's powerful elite, and that took seriously qualitative aspects of neighborhood revitalization and the significance of the genealogies and origins I attend to in the previous section. The Design Team was comprised of architects, engineers, and community leaders, chaired by Rudy Lombard, formerly the leader of New Orleans's chapter of CORE and a Ph.D. in the field of Urban Planning. The proposal was based not only on their own professional opinions but on "extensive input from community residents, organizations, and agencies":<sup>129</sup> the team conducted surveys among residents, held weekly community forums, conducted door-to-

---

<sup>127</sup> Hartman 2007: 169.

<sup>128</sup> *CADT I-10 Multi-Use Study*, page 10, Claiborne Avenue Design Team for the Louisiana Department of Highways, in Cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, City of New Orleans, 1976. City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

door campaigns, and held symposia for and with community members and leaders. And the stakes were high. In the preface to the report, Lombard writes:

The enduring cultural personality of the CADT area is greatly responsible for much of the charm and universal appeal of present day New Orleans. However, CADT is compelled to point out that the general situation among residents of the Claiborne Avenue corridor is one of noticeable frustration, permeated by a quietly envolving [sic] tension. The sordid conditions of the corridor must be acted on with a sense of urgency and good faith. [...] The political elite, the captains of industry, and the everyday people of the city have ignored the conventional wisdom of the great urban poet, Langston Hughes, who warned everyone in his poem, "Raisin in the Sun," that some dreams deferred dry up, some fester like a sore, and others explode.<sup>130</sup>

This statement seems to reveal the powerful array of facets that are embedded in the community's engagement for this study: on one hand, the statement is descriptive, indicating that their research reflects the frustration people express with their neighborhood as well as the changes residents have articulated that they wish to see enacted. On the other, the statement issues a warning to the city and state agencies reviewing it: it is not only community-based *research*, but *organizing* that has taken place, and organizing and community-building around discussions of reform can quite easily lend themselves to organizing and community-mobilizing around formidable protest. And, it seems to imply, the frustration and anger is so thick that it runs the risk of exploding and endangering the "political elite, the captains of industry, and the everyday people of the city," even without an organizing campaign, in the event that there is not imminently a good-faith effort toward reparations. In the same preface, Lombard also states that "[c]reative change begins with a vision, some imagination, and a dream."<sup>131</sup> Part of what is so interesting about the CADT proposal and survey is the fact that it is its own freedom dream and performative return: that is, it is seeking to restore and improve N. Claiborne Ave. to its previous function, while also romanticizing what it has been, and inventing it in the image of its ideal.

The elements that are included in the report are quite revealing: it is not a dry, technical document containing only a series of statistics and architectural drawings. Rather, it is published as a book and reads like a compelling piece of journalism, drawing on oral histories with Danny Barker – a well-known and well-respected local musician and music teacher, as well as a writer and historian – and obliquely theorizing the nature of loss. After asserting the objectives and methodologies of the study, and describing the inclusive and community-oriented nature of the research, a lengthy section of the document consists of a detailed discussion of the historic area in question: the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward (Back-o-Town), Over the Basin, Storyville, Tremé, the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward, and a particularly long discussion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward. This section is illustrated with photographs and maps, and includes an overview of when each neighborhood was founded, significant moments in their histories as well as descriptions of locally or inter-/nationally famous residents, what distinguishes these neighborhoods from one another and what each is known for. The document particularly stresses musical, artistic, cultural, and entrepreneurial innovation, with the street traditions of jazz, second lining, jazz funerals, and Mardi Gras Indian masking occupying a central narrative position. Each

---

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

neighborhood, in its own way, is attributed a role in an origin myth – for instance, of jazz, or of significant facets of Blackness – that is being reinforced and/or woven anew.<sup>132</sup>

The report goes on to describe the existing conditions, positioning the construction of the highway as the rupture – the site of originary grievance, the catalyst for displacement, and the before/after moment. That is, according to the narrative of the study, prior to the highway construction the area was peaceful, thriving, self-sufficient, and proud. Afterwards, it was characterized by blight, un(der)employment, crime, and frustration. The report damningly describes the spaces of cultural and historical significance that have been lost or knocked down: not only the neutral ground where the trees once stood and the highway impinged, but the blocks comprising Armstrong Park, the site of former Storyville, the Black benevolent halls, historically Black-owned businesses and gracious homes, etc. In the section on the existing conditions of the area, the report pays a great deal of attention to the environmental factors (broken streets, traffic posing threats to safety, unsanitary conditions and the buildup of trash, lack of parking, poor drainage, noise and air pollution from the highway) that contribute to the residents' structural dispossession. It contextualizes this environmental analysis in its demographic profile and community surveys in the next chapter, describing the issues of poor health (and limited access to health care), poverty, crime, and underemployment, consistently connecting the area's problems to the structural factors that contribute to many of the racist justifications for urban restructuring. Without being entirely explicit about pointing fingers, the report makes a damning link between the decision to plow through the Black communities for the construction of these highways, and the disintegration of these same communities.

Ultimately, the report proposes very comprehensive plans.<sup>133</sup> But by far the proposal with the most elevated language – which reveals its prime importance to the project, as does the fact that it was one of the few proposals ultimately to be implemented – was a memorial/history lesson that the report referred to as the 'Shrine to the Black Experience,' which is described as follows:

There are at least thirty eight (38) major statues, plaques, squares, and landmarks in New Orleans; not one of them is dedicated to a Black personage. Except for a few schools and playgrounds Black historic and contemporary figures are without due public recognition of their outstanding contributions to the history and culture of the city, state, national and international communities. CADT, therefore, recommends that, with an initial emphasis on the intersection at St. Bernard Avenue, the cement support columns of the I-10 Expressway be used in such a way as to commemorate the outstanding contributions and achievements of Black persons.

It is further proposed that the expressway columns be refurbished with artistic designs and historic information, specifically to acknowledge the contributions of local Black musicians, scientists, artists, philanthropists, educators, craftsmen, physicians,

---

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, see Chapter II, approximately pages 22-40.

<sup>133</sup> They include architectural and botanical beautification; children's recreational facilities; opportunities for businesses to revitalize; a health and job training center; an ecumenical chapel; a parking lot; bike and walking paths; plazas that recreate, to the extent possible, the social function of N. Claiborne's neutral ground; a municipal structure with fire and police stations; a seafood complex and stores where people can buy and sell the goods and products historically associated with this place and its culture; "super-blocks" or new housing units that are more spread out and conducive to healthful living; and reconstruction of highway ramps and exits in order to redirect the traffic flow in a manner that better takes into account residents' safety and their habits of sociality. The report concludes with two slightly less intensive (and expensive) plans, with a strong recommendation to implement the first, as well as a breakdown of strategies for implementation, and a budget proposal for each, projecting that it would be implemented over a period of about ten years.

writers, political leaders, professionals, Mardi Gras Indians, second-line clubs, and others. CADT also suggests that commemorative columns highlight the accomplishments of Black New Orleanians but also focus on the contributions of Blacks and their culture throughout the world. In the Bicentennial year it would be fitting to honor the contributions of Crispus Attucks, Phyllis Wheatley, Prince Hall, and Benjamin Bannaker to United States' history.<sup>134</sup>

The report appeals to a narrative of Black achievement and middle class ascension on the basis of artistic, political, intellectual, and cultural innovation in order to convince the funders of the value of the area, and to strive to re/create the structures that would support the perpetuation and flourishing of the historically Black neighborhoods and the performance practices that are articulated as being so central to their culture.

It is significant that in the context of this study, it is Blackness itself that constitutes authenticity and origin: that is, the CADT report references Congo Square and the other narratives I describe in section one, but its object is not to restore or performatively return to "Africa" or some other real or imaginary diasporic location. Rather, the CADT report is referencing a glorious homogenous racial past: Black-owned businesses, Free People of Color, Mardi Gras Indians, jazz funerals and second-lines, music spontaneously emerging from homes and churches and schools, political engagement, self-determination. And like the Mardi Gras Indians' implicit reference to an indigenous world prior to whiteness, and/or a world whose homogeneity, self-determination, and success is defined by its successful resistance to the ravages of whiteness (i.e. white supremacy, capitalism, slavery, genocide), the vision articulated in the CADT report romances a kind of pre-contact (i.e. pre-assimilation, pre-urban restructuring) vision, and indicates that there is a "won't bow, don't know how" ethic as well about the history of professional success, artistic, musical, and cultural innovation, and the protection and retention of these histories. In both sets of performative returns, the fight – that is, struggle against and resistance to an antagonistic dominant culture – is central to what is upheld as valuable.

One of the few elements of the proposal that was implemented was the above suggestion of converting the area under the overpass to a public art venue engaged in memorial practices: the murals on the expressway columns depict touchstones of this glorious past and its legacies into the present, participating in instilling cultural pride and memory. At the same time, they visually and publicly illuminate genealogies of displacement. Although the intended effect according to the CADT proposal was a commemorative "shrine" that would exist amidst a thriving and revitalized neighborhood, in fact the ways in which these murals are embedded into and juxtaposed against the palimpsestic site that contains at once the memory of resistant histories and the contemporary evidence of blight and deterioration constitutes and makes visible the terms of a sharp critique. On some of the identical rows of cement posts, trees are painted; these call to mind the rows of enormous live oak trees they replaced. They highlight the absence and loss of the real trees, and the surrogation of real trees with painted posts underscores the violent ruptures that removed them: while they are much more attractive than plain cement columns, nonetheless their particular site-specificity emphasizes the distance between these representations and the actual trees they replaced. Likewise, the painted Mardi Gras Indians on other columns make plainly visible the absence of fleshly Indians, which encompasses at once the genocide of actual indigenous Americans – which is remembered and altered in representation within Black expressive culture – *and* the displacement of the Black

---

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, pg 90.

Indians of New Orleans.<sup>135</sup> The formal mechanism of juxtaposition appears similar to its manifestation in the streets (masking and parading against the urban backdrop), insofar as there are images that provide a glimpse of magical-seeming, feathery people against a polluted traffic corridor. The painted images imply a critique by the fact that they are *only* images, and thus measure the distance between two-dimensional representations and the always-mysterious real ritual: that is, the *images* of a different world of possibilities set inside a banal urban context is a far cry from the fleshed-out, four-dimensional incorporation of another reality into it.<sup>136</sup>

These instances of public art accomplish effects that are similar to other artistic and cultural forms of resistance, in that they instill and nurture affective forms of belonging and memory; in this case, they stand as a performative return to a romantic past and articulation of a better future, claiming the space as one that has been, and can again be, generative and healthy rather than desolate. But simultaneously, they can be juxtaposed against the more structural reforms called for in the proposal (see footnote 129), which would have made a material contribution to the life-chances of the neighborhood residents, but which, for various budgetary and bureaucratic reasons, were not implemented. The 1976 CADT Study was accepted by the State of Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, and by the Federal Highway Association. Plan I was the multi-faceted transformation elaborated above; the plan approved was Plan III, by far the least expensive – and least extensive – of the proposals.<sup>137</sup> Yet in spite of these noble narratives and appeals to origins, strategically deployed in extremely well-executed and savvy organizing efforts, and even in spite of a particularly sympathetic city (and briefly, federal) government in an era that was still benefiting from the War on Poverty programming and funding and the sweep of racial and political liberalism of the '60s and '70s, ultimately a combination of bureaucratic red tape, funding limitations, good intentions coupled with inexperience and interpersonal bad blood, and the sheer magnitude and entrenchment of the problems (of poverty, racism, political corruption, etc) faced by the

---

<sup>135</sup> Moreover, I cannot drive down N. Claiborne under the overpass and see the small gatherings of people who still congregate in the dark, garbage-filled, cement-paved area under the overpass without imagining the crowds of people enjoying the sun, trees, and grass in photographs I've seen of the same spot in past decades, and become incensed.

<sup>136</sup> This is not to say that *real* second-line parades, Mardi Gras Indians, and jazz funerals don't appear on and underneath the overpass: they do, with some regularity, and it's a jolting and magnificent act of signifying when the hard surfaces of the underpass are exploited for their awesome amplification of the brass band. I think of these events according to my discussion of the previous section's analysis of magical realist (and magically real) qualities of the street performances. My analysis of the paintings on the columns is specifically of the permanent images that are inscribed on this structure.

<sup>137</sup> A letter from Mayor Ernest N. "Dutch" Morial – the first black mayor of New Orleans – to Paul Hardy of the LA Department of Transportation and Development states that the city spent several years beginning to make improvements recommended by CADT; "[s]ince 1975, the city has dedicated Community Development Block Grant funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to the Claiborne Corridor neighborhoods. In 1979, the City designated the North Claiborne/St. Bernard commercial strip a Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization (NCR) area. The NCR program provides low-interest financing opportunities and management strategies to area businesses to reverse the economic decline of the area" (Letter from Mayor Ernest N. Morial to The Honorable Paul Hardy, April 22, 1981. Morial Papers, NCR Records, Box J47, Folder 15, "Hunter's Field." City Archives, New Orleans Public Library). Indeed, the N. Claiborne NCR project represented the second in a series of revitalization projects that took place under the city-appointed NCR Unit, established by Morial "to reverse disinvestment cycles in old neighborhood shopping strips and encourage neighborhood revitalization" ("\$1.8 million program is outlined by Morial," Wednesday, August 26, 1981, *The Times-Picayune/The States-Item*, Section I, pg 15). The implementation of this project necessitated that yet another multi-use study, conducted by the City's Office of Federal Programs and Special Projects Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Unit, and published in December 1981, take place ("N. Claiborne/St. Bernard Avenues Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Concept Study," Morial Papers, NCR Records, Box J45, Folder 55, "Contract – Hewitt Washington & Assoc (Folder 2). City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.).



reformers meant that the quantifiable success of the revitalization project was limited. The public art works that remain to this day and constitute one of the few implementations of the proposal that were executed thus stand as a testament to, and critique of, not only the discrete history of displacement of particular communities in a particular city at a particular moment in time, but the larger anti-black and anti-poor structures that position communities such as those along the Claiborne corridor as being continually available to this sort of violence.

Clearly, the zone delimited by the Claiborne Corridor is a profoundly important site. In this report and elsewhere in present and past representations of the city, it has been symbolically rendered the heart and bones of New Orleans: its Black communities and traditions, its musical and cultural history, its ethical and political center. And these narratives reflect not only its generative profundity, but its continuous ruptures – that is, the Claiborne Corridor is symbolically remapped as a metonym or microcosm of the displacement and genocide that have occurred again and again. In a brilliant discussion of what he calls “ritual topography” in a book that places “conjuring” – theorized as a performative transformation of or intervention into reality – at its center, Theophus H. Smith cites Robert Stepto’s analysis of the sacralized function of the South in African American literature. This literary tradition reflects a history in which “the black North American experience acquires two ritual movements: ‘ascension’ to the North for freedom, industry, and culture, but also return to the South in the form of ‘immersion’ experiences and ritual journeys.”<sup>138</sup> Stepto writes of DuBois’s autobiographical account of his journey from a childhood in New England to the South for a career of teaching and service:

Du Bois’s journey south is, figuratively, a journey into the color red: red for the heat and blood of the War, red for the clay soil of Georgia, red for the deposed and dispossessed Indian, red for the relentless sun upon the plantation field, red for the split blood and enduring bloodlines of black brethren under assault. The structural topography of *The Souls* is thus strung between two poles, the green and shadowy hills of the Berkshires and the red dust “full of history” of the Black Belt.<sup>139</sup>

Stepto interprets Du Bois’s South as being curative because it is thick with history, but this history registers as a raw wound. Indeed, Smith describes Du Bois’s participation in this journey as ratifying “whether consciously or unconsciously, [...] the mystique of the South as a surrogate Africa for displaced African peoples.”<sup>140</sup> If it is ritually necessary to “return” – literally or discursively – to the South, it is on account of the presence of ancestors and tradition but it is also on account of the need to return to a place that symbolizes the originary site of grievance, as the site of enslavement, of filial rupture, racial terror, backbreaking labor, and social death. The notion of “the South as a surrogate Africa for displaced African people” registers as a particularly powerful example of how the origins that are configured in origin myths are not static and literal but are processual and metaphorical– a discursive process that takes place by way of a feedback loop of surrogations. It is also a similar operation to the Biblical typologies pertaining to the Exodus narrative that we saw in chapter one, and this typological practice of charging historical events or physical spaces with a weighty spiritual force and meaning that far exceeds their more obvious or banal literal context is, I think, an illuminating means of understanding how Congo Square and the Claiborne Corridor function within many narratives of Black New Orleanian resistance.

---

<sup>138</sup> T. Smith 1994: 132.

<sup>139</sup> Stepto cited in T. Smith 1994: 132-33.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

In such a state of larger-than-life significance, stories of displacement and resistance, autochthonousness and diaspora ramify widely, and these spaces apparently possess and disperse powerful force. Both the CADT project and other community organizations that have arisen in the wake of the urban restructuring and persist to the present day – such as the Backstreet Cultural Museum and the House of Dance and Feathers – mobilize the spiritual and moral force of the historic neighborhoods in which they are located, and that of the origins cited in the street traditions that they seek to preserve and promote, in order to communicate pride, a history of struggle, and appeals for recognition to visitors for whom they serve as ambassadors, while simultaneously serving as a repository of cultural memory for their own communities. These sites become “centers” not only in the sense of an institution, a cultural center where people come together, but in the more heightened sense of a super-concentrated nexus or hub where the layers of meanings of the sites and the traditions converge with one another.

Individual informational visits, which resemble a combination of a tour, a lecture, and a Q&A session, in the small but jam-packed neighborhood museums – the House of Dance and Feathers in the Lower Ninth Ward and its precursor, the Backstreet Cultural Museum in the Tremé, with their founder-proprietors, Ronald W. Lewis and Sylvester Francis, respectively – give visitors a peek into these backstreet traditions. The Backstreet is in a former funeral home and mainly consists of two large rooms, one of which houses artifacts from anniversary parades, including fans, suits, alligator shoes, and t-shirts made to commemorate loved ones who passed. The other room contains artifacts from Indian masking – including an astounding collection of Indian suits. Additionally, he has footage from hundreds of jazz funerals and second-line parades, which he has recorded over the course of the past three decades or so. The House of Dance and Feathers is in the backyard of Ronald Lewis’s house. It was built several years before Katrina but was destroyed in the flood; however, he rebuilt shortly thereafter, and has also recently published a book/exhibition catalogue in partnership with the Neighborhood Story Project. His museum is a one-room building that contains hundreds of artifacts, many of which are similar to those found in the Backstreet but are often specifically from S&P clubs and Indian tribes from the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, as well as artifacts that people have donated to him that have conceptual affinities, even if not direct affinities of use, with the objects and practices his museum is devoted to.

Part of what the museums communicate is a picture of strength and power – the historic significance of the neighborhoods from which these traditions emerge, and the fact that these traditions are longstanding, politically and spiritually weighty, have withstood many odds and remained intact, and their practitioners intend for them to continue to do so for a long time to come. And part of what they communicate is evidence and exposure of the racist and classist policies that surround and politicize these cultural practices, rendering their dissent, much of which comes through in the stories that Sylvester and Ronald tell visitors to their museums. During a February 2009 visit to the Backstreet Cultural Museum, Sylvester told me the story of Tootie Montana’s demise and the ways it was bound up in a history of state terror and police brutality. When I visited the House of Dance and Feathers, Ronald talked at length about how people had owned their own homes in that community for generations, but after the storm many couldn’t claim their land because they didn’t have “proper” documentation: proof of property ownership hadn’t been filed with the City, either because the property itself was passed along through generations without documentation, or because the documents were in people’s homes and had been destroyed in the flood. He told me about how, just prior to my visit, he had been visited by two women from wealthy white neighborhoods, who had encountered him representing his museum at Jazz Fest and wanted to learn more. They had

had misconceptions about neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth, and according to Ronald, after talking to him they claimed that many of these had been dispelled: he had made them aware that these neighborhoods were comprised of working people, who owned their own homes, and now they knew more about the complex and beautiful cultures emerging from the neighborhoods. We discussed the importance of the museums' ability to challenge the assumptions of people in powerful positions, whose racist and classist misconceptions have very material consequences. The moment he described could be interpreted as an instance of demonstrating the assimilative capacity of black people in working class neighborhoods: one of the many "Look, we are just like you!" moments that proliferate in the long history of laboring to gain access to the rights and privileges of American civil society. Perhaps it is part of its genius that it is able to register in this way; safe and non-threatening. But I think there is more to it than that: it signifies, in the Gatesian sense, employing this apparently reassuring proposal to actually or simultaneously expose the antiblack and anti-poor infrastructure for what it is and provide demonstrable evidence that it is the system that has failed the people, rather than a question of people failing to live up to the system's expectations. The museums make use of their position as cultural ambassadors to make explicit the terms of their critique, and the significance of their locations and traditions within genealogies of displacement and resistance.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, both museums participate in the life of their communities to facilitate the continuity of the traditions they celebrate. The Backstreet Museum has an email listserv that distributes routes for upcoming second-lines, thus serving as a central information station for the social and pleasure clubs to spread word of their anniversary parades and more explicitly politicized or infrastructural activities, which include events such as a yearly Back to School Picnic sponsored by the Backstreet Cultural Museum and the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi, whose primary goal is to distribute free school supplies to schoolchildren, and also features health screenings, refreshments, and games; a Stop the Violence Walk; jazz funerals; and second-lines organized around protest or political messages, such as a "second line for democracy." Sylvester Francis also holds yearly block parties on Mardi Gras Day at the Backstreet, to which community members and in-the-know outsiders can join together for a family-friendly party.

The performative returns to the autochthonous past staged by the CADT and cultural institutions – configured in the CADT document as a heroic and racially homogenous golden age and in the cultural museums as a powerful local performance and spiritual tradition – assert that the historic communities are entitled to the resources and infrastructure from the city that are necessary to survival, while the critiques they level make patently clear the long-term denial of necessary resources to these communities. The complex nature of felicitousness in these internally-oriented processes has to do with the fact that these communities' position in the face of urban restructuring rendered them reliant upon the very entities that ruptured them for the resources to survive and thrive. Thus they have been required to appeal to these mainstream entities for resources from recognition to millions of dollars in funding for urban reform. The strength of their appeals depends on the spiritual and moral force of their traditions and of the historic sites from which they emerged and which have continued to nurture them. The force of that spiritual power (that which is a function of internal knowledge and ritual understandings of both place and traditions) and moral power (that which is derived from making public claims on autochthonous relationship, display of grievance, from the juxtaposition of what is deserved and what is actually rendered) is considerable, as is evidenced by the extent to which the street traditions are appropriated for aesthetic and political ends by insiders and outsiders alike. The paintings of oak trees and Indians on the highway overpass columns stage a critique and provide affective affirmation to their own communities. Yet the

paintings on the columns are not a felicitous execution of the CADT proposal: the force of these traditions' structural power – that which might have the capacity to alter the material circumstances of their communities – is considerably more limited, circumscribed as it is by the power structures to which they appeal. But there is a polyvalent operation at play: these same entities that appeal to the mainstream infrastructures simultaneously exist as, and in order to provide, alternative under-the-radar infrastructures and modes of felicitousness to their own communities in a manner which neither relies on, nor is legible to, nor *ratifies* the structures of power among which they are situated. The ways in which the street traditions are conjured in internally-oriented organizing efforts and cultural institutions gestures to and preserves knowledge of the losses the communities have suffered and struggles they have faced, as well as of the legitimacy and originary ownership of these communities, and thus their entitlement to reparations. All the while, they performatively restore, re-constitute, or quietly perpetuate the thing itself that is under threat.

### **in appropriation**

Unfortunately, not all instances of representation are so carefully controlled and curated by insiders and sensitive, savvy cultural ambassadors. For many practitioners of these traditions, the relationship to outsiders is highly fraught. Rachel Breunlin and Ronald Lewis write of the ambivalence many Indians feel toward documentarians such as Michael P. Smith and Dr. Maurice Martinez:

Smith was a documentary photographer whose work on New Orleans African American street performances has been the source of a great deal of recognition and controversy. Although Smith had spent many years with the subjects of his photographs, and had written directly about the issue of what he calls the “third line” – the documenters who follow second lines – many Mardi Gras Indians represented in his book were upset that they hadn't been consulted before their images were published. Many also have a copy of the book in their own archives.<sup>141</sup>

The question largely revolves around who is speaking for whom, how accurately, and who benefits – and in what ways – from the acts of representation and the visibility of these traditions. Two contexts in which street practices have been displayed in highly public settings – for largely non-specialist, outsider, and often tourist audiences – are the Jazz and Heritage Festival (whose full title is “New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Presented by Shell”<sup>142</sup>), known as Jazz Fest, and the recently-launched fine art biennial, Prospect New Orleans. In contrast to film projects and scholarship that are invested in sociological analyses of racism and mobilize these traditions in order to attempt to translate their ethical, political, spiritual, and even experiential aspects for their audiences, these arts festivals' focus is on the aesthetic elements of black New Orleanian street performances.

---

<sup>141</sup> Breunlin and Lewis 2009: 6.

<sup>142</sup> This is particularly interesting given the lack of corporate accountability on the part of the oil and gas companies, as has most horribly and recently been underscored by the BP oil drilling disaster; they are major employers on which thousands of people are dependent for their living, but corporations whose destruction of the wetlands (oil and gas companies are estimated to be responsible for 60% of wetland damage on the Louisiana coast) contributed quite extensively to the damage that Katrina was able to cause, as the wetlands are Gulf Coast communities' natural lines of defense against storms.

Jazz Fest started in 1970, and was initially held in Congo Square itself.<sup>143</sup> A seven-day-long daytime music and culture festival spanning two consecutive weekends and constituting the largest tourist draw – and thus economic boost – of the whole year in a city that is dependent on tourism, Jazz Fest is dedicated to celebrating the unique culture, heritage, and historical and contemporary music of Louisiana.<sup>144</sup> It features twelve stages that each present nearly eight hours per day of musical acts that correspond to their individual theme (traditional or contemporary jazz, blues, folk, Cajun, music of the African diaspora, gospel, and big-name national acts, for instance).<sup>145</sup> The Jazz and Heritage Stage features sets performed by Mardi Gras Indian tribes singing songs from the Indian repertoire and playing the drums and tambourines, and sometimes – especially those groups that have made more pop- or rock-oriented album recordings – accompanied by other instruments not used in the street masking, such as the piano. Throughout the days of the festival, various marching and brass bands and sometimes members of S&P Clubs in their regalia will parade through the Fairgrounds, inciting “impromptu” (scheduled) second-lines. Additionally, there are non-musical culture and heritage displays, including craft and “folk” displays like the “Louisiana Folklife Village” and the “Native American Village”, and craft marketplaces, such as “Congo Square.”<sup>146</sup> Men who mask Indian are featured in beading and drumming demonstrations, interview panels, and representing their neighborhood museums.

Of much more recent origin is the fine art biennial Prospect New Orleans, curated by Dan Cameron, which began in late 2008. From November until January of 2009, eighty artists from around the world, including ten who were Louisiana-born or –based, had their work installed throughout the city: from work installed in traditional gallery formats in the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) and Contemporary Art Center (CAC), to multi-room installations in institutions such as the Louisiana State Museum’s Old U.S. Mint, works installed in automotive repair and furniture shops, to massive site-specific sculptures and installations in the Lower Ninth Ward, in places there like cultural centers, empty lots, and old churches. While there was work shown that did not directly relate to the histories or present of those places or of New Orleans more generally, or to Hurricane Katrina, many other pieces *did* quite explicitly meditate on these sites and events (particularly Katrina) in some cases as insiders and in many others as outsiders looking in.<sup>147</sup> Created in order to bring a top-notch

---

<sup>143</sup> However, it swiftly outgrew that site and has been presented at the racetrack, known as the Fairgrounds, since 1972.

<sup>144</sup> See “New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival” website - <http://www.nojazzfest.com/#>.

<sup>145</sup> The tents are named for corporate sponsors or themes, such as the Acura Stage, the Congo Square “My Louisiana” Stage – which predictably features “black” music, the Blues Tent, or the WWOZ Jazz Tent.

<sup>146</sup> According to their website, in Congo Square one can “experience music and art from Africa and the African Diaspora. The Congo Square stage features performances by African, African-American, African-Caribbean and Latino musicians. Shop at Congo Square African Marketplace for original paintings, sculpture, clothing, jewelry, musical instruments, and an array of handcrafted artworks.” “New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival – Crafts” accessed January 9, 2010. <<http://www.nojazzfest.com/#>>

<sup>147</sup> For instance, nearly all of the work installed in the Lower Ninth Ward was created by non-residents. It included pieces such as an installation by Mark Bradford called “Mithra,” a massive wooden ark situated in an empty lot, which was striking visually, physically, and conceptually, and was likely conceived as a sort of wistful what-if – what if there had been sufficient transportation to get people out from a flooded neighborhood instead of leaving them to die. Yet I found the implications of the ark, which connotes the biblical tale of Noah being spared while his sinful compatriots were left to drown, to be extremely troublesome, particularly given both the horrifying number of deaths, which in most cases occurred precisely because people without cars were not provided by the city or state with the means to leave, and against the backdrop of anti-black and openly hateful rhetoric spewed in the wake of the storm, in which the notion of an “act of God” cleansing Sin City of its undesirables was common parlance.

international art biennial to the U.S., in order to boost New Orleans's post-Katrina economy and tourism industry, and to offer an opportunity for artists to exhibit in a high-profile exhibition, it also functioned to bring visitors – for free, in frequently-operating shuttles – all around the city, far beyond the usual (and largely white) areas of the city frequented by tourists, while giving them artistic means (and unofficial tour guides driving the shuttles) through which to understand something about these sites.

During this art festival, visitors to New Orleans had several opportunities to see Mardi Gras Indian suits displayed in mainstream venues. Though not sponsored by Prospect.1, during the time it was up two suits created by Big Chief Alfred Doucette were displayed in the windows of Peaches, a record shop in a particularly heavily touristed area of the French Quarter. The beadwork on these suits was figurative: one depicted a slave ship on the torso, and below on the apron was an image of black men being lynched and hung from trees; the other suit depicted a proud Indian brave above, and below, Native Americans in what appeared to be a New Orleans cemetery in which the central mausoleum was on fire. Perhaps these suits – which, to an untrained onlooker would likely appear both beautiful and exotic, and would also offer a fairly legible lesson on interpreting some aspects of Mardi Gras Indian practice – were there to attempt to entice visitors to the Prospect.1 exhibit at the NOMA of suits created by Big Chief Victor Harris and his tribe, the Spirit of the Fi Yi Yi Mandingo Warriors. Prospect.1's display of a multitude of suits was accompanied by a video showing interviews with Harris as well as footage of the tribe masking in the street. The suits were positioned throughout the exhibition rooms, in kinetic-looking poses that made it appear as though the warriors were poised to dance, or perhaps to attack.

Jazz Fest and Prospect.1 display and make available what these practices look like: they offer visitors a glimpse of their aesthetic qualities, in some cases with information that supports an interpretation of their meaning and function, and in others, without it. For some visitors this may well translate to a genuine appreciation for the artistry, which is indeed noteworthy and profound, and may potentially stimulate some combination of curiosity to seek what is below the surface representations, and catalyze the investment that makes this possible. This appreciation may be facilitated as well by the fact that throughout Jazzfest there are opportunities for further engagement beyond the staged (and stagey) “second-lines” and performances of Indians singing/playing the traditional repertoire, by way of the “heritage” component of the festival, which, through the interviews, panel discussions, craft pavilions, and museum representation, give the practices and their practitioners voice in a medium that outsiders can access. But it is also an example of what David Theo Goldberg might call the racial state's “management of heterogeneity” – in this case by way of making it knowable, reducing it to its most elementary, aesthetic, appropriate-able, and commodifiable aspects – or what bell hooks might call “eating the other.” In the 1995 article that I cited above, Regis characterizes the controlled imitation of these practices by or for tourists (brass bands or second-line organizations performing for pay at Jazz Fest or in the French Quarter or at conventions, while white tourists wave handkerchiefs and grin for the camera) as “minstrelsy,” and in a 2008 article that she co-wrote with Shana Walton – both of whom are participants in, lovers of, and rigorous ethnographers of Jazz Fest – they offer the following critical analysis:

Blackness and other forms of otherness are central to producing a concentrated experience of cosmopolitanism [at Jazz Fest] and to constructing a ‘hip’ identity. Festgoers and producers are ‘in the know’ about the folk, even as they are separated from them by race, class, and/or education. Those who produce the folk participate in an imaginary leveling of difference, while festival visitors experience the spine-tingling

transcendence of musical communion. At the same time, folk artists, demonstrators, vendors, and performers are tightly disciplined by the structures that specify precise limits on what they can and cannot do. A close examination of the production of culture at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival reveals a reproduction of a racialized social structure in which people of color (mostly African Americans) and other ‘folks’ are sidelined while owner-commissioners are able to control presentation and production.<sup>148</sup>

In many ways, both Jazz Fest and Prospect.1 appropriate the traditions of the “folk” by mobilizing and displaying their enticingly magical properties, which I think helps to explain why such festivals are so successful in achieving their appeal as well as their unintentional reiteration of the exclusionary structures that Regis and Walton cite above. But magical though they be, these properties are not necessarily mobilized in ways that share the same affinities with magical realism as do the performances that occur in the street, in the ways I elaborated in the first section. As we have seen, one of the things that defines magical realism is the element that we experience as readers of the juxtaposition of two fully-developed worlds (one that we recognize as reality, and the other as magical) co-existing simultaneously and not interrupting one another; Jazz Fest does not possess that quality, because it is wholly a festival, a site where the daily grind of reality is suspended, but not in any way that threatens, subverts, or calls its structures into question: rather, the powerful forces and structures that circumscribe reality are reinforced. Everything at the festival is heightened, so no particular sort of heightening effect makes apparent its difference, or indicates a critical stance. Considering the appearance of Jazz Fest in terms of Faris’s five characteristics of magical realism, it does seem that the festival offers visitors what Faris calls “the irreducible element of magic,” a fully-fleshed-out representation of Louisiana’s cultural, musical, and gustatory gems. There is an extent to which Jazz Fest is *the* site where the narrative mode in which the Indians are indeed interpellated as Big Chiefs not only by their own people but by the core of white liberal or bohemian New Orleans (those who are affiliated with universities, certain non-profits, the music scene, the Jazz and Heritage Foundation, WWOZ, certain newspapers, etc) is ratified, made flesh; is able to exist unmolested and uncontested within the bounds of the fairgrounds for a few days. In this sense, Jazz Fest may be the most thorough place where the magical is able to flourish and indeed to take shape as a temporary reality.

However, it is really only a representation of the *images* of this ostensible “irreducible” magic, and I argue that in the context of the Jazz Fest performances, the (representations of) street practices lose their critical edge. In Jazz Fest, the Indians and other spiritual practitioners whose “cultures” are put on display are to some degree reduced to practitioners of magical *thinking*: that is, because they are mere images, they can register as folkloric, exotic, superstitious, ethnographic objects possessing imaginary and quaint beliefs. They are fragmented, disconnected from the context in which they are understood and where their power registers, and the neighborhood to which they have a relationship; therefore they are separated from their spiritual and community significance, as well as from the terms of their critique. What is being celebrated is music as an aesthetic form, or culture and heritage in the sense that it is everyone’s inheritance, or even if the history of struggle that the Indians represent or to which they bear witness is being celebrated by people who have not shared in those same struggles. The Indians are hailed as Big Chiefs only within the context of the festival – say, in the same way that a “rational” modern Western museumgoer might “recognize” the spiritual leadership of a non-Western shaman whose healing paraphernalia are

---

<sup>148</sup> Regis and Walton 2008: 1.

displayed before the Westerner in a vitrine, that is, only as a sort of patronizing obligatory gesture of multiculturalism rather than as the follower of a leader. Thus, the history of struggle – and more importantly, the ongoing fact of it – is obscured in favor of ethnographic objecthood or narratives of redemption and triumph. The performances lose their critical edge. Moreover, Jazz Fest is not particularly invested in calling the terms of outside reality into serious question – for visitors to the festival, it’s a joyful departure from them, perhaps a welcome relief from the stress of their “real lives,” jobs, families, etc; and its primary reference to outside reality is to celebrate its “diversity” and “cultures” through the festival. Nor are the manifestations of the Africanist street performances operating for the benefit of their own people – it’s a performance from which most of the members of the communities are barred from entry by way of the steep admission fee.<sup>149</sup> Although the festival does interpellate the Indians as Indians and the Big Chiefs as Chiefs, a performative act that is on one hand felicitous because in the context of the festival everyone there goes along with it and also refers to them as such, on another is infelicitous because it takes place out of context, where they are not Chiefs to their tribes and where everyone there plays dress-up and pretend.

Prospect.1, on the other hand, does not separate these practices from the terms of their critique, which is one of the formations that bestow upon them their power. Certainly, the art biennial does to some extent offer a similar fragmentation: the suits are set forth in a museum gallery, objects in a darkened room illuminated by what Stephen Greenblatt calls “boutique lighting.” And while the element of jarring juxtaposition can be an important element of magical realist functioning, in an art exhibit there is a chance that this arrangement can reduce an otherwise uncanny and charged entity to an ordinary art object; its existence in the context of so many other strange and beautiful art objects can mean that its strangeness and magic doesn’t register as strongly as, say, an Indian suit does against the backdrop of a neighborhood that is both inhabited and “blighted.” Yet the display of Mardi Gras Indian culture, metonymically manifested through Harris’s suits, is hardly divorced from the terms of its critique.

While the exhibition contains all sorts of work – abstract, fanciful, joyful, hopeful, moody, dark, etc – that have no particular relationship, implicit or explicit, with the Indian suits or traditions, nonetheless in many ways the show sets forth the terms of critique rather thoroughly, by virtue of its wide-ranging, site-specific, and often quite intelligent artistic interpretations of Louisiana and New Orleans history. The suits and the video are located in NOMA, a large, neoclassical, very museumy space which one enters through a large formal foyer, filled with light, and hung, during the biennial, with the large charcoal-and-white-paint drawings done by nationally-known artist Willie Birch. His drawings are based on photographs that he takes of mostly banal, daily events – people, houses, parades, parties, cloud formations – in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, where he lives. In Prospect.1, a series of these drawings are called “Sweeping, Scrubbing, Washing, Healing: A Community Traumatized by Another Senseless Act of Violence,” which depicts several men washing the streets after a murder has taken place. In a *Times-Picayune* article, Brian Thevenot describes the context:

Willie Birch had talked to 20-year-old Corderro Davis less than an hour before his murder, on the corner of Pauger and North Villere streets, half a block from Birch's 7th Ward home.

As a crowd gathered around Davis' body, Birch unleashed his rage and grief.

---

<sup>149</sup> A ticket to a single day of the festival is \$45 in advance (or \$48 including the online Ticketmaster service fee), or \$60 at the door.



"This could be you!" he yelled at a group of young men. "Is this all you want out of your life?"

Later, he chided a police captain about what he saw as an undignified handling of the scene: the body exposed too long, blood and brain tissue left in the street. The next day, Birch and four other men brought brooms and buckets to the corner and scrubbed away the carnage. The act lifted them spiritually and today drives them to teach and counsel young men at The Porch, a 7th Ward cultural center they founded.

After Davis' slaying in late 2007, the violence continued apace last year in the 7th Ward, with at least 19 people killed. The patterns of murder in the old neighborhood, once a fabled breeding ground for African-American artists, lawyers and teachers, mirrored those seen across the city, where 179 people were killed in 2008.

Most 7th Ward victims were young black men, many killed in daylight. Most deaths barely registered outside circles of friends and family. And the vast majority remain unsolved.<sup>150</sup>

A visitor to NOMA during P.1 must thus pass through a brief foray into the geographic and social context from which the Indian suits and culture also emerge.<sup>151</sup>

At the CAC, another high-profile, mainstream venue, one of the first pieces you see when you walk in the museum, and to which most of the main room of the first floor is devoted – is a piece co-created by the artists/activists Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. Wallace is a member of the Angola 3: a prisoner of Angola State Penitentiary who has been in solitary confinement since 1972, after his co-founding of the Angola chapter of the Black Panther Party and involvement in efforts to end prisoner rape, facilitate race relations, and improve inhumane conditions, at which point he, Albert Woodfox, and Robert King Wilkerson were wrongly accused of the murder of a white guard and thrown into solitary confinement. King was released in 2001; Wallace and Woodfox remain incarcerated and in solitary confinement in other facilities. Sumell, an MFA student at Stanford, began corresponding with Wallace and at one point, asked him a question: "What kind of a house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?" His answers and their correspondence were translated into a collaborative and processual project that manifests as a set of displayable art objects (such as a model home, framed letters, life-sized mockup of the solitary cell that visitors can walk up to) as well as public panels and talks to educate members of the public about this wrongful incarceration and the larger problems of the highly racialized criminal "justice"

---

<sup>150</sup> Even if the visitors to the museum could not access this context in all its detail, Birch's work is quite eloquent, and specifically and explicitly takes up urban Black subject matter lovingly, critically, and with candor. See Brian Thevenot with the *Times Picayune*, "7th Ward residents wrestle with how a city can turn blind eye to continued killings," accessed on the Web at

<[http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/01/7th\\_ward\\_residents\\_wrestle\\_wit.html](http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/01/7th_ward_residents_wrestle_wit.html)> on October 2, 2011.

<sup>151</sup> Another piece that seems to be in dialogue with the Birch piece was to be found at the Old U.S. Mint, where a large stack of books – tomes, really – consisting of large-format round photographs of places mounted on the right side of each page spread, images of empty corners of the city shot in black and white. On the left of each spread, a large plate provides statistics: place, time taken, type of death, name and age and demographics of person killed, date of death. You realize that this is a compendium or archive of, or elegy for, hundreds of recent murders that have taken place in the city, as documented through Deborah Luster's photographs of the sites in a project called "A Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish." Some are cases of domestic violence; the majority of these deaths are of young black men. See the article "Photographer Deborah Luster's murderscapes are Prospect.1 reality check" by Doug MacCash with the *Times Picayune* at [http://blog.nola.com/dougmaccash/2008/11/photographer\\_deborah\\_lusters\\_m.html](http://blog.nola.com/dougmaccash/2008/11/photographer_deborah_lusters_m.html)). Accessed on October 2, 2010.

system and prison industrial complex, political agitation to get him freed, and a foundation that is in process of building the house to his specifications.<sup>152</sup>

Further from the beaten path, but still accessible (and made apparently “safe”) to tourists through the free shuttle system are works in the downtown neighborhoods of Tremé and the Lower Ninth Ward, and going to any of the exhibition spaces in those areas puts visitors close to the Backstreet Museum and the House of Dances and Feathers, as well as other neighborhood-run sites, that are given the opportunity to tell the stories they want told to visitors on their own terms. And Prospect.1 overall bursts with commentary about Katrina – some of which is fairly surface-level, much of which is quite complex, affecting, and incisive. Although it is important to note that in Prospect.1 not all blackness is equated with struggle or pain, nor is all struggle and pain in the exhibition equated with blackness, it is also the case that the biennial does establish, for visitors who take the time to visit multiple sites, the context in which and about which the street practices stage a critique. This situatedness in turn enables the display of Harris’s Afro-centric suits and Doucette’s explicitly narrative suits in the windows of Peaches Records to hint at the political potential of the performative returns to Africa and Congo Square, that the practices suggest.

Reducing the citational street practices to hollow images can sap their strength and power because it divests them of the Ashé they possess: to make critique and/or to operate as infrastructure within communities. Because Prospect.1 is devoted to site-specificity in the sense that the art works are situated in contexts that are crucial to the production of their meaning, and plays on their diasporic relevance, it situates the traditions’ practitioners not as ethnographic or primitive Others, lost in time, but rather enables the possibility of understanding the practices as semiotically complex acts of performative return. Yet in both cases, the site-specificity resonates mostly with their both/and-ness – their autochthonous and diasporic qualities – and the political significance of Congo Square and the resistant histories of Black New Orleans are less apparent; thus, the narrative becomes one of *cultural* rather than *political* resistance. The displays are not depoliticized, but they are not politicized as strongly or on quite the same terms that the communities that keep these traditions engage them.

Joel Dinerstein characterizes “black expressive culture in New Orleans” as being persistently “overexposed and underanalyzed.”<sup>153</sup> Dan Cameron and the artists and curators of Prospect New Orleans, and many scholars, artists, and filmmakers – including David Simon and Eric Overmyer – who produce highly researched and thoughtful representations of New Orleans in social justice efforts are unlikely to be accused of a lack of analysis. Yet as specific, loving, accurate, and important as Simon’s work is, and however gratifying it is to be “in the know” about New Orleans and see it represented in the ways it is in this series and in contexts like Prospect.1 and (sometimes) even Jazz Fest, still I feel a kind of ambivalence in watching these practices be translated in such detail. Who is viewing, and what will they do with this? Whose business, really, is the significance of Mardi Gras Indian culture to anyone other than Mardi Gras Indians and the people they choose to share their practices with? Regis writes:

Professional second-liners are involved in a process of bringing their ‘tradition’ to audiences who would not otherwise have access to it. Yet, even if it is the intention of these paid performers to ‘bring’ their culture to others, they inevitably leave significant

---

<sup>152</sup> See, among other sources, *The House That Herman Built*, Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace (Stuttgart: merz&solitude, 2007); “The Angola Three,” <http://www.angola3.org/default.aspx>; and “The House That Herman Built,” <http://www.hermanshouse.org/>.

<sup>153</sup> Dinerstein 2009: 615.

aspects of second lining in the “back of town” neighborhoods. Moreover, some performers consciously “hold back” certain things that are not intended for outsiders. [...] These performances, in the words of the Nigerian critic Ikem Okoye, are “meant to be misunderstood by a certain group of people” (1998.)<sup>154</sup>

There is a striking moment – and perhaps a self-reflexive one – close to the beginning of season one of *Treme*. During the course of Chief Lambreaux’s efforts to reassemble his tribe, he comes across the corpse of one of his members, Jesse, who apparently drowned while trying to escape by boat. He and his tribe are treated coldly by Jesse’s relatives, who disapprove of Indian culture and masking; they are asked not to speak at the funeral. Since their cultural and spiritual affiliation bars them from participating in Jesse’s official last rites, Lambreaux and some other Indians hold a memorial ceremony on their own near Jesse’s house in the Lower Ninth Ward. However, the sacrosanct nature and privacy of the ritual is ruptured by the sudden arrival of a tour bus full of gawking visitors who want to witness Katrina’s damage, and although the bus driver and tourists seem to be ashamed and embarrassed when they realize their desire for catharsis via a scopic affirmation of suffering amounts to an act of voyeurism, nonetheless, the damage is done: the memorial event is transformed – belittled, exoticized, and ruined – by the tourist gaze upon it.<sup>155</sup>

This moment seems to speak to the tension that exists between, on one hand, the necessity of penetrating beyond what the mainstream media tells us in order to know about and be outraged by the insidious operations of domination, and the fact that the complexity of witnessing is always bound up in questions of action and reciprocity. Seeing without the contextualization to understand what is being seen, without the intent or capacity to translate knowledge to action, or without the knowledge and/or humility to take action in a way that is productive for those who are suffering may be as or more damaging than invisibility. In her important book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman chooses not to reproduce the scene in which Frederick Douglass’s Aunt Hester is beaten in order to call attention to the ease with which such violent spectacles are normally re-cited, to the ways in which they become easily naturalized by virtue of their oft-repeated nature, and to the ways in which violence continues to be enacted through the consumption, empathy, and re-presentation of spectacular scenes of violence, as the suffering body is erased.<sup>156</sup> She writes: “Is the act of witnessing a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment?” (Hartman 1997: 22). Hartman’s fears regarding witnessing arise in instances in which those doing the looking are at a safe distance, and instances in which the nature of suffering is spectacular; legible without explanation; captivating, horrific, and visceral. These fears also

---

<sup>154</sup> Regis 1999: 475.

<sup>155</sup> “Right Place, Wrong Time,” S1E3.

<sup>156</sup> She writes: “What interests me are the ways in which we are called upon to participate in such scenes [of spectacular violence, i.e. the whipping of Frederick Douglass’s enslaved Aunt Hester]. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering? [...] At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays? (Hartman 1997: 3-4)

arise out of an examination of a particular genealogy of highly visible displays of black bodies in pain, one which stems from contexts of American slavery, in which agency, sentience, and legal and discursive status as a human being were – and continue to be – violently denied to black people. The people doing the looking and witnessing, according to her analysis, are generally people whose wholeness and well-being is not immediately threatened by the other's suffering, and who are therefore in a position to further distance the suffering enslaved from sight, sentience, and humanity, by virtue of their empathic response which substitutes the observer in the sufferer's place, thereby committing still another layer of violence.

The affluent white tourists on the bus – safe in their distance from experiencing the horrors of the flood or its aftermath, far removed experientially and positionally from most of the inhabitants of the Lower Ninth Ward, knew they had seen something that wasn't their business and they retreated, but it was too late for the terms of the ritual not to be altered: frozen, reduced, apparently knowable, placing the tourists in the position – like it or not – of deciding how to treat the people and event they had encountered. The very structures of power and positionality of which Simon and Overmyer are so articulately critical position them, many members of their audience, and many would-be good-doers, including the curators and organizers of Prospect.1 and Jazz Fest, in the position of knowing, “discovering,” revealing. They become the keepers of the knowledge of those whom Regis calls “the folk” and the decision-makers about how that knowledge is to be disseminated, while positioning those about whom they speak, the bearers of culture, to be the knowable subjects – or objects, thus inadvertently but inevitably repeating the sort of dynamics that Regis critiques in the context of Jazz Fest, and, as they place narratives and images of violence and suffering as focal points of the narrative, being haunted by those insidious ones that Hartman describes.

An important part of the way that representing New Orleans street traditions works to expose the racism, classism, and antiblackness that is embedded in and often constitutive of the infrastructures upon which American citizens must rely is by the way in which the Indians and second-line organizations function as an example: how they are located structurally means that, if someone (whether that someone is Sylvester Francis or Ronald Lewis in their respective museums, or David Simon on HBO) is documenting or narrating their stories, what happens to them serves as evidence of a broken system. The facts of these groups' organization and affiliation – that is, membership is based around neighborhood, and in particular, historic black working class neighborhoods – means that when the kind of displacement that was sanctioned by the state after the storm happens on a large scale, it is they who are no longer present in the city and/or who are the most vulnerable and incapacitated if and when they do return. This explains, in part, why it has become so compelling and frequent a practice to use them as metaphors. At the same time, they are used to stand in for how blackness in southern Louisiana is unique, but also how New Orleanian and Louisianan culture more generally are unique; are particularly other but particularly American in not-entirely-paradoxical ways. Especially post-Katrina, these are the practices mobilized to explain “why New Orleans matters”: what this place, and in particular, black vernacular culture has contributed in deeply constitutive ways to larger American culture. These practices come to function as a kind of mirror or measure of how successful racialized and class-coded resistance is, how much it is or isn't circumscribed by the racial state, and as a kind of compass or even prediction of how New Orleans's own renewal is coming along – where it succeeds or fails. They also function as a mirror for the ways in which black self-determination has been persistently pathologized and criminalized, and produces massive anxiety on the part of the state – and also how it is constantly poached by others. A lot of symbolic weight is put upon the Indians and second-

lines – some of which is accepted and participated in, and some of which is imposed by the “third-line”: the documentarians and narrators who have produced this salient and constitutive body of New Orleans literature that largely determines how it is interpellated, understood, traveled to, and acted upon by people from outside and therefore has a relationship to how it is acted upon from within.

Part of what is slippery about the ramifications of a performative return that claims site-specific origins, then – that is, with claiming both a strong diasporic affinity and an intense rootedness in local social, cultural, and political realities – has to do with the way that these narratives are often perceived by outsiders to the traditions as being both discursively available and more broadly applicable. The act of claiming separatism and difference from the mainstream, aligning oneself with a history of terror and a response of militancy, resistance, and spirituality, is very appealing, and it is easy – particularly post-Katrina – to surrogate that narrative as a metaphor for the travails of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast at large. But while some of this may be productive, it is important to note the lurking violence of appropriation and of identification across vast power disparities: collapsing and substituting one form of suffering for another effaces those who have suffered most and magically sets others who are less impacted in their stead.

#### **when you call my Indian red**

By pointing out the profound violence of slavery and its ongoing structural and psychic effects, and referencing the multiple genocides that underpinned the amassing of white possession, by placing slavery, genocide, Maroonage, and complex understandings of freedom front and center, and by putting grievance, loss, displacement, and freedom into stark perspective, Black street traditions have historically, and continue to, quite explicitly insist that slavery, violence, and racism are not unspeakable but rather are *necessarily and crucially* speakable. But even as they bear witness to and insist on foregrounding loss and violence, they also tell an oppositionally romantic origin myth that is bound up in retention and resistance. The origins they call up are about, on one hand, revisionist historiography: the romantic vision of a world inhabited by their ancestors that existed prior to this one and that was untainted by white men, by the institutionalization of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans, and by American capitalist “democracy” that protects structures of domination and disparity; and on the other, a vigilant presentism manifested through efforts to create, in the gaps left in the infrastructure, alternative economies, networks, and communities that attempt to replicate and/or invent those that came about previously or – because of the fact that these structures did exist and do have ongoing ramifications – have always been deferred. These practices, then, are both celebratory and critical at the same time, and they speak to origins that occupy multiple temporalities and spatialities. These origins rely on a centrality of place – the Congo Square mythology and diasporic/autochthonous dichotomy, and contain very particular forms of power that are mobilized by the traditions that cite them. This power, or magic, or performativity, is the ability to get things done; is that which makes things happen: in some instances, it is a power to enact (whereby magic = power = action), and in others it is a power to envision (whereby magic = conjuring = vision). But it is a power that cannot quite be accounted for or explained; it is somewhat uncanny. Perhaps therein lies the secret: the myths of origins that animate the performance traditions possess an unquantifiable, inexplicable, impossible, contingent, and wholly powerful (and powerless) form of felicitousness.

I have argued that the street practices are, among other things, a critique of reality – of the conditions of it and of the terms by which it is conferred and meted out; an offering of an ensemble of alternative realities, and an acknowledgement of the limitations of both the larger forces and the local traditions. They acknowledge genealogies of loss and displacement, and

intervene in these narratives to constitute and celebrate what has emerged in their place, as well as to acknowledge what is missing, impossible, unfulfilled, violently perpetrated, and violently denied. The ways these practices operate as a public practice and the ways they operate as a set of internally focused survival strategies are linked, relying on and being deeply imbricated in one another. They are both about hammering out a survival strategy and acknowledging the power that they do have, *while* working against and critiquing the larger forces that circumscribe them, over which they do not have power, and which have circumscribed the ways and contexts in which they *do* have power. They work within their communities to provide what is needed to survive, while issuing public critiques that operate on their own and become available for others' representational and social justice projects that possess more power to be mobilized in service of these communities – yet simultaneously engage a strategy of invisibility or opacity in order to control the ways in which these practices are apprehended. Ultimately, then, felicitousness is a way of understanding: (1) how these practices are situated and the limits and the capacities they have; and (2) how they are articulated by their practitioners in relation to these limits and capacities.

The topsy-turvy relationship between make-believe and reality, past and present, that is exemplified by and amplified during Mardi Gras season's carnivalesque masking traditions can also be found throughout the year; there exist many different realities, on different scales, that coexist with and contest one another and often barely recognize one another's existence, each with different rules and parameters of "real"-ness. The question of whether something is felicitous hinges on the question and the answers of whose reality is realer, and on which scale an act is being registered. (Do the neighborhood organizations recognize – and concede to – the power of the state to regard their members as not fully human? Does the police officer recognize Tootie's legendary chieftainship, or see him as a fungible working class black man, the antagonism of whom will not mar his policing record? Do the neighborhood organizations need the dominant cultural structures that ruptured them in the first place to have the power to survive, or can they operate under the radar to provide for their own? Do the well-meaning but reductive representations of street culture from outsiders in fact hail Black Indian Chiefs as Chiefs and accord them that power, or do they sap that power by removing them from the context that provides the strength/power to level a critique and provide for their own? And/or is power, or felicitousness, measured in the enactment of a critique because it divests reality of its legitimacy and reveals its contingent and constructed nature?)

The stakes of being legible to and provided for by "the system" are high: Katrina and the ethnic cleansing occurring in its wake make it patently clear what happens to those who aren't a priority to it. But as Austin points out, even when a performative is uttered under infelicitous circumstances, it is still uttered, and it still then registers in the world.

This does not mean, of course, to say that we won't have done anything: lots of things will have been done [i.e. if one takes the marriage vow in the infelicitous context of already being married] – we shall most interestingly have committed the act of bigamy – but we shall *not* have done the purported act, viz. marrying. [...] Further, 'without effect' does not here mean 'without consequences, results, effects.'<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, Second Edition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962, 1975), 17. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds.

Performances of rebellion – whether this takes the form of organized reform in the wake of urban renewal or the politicized and spiritual Africanist performance genres – may change the given circumstances on a small level, and/or are symbolic. Yet they *do* quite effectively point to the entrenched nature of power, and in some ways this is part of their great value – as descriptive and analytical rather than necessarily antidotal, and in their ability to *envision* freedom dreams, even if they do not have the structural means to fully enact them. Ronald Lewis is quoted in *The House of Dance and Feathers* catalogue as saying:

Coming out of slavery, being African American wasn't socially acceptable. By masking like Native Americans, it created an identity of strength. The Native Americans, under all the pressure and duress, would not concede. These people were almost drove into extinction to maintain their way of life. And the same kind of feeling, coming out of slavery, 'You're not going to give us a place here in society, we'll create our own.' In masking, they paid respect for and homage to the Native American for using their identity and making a social statement that despite the odds, you're still not going to stop (pg 65).<sup>158</sup>

The most sacred of Mardi Gras Indian songs – for lack of a better word – although it is much more like a sacramental invocation – is “My Indian Red,” which opens and closes Indian practices and rituals, and in which the Big Chief names and calls the members of his tribe by position, and which features a repetition of the lyrics:

I've got my Spyboy [or other position, including in the last verse “I am the Big Chief”]  
 Spyboy  
 Spyboy of the nation  
 The whole wild creation  
 We won't bow down (We won't bow down)  
 Not on the ground (The dirty ground)  
 Because [or “but how”] I love it when you call my Indian Red

The ethos of “We won't bow down,” which is sometimes encapsulated in the phrase “Won't bow – don't know how,” is in part a proposal for a different kind of efficacy – a notion of legitimacy and felicitousness that cannot be measured quantitatively, broken down into

---

<sup>158</sup> This registers quite closely with Saidiya Hartman's theorizing of supplication in *Lose Your Mother*. She writes: “I had grown weary of pleading our case and repeating our complaint. It seems to me that there is something innately servile about making an appeal to a deaf ear or praying for relief to an indifferent and hostile court or expecting remedy from a government unwilling even to acknowledge that slavery was a crime against humanity. [...] “I couldn't help but think of Josiah Wedgwood's famous antislavery medallion of the chained slave on bended knee, begging in supplication, ‘Am I not a man and brother?’ [...] “Of course, once you have assumed the position of supplicant and find yourself genuflecting before the court or the bar of public opinion, then, like the strapping man on the medallion, you have conceded the battle. It is hard to demand anything when you are on bended knee or even to keep your head raised. And you can forget trying to counter the violence that has landed you on your knee in the first place. Being so low to the ground, it is difficult not to grovel or to think of freedom as a gift dispensed by a kind benefactor or to imagine that your fate rests in the hands of a higher authority, a great emancipator, the state, or to implore that you are human too. ‘Am I not a man and brother?’ Having to ask such a question, no doubt, would have made the petitioner's nostrils flare with anger and perspiration bead on his forehead and the bile rise to the back of his throat.” [see introduction document for the next section, about the enslaved as our contemporaries as a bid for freedom, a fight to establish a better world.] – Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, pgs 166-170.

definitive successes or failures. The repudiation of supplication is also about a repudiation of the official infrastructure as having the ultimate capacity to confer status and legitimation, to consolidate and mete out power, and render acts felicitous. If the system in question doesn't recognize one's humanity, how can it confer – or refuse to confer – legitimacy to one's history or actions? If instead, as Elie suggests, dignity is cultivated elsewhere – privately, within families, within communities, and under the radar – it cannot be granted by the state or the dominant culture, whether it is asked for by supplication, begging, or prostrating, by organized reform, or by militancy.

My interpretation of this most sacred of chants is that it names the potential for an utterance to become a legitimating act, explicitly attributing to language the power to confer status, and recognizing the extent of that power. As a speech act it is sung, it is surrounded by ritual, and it becomes profane when not uttered under the right circumstances and by the right people. There are a number of covers of the song, including by non-Indians. But these are still a kind of tribute – Dr. John's version acknowledges the centrality of the speech act to the song when he calls out the names of each of the Big Chiefs and their tribes, as well as the claim of ownership that the song makes on space, time, and ritual: "Y'all get out the way, this here the Indians' day." Certainly these covers, when done irreverently, threaten to sap the Indians' power, to reposition the power of the state, the mainstream, the profane and antiblackness to appropriate, harass, displace, and exterminate them. But there is also a way in which the reverential tribute covers may constitute felicitous interpellations – hailing the Indians as Indians, calling their Indian red. When you "call my Indian red" it can be a felicitous performative speech act, recognizing the tribes' status as Indians, as warriors, as Chiefs, as a link to the past in a genealogy of literal (i.e. ancestral bloodlines) and affiliative Maroon resistance. But it also has to do with who is hailing and how: such a hail can be infelicitous, even when well-intentioned, if it displaces the tradition from the source of its power.

Cultural geographers talk about scale in terms of the body, the home, community, nation, global – and the interconnected relationship between one scale and the other, so that the interactions between individuals are mediated and produced by global flows, meanings, and networks. Tootie Montana was a Big Chief on a number of scales: the tribe, the neighborhood, a community of like-minded and/or sympathetic folks (WWOZ and Jazz Fest enthusiasts, journalists, etc). He was recognized and rewarded by the state on some levels – i.e. by the "culture" wing, or soft state, through his NEA awards, funding that enabled museum programming about his "craft," and other such manifestations. But according to the state as it is manifested in terms of police, in terms of a long and deeply entrenched regime of antiblack racism maintained by "common sense" that has been naturalized through performativity and enforced by state power, the status of chief is imaginary rather than felicitous: it did not prevent him from being attacked by and ultimately dying on account of these forces. And more than half a decade after the storm, the same people continue to slip through the safety net that didn't catch them before it, either. But the efforts to create an alternative infrastructure and to call attention to, critically respond to, and work to change oppressive regimes are also ongoing. Some of it takes place by way of legible means, while some of it is by means of magical realist performances that stage a critique of reality. And what an infrastructure is able to accomplish, ultimately, is an interconnected and mutually-agreed-upon regime or architecture that is able to provide for its constituents' needs and to grant legitimacy, entitlement, and belonging, with their accompanying rights and privileges (and simultaneously to exact their accompanying responsibilities). With all this comes the power to render acts felicitous or to deny them this status.



Ultimately, I understand these magical genres to be a way of articulating an analysis of and relationship to power, and I posit that the notion of felicitousness helps us understand the way they operate on a variety of scales – simultaneously seizing the reins in order to arbitrate the terms on one scale – to determine certain aspects of their own reality, and even to structure the language and terms of others' (insiders' and outsiders') realities. On one hand, the fantastical vision of reality that these forms articulate is so appealing that it comes to produce alternative infrastructures, to generate belief and desire in its insiders and outsiders. On the other, this under-the-radar realm of magical forms, ritual, and memory is the only place where agency or power is to be had and can be exercised, since structural power is largely inaccessible to people at the bottom of a societal system of hierarchies: the practices and the people who practice them are constantly reminded of the limitations of these visionary alternatives, because of the ways in which they are circumscribed by violence, white supremacy, the racial state, and a large official broken infrastructure, all of which are to a large degree the final arbiters – although they cannot fully contain or put a stop to these persistent magical realist critiques.

**SECTION TWO**

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**Open Signifiers of Immigration, Italian-ness, and the Port-of-Entry:**  
**on the possibilities and limitations of liberal multiculturalism**

**introduction**

The ferries that take visitors to Ellis Island from Lower Manhattan – departing from a port that, nearly a decade ago, would have been virtually in the shadow of the World Trade Center – also make stops at the Statue of Liberty, although you cannot get off spontaneously, because the Liberty Island tours are booked half a year in advance. And both sites apparently compel visitors of every stripe – every race, color, and creed – speaking every language I can think of: during a trip to Ellis Island in July of 2009, I see tourists from other countries, tourists from other parts of the U.S., tourists hailing from local climes. Nearly everyone’s cameras come out as we pass the Statue and the old immigration station; some people take out their tissues and wipe their eyes; people hold their babies up or pose as families in front of it. The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island circuit is one of the fundamentals of New York tourism, because it encompasses two of the most central and most sacred symbols of America.

As Leo Chavez documents in his work on immigration propaganda and visual culture, the image of the Statue of Liberty is recycled for use in a wide-ranging number of contexts, often with radically different political and representational agendas.<sup>159</sup> Although it does not migrate visually in the same ways, discursively Ellis Island and the Ellis Island immigration narrative have, as Matthew Frye Jacobson argues, become the very basis of the national imaginary and of the American Dream.<sup>160</sup> What is implicit in the “nation of immigrants” configuration is whiteness, agency, and incorporation: visions of waves of downtrodden, resilient, self-reliant, hard-working pre-1924 European immigrants coming in search of a better life, and finding it by way of their sheer grit, tenacity, talent, work ethic, and willingness to assimilate.

I turn now to examine the widespread, liberal-multiculturalist notion that the immigrant narrative can serve as an “open signifier” that functions as a one-size-fits-all mechanism for approaching and engaging with ethnic, racial, national, and religious difference in the United States. This chapter is an examination of this well-meaning and convenient narrative, its generative potential as well as the blindspots and problematic assumptions embedded in its rhetoric. On one hand, I consider this narrative’s shortcomings and dangers. These limitations often stem from a crucial misunderstanding, on the part of white ethnics and middle class liberals, of the significant differences between structural or institutional racism and personal or representational racialism or racist behaviors, and stem also from a fraught relationship to whiteness mediated at once by its privileges and invisibility, and by its ongoing and enforced deferral. It is also an effort to identify contexts in which the narrative of liberal multiculturalism might present a viable vision of inclusion and an apt critique of the American racial state, rather than a dangerous reinscription of racialized hierarchy that depends, at once, on the aestheticization and commodification, *and* the elision, of difference. This potential emerges when the narrative is constructed in a way that more closely resembles a truly anti-racist global perspective committed to structural and perceptual change and justice.

This is a study of three sites of knowledge production and citizen-interpellation, each of which invokes familiar narratives of liberal multiculturalism, the nation of immigrants, the urban port-of-entry, and the American Dream. I situate this interrogation in New York City,

---

<sup>159</sup> See Chavez 2001.

<sup>160</sup> See Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*, 2006.

the busiest and most mythic port-of-entry in the United States for both pre-1924 and post-1965 immigration, and consider three sites that play an important role in proposing and reifying iterations of this narrative. Two of the sites, Ellis Island and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, are located on turf that was central to pre-1924 mass immigration waves and has come to constitute the mise-en-scene and spatial origin for the staging of the American Dream. The interpretations of immigration and its place in American history at each museum evince a nuanced, critical engagement with the global forces and migrations (not limited to European immigrants, or even to “immigration” per se) that have peopled the United States, and a nuanced understanding of the spatially and temporally contingent interplay of immigration and racialization/racial formation. Belmont, the third site, is an historic Italian immigrant neighborhood in the South Bronx whose leaders chose, in an effort to keep the community intact and resist deterioration in the face of population turnover, urban renewal, and urban blight, to enact a concerted revitalization plan that marketed the neighborhood on a regional basis as “the *Real* Little Italy in the Bronx!”

Attending to three sites that employ the immigrant narrative in their efforts to appeal and relate to their audiences and to attempt to productively address racialized and economic disparity and the social rifts that emerge from them, I argue that in each case, this narrative accomplishes very paradoxical performative work. Often simultaneously, the sites revise the meaning of the narrative such that it refers to a “port of entry” that welcomes not only immigrants, and not only those from Europe, but anyone who arrives (in the neighborhood, in the city, in the nation) seeking to belong within that entity’s real and imagined community(s). At the same time that this interpretation smacks of naïve idealism and/or the insidiously ahistoric appeals to “colorblindness” that are bolstered by liberal individualism’s refusal to see or address conditions of disparity – and it does – this port-of-entry narrative is also in several cases accompanied by very careful, incisive, and undeniably progressive education about, and advocacy for, networks of social welfare: official and under-the-radar safety nets that belie and contradict the tyranny of the bootstraps myth. The way that the narrative trope of immigration is subjected to these revisions and configured as more flexible is apparent in various instances as a somewhat general reconfiguration of the Ellis Island story, but is employed especially thoroughly and specifically in the Belmont community’s self-branding as an authentic Italian neighborhood. In this case, the revision of the narrative manifests as a tacit proposal that it is the Ellis Island narrative more generally and ethnic Italianness specifically that serve as the open signifier that is to enable all of the area’s residents to be visible, incorporated, and their needs attended to because of an ethic of collectivity upheld by the notion of the port-of-entry. Italian-ness is a convenient open signifier, because of the ways it is both successfully white and deferred; alien and knowable; etc. That is, it may at times be constructed as exotic or authentic (wbut only after whiteness – with its accompanying lack of specificity and access to power – is achieved), or as undesirable, unshakably other – namely, through associations with criminality, anarchy, and un-American-ness.<sup>161</sup> The savviness of this branding lies in the fact that it is deployed by community leaders, most of whom possess a sophisticated understanding of power and racialized and economic disparity, because it is a

---

<sup>161</sup> Italian-American-ness is a salient example on account of the particular ways that it both echoes and diverges from other forms of white ethnicity: unlike Judaism, Italian Catholicism was not figured as a racial category but was potentially regarded as un-American, subject to anti-Papist nativism; Italian Americans were also categorically associated with organized crime. Equally noteworthy are the ways in which Italianness is very successfully assimilated, in particular as a positive and familiar (and therefore safe, and safely white and American) ethnicity, especially in relation to food and place and the ways in which Italy has been construed as a desirable travel destination.

marketing strategy that works – generating funding and affective identification on the part of long-term residents and tourists precisely because of its being so legible, and, indeed, politically and affectively loaded. This affective commitment then translates to residents’ sense of ownership and community, which in turn generates their production and maintenance of social and institutional safety nets that are available to catch not only those who fit the demographic profile of the Ellis Island immigrant, but also the majority of its residents who fall outside of it.

However, haunting each site’s genuinely inclusive enactments is that fact that privileging the immigrant narrative effaces forms of arrival and racial formation that fall outside of this paradigm (i.e. Native American and African American) and implies that they either need to find a way to fit into this immigration narrative or that they are not actually a legitimate part of the body politic. Moreover, the deeply entrenched dominant narratives and belief-structures that determine how difference is conceived and how resources are distributed, which are both anti-black and anti-immigrant and have no place at all for dealing with settler colonialism, not to mention the fact that they are steeped in colorblind doctrine and neoliberal multiculturalism, often – discursively and on the ground – trump these inclusive efforts, enabling what Bonilla-Silva calls “racism without racists.”

The chapter is organized by way of a kind of funneling analysis, in terms of the scope and scale of 1) the discursive resonance of the site, 2) the physical/literal number of people that see it and are interpellated by it, and 3) from public to private in the sense of being purely a tourist operation, to a museum that interprets historical individuals and families and is situated in a living neighborhood, to a community where the on-the-ground negotiations of race, space, and belonging are urgent, contemporary, and ongoing. It begins with a consideration of the two significant, large-scale public tourism operations that physically interpellate vast numbers of people (two million visitors pass through Ellis Island each year; thousands visit the Tenement Museum as well, including 44,000 students each year<sup>162</sup>), from curious locals to visitors from all around the world; individuals and countless school groups alike. They are located in sites that give them an historic aura and thus a particular affective power over their guests, and this factor in addition to their museum status gives them the institutional authority to function as powerful sites of knowledge production about the nature of American immigration, citizenship, and belonging; as visitors explore these sites the institutions have the opportunity to contest, negotiate, and/or bolster widely-circulating discourses on these themes. At the same time, they – particularly Ellis Island – circulate/s as discourses themselves, often exceeding or quite independent of the actual institution. Belmont, too, is included as a site of knowledge production to these ends, one that straddles the boundaries of being a tourist operation – a performance for a public hungry for authenticity – and a very local and specific neighborhood employing these narratives in often-surprising ways in order to negotiate the demographic and paradigm shifts of the postwar and post-civil rights era. It is a case study of an ethnic enclave faced with a series of urban crises – typical of a certain moment in time, but also typical of the trajectories of many similar neighborhoods since the 60s – and is forced to act in relation to them. Although there are more than a few instances of *reactive* response (many of which are overtly destructive, and usually undeniably racist), due to the efforts of a number of civic leaders Belmont was able, generally speaking, to be *proactive* in its response, and these leaders in particular were instrumental in the initiation of a method of place-making, of creative world-making, that involves the production and performance of a salvageable ethnic

---

<sup>162</sup>Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc., accessed October 31, 2010 [http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis\\_island\\_history.asp](http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island_history.asp), and Tenement Museum: About: Our Story, accessed October 31, 2010 <<http://www.tenement.org/about.html>>

Italian immigrant past, the contours of which are reflected in and exceed the work the museums do.

By performances I refer to framed representations of the past, of history, of ethnicity, and of place, that are produced according to a set of collectively agreed-upon narratives or scripts, for an audience, in order to make public commentary about the nature of this entity (i.e. the past, ethnicity, place, etc). These include behaviors, speech, gestures etc that, when performed, signify ethnic particularity, as well as tourism displays, neighborhood revitalization projects, festivals, reunions, oral histories, and the activities of consumption – eating and shopping – that are specific to contexts such as Belmont that construct themselves and their visitors as participating in a framework whereby it is imperative that the goods be “authentic” to temporal and ethnic Others. They also include the content of displays, tours, shopping experiences, and the location in historically-charged, palimpsesting sites the Ellis Island and Tenement museums offer. These performances are only meaningful and constitutive within a larger context of performativity. One way that this emerges is through this notion of the open signifier: the idea that there is a gap or a space in a narrative that is already predetermined but into which different individuals (or ethnicities, or communities) can and are expected to fit, and it in turn is flexible enough to accommodate them. Both repetition and revision are built in and assumed. The revision or range of variations are supposed to affirm the validity, flexibility, rightness, and universality of the narrative; and the repetition affirms the same as well as the appropriateness and welcomeness of different groups. The immigration/port-of-entry narrative is the open signifier that is deployed most frequently and studiously throughout each of these sites, and Belmont renders it more specific with an invocation of Italian-ness.

My analysis is indebted to the work that scholars in whiteness studies have done, and in particular those who have addressed Italian/-American-ness’s interstitial qualities – and who have ultimately concluded that the structural privileges of whiteness have long accrued to Italian/-Americans.<sup>163</sup> This is not a study of how, why, and when Italians became white, nor of their perceptions of whether they are; rather, it begins at a moment when they unquestionably were so, and engages questions of what they in particular and other white ethnics more generally *do* with that status, and with their memories of struggle and discrimination. It examines a set of practices and discourses that Jacobson so thoroughly situates in *Roots Too*; the contextualization of the “roots phenomenon”, and in particular the latching-on of white ethnics to it, has been instrumental to my understanding of how the practices and sites I discuss are situated both historically and across a range of white ethnic roots-seeking projects. But whereas the crux of his analysis is an examination of discourses and objects that circulate broadly, and that are situated within an historiographic framework, in this particular chapter I am interested in both ethnically-specific and site-specific operations, and in understanding them through ethnographic as well discursive methods: how do these venues specifically interpellate their visitors into a framework of New York as a mythic port of entry; how does the immigrant narrative play out in very specific social, cultural, affective, and relational contexts on the ground?

Jacobson’s arguments focus on the ways that white ethnics often quite self-servingly poach language, rhetoric, and aggrieved group subjectivities from civil rights discourses and populations of color, namely African Americans, usually in order to ratify the veracity of the American Dream, as they unfavorably compare ostensibly lazy and undeserving “new” immigrants with their own ostensibly hardy and meritorious stock, and simultaneously obscure

---

<sup>163</sup> See, for instance, di Leonardo 1984; J. Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; T. Guglielmo 2004; Jacobson 1995, 1998, and 2006; and Roediger 1991 and 2005.

the histories of conquest, genocide, slavery, and ongoing structural and institutional racism that enable white Americans – whether of Plimoth Rock or Ellis Island origin – to get ahead. Often, the Ellis Island immigrant narrative is called on to justify deeply conservative policy decisions pertaining to welfare, militarizing the Border, bilingualism, education funding, healthcare reform, religious tolerance and the separation of church and state; the logic of these policies' restrictions is bound up in racist and classist notions of white entitlement that are bolstered by the figure of the hardworking, self-reliant, uncomplaining immigrant pulling himself up by his bootstraps. I wholeheartedly agree that this process is quite foundational to the formulation of white ethnic revival, and find this framework quite applicable to aspects of the museum sites as well as to a good deal of the nostalgia demonstrated in Belmont. But the sites I examine are doing other things as well, which my engagement as a participant-observer makes clear: namely, I argue, in some cases they quite self-consciously and critically appropriate the narratives of immigration and the port-of-entry precisely because they understand the power these narratives have, in order to attract visitors and/or funding and to use this platform to advocate a non-judgmental ethic of inclusion that, in some cases, takes into careful consideration the structural and power disparities that differentiate and exercise enormous control over people's lives.

In order to fully understand the possibilities and limitations of liberal multiculturalism, it is necessary to examine, for a moment, its broader context. Goldberg's racial state revolves around legislating homogeneity, articulating who and what, ontologically and constitutively, it is and is not, and managing ideological and material borders. For multiculturalism as for the racial state, the tension is in the assertion and enforcement of and between *difference* and *sameness*. The trajectory of multiculturalism as deployed within the U.S. nation-state is a constant pull between its being used as a way to manage difference and make it the same – that is, to make it less threatening by making it usable, commodifiable, and knowable – and, on the other hand, more radical conceptions of multiculturalism that have to do with attending to the structures that have enforced disparities in power and resources. In the anthology *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield address the variety of histories and interpretations of multiculturalism that make the concept so difficult to pin down; they pose the following questions in their introduction: “Is multiculturalism antiracist or oblivious to racism?” (3); “Is multiculturalism cultural autonomy or common culture revisited?” (4); “Is multiculturalism grounded in grassroots alliances or diversity management?” (5); “Does multiculturalism link politics and culture or separate them?” (6). They conclude that, without exception, it does both of the things that seem opposed, often simultaneously in the same instance.

One of the ways, then, in which multiculturalism serves to bolster the racial state is to hide its operations, to obscure the fact that the state is in fact racial, and to render difference a kind of commodifiable, detachable, consumable, aesthetic, and otherwise cosmetic or chosen factor; or, on the other hand, though with similar effect and to a similar end, to render *identity* essential and *culture* static, as opposed to defining identification as processual. The latter iteration serves to make multiculturalism and difference appear not to be everyone's problem, articulating it as something that people who are not “of color,” who are invisible or unmarked in their whiteness, maleness, or heteronormativity do not have stake in except as a matter of choice as consumers in the marketplace. When multiculturalism is taken up by those adhering to a liberal worldview, who turn for solutions to problems of unequal treatment to configurations of “color-blindness,” “facial neutrality,” and antidiscrimination legislation, the possibilities for more radical forms of multiculturalism are easily misused, co-opted, or quashed. These people may politely tolerate difference, rather than take responsibility for what it means

or why it persists. In *Regulating Aversion*, Wendy Brown traces ways in which tolerance operates and has been deployed historically in order to understand how it becomes a tool of depoliticization that serves to render and retain the tolerated group(s) as other, and merely or grudgingly necessarily *tolerable*, rather than fully incorporated or accepted. Those who have the ability or choice *to tolerate* others are in a position of power that allows them to make that choice, rather than to cast them out or abuse them, thus preserving a power differential that enables a relation of contingency of the tolerated to the tolerant. This project of toleration is deeply embedded in the tenets of liberalism, particularly as they extend to individualism, identity, and the formation of empire. Here, nation-states seek to define themselves and their image in more palatable ways – in terms of egalitarianism, democratization, and colorblindness, in order to shore up gaps between an empty image of democracy and some sort of rhetorical and policy evidence that it is following through on it. Goldberg writes,

particular racist states recently have sought to distribute the means and modes of their expression behind the façade of racial dispersal. Racist states have undertaken to deflect resistance by indirection. Contemporary states have sought thus to dissipate the normative power of critique in two related ways. On one hand, they have rerouted rightful anger at the homogenizing exclusions of racist states into the circuitous ambiguities and ambivalences of ‘mere’ racially characterized, if not outrightly colorblind, conditions; and on the other hand, they have pursued superficial appropriation through uncritical celebration of the multicultural (5-6).

These policies become something to hide behind that allow for disparities to remain intact, unaddressed, a way of denying/remaining blind to history.

Whereas more conservative and co-optive forms of multiculturalism erase not only difference, but the structural inequalities and historical circumstances that underlie them, effectively rerouting an understanding of the causes of difference to be deficiencies on the part of those who fall outside of the echelons of the unmarked, a more progressive form puts a high value on opening up definitions of what counts as “sameness” and about *who* counts in the eyes of the state as being worthy of rights and protection; they look critically at the circumstances that have produced inequalities and imbalances of power. I demonstrate that most of the multiculturalisms that emerge from these invocations of the immigration narrative perceive their work – indeed, their mission – as embodying and advocating the latter variety, revising the discourses of immigration to become more flexible, rather than reiterating a narrow and conservative interpretation, precisely for this reason. To an admirable extent, they succeed. Yet a combination of limitations, including the structural positionality of white ethnics, the exclusions inherent to the immigration narrative, and the persistence of neo/liberal “common-sense” often come together to undermine the more radical potential of the multiculturalisms articulated in the performative reiterations of the immigrant myth.

In my discussions of the two museums, I base my analyses on the observations I made on multiple visits to each site, during which I made notes on the ways in which the museums interpreted the relationship between the past and the present, the significance and adaptability of the story of pre-1924 immigration, and the meaning, causes, and consequences of ethnoracial and economic difference – and the ways that these notions are performed for their respective audiences by explicit and implicit means. That is, I attend to the ways that certain messages are clearly articulated through textual, visual, and oral elements (for instance, the objects and wall-texts in museum exhibits, the scripts used by tour guides, the ways in which refurbishment of buildings has taken place and is interpreted, the stated agenda of various



displays and of their websites), as well as what sorts of affiliations and ideologies are implied – intentionally or unwittingly – by the ways that certain images, narratives, or subjects are included or excluded in each institution. In Belmont, I make use of a series of oral history interviews that I conducted during May and June of 2006 with approximately thirty people – primarily residents and former residents of Italian descent, as well as several teachers who have emigrated from Eastern Europe and Latin America – who have various relationships to the history and present of the Belmont neighborhood. Of course, both oral histories and museum exhibitions are performative; they are speech acts with constitutive, world-making capacities. They *do* something. In particular, they establish an ethic of inclusion or of exclusion; deploying logic or justification that interpellates newcomers as the same or different/Other; as incorporable or irretrievably alien. They also work to constitute a usable past: they contribute to, reaffirm, or contest discourses of what the neighborhood once was, and what it continues to mean in relation to its past; the origins that are articulated in these oral histories serve in a teleological manner to determine the nature of its present. The narratives also reify nostalgia and nostalgic views of the past. These can be, again, used for inclusive and/or exclusive ends: toward a vision of ethnic homogeneity (and/or, in particular, a moment in time when ethnic variation/multiculturalism was specifically Euro-American enclaves, white ethnics, as opposed to a time (now) when the “others” are ostensibly less assimilable); or toward a memory of generations of struggle and of the assistance and support from formal and informal avenues that demands a contemporary commitment to establishing similarly communitarian infrastructures.

Although Belmont presents an array of important questions that are worth attending to for their own sake, my attachments to it do not end at a scholarly investment. This is also the neighborhood in which my mother grew up, to which I have been making visits since I was a small child. The eye/“I” then, is one that cannot pretend to objectivity: it is simultaneously inside and outside, implicated in the telling and in the doing. These are my people – in some cases, literally by blood; in others I am welcomed in and trusted as family. Nor can I deny that my affiliation with this place is something I’m proud of, namely to be the grand-niece of two people who have played significant roles in keeping the neighborhood community-oriented and inclusive. In being thus implicated, I have a responsibility to the individuals with whom I’ve spoken that is particularly precarious; in the act of writing I must carefully balance the responsibility to my profession of reporting and analyzing what I observe, and the responsibility to people with whom I have a relationship to respect their lives, privacy, and opinions, and not to betray their trust. Ethnographic data and interviews with real people enrich, flesh out, and complicate theorization that can often be simplifying. Racist and classist images of the South Bronx as a hotbed of crime, fear, and poverty, and of Italian-Americans jingoistic, hyper-ethnic, and racist mobsters are still in circulation, and I hope this work will help to complicate and contest these ideas. In doing so it is necessary not to turn away from those instances in which these images may be reinforced or to pretend they do not exist, but rather to examine them, to probe them deeply in order to parse what is truly happening, and what is at stake.

### **the limits of inclusion: Ellis Island competing with the idea of itself**

Ellis Island was a military fort until it was recruited as the nation’s major processing station for immigrants during the largest migration in world history. Between 1892 and 1924 more than twenty million immigrants were processed there: 1.25 million immigrants were processed in 1907 – the year that saw the largest influx – alone. After 1924, when major restrictions occurred with the National Origins Act and changes in how applications to

emigrate to the U.S. were enforced, the island was quiet and eventually fell into disrepair. However, in 1965 President Johnson declared Ellis Island to be a part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Matthew Frye Jacobson characterizes “the project to restore and sanctify Ellis Island” – its recruitment into the tourism economy and symbolic cartography – as being, on account of “the symbolism it deployed and the narratives it generated,” “the most significant instance of state sponsorship at play in the ethnic revival. President Johnson initially annexed Ellis Island to the more popular and better-kept Statue of Liberty National Park as part of his public relations campaign on behalf of a liberalized immigration bill.”<sup>164</sup> It was open to the public on a limited basis from 1976–1984, underwent an enormous and expensive renovation, and opened in 1990 as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, run by the National Park Service.<sup>165</sup>

In this section I perform a thick description of the visitor’s experience of some of the main exhibits, and her interpellation as a visitor and citizen in that space in order to illuminate the ambiguities that pervade the museum’s performances of history and citizenship. I conclude that the museum in some contexts does progressive work that situates im/em/migration to the U.S. within a complex historical and sociopolitical framework. This framework includes the variety of ways that people came to be incorporated into the territory and polity comprised by the contemporary United States – both forced and voluntary – as well as analyses of racial formation, contemporary immigration debates, and globalization. However, some of this effort is complicated by the neo/liberal notions of meritocracy, freedom, individualism, and appropriate citizenship that leak through some aspects of the museum exhibits themselves, or eclipsed because of the way the museum registers as a powerful and polysemic symbol that migrates far beyond the physical space and its visitors.

Visitors to Ellis Island enter the Main Building and are immediately faced by a massive installation of luggage – baskets, trunks, suitcases, and other personal effects of immigrants, with banners overhead showing sepia photographs of immigrants carrying their luggage as they disembark onto the Island. It’s quite affecting, being that there are hundreds of these artifacts, and they accrue a great deal of pathos and compelling palimpsestic objecthood. They are old, they are picturesque, and they begin to indicate – and to humanize – the enormous numbers of people who passed through here. In their anonymity and preponderance, they seem to beg the interpretation that there is a kind of universality to the experience of passing through Ellis Island en route to the United States. There is a kind of diasporic wonder about them, as they seem to say “they touched and carried this, from the Old World to the New World, these could have been your very own ancestors’ belongings.” As I stand looking at it, I think of the passages in *Lose Your Mother* when Hartman expresses the gnawing loss that comes with knowing that there is nothing like this that remains of the personal effects of slaves aboard the Middle Passage.

When I visited in July and August of 2009, a short live performance called “Taking a Chance on America: Bela Lugosi’s Ellis Island Story” was running several times daily in a small theater. This was a seemingly lighthearted 25-minute play whose premise was that two young women were writing and directing a play for Ellis Island about Bela Lugosi’s experience immigrating to the United States. Conflict emerges when the director wants it to be about horror and vampires, and the earnest young writer wants it to be about historical context, struggle, and the political and social factors driving people to emigrate. Bela himself appears

---

<sup>164</sup> Jacobson 2006, pg 60.

<sup>165</sup> Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation. Ellis Island History. 2010. Accessed October 30, 2010. <[http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis\\_island\\_history.asp](http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island_history.asp)>

and begins to explain his past. An enactment of his emigration ensues, in which we learn that he was a political exile from Hungary, a famous actor and activist who was blacklisted and needed to get out; he took a job working on a boat to New Orleans and slipped off the ship, and was therefore initially in the U.S. illegally. He found his way to New York and lived there for several months before sweet-talking a guard into letting him onto the boat for Ellis Island so he could be processed in an honest fashion, get registered, and move toward citizenship. The play then features a reenactment of the processing interviews; the two women move in and out of different characters and he is almost sent back for having entered illegally (i.e. having been in the US prior to his official processing, and admitting to it); but somehow (the mechanics of which are not clear) he is let off the hook and allowed to enter the U.S. and work his way toward Hollywood success and American citizenship.

It quite accessibly and effectively makes several pointed arguments about the complex realities of immigrants' lives and circumstances in relation to Ellis Island's and the U.S.'s procedures and policies surrounding immigration. First, it highlights the political and social contexts that led to people's decisions to leave, and the immigrants' actualized, multi-dimensional human lives prior to being in America, in order to produce a humanizing effect. I interpreted this move as very intentionally commenting not only on historical but ongoing nativism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant racism. It speaks a bit about the frightening and vulnerable nature of being "processed" at the Island and therefore the strife through which immigrants, including young children, were put, although it does not particularly call attention to its arbitrariness, lack of scientific or medical veracity, or the filter of a racist and eugenic imagination through which this processing was undertaken. But importantly, it does present the argument that people who make decisions out of desperation or need that result in their entering the country through illegal or undocumented means are not evil, inhuman, threatening, etc, nor does it compromise their allegiance to the U.S. and their desire to become citizens. Nor are all immigrants uneducated or unskilled, even if they can't speak English, limiting their ability to get certain jobs. However, at the same time that it makes a number of nuanced and progressive statements, it also implicitly makes several exclusionary, moralizing suggestions: it reinscribes the bootstraps myth, without analyzing what structural factors might have been working toward Lugosi's advantage, while simultaneously advocating a notion that he did "the right thing" in turning himself into the immigration authorities, choosing to be examined and admitted in an "honest" fashion in spite of the odds and the dangers to himself. So, it seems to imply, because he was moral and good – rather than because he was European, educated, and white – he was forgiven his sins and incorporated into the body politic.

After the performance ended, I walked to the main exhibit of the downstairs floor, behind the luggage installation. This large, light-filled room contained what was primarily a charts-and-graphs exhibition, consisting of many interactive, map-like, activity-oriented objects and displays that introduced, in visually striking ways, an almost dizzying array of comparative historical, sociological, political, and ethnic/racial/national facts into the visitor's interpretation of the site. This room was the most direct and empirical in conveying that the political stance that the museum takes is a progressive one; it represents a commitment to understanding U.S. history as starting from Native Americans, and immigration to the United States as occurring within a long trajectory of global forces and migrations. The sign that greets visitors entering the exhibit – titled "The Peopling of America" – reads: "Since 1600, over 60 million people from throughout the world have come to the United States, creating a multiethnic nation unparalleled in history. The exhibits in this room present a statistical portrait of this pageant of immigration. Based on government records and scholarly analyses, the displays reveal

patterns of growth and change in a dynamic process that continues to bring new arrivals to the United States.” As one walks throughout the room, one encounters displays such as the following:

- “Opening the West: US Expansion 1783-1853” – a map that indicates the geographic boundaries of various territories of the U.S. and the years that they were added, including their names and the means by which they were acquired.
- “Forced Migration: The Atlantic Slave Trade” – large map with arrows sized according to population where various Africans were shipped to, proportionally, from British North America to Brazil and places in between.
- “The First American Indian Groups” – a large map of North America showing the names and geographic range of many indigenous groups.
- “Settlers, Servants, Slaves: Immigration Before 1780” – a display that indicates the year and the corresponding numbers of who came and by what means, and the race (in vocabulary that indicates contemporary definitions of racial categories – i.e. “white” or “black”) of those newcomers. It also clarifies a little bit about the nature of indentured servitude and the varieties of paid or forced labor prior to the consolidation of race-based chattel slavery.
- “A Two-Way Street: Immigration vs. Emigration” – a road-sign-like post with arrows, years, and blue/red arrows with size and numbers showing how many people were coming into the United States and emigrating from it both over time and in relationship to one another at any given moment.
- “Where We Come From: Sources of Immigration” – a three-dimensional graph showing locations over time where immigrants have tended to come from, again in a manner that is geographically comparative at a given moment in time and over centuries.
- An American flag comprised of photographs of the faces (presumably of immigrants and their progeny).
- An interactive/digital map display where a visitor can click on a state and see the population in numbers, as well as broken down into ethnicity, race, and national origin.
- “The Word Tree: Ethnic Americanisms” – a tree-shaped display where each branch has a commonplace word as well as its linguistic origin (ranging from Native languages to Spanish)
- “The Growth of a Nation: Immigration Since 1820” – a particularly detailed display with a chart and extensive text that shows spikes/drops in numbers of immigrants and simultaneously indicates a range of international and domestic factors (including immigration policy, domestic and international economic situations, wars, socio-cultural factors, etc) that contributed to numbers rising and falling.
- “Millions on the Move: Worldwide Migrations” – an enormous globe with routes mapped out that indicate the largest migrations in history.

Perhaps because it is so colorful and physically accessible, this area was filled with children and families: adults often stopping to read the text, and sometimes to read it aloud or translate it into simpler language for their children, and explain the charts and graphs to them. Children were tolerated to wander around the room, and seemed amused and engaged by at least the look of the exhibit’s enticing and varied colors and objects. The apparent simplicity of this visual rhetoric functions not only to afford family-friendly accessibility but to enable a performance of empiricism: a colorful and creatively-assembled, yet authoritative presentation of facts that appeals to visitors’ presumed belief and trust in empirical evidence. Of course, the

building itself and the display of suitcases that I described above have their own aura of truth and evidence that is predicated on their indexical and palimpsestic relationship to the processes that the museum enshrines – as do two of the more extensive exhibits on the second floor, each of which is filled with historical artifacts and excerpts from oral histories, ranging from sheet music and pro- and anti-immigration cartoons to teddy bears and hand-sewn children's clothing. But the evidence that these artifacts and the exhibits that contain them suggest is a more subjective, interpretive, and affective sort. What the charts and graphs accomplish in service of the theme they are required to elucidate – the peopling of America – is the performance of an irrefutable argument based in scientific fact, that takes a visually cheerful but ideologically hard line against a more selective or exclusive interpretation of belonging.

“The peopling of America” is represented as being a process that is not dominated by Ellis Island immigrants, and in such a way that historical events such as conquest and imperialism, indentured servitude, slavery, post-1965 immigration to the U.S., and the global forces that compelled masses of people to migrate in larger or smaller numbers are given quite significant visual/spatial and conceptual weight. The exhibit's conceptualization and empirical rhetoric make the case for an understanding of the past as being produced by uneven power dynamics and, following that, a potential understanding of multiculturalism as descriptive of the result of a series of often-violent encounters and historical circumstances that placed people with different structural positions and different lived experiences into the same polity. Yet at the same time that these often-silenced facts are – admirably – attended to quite thoroughly, it is also true that the specificities (the violence, the lived experience, the ongoing consequences) of slavery, conquest, genocide, and the differences between instances of immigration have no place in the exhibition's argument; the displays' performance of shiny, unambiguous empiricism enables a kind of neutralizing or smoothing-over of the more difficult realities of the facts it represents. While it is an important step to acknowledge that these events occurred in the past, and were indeed cornerstones in the process of producing a national population, the questions of their ongoing consequences, of whether they were long-ago aberrations in a narrative of overall progress, and of whether events like genocide, slavery, and conquest can rightly be understood as analogous to traumatic instances of immigration, are left ambiguous and unanswered.

Perhaps the most successful elements of the museum are those that avoid these often-treacherous, sweeping gestures of inclusion or narrative extrapolation, focusing instead on illuminating the historical circumstances and experiential realities faced both in the “old country” and in the U.S. by those immigrants who in fact did pass through Ellis Island. Upstairs in an exhibit called “The Peak Immigration Years” (i.e. 1880-1924) the museum takes pains to fill in some of the blanks about the experience of being an immigrant, continuing the efforts at humanization and contextualization that the Bela Lugosi performance represents by offering visitors a somewhat overwhelming assortment of information about the texture of immigrants' lives. The exhibit is broken up thematically by room, employing artifacts, historic photographs, wall text, and excerpts from oral histories to afford insights into issues beginning with the circumstances that caused people to emigrate from their homes, to the passage itself, to an array of details about what life was like upon arrival. There are details about anti-Jewish pogroms, the Irish potato famine, and other instances of widespread poverty in one room; testimonials about the horrors of making the transatlantic journey in steerage in another; and a large area containing posters, cartoons, news articles, and other documents depicting both pro-immigration and anti-immigration (as well as a good deal of anti-immigrant opinion), illuminating the specific forms of nativism that awaited the new arrivals and the political and economic context that conditioned particular policies and attitudes. A sizeable section is

devoted to explaining – primarily by way of photographs and oral histories – the vicissitudes of often-harrowing labor markets, giving particular attention to women’s and children’s labor and the garment, railroad, and mining industries. There are also rooms demonstrating the range of activities devoted to ethnic solidarity, like arts and cultural organizations, mutual aid societies, and performance groups and traditions.

Part of the exhibit’s strength is in lending specificity and a sense of both the banality and the strangeness, some of the joys and comforts and many of the harrowing circumstances and the dangers, of the world into which the immigrants entered and which their presence (and fears about and reactions to it) helped to condition. While it does not engage in the narrative leaps in analogy-making that many of the sites invoking the immigrant myth – or indeed many sections of the Ellis Island museum – do, it does make the case for the ways in which immigrants’ lives were situated in larger historical, political, social, and economic forces. Because so many of the issues they faced on both sides of the crossing resonate so specifically with those of many immigrants since 1965 and up through the present (poverty, exploitive labor conditions, forms of nativism or, conversely/simultaneously, of being desired or included for purposes of political and economic interests that have little to do with the immigrants themselves, and the complexities of navigating assimilation, cultural retention, transnational networks, and social welfare infrastructures, for example), there is an implicit pedagogical commentary about post-Ellis Island immigration that seems to reproduce the concerns in the Lugosi piece – that is, to attempt to educate against present-day nativism. While it does not make the same argument about the port-of-entry that we will see made across the other sites, this exhibit is the closest that the immigration station museum comes to a statement about the phenomenon of “getting by”: it is a very unsentimental statement which makes it patently clear that the networks of assistance presented in the displays about ethnic solidarity are necessary because they are set against a backdrop of backbreaking labor, nativism, and entrenched global and national disparity.

The problem is not in attending to the historical migration, nor to the immigrants themselves or their progeny: it was a massively significant historical phenomenon, responsible for profound demographic, political, economic, cultural, and social shifts in the U.S., in Europe, and in the other countries in which emigrants settled, and it is of personal significance for millions of people: the Ellis Island website claims that nearly half of all Americans can trace their lineage to one or more people who passed through the processing station. Ellis Island (the place, its history, and the myth of it) can also be a useful pedagogical tool to encourage both an empathic and analytic understanding of the forces that compel migration and the im/migrants themselves, which is to say that careful, historically-situated and rigorous extrapolation can be a powerful *raison d’être* for a museum situated in such a charged and significance locale.

But the museum’s ethic of inclusiveness can be taken so far that it seems to become almost meaningless; that is, it is inclusive in contexts that elide difference in disturbing ways. In one exhibit on the second floor there was a series of photographs of pre-1924 immigrants, blown up to nearly life size, which apparently aim to represent a wide range of demographics that came through the station. There are Northern European (Irish, Flemish, Scandinavian, German), Eastern and Southern European, West Indian, Balkan, East Asian, Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latin American individuals with their families and their belongings represented in affecting, poignant black and white images, testifying, by way of the subjects’ disarming full-on gazes, to the common humanity and individual personhood of the immigrants. Although this particular display might have given the impression that these people came through in equal numbers, many other parts of the museum gave very clear statistics in

terms of numbers, gender, time period, and historical context (including immigration laws/policies/restrictions, as well as circumstances in the US and abroad) that would influence immigration flows in general and from particular areas. And while the photographic display does not speak to whether these people were admitted, or were (or had the option of becoming) naturalized, or what conditions would have been like for them if indeed they were admitted, it is valuable to clearly articulate the diversity of immigrants' origins, because even if the majority of immigrants coming through Ellis Island were from Eastern and Southern Europe, the U.S. was continuing to accumulate more diversity, and legal, academic, and common-sense articulations of racial categorization and racial formation were influenced by this variation. Moreover, the photographs are beautiful. But even as the exhibit makes available the above interpretive nuances, its most apparent proposition seems to be that Ellis Island immigration wasn't all that white, after all, and that therefore its multicultural and multicolor past and inclusive understanding of the present renders it a useful and appropriate narrative touchstone for everyone, rather than probing the reasons that the "nation of immigrants" and the symbolism of Ellis Island is asked to occupy this role, and examining the limits of this narrative surrogation.

Perhaps a more widely-known instance of this snowballing inclusiveness takes place in one of the major attractions at Ellis Island: a monument called the American Immigrant Wall of Honor, on which people can elect to pay to have names inscribed. At first glance it appears that this area does what most visitors expect the island and park to do overall: that is, to celebrate quite specifically the lives, struggles, and contributions of Ellis Island immigrants to America. However, upon closer inspection (of the wall and of the website, which makes much of what I am about to relate), one learns that inscription of one's name on the wall is actually available to anyone who came to America, at any time, by any means, of any race, ethnicity, or national origin. Indeed, the wall is intended to include Native Americans, enslaved Africans, immigrants from all over the world from pre-1924 and post-1965 and in between, and sometimes, according to the website, people put their own names on in order to honor the date of their naturalization.<sup>166</sup> This gesture seems to be a rejoinder to the assumption that the affective and specific elements of Ellis Island are only intended to include those (implicitly or explicitly white) people whose ancestors passed through during the station's peak years, or more broadly, those people who themselves or whose ancestors migrated *willingly* to the United States after it was already a nation and were permitted to become citizens within it. But the gesture of openness simultaneously seems to espouse the idea that differences are merely aesthetic and/or are to be celebrated chiefly because they don't matter materially or experientially in deep and structural or psychological ways, or that they can't be seen. It elides the circumstances of arrival in order to posit that immigration is *the* national story.

The work of honoring that the wall does is apparently in the fact of coming. Thus, even if it is apparently honoring the individuals who came – whether they were starving and impoverished immigrants from Southern Europe, ancient indigenous peoples crossing the Bering Strait, or strong, noble, and tragic African ancestors like Kunta Kinte – in fact it seems to honor and celebrate the fact and process of coming to the U.S. This move ratifies violent modes of "peopling America" such as settler colonization and slavery and flattens the differences between forced and voluntary modes of arrival; at the same time it implies that the experience of incorporation into the body politic, even amongst immigrants of different colors and at different eras, is similar and successful, which in turn ratifies the bootstraps myth that

---

<sup>166</sup> The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. 2010. Accessed October 27, 2010. <<http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis-island.asp>>

America is a meritocracy and that hard work is the key to success. Moreover, it participates in a nationalistic celebration of America that easily slides toward jingoism. Whereas the “Peopling of America” exhibit seems incisively to argue something along the lines that America began as a racial state, in Omi and Winant’s and Goldberg’s sense, the American Immigrant Wall of Honor seems to finish the story the other exhibit began with a conclusion that indiscriminately celebrates the arrival of newcomers in a way that implies a teleological or ontological narrative characterizing the United States as a cosmopolitan, inclusive, multicultural nation of immigrants, comprised entirely of people from distant shores. Like so many well-intentioned efforts to fight the dehumanizing logic of racism (including the uncannily similar move of the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and the National Geographic Society’s Genographic Project, which both posit that we are *all* members of the African diaspora because of humanity’s common ancestor 10,000 years ago in central Africa, a move that somehow implies that the slave trade is reducible in cause and effect to the ancient migrations that peopled the planet) this one, too, falls just short of its mark as it espouses a logic of multiculturalism that borders dangerously close to that of colorblindness.

It would seem, then, that the museum at Ellis Island puts forth a complicated and ambivalent set of messages, that simultaneously reaffirm and challenge exclusionary elements of the immigration narrative, from the “nation of *immigrants*” to the bootstraps myth, from American exceptionalism to white grievance. At its best it proffers a rigorous analysis that situates immigration to America in a framework of migration, power, and globalization. Nowhere does it truly dig deep into settler colonialism, genocide, and slavery as forces that were constitutive, as forces with ongoing consequences, and as forces that underlay the context and emergence of the nation into which Ellis Island immigrants were enfolded, or indeed the structures of racial formation into which they would be recruited.

But even the most progressive and incisive work it does, which could have the potential to significantly reframe its public’s conceptions of who and what constitutes the United States, its history, and its people, is limited by the fact that not everyone who invokes Ellis Island myths (for instance, in making conservative public policy) actually *sees it*. Its reputation precedes and exceeds it, and it cannot wholly compete with the idea of itself, with the discourses of Ellis Island and of the exceptional qualities of Ellis Island Immigrants that helped propel it into being and continue to be detachable and circulate irrespective of its institutional particularities. The Ellis Island museum appeals to its own status as an origin myth as it produces exhibits that elaborate its meanings, attempting to rewrite what it signifies in this capacity. My interpretation is that it does so on account of the force and usefulness of the myth; indeed, its curators appear to be aware of this myth’s persistence as well as its exclusionary limitations which demand revision in order to toe a progressive and inclusive – and/or, perhaps, a politically-correct liberal – line. Yet even as the museum engages in its admirable acts of intentional revisionism, the messages it sends are ambivalent, loaded as they are with the persistent residue of neo/liberal assumptive logic and the well-intentioned historic and structural obliviousness that so often accompanies both whiteness itself and the immigration narratives that enable it. Ellis Island – the place and the myth – operate/s as a kind of performative machine, a reflexive and unbidden performative return: citing and revising itself, even as it is also haunted by other, less desirable versions of itself and the ways in which it circulates and is borrowed.

### on “getting by”: the Lower East Side Tenement Museum

Vast numbers of immigrants, upon leaving Ellis Island, settled in Manhattan’s Lower East Side neighborhood. While the Tenement Museum is not mired in nearly the same sort of



mythical baggage as is the immigration station museum, it is located in a site where the “magic” or aura of historical “there”-ness works on its visitors, and in the twenty-three years since it opened it has come to play a significant role in educating New Yorkers and visitors from elsewhere about American immigration history.

The Tenement Museum was opened to the public in 1988 after Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson purchased and partially restored 97 Orchard St. on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that has, throughout its long history, been a port-of-entry for many immigrants: at one time German, Irish, Jewish, and Italian; now largely Chinese, Puerto Rican, and Dominican. Although it has in recent decades seen some significant gentrification, it still contains pockets of working class and ethnic enclaves. The building they purchased had been completed in 1864 and was owned by a German immigrant, Lucas Glockner, who also owned a number of other LES tenements, and who renovated it several times in accordance with city zoning and housing ordinances. The building was shut down in 1935 and so was a sort of “time capsule,” as the museum’s website and interpreters like to call it; that is, having been left in the condition it had been in when its last tenants were required to leave, it was an historian’s and urban archeologist’s dream come true, as its layout, conditions, artifacts, and décor were able to shed very clear and specific light on the living conditions of its immigrant tenants. The museum describes the significance of the site in a promotional spot on PBS as follows:

In finding #97, The Tenement Museum located the perfect building in which to reveal the history of tenement life on the Lower East Side. A pre-Law building, sealed from change since 1935, it stands as a monument to America’s urban poor, to the architects and owners who designed and built their housing, and to the reformers who fought to improve it. Today, save for the basement and first floor, renovated to greater and lesser degrees for Museum purposes, 97 Orchard Street is as authentic as a tenement can get, right down to impossibly cramped but still useable water closet in the hall next to the exhibition space.<sup>167</sup>

Visitors have the opportunity to visit the Visitors’ Center, across the street from the tenement itself, where they can participate in programming such as talks by authors or historians, can purchase items ranging from tourist memorabilia to scholarly books on histories of immigration, racism, labor, and New York City, and where they purchase tickets for the tours, which constitute the way of accessing or engaging with the museum itself. The tours are limited to around fifteen to twenty people and are led by an “educator” who has been trained with a script that contains an enormous amount of historical information that they can use to make the tour their own while still providing the same basic information that everyone else who attends the tour will hear. With the exception of one neighborhood walking tour, the museum tours take visitors around the tenement building, into different apartments that have been set up according to what information has been possible to piece together about specific families who actually resided in that building, and about the era in which they lived there. The museum’s imperative is specificity and accuracy not only in a general historical sense, but in the sense of a very site-specific commitment: the interpretations work outward from the specific residents to situate them in an historic context.

The museum is committed to a “bottom-up” social-history approach that addresses issues like race, class, gender, labor, the lives of children, unions, education, benevolent societies

---

<sup>167</sup> Thirteen/WNET New York: Tenement Museum History. 2010. Accessed 30 October 2010. <<http://www.thirteen.org/tenement/eagle.html>>

and other forms of welfare and support, which makes it particularly interesting that they have received some very critical attention for their management's resistance to its employees unionizing, as well as for having tried for several years to acquire the building next door to 97 Orchard as an additional interpretive site – by means of working with the city to evict its current owners (and their tenants) by way of eminent domain.<sup>168</sup> What makes this a particularly complex situation is that since the museum is committed to excavating the specific history of the site – i.e. tracking down the stories and objects of the specific families who lived in the tenement over the years – its current tours (excluding the walking tour) are limited to the period when it was inhabited. The inclusion of this building – which has included tenants up to the present, which is to say, after the Immigration Act of 1965 – would enable the museum to speak explicitly to the experiences of immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean, which would significantly expand the range of stories that would be told, and presumably require putting a much finer point on contemporary issues of racial formation and racism.<sup>169</sup>

At the same time that its managerial practices in the present seem to contradict the work of its historical interpretation, its historiographic goals with respect to helping its visitors understand historical and contemporary immigration are quite incisive. One of the museum's primary goals – as it is explicitly stated in their promotional literature, including their website, and as it is communicated through the workings of the museum (its tours, the narratives offered in the official “scripts” that tour guides follow, individual tour guides' interpretations of these scripts, the materials and events on offer in the visitor center, and the types of themes that the tours tackle) are to connect the experiences of immigrants in the past (i.e. pre-1924) with the experiences of those in the present (i.e. post-1965). In so doing it seeks to make connections between the individual lives, experiences, and agency of poor and working class “everyday” Americans, particularly immigrants, with the workings of larger forces, including laws and policies at various levels, education, demographic shifts, economic circumstances, etc. The museum also evinces a commitment to rigorously engage processes of racialization and racial formation in its exposition of these histories, in the sense that the stories often center around groups of people who were from a racialized group or nation (although that terminology is not usually used), and faced stereotypes that circulated about them and often impacted how they were received and often repudiated, how they engaged in acts of solidarity, and how language, education, and opportunities were available to them. The museum points to the similarities as well as, to a lesser extent, the differences, between eras and forms of nativism

---

<sup>168</sup> See Haberman, Clyde (2002-02-13). "Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Building?". *The New York Times*, and Shapiro, Julie; Giachino, Alyssa (May 2007). "Tenement guides learn from history form union". *The Villager* **76** (50).

<sup>169</sup> It would be interesting to see what the museum would do with the presence of black immigrants and black Americans that this addition would insert into its schema of immigration. At present, African American experience and/or the centuries-long presence of Africans and people of African descent in New York is, for the most part, a lacuna in the museum's tour roster, ostensibly because in its imperative of site-specific historical interpretation and the temporal bracketing of 97 Orchard Street's habitation; the tours do not often include, in their contextualization, very much about African Americans' interfacing with immigration (policies, demographics, Great Migration, housing, competition for jobs, Irish Draft Riots, slavery in NY, etc). However, the visitor center's bookstore and programming make a point of including works and talks that speak explicitly to slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Black Power, race relations, and other aspects of African American history, including books about New York history that reflect the discovery in 1991 of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan near Wall Street, a colonial-era cemetery for enslaved Africans. Its discovery and the controversy surrounding its investigation, preservation, and memorialization sparked, among other things, a significant reappraisal of the role of slavery in New York City, before as well as after slaveholding there was abolished in 1827.

and immigrant experience. It points at once to the limitations and possibilities immigrants face/d in creating and accessing formal and informal networks, including government intervention and welfare, that could offer assistance in keeping them afloat. Implicitly, then, it seems that one of its most significant narrative functions is to aid in decriminalizing, humanizing, and contextualizing the people who are today's immigrants and "aliens," legal and illegal, and to suggest that today's Americans inherit a kind of debt or obligation to provide for newcomers, just as one's own people were provided for – or precisely because they were not.

These efforts are manifested in part through the physical space of the museum, which is a kind of temporal checkerboard: some areas have been left in the condition in which it was "discovered" by Abram and Jacobson, while others have been carefully restored with period furniture, décor, and artifacts to represent the eras during which various families inhabited specific apartments. Walking into the building is an inevitably bodily experience, as it is swelteringly hot during the summer and terribly cold during the winter; it is dim and shadowy inside in the areas that are not lit by electricity (determined by which eras the rooms represent), and this offers a phenomenal, sensory appreciation of what it must have been like to live inside of a building whose windows were only on the front and back sides, such that each railroad- or shotgun-style apartment would have only had one room that saw daylight and admitted fresh air. The tour guides begin each tour in the foyer and provide some history of the building codes that required renovations at various times, providing insight into when residents would have been dumping their garbage and human waste into the gap between buildings, when they would have shared outhouses in the yard out back where the water source also was located, when toilets or electricity were installed. Visitors are then taken upstairs to various apartments, depending on the tour they have chosen, that are enormously detailed in their refurbishing and historical specificity.

On some level it is apparent in the physical elements of each apartment, and through the tour guide's careful explication of details you didn't notice on first glance or wouldn't have made sense of on your own, that it would be hard to live in this building at almost any point in time, no matter how good a landlord Glockner might have been, because of the crowding in particular as well as the limited amenities and the exigencies of life on the Lower East Side. But with their wallpaper, dishes, lace, furniture, family photos, articles of clothing, knick-knacks, and period appliances, each apartment feels surprisingly homey and familiar, inviting visitors to explore it and to relate to it: even in spite of the temporal and – for many visitors – the class distance (tours are \$15 for students and \$20 for adults) between the visitors and the long-ago immigrant residents, stepping inside of the tenement apartments forces a disabling of visitors' judgment and tendencies toward othering. And since the tours do such explicit work to connect the experiential and familial elements of past immigrants' lives as well as the historical circumstances they faced with those of recent and present immigrants, the appeal that the apartments' refurbishment makes to visitors' empathy has the potential to make the rhetorical argument that humanizes contemporary immigrants by recognizing the familiarity of their homes register affectively for visitors as well.

The museum's political, historical, and ideological efforts and goals are also manifested through the tenor of the tours themselves. One tour, "Piecing It Together," brings the abstract-sounding "garment industry" into very personal and specific range, as it details the lives of two families at different points in time who sewed – and occasionally employed others, in miniature living-room factories, in sewing – garments for wealthy clients and companies. The tour usually concludes with a discussion of who works in the garment industry today, under what labor conditions, and the role of immigration (legal and illegal) and human trafficking in this enterprise. On one of my trips, the guide for this tour memorably described

female immigrant garment-workers in L.A. being chained to their sewing machines at the factory where they worked – within the last decade – and asked us to consider the similarities and differences between working in cramped tenement settings for long hours in low light while employed by a family member or neighbor, and working in a garment factory – whether in the late nineteenth-century or early twenty-first – that sets the terms and conditions of your labor, often managing to evade laws regulating fair labor practices. As is often the case on tours, there are usually one or two people who do ask questions (I am often one of them), while most are quiet, taking in what the guide has to say. On the Tenement Tours in particular there tends to be a contingent of visitors who are outspoken and invested in social justice issues, engaging in knowledgeable dialogue with the guides – as well as a contingent of guests who don't say very much, and sometimes their facial expressions and shifting body carriage indicate that they may feel uncomfortable about discussing the contemporary manifestations of issues faced by long-ago immigrants.

I focus my analysis on a tour called “Getting By,” because it is particularly focused on the significance of social welfare, and the networks that immigrants a) created and b) found themselves in upon arrival. Like the majority of the museum's tours, this one takes place in 97 Orchard St., and tells the stories of two families – a German family, the Gumpertzes, and the Italian Baldizzi family – each of whom resided in the tenement during periods of major economic hardship – a recession in the 1870s and the Great Depression, respectively. As the official outline of the tour clearly states, the tour objectives are to:

- **Help visitors connect to the human experience of living through the Panic of 1873 and the Great Depression**, by describing the options available to the Gumpertz and Baldizzi families and the choices they made about how to “get by.”
- **Help visitors understand how the Gumpertz and Baldizzi families' choices were shaped by larger forces**, by describing the attitudes, practices, and policies that affected their immigration experience and their access to assistance. Through the Gumpertz and Baldizzi stories, help visitors understand how immigrants who are in dire economic straits have to make hard choices in order to get by.
- **Help visitors make a personal connection with the Gumpertz and Baldizzi families**, encouraging visitors to compare and contrast their own experiences with the Gumpertz and Baldizzi's experiences.
- **Help visitors compare the Gumpertz and Baldizzis with the experiences of immigrants today**
- **Foster dialogue among visitors on the question of who is in need and who is responsible for assisting those in need** -- exploring the variety of perspectives on this question that were debated in the time of the Gumpertzes and the Baldizzis, and encouraging visitors to share a variety of perspectives on the question today.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> This is quoted from one of two documents that is distributed to guides giving this tour; this one contains the general parameters and outline of the tour, and the other includes in-depth historical details. I received these documents over email in personal correspondence with David Favoloro, the Director of Curatorial Affairs, on February 11, 2010.

It is clear that the sixty-minute tour aims to foster a more concrete understanding of how systems of social welfare have been available for immigrants and when and why they have been restricted for political, economic, or ideological reasons; the importance of these networks in the immigrants' capacity to survive and carve out a place for themselves in a fast-paced, alien, and often-hostile society, and the links between nineteenth and early-twentieth century networks (that most likely had an important function in many American visitors' own ancestors' incorporation into the polity) and those that exist for or are denied to more recent immigrants. The centrality of these goals of the museum at large is reinforced by the fact that this tour is the first tenement tour that has been expanded to be available in a two-hours-long option as well, revealingly titled "Getting By: Past and Present."

The story of the Gumpertz family involves a description of their lives prior to the Panic of 1873, when many New Yorkers lost their jobs or found their wages slashed, and the exposition of the major plot point: Nathalie Gumpertz's husband Julius disappeared one morning in 1874 and was never heard from again. The rest of the time in their apartment is spent discussing what she would have done in the absence of the family's breadwinner, and educating the visitors about various options she had. These included networks of relationships she had with other immigrants; as well as appealing to her landlord for a break in paying the rent and the man who owned the saloon in the basement for leftover food, or to the mutual aid society to which Julius had belonged and had paid dues so that in the event of his death his family would be provided for. They also included limited government relief, whose restriction, the museum points out, was not on the basis of her citizenship status but rather on the basis of the government's policy that giving aid to anyone was a way to encourage laziness and dependency. It also describes Nathalie's efforts to start a business, but makes it fairly clear that the reason she and her family were finally able to get out of the tight situation they found themselves in was that several years down the line, she petitioned to have Julius declared dead, and thus received a significant estate that his father had left him.

The tour then moves to a different apartment, on the way describing the changes in housing and zoning laws that were supposed to make living conditions easier, and once there tells the story of the Baldizzi family, a family of undocumented Sicilians, elaborating on the difference between immigration policy and restriction during the two different eras, and providing quite an incisive explanation of the nativist context they arrived into. I quote at length from the document "Getting By Tour Content" – one of the documents that are distributed to guides giving the tour which contains detailed historical information – because the document makes quite apparent how attentive the museum is to both historical contingency and to the importance of situating biography within larger sociopolitical, economic, and historical forces:

Where Natalie had stepped right off the boat at Castle Clinton, with minimal processing from the state immigration officials, by the time Adolpho sought to come, immigration had become a grave national concern. His neighbors from Palermo, together with all other immigrants, were processed by federal agents through Ellis Island in a long and often invasive series of interviews and tests. Starting in the 1880s, the nation had begun restricting immigration, defining who should and who should not become American – starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which set a precedent for denying entry to the US solely on the basis of national origin. By the early 1920s, after millions of immigrants had transformed America's major cities, a movement grew to restrict immigration again – this time even more broadly.

Eugenicists – people who believed that hereditary traits (both positive and negative) could be determined by selective breeding – began arguing that the “blood” of the American nation was becoming “corrupted” by the influx of people of inferior races with defective genes – like Italians, Jews, and other Eastern Europeans. Where a generation ago native New Yorkers had expressed anxiety about the inassimilable Germans like Nathalie, by the 1920s the “Teutonic” race was considered to have good genetic stock for America. Eugenicists argued that federal government needed to control who came into the country, to be sure only superior “races” were allowed to become American. As jobs became scarcer after the end of World War I, this idea gained currency – and just as Adolpho decided to follow in his neighbors’ footsteps and come to New York, quotas were put into place that severely restricted immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924.

What did this mean for Adolpho? Bottom line, it meant that if he came sailing into New York Harbor and tried to enter through Ellis Island, he might well have been sent back. Adolpho decided to come anyway, with two of Rosaria’s male cousins, planning to get settled and send for Rosaria later. The Museum doesn’t know exactly how he and Rosaria avoided the restrictions – the family tells stories about last-minute escapes from border guards in Europe, stowing away on ships, arriving as illegal immigrants and paying for false papers. What the Museum does know is that their neighbors who immigrated a year before could enter freely, when the Baldizzis chose to come they had to be creative to get here, and to get by. But not 15 years after arriving in New York, Adolpho and Rosaria were known as Al and Sadie, naturalized American citizens with two American-born children, Josephine and Johnnie.<sup>171</sup>

This passage, and its manifestation in the live tour, demonstrate and implicitly critique the logic of nativism, proposing an analysis of immigration policy in terms of ethnic nationalism and the vicissitudes of racial formation, and point to their deleterious political and social effects. The tour then goes on to elaborate the possibilities this family would have had once the Depression set in, in terms of assistance from unofficial networks as well as government aid, which is characterized in the tour as being considerably more available than in the 1870s, but still insufficient, and was further restricted in the event that a member of the family became employed. In both sections of the tour, the presentation is interactive, with the guide asking the visitors many questions, primarily in order to encourage them to discuss and think critically about their own experiences with, views on, and assumptions about receiving assistance in “getting by” from various avenues. Indeed, a large part of this tour’s mission is to reveal the role of the state as well as local, often informal, networks of individuals and local NGOs – networks of various sorts and levels of officialdom – in helping people who are not well-off to get by and make their way “up.” It makes significant efforts to dispel the myth of rugged individualism, “picking oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” and making it by way of sheer will, grit, and talent. Specifically, the progressive, pro-immigrant revisionist history demands that ethnic white visitors whose ancestors may have passed through Ellis Island have to very critically re-evaluate beliefs they might harbor about their own ancestors capacity to “get by” on the basis of their own ingenuity – if these other immigrants were deeply embedded in networks of assistance, surely their grandmothers who lived on the LES at the same time must

---

<sup>171</sup> From the document “Getting By: Tour Content,” sent by David Favoloro over email, personal correspondence, February 11, 2010.

have been located in something similar if not identical, the logic of extrapolation might suggest.

The emotional affinity for the families when they are down on their luck – facilitated by coming to know the families’ first names, their biographical information, and their familiar homey objects – is punctuated by a swell of indignation that the cathartic storyline incites at the moments when the assistance is restricted, or is freely given but is not sufficient to help the families make ends meet (in spite of their commitment to hard work), or is denied because a family member is employed but not at a wage that can support the family. The logic of extrapolation that is underscored by the tour guide’s line of questioning about the role of welfare and state and local networks of assistance in today’s society – even asking them to think about what networks they themselves rely on – is constructed in order to push visitors to examine the ways they perceive and interpellate contemporary Americans receiving various forms of assistance – who may be immigrants as well as people of a range of racial and ethnic affiliations who have been citizens or residents for generations – and perhaps even the ways they vote relative to policies that affect them. The tour, in other words, carries rather significant progressive potential.

The foregrounding of a welfare infrastructure is also part of what I posit throughout this chapter is an increasingly widespread progressive effort to re-write the origin myth of immigration, particularly the Ellis Island variety. Performed as an Asserting and ratifying the presence as well as the necessity of a social safety net reconfigures the terms of American-ness to elevate an ethic of collectivity and mutual aid. The performative return, then, that is most important within this revisionist history is not one that “returns” to or attempts to reconstitute or revere ties to an ancestral homeland: rather, it revisits a collective memory of arrival in order to deploy its rhetorical and performative power to inclusive political ends that reconfigure the social role of “Others” such as immigrants and welfare recipients. The openness of the signifier of the port-of-entry is also an invitation to open the structures of belonging. And yet, even as these progressive operations unfold, surrogating and eclipsing the exclusionary iterations of the immigrant myth, the narrative openings embedded in these configurations also allow for the deeply entrenched exclusionary tendencies to leak through.

There is much to be admired about the Tenement Museum’s goals, as well as its enactment of them. However, though nearly every tour I have attended (upward of ten; repeats of nearly all of its various offerings) has been thorough, factual, lively, informative, and careful, occasionally, depending on the tour guide, facts slip through the cracks, and irrespective of anyone’s intentions, the narrative that is communicated can run counter to the museum’s mission. The performative return is haunted, interrupted, and at times even undermined by the unbidden florescence of the limits of liberal multiculturalism: subverted by precisely the narrative it attempts to disrupt.

In 2009, I went for the second or third time on a tour called “Immigrant Soles,” a walking tour of the Lower East Side that at the time of my visits was the only tour offered by the museum that interprets the larger neighborhood, outside of the tenement building itself.<sup>172</sup> It is a very engaging tour, and often succeeds particularly well at pointing to and bringing to life the similarities and differences between the neighborhood as a port-of-entry for pre-1924 and for post-1965 immigrants. Whereas the tenement building is no longer inhabited, the

---

<sup>172</sup> Another has recently been added, called “Next Steps: A Neighborhood Walking Tour,” which lasts two hours and takes visitors a bit further into the Lower East Side than “Immigrant Soles” does; this tour claims to “explore Lower East Side life from 1935 to the present” ([www.tenement.org/tours/php](http://www.tenement.org/tours/php), accessed February 8, 2011), thus apparently broadening the temporal focus of the museum. I have not yet been on this tour and so cannot speak to its specificities.

Lower East Side is busy, vibrant, and constantly changing; you walk down the street and read signs in different languages, which you can also hear spoken; people are bustling down the sidewalk engaged in their daily tasks, and all this is set against the palimpsestic backdrop of buildings and sites that were built or given a specific set of meanings a century ago.

It is a fascinating tour, but on this particular day it was a bit more fascinating than perhaps it was intended to be. In instances when the tour guide didn't know the answers to questions visitors asked, he would make them up, in a way that was not entirely inaccurate but involved a lot of filling-in-the-blanks with guesses. (I kept thinking of a tour guide I know in New Orleans, whose most important charge to the new tour guides he trains is never to make anything up – to say “I don't know” when they are uncertain of the answer: the consequences of bestowing authority and facticity on un- or half-truths are too great.) Additionally, this young man's discussion about why immigrants would have turned to prostitution and petty and organized crime was predicated on moralizing judgment; that is, his narrative implied that these individuals were morally flawed, backward, misled, and benighted – rather than offering an explanatory framework that demonstrated what the circumstances were that might have led people to make complicated or desperate decisions. Indeed, according to his narrative, the church was instrumental in saving these people from themselves and thereby producing ideal and appropriate citizens. At another juncture, when looking at a building that he described as embodying Constitutional ideals, he made comments that indicated his view about the Constitution's greatness, and its ability to guarantee freedom(s) to all Americans. One of the visitors made a comment about its exclusions and shortcomings, and the guide hastily added that “if you just ignored the way that African Americans and Native Americans had been treated in the past, the Constitution was essentially perfect, and it couldn't be blamed for those things. Besides, now that Obama has been elected President, we're over all of that, anyway. Yay, democracy!” It was the sort of commentary that might have been made ironically, but nothing in his performance or speech indicated that he didn't believe this surprising statement.

My goal is not to vilify this person, who was very friendly, a good public speaker, and clearly seemed invested in the museum's work. Nor it is to suggest that all of the important work that the museum has done is somehow negated by the questionable if well-intentioned performance of one tour guide. Rather it is to point out that the dominant discourse and its accompanying assumptive logic runs deep and has significant and counterproductive effects when it emerges, unbidden, in private and public speech acts – with larger ramifications, of course, when these speech acts are in service to interpretations of history that bear the imprimatur of institutional authority that a museum implies. To the extent that immigration (and its relationship to racialization) is a hot-button issue, deeply politicized, and also a topic about which many people draw conclusions without deferring to, and/or despite missing, crucial contextualizing and factual information (indeed, often drawing conclusions that are emotionally motivated because of the ways that it is represented in popular culture and because many Americans can see themselves in the “nation of immigrants,” conferring upon themselves the moral high ground that is backed by experience) it is an issue that is particularly available to be subtly (or not-so-subtly) and powerfully manipulated. Even if the intentions of this person were in line with those of the institution he represented, subtle gradations in the narrative based on his ignorance of some of the larger contexts and historical circumstances – ignorance that so often undergirds misfires in the efforts of well-meaning liberals – ends up (re)producing exclusionary and dehumanizing logic that privileges Christianity, whiteness, rugged individualism, and capitalism.



### **the open signifiers of Italian-ness and the port-of-entry**

Indeed, this thorny tension between the inclusive intentions of people occupying positions of authority and the tendency for deep-seated assumptive logic based on exclusion and entitlement to emerge unbidden is one that pervades not only the tourism economy on a large scale, but the small neighborhood tourism economy and local institutional infrastructure of Belmont. And as both immigration museums, and especially the Tenement Museum, emphasize, urban centers, in particular the neighborhoods within them, are important sites where the negotiation of the consequences of immigration occur; they are crucibles of demographic shifts, where the specificity of racialization and racial formation gets played out as neighborhoods change hands and space is contested.

Located in the South Bronx, Belmont is bounded by Fordham University, the Botanical Gardens, and the Bronx Zoo. It was an insular, deeply rooted, and largely self-sufficient community of Italian immigrants and their progeny during the early-mid twentieth century. However, the 1960s and '70s saw an unprecedented outward migration, and the population began to be replaced by various groups of people who were not of Italian descent. The South Bronx saw a turbulent history of changes during the '60s and '70s, which reflected trends in population turnover, urban renewal, upward mobility and white flight, immigration booms, often-violent racial tension, prevalence of drug-related crime, and urban blight that were occurring on the scale of the city and of the nation at large. Although Belmont was strongly impacted by these events, its civic leaders employed a number of strategies to resist deterioration. Among these was a concerted revitalization plan that involved marketing the Neighborhood on a city- and region-wide basis as “the *Real* Little Italy in the Bronx!” and capitalizing on the quality, longevity, and authenticity of its long-standing businesses and restaurants. The marketing was effective; today Belmont is billed as an authentic Italian neighborhood, and sees a steady influx of tourists from the surrounding boroughs and tri-state area. Additionally, the neighborhood receives numerous visits on a daily or weekly basis by people who made a decision to move away from there to other parts of the city or region, who return to work, to buy food, to visit with friends.

While Belmont was a major enclave of Italian immigrants, it very intentionally created or embroidered an identity for itself at a certain moment, strategically in the face of urban decay, and self-consciously building off of certain widely-circulating narratives and desires, as well as earnest beliefs about, immigration and authenticity. This self-conscious project represents an effort to grab ahold of the coattails of the ethnic revival trend in order to become legible, receive funding, attract tourists, and revitalize the area for the benefit of its multiracial residents. It makes for an interesting case study: an urban neighborhood making use of the same port-of-entry narrative and story that elides or brings into proximity pre-1924 and post-1965 immigration waves and experiences that the museums use, to two different ends: first, to interpellate and educate tourists who will only have a brief, ephemeral, and non-invested relationship to the site/neighborhood; and second, as a mechanism of creating, building, and maintaining community, deployed in order to integrate newcomers into an already-established neighborhood and community. When presenting the neighborhood for the tourist economy, the Local Development Corporation, merchants, and guidebooks employ a narrative of ethnic specificity, homogeneity, insularity, authenticity, and tradition. But for its audience of residents – those who are new as well as those who have been in the neighborhood for a long time – civic leaders who have ongoing relationships with the neighborhood, its residents, and its institutions employ a narrative of the “port-of-entry” in a way that incorporates the rhetoric and ethics that are similar to what Ellis Island and the Tenement Museum articulate.

That is, the leadership proposed and worked to embed an ethic within the local institutions that the neighborhood has, for generations, been a “port-of-entry” that welcomes new people from near and far into its fold and provides them, through individual relationships and institutional infrastructure, the tools and resources necessary for incorporation and belonging. That is, the space has become defined by a usable ethnic past that is irrelevant to the experiences of most of its current residents, who are primarily Latino, Asian, and Albanian immigrants as well as African Americans, but the success of this narrative in unifying the neighborhood is attributed to the fact that this ostensible Italian-ness is generally interpreted as an open signifier for non-ethnically-specific notions of community, neighborhood, and solidarity in the face of the challenges of urban living and immigrating, and as such needn’t be taken too literally.

These performances and performatives underlie the construction of a particular form of, and script for, the enactment of an inclusive multiculturalism, and allow the neighborhood to become figured by its Italian-American members as a diasporic and community “center” and a site that compels a variety of “returns.” As a diasporic center for these Italian Americans, it becomes figured as the site of dispersal, which puts the reason for dispersal at the center of the narrative; thus the changes that occurred in the 1960s and 70s become, in many accounts, the crux of the story of the neighborhood. It becomes the basis of its success or of its failure – and which of those it is depends upon the position of the inhabitants. The present becomes defined by the past, that is to say, by an ethnic past, one that is by no means relevant to the lives of a large number of the current residents. However, it is clearly articulated and understood as simultaneously “authentic,” and a figure-head for a number of other factors and is accepted as being a unifying factor that can be utilized but, where it is not useful or personally relevant, not taken literally. Because it is deployed in service to a notion of the neighborhood as a port-of-entry that works to provide a softer landing for its newcomers as it acknowledges the structural inequity that characterizes the relationships in the community, this “Italian-ness” is widely accepted as that which is at the center of what has allowed the community to remain cohesive and continuous, and has allowed for it to resist the fates of other similarly-situated neighborhoods: violent disintegration or wholesale gentrification.

The story relative to the demographic and paradigm shift that engendered both the nostalgic and the forward-looking articulations of contemporary Belmont begins during the Second World War, when, in the context of a period of post-Depression economic revival, plentiful new jobs opened up, and the Great Migration continued as thousands of African Americans moved from the South to northern cities; in New York, many settled in the Bronx as well as in Harlem. At the same time, rent-control legislation was enacted that was intended to protect working-class tenants from major housing shortage, and this system was to remain in place for nearly thirty years. The practice of redlining, or mortgage discrimination that mapped out along racial and economic lines where banks could and could not invest in property, helped to produce the intense segregation of Northern cities. A number of other policy decisions were made in the fifties – decisions made in order to accommodate groups such as war veterans and “the deserving poor,” as well as major resurfacing of cities such as New York in the age of terrorizing urban renewal projects – most infamously in that city, perhaps, was the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which tore through a number of old neighborhoods and displaced thousands; and various ghettoizing public housing initiatives in the Bronx – all of which corresponded with the upward mobility of groups of European pre-1924 immigrants and their progeny. This “push and pull” phenomenon – i.e., urban residents being pushed out by their fear of new inhabitants and/or literally by displacement, and simultaneously pulled away by the lure of more desirable property and schools, and the means to acquire these things –

unquestionably participated in deepening racial and class divides, irrespective of anyone's motivations.

In the sixties, the situation worsened, as jobs became scarce when manufacturing and other industries that provided hundreds of thousands of entry-level jobs relocated out of New York City; over the course of the 1960s at least 600,000 jobs disappeared from the labor market. As labor costs rose and rent control continued, quality management became increasingly less profitable. Finally, as civil rights codes such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968 were enacted and eradicated the most overt forms of housing discrimination, middle class blacks and Puerto Ricans moved from the South Bronx to more desirable communities north and west of there. A housing gap was created in the South Bronx, and landlords – who were increasingly absentee – discovered that welfare housing allowances were more profitable than market rent, and they began to rent less desirable properties to clients on welfare. The prevalence of drugs provided an added level of change and destruction. And the 1965 repeal of immigration quotas that had been set in 1924 led to an influx of immigration, unparalleled since the twenties, from many parts of the world that had not previously accounted for a significant presence in the United States, which required new (re)negotiations of identity and turf. In short, the economy of poverty, despair, and desperation did not provide an auspicious context for racial, ethnic, and class integration.

Geographically, Belmont was sheltered from a good deal of upheaval: surrounded on three sides by Fordham University, the Bronx Zoo, and the New York Botanical Gardens, it escaped being torn through by the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Although housing project towers were built on the edges of the neighborhood, powerful local leaders, namely the Bishop, prevented the creation of towers inside the community. It therefore didn't see, at its most local, the kinds of physical changes that other nearby neighborhoods did. Nonetheless, the fallout from the above events that took the Bronx by storm, as well as the upheaval of the 1960s and '70s in the United States across the board, created shockwaves that by no means left Belmont exempt. The neighborhood faced a number of challenges, particularly related to the migration of middle class residents outward toward the suburbs, changes in boundaries and demographics resulting in contested turf, and serious racial tension. Against the backdrop of "the Bronx is burning," one of the most notorious events that occurred locally involved the emergency rerouting of public transit buses that had historically gone down 187<sup>th</sup> St. to an area outside of the neighborhood – a change that was never turned around – because black schoolchildren who lived beyond Webster Avenue but were within the school district, who took these buses to get to school, became targets of racial violence at a particularly fraught moment.

Yet given how ugly these conflicts were, there are surprising ways in which Belmont's transition through this period was relatively less fraught than what many other neighborhoods experienced. Three mutually-constitutive facts made this possible: 1) a comparatively sizable number of residents stayed, and others who moved away remained connected and involved in Belmont's day-to-day existence, 2) the majority of the new residents were immigrants, either from Italy, or from, initially, Albania, and subsequently a number of Latin American countries, and 3) major efforts were undertaken on the part of leaders of the church, the schools, the Local Development Corporation, and other professionals and merchants to smooth over the transition and maintain a sense of cohesiveness within the community. The fact that immigration into the neighborhood looked as it did, and involved people who seemed familiar enough to Italian American residents in their customs, foods, family structures, and in some cases, religious expressions, meant that there was a certain level of consistency; even as businesses occasionally changed owners, there were cases in which a restaurant might, for

instance, change hands from an Italian American proprietor to an Albanian one but stay open, and retain its recipes and even its customer base. In many ways, this pattern reflected previous decades' patterns of inter-ethnic encounter, when groups of European immigrants, each racialized specifically and differently from one another but still occupying shades of more-or-less-whiteness, participated in the lives of one another's neighborhoods as merchants, colleagues, etc, though occasionally with some conflict. During his interview, Peter was specific in his contextualization of apparently racist tensions in the 60s within a much longer history of intra- and inter-group tensions that arise in the context of claiming ownership of space.

Everybody who (tape jumps [lived there]) had this sense of ownership to that neighborhood (tape jumps [?]), rightfully so, anyways and they weren't shy about letting you know that, if you didn't fit in there, and I had legitimate roots there. Nobody could question my roots there. [...But ] not everybody knew who I was. [...] Not being a fixture there or being interested in not being there very much, I was an outsider and they didn't welcome outsiders. [...] They were not uncomfortable (tape jumps [with making me feel]) uncomfortable. That kind of thing went on (tape jumps [also between the Italian kids and]) the Irish kids (tape jumps [who lived nearby]). If you crossed over the turf people are going to make you uncomfortable, man. [...] That's just the way it is. [...] They didn't have much but what they had they wanted to (tape jumps [hang on to]).

He points to an important nuance that is often overlooked, as he identifies patterns of tension that are more closely related to defending against encroachment on turf believed to be rightfully marked and owned, than to categorical hatred for any particular "others." Joe, who runs the Local Development Corporation, concurs, describing the ways in which situations that require people to live in proximity with one another inevitably produce negotiations of space, claim, and identity, that entail both conflict and coming to terms with one another. He points out that, in fact, in order for coexistence to occur between people who perceive themselves as fundamentally different from one another, proximity is *necessary*, and makes clear that he believes that those people who left, or who come from outside and live in homogeneous communities, have no right to an accusatory opinion about how these negotiations are accomplished.

There were people living here in some of these buildings for a very long time. [...] Some people say, "Whoa, I'm okay over here." They're not burning down my house. [...] They're not shooting through the windows. They're not mugging me on the street. [...] Even though the new people were in here people did not get intimidated to the point of fear. Unfortunately, by not being fearful and running away sometimes you're going to have a confrontation because somebody may want to exercise a point of view which you may consider different than your point of view and if you can't kind of slide off of each other sometimes you're going to bump into each other and something is going to happen. Growing up in this community there was a certain amount of that. Some people would call it racist attitudes but that's the ignorant academic. [...] Over here is "You think you're tougher than me. This is my turf." [...] It has to do with, "This is mine. I paid for this. You're not going to destroy it. You're not going to take it from me [...]. Some people will say, "Hey, I'm not going to put up with that. I'm going to move away," and that's what some people have ultimately done then, but some people will stand their

ground and if neither one of them takes a (inaudible, [either]) somebody is going to get hurt *or people are going to begin to understand*. If they stand and look at each other long enough and discuss those types of issues in an existential type of way someone is going to say, “You know, I think this guy is not going to put up with this thing. Maybe I shouldn’t do that,” and a certain amount of that takes place because in this community you can go to the playground and you will see people of different colors and backgrounds playing and you see them working in the same establishment. You see them dining in the same establishment. You see them living in the same building. [...] Things can work but you have to be in the same area for that to work. If you’re not in the same area it doesn’t work.

Joe’s disgust with white flight, on one hand, and frustration with smug diagnoses of racism from outsiders, on the other, leads him to espouse an ethic of staying put, of mingling, of butting heads and learning from one another. This theorization of multiculturalism as descriptive rather than doctrinal or tokenistic, consists of a messy but productive process of negotiating the differences between people living side by side that appear threatening. Although this stands the chance of coming to resemble tolerance, which, as Brown has theorized, is a thinly veiled maintenance of uneven power relationships, it seems that what Joe aspires to is more akin to something like acceptance and realism, whereby difference is grappled with and taken seriously, while also presenting an opportunity to come to a more complex understanding of one’s own cultural affiliations and assumptions by interacting with people who are not the same.

The demographic consistencies I describe above – that is, residents, merchants, and community leaders who stayed, and newcomers whose practices and traditions were perceived as being familiar to the Italian American residents – contributed to many Italian Americans feeling comfortable remaining, or at least continuing to work or teach, in the neighborhood and mitigated some of the fear, tension, and hatred that accompany demographic shifts. Additionally the sudden flow of Italians fresh from Italy after 1965 not only contributed to this sense of constancy, but also revitalized Belmont’s claim on Italian-ness per se – since many of the older residents’ ties to Italy were distant and tenuous, not least because of the emphasis and valuation of assimilation and becoming “fully American” during earlier generations. This new influx, which corresponded with the moment when claiming ethnicity became fashionable and claiming difference and grievance became strategic, re-introduced the narrative of immigrant success, the American Dream, and the notion of an authentic ethnic affiliation.

However, simultaneous to these consistencies, “how the neighborhood has changed” was a topic that came up in every interview I conducted. In the beginning, I was asking about it in a very naïve and neutral way, in service in an interest in how the past was constructed in light of the proliferation of “returns” and “nostalgia literature,” although as the interviews continued it became clear that “change” was a loaded term for many, and a central narrative structure for nearly all. Namely, the notion of “how the neighborhood has changed” is interpreted as referring to a demographic shift: from Italian and/or European immigrant communities to communities of color. People were quick to jump to the defensive, as Italian Americans have long been accused (often rightfully so, though by no means always) of being jingoistic and racist. And many interviews evince an acknowledgement of the fact that, *whether or not they agree*, there is a collective expectation or understanding that non-white urban populations are threatening and dangerous. Their responses make apparent their relationship to this assumption: some debunk it, others uncritically reinscribe it, others indicate that some

people have negotiated positions which enable them to believe that this threat is true while still maintaining a relationship to the neighborhood, by finding ways to minimize the importance of the perceived threat and/or by avoiding certain areas. I turn now to several individuals who articulate a number of contrasting views, each of which has certain resonances with the opinions of others who have similar relationships to the neighborhood. I will present excerpts from these interviews, and subsequently will synthesize and analyze what they say and do.

Fran emigrated to the Bronx from Italy with her family in the 1960s when she was a child. She still lives in the neighborhood, where she owns and runs a hair salon, and has been very active in the neighborhood schools.

**F:** It's, you know, changed, yes it's changed, but I think everywhere else changed also. You know? It's still Arthur Avenue. [...] It's a community. I find other places don't have a community. Over here you go out in the morning and you know where you're going to go buy your bread and you say hello to whoever you know from the bread store. Then, you go to your supermarket and you go to your deli and it's all people that you know. So, as you're doing your shopping you're also communicating with people that you know. As to other neighborhoods, it doesn't have that. It doesn't have a community.

\* \*

Peter's grandfather opened the family's bakery – which Peter still owns today – when he came to the Bronx in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Peter is the official owner and manager of the bakery, his own career has taken him into the realm of government and philanthropy; additionally, he has been an important figure in Belmont's revitalization. I met with him in his Fifth Avenue office at the Foundation he works for. In response to a question that I asked about how the population changes were and are perceived by Belmont's pre-war inhabitants, he explained:

**P:** They hate it.

**K:** Outright?

**P:** No. I mean not disrespectfully, inappropriately disrespectfully. I think now that people are used to it now, there is much less hate about it now. People just sort of deal with it. [...] I don't know if they left because it was changing or they left because it was time to live (tape jumps) out of living. Why do people smoke cigarettes? They advertise and it looks cool and people start smoking. If enough people hear about the green grass somewhere else then they believe it's greener grass, and sometimes it is, and sometimes when you get there you say, "It's different but it's not so much greener." I think some of those people long for what they had but there's no doubt about it, it's ghetto living – urban, ghetto living. Housing (tape jumps) all of those things. I mostly think it was time for people to leave their (tape jumps) situation and they did. I think it was sort of a natural flow.

\* \*

Gordana is a teacher in Junior High School 45, who emigrated from Macedonia and has lived in Belmont for about ten years. In response to a question about what she makes of the extensive nostalgia evidenced on the part of residents, she said:

Again, living here in this neighborhood ten years [...] I someplace hear many people say, oh, you should have seen this neighborhood like 20 or 30 years ago. It was safer.

Now, it is older people [who say these things]. Me, I am okay. I don't feel any sense of nostalgia. [...] Me, I don't know what is nostalgia. It is like I've never been in another place. [...] Actually, as I told you, when I saw my favorite juice from my native country I was like, "This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century." It was very much like no nostalgia. This is what the world should be like. You live like the whole world is your city. [...] I'm very forward looking, looking towards the future. [...] Maybe you would interest some other people who...I don't know. [...] They are living here but with their bodies, and with their minds back there. Many of the older people maybe you can find like that. It is only nostalgia. It doesn't make sense with heredity. [...] So, it stuck with them and they do it for 30 or 40 years and they are not changing. [...] I know my landlord. She's here for 30 years. She owns the building for 30 years. She loves the neighborhood. She loves the people. She's not like "why me". She loves the neighborhood.

\* \*

Stephen's father grew up in Belmont, and his uncles continue/d to have important roles in the community as civic leaders. Stephen's connection to Belmont comes primarily as a tie to family, as well as being one of the formative sites that inspired his studying the Italian language, and making repeated long-term stays in Italy.

[I]t is more infrequent that I hear the spoken Italian used, in people going on a walk or people in the neighborhood. [...] So, I don't think there is such a strong Italian presence there as there was. [...] I also think that the geography or the size of that neighborhood is really probably a two or three-block radius, whereas I can even remember that it was much longer and went pretty much all the way down to Southern Boulevard by the Bronx Zoo and extended a few more blocks past Arthur Avenue, and now it has really become smaller and smaller, and I look at the [street] signs. There are very few Italian proprietors. [...] I'm seeing McDonald's on Arthur Avenue. [...] If I walk with you down there I can say to you, I consider this to be part of the neighborhood. [T]here are a few things that I measure. One is the safety that I feel. So, if I'm on a street and I feel more comfortable walking down there with my wife and my son, that is a way that I sense the neighborhood's presence kind of enveloping me. [...] It's hard for me to put kind of a description of the geography or (inaudible) boundaries, but I will tell you that just walking from one side of the parking lot extending from Arthur Avenue going towards Lorillard Place there is a very different feel that I have versus walking down Arthur Avenue.

\* \*

John was the Monsignor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the neighborhood Catholic church whose hundred-year anniversary was celebrated a month after these interviews were held, as of 2006. He has since retired but remains involved in the LDC. The Monsignor grew up in Belmont and was a member of the parish, and was called by the Church to return to Mt. Carmel to serve later in his career.

You know, paradoxically, I have been growing up here and living here and I can say it hasn't changed. Demographically and historically, it has changed. I mean people that I knew as a boy are not here. People who were here when I came twenty-two years ago are not here. The increase in the other immigrant population where once the immigrants were Italian, now it is from another area. The thing is that we serve the people. It

doesn't make a difference. In other words, we are not serving a particular people. We serve the people that happen to be here at this particular time. At one time they were Italians. At another time they would be Mexicans and other times they would be Albanians. So, the thing is, the people have changed but the area hasn't. [...] When I was at Our Lady of Lourdes in Harlem we had a pastor who used to walk all around the neighborhood and people would be crying saying how the west side of Manhattan had changed and had deteriorated. It had been predominately at that time Irish and now at that time it was coming to be more Puerto Rican. He used to say this, that I think was wonderful. He would say, "This neighborhood is better now than ever before." They would look at him and say, "What?" He would say, "You know why? Because you and I are here." So that is what I say. That as much as I love the past, it is better now because you and I are here. We don't live in a vacuum. We don't live in a static society. We have to accept the changes and make the best of the changes, but don't let the changes ruin us or make us do things that would be contrary to our humanity.

When I conducted my interviews, I spoke with nearly twenty people who had been born and raised in the Neighborhood, many of whom had opportunities to leave – during or after college, during portions of their careers, or when raising families – who nonetheless either chose to remain as residents, or, if they chose to live elsewhere, remained affiliated in other ways. Some work(ed) for or with the major local institutions as schoolteachers, principals, administrators or church leaders. Some have taken over running their families' century-old businesses, or have relocated their careers in law, education, or urban planning to the neighborhood in order to direct their skills and livelihoods in service to it.

I interviewed approximately ten others, primarily men over sixty or seventy years of age, who no longer live or work in Belmont, but who return to it at least once weekly to shop for certain groceries that cannot be replicated elsewhere. That is, they come in search of traditional ethnic food specialties, such as fresh bread and mozzarella, pastries, etc., that are acquired in very particular ways: namely, going to several different shops – the cheese store, bakery, butcher, fishmonger, greengrocer, and so forth – to take care of the shopping, instead of going to a supermarket; all the while speaking in Italian; and enjoying a deep sense of community. Generally these trips back to the neighborhood also entail visiting old friends, or having a tradition of having meals in a certain restaurant with a certain group of people on a certain day, and almost inevitably involve reminiscing. These forays into the past, which former residents make in order to try to reconstitute (a romanticized, pleasant version of) it in the present, function as efforts to – even temporarily – reclaim space and time that they feel has slipped out of their grasp.

Although the shopping experience itself is something that most people who come to Belmont from elsewhere – whether returning as former residents, coming to work as teachers or community leaders, or scouting around as a tourist – what these visitors see when they look at, or for, the Neighborhood that lies beyond or contains the retail nodes is often quite divergent. Sometimes people completely disavow the notion that any change has occurred in the neighborhood over the years, or else they articulate that they understand change as constant, inevitable, and necessary. Such responses often occur on the part of people who are affiliated with the schools or with various forms of organized or informal social justice, who are intimately connected to the lives of individual residents, and who are not inclined to see the past in monolithic, romantic terms – and nor do they see racial others in monolithic and threatening terms. In other cases, the past is held up as an ideal; the Neighborhood is understood as something that has failed, that is over; and what is left is a simulacrum, a



production put on for tourists that bears some semblance to something that did once exist, but is at this point only a representation. Most people in these instances maintain relationships only with other former residents with whom a common past is shared; they see current residents as less worthy of ownership of the space, or don't see them at all. In certain other cases, people are not focused on change; they see the neighborhood as primarily a business community, or as a unique place with an "old world" feel. The physical and factual "reality" of the place is negotiated in terms of, and is both constitutive of and modified by, the particular agenda or stakes that each person brings to the situation.

This is to say that there are certain people – the ones whose relationships with the neighborhood are continuous and daily, and who are invested in the lives of the current residents – who resist the notion of "golden years" altogether, and perceive the extent to which that category is manufactured by personal nostalgia, a perceived loss of a time and place, external media influences, and "commonsense" understandings of racial and ethnic difference. Some of those people do engage actively in nostalgic reconstitution of their "golden" pasts, which are inflected by deeply personal memories, and most often are *not* ethnically-oriented, but rather, center around particular people, families, sporting events, cultural institutions, etc. Others of them eschew the notion of a "golden" period and often imply that they perceive that the assumption I or others am making by questioning their opinion about whether the neighborhood, or their relationship to it, has changed is a loaded one that points to a lack of willingness to accept the more recent non-Italian residents, most of whom are immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and in some cases Europe, and black Americans. That is, it seems most people I spoke with assume that a golden period must connote a desire for ethnic/racial homogeneity and/or exclusivity. And indeed, there are also certain people for whom the loss of the neighborhood-as-it-was is a very tangible and often bitter loss; one that is bound up in nostalgia for their own past, as well as nostalgia for an ideal that may not have existed. Images used to depict this "golden period" circulate in the collective memory of the area: there is a disproportionate amount nostalgia literature produced in and about this place, as well as about other Little Italies and white ethnic enclaves in and outside of New York that create a feedback-loop of a nostalgic popular imaginary and a set of specific, tangible memories. Often these representations reflect aging or former residents' nostalgia for a specific bygone time and the place and community in which they grew up. However, given that the "golden period" is typically located, temporally speaking, somewhere starting in the 1940s and lasting through the 1950s or the early-mid 1960s – the period when the area was primarily European, and specifically Italian, a period of time centered around postwar prosperity, security, and ascension to whiteness – it is realistic to interpret some of this nostalgia on the part of some people as reflecting their desire for insularity and ethno-racial homogeneity. Each of these invocations of the past – these returns – is performative, bolstering and reproducing in the present the particular version of the past that they invoke. They create networks of relationality that either include "newcomers" or exclude them, that insist on the centrality of residents' lives or of the business and tourism industry or of the ghosts of the golden past. In so doing, they contribute to the competing visibilities of "new" and "old" residents, and to the collective sense of acceptability of valuing either the ethnically homogenous past, the multiethnic and multiracial present, or some combination of the two.

These issues begin to get at a central question: the performance of ethnicity and authenticity, which is always haunted by questions of inclusion and exclusion. How are Italian-ness and Italian-American-ness performed? How does the performance(s) of Italian-ness operate in this community, and to what end? I argue that authenticity and belonging accrue through performative returns that take place by way of *both* performances of ethnicity – legible

acts that constitute embodied ethnic identifications or ethnically-associated places – *and* invocations of the “old country” as a site of pre-modern neighborliness, community, connectedness, and collectivity; that is, it is cleverly constructed to connote a hybrid, postmodern space that fuses the idealized intimacies, values, and socialities of an Old World village with a multicultural American metropolis.

Butler’s definition of gender is “a series of stylized acts” that have been “sedimented over time”;<sup>173</sup> their discursive significance becomes naturalized just as the constructedness of the roles do, and simultaneously, the fact that this reality is constructed through acts means that they constantly undergo revision, both revision that is invisible or predicated on historical and contextual contingency, and revision that takes place intentionally but within definitive parameters. Similarly, the notion of ethnic or racial performativity proposes that ethno/-racial identities are constructed and maintained through the combination of repetitions of recognizable acts that are attributed racialized significance and naturalized – and quite often calcified – as such. In the case of the neighborhood, food is consumed, language is spoken, and place is made and attributed significance according to logic that both reinscribes and rearticulates meanings of ethnicity and authenticity. On one hand, the logic of authenticity can be exclusive in intent and in effect: it communicates that if you don’t look a certain way, if you do not share a particular history that is charged with importance, then you cannot belong. On the other, the authenticity that attends this particular place can migrate – it is fluid and available enough to be accessed and appropriated.

This is true, in part, because the tourism industry is structured around businesses: you can travel to an/Other world – one which is separated from the American metropolis temporally and ethnically – by engaging in practices of trade. This can occur by way of eating “authentic” food, by knowing where to go to get the best versions of each delicacy, by having loyalty to certain shops and going there every week, making small talk with the man stretching mozzarella or buying fish often enough from the fishmonger that she knows what you like and how much of it. This desirable otherness and authenticity can also be accessed by shopping in an “authentic” manner by patronizing small mom-n-pop shops that have specialized for generations in particular types of products rather than going to either the supermarket or department store or to the upscale urban boutique. On some level this foregrounding of consumption breeds a fetishizing and commodifying relation to ethnic otherness, while on another, in Italian/-American culture (which, if it can be considered “other” in twenty-first century America, is safely and tantalizingly so rather than threateningly or threatened-ly so) sharing food is an important way of demonstrating hospitality and making or maintaining community, and thus represents a site that enables the boundaries of insider and outsider to be blurred.

The fluidity of what constitutes and who may access authenticity is also partially predicated on the way that Italian-ness is an imperfect and unstable form of whiteness, which is at once haunted by a racialized history, and, at present, can be (and often is) unmarked unless it is claimed through *acts*: practicing cultural traditions, speaking the Italian language or speaking with a certain American accent – a Jersey/Bronx/Brooklyn patois that is associated with ethnic Italian-ness. Sal and John were two of many people who told me about a family of Jewish merchants, the Teitels, who owned a dry goods shop in the neighborhood for generations, and who, in the early twentieth century when English was not commonly spoken, learned Italian – indeed, a number of different dialects – thus demonstrating their desire to communicate with and participate in the community, and earning themselves an insider status. The contemporary

---

<sup>173</sup> See Butler 1988.

analogue is, as I have discussed, the interpellation of other Southern and Eastern European and Latin American immigrants as culturally similar and knowable, demonstrated through the familiarity of their traditions to those of the previous residents and through their willingness and apparent facility to maintain local business and culinary practices. Of course, it is quite apparent that this ease of incorporation is extended in all of these cases to groups of people who occupy structurally similar racial, ethnical, or cultural positions. But Sal and John also told me about a community member who was a rather anomalous presence when he lived in the area perhaps forty or fifty years ago:

[[Sal]]: [T]hat entire building was all Italians with the exception of (tape jumps [a black man named Victor, who lived in the neighborhood and had married an Italian woman]). He had all the mannerisms with the waving hands...

[[John]]: Like an Italian.

[[Sal]]: They were saying what is this black guy doing over here? He would answer them. (Laughter)

[[John]]: Yes, he would answer them. They would say it in Italian not wanting him to hear and then he would...but after a while everybody got to know him. He was (inaudible [the only]) black in the neighborhood. I don't know. Whatever you want to call him but he was an Italian.

This anecdote reveals the surprising ability for the performative qualities of ethnicity to be at once widely available and adequately legitimizing: Sal and John considered Victor to be “Italian,” an insider, because he could act legitimately or recognizably, but also, it seems, because of his demonstrated commitment to the place, its people, its rules, and its mode of being.

This example also speaks, then, to the ways that authenticity circulates or is accrued in relation to the cohesiveness of the community. In articulating a set of values about what a community means and making them, through institutional modeling, into a kind of public mandate, community leaders build on a fondly-remembered genealogy of previous leadership and an idea of an Old World village, where it does “take a village to raise a child,” where you know your neighbors and your merchants and you look out for one another. The attachment to the neighborhood at this level is what motivates former residents, many of whom are aging, who have spread out throughout the region or the country to send checks every year to the Giordano Fund, a non-profit that provides school activities, mentoring programs, and money to pay for Catholic high school and college tuition to schoolchildren in the district (that is, children who are primarily brown and black). It is what motivates neighborhood merchants to contribute their products to holiday food baskets for schoolchildren and their families whose incomes are low. It is what motivates the proprietor of a family bakery, who was involved for many years in organized crime, and who subsequently had a religious revelation that helped him find a different path for his life, to provide food – every single morning before his shop opens – to people who are in the streets and hungry, who struggle with homelessness, drug addiction, or prostitution and encourages them to seek social services.

It is crucial to the success of this place that Italian-ness remains a flexible category, in part because of its deployment as an open signifier in an economic venture that has proven to bring, maintain, and distribute resources among the diversity of residents in the neighborhood.

Of course it is also necessary, on a broader national scale, for Americans collectively to continue to accept and believe in the idea that the immigrant narrative is applicable to all citizens, because it is the foundation of the American Dream, the basis of the liberal individualist and capitalist notions that anyone can start from nothing and can succeed at accumulating wealth, property, and a legible, successful, middle-class career. Not to believe that would threaten the fundamental order. And to some extent, these enactments are compelled by ethnic pride, a sense of authenticity, or a sense of claiming turf. But they are also a survival mechanism – a successful marketing strategy – that has been able to unify the neighborhood and preserve its culture of serving one another, helping to keep it from undergoing the same disintegration, fracturing, and upheaval of many of its environs. Even for the residents who have the most invested in the Italian-ness of this place, to an important extent the neighborhood is constructed around a community sensibility, in which Italian-ness becomes a figurehead for something else.

The Belmont Arthur Avenue Local Development Corporation, “the official commercial and economic development agency for the Belmont community,” came into being in 1981, with Joe Cicciu at the center. According to their website,

The Belmont Arthur Avenue Local Development Corporation (BAALDC) and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) have been working together on a comprehensive initiative to prevent the deterioration, blight and abandonment of at-risk housing stock in the Belmont neighborhood community. [...] BAALDC activities have included the development, ownership and management of housing; creating housing opportunities for home ownership for moderate income, low income and special needs housing, including the elderly as well as the homeless population.<sup>174</sup>

Around 1983 – notably, 6-7 years after *Roots* and during the era of Ethnic Heritage Funding – this organization recognized that Mulberry St. was being touted as New York’s Little Italy, although there were few Italian inhabitants there by then; conversely, in the Bronx neighborhood there was still, at that time, a sizeable population. Given that, and given that there were still a number of stores owned by the same families for many generations – although at that time these Italian food and specialty shops were not by any means the neighborhood’s focus, but were part of a larger fabric that catered to the varieties of residents’ needs – the LDC decided to take a gamble and invest in producing and fleshing out the image of an Italian ethnic enclave. They advocated for a shift in parlance, to change the way the neighborhood was referred to, from Fordham, which they felt was too generic, to Belmont, which means “beautiful mountain” in Italian and recalled one of the early names of this place given to a centrally located estate by a prominent immigrant family decades earlier. The organization offered to merchants various incentives, with the help of the city government, to stay put – not to shut out the lights and escape to the suburbs – and instead to fix up their storefronts and step up to a central role in the community. As these efforts proved fruitful, the LDC and friends continued to expand their efforts to give a new face to the public amenities – street lights, sidewalks, public works, and eventually cosmetic additions to reinforce the new reputation, in the way of storefront refurbishments, awnings, flags, murals, and sculptures by prominent

---

<sup>174</sup> Belmont LDC. 2007. Accessed 17 May 2007. <[www.belmontarthurldc.com/about/](http://www.belmontarthurldc.com/about/)>

Italian sculptors of prominent Italian historical characters, including Columbus. These features would greet not only locals, but the visitors that would prove to be lured from other parts of the city and its environs by the ad campaign that was put out in local news, Zagat's, and food magazines.

But even the success of these efforts could easily add up only to a gentrification project, albeit a self-determined one; or a forced ethnic identification that deepens divides, as it encourages current residents with no apparent claim on Italian-ness to become invisibilized and/or identified as unwelcome; or a surface-level successful economic initiative that provides some jobs and perhaps, to some, a sense of safety or familiarity, but no cohesion. To a certain extent the program may have produced all of these effects on some level. And/at the same time, the above efforts do not explain the ways in which this place becomes figured as an intensely beloved site, or the ways in which this rhetoric allows for the community to cohere – around it or in spite of it. In many ways, what remained central to the neighborhood's cohesiveness was its leaders – historical leaders who continue to be remembered and invoked, the educators Angelo Patri and Thomas Giordano and the Bishop Perniconi, as well as many contemporary leaders whom I interviewed – and the institutions such as the church, the elementary, middle, and high schools, the Development Agency, the Thomas C. Giordano Fund, and various community-based organizations. These were led by individuals who interpreted their roles as being diplomats and educators, and their institutions' roles as attending to the business of ministry and education, respectively, and simultaneously fostering an inclusive version of a multicultural America, one that takes stock of difference. These institutions functioned to signify and reiterate local history, and therefore to play a role in the narrative of continuity and ethnic affiliation discussed above, but they are also flexible and designed to accommodate contemporary changes as they come. J.H.S. 45, the Thomas Giordano School, is staffed by a diverse group of teachers, and provides bilingual education in a variety of languages, and their programs seem intent upon maintaining students' sense of their own backgrounds while preparing them to be able to participate effectively in American social and institutional contexts. Joseph, former principal of 45, describes the context of the '60s and the tensions that came with integration, and the ways in which the school saw its job to be a major player in fostering peace.

As more and more African Americans began to move into the fringes of the neighborhood and into the neighborhood [Italian] people began to move out. Those are the days when there was great racial tension and it all came together in school because the school reflected the community. I remember a time when your Uncle Tom was dean here when we had to have buses come and park on 189<sup>th</sup> right off of Lorillard and pick up the black kids so they could get bused back to their neighborhood. It was really challenging. I had cops on the roofs. It was a tough time but our role was to really work hard to... I'll never forget the day that Martin Luther King was shot. I was working the cafeteria at that time and it was May [sic] of 1968. I walked into my cafeteria and I could feel the tension. You could sense the tension. What I tried to do to cut the tension was I had everybody stand and we had a moment of silence. A way of sort of cutting the tension recognizing that something horrific had happened. [...] I was seeing Mary [a black music teacher] the next day. [He says cheerfully:] "Hey, Mary, how are you doing?" "Not so well, Joe." I realized that I was not being sensitive. Well, you better learn. I think what I tried to do when changes came, we tried to do here we did through sports. We did it in the school. We tried to get the kids to at least accept playing side-by-side or

learning side-by-side and again these were real difficult times. I mean you had stuff on the street there. We had gang stuff. [...] I mean there could have been race riots in the building. We never had that. [...] It was important for us to make this school a safe place for children, very important, and it was also the breakdown of the attitudes.

His analysis does not perform a structural/institutional analysis – rather, like many liberal multiculturalist arguments and analyses, it situates racism as an attitudinal and individual phenomenon. And his action follows suit, working to foster “a breakdown of the attitudes,” providing opportunities for acceptance and coexistence. At the same time, Joseph’s commentary reveals a crucial and distinguishing factor in the neighborhood’s discourse of the port-of-entry: it is not only about immigrants. Rather, it offers a model that posits that everyone has been the outsider at one time or another, and those of us currently able to access resources and the system have the responsibility to help those of us who haven’t got it.

The school has a long and rigorous history of involvement in outreach endeavors, hosting weekend activities and language classes on weekends for parents, and trying to give athletics and other extracurricular activities a public face as a site where students can be brought together to work collectively toward a goal. Kathy, who was at the time of the interview a superintendent for the school district that includes Belmont, has been a teacher and principal in the district, is currently the Adjunct Field Supervisor for the College of Mount St. Vincent; as an Italian-American college-educated woman in the sixties in the Bronx, she was something of an anomaly. She recalls the inception of the non-profit called the Giordano Fund that provides resources for local schoolchildren.

They were making the arrangements for the wake and [...] talking about if people wanted to make donations what would be appropriate. [...] I said, “I really think we should do something for children because that’s how he spent his life. [...] We were making it more specific and maybe we could dedicate a section of the library that we could fill with donations where I said maybe we could just make a fund for needy children because at the time we still had kids coming who needed winter coats. [...] I had a vision about it being a fund in his memory for the children of Belmont but I was thinking on smaller scale. [...] The amount of money that started to come in it was just remarkable. So, then we realized that this was something that we were going to do on a grander scale. [...] Then we just started to dream big and sponsor activities at the [P.S.] 205 with the special programs, the arts and the zoo. [...] Then, we just branched out into scholarships. We started with the stipends for the graduates of 45 giving kids who exhibited a strong academic performance and leadership skills that award is given in Uncle Tom’s memory and it entitles them to a thousand dollar stipend a year for college. So, we sort of saw it as an incentive to finish high school really because there was hope at the end. [...] Then, I guess about six or seven years ago I was talking to Uncle Frank and said I was very concerned that the kids in the Bronx didn’t have many opportunities for high schools. The high schools are really rundown into the ground and I said they really don’t have alternatives. So, maybe we have to think about the fund offering some kind of financial support to kids who want the alternative of Catholic school or private school. [...] Now, we give them the financial support but we also give them a personal mentor because again these are kids whose parents don’t know how to navigate the system. [...] So, it is another [...] institution in the community to support our kids.

Kathy's analytical and non-moralizing language – “parents not knowing how to navigate the system” – and the trajectory she describes of initially envisioning programs with limited resources but that would serve to educate and engage children, and ultimately making use of the more extensive resources to offer them access to better education – evinces a recognition and reckoning with structural disparities that is often the most significant lacuna in white ethnic appeals to multiculturalism in their social justice efforts.

The schools and the church have consistently extended their reach beyond simply offering the services they are expected to offer, in order to be present in other forms of community activism. John, the Monsignor of Mt. Carmel, describes the far reach of the church in earlier days as a community center: a locus for recreational activities and social services.

In the early days, the parish, the church was really the center of activity. [...] We came here for recreation. We came here for social gatherings. They had basketball games. We came here to help the poor or the poor came here to be helped. [...] The church provided that because it had the area. It had the gymnasium. They had the lower church and the school. For instance in the summertime they used to show movies. They would close the street in the area and show movies. [...] In the school they used to have roller-skating. [...] People come back and still consider it as their parish, even though they live far away, and that is why some people want to get married here, want to be buried from here, and want their children baptized here even though they have moved far away. [...] Mt Carmel has been a beacon of light, a welcoming beacon to thousands of people, immigrant Italians and now Spanish, the Mexicans.

And Kathy speaks specifically to her understanding of how the local institutions incorporate the rhetoric and memory of the port-of-entry and immigrants' struggle into their ethical and practical frameworks for providing services.

I think that this neighborhood was a port of entry for so many of the immigrants who really struggled and it continues to be a port of entry for different groups. In the early 1970's we certainly saw an influx of the Yugoslavians and Albanians who were really refugees and escaped from very, very difficult lives. We were able to embrace them here because the prior generation sort of paved the path for that immigrant life. Now, we see an influx of Mexicans who also through the coyotes have escaped and come across the desert and here they find safety because there is an understanding of the life they had and their need to come to make a better life for themselves and for their children. So, I guess there was a real foundation here as a port of entry. The schools were always through all of these groups I think, [...] a beacon of hope for these people because education was what everybody saw as the way out of their difficult life.

It is within many of the community leaders' immediate memory that they, themselves or their parents, suffered anti-Italian discrimination that was at once personal and attitudinal, *and* had damaging structural effects. For instance, in my interview with former Democratic Congressman Mario Biaggi – who represented the Bronx from 1968-1988, when he resigned after federal convictions of corruption – he insisted that he was innocent, and that he had been hounded, surveilled, and framed throughout his long career in public service (as a policeman, a law partner, a variety of state-level advisory positions, and in the U.S. Congress) because of the deeply-entrenched assumptive logic that tethers ethnic Italian-ness and organized crime. While

I don't and can't know for certain what actually happened, what *is* certain is that Biaggi is convinced that the particular way in which he was positioned as an Italian American public figure meant that he was under scrutiny in a way that others in similar positions – who may have been involved in the same kinds of affairs for which he was accused, but were ethnically unmarked – were not. Kathy and John speak to the ways that for many, this collective memory translates to a much greater sensitivity than many white non-ethnics, or white ethnics of even a generation later, can conjure up for their non-white neighbors. Their testimonies also speak to the significance of struggle more generally: that even if they cannot remember or have not experienced discrimination on the basis of ethnic or racial difference, many neighborhood residents have, themselves or their parents, experienced economic difficulty. Moreover, the generational relationship with the neighborhood means that many neighborhood residents' and former residents' families have benefited from the institutions such as the church and the schools in their capacities as community centers and social service providers. All of which is to say that the performative returns to the Old Neighborhood are, for many community leaders, invocations of a pedagogical and affective memory of struggle and poverty; rather than the typical immigrant narrative of pluckiness and self-made success, this one upholds a detailed memory of mutual aid: receiving a helping hand and offering it to others.

I quote at length from several teachers and administrators who understand the connection between their own family's and the neighborhood's immigrant traditions as being a crucial underlying motivation for continuing a philosophy of inclusion and a version of multiculturalism that involves enough assimilation to get by, but not so much that people's identifications and customs totally dissolve.

**Kathy:** There's a mandate in terms of offering bilingual programs to kids who are eligible based on language proficiency. I think we have an obligation to also help them maintain their culture, their language, their culture but also to infuse English so that they can be successful in school and in life and to try to give them opportunities and experiences to be integrated in a multicultural society sharing one another's cultural and everybody learning to live together and respect one another all without having to give up who you are and where you come from and what you're about. I think one of the dynamics of the team unity that I remember and I'm going back a very, very longtime, originally the merchants in the area were Jewish and the residents were primarily Italian and/or Irish and German a little bit at the time but there were Jewish merchants who spoke Italian fluently just so that they could accommodate their customers and make them comfortable. There were some who even spoke different dialects of Italian and so look at this blending of cultures but not really giving up who you are and what you are but it was just a blending. I guess that's what we look for in the schools people to be able to keep their identity but to blend as well.

\* \*

**Gordana:** I'm telling you, the school, the administration [...] it is like the mission is to really be human beings and help another human being, that's how I understand. So, when I got this job and I learn about everything, the new school system, I was amazed because I'm telling you I feel something like I'm working at the United Nations. They are aware that this is mostly a population of immigrants [...]. The bilingual kids (inaudible [often don't speak English]) when they come from their native countries. [...] They get their classes in Spanish. So, they have English and they have math and social studies in Spanish until they have enough efficiency so they can do everything in English. [...] Last year, I had in the mini-school 22 different languages and countries. [...] I'm so



blessed again that me, as an immigrant and a person who speaks three languages and it is multicultural to give back to something, to the universe or whatever. [...] The school provided interpreters in Korean, Albanian, I felt like I'm in the United Nations. I have my parent/teacher conference and they were waiting in the corner.

\* \*

**Yesenia:** We would celebrate the different cultures and it was amazing. [...] We would have the international feast where we wouldn't celebrate Thanksgiving per se but we would celebrate all of these different cultures and their foods and invite the parents and whatnot and the same thing for the December holidays. It would be different – Kwanzaa. It would be other African religions that are celebrated. It could be Jewish. It could be Catholic. It could be whatever. Then we would celebrate it. We would have little talent shows where kids would come in and bring their music and they would dress up and show us what their culture is about. It was fun. It was really cool.

Kathy and John point to the centrality of leadership and institutions in imagining and carrying out a vision of community whose job it is to care for and incorporate all of its members, irrespective of who they are, and to build into this community a social safety net, and teachers such as Gordana and Yesenia attest to the viability of this project on the ground. Certainly, there are many instances in which celebrating cultural difference manages to obscure the more fundamental disparities that maintain structural difference, but what these leaders and institutions do well is not effacing or playing down difference, digging into what it means in structuring people's lives and the ways they can/do interact with one another. Yet, even as this optimism is tempered by the understanding that some are not favored within it, and it takes institutional attention, special funding, teachers, communities, etc, on a local level to provide a safety net and public access, they evince an uncritical belief that America is the better or best place to be, and that the American Dream is real and accessible. Despite the rosy vision on the part of a number of community members, there is no question that the struggles of residents who are poor and working class and are for the most part people of color, the doors to access are largely blockaded.

Yesenia, who voiced her appreciation of the school's inclusive approach above, also recounted the following:

I remember a comment that I got from a little girl last year and she's Ecuadorian and had been living in the country for about a year or two. She had said something about she knew that I lived in the neighborhood and she said, "Oh, do you live in the rich area?" I said, "What rich area?" I said, "I'm not rich." She says, "Yes, like right on Arthur Avenue where all the rich people live." That stayed with me because I said, "Well, where do you live?" She said, "Well, I live two blocks away from there." I guess this is what happens in New York. I mean there is one neighborhood that has a completely distinct persona and then like one block next to them or around the corner it is a completely different world and I think that's what she was perceiving. She was seeing the difference in race and in quality of anything and everything. The difference between her, what she called her neighborhood, which is maybe two blocks away from Arthur Avenue and Arthur Avenue is perceived as the white and rich area. I think she sees that because of the tourists and also the old-time Italians that have stayed.

In this case it is not surprising that one day while eating lunch in a neighborhood restaurant that serves Italian American cuisine and has an Italian name, which is run by Albanian

proprietors and whose waitstaff is primarily Latin American, I overheard a well-off, older Italian American woman who happens to have taught in the public schools for many years loudly characterizing today's "Spanish" immigrants as lazy in their efforts to work, unwilling to learn English, and generally less trustworthy and capable than the European immigrants of her parents' generation. This moment crystallized for me the persistence of the insidious genealogy-of-performance that is nativism: even those elderly or middle-aged ethnic whites who, themselves or their loved ones, experienced discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity, often according to nearly identical logic or narratives of otherness, are entirely capable – once they have ascended safely to whiteness – of parroting and believing the same tropes, turning them around on whatever contemporaries occupy the same tenuous position their own people once did. The complexity and paradoxes of the moral economy and the logic of inclusion and exclusion work in many directions, though; a conversation about post-Katrina New Orleans with a community member who is at least a generation younger and also works with children in Belmont revealed that she got a great deal of her information about the event from far-right pundits, yet she passionately offered a savvy assessment – entirely devoid of smugness or victim-blaming – of the structural and institutional operations that perpetuated profound disparities for the families in the Recovery School District.

Joseph, who was the principal of 45 until 2005, told me that:

[I]n a sense we connect [incoming residents] to our experiences as Italian Americans growing up. It's not that we spoke about being Italian American it is that we spoke about the fact that we are immigrant people, our families are immigrant people and America has allowed us to open up and to live a life that I probably never could have had if my parents had stayed. [...] We tried to come up with something that could be a teaching moment [after 9-11] for teachers and for adults and it connects to our love of history and what we believe America is all about and that is why we call [the neighborhood] An American Cradle. Learn America's story and know the history of America, which is all of our story and to value the freedom that we have as Americans. Many of us from immigrant communities left other places where we didn't have the freedom we have here and still don't for a lot of people but for America to function we've got to become good citizens. We've got to become actively involved in our community not only for kids but for the adults. Then, in the end just like Dr. King wanted we want to build a better country and build a better America. So, all of this became part of what we tried to do with 45 but it all goes back to the neighborhood. It all goes back to the fact that this community to me is a miracle everyday.

What seems particularly significant in his narrative is the notion of *becoming*. Certainly, some of his articulations are nationalistic and uncritically celebratory, but when he talks about how we "still don't [have full freedom] for a lot of people but for America to function we've got to *become* good citizens. We've got to become actively involved in our community" and necessity of "*work[ing] to build a better country and build[ing] a better America*": his focus is on process. Thus, even if his and his institution's idea of America is one that registers as a narrative of progress, still it is one that glorifies neither the past nor the present; it doesn't position us as the inevitable and entitled endpoint of a teleological past, instead focusing on ongoing emergence, accountability, and the necessity to continue to improve, to cull the best from the American principles and attempt to eradicate the ones that reinscribe various forms and scales of oppression.

The framework of genealogy helps to illuminate both the rigid and flexible qualities of these performances and performatives of the open signifier of the port-of-entry, immigration, and Italian-ness. On one level, the one where authenticity is bound up in issues of ethnicity or ethnic specificity, where Italian-ness matters to the success of the tourist operation – the merchants to choose to stay, the residents to choose encounter over fear, etc. – it is important to be able to trace your genealogy to the old country; that is, the neighborhood in this respect is configured as a discursive and diasporic center because of its relationship to Ellis Island specifically. On another level, where authenticity accrues to a narrative of coming from struggle, from “elsewhere” (i.e. from other countries, or other parts of the city) and fitting into the idea of an immigrant narrative where you aren’t expected to succeed on your own without the help of mutual aid societies and other official and unofficial infrastructures, the genealogy is more like a) the port of entry and b) the network you arrive into, for which the neighborhood is bent on actually providing infrastructure. The first involves a temporal progression, going back in time, and requires connection to or affiliation with a particular past. The second is lateral, network-like, with temporal elements, but also spreading widely. It requires a connection to and affiliation with a network and an ethic about the past rather than a literal familial or ethnic past.

The performance of Italian-ness operates, then, in several ways at once. For some, these enactments are compelled by something like ethnic pride, a sense of authenticity, or a sense of claiming turf. But they are also a survival mechanism, a marketing strategy that works. At the same time, for the residents who have the most and for those who have the least invested in the Italian-ness of this place, to an important extent the neighborhood is, for each interviewee, constructed around a *community* sensibility, in which Italian-ness becomes a figurehead for a host of liberal abstractions. I end with Joe C.’s definition of what he understands the success of a neighborhood to be, and what he hopes for the future.

It’s a question of perception. What is acceptable? What isn’t acceptable? Is it the rent that’s right? Is it the size of the room? Is it the safety of the community? Is it how clean the area? What are the amenities that the community has for recreation and religious things? I think all of these immigrants that come to Belmont are finding some of the same things that were attractive to the Italian psyche you now find those (inaudible) attractive to them. Whether it will become their neighborhood I don’t really know but when people talk about integration will transition communities like the human body shouldn’t be put into shock therapy to change. The human body should be allowed to be born, to live, to age and to die in the natural environment. Communities have a right and it doesn’t have to die. It can be transformed. The bricks and mortars of this community will be here. Yes, some of it will get old and you’ll have to knock it down and build it. Some of it can just be rehabilitated. Who lives there, who operates the stores, who operates the essence of a community, the good (inaudible) I was born and raised and the Giordano’s (inaudible) and everything and if their names are Gonzalez or Scrombly or who the hell knows what freaking names come from Africa, if that’s what is going to call it 30, 40, 50 years from now and somebody says, “This is a nice neighborhood.” The work that we have done has been worth it.

### conclusion

The work Belmont’s civic leaders have done relies at once on the romance of the immigrant and the ostensibly interstitial white ethnic that fuels Ellis Island’s sanctified status,

in its marketing strategy, as well as on the infrastructural ethic of “getting by” that the Tenement Tour puts forth, in its under-the-radar programs, community-centered, self-determined, people-oriented programs for new immigrants, and its interfacing with some of the soft state programs as well as the tourism and economic infrastructure. This ethic enables their newcomers to come “off the boat” not into state-administered institutions, but into nurturing neighborhoods whose institutions are established with the self-appointed mission to help pad their landing. Leaders within this infrastructure actually occupy a tremendous position of power and influence, and in this context, acculturation could go any-which-way. It is important to understand the relationship between marketing rhetoric that draws on doctrinal forms of aesthetic and corporate multiculturalism and glorifies and ratifies the American Dream *and* the ways that this translates from myths and discourses to structures and institutions; the ways that these myths engender the unequal distribution of resources and power *and* the ways that people actually interpret them in their personal interactions, in managing their own lives and institutions, in ways that in fact enable communities to cohere. At their best they advocate visions of radical inclusivity, recognizing *at once* the differences in our histories and experiences *and* our common humanity, entitlement to resources, and the ability to access “the system,” however we choose to make use of it. Such a position, irrespective of people’s stated electoral political preferences, demonstrates a potentially radical orientation toward collectivity and the sense that we are all one another’s responsibility, that those with more redistribute their resources among those with less. Some of this may be attributable to the more liberal/liberationist tenets of the Catholic Church, and much of it boils down to the fact that decent people who chose to remain connected to the urban center of their youth instead of fleeing it were forced to – and in many cases embraced – encountering seemingly very different people and learn how to live with them. But there is also a persistent blind spot for many white ethnics in this situation, even those who may be willing to engage difference and common humanity with grace and dignity, when they cannot see the flawed nature of the immigrant/American Dream/bootstraps narrative’s disregard for structural disparity, when they ignore the ways in which white privilege operates. Even at its best, reliance on a narrative of immigration reifies the problematic notion that the U.S. is a “nation of immigrants.” As Jacobson writes,

As early as 1967 Martin Luther King, Jr., decried the notion that the United States was a “nation of immigrants,” and he cautioned against the damning exclusions inherent in such a conception. [...] Ultimately the language, symbols, and logic of the white ethnic revival profoundly influenced those political movements, both progressive and conservative, that are the legacy of the 1960s – neoconservatism, the New Left, second-wave feminism, multiculturalism, and both pro- and anti-immigration coalitions. Though clearly a political resource for progressives, [...] the net effect of the Ellis Island epic has pitched decisively toward the right: appeals to the romantic icon of yesterday’s European immigrants – downtrodden, hard-working, self-reliant, triumphant – have shaped policy debates about everything from affirmative action and the welfare state to slavery reparations and contemporary immigration. The pervasive conceit of the nation of immigrants, as King recognized, blunted the charges of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and eased the conscience of a nation that had just barely begun to reckon with the harshest contours of its history forged in white supremacy.<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup> Jacobson 2006, pgs 8-9.

This narrative configuration assumes that the U.S. is ethical in its origins and in its treatment of its constituents, as it effaces forms of arrival, racialized status, and incorporation that are older, more ongoing, and much more violent, implying that subjects who do not fit into the immigrant narrative per se must either find a way to fit into this immigration narrative or that they are not actually a part of the body politic.

Performance and performativity are useful frameworks to employ in analyzing the shifting and ostensibly open signifiers of immigration, the port-of-entry, and Italian ethnicity, insofar as what makes conclusions difficult to draw is the fact that although there are institutional and discursive imperatives affixed to the collectively-understood narratives of these issues, on one hand, what ends up happening on the ground is entirely dependent on the people doing it; on the other, these individual actions are mediated and often interrupted by the larger circulating discourses. That is, while the institutions of Ellis Island and the Tenement Museum emerge in relation to ideologies about the significance, sanctity, and centrality of immigration in American social life, they are also working to undo a number of elements in the dominant discourses: they strive to educate people about difference and power, to challenge their visitors to unthink immigrants as filthy or inhuman or lazy. The radical work that Belmont's civic leaders do is in aligning themselves with these oppositional efforts and redefine the port-of-entry narrative as one that is about inclusivity; rather than positing that they and their kind were better immigrants than more recent ones, or that immigrants are more noble than, say, African Americans or Native Americans or others whose collective past flies in the face of the nation of immigrants, but to advocate an ethic that is more like: "we remember, individually or collectively/mediated, this history of difficulty, of not being provided for, and this is a port of entry into a place that can be difficult but just as we were given a safety net, which came not from above but from a community, we will help by providing one for you." These articulations are substantially different from many of the ways that the immigration narrative has been deployed. But in each case I have demonstrated that in spite of the best intentions of the individuals and institutions, deeply entrenched dominant narratives, which are both antiblack and anti-immigrant and have no place at all for dealing with settler colonialism, not to mention the fact that they are steeped in colorblind doctrine and neoliberal multiculturalism, occasionally emerge unbidden and serve to structure significant portions of the rhetoric and action that emerge. Additionally, one cannot control how discourses circulate; the myth of Ellis Island differs from the actual displays the museum constructs; the notion of the immigrant narrative is very different than the one that's often employed in the Bronx; and often it is the myth, rather than the reality, that constitutes the usable building blocks from which assumptions are made, and therefore on which action is taken.

Ultimately, the Italian narrative is about packaging, and where access succeeds or fails is in the relationships between institutions and their constituents. A safety net that accommodates everyone cannot be built on rhetoric that ratifies an immigration narrative as *the* constitutive narrative of belonging, but neither can a safety net be built exclusively on any rhetoric: what matters much more is what happens on the ground – what people and institutions do for one another.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Made In/No Such Thing As America: conjuring Manichean ghosts and haunting grief in Italian American performative returns

#### introduction

Melania G. Mazzucco's fourth novel *Vita*, which met with enormous critical acclaim and was awarded the Strega Prize<sup>176</sup> in 2003, is a story of immigration and the forces of history, as well as an effort on Mazzucco's part to try to learn about her own ancestry. In it, two children, cousins Vita and Diamante, immigrate in steerage to America, alone but for one another, falling in love as they do so. After passing through Ellis Island they find their way to the Lower East Side, where they live for a few years in a boarding house, witnessing and being subjected to the violence, discrimination, and privations (and occasional, small moments of joy) that were germane to the lives of immigrants in that era, as they negotiated employment, school, organized crime, sexual violence and structures of kinship that arose out of necessity in the context of the crowded tenements. Their lives in the United States crush their dreams of freedom, happiness, love, and a better life, and although Vita seems resilient, Diamante is not. In an effort to escape the obligations of serving the Black Hand and to earn enough money to marry Vita, Diamante gets a job working for the railroad-building industry, which makes him victim to a system that is structured to put its laborers into greater and greater debt. When he finally escapes, he returns to New York only to discover that Vita gave up waiting for him and married. Devastated and embittered, he returns to the West; their paths cross again when he passes through New York several years later on his way back to Italy, where he has enlisted in the military. They enjoy a brief rendezvous, but do not see one another again until shortly before Diamante's death, when Vita returns to Italy; although they are both widows/ed, life has been too long and Diamante is too world-weary for them to successfully rekindle the love that has sustained both of them over the decades. Intertwined with this narrative are other stories of members of various generations – Melania Mazzucco is Diamante's granddaughter and she is trying to learn about her own family's past.<sup>177</sup> The novel is peppered with photographs and empirical genealogical data (postcards, vital statistics, police reports), and we follow Melania's father as well as Vita's son (we are left wondering for awhile whether they're the same person; they are not), the latter of whom, Captain Dy,<sup>178</sup> returns to his mother's birth town of Tufo when he is fighting in WWII; the town has just been decimated in a battle.

Like the empirical genealogical research that Gates does for his guests (see chapter one of this dissertation), the things Melania finds manage to confirm only that the people she is seeking were inconsequential in the eyes of officialdom, typically documented as statistics or when accused of crimes, or showing up (occasionally and frustratingly inconsistently) in family keepsakes (photographs, letters); her findings also confirm that the stories that sustain people through generations do not always match up with the available data. Although there were fleeting glimpses of the proof of Vita's existence scattered throughout Mazzucco's research, and although Mazzucco has spent the whole of the novel filling in the complex details of Vita's life, which are unflinchingly real (except for her supernatural gift: to move and manipulate objects with her eyes and her will), we learn that Vita – who is the lifeblood of the novel and all of its characters – has no documentary evidence supporting her existence. That is, in the last twenty pages of the novel Mazzucco reveals that Tufo's baptismal register did not contain evidence of

---

<sup>176</sup> Italy's most prestigious literary award.

<sup>177</sup> Throughout this chapter I will refer to the author as Mazzucco when I am describing her meta-presence as an author, and as Melania when I am referring to her presence within the novel as a quasi-character.

<sup>178</sup> Dy is short for Diamante.

Vita's birth, nor is there proof of her arrival at Ellis Island. The narrative forces an ambiguity about her absence: we are left uncertain whether Mazzucco cannot find Vita because the data available to document small, ordinary, and especially racialized lives are greatly lacking (which might suggest a secondary meaning of "undocumented im/migrants"), and/or because Vita is in fact an invention conjured up by Diamante, his impossible star-crossed lover who gives his life in America what meaning it has and an embodiment of freedom, life, and possibility, who has been passed along the generations so that she becomes a significant force.

This chapter examines the discursive construction of Italian American performative returns in Mazzucco's novel *Vita*, Mario Puzo's and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy*, and David Chase's hit HBO series *The Sopranos*. I open by invoking *Vita*, and weave an interpretation of the novel throughout, because it introduces the major stakes of the works that this chapter considers: for instance, the novel narratively establishes the immigrants as floating and interstitial, doing so in two significant ways. On one hand, they are positioned as being set between two countries or poles: America, variously configured as the land of opportunity or the American racial state;<sup>179</sup> and Italy, positioned as the oppressive or nostalgic natal land, and/or the romantic and mythic ancestral homeland. As neither Italy nor America is sufficient, these interstitial figures emerge in the liminal moments (transatlantic crossing, the street, the dark tenement) where any number of pasts and futures are possible. They are searching in part because they become detached from either place, yet they are of or formed by both. On another hand, the characters are, as we shall see, positioned as floating between two racial poles, blackness and whiteness, which register in both symbolic, Manichean terms, and in more literal cultural or sociological ones. Throughout the three works I consider here, the Italian/American characters' racial and national interstitiality contributes to the compulsion of their performative returns, which manifest both by way of ethnic performativity and by way of actual, literal journeys. Chapter four mirrors chapter one in its concern with the discursive construction of the homeland and its significance in widely circulating performative returns, in this case representations of Italian American engagements with the longed-for American "land of opportunity" and the Italian homeland. In it I identify the ethos of impossibility and loss that attends them even as they propose conceptions of genealogy that are open, oriented to invention, affect, and affiliation, rather than to blood. I argue that each of these structures of feeling is compelled and circumscribed by the losses as well as the blindspots engendered by a form of whiteness that is structurally successful but sometimes performatively deferred.

I focus much of my analysis on *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* in part because of their centrality in American popular culture; these works disproportionately constitute the information that many Americans (and people globally) receive about what Italian American-ness is and means. But I also turn to them because of the specific cultural and rhetorical work they do. The *Godfather* films, namely *Parts I* and *II* (1972 and 1974, respectively), are considered to be some of the best films ever made – indeed, to have revolutionized Hollywood filmmaking; they are lauded for their complex psychological and political reinvention of the gangster film genre and their epic, tragic scope, all of which are supported by the moody chiaroscuro lighting and haunting score, memorable dialogue, and multidimensional yet archetypal characters.<sup>180</sup> They are also well-known – in some circles, notoriously so – for their

---

<sup>179</sup> The American racial state has been defined at length over the course of the dissertation; see introduction.

<sup>180</sup> The film won three Oscars (Marlon Brando won for Best Actor, Albert S. Ruddy won for Best Picture, and Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola won Best Writing, Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium), and also saw twenty-four other wins and seventeen nominations from the Academy Awards and other venues. See IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068646/awards>.

nuanced and textured treatment of *italianità*, at once intimate and loving, and deeply critical. *The Sopranos*, another epic cinematographic exploration of Italian-American mobster life, first aired in 1999 and ran through 2007, a period of time that inherited the political and cultural legacies of the *Godfather* eras; it is widely considered to be the best television series ever made.<sup>181</sup> It deals with the decadence of what many regard as the end of American empire, and with suburban malaise, loss, dissatisfaction, and the sense of meaninglessness that accompanies class and racial ascension. Both *The Godfather Trilogy* and *The Sopranos* share an epic quality, a status as groundbreaking cinema, and a self-reflexive engagement with a genealogy of – and participation in – mafia films that explore themes of performative return and the conjuration of difference, whiteness, and grievance.

But I open this chapter and my analysis of these works with a discussion of *Vita* because the novel introduces the stakes and themes I will explore through a framework of haunting and conjuring, which, though not mobilized quite so explicitly in *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*, is an extremely salient analytic to apply to the latter works, particularly in excavating the ways in which they engage issues of deferred whiteness and racial and ethnic difference, grievance, and grief. In the remainder of this introduction, I will lay out my theoretical framework, which I will derive from my reading of the invention of *Vita* and from the novel's ambivalence about the American Dream.

A number of textual details support the interpretation that *Vita* is an invention, even as they suspect it. For instance, the preface to the novel opens with Captain Dy's "return" to Tufo. He is fighting in the Second World War, which is destroying Italy's landscape, and by the time he arrives, he is too late: everything is gone, the town is decimated, and apparently his grandmother is dead under the rubble of her house. He sees an old man, who "passes the captain as if he were a phantom. As if he weren't there" (4); "every now and then he was assailed by fragmented and involuntary images of memories not his own, vexed somehow, like the residue of a dream" (4). These ghostly images undermine the fact of his presence – in the city, and perhaps at all, as the devastation of the village just prior to his arrival forecloses the possibility of a reunion, thus making impossible corroborating evidence of his visit. Mazzucco, writing in the first person, furthers this ambivalence:

I never met him, and I don't know what thoughts were passing through his head on that day in May 1944 [...]. Yet this man is not irrelevant to me – in fact, his story and mine are so interwoven they could be one and the same. Now I know he could have been my father, and could have recounted his return to Tufo a thousand times as we barbecued steaks on a Sunday afternoon or did yard work at our house in New Jersey. But he never told me the story. Instead, the man who was my father told me another story. He spoke willingly because he loved telling stories and knew that only what gets told is true (7).

She distances herself from Dy, claiming that he is unknowable perhaps because he is fictional: and at the very least, she asserts the fictionality of his thoughts and actions on this day because she doesn't know him and is making them up. Yet he could have been her father – an ambivalent statement about his existence that nonetheless renders him indispensable: even if

---

<sup>181</sup> *The Sopranos* sometimes competes for that superlative with *The Wire*, which was also produced by HBO, and which is also a novelistic, nuanced, richly textured epic that builds on the crime drama to issue a damning critique of American capitalism and the striking similarity in the structures of corruption that underlie criminal syndicates and venerable, legitimate institutions alike.



“only what gets told is true,” this person and this tale are significant enough to demand the telling, and that this narrative conjuring will have significant consequences.

This scene is bookended by the last scene in the book: the only scene that comes after the revelation of the family’s inventions is a recounting of the scene on the *Republic*, the steamer on which Vita and Diamante traveled across the ocean, on the night when they escaped from steerage and slept outside in a lifeboat in one another’s arms. It is configured as a kind of origin myth throughout the novel – the origin of their deep bond, and perhaps of the impossibility that attends their love – but this emplotment gives it a different sense of originality: one where Vita comes into existence. Mazzucco writes:

The bell rings for the third – and last – time. Then the hatches will be closed from the outside, the bolts will slide in place, and darkness will descend over the dormitory. Vita is hiding at the top of the stairs, buried up to her nose in sawdust. [...] She rises from the crate, shakes the sawdust from her hair and skirt, and breathes deeply; the air smells of smoke, salt, and gasoline. This is her first voyage. She has never been on a ship before. [...] She couldn’t say how many days they’ve been at sea. She forgot to keep count; there was the day they embarked, and then it was too late – time has taken on a circular rhythm. The dawns repeat themselves, as do the nights. [...] On the other side of the railing is a dark, turbid mass. All around her, everywhere she looks. Suspended who knows where in the middle of nothing. She isn’t going anywhere and has come from nowhere. In other words, she has arrived (423-5).

She literally appears out of nowhere, and the guards can’t see her hiding; the circular temporality and imagery of the sea’s massive darkness yield the final two sentences of emergence. And perhaps it is fitting for Vita to “arrive” or be conjured into existence on the crossing, a manifestation of Diamante’s and other immigrants’ hopes, desires, and projections of the world they will find; the voyage is the liminal zone between worlds – the Old and New, between national affiliations and possibilities for citizenship and life-chances.

We are left to parse the ambiguity of what is history and what is fiction; about what is reality as it was, and what is reality as Mazzucco’s characters wished it was. What, finally, is at stake if these personages lack documentation, if Vita is made up?<sup>182</sup> Although we cannot actually know where Melania’s inventions end and her characters’ begin, from what is possible to understand based on the novel, Diamante’s and others’ inventions are necessary to their survival. Are these characters deluding themselves, or creating self-aware systems of meaning

---

<sup>182</sup> There are multiple scales on which invention matters and is compelled. On one level, there exists a compulsion or necessity for invention in histories that are incomplete: the need to supplement partial evidence by filling in the blank. On another, there is the importance of bearing witness, of intervening in instances in which discursive silencing takes place, for instance, the Italian silence on immigration, which has yielded searches and inventions from both sides of the Atlantic. On yet another, invention takes place in cases where the historical actors are marginalized or insignificant in the eyes of those engaged in documentation: that is, where evidence to reconstitute the past is lacking (see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Complete bibliographic information. And quote him). Inventions also occur by way of a “game of telephone,” unbidden by way of repetition with revision: where things that are passed along through generations wind their way through time altering slightly, and are repeated even in their falsehoods or inventions because there is nothing to dispute them over time; their repeaters believe them. Melania’s invention of Vita and of the novel’s fictions more generally seem to begin like the game of telephone, or like filling in the blank, but end by self-reflexively encompassing all of these varieties and perhaps more, because they are ostensibly built on the gaps and assumptions of oral history and archival yieldings.

that help make sense of the absurdity and ugliness of the world and to make the bitter loss of their innocence and their illusions less painful, more bearable?

The epigraph for the novel is a quote from *Mon oncle d’Amerique* by Alain Resnais, which proclaims: “There is no such thing as America. I know because I’ve been there.” America isn’t un-real because it is physically absent; it is unreal because what it signifies is too good to be true, and the real thing does not fulfill the promises its myth makes. It is necessary to conjure into existence, because it is the freedom dream that is necessary for survival; however, the illusions it produces are at once sustaining and hopeful, and also dangerous, even devastating. In light of the novel’s epigraph, I read the conjuring of Vita (by the character of Diamante and the author Mazzucco, both) to be a commentary on the force of the American Dream: there is no such thing as America, and Vita isn’t real. However, Resnais can only say that it isn’t real because he’s been there; it’s a felicitous fiction, which has a shimmering performative quality to it – it was conjured into being and now it is there – though its felicitousness is contingent, without the necessary follow-through. But felicitousness is not the same as facticity; America may be there, but it isn’t what it proclaims, and Vita may not have factually existed, but the force of her presence, the freedom dream she represents, has sustained lives and been preserved intact through generations. Is it that she was conjured, then, or is she a kind of ghost, the unbidden haunting or manifestation of the frustrated dreams, desires, and inventions that have been erased, stamped out of existence, or made impossible in the first place by the exigencies of power?

Theophus Smith defines conjuring as “a magical means of transforming reality,” and magic as “ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses.” He then states that “[m]ore familiar and pertinent here are the three related meanings: (1) to invoke or summon (up) a spirit, as in sorcery; (2) to effect by the use of ‘magical’ arts; and finally (3) to summon up an image or an idea as an act of imagination.”<sup>183</sup> That is, according to Smith’s formulation, conjuring is a performative speech/act, one that actively seeks to transform reality or to instantiate a new one. As I describe in the introduction, Theophus Smith’s work on conjuring has specifically to do with African American theology and spiritual practices. This chapter does not deal with conjuring in terms of a particular theological tradition or spiritual practice, but is primarily concerned with the third of his three related meanings, the summoning of an image or idea as an act of imagination – although I contend that the force and circulation of these imaginative acts begets a more material invocation or summoning, such as in his first meaning – not by sorcery, but by collective ideological persuasion. The agency or force, then, does not stem from the entity being conjured, but by the one doing the conjuring. Conversely, Avery Gordon tells us that “[i]f haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place” (Gordon 8). That is, it is the entity itself, the ghost, or “the people and lives unaccounted for” (pg #), “the beloveds and the force that made them disposable” (205) that re-appears to haunt the present; the agency is on the part of the ghost rather than on those who are being haunted. Either way or both, Vita is the excess, for which there isn’t space in reality, but without whom reality would also not exist.

In this chapter I am concerned with this multidirectional force-field of conjuring and haunting in the context of a multifaceted American Dream whose accessibility is structurally available to some (but not all), but whose affective accessibility is perpetually deferred, even to those who seem best positioned to be able to access it. This deferral compels performative

---

<sup>183</sup> T. Smith 1994: 4-5.

returns in the form of ethnic performativity and in the form of literal “returns” to places that the seekers have never been. The freedom dream that constitutes the performative return’s animating power is – both – the “promised land” being sought by those looking to emigrate to America, the notion of opportunity, success, and meritocracy; and, for the characters in America looking to give meaning to a compromised existence, it is the mythic ancestral homeland and the process of becoming. I am also concerned with this conjuring/haunting dialectic in the context of Italian American representations that conjure structural racial grievance and propose a “property” in racial otherness or in multiculturalism, even while, surreptitiously, they performatively claim the “possessive investment” in whiteness “as property,” and even as they are haunted or possessed by the grief and loss of deferred belonging.

Genealogy is valuable as a mechanism to accommodate the conjuring/haunting dialectic and the national and racial interstitiality it negotiates – within the world of the filmic and literary objects as a central trope, *and* as an analytic to be brought to bear upon them – in several ways. First, ethnic performativity is mobilized to stand in as evidence of a traceable connection to, and claims proximity with, a history of oppression, exploitation, and neglect based on racial logic. Italians were “white on arrival,” as Thomas Guglielmo puts it (see T. Guglielmo 2004 and in J. Guglielmo and Salerno 2003) – that is, they were legally white and thus were able to be naturalized as citizens, were permitted to marry other white people, and, with some notable exceptions, were generally able to avoid the most egregious forms of structural and systemic oppression. Insofar as that was the case, the racial grievances that contemporary Italian Americans conjure in artistic representations and in anti-defamation complaints constitute a kind of conjuring – that is, the summoning up of an ethereal and at-least-partially-imaginary image – not least because of the definitive hold that today’s Italian Americans have on whiteness and the power and privilege that accompanies it. Even so, these representations are haunted by the fact that historically, Italian Americans were in fact treated quite poorly in the United States on the basis of a particular racial and nativist logic, which continues to show up in contexts ranging from the assumption many Americans have that Italian Americans are all connected with the mob, which has had the effect of, for instance, costing unaffiliated Italian Americans job opportunities, to uncritical media such as *Jersey Shore* playing on and igniting nativist tropes of bestiality.

I argue that to some degree what deferral there is of whiteness for Italian Americans is self-fulfilling. The Mafia representations participate in a genealogy of reifying displays of ethnic performativity that defer sameness and assimilation, revealing how performative aspects of identity can function as indices of racialized status. (Since they look white, if and when they act white, they *are* white. If and when they either cannot shed their racialized or ethnically specific behaviors or *choose* to retain – or readopt – them (whether these behaviors have to do with custom, like food or Catholicism, or with embodied actions, like speech, gestures, etc), they occupy a less clear status of deferred or incomplete whiteness.) To some extent, such a move may be strategic in a number of ways: it works to facilitate the creation of imagined communities, united over shared experiences of outsider-ness and ethnic particularity, which is to say, of recognition, pride, and sometimes a sense of grief at structural and/or affective exclusion. Yet in many cases, these displays also simultaneously display and shore up the possessive investment in whiteness, property, and domination. That is, efforts on the part of Italian Americans and other ethnic whites to reclaim a perceived sense of racial entitlement – which is seen as being lost or under threat by the machinations of affirmative action and a new multicultural racial order in which difference is rewarded – take the form of 1) deferring their whiteness, claiming to be something “other”; and 2) shoring up their whiteness by reiterating their structural positional racial power by attacking, ousting, and otherwise putting down

racial “others.”<sup>184</sup> Yet, I argue, there is more to these representations than merely intentional acts of conjuring: they also document the haunting persistence of a deferral of total access that manifests through perennial forms of nativism and the looming threat of Manichean blackness that seep into the language and tactics of anti-Italian sentiment. Even still, the grievances are not as grievous as they are sometimes identified as being, because of racial whiteness and what its structural and discursive power accomplishes.

Second, the specificity of how performative identity accrues with respect to Italian American-ness also speaks to notions of genealogy as they relate to the family and “the Family.” Family at once signifies the Italian American Catholic family and the vicissitudes of its exclusivity or porousness relative to notions of blood, loyalty, and the performative enactment of certain values and behaviors; as well as the metaphor (i.e. “the Family”) used to refer to the organization that oversees the criminal activity, governed by notions of loyalty and honor, devoted to sustaining itself as an institution and protecting the family members and family’s business. Both are constituted by notions of inheritance: the narrative of inevitability, of classical dramatic and tragic figures fated to be in this brutal profession and assuming its mantle, and the ways that the sins of the fathers are thus visited on future generations. These processes are represented as occurring both in the sense of a mythologized ancient Sicilian/Neapolitan institution (which has evolved into its own specific entity in the U.S.), *la Cosa Nostra*, and the corruption and brutality of American capitalism and materialism, which reflect the dark side of the imperative of assimilation, of the privileging of whiteness, and of the American Dream.

Finally, the performative returns to Italy provide the connective tissue between genealogical manifestations. These returns accomplish several things: 1) they more specifically shore up ties to family genealogy; 2) they provide instruction for ethnic performativity; and 3) they engage the romantic mythology of the homeland – as a lost ancestral origin, valuable in its own right but that also affirms the ethnic difference that Italian Americans sometimes feel or claim, and as a symbolic foil to hold up next to the broken promises of the American promised land and the failures of the American Dream. Thus, the Italian homeland as it is imagined and to which performative returns occur within these representations speaks at once to the desires for the rewards that difference and grievance are thought to bestow – desires produced by post-*Roots* multiculturalism yet policed by the possessive investment in whiteness – and to the deep-seated and incisive critiques of capitalism and the American racial state that the works in this chapter consistently and staunchly level.

### **chimeric American Dreams**

In this section, I take *The Godfather* as the point of departure. I lay out the terms of its critique of capitalism and the American Dream, in particular the ways the trilogy negotiates issues of property, access, and assimilation through a number of representational strategies, including its depiction of *italianità*, the family (i.e. the literal familial unit and The Family in the sense of the “family business” of organized crime) and its ties to Sicily, and the embeddedness of the “family business” in powerful yet corrupt “legitimate” institutions. All the while, the release of the first two films in particular was framed by the context not only of a crisis of faith in government and capitalism on the part of the American public, but also a crisis of whiteness. I contextualize the representational moves that *The Godfather* makes in relation to these problems by historicizing and providing an overview of Italian Americans’ fraught relationship to whiteness and its deferral. In order to do so, I theorize the doubleness and contingency of a

---

<sup>184</sup> See Guglielmo 2004, Kocela 2005, Jacobson 2006.

structural and an affective American Dream, that Dream's persistent whiteness in relation to a multiculturalist promise, and the dexterous magic tricks that Italian Americans perform to shore up their possessive investment in whiteness while grieving and being haunted by a history of exclusion on racial grounds. My reading of the negotiations of whiteness in *The Godfather* helps to set up my reading in the next section of how *The Sopranos* inherits and elaborates on the critiques leveled in *The Godfather*, and setting up the idea of the multiplicity of the American Dream and its whiteness lays the groundwork for the next two sections, in which I theorize performative returns in terms of ethnic performativity and in terms of engagements with the actual homeland.

Initially Francis Ford Coppolla didn't want to direct *The Godfather*. However, he was broke and his film company was in debt, so he spent some time doing research on the Mafia and realized that it would in fact be a valuable project, as the story lent itself to a powerful critique of American capitalism.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, *The Godfather* (i.e. *Part I*, released in 1972) emerged in the context of a radical and widespread critique of capitalism, American civil society, and American foreign policy, critiques in which the films participate. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War took place between 1965 and 1972; vociferous and influential American protests of the war began in earnest in the mid-1960s, and escalated up until the time of U.S. withdrawal, particularly in response to key events that underscored the waste, violence, and imperialist aggression of the war.<sup>186</sup> The anti-war efforts built on and supported the critiques and infrastructures of protest movements including the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow Power Movements, Third World Liberation Movements, and the Women's and Gay Rights Movements. Most of these radical movements, particularly the anti-war, anti-imperialism, and anti-racism movements, were predicated on a scathing critique of capitalism and the corruption of the U.S. war machine and government. Anti-government sentiment was bolstered by the growing sense that U.S. citizens on the domestic front were under siege and were frequently betrayed or attacked by those who were supposed to protect them; in 1971, the Pentagon Papers – the Defense Department's secret history of the Vietnam War – began being published by the *New York Times*. In October of 1972 the *Washington Post* reported that "FBI agents establish that the Watergate break-in stems from a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage conducted on behalf of the Nixon reelection effort";<sup>187</sup> the Watergate scandal continued to unfold over the next year-and-a-half, leading to Nixon's resignation in 1974 (*The Godfather Part II* was released in the same year). And many Americans whose political ideologies or actions were perceived by the U.S. government as threatening found themselves targeted by local, state, and federal police and military forces and/or federal intelligence agencies, blacklisted or, in a number of cases, assassinated; often the intelligence affairs were secretive and the information suppressed, and there was no little speculation about the cooperation between law enforcement, government, and organized crime.<sup>188</sup> The trilogy's subversion is, in part, its biting critique of the Church, the State, and the American Dream: it achieves this commentary by equating organized crime with these

---

<sup>185</sup> See Mark Seal, "The Godfather Wars," *Vanity Fair* 583 (March 2009): 270-329.

<sup>186</sup> These events include, for instance, the Tet Offensive, the Mai Lai Massacre, increases in the draft, napalm attacks on villages, and the United States' invasion of Cambodia.

<sup>187</sup> See "Watergate: Brief Timeline of Events" at [watergate.info http://www.watergate.info/chronology/brief.shtml](http://www.watergate.info/chronology/brief.shtml), March 8, 2011.

<sup>188</sup> See Dissident Voice: a radical newspaper in the struggle for peace and social justice at <http://dissidentvoice.org>, as well as William F. Pepper, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King* (Verso: 2003), and footnote #7, among other sources.

other institutions, using it as a metaphor for capitalism, and pointing out ways in which institutions like law enforcement, various levels of government, the press, the church, and other institutions ostensibly set up in service of the public are in cahoots.

*Part I* was also released in the context of a number of significant public revelations regarding organized crime.<sup>189</sup> The Kefauver Hearings, held in fourteen U.S. cities by the U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce with the aim of investigating organized crime's – particularly the Sicilian Mafia's – role in interstate commerce, had occurred twenty years earlier (1950-51) and was widely televised. Additionally, the McClellan, or Velachi, Hearings in 1962 (so-called after Senator John L. McClellan, whose committee on organized crime led the charge, and/or after Joseph Velachi, the first government witness from the American Mafia whose testimony uncovered hitherto unknown details about the organization and operations of crime syndicates, including the fact that the Mafia did indeed exist) led to the passage of the RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) Statute in 1970. The FBI's web page makes the vast impact of global organized crime quite clear:

Organized crime rings manipulate and monopolize financial markets, traditional institutions like labor unions, and legitimate industries like construction and trash hauling. They bring drugs into our cities and raise the level of violence in our communities by buying off corrupt officials and using graft, extortion, intimidation, and murder to maintain their operations. Their underground businesses—including prostitution and human trafficking—sow misery nationally and globally. They also con us out of millions each year through various stock frauds and financial scams. The economic impact alone is staggering: it's estimated that global organized crime reaps illegal profits of around \$1 trillion per year.<sup>190</sup>

Yet not only does the description of organized crime's reach sound like that of a well-run trans/national corporation, some of its activities sound strikingly similar to the operations of Wall Street, big business, and certain federal agencies. And as a number of researchers have uncovered, some of these federal agencies and the Mafia have had momentous histories of collusion; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X have all been linked to the Mafia as well as to the FBI and/or CIA, and the success of the operations was partially to do with the government's willingness to produce elaborate cover-ups to deflect attention and fact-finding.<sup>191</sup> Such hypocrisy was not lost on Puzo and Coppolla; beginning in the first *Godfather* film the complicity of government and law enforcement with organized criminal activity is highlighted, especially in the figure of the corrupt police captain McCluskey, who is bought by a rival family of the Corleones and orders the hospital's staff and guards to abandon the critically injured Vito so that assassins can freely overtake him, and whose corruption is instrumental in convincing Michael that the "legitimate"

---

<sup>189</sup> Italian organized crime (that is, in Italy as well as in the United States and worldwide) includes activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal gambling, political corruption, extortion, kidnapping, fraud, counterfeiting, infiltration of legitimate businesses, murders, bombing, and weapons trafficking, according to the FBI. "Italian Organized Crime," Federal Bureau of Investigation website, [http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/organizedcrime/italian\\_mafia](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/organizedcrime/italian_mafia), accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>190</sup> "Organized Crime Overview," Federal Bureau of Investigation, <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/organizedcrime/overview>, accessed 6 March 2011.

<sup>191</sup> See, among other sources, David Scheim – *Contract on America*, Mark North – *Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy*.

world is not what it appears. In *Part II*, the analysis moves up the ranks to focus on the Senator who has been manipulated and bought by the mob, and in *III* the intimate interfacing between the Church, the government, transnational corporations, and organized crime constitutes the overriding plot. Although the Mafia is depicted as brutal, it operates according to codes of honor and propriety that are portrayed as alien to its legitimate counterparts in America, and its existence is plainly argued as having emerged from, and been maintained because of, all of the ways in which the legal and other official structures failed them – and when its codes are compromised, it is implied that this is because they have become too Americanized. *The Godfather* famously opens with Don Corleone’s reception of the undertaker Amerigo Bonasera – which almost precisely translates to “America, Goodnight” – who comes to Vito for the first time after his daughter has been brutally disfigured after resisting some American men who sexually assaulted her. Bonasera has gone to the police, like a good American, but they let the men go, and although he has avoided the Corleone family and eschewed their services, he is so utterly betrayed by the official system and its disregard that he goes to the underground criminal operation because he wants justice. Much later, nearly at the end of *Part III*, Michael – who has shared his father’s goal of eventually moving the family’s business to the realm of strictly legitimate operations, and has, after thirty years of being Don, finally come a breath away from success in doing so – observes to his sister, with distress: “[A]ll my life I kept trying to go up in society, where everything higher up was legal, straight, but the higher I go, the crooked it becomes.”

Certainly, this observation underscores the critique of the profundity of the corruption within the “legitimate” capitalist world, which *Part III* treats extensively. But it is also one of the moments in which the “alchemy of race,” and in particular, of racial whiteness, surfaces as an implicit but insistent ghost. If the Corleones were at one point excluded from opportunities to ascend in civil society, as the final scene of *Part I* posits – when Don Vito tells Michael that he had hoped that by the time his son reached adulthood he could be a senator or governor, or some other respectable public figure with his hands on the official strings of power, to which Michael responds, “We’ll get there, Pop, we’ll get there” – and the day when they have gotten there has come by the time Michael makes the aforementioned remark to his sister in his twilight years. And that someday came because of the ways in which he, his family, and his ethnic group have been transmuted into racial whiteness; that is, the ascension to whiteness, as in an alchemical process, is a substantive transformation of a “base element” to a golden and favorable one. In being so transmuted, they are granted access to the power and favor that attends this. George Lipsitz argues that “public policy and private prejudice work together to create a ‘possessive investment in whiteness’ that is responsible for the racialized hierarchies of our society”; that is, that whiteness “has a cash value” that accrues through a variety of advantages (in housing, education, networking, and intergenerational transfers of wealth) that are secured through a system of discriminatory and inequitable means, some of which are entrenched and some of which are enforced through the creation of new policies. He writes: “white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunities.”<sup>192</sup>

Indeed, in the rare moments when blackness *per se* shows up in the trilogy, it is invoked as a debased foil, in relation to which the Sicilian Americans are able to shore up and consolidate their power at the expense of the voiceless representation of blacks; as Toni Morrison writes: “Even, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line

---

<sup>192</sup> Lipsitz 2006, pg *vii*.

of demarcation” (Morrison 1992, pp. 46-47). In *Part I*, Vito rejects a proposal to deal in narcotics and an assassination is attempted on him as a result. He calls a meeting of the Five Families at which the Dons outnumber Vito and agree on the terms by which they will begin their involvement in the drug trade. The Don of Detroit insists on the necessity “to control it as a business, to keep it respectable. I don’t want it near schools! I don’t want it sold to children! That’s an infamia. In my city, we would keep the traffic in the dark people, the coloreds. They’re animals anyway, so let them lose their souls.”<sup>193</sup> Although the Italian families are apparently forced underground if they are to make something of themselves, they are clearly positioned to be able to make their fortune on the backs of, and at the expense of, a black population that they interpellate as sub-human.

However, one might argue that alchemy is a powerful metaphor but an infelicitous science; Puzo’s and Coppolla’s film trilogy demonstrates a highly complex, disidentificatory<sup>194</sup> relationship to whiteness. On one hand, their ethnic displays are perceived by some of their (“actually” white, American) enemies as inferior, but in each of these instances, the characters who explicitly claim racial superiority to the Italian Americans are presented as being amoral, unethical, and provincial, and when they are violently threatened by the Corleones (for instance, Jack Woltz, the Hollywood producer and pedophile, finds himself in bed with the severed head of his prize racehorse in *Part I*, and Senator Geary, the all-American hypocrite, finds himself in bed with a mysteriously murdered prostitute) the viewer has been conditioned to see their punishment as a well-deserved come-uppance. However, even as they are insistently configured as being racially suspect, the Sicilian American Corleones succeed precisely on the terms that whiteness offers: they make the most money and have the most demonstrable success when they do things the “white” way, the American way, and the crime syndicate is depicted as an institution whose most expansive and public form is modeled after, or operates similarly to, “legitimate” American structures. Yet these are the moments when they become “lost,” that is, when they lose sight of the ostensibly uniquely Sicilian code that sets them apart from crass and greedy Americans and ostensibly raises the Sicilians above them; indeed, their behavior and customs are established immediately as being ethnically specific, different from and unassimilated into, American culture.

James Chiampi argues that

[w]hat Puzo has done in *The Godfather* is to use the defamiliarization of art to create a number of tours de force which invert the stereotypes that alienated him from his own ethnic identity. Thus, American society becomes the irrational, spontaneous other to Sicilian calm, inhibition, and cunning. The Americans are dishonest, bestial, and untrustworthy, vices they regularly reveal in their business dealings. [...] Puzo has [...] [made] clear just who the “other” really is. Puzo will not permit his Sicilians to represent some dissociated element in the American psyche; his people will not become the missing piece that completes the mosaic of the American self. They will not represent mindless spontaneity or peasant goodness simply because the Americans have chosen to suppress these qualities in themselves while projecting them upon the silly foreigners.<sup>195</sup>

According to this reading, America is brutal, unrestrained, impassioned, out of control, and decadent, while Sicily (and Italy more generally) is the epitome of propriety, order, ritual, and tradition. It is because of what he finds in America that Vito commences his criminal activities,

---

<sup>193</sup> *The Godfather*, 1972.

<sup>194</sup> See Muñoz 1999.

<sup>195</sup> James Thomas Chiampi, “Resurrecting *The Godfather*,” *Melus*, 5.4 (Winter, 1978), pp 18-31, page 30.



not because he is Sicilian: he is protecting his honor, his family, and those who have helped him where, despite, and because of official civil society's failure to do so. He is shown as moral, reasonable, resourceful, rational, family-values-oriented, and upstanding – the ideal immigrant – but is operating in a broken system, so his good instincts are funneled in directions that counter and threaten the American way of being. This critique of America and lionizing of Sicily can also be seen, as Chiampi points out, in the differences between Michael – the Sicilian son – and Sonny – the hopelessly, and fatally, American one. The most successful Mafiosi are those who are most connected to Sicily; Michael, who spends formative time in Sicily in *Part I*, is Sicilian in appearance<sup>196</sup> and in temperament, quiet, restrained, and calculating. He initially buys into the American way – attending Dartmouth and serving in the Marines as a war hero – but is most betrayed by its corruption on account of this participation; after he witnesses McCluskey's corrupt actions, he buys into the family's criminal affairs completely. Sonny and Fredo, the Americanized brothers, cannot adequately perform their roles in the family business, and find themselves assassinated as a result.

Sonny's and Michael's relationships with women and to family are equally revealing: Sonny – whose fiery and uncontrolled temper causes him not only to engage in brutal acts of violence himself, but to speak out of turn, thus inadvertently bringing down violence upon others – has a mistress, whom he makes little effort to hide from his wife, and with whom he has quite explicit sex at his sister's wedding. Michael, on the other hand, has two extremely proper, old-fashioned, and rule-bound marriages: first to Apollonia, his Sicilian wife whom he marries during his exile, courting her according to tradition, with a troupe of old ladies and bodyguards as chaperones on their "dates" and no sex until marriage, but who is killed by a bomb intended for him; and then to Kay, who is WASPy and restrained, to whom he is faithful and attempts to protect as the mother of his children, which are, for him – apparently in Sicilian custom – the foundation of his existence. Family is, of course, constructed as the bottom line of the code that guides not only the family business, but the honorable Sicilian/-American way of life; its *raison d'être*, and Sonny's betrayal of his wife thus ramifies as a more significant betrayal of his family's legitimacy and way of life. When Michael alienates Kay and his son Anthony by the middle of *II*, it seems that he is capable of doing so because, although he believes he is fighting to protect his family, he has become increasingly American in his approach to his business, where the bottom line is profit, and has abandoned some of his ostensibly more honorable Sicilian instincts.

The fact that the further the family business gets from the original set of needs, codes of honor, and restraint – that is, the more American it becomes – the more brutal it becomes, supports the above interpretation of the narrative function of Sicily. Even though Michael is the most Sicilian of Vito's children, the more he is able to – and chooses to – access American mainstream success, in the form of whiteness, assimilation, affluence, and influence, the more excessive and decadent he becomes in his approach to violence, and the less restrained he becomes in his vision of the family business's reach. By *Part II*, and especially by *Part III*, it is apparent how much more American Michael has become in his ambitions, per his transnational gambling and corporate projects. (However, they simultaneously demonstrate that even Sicily has not remained untouched by creeping American capitalist impulses: *Part III* in particular makes it plain that the Catholic Church, the transnational corporation Immobiliare, several transnational banks, and local and federal governments in both countries are engaged in the same pursuits. There is no real separation by institution or by nation – they are scratching one another's backs, and each is hypocritical, violent, and corrupt, vying for power and seeking to

---

<sup>196</sup> This casting is not an accident; see Seal 2009.

preserve itself.) But when Michael engages with Sicily in *Part III*, these engagements seem to return him to his better self: the Vito Andolini Corleone Foundation is intended to assist the poor in Sicily and worldwide (ostensibly the reason that Vito began his work in the first place was to assist his impoverished family and countrymen) and moreover, when Michael travels to Sicily not only does he make peace with his estranged ex-wife Kay and son Anthony, but he is hit with a torrent of regret, questioning his decisions in *Part II*, arguably at the height of his American-ness, that caused him not to protect his family but to lose it. But Michael's sins – whether they are American or Sicilian in nature – cannot be redeemed: a group of men who wish to assassinate him because of his capitalist ventures with Immobiliare hire an assassin, but it is his beloved daughter Mary who receives the bullet, and Michael loses everything that matters according both to ostensibly-American and ostensibly-Sicilian codes. Sicily becomes an explanatory foil for all of the things that are broken, corrupt, or disappointing about America, and the performative returns deploy the homeland to shore up the films' implicit argument that this nearly ontological ethnic difference renders them tragic in their besiegement within the nation of Italy and within America, and in their inheritance of a brutal institution that emerged in the wake of this siege. Such a tragic situatedness, then, seems narratively to demand sympathy, if not forgiveness, for their violent racial and criminal transgressions.

Indeed, the onus for these transgressions is transferred from these individuals or their ethnic code to a failed American Dream that does not function as inclusively as is commonly believed. It is important to note what the failures of the American Dream mean in this case. According to the tropes of the American Dream and its failures in many immigrant narratives, to access the American Dream is to be willing to abandon a set of deeply-held values; American-ness implies the seduction of and an obsession with money, and the upholding of the “bottom line” or the profit margin as the ultimate indicator of worth, such that people become willing to turn a blind eye to one another's humanity as well as their own, in pursuit of gold. It also implies the disintegration of the family, and a deteriorating sense of self-worth, a lesser valuation of certain forms of labor, religion, and familial traditions, and the abandonment of roots – of traditions, uniqueness, and specificity – that accompanies the process of “melting” or assimilation.<sup>197</sup> This laundry-list of failures is flexible enough in its significance that it can be – and often has been – mobilized equally effectively within progressive race and class analyses, and within displays of nostalgia for politically and ideologically conservative ends. Unlike many people in the United States, Italian Americans and other ethnic whites have enjoyed a great deal of access to mainstream success – i.e. economic security and white privilege, for instance by way of the lack of structural and institutional racial discrimination in arenas such as law enforcement, employment, housing, unions, and education. But it is also important to note that the films do not ultimately disavow that its protagonists have achieved access: rather, its critique is of precisely that access itself. I turn now to an explication of Italian/-Americans'

---

<sup>197</sup> In Robert Orsi's well-known analysis of oral history and popular Italian American religious expression, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> St.*, he illuminates both the compulsion and the fear of achieving monetary success, or “making America”: “By ‘making America’ [an immigrant whom Orsi interviewed] would make himself. He came from a society that would have denied him all the decency and dignity it had the power to deny him; seen against this possibility, his triumph is compelling, and all the immigrants knew its power. But many of them feared it as well. They realized that such desire could devour a person, could engulf families and endanger the moral order. Garibaldi Lapolla probed this compulsion and fear in his two novels of East Harlem life [...]. Both novels have as their main characters immigrants who are enormously successful in America; in both, these men achieve this success ruthlessly and with explicit disregard for Italian values, particularly the moral centrality of the domus [that is, the home, the hub of family, belonging, and moral order around which Orsi's findings revolve]” (Orsi 2002: 156-7).

historic racial interstitiality, in order to then theorize a polyvalent American Dream and its fraught relationship to performative returns.

Southern Italians, who comprised the vast majority of the Italian immigrants to the U.S. between 1880 and 1924, were considered racially inferior within Italy prior to their departure, and in the United States were racialized as occupying an interstitial rung between blackness and whiteness in many “common-sense,” representational/discursive, and structural ways – from eugenic theories to immigration quotas to political cartoons. The *Mezzogiorno*, or the south of Italy, had, prior to unification, been controlled by Bourbon monarchs, and was “freed” by Garibaldi only to fall under the control of a unified state that was unsympathetic to the South as well. The region was largely agricultural, but there was a scarcity of land that was actually able to be cultivated, as it was brutally hot and plagued by soil erosion and deforestation, as well as, at various points in time, natural disasters such as volcanoes and earthquakes that yielded enormous numbers of casualties; additionally, there were high taxes and protective tariffs on goods produced in the North, and the region had an incredibly high rate of illiteracy. Most of the emigrants from this region left because they and their families had no prospects in Italy – many were literally starving – and they hoped to make a decent living in the United States, although many did not intend to stay. However, upon arrival, John Higham writes that unlike most other immigrant groups during the 1880s, Italians and Jews were criticized in racial terms, according to

stereotyped traits, not on imputations of subversive activity or total unassimilability. The Italians were often thought to be the most degraded of the European newcomers. They were swarthy, more than half of them were illiterate, and almost all were victims of a standard of living lower than that of any of the other prominent nationalities. They were the ragpickers and the poorest of common laborers.<sup>198</sup>

They were considered “Dagos” rather than “white” men in common parlance, and as early as the 1830s, when Irish immigration was more numerous and Irish immigrants were subject to strong nativist backlash, Italians were spoken of as being deeply inferior to the Irish. Italians and Italian Americans have also consistently been strongly associated with indexical and “bloodthirsty” criminality since early in the nineteenth century.<sup>199</sup> This attribution of innate criminality, coupled with an apparently confusing “swarthy” appearance and a frequent refusal to comply with racially inflexible comportment,<sup>200</sup> on several occasions attracted the same approach to the policing of a racial threat that was visited with chilling frequency and nonchalance upon black Americans: socially and governmentally sanctioned lynchings. Most (in)famously, there was a mass mob-lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans in 1891; the

---

<sup>198</sup> Higham 1955: 66.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, 65-67. The attribution of a violent nature to Italians was sometimes also cast in terms of anti-radical nativism, as Italians were often “[thought to be]” associated with anarchy as well; they were also subject to anti-Catholic forms of nativism.

<sup>200</sup> For instance, Jacobson (1998) points out: “So fused in popular perception were the issues of Mafia conduct and Italian racial character that, in editorials about the affair, the *Times* would cast Italian immigrants’ behavior as racially determined and question their fitness for citizenship” (56). And: “In New Orleans Italian immigrants were stigmatized in the post-Civil War period because they accepted economic niches (farm labor and small tenancy, for instance) marked as ‘black’ by local custom, and because they lived and worked comfortably among blacks. [...] Italian immigrants ran further afoul of white supremacists in the region when they ‘fraternized with local blacks and even intermarried,’ and when – like blacks – they supported Republican and Populist candidates instead of the party of white supremacy” (57).

murder of the Irish American police superintendent David Hennessy had taken place under circumstances that pointed to the involvement of local Sicilians, but of those that were lynched, most had been found not guilty of, and two had not yet been tried for, the murder. According to Higham, the violence was incited by and sanctioned by the city's leaders.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, Jacobson writes that this action was carried out by the White League, "a Reconstruction-era terrorist organization much like the better-known Ku Klux Klan."<sup>202</sup> This event nearly catalyzed a war between Italy and the U.S. However, it was hardly the only instance of nativist sentiment manifesting in the lynching of Italians in America. Higham situates the recounting of the New Orleans incident in the midst of numerous other lynchings and violent attacks during the 1890s across the nation, and also describes incidents in the 1870s, the 1900s, 1914, and 1920, the latter of which corresponded with the moment of the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. All of this is to say that there was a not-insignificant collapse of Italian-ness into blackness that was widely enforced in a variety of realms, each with a certain authority, which colluded with one another to perpetuate this interstitiality.

However, during the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries, Italians were legally considered "white on arrival," as Thomas Guglielmo puts it. That is, however much "[t]he untroubled republican equation of whiteness with fitness for self-government, which had informed colonial thinking and had reigned in the new nation since 1790 [...] had become increasingly untenable as 'free white persons' of undreamt-of diversity and number dragged ashore in the 1840s and after."<sup>203</sup> the immigrants' legal status was as "free white persons," who were the only foreigners permitted to enter the United States and become naturalized. In the late 1910s and early 1920s restrictions and quotas were put into place that culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which restricted immigration through quotas, such that visas were only granted to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States in 1890; it also excluded from entry anyone who was, by race or nationality, ineligible for citizenship – thus Asians, among others, were expressly forbidden from entering the nation.

During the period between 1924 and 1965, when many restrictions on immigration were lifted, a variety of shifts had occurred that had rendered Italian Americans and other European-descended citizens white; perhaps most importantly, the imprimatur of racial "science" and the trend of racial common sense came together around the notion of a "Caucasian" race that encompassed all white people, rather than separate white races, and began to enable the consolidation of a notion in the U.S. of race as a relatively binary system. Additionally, these shifts included changes in foreign policy, such as the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, both of which brought national and international attention to the hypocrisy of American calls for freedom and democracy abroad backed up with a gun, and their treatment of black Americans under Jim Crow. The Immigration Act of 1965 was built upon measures that facilitated both greater inclusiveness and greater exclusiveness of the American polity; while it created more opportunities for migration from Asia and Africa, it significantly restricted it from the Western hemisphere (Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean). However, by abolishing the national origins quota system "[e]astern and southern

---

<sup>201</sup> He writes: "Wholesale arrests followed in an atmosphere of hysteria. The mayor issued a public appeal: 'We must teach these people a lesson that they will not forget for all time.' The city council appointed a citizens' committee to suggest ways of preventing the influx of European criminals. But when some of the accused were tried, the jury (which may have been suborned) stunned the city by refusing to convict. While officials stood idly by, a mob proceeded 'to remedy the failure of justice' by lynching eleven Italian suspects. With apparent unanimity local newspapers and business leaders blessed the action" (Higham 1955: 91).

<sup>202</sup> Jacobson 1998: 57.

<sup>203</sup> Jacobson 1998: 38.

Europeans, the principal objects of exclusion in the Immigration Act of 1924, could now enter the United States in equal numbers as northern and western Europeans. This was an important political victory for Euro-American ethnic groups,” insofar as it “overturn[ed] the last vestige of law that expressed their social subordination.”<sup>204</sup>

Italian Americans and other white ethnics had become increasingly legally, socially, and structurally deracinated, particularly now relative to new immigrants hailing from countries and continents outside of Europe, and many urban enclaves were disintegrating at this point as Italian Americans assimilated, achieved upward mobility, and moved out to the suburbs – and many of the developments that made that possible, such as New Deal reforms (i.e. the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, and the Federal Housing Act) that benefited those legally considered white, but not people of color. According to most of the ways it is usually configured, Italian Americans had achieved the American Dream.

However, I posit that there are two (or more) American Dreams. One is about affective and psychic access: belonging, freedom, joy, and all of the invisible things that America promises as a land of opportunity – and *that* is the American Dream that constitutes the invisible, shimmering vision that we can’t ever put our finger on, that lingers overhead, and everyone has their own image of it – but no one fully has access to this part, and/or access to it is seen as contingent. The other Dream is one of access on structural and economic terms. This doubleness (at least) of the American Dream helps to explain how Vita is at once an invention, the image that is conjured up of the possibilities of the first (affective) sort of American Dream, *and* she is the haunting excess that slips through into the present because of the impossibility of that Dream. Doubleness also helps to explain white ethnic insistence on grievance, given both the history – sometimes, in living memory – of the grief of racial exclusion and the grievous injuries to structural access, *and* their compulsion to fiercely guard the racial entitlements whose conferral may not have been inevitable.

Each work in this chapter yearns for the latter, structural sort of access, while also directing toward it a stringent critique, as that structural Dream is predicated on capitalism, exclusion, meritocracy, money, and corruption. Some of that critique is also savvily leveled at the ways in which this structural access is predicated on whiteness and on the ravages and entrenched disparities of the racial state. America is, even in an age of multiculturalism,<sup>205</sup> persistently configured as white, which is defined in relation to a Manichean black otherness. Whiteness is figured as property; and property is figured as power and “the settled expectations that are to be protected”.<sup>206</sup> And because of this fact, and because of the possessive investment in whiteness<sup>207</sup> – the structurally entrenched nature of white power, privilege, and property – the American Dream is only accessible to those who can conjure up an affiliation with whiteness, whether through racial ascent or through performative and economic displays of assimilation.

---

<sup>204</sup> Ngai 2005: 263.

<sup>205</sup> See the introduction to this dissertation as well as the previous chapter (three) for a more extended discussion of American multiculturalism in the post-Civil Rights, post-*Roots* era.

<sup>206</sup> (C. Harris 1993: 1778).

<sup>207</sup> George Lipsitz argues that “[w]hiteness [...] accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations” and that “white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity” (Lipsitz 2006: vii).

Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno argue that Italian Americans made a choice at some point(s) to consolidate their whiteness, affiliating with and accepting it rather than repudiating it by acting not-white or fighting for a more just, far-reaching, and progressive order rather than hiding behind white supremacy; that is, Italian Americans' affiliation with whiteness may be thought of as having been conjured up in order to gain access to the more empirical and capitalist American Dream.<sup>208</sup> As Cheryl Harris points out,

In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect *and that those who passed sought to attain* – by fraud if necessary. Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law. [...] [W]hiteness shares the critical characteristics of property even as the meaning of property has changed over time. In particular, whiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude.<sup>209</sup>

Although Harris's reference to passing pertains to her light-skinned Black grandmother passing for white in order to earn a living in the segregated North, the performative embrace, or the felicitous uptake, of the property in whiteness was also enacted by Italian and other ethnic whites. Indeed, the possessive investment in whiteness-as-property and the "right to exclude" have sometimes been manifested in quite chilling ways: one method that Italians and other white ethnics have sometimes employed to consolidate their whiteness is to violently attack people of color, especially Blacks and Latinos.<sup>210</sup>

I am suggesting that becoming white is a kind of a magic trick, at once a sleight of hand and a felicitous conjuring act by a group of people who left Southern Italy in large part because of the consequences of being colonized, starved, and constructed in their home country as racially distinct and inferior, and who entered the U.S. as legally white, and therefore entitled to become citizens, vote, own land, and marry other whites, but were generally considered an undesirable (bestial, dark, filthy, violent, lazy, deviant) race located between white and black. And the ongoing deferral of their full whiteness is at once a similarly strategic conjuration of persistent difference by way of the ethnic performativity of *italianità* (that is, certain vocal, gestural, behavioral, or social elements that are consistently consigned to Italian particularity and/or how they are or are not able to be disposed of over time as whiteness was achieved), which comments on or benefits from multiculturalism, *and* it is a lingering, haunting racial

---

<sup>208</sup> They write: "The 'price of the ticket' for full admission into U.S. society, [James] Baldwin recognized, was to 'become white,' and European immigrants faced this 'moral choice' immediately upon arrival.<sup>208</sup> [...] To this day, the persistence of disenfranchisement, segregation, ghettoization, profiling, and other forms of structural racism continues to enforce the material rewards of whiteness. Democracy, freedom, and other ideals that Americans hold sacred have not been a given, but rather struggled for from the bottom up, often by those most excluded. Virtually all Italian immigrants arrived in the United States without a consciousness about its color line. But they quickly learned that to be white meant having the ability to avoid many forms of violence and humiliation, and assured preferential access to citizenship, property, satisfying work, livable wages, decent housing, political power, social status, and a good education, among other privileges. 'White' was both a category into which they were most often placed, and also a consciousness they both adopted and rejected." (Guglielmo and Salerno [[year]]: 2-3.)

<sup>209</sup> C. Harris 1993: 1713-1714, emphasis mine.

<sup>210</sup> J. Guglielmo's and Salerno's 2003 anthology *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* was conceived most immediately in the wake of white "ethnics" beating a black child nearly to death in the Chicago area in 1997, as well as in response to the gamut of deadly attacks on blacks by Italian Americans throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

logic, grounded in various forms of nativism, that sometimes continues to rear its head unbidden, shaming Italian Americans or compromising their privileged status.

A multiculturalism that affirms and celebrates difference has been constructed since the 1970s in America as a bright vision that offers a ticket to accessing the first (affective) American Dream, which helps to explain the high stakes involved in Italian American representations that make much of ethnic difference. However, a problem with this vision is that built in is an assumption that there is parity in terms of structural access, and/or the issue of, and impediments to, structural access is overlooked entirely. Thus, the “difference” of Italian ethnicity often gets conjured up or called upon either as though it is one of many equivalent “ethnic options,” one tasty dish in a smorgasbord of equally delicious and safely exotic plates of aesthetic difference; *or* in the terms of ostensible racial grievance, which thus implies the necessity of redress and the imperative of entitlement to reparations. And when grievance is conjured – fabricated but furnished forth – in these ambivalent representations, it is misleading when it is conjured as anything other than affective, because the Italian Americans whom these representations reference *do* have access to the second, structural sort of American Dream. I quote Matthew Frye Jacobson at length because of the centrality of his configuration of white grievance to my theorization:

The sudden centrality of black grievance to national discussion [in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement] prompted a rapid move among white ethnics to disassociate themselves from white privilege. The popular rediscovery of ethnic forebears became one way of saying, ‘We’re merely newcomers; the nation’s crimes are not our own.’ [...] Such ethnic self-distancing from whiteness and privilege [...] fossilizes racial injustice in dim national antiquity, and so glosses over more recent discriminatory practices in housing, hiring, and unionization, for instance, which *did* benefit these ‘newcomers,’ fresh off the boat though they were. This move to distance oneself or one’s group from monolithic white privilege gave way in some cases to a politics of white grievance that pitted itself against unfair *black* grievance (as in the ensuing civil rights debates), often, ironically, couched in a civil rights language poached from blacks themselves. [...] Even as various racialized struggles over busing, housing, or ‘community control’ helped white ethnics to ‘complete their journey to unambiguous white identity’ – as their *whiteness* became increasingly salient in the black-white conflicts of Boston, New York, or Detroit – a language of ethnic specificity, of not-*quite*-whiteness, became ever more valuable.<sup>211</sup>

Thus, the claim on an external homeland helps to shore up ethnic whites’ innocence and the distance between them and the violence of the American racial state. This narrative can provide either – or both – the terms for a staunch critique of that racial state and the grounds for solidarity, and/or the terms for a narrative of their own superiority on account of their resilient bootstrapping and thus the implicit or explicit blame of today’s immigrants, Black Americans, or others for their misfortunes, which are then construed as cultural rather than

---

<sup>211</sup> Jacobson 2006: 22-23. Additionally, although white Americans were quite involved in the mid-twentieth-century movement for immigration reform, and were inspired and influenced by the civil rights movements in their rhetoric and their tactics, white ethnics often conflated the stakes of these movements. Mae Ngai points out that despite the similarities between civil rights and immigration reform in terms of their “broad appeals for social justice and human freedom and [their] more specific conception of formal equal rights,” the differences in the positionalities of those whom the reforms were intended to benefit were significant: “whereas the civil rights movement targeted the legacies of racial slavery, immigration reform in the 1940s to 1960s addressed, for the most part, discriminations faced by ethnic Euro-Americans who were racialized as white” (Ngai 2005: 228-29).

structural (see chapter three of this dissertation). That is, the type of mostly-aesthetic multiculturalism that is popularly rewarded with the status of safely appealing and consumable otherness is not multiculturalism that actually undoes white supremacy, “colorblindness,” or structurally entrenched disparities. However, because both the property or possessive investment in whiteness *and* what I might call a moveable property in otherness are compelled by the context of post-*Roots* American multiculturalism, representations of Italian Americans and *italianità* by Italian Americans enact performative returns to and about homeland that *both conjure and are haunted by* ineluctable difference.

### **ethnic performativity: conjuring specters of difference**

This is the first of two sections explicitly about performative return: while the next one deals with the homeland itself, this one is about ethnic performativity as performative return, and in particular, the negotiation of the Mafia stereotype. In this section I further elaborate my theory of ethnic performativity, namely a version of *italianità* that is deployed in Mafia films, often as a signifier of criminality and unassimilable otherness and darkness, as a genealogical project or a type of performative return. I elaborate my discussion of how blackness functions as an especially potent catalyst for its enactment – both in the sense of providing some cues for what the performance signifies and/or how it is to be performed, and in the sense of motivating its performance as a claim of grievance and difference – *and* as a catalyst for the anxieties that sometimes impede its felicitous execution.

Ethnic performativity is a display that participates in local, individually-scaled-but-collectively-recognizable gestures, actions, speech, behaviors, and so forth that are repeatable and serve – in the case of the representations such as this – to participate in and in some cases constitute performative returns, insofar as they are part of effort to stake a claim on origins, elsewhere, and an affiliation that persists in spite of, and resists, American-ness. The ethnic performativity of *italianità*, particularly those tropes recognizable in the Mafia representations, is understood in several ways, which compete with and/or bolster one another. In “real life” interactions, it is construed as evidence of what wouldn’t “melt” in the melting pot, which in turn is variously understood as defiant or deviant unassimilated traits, or as the stuff of “authenticity,” although it can of course be furnished forth when it is beneficial or compelled, even if it does not routinely manifest itself in an individual’s behavior. In self-conscious representations, such as the cinematic works under consideration here, *italianità* is similarly understood, and is sometimes used as a mechanism from which to launch various forms of social and political critique. In these self-reflexive cinematic and literary works made by Italians and Italian Americans who meditate on their own national and ethnic identity, ethnic performativity is not the same as the predominantly racist filmic representations that preceded and sometimes have continued alongside these works, wherein Italian-ness/ethnic performativity was staged to refer to a kind of bestial, nativist-inflected brand of Otherness with which Italians have often been associated. Rather, these works’ engagement with ethnic performativity evince an effort toward authenticity, legitimacy, and a more specific, locate-able elsewhere; in their repetition, self-reflexiveness, and investment in origins, these works’ engagements with ethnic performativity constitute genealogical projects. The elements of self-reflexiveness and social critique do not necessarily mean that these representations demonstrate a critical relationship to the “possessive investment” or “property” in whiteness, although in many instances I will examine, this problem is quite central to the way that these performances are represented.



In addition to staking out grievances, ethnic performativity creates imagined communities, and explores the specificity of a particular ethnicity to get at the general: what it means to be ambivalently white/ambivalently ethnic in the American century and empire. As we have seen, the images of ethnicity function in *Godfather I* to build up a defense against encroaching American-ness, to make Sicilian-ness appear to be the honorable, besieged alternative to American corruption, even as the outsider-Sicilians are nonetheless depicted as building their success – illegitimate and underground as it is – on the backs of nameless black people. And in *The Sopranos*, ethnic performativity is depicted as a means of staking an ambivalent claim of ethnicity that is experienced or believed to be somehow both/or occasionally essential and occasionally performative – and somehow also structural. I find Christopher Kocela’s reading of *The Sopranos*’ racial dynamics to be very productive in my discussion of these works, and engage in this section with his interpretation of the characters’ ambivalence in wanting to disidentify with difference *and* whiteness: their fear of displacement, of not receiving the rewards of multiculturalism, their nagging sense that racial Others more racialized than themselves are being unjustly favored in a strange new world of affirmative action, and thus their sense of needing to shore up their claim on the possessions and privileges of whiteness, sameness, and belonging. My reading, though, takes a bit more seriously the ways in which the anxiety of these displays is haunted by the threat of a too-inevitable otherness, foreignness, and Manichean abjection, so that the performative returns in these representations also ends up resembling the “wounds of returning,” where unfinished business emerges unbidden.

The ongoing, citational representations of the Mafia epitomized and elaborated by the *Godfather Trilogy* and *The Sopranos*, in their epic scale and psychological and political complexity, make much of the performative, recognizable aspects of Italian American heritage, reproducing images, characters, and scenarios with which many Italian Americans, even if they are not affiliated with the Mafia (as most are not), can identify or can see others they know reflected, for instance, through details like the ziti in the freezer or the marinara on the stove, the Jersey accents, and the ambivalent centrality of Catholicism and family. In his study of the place of the Mafia in the American imaginary, George De Stephano recalls the shock of seeing himself and his family reflected in uncanny detail in *The Godfather*:

[W]hen I, radical hippie freak and closeted young gay man, walked into that [...] movie theater in 1972 [...], the last thing I expected was to see myself. But, as would be true of so many Italian Americans, I felt an immediate shock of recognition as I watched Coppola’s Corleones. They were the most Italian Italians I’d ever seen in an American movie. The opening scenes are set in 1945, years before I was born. But it didn’t matter. I knew these people, and their world. At Connie Corleone’s wedding, the guests lustily sing “La luna mezzu’ mari,” the bawdy Sicilian ditty familiar to me from wedding receptions I’d been to as a child. [...] Among the guests are paisans who could have been my relatives: old women with corsages pinned to their heavy bosoms, reserved old men; all alongside loud gavones and others who maintain a proud reserve and dignity. [...] The guests are eating capicola sandwiches, and I laughed out loud to hear an exuberant young paisan call the spiced meat “gobbagoal,” the typical southern Italian dialect pronunciation favored by my family and every other Italian American of my acquaintance. [...] *The Godfather* is, in other words, drenched in *italianità*.<sup>212</sup>

---

<sup>212</sup> De Stephano 2007: 98-99

De Stephano describes growing up steeped in Italian American culture, but often either finding it unremarkable or somewhat embarrassing, backward, and irrelevant; his apprehension of *The Godfather* catalyzed a very different, much more curious and examined relationship to his background – a roots-seeking urge that yielded both appreciation for and criticism of its cultural and political qualities. The recognition of not only the performative qualities of *italianità*, but the sociocultural/familial mores, arrangements, and values produces a pleasurable response, the sense of being an insider as well as being deserving of narration, and creates an imagined community of these Italian American viewers seeing themselves writ large.

But the recognition of these details, and the pleasure of seeing them attached to characters who seem Shakespearean, is complicated by their also being attached to a brutal, amoral criminal system. These representations also operate to negotiate the terms of the stereotypical association of all Italian Americans with the Mafia (as well as, on occasion, the stereotypical anti-defamation activist): producing iterations of Mafia-genre films that function less as a further inscription of the stereotype, and more as an act of questioning and complicating it. As Tony Soprano posits to his teenaged daughter Meadow, depictions of La Cosa Nostra on film is part of Italian Americans' filmic and cultural heritage: like it or not, Italian Americans are always already implicated by it. Epic cinematic works such as *The Godfather Trilogy* and *The Sopranos* – which are written and directed by Italian Americans – respond to this fact by appropriating the genre to explore what is at stake in this very fact: what the nativist stereotypes<sup>213</sup> mean for Italian Americans, as well as what it means about the nature of the United States' preoccupations and values. *The Godfather Trilogy* and *The Sopranos*, both Italian Americans' negotiations of their own cultural identity, never condone what the mafia does. However, since the representations continue to circulate, meditating on the particularities of Italian American whiteness, they participate, perhaps intentionally, in the deferral of performative whiteness by expanding the representational field of otherness, reiterating and affirming the alterity that the unassimilable Catholic Mafioso represents through his association with exceptionally ethnic or regional performative tropes.

This explicitly performative otherness manifests in a blurring of boundaries, acts of borrowing, and feedback loops; representations and real-life behaviors influence one another in surprising ways and on surprising scales. Somewhat uncannily, as if to underscore the blurry line between fact and fiction, during the same week that Coppola was filming the scene where Michael “settles the family business” in a series of public assassinations, at a Unity Day rally for the Italian American Civil Rights League – which I will discuss momentarily – the mob boss Joseph Colombo was shot at close range by an assassin hired by the rival mobster “Crazy” Joey Gallo, who was then gunned down in retribution a year later in a famous hit at Umberto's Clam House on the Lower East Side. Indeed, the feedback loop of Mafia representations and Mafia activity is quite extensive. In a talk he gave about his book *The Mad Ones*, Tom Folsom described how Joey Gallo self-consciously modeled his public persona off of the character of Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death*, and that his family served as the model for Jimmy Breslin's film *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight*; moreover, Gallo became close friends with Jerry Orbach, who played the Joey Gallo character in the movie. *The Godfather* is rife with references to gangland and historical events and characters that more or less coincide with the eras the films portray, from the inter-family Mafia wars of the 1940s and '50s, to Meyer Lansky's partnership with “Lucky” Luciano and their role in American and Cuban gambling operations, to the

---

<sup>213</sup> Higham's definition of nativism has to do with a perceived threat to an “American way of life.”

fictionalized engagement with the suspiciously short reign of Pope John Paul I after Pope Paul VI's death and the collapse of Banco Ambrosiano. The citation of real gangsters did not end with plotlines: it extended to the performative aspects of ethnicity and milieu. Marlon Brando mined recordings of the televised Kevauver Hearings for models to guide his speech, gestures, and other aspects of his performance as Don Corleone, and other actors followed suit.<sup>214</sup> Later the *Godfather* trilogy provided a significant template not only for other representations (including, quite self-reflexively, *The Sopranos*, whose characters often discuss the trilogy, and which often includes visual, conceptual cinematographic references to it as well), but real-life gangsters' behavior as well.<sup>215</sup> These feedback loops generate and constitute a kind of performative return through their citational qualities, the way they double back and borrow from one another: the performances produce and affirm their own reality, which is consulted as a kind of origin, a source of ethnic authenticity in the enactment of later performances.

On one hand, these performative feedback loops can lead to a problem of conflating *italianità* with mobsterism; hence the upset of anti-defamation activists. On another, they can engender or facilitate the problem of conflating one form of (and accompanying stakes of) difference with another. For anti-defamation organizations, representations of *italianità* in Mafia films and sometimes elsewhere is shameful evidence not of what has never melted, but of racist stereotypes that have consistently been imposed on Italian Americans, in spite of the full assimilation and incorporation that these groups often insist has occurred instead. Although in some cases they do point to damaging representations, frequently their accusations of racism conflate structural with individual or discursive racism, and often implicitly seek to shore up the possessive investment in whiteness rather than to point to it.

In an explicit appropriation of the rhetoric of racialized grievance, the so-called Italian American Civil Rights League (IACRL) was formed in 1970 by Joseph Colombo, head of one of the five crime families in New York, to protest the FBI's interest in his illegal activities and pursuit of the Mafia. He charged the FBI with harassment and violation of civil rights, not only of him but of *all* Italian Americans:

A top priority of the league's was to eradicate "Mafia" from the English language, since Colombo contended that it had been turned into a one-word smear campaign. "Mafia? What is Mafia?" he asked a reporter in 1970. "There is not a Mafia. Am I the head of a family? Yes. My wife, and four sons and a daughter. That's my family." What began with the picketing of F.B.I. offices on March 30, 1970, soon grew into a crusade with a membership of 45,000 and a \$1 million war chest. An estimated quarter of a million people showed up at the league's inaugural rally in New York City in order to put the feds and everyone else on notice. "Those who go against the league will feel [God's] sting," said Colombo.<sup>216</sup>

Originally Colombo and his associates tried to prevent *The Godfather* from being produced, although ultimately agreed to it as long as Coppolla and Puzo didn't use the *word* "Mafia" – and it became an intensely popular and iconic film for members of the real-life mob. And in spite of its mob backing, the IACRL saw widespread involvement. Many Italian Americans – including merchants who had been strong-armed by the Mafia, as well as civilians who were not connected to the mob – and non-Italian civic leaders (including New York's Mayor Lindsay)

---

<sup>214</sup> See Seal's article "The Godfather Wars" in *Vanity Fair* 2009.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> See "The Godfather Wars," by Mark Seal, from *Vanity Fair* in *Vanity Fair*; Mar2009, Issue 583, p270-329, 18p. Web access.

joined the organization; indeed, when activist Mary Sansone received an award in 2010 from *Ciao America!*, a progressive Italian American journal, for her decades of progressive, anti-racist organizing, she was hailed in the journal for being one of the *few* Italian American leaders not to get pulled into the IACRL in the early '70s.<sup>217</sup>

Today, a number of Italian American cultural organizations continue to engage in anti-defamation activism; in particular, the omnipresence of the Mafia in representations of Italian Americans has drawn the ire of “media watch” campaigns. For instance, an organization called the Italic Institute of America, which calls itself a “Guardian of the Italian Heritage,” has a website on which they post various letters to the editor they have penned in a variety of small-town and major national newspapers that critique the presentation of stereotypes of Italians in the media, as well as accounts of various protests of what they call “negative” depictions of Italians that they have staged over the years, for instance, of Steven Spielberg’s *Shark Tale*. Perhaps most interesting is what they call a “years-long study of Hollywood’s treatment of the Italian mobster, [Image Research Project: Italian Culture on Film \(1928 - 2002\)](#), which surveyed Italian-related films and found that 69% portrayed Italians in a negative light.”<sup>218</sup> What is particularly noteworthy is how transparent the level of subjectivity is in their analysis; while their general findings are objectively stated and use clear and empirical criteria,<sup>219</sup> their methodology uses empirical-sounding language and appeals to ostensible authority<sup>220</sup> to attempt to give weight to weakly-analyzed and highly subjective criteria.<sup>221</sup> The Italic Institute and other organizations like it work to counter the grievances that they perceive through media stereotyping by engaging in various activities to promote “Italic” contributions (honoring with awards well-known Italian and Italian-descended individuals for their positive contributions to society, writing letters to the editor and publishing newsletters extolling the cultural virtues of Italian-descent people, and promoting awareness of major political events in Italic history that ostensibly engendered unity such as the Pax Romana and the unification of the nation of Italy) and highlighting unfair mistreatment of Italian Americans.<sup>222</sup> Evidently the grievances cited by the IACRL have continued to ring true for a number of Italian Americans to this day. The media’s reinforcement of images of Italians and Italian Americans as violent

---

<sup>217</sup> See “Mary Crisalli Sansone, 93 year old Brooklyn native, receives Civil Rights award” in *Ciao America!*, February 8, 2010. Web access. <[http://www.ciaoamerica.net/stories\\_10/mary\\_sansone.html](http://www.ciaoamerica.net/stories_10/mary_sansone.html)>

<sup>218</sup> All the above information is found on the homepage of the Italic Institute’s website, <<http://italic.org/>>.

<sup>219</sup> “(1) Close to 300 movies featuring Italians as criminals have been produced since the success of “The Godfather” (1972), an average of 9 mob movies a year over the past 30 years. (2) Of the overall total 500 mob movies, only 12% are based on real-life criminals. The remaining 88% are fictionalized stereotypes. (3) Positive or complex portrayals of Italians are often treated fleetingly--i.e., as supporting characters. It is indeed rare to have a film featuring a complex, non-stereotypical Italian character as a main protagonist from start to finish (e.g., Al Pacino in 1973’s “Serpico” or Meryl Streep in 1996’s “The Bridges of Madison County”). (4)The criteria for selecting films is based on image, not aesthetics. Thus, although “The Godfather” is indeed a great film, it falls under the category of “negative” for portraying crime as an “integral” part of Italian culture.” From “The Italic Institute: Image Research Project: Italian Culture on Film (1928-2002),” <<http://italic.org/mediaWatch/filmStudy.php>>, accessed 19 September 2011.

<sup>220</sup> “The Image Research Project was initiated in 1995 by Bill Dal Cerro, an Italic Institute Media Director and film critic for Fra Noi Italian American newspaper in Chicago. In addition to Mr. Dal Cerro’s encyclopaedic knowledge of film, four of the Institute’s top researchers contributed film titles and input on a continuous basis. Another 100 titles remain to be added to the project pending personal verification by the researchers” (*ibid*).

<sup>221</sup> “Film portrayals were classified individually, yet headed under the rubric of either “Positive” or “Negative,” depending on the image conveyed of Italian/Italian American culture. Since film viewing is considered a subjective experience, borderline cases were weighted by overall image and/or an attempt at balance. For example: “The Godfather” has complex characters, which is a plus; however, the overwhelming impression it leaves with the viewers is one of a culture tied to criminality. There’s no balance; therefore it’s a negative” (*ibid*).

<sup>222</sup> See the programs section of the Italic Institute’s website: <<http://italic.org/programs/progdesc.php>>.

and amoral can certainly enable Americans' associations of Italian-ness with organized crime. These persistent stereotypes are based on constructions of otherness – darkness, bestial qualities, alien cultural and religious habits that threaten the polity and make assimilation impossible – that are deeply embedded in perennial forms of nativism; these associations have in some limited capacities followed Ellis Island immigrants, but more urgently continue to characterize anti-immigrant and anti-immigration rhetoric in the present with much more insidious material effects.

And even as it conjures difference, Italian American anti-defamation activity often presents a curious and seemingly paradoxical effort at a total exorcism of the ghosts of difference. Particularly revealing of this tendency is the section of the Italic Institute's website that is devoted to an analysis of organized crime (see "Italic Institute: Organized Crime – Learn More," at <<http://italic.org/crime/index.php>>). This webpage narrativizes the history of Italian American organized crime as a history of victimization and false accusation, omitting significant facts and details and seemingly disavowing the very existence of the Mafia or the participation of *any* Italian Americans in organized crime, and painting an ahistoric and incomplete picture of both the Mafia and of American nativism, their manifestations and causes, depicting them as a kind of media heist specifically targeting Italian Americans, rather than a polyvalent, deeply-entrenched response to political, economic, and social forces rooted in both Italy and America. The page then goes on to promote books about a wide variety of non-Italian gangsters, which are organized by ethnicity or race rather than by type of organization or criminal activity, or by the type of damage they caused.<sup>223</sup> This is a particularly revealing section of their site, as it demonstrates a lack of historical consciousness as well as a skewed (and very white) sense of racial understanding.

A few problems arise with this interpretation. First, if, according to this group, there was ostensibly *no* organized crime among Italians – if it was not engendered in some sociopolitical crucible – then by extension this move also either disavows that there were structural circumstances that engendered it, or it lionizes the good Italians who were able to transcend these difficult circumstances without resorting to criminal activity. In that case, criminal activity on the part of other Others is inexplicable or less forgivable. But secondly, the injury that is portrayed is one of slander rather than one of structural and psychic disparity, and if this organization's assumptive logic indicates that to be seen as racialized constitutes a form of slander, then it indicates a belief that Italians are not racial subjects. The strong reaction to being treated as if they were racialized disavows the complexity of racial formation, *and* reveals an underlying assumption that they were *misconstrued* as racially other, which – rather than implying a categorical suspicion of race as a taxonomy – implies an investment and belief in notions of racial difference, and in particular, the belief that these Italic people were falsely accused of being other but were in fact *cristiani*, the Southern Italian word for human, which is to say – in the parlance of the United States – *white* the whole time.

The ways in which this website and others like it narrativize history and grievance is haunted by white blindness, an investment in whiteness, and the politics of respectability; the ideals of class ascension and assimilation are uncritically embraced. In order to be able to understand others' injury, these activists have to acknowledge own racialized history as being larger than a media heist, and also to understand their own racialized past in the context of the complex history of American racial formation. Such an understanding also facilitates an understanding of structural and psychic racial stratification and oppression, and becomes a

---

<sup>223</sup> They are broken down into categories of Irish, Jewish, Asian, African-American, Hispanic, English/Scots-Irish, German, and Arabic/Muslim; their criminal activity ranges from Nazism to the Ku Klux Klan to Jewish, Black, and Irish "mafias," to the Bloods and Crips.

potential building block for anti-racist understanding; hence the potential that I see in the rhetorical moves I describe in the third chapter that the Tenement Museum and the residents of Belmont make with respect to a polysemic port of entry and acknowledging the centrality of the safety net. But such analysis cannot emerge without a proper understanding of the differences between structural, individual, and discursive racism, and of racial formation over time. I do not dispute that the anti-defamation lobby has an important point about the discursive power that is generated by feedback loops of damning representations, even if they skew the language of grievance they deploy to make this point. But the analyses they make are far different from those made in representations like *The Sopranos*, which offers a scathing critique of whiteness and the investments that sustain it, and which simultaneously admits to the haunting of the interstitial racial status that bespeaks the not-inevitability of whiteness.

In either case, this conjuring of difference leads to a kind of insidious magic trick, a confusingly duplicitous switcheroo, wherein the investment in whiteness as property that these anti-defamation groups evince necessitates a politics of respectability, while an investment in difference as property that the fictional Mafiosi embody calls for a politics of “authenticity” which often masks the possessive investment in whiteness, the investment *in property*, that underlies it. That is, the politics of respectability militates against depictions of Mafiosi, and advocates for limited ethnic performativity, as those who display it are often construed as “boors” and “buffoons”:<sup>224</sup> the imaginary homeland that is implied is a fantasmatic democracy that yielded a people whose racial neutrality has been sullied in the threatening, politically-correct post-civil rights landscape of American multiculturalism. And the politics of authenticity calls for visible and strong ethnic performativity that is furnished forth in order to restore or stake a claim on a long-lost origin, a national and ethnic homeland whose ineluctable difference is magnified and made much of, which in turn is mobilized in order to stake a claim on what are perceived to be the rewards of difference in the context of American multiculturalism. In fact, both these politics harken back to imaginary and exalted homelands whose difference from the U.S. serves as the key to their conjuring of grievance; and in a sense this renders interchangeable the forms of property in which each is invested, as they are built on structures of exclusion: one group benefits only at others’ (namely Others’) expense. Hence the representations I discuss in this chapter are quite delicate, are complicated operations of smoke and mirrors – what appears to be one thing is actually doing another.

Both *The Godfather Trilogy* and *The Sopranos* make moves to quite specifically situate their Italian American characters as ethn racially not-quite-white, and therefore not wholly American (for instance, in *The Godfather*, by setting Don Vito Corleone’s offspring in contradistinction to their very Anglo (i.e. white and American) spouses, having them speak in Italian or dialect when they don’t want Americans/whites to understand them, or reiterating nasty racial slurs (wop, guinea, oily-haired, etc) flung by ostensibly whiter characters at the Italian Americans). These moves recall Toni Morrison’s remark about the ways that immigrant groups enter into an order that suspends its subjects between racialized poles of American-ness, i.e. whiteness, and abjection, i.e. Manichean blackness (see footnote 43). At the same time, both works evince a relationship to blackness that makes it clear that the Italian Americans benefit from significant advantages that enable them to exercise power over black Americans. This does not contradict Morrison’s insight. According to the old Northern Italian saying, Africa begins at Naples, and if Ellis-Island-era Italian immigrants entered into a racial order that positioned them in an especially fraught relationship to blackness – proximate for

---

<sup>224</sup> See the Italic Institute’s film study, “Image Research Project: Italian Culture on Film (1928- 2002),” which can be accessed at < <http://italic.org/imageb1.htm>>.

some years by psychic association yet distinct by legal definition, perhaps it is no surprise that these works make use of critical depictions of ethnic performativity, Mafia tropes, and fervent yet ambivalent antiblackness to explore the consequences of Italian American and white ethnic racial anxiety.

Christopher Kocela has written an extremely useful analysis of the racial anxiety that in many ways underpins the psychic and sociopolitical operations of *The Sopranos*, and accounts for many of the ways in which it packs a critical punch. The premise of his argument is based on a recent turn in critical whiteness studies that seeks to correct some of the previous assumptions of the field: rather than whiteness existing for white subjects as an unmarked, invisible, and imperceptible category, scholars now see that many contemporary white people, “regardless of class or location, tend to see whiteness not as a system of privilege but of victimization”:<sup>225</sup> that is, they are quite aware of their whiteness but see themselves as being under threat as a result. Kocela writes: “Through its complex treatment of Italian-American identity, *The Sopranos* simultaneously mourns and celebrates the advent of a lost white majority in the United States.”<sup>226</sup> In order to make this argument, he also mobilizes Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’ Lacanian theorization of racial anxiety, a phenomenon that occurs when desire is foreclosed: that is, when the object of desire is recognized as impossible. Thus

[f]aced with the realization that Whiteness offers no possibility for desire, the raced subject experiences anxiety as the recognition of the false nature of a fantasy in which he or she nonetheless continues to believe. [...] In *The Sopranos* Tony consistently longs for a lost master signifier of Whiteness. That white racial Name-of-the-Father is Gary Cooper, whose absent presence hovers over Tony's therapeutic sessions with Jennifer from the pilot episode onward. It is Gary Cooper's image as "the strong, silent type" that Tony invokes repeatedly in order to express his sense of failed American and masculine ideals—ideals most shamefully betrayed by Tony's own disabling panic attacks and the confessional therapy required to cure them.<sup>227</sup>

As Kocela and De Stephano both point out, Tony and other mobsters continuously insert imaginary black people into narrative gaps that their own fallibilities have produced, in order to cover for their own mistakes: for instance, when the Soprano crew’s hitman kills a meddlesome youngster, it is blamed on black drug dealers; one of Tony’s associates explains a limp he acquired while murdering someone he wasn’t supposed to kill with a story about being jumped by black men; and Tony, too, explains away his absence in a pivotal heist on having been jumped by blacks (in fact, he was arguing with his mother and had a panic attack, and the admission of this fact during therapy is both humiliating and painful for him). But Kocela also points, perhaps more importantly, to the ways in which racial otherness, especially blackness, functions as a catalyst for his anxieties: Tony’s panic attacks occur when some sort of racially fraught situation arises, causing him to need psychiatric counseling, and thus failing at the macho masculinity that has profession and culture demands. This occurs in a number of instances, ranging from a situation when he has an altercation in which he instructs his daughter’s half-black boyfriend to stop seeing her, then later comes upon a box of Uncle Ben rice and collapses on the kitchen floor, to instances in which traumatic episodes with his parents, the memory of which later triggers panic attacks, take place against the backdrop of – and/or occur directly in relation to a threat from – the presence of racial otherness, namely

---

<sup>225</sup> Kocela, paragraph 3

<sup>226</sup> Kocela 2005, paragraph 5

<sup>227</sup> Kocela 2005, paragraphs 21 and 22

black people. I think it is not a coincidence that these moments are referred to in the series as “black-outs”: racial anxiety – the foreclosure of desire, but also the fantasmatic sense of being displaced or under threat by a(n imaginary) racial order that can’t guarantee the rewards of whiteness – renders Tony incapable of participating in the trajectory of his daily business, *and* eclipses the possibility of Tony (and by extension, other white Americans) having a realistic sociopolitical analysis.

But Tony’s complex relationship to whiteness and blackness is negotiated through other more lucid, though no less complicated, moments. In a fascinating episode in the first season of *The Sopranos*, the problem of racial stratification in America and the ambiguous self-fashioning, crisis of whiteness, and positionality of the Italian American is treated quite thoroughly.<sup>228</sup> Dr. Melfi goes to dinner at the home of Tony’s neighbor, the physician Dr. Cusamano, and we see his friends, other assimilated Italian Americans, disparaging the super-ethnic Sopranos and conflating organized crime with ethnic displays. However, later in the episode, Tony takes Melfi’s and Carmela’s advice to try to make friends with “legitimate” people – Cusamano et al – who exoticize, romanticize, and mock him when he joins them for golf at their country club. Later in therapy with Melfi, Tony reflects to her on his fraught relationship to whiteness, revealing that he identifies as technically Caucasian but not *white*, like the assimilated Italian Americans whom he refers to as “medigahns” (i.e. an accented “Americans”) and “Wonder Bread Wops” and whom he considers to be hypocrites, in denial of their ethnic and working-class roots. He describes feeling used, shamed, marked, and like a “dancing bear” in their presence, likening his experience of spending time with them to a childhood acquaintance with a cleft palate whom his friends used to call up for a laugh, who seemed to go along with the joke and make himself available for their amusement to fit in, but who secretly went home and cried every night.

Yet the performative – rather than essential – qualities of Italian ethnicity are highlighted not only in the differences between Cusamano’s and Tony Soprano’s “fronts”<sup>229</sup> (they are neighbors with similar incomes and equivalent, if differently located, footholds in and access to power), but in the behaviors (accents, language choice, gestures, etc) that are detachable or appropriated depending on the demands of the given situation. Cusamano and his very white buddies suddenly begin accentuating their Jersey accents, peppering their speech with expletives, and trying to act “tough” when they hang out with Tony – although it looks so awkward and forced that the strictly performative qualities are simultaneously called into question – and at the end, after Tony has realized how humiliated they make him feel, he decides to play up his performative ethnicity and its dangerous mafia associations, wrapping a box full of sand with paper and string and asking a very nervous “Cus” to hang onto it for him “for a month, maybe less, maybe more.”

Although Tony acknowledges the ways that for Italian Americans, ethnic qualities are detachable – his disparaging remarks about the Wonder Bread Wops imply that he understands that they have made *choices* to pursue whiteness – he is in denial of his own whiteness as a structural phenomenon, and the ways in which both his and Cusamano’s grip on money and power have accrued on account of the whiteness that they share. But the grief that he experiences when his assimilationist neighbors mock him seems to be, for him, not only a moment when he fails to recognize his actual whiteness, but is also particularly jarring because his whiteness and the property that accompanies it is also misrecognized by his neighbors, who seem to see *him* as a threatening racial other. When he compares himself to a performing

---

<sup>228</sup> “A Hit is a Hit,” S1E10.

<sup>229</sup> See Goffman 1959: pp 17-77.



animal, it is not only the element of performance that is significant: it is also the element of bestiality and otherness that he sees in their perception of him. It is not only a racial anxiety about other Others but racial grief that Tony experiences when the neighbors conjure up, through their rhetoric and behavior, the specter of racial and nativist animus about *him*.

The other plotline in this episode involves Christopher's exchange with a black gangsta rap star Massive Genius, a tycoon with a record label, a mansion, and a band of soldiers who are much more disciplined than Christopher and his fellows, and who throws parties attended by the likes of Alec Baldwin. Massive overlooks Chris's extremely racist remarks in the rib joint where they first encounter one another when he learns that the latter is affiliated with the Sopranos. He invites Chris and his girlfriend to his party because he wants to arrange a meeting with the Soprano crew's Jewish associate Hesh, who produced many black musicians' records in the 1950s and '60s and has ripped \$400,000 in royalties off of one of these musicians; Massive wants to arrange for the rightful return of this money to the musician's family, who is struggling financially, and is willing to sue if necessary. Chris is deeply impressed with – and jealous of – Massive's power, wealth, education, property, weapon collection, publicity, connections, and his reserved, eloquent professionalism. The latter makes an overture of solidarity to Chris by saying, "Your people are alright. I've seen *The Godfather* maybe 200 times," implicitly claiming a citational relationship to the example of that film's model of criminality: its code, its badass qualities, and its existence as an organization that emerged due to a deferred relationship to American privileges and a rejection of America's definitions of legitimacy.

Chris sees all of this, however, as an affront to and displacement of his own and "his people's" rightful entitlement to progress, access, and legitimacy, claiming that "*We* were the original OGs!" and complaining about the bedraggled crime outfit operating out of a pork shop in working-class New Jersey. But the structure of the narrative makes it clear from the fact that Hesh is in a position to deny Massive of his aunt's royalties – and does so, employing a bit of blackmail in the process – that in spite of Massive's individual success, his blackness positions him in a structurally compromised position relative to the Soprano crew's whiteness; his plaint is the very real exploitation of blacks in music and many other industries by the people – often Jews and Italians – who ran them. That is, Chris's and Tony's perceptions of ethnic grievance may be true on the interpersonal scale of Tony and his neighbors, or Chris relative to Massive's wealth, but carries little consequence at a structural level in a sharply stratified American society.

The series continues this argument later, in an episode of season four called "Christopher," which takes on the Italian American perception of grievance relative to Columbus Day's fraught politics. The protests of the Columbus Day Parade by the Native American/activist community make the Italian American anti-defamation folks look rather foolish, backward, uncompromising, and unenlightened: they are up against arguments made by Howard Zinn in *A People's History of the United States* (as brought up by Tony's son Anthony Jr. by way of his teacher), by one of the main activists who is a university professor, and by most of their (non-Italian) friends, all of whom concur that Columbus is a "slave trader" and ringleader of Indian genocide. But everyone ends up looking a little bit defensive and tribal – that is, blinded by a sense of exceptionalism as it pertains to their own people's historic suffering.

There are several fascinating moments when this blindness is foregrounded. First, there is a television talk show playing in the background at the Soprano home, which features an African American host interviewing – and apparently mediating between – Professor Redclay, the Indian professor/activist from the protest and an elderly representative of an

Italian American anti-defamation organization. The host takes the side of the Italian American up until the latter calls the experience of emigrating in steerage a “middle passage” – at which point the host becomes furious and protective of the distinction between “three hundred years of slavery” and the experience of elective immigration. Later in the episode, a nearly identical exchange, cast differently, takes place: at Hesh’s place, Tony, Silvio – who feels the most strongly about protecting Columbus’s good name, Hesh, and a Cuban friend of Hesh’s called Ruben are discussing the anti-Columbus activities. Ruben very empirically and specifically makes a case for Columbus’s misdeeds, to Silvio’s great dismay, and Hesh takes Ruben’s part – that is, until Ruben likens Columbus to Hitler, at which point Hesh calls him an anti-Semite, accusing him of minimizing the Holocaust, and banishes him from his estate.

These scenarios could be read in one of two ways. According to one reading, it could be seen as an instance in which the series argues for a flattening of difference, making an assertion that contemporary racial difference is primarily a matter of identification and performative expression, whereby historical suffering and consequential difference are matters of the past. According to another, because the Italian and Jewish characters claim exceptional suffering even as we watch these affluent white Americans exercise tremendous power over the lives of others – including the racial others whose claims of grievance they dispute – they are intentionally depicted to appear foolish and blind. That is, according to the second reading, the series makes an incisive analysis of the structural and psychic entrenchments both of racial difference and of ethnic white Americans’ investment in believing otherwise. Although Tony is furious with Anthony Jr. for his assertion that Columbus is a slave trader and Indian killer, at the end of the episode he blows up at Silvio, making something somewhat akin to a structural argument: he asks Silvio if *he* personally has suffered, and Silvio can only reply that his grandparents were denied their due. It seems for a moment that Tony is concluding that figures like Columbus are only images, and are not necessary because Italian Americans are not in a structurally compromised position. But then he says:

If [Gary Cooper] was a medigahn around nowadays he'd be a member of some victims group--the fundamentalist Christians, the abused cowboys, the gays, whatever the fuck. ... Let me ask you something. All the good things you got in your life, did they come to you because you're Calabrese? I'll tell you the answer. The answer is no. ... You got it 'cause you're you, 'cause you're smart, cause you're whatever the fuck. Where the fuck is our self-esteem? That shit doesn't come from Columbus or The Godfather or Chef-fuckin'-Boy-Ardee.<sup>230</sup>

Rather than posing the question and answering, “You got them because you’re white,” he answers in terms that evade the stakes of the tension. I quote Kocela’s reading of this moment at some length, because he is right on the mark in terms of both his analysis and the language he uses to describe it:

Shifting attention away from historical injustice and ethnicity to the comforts of Sylvio's [sic] life, Tony's response is indebted to Jennifer's earlier question, "What do poor Italian immigrants have to do with you?" But Tony calls up the spectre of white racial identification only to pass over it immediately in his celebration of an unraced, universal subjectivity. It is this fantasy of wholeness which, according to Seshadri-Crooks, is the enduring special effect of Whiteness. It is also this illusion that structures Tony's

---

<sup>230</sup> S4E3

strategies of racial misrecognition and his disabling bouts of racial anxiety. The ease with which Tony believes in a coherent, continuous identity despite his recurring panic attacks and losses of consciousness shows how hard it is to shake loose of subjective investment in prominent cultural signifiers of whiteness.<sup>231</sup>

Tony's own identity is neither coherent nor continuous, as is demonstrated both by the phenomenon of the black-outs and panic attacks that crop up on account of racial anxiety, *and* by the fact that the ways in which he is interpellated as white are at once structurally sound and psychically shaky, as his neighbors proved. But the notion of "unraced, universal subjectivity" is a compelling fiction for him and for other whites, as we have seen with the anti-defamation activists from the Italic Institute, even as this wholeness is perceived to be at once under threat by a new multiculturalist order, and threatening to the potential of receiving the rewards of difference that this multiculturalism ostensibly doles out.

Thus the Italian American characters disidentify with whiteness and the wholeness that it promises, even as their actions and their psychic relationships to racial Others shore up their actual pursuit of it. In *The Godfather*, the Corleones choose whiteness by striving toward access and power, and building this on the backs of those more vulnerable than themselves, even as they cling to their ethnic otherness; in *The Sopranos* Tony and his two families choose performative difference and simultaneously, the modes of power and supremacy that accompany much whiter whiteness. But the sense Tony has of being laughed at and humiliated speaks to the racialized difference that always haunts, that makes the claim on and the possessive investment in whiteness, and the access and power that constitute it, so urgent and compelling. Coppola and Puzo, Chase and his team, perceive the illusory nature of the wholeness of both whiteness and American-ness (which, as we have seen, are largely equated) and have constructed cinematic epics that analyze the consequences of this disidentification with it on the part of ethnically marked yet structurally white families whose criminal "business" is under the radar in part precisely because of their fraught relationship with the false promises of American-ness, and with an American Dream whose structural elements are tangible and readily available to those whose racial position is structurally felicitous, but whose affective promises are impossible to make good on. Performance and performativity – including performances of ethnicity and ethnic performativity – do not only instantiate, but expose and reveal dynamics and power relationships that are already at work: they not only *make*, but *make manifest*. These self-reflexive and critical works, and especially *The Sopranos*, identify the value perceived by white Americans in claiming *and* in disavowing difference, as well as the racial anxiety that underlies both processes. Tony is haunted by loss and racial anxiety. Sometimes this manifests itself through a psychic and physical response to his perception of racial grievance, in the form of black-outs, misrecognition, and rage – and sometimes it manifests through a sense of grief, as in the instance where he is slighted by his neighbors. Can grief and grievance possess people? What if we were to consider ethnic performativity a kind of possession?

The American Dream is predicated on capital, on being able to achieve *things*: economic success, parity and access, property. Even as whiteness is property, I argue that these two epic gangster parables position racialized otherness as another kind of property – a moveable property, as it were, that can be appropriated, detached, and performed. White ethnic racial anxiety is very well explained by a comment made by the protagonist's estranged father in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (a film that is also about, among other things, insidious politics of racial

---

<sup>231</sup> Kocela 2005, paragraph 29

performativity and misrecognition): “Everybody wants to be black, but nobody wants to be black.” That is, everybody wants to be able to claim the privileges and possessions of, or the property in, some of the things that blackness in particular signifies – the cultural caché of being badass, cool, noble, tragic, and oppressed – and that otherness more generally signifies in the U.S.: the legitimate entitlement to claims of grievance which, in post-civil rights multiculturalism, signifies to whites a claim on the resources allotted by affirmative action. At the same time, this desire, anxiety, and racial misrecognition overlooks the Manichean quality of the black-white binary that governs many people’s conception of race in the U.S., and the actual psychic and structural violence and dispossession that perpetuates and enforces its terms. Cheryl Harris argues against the notion that affirmative action could render blackness a form of property that is the functional and structural inverse of whiteness-as-property, because blackness isn’t predicated on racial subjugation and exclusion of its opposite in a systemic, structural manner.<sup>232</sup> But even if difference or otherness is not *property* in the sense of categorical rights to exclusion, nonetheless racial otherness may be construed as a kind of *possession*, in the sense of a thing to have and covet, and in the sense of a force that can possess its subjects so that they do the bidding of a perception of its logic – often one that is predicated on misrecognition.

### **promised land**

As much as misrecognition and invention might characterize whites’ sense of racial understanding, in many ways this overabundant capacity for invention can be traced to negotiations of feelings of loss. Both in the context of a multicultural order in which difference is affectively (if not structurally) rewarded, and in the context of forced assimilation in a hierarchical racial order that punishes difference (as we have seen in chapter two through Jerome Smith’s and Lolis Elie’s condemnation of what was lost under “integration”), successful assimilation and integration becomes associated with loss. This loss occurs when, through the process of assimilating, those things “melt” away that make a group of people able to be legible to one another as specific, unique, and collective bearers of some special knowledge or experience; it also entails the evaporation of the group-specific safety nets, such as mutual aid societies, necessitated by and constructed to suture the wounds or losses of ethnoracial difference or the lack of a common language with the dominant majority. For white Americans, this loss of ethnicity and the ascension to racial whiteness means that they have to occupy a dominant position of privilege that may generate guilt, and/or may engender the sense that this privilege is under threat, as I elaborated in the previous section. This particular sense of loss compels performative returns – claims on origins and wholeness, the promise of which has been broken – and it does so not only through ethnic performativity and the politics of authenticity that bolster it, but through engagements with the promised land, which for the descendents of Italian immigrants is the nation of Italy. But in analyzing the terms (their anticipated function, their successes or failures, their rhetorical strategies) of contemporary performative returns, it is also important to consider the inverse operation of yearning for a promised land – the relationship of Italians toward America prior to and in the process of their migration and incorporation into the U.S. – as this inaugurated the circumstances of departure and the hopes and losses knotted up in the myth of the American Dream.

In *The Godfather*, the losses are initially a lack of incorporation into the American safety net and structures of belonging, and the creation of an alternative structure under the radar; for Vito this was inaugurated, and for Michael compounded, by acts of deadly violence toward their

---

<sup>232</sup> See C. Harris 1993: 1787-1789.

family members that were sanctioned by the governing power structure.<sup>233</sup> Ultimately, however, the central loss is that of their Sicilian code and its replacement by a corrupted American one, to the great detriment of the family. For Tony Soprano and his two families, what is highlighted throughout the series is the sense of meaninglessness the family experiences upon their ascension to structural dominance, and his gang's sense that the Family business is a mess, disorganized, and doesn't hold up the same codes and order as their mythologized predecessors' Mafia. All of this comes together in their perception of having been displaced, which translates to efforts to "reclaim" what was lost, ranging from Italy, the romantic homeland, to their perceived sense of racial entitlement. In *Vita*, what Italy can't provide the emigrants search for in America; what America fails to provide they return to Italy to search for; and when empirical genealogy fails to corroborate legends, the empiricism is suspected in favor of elaborations on, and underscoring their belief in and need for, personal, familial, and national legends.

My arguments in this dissertation about the functions of performative returns in the wake of sensibilities of loss triggered by the psychic and material operations of the American racial state hinge very much on the centrality of invention, reflected in and instantiated by performances and performativity that take place in the gaps left in unruly genealogies. This interlocking between loss and invention is reflected too in an important collection of essays that theorize the nature of loss and the politics of mourning. David Eng and David Kazanjian write:

[W]hat [Walter] Benjamin calls "historical materialism" – is a creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies. [...] Benjamin's historical materialist establishes a continuing dialogue with loss and its remains – a flash of emergence, an instant of emergency, and most important a moment of production. [...] This anthology suggests that while the twentieth century resounds with catastrophic losses of bodies, spaces, and ideals, psychic and material practices of loss and its remains are productive for history and for politics. Avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings.<sup>234</sup>

Such a furnishing forth of improvised representations and significations occurs in the gaps and holes left behind by processes of loss. Although the authors of this anthology have a very optimistic analysis of what these inventions and remains can facilitate – they seem to assume that a certain intentionality and liberatory politics accompany the work of mourning and the processes of creativity that they describe – as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, including in the previous section of this chapter, inventions in the face of real or perceived loss can be quite insidious, used to shore up structures of domination. There is no political ontology categorically embedded in invention. But in the phenomena I address in this project, whereby loss is inaugurated in the context of a racist state, there does seem to be a certain inevitability in turning to origins for resources and as ideological anchors in these processes of invention. In this final section, I examine these questions in light of Italian/American characters' performative returns to their promised home/land.

---

<sup>233</sup> Vito's father and subsequently mother and brother; and for Michael, the police toward his mother and subsequently Apollonia.

<sup>234</sup> Eng and Kazanjian 2002: 1, 5.

My analysis of the performative returns to Sicily in *The Godfather Trilogy* was treated extensively in section one relative to its critique of the American Dream and exposure of its whiteness and polyvalence, and its analysis of the costs of societal access. Therefore I need not rehearse this discussion again here. What is significant to point out is simply that this film was instrumental in establishing the trope that tethers Mafia-*italianità* with a politics of authenticity, a sensibility of melancholy and epic tragedy, and a critique of capitalism. In the post-civil rights multiculturalist moment, all of these factors conjoin to facilitate a notion that the conjuration of ancestral homelands – darkly exotic, yet safely familiar, and that function as dramatic foils to the U.S. – works to suture the broken promises of the American Dream.

This operation is reflected in *The Sopranos*: Italy does not show up routinely in the series, although in one episode, “Commendatori,” its significance is explicated quite thoroughly and revealingly.<sup>235</sup> Tony and several of his men travel to Naples on business. None of them have ever been to Italy – having grown up working-class and unambiguously American – and it is quite explicitly configured as the homeland for each of them, romanticized according to many of the expected post-*Roots* tropes, although precisely how, and the capacity of each to access what they hoped to get from it, is mediated in each case by the character’s specific existential dilemmas and relationship to America and its measures of success. It is noteworthy, however, that the romance with Italy is depicted ambivalently, in part because it is the characters who romanticize it, rather than the television drama that does so; rather the series meditates on the nature of this desire for and invention of the homeland, and of the losses that engender it. But it is also ambivalent in part because of the ways that it is at once inaccessible and stands in for values or ways of being that are not as ideal as they first appear, which makes the show’s critique of America, in turn, also more ambivalent.

The characters that desire to travel to Italy but are left behind in the U.S. are those whose larger desires, needs, or ambitions have been frustrated. Tony’s Uncle Junior, who is shown in the episode in a wheelchair, requiring assistance for his intimate functions, and fully aware that he has only been appointed Don as a kind of puppet, describes the formidable Neapolitan Don and a vividly-recalled business meeting with their Italian associates, then sadly notes that he never had a chance to go to Italy. The homeland for him is both ancestral and professional, and its inaccessibility apparently stands in relation to his personal and professional failures, and a sense of failed masculinity. Tony’s wife Carmela is extremely resentful of being left behind, and during this episode her thwarted desire to travel to Italy is joined with a plotline in which her close friend, another Mafia wife, is considering divorcing her husband. Tony’s opinionated sister visits Carmela and points out that all of the Mafia wives have sold themselves short: plied with beautiful homes and lots of money in order to comply with being shunted aside for lovers, left out of decisions, and treated with little respect. Italy is a romantic destination for the women (each time they are discussing Italy, the fact that they have never been, and the problems in their marriages the sentimental pop-operatic song “Con te partiró” – made popular by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman in the 1990s and played often on television shows, at sporting events, and in Italian tourist traps – is playing in the background; this song is also a nostalgic invocation of travelling to distant and romantic shores with a lover who is apparently in danger of being lost), and its inaccessibility to Carmela reinforces the prison-like gendered and professional double-standards to which she is subject.

However, she is appalled by Angie’s desire to divorce her husband and tells her she knows she’ll never actually do it – citing the religious and cultural importance of marriage (she calls it a “holy sacrament,” and a divorced family a “broken home,” and Angie a bad example for

---

<sup>235</sup> “Commendatori,” S2E4.

her children) – which also sets up Italian or Italian American cultural mores and Catholic values as implicitly the *source* of the oppressive gendered propriety and religious ideals. It seems that Carmela’s friend and sister-in-law, who have accepted more Americanized, secular relationships to their femininity and marriages, are in greater control of their lives, even if Carmela’s is more socially appropriate.

Much of the episode focuses on the crew who does make it to Naples. It is clear from the episode’s opening that each of them has a reverential relationship to the Old Country because of their relationship to *The Godfather* – the episode opens with them viewing a bootleg copy of it and discussing their favorite scenes (Tony’s is Vito’s “return” to Sicily) – but each also loads it with the romance of blood and ancestry as well. Christopher has both sexual and touristic conquests in mind, but wastes the entire trip shooting heroin and canoodling with prostitutes in the company of one of the Neapolitan soldiers. Paulie, nearly giddy with childlike excitement, is obsessed by the country’s sensual elements – the food, the views, the opportunity to speak Italian – explaining that all of his other apparently more affluent siblings made it there, but he never had. However, as moved and self-satisfied as he is, he constantly misses social cues and makes himself appear to be very foolish, in a way particular to *Roots*-crazy, culturally-oblivious Americans: he offends the waitstaff at an important business dinner by asking for “macaroni and gravy” instead of the sophisticated local fare; he hails strangers on the street as *commendatori*, or “commanders,” and is either ignored or interpellated as a spy, but he cannot understand the language and does not realize how he is presenting himself. At the end, he is thrilled to discover he came from the same town as the prostitute with whom he is enjoying himself; she is businesslike and unmoved; we as viewers are embarrassed for him.

Tony is the most clearheaded of the three of them in his envisioning of his “return” beforehand, in his approach to his business endeavors and cultural diplomacy, and in his assessment of the ways Italy has and has not met his expectations. He does a decent job of reading the social cues, speaking the language, demonstrating the proper respect in order to achieve his professional objectives; he, more than his compatriots, actively compares his expectations to what he sees, and is well-aware of the disappointments and/or contradictions that color his experience. He is disturbed and disappointed to realize that Zi Vittorio, the legendary Don, is not only infirm but senile, and to realize that a woman is now leading the organization – Vittorio’s daughter Annalisa, a shrewd businesswoman who makes good use of her exceptional toughness and beauty to get what she wants from the men she directs, including Tony. He is taken with how ancient Naples is, how stunning its natural and architectural beauty is, how intact and healthy the family seems, how Annalisa’s children are raised in a villa next to the one that her grandfather was born in. But Tony’s observation of the operations of the Neapolitan branch – so greatly romanticized by the Americans as *Godfather*-like in its authenticity, propriety, and honor – shocks him with what he perceives as its needless, irrational, calculated brutality, on one hand (the Neapolitan capo Furio beats up a kid who set off firecrackers, and instead of taking pity when his mother tries to intervene on his behalf, he smacks the mother down in the street as well), and on the other, what he perceives as the emasculation of the operation vis-à-vis Annalisa’s leadership.

The performative returns to Italy in *The Sopranos* reveal that although information about the homeland and the ancestors is available in a way that it is not for black Americans, the Italian American characters are too American to be able to fully claim it. Indeed, the series puts themes of late twentieth/early-twenty-first century American resignation, failure, and compromise front and center in its thematics: as Tony tells Dr. Melfi during the first episode, referring specifically to the Mafia but not naming it, he says “I feel like I got in here after its glory days, there’s nothing left for me” and she says “a lot of Americans, I think, feel that way.”

The show demonstrates the ways that contemporary organized crime is not the well-oiled machine based on honor, loyalty, family, *omertá*, classiness and “reason,” etc, that it once was – *if* it ever was. And the doubts about whether it was and the characters’ sense of inheriting an impotent, fallen operation whose time has passed speaks metaphorically to the upward mobility that is glorified in the American Dream – and to the compromises and losses associated with achieving these things, and the sense that the grass may not always be greener when the goals are attained. For Tony, at least, the vision of an idealized, mythical-original Neapolitan crime organization has been tarnished a little when he visits the ancient city, which presumably contains as close to the original as one can find, and sees the Neapolitan Mafia’s shortcomings. Even when these characters can physically arrive in Italy, can speak the language, know who their family is and how to find it, the repetitious deferral of access to a fully realized experience of the homeland, that is, of a satisfying return, has to do with showing what acculturation has done, and in particular, the effects of American middle class structures and values.

The disturbing discovery this engenders is not dissimilar from that made by other Americans, notably – in a seeming paradox – African Americans: that is, that the Americanness of the visitor is highlighted, as are the ways in which they and their lives are irreducibly different from those of their ancestors or their contemporaries in their ancestral homelands, and have been formed in the crucible of the very America that they critique and wish to transcend. In some cases and contexts this is reason for gratitude, but often it is the source of a nagging sense of loss. The broken promises of the American Dream compel the invention of romanticized homelands, but the reality of these places that cannot measure up to their myth engenders some recognition of the impossibility of *both* myths. The ideals are formed in the image of the entity that those enacting the performative returns reject – that is, the homeland is always a rejection of and foil for the (fraught) home – and the slippages and gaps between the ideal and the reality, which operates according to the quotidian logic of its own reality, demonstrate that as beautiful as the ideal is, it can only ever be envisioned in the terms of, and reflect the failures of, the entity to which it is being compared. Thus the shortcomings of the romanticized ancestral homeland only serve to further underscore the impossibility of access to the affective American Dream.

In *Vita*, there are multiple directions from which searches for promised home/lands are moving – and they are all searches of various sorts, and the hope in and disappointment of the American Dream is of central importance to the ways that these places are imagined. Italy functions in the novel as the homeland in several ways, an important image for both the immigrants and their progeny. There are the immigrants coming from Italy to New York in the early twentieth century, many of whom settle there, and many of whom migrate within the U.S. There are those who try to emigrate – even more than once, in some cases – but are rejected, who must thus return to their villages in Italy. Then there are those who always intended to return – who come intending to stay to earn some money and go back home, and who do so – and those who may yet return to the states and go back again to Italy – living transnational lives between two worlds, much like many immigrants, especially from the Americas, to the U.S. today. There are also those like Diamante who return to Italy because they reject and are rejected by America. For subsequent generations, Italy represents the possibility of grounding their parent’s stories in fact, of connecting the dots, of making whole the fragments of their or their family’s past – but by the time they get around to seeking it out, it’s inaccessible: too much has changed, and too much has been destroyed – on both sides. There is Captain Dy, Vita’s son, who returns to Tufo during the Second World War to find his roots, and fails to do so: Tufo has been destroyed, and although he finds Diamante (and even Diamante’s daughter on the street, whom he thinks is beautiful and imagines momentarily



about chasing after her and wooing her), he does not identify himself to Dy because he does not think that Dy wants to find him as he is, having been expecting a hero. And although she was an immigrant herself, in later years Vita has become too Americanized to find what she seeks upon her return to Italy: she goes back Italy to find Diamante, and although she finds him, she is also unsuccessful in fully accessing him: they are not everything the other remembered, and are too broken and/or proud and/or fearful to come together. Finally, there is Melania's search: one that occurs for and among documents, for and among stories. For her, the search for America *per se* is not really the point; she is trying to reconstitute her own history, her own family, to finish the story of specific flesh and blood Italians, whose story is incomplete without the story of the Italians who went to America. But this is the case precisely because of the ways that America failed to be accessible to some of the Italians, and the ways that Italy became then inaccessible to those who stayed. The Italians on each side of the ocean are inextricably linked with one another – on individual family levels and in terms of a larger historical scale through the transnational linkages: the forces that compelled migration are related to the forces that compelled return.

The searches go on from many different directions, and all of them contain both hope/possibility and unknowability, frustration, and defeat. And these searches are never entirely final; characters keep going back and forth, searching for one another; America and Italy both function as open signifiers and so does family history. There is a certain amount of projection that is possible, but these places and their stark realities also imprint themselves upon the migrants as well. Vita is shaped by America in curious ways. She appears to be an embodiment of its hope, casting off the gendered limitations of rural, Southern Italian villages, even as she experiences copious amounts of disappointment, violence (that she both performs and suffers), and develops a matter-of-fact sense of realism. Yet she maintains a rich inner life. She is always imagining alternative realities, embroidering this one, making up stories, and dreaming, yet she is also quite grounded, works tirelessly, and is deeply realistic in her wisdom as a result of having gone through many privations and brutalities, disappointments and betrayals. She keeps buying land, in New Jersey and in Tufo, that she hopes will be where she finally is able to make the fragmented and disappointing pieces of her life come together. But the land indicates something hopeful or at least pragmatic about her approach: it is what it is, the only thing is the present; you survive because what else are you going to do, you figure out how to be resourceful and not let the world kill you. And her power is magic – making objects move, and willing impossible things to happen and making them possible. But this power is limited: it controls discrete things on a small scale, rather than intervening in larger structural realities or historical conditions. Diamante, on the other hand, is totally broken by America; he becomes a curmudgeonly, compromised, fearful shell of his former self. Yet apparently not wholly, because he retreats into the realm of invention as a means of surviving. He and his sons aspire to “moderate unsuccess” – he won't identify himself to Dy when Dy comes looking for him, because Dy wants to find a hero rather than an usher. And when Vita comes back for him once they are both widows/ed, he refuses to go with her, and after she leaves, he dies. Those who are rejected by and in turn reject the terms of America – its dream, its costs, its shininess and unethical promise and brutality – are nonetheless shaped by them, and in a way that extracts and saps from them their innocence, their ambition, their hope. But his power is storytelling, and he invents Federico and quite likely Vita herself.

America signifies newness, loss, erasure. In each direction, they're looking for lost souls, for people who didn't belong in either place: what they left behind was too hard, and what they found in America was too hard – it wound up exhausting them, sapping them, propelling flights of invention, and they couldn't quite succeed in either place. But there's also

a certain magic to the appearance and disappearance of evidence: just as Melania goes on a wild goose chase for the documentary evidence of her characters/ancestors, we are left with a certain ambiguity about what is history and what is fiction, what is reality as it was and what was reality as her characters wished it was. Americans search for Italy because of their relationship to Italians-who-became-Americans who can't quite find it, or can find *it* on its own terms, which aren't the terms they seek. Meanwhile Italians searching for Italians-who-became-Americans also can't quite find them. It's the back-and-forth, under duress, in time of need, the transformation, the crucible of immigration and the surrogation of the New World – the transformation and transition from the Old World to the New World, and from one racially interstitial state to another – that engenders this loss: the immigrants are neither fully of one nor fully of the other. Loss indicates something that was there, while absence suggests that there never was anything there. Invention, however, emerges from either or both, technically on its own terms but can also emerge in specific ways (and often does) in response to one or both of those conditions. If the novel indicates something about the romance between America and Italy, there is a way in which both Diamante and Vita embody the mythology of each of those places, but ultimately, I think, Diamante is closest to Italy and Vita is closest to America. But she is a phantasm, a beautiful, sustaining, and devastating invention. From this novel we learn several things: that “the story of a family without a history is its legend” (413). That stories are the only things that ` are true (7). That genealogy consists of accidents, impossibilities, surprises, erasures, and inventions. No one becomes America; yet everyone becomes it. No one can find it, but it finds, haunts, and imprints itself on everyone. No one can fully lose her ties to home, and everyone loses them. No one labors under any illusions. Everyone invents illusions in order to sustain themselves.

The shimmering vision of the Promised Land, coupled with horrible conditions at home, compelled the initial journey for the Italian immigrants that are fictionalized in these works. The American Dream is held up as a vision over generations, but it doesn't deliver in the ways expected, so alternatives to it are conjured up in its stead – the Mafia as an alternative safety net and as an imagined, mythic ethnic inheritance or destiny governed by a tragic and idealized “Family” and ethnic code; the figures of Gary Cooper and of Vita; and a vision of a romantic ancestral homeland that serves as a foil for the unsatisfactory home – and over generations the yearning as well as the imagination that motivate and are embedded in these inventions often only increase. Meanwhile, these immigrants and their descendents unrelentingly strive for whiteness and American-ness, even as they regard these things ambivalently. All of these inventions, yearnings, and ambitions stem from a deep and multifaceted sense of loss and disappointment. But these losses are not the same losses suffered from *dispossession* or the sort of ontological or deeply structural displacement that I describe in part one of the dissertation (i.e. by the Middle Passage, and/or through urban manifestations of antiblackness); rather they are losses incurred *by way of possession*, by whiteness as it is conceived as a cultural lack, and by structural access to the American Dream revealing the cracks in the myth of it and the impossibility of affective access to it, even for those who seem best positioned to be able to access it. The homeland to which performative returns are made is constructed from and haunted by this material, the vision of it conjured up, rising shimmering.

### losses and inventions

As Italian immigrants and their progeny make the choice not only to ascend to positions of economic access and power – whether above or under the radar – but to consolidate the power vested in these positions by participating in the dispossession and exclusion of others

(and Others), they enact, or perform, a possessive investment in whiteness. Meanwhile, the interstitiality of ethnic whiteness is performed through tropes of *italianità*. It may be the manifestation of cultural habits and traditions that have made their way into the present, the representation of which may either inspire feelings of belonging and empathy on the part of those who recognize and participate in these traditions, or may appear to unsympathetic onlookers to be proof of what is unassimilable and dangerous, enabling the re-emergence of specters of nativism and racial logic. Even as this invokes the Manichean schema of black/white or abject/American that continues to dominate racial thinking in the U.S. in spite of a variety of other racialized subject positions, it also complicates the binary by asserting the presence of the in-between space that many immigrants to this country occupy. But the enactment of ethnic performativity can also be mobilized intentionally on the part of Italian Americans in order to conjure up difference and stake a claim on what they perceive to be the moveable property or the possessive benefits of otherness, which in fact, doubling back, demonstrates the possessive investment in whiteness. The mythical homeland that is inevitably conjured up in these performances provides resources for all of these operations: homelands more specifically shore up ties to familial or cultural – or in the Mafia cinema, “professional” – genealogy. They provide affirmation of and/or instruction for ethnic performativity. And the romantic mythology of the homeland is a narrative conceit fueled by the desires ignited at once by 1) multiculturalism’s celebration of difference, and 2) critiques of the American racial state and the ravages of capitalism.

But these crises of access and of whiteness produce a context in which losses – real or perceived – create openings that widen and make space for inventions to be conjured and ghosts to emerge. Some of these are conjurations of difference that manifest in a striking repetition of tropes, especially of the Mafia, of claims of grievance, and of a vehement ambivalence toward blackness, which registers through both an affinity for and an animus toward both Manichean and metaphorical blackness, and actual black people. In both *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather Trilogy* the Mafia is represented as a stand-in for legitimate business, one that is created in the interstices of civil society on account of the immigrants’ lack of access to it, but it is haunted by the context in which it emerges, so even as it pushes back against American values and hierarchies, it is shaped in their crucible, causing this under-the-radar network to become deeply corrupt and very American. Both works also give voice to a complex ensemble of ways in which ethnic performativity is represented: it is always a gesture of solidarity and inclusion, but there are also always exclusions or absences that attend it. In *The Sopranos* Tony’s losses of consciousness arise in response to his sense of loss as it is related to whiteness. And the American Dream is perhaps the most prevalent and persistent feat of conjure or magic of all, a mirage with enough force that everyone goes off in search of it, but there’s no evidence of its felicitousness, and it slips from our grasp when we try to hold it.

Vita is a manifestation of what gets caught in the middle between the homeland and the promised land, the shimmering vision of the American Dream and the slap of its disappointments; she is performative in the sense of what comes back around – what returns, if you will; she is the excess that does not make it into the annals of documentable knowledge, but who haunts history from all directions. The emotional complexity of the character and of those who people her world, and the force of her presence in the novel – the intensity of the yearning and disappointment from which she is conjured up – remind us that loss is loss, and disappointment in the unfulfillment of a dream born of desperation and optimism and hope is an especially bitter loss. So while the racial reality of Italian Americans are usually not accurately reflected in the grievances that are conjured into discursive recognition in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these grievances are nonetheless always haunted by grief.

Thus she is a crucial figure to linger on, and the novel is an extremely valuable theoretical model to create a framework from, in order to make a space for complexity and invisibility in a scholarly analysis that can too easily tend toward privileging the unambiguously evidentiary, and in an analysis of power whose staunchness can run the risk of simplifying ambiguity and painting over paradoxes. It is fitting, too, that I close this dissertation as I opened it, with another work of feminist historiography – one that, like *Lose Your Mother*, unflinchingly addresses the operations of power through an analysis that loses sight neither of the fact *nor* the significance of both the structural and the psychic, and that helps us to remember that invention is at once dangerous and healing, inevitable and powerful. Indeed, these feminist historiographies help us to remember that our engagements with the past and the performative returns we make to our various origins – whether in rigorous scholarly searches, in personal genealogical quests, in artistic investigations, or in popular and public enactments – are always limited by the exigencies of power that make some evidence available and some not, are always situated in a force-field where the *Zeitgeist* meets our vested interests and desires, and are always constructed out of gaps and longings, attended by impossibility, which are filled in by a combination of evidence, speculation and invention, and the performative returns of what has not gone away.

## CONCLUSION

Ratifying origins shores up legitimacy, which is to say, it shores up the felicitousness of the performative. And performativity is a deeply temporal concept – while a performance takes place as a discrete event in a bounded moment in time, performativity is the repetition and revision over a long expanse of time: it is the *longue durée*, the mechanism by which social and power structures are formed and upheld. Performative return is central to the process of creating usable histories – to various and sometimes deeply conflicting political and ideological ends: origins shore up legitimacy so that the narratives they invoke become articulated as reality. *Performative Return and the Rememory of History* establishes a comparative framework of racialized histories and groups, of defining moments in the construction of an American racial state, and the ways in which their consequences register and are negotiated in the present through representations that slip into various worldmaking activities. And the project is comparative and relational not only because the racial state produces its subjects relationally within the framework of slavery, genocide, conquest and imperialism, and immigration, but also because I want to demonstrate the across-the-board nature of the ways that the past, ancestral homelands, and narratives of arrival are invoked as a means of negotiating racialized subjects' exclusion and legitimacy. The performative returns that I examine articulate the racial state, as well as ground-up negotiations of groups' and individuals' own racialized experiences or categorizations, in terms of the relational context of the U.S. in the world. That is, the performative returns are produced within a historical consciousness and transnational imaginary that brings spatial and temporal causes to bear on one another and takes seriously the constitutive potential of memory, the uses of narratives, and the calling into being of re-constituted "elsewheres."

In this project I articulate the operations of the racial state and the structural and psychic dimensions of racialization and multiculturalism in terms of genealogy, performativity, and felicitousness and through discourses of haunting, and conjuring. This conceptualization not only invokes an interdisciplinary framework that draws on several humanities and social sciences as well as legal theory, but also takes seriously *as theory* the theorizing that the producers of my objects of analysis undertake. It also examines the polyvalent meanings of *performative/ity* from many angles, and espouses a use of the term that acknowledges the limitations and possibilities in its capacity to instantiate and to make manifest what is already there, and that also acknowledges the depth of temporality and the often-unbidden nature of "return" that is built into it. It is my hope that this project will reframe conceptions of the relationship between performativity and racial formation by way of examining the latter through the constitutive articulations of performative returns and enactments of rememory – of artistic, political, and "everyday life" engagements with the presence of the past in the present and of "elsewheres" in the "here."

Because the dissertation addresses a range of historical and contemporary political issues that play out in the realms of culture, social life, and state policy, and also addresses a range of theoretical problems and vocabularies, it suggests a variety of directions for future research. For instance, it would be productive within American studies and ethnic studies to analyze the performative returns of other racialized groups: in particular, to see what happens to people whose racialization is somewhere in a shade beyond or between the binary arrangement of black and white, and/or who have been racialized in relation to other racial (state) projects, such as settler colonialism, various manifestations of imperialism, other responses to immigration beyond Ellis Island, and so forth. It would also be fruitful to study what happens in performative returns that take place within the context of a more

active/contemporary transnational engagement, rather than merely within a transnational imaginary. Within the same fields or within cultural geography, studies could take place about the same cities, New Orleans and New York, from the perspective of other groups' genealogical practices; cultural geography studies could also attend to how other cities or geographic sites – within the U.S. or beyond – are figured within symbolic and diasporic cartographies. Additionally, although the framework of performativity, felicitousness, magic, and haunting/conjuring follows the theoretical, ethical, political, and affective lead of many scholars and artists I admire and have invoked throughout this document, nonetheless the very centrality of invisibility and unknowability within it speaks to the continued silencing and erasure of the ways of knowing, historical experiences, and grief and grievances of marginalized people. Thus the very framework begs further excavation of the terms and problems it speaks to: further research about the ways that power is structured and consolidated and flows and is wielded, obviously or obscured; into the ways that the unfinished business of the racial state is articulated, negotiated, and made visible through performances and performativity; and further work to critically render and refashion epistemologies of the invisible.

I have conceived this dissertation because I take these practices, and the desires that underlie them, very seriously. I am also critical of many of them, which is partially a requirement of academic convention and critical inquiry, and partially a requirement of an ethical stance – that is, the uptake of an imperative to point to, illuminate, and unpack abuses and mystifications of power as well as well-intentioned projects that have unintended exclusionary consequences. But I undertook this project because I took seriously and also *felt* the deep-seated desires that performative returns engender – and that engender performative returns: desires that pertain to homeland, loss, belonging, longing, and the desire for a usable past that can be deployed to make a bid for a better future; and because I find the works I have chosen to analyze in this dissertation to be compelling, complicated, challenging, gratifying to engage with, and important – even the ones against whose politics and/or representational strategies I take a hard critical line. Of course I watch *Roots* and cry; of course I applaud the vision of collectivity and the port-of-entry as a really appealing and potentially radical freedom dream.

I also want to shed light on the sources of those desires, as this is very much an epistemological project: it seeks to probe and offer explanatory frameworks for how we know what we think we know, why we believe what we do, and how the desires we have are structured and by what sources they are compelled. As I have endeavored to point out throughout the dissertation, “the invisible” that is significant is partially a matter of what has been silenced by way of being genocided or marginalized, but is also partially a matter of what has been naturalized or magically made to disappear *strategically* in order to mask and mystify the operations of power and the very practices and beliefs that contribute to these violent erasures.

So at the same time that I feel it is crucial to take this sort of hard line, particularly in matters of life and death – as the machinations of the racial state, and its constitution of slavery, conquest, genocide, xenophobia and nativism, the possessive investment in whiteness-as-property inevitably are – I also don't want to brush aside the force of desire that attends normative access, middle class striving, or the sensibility of loss, grief, and impossibility that attends even the most apparently successful narratives of access.

When I was a child, my fifth grade teacher Ms. Allaman – one of the best and most influential teachers I ever had – took the Friday afternoon before Martin Luther King, Jr. day

to enact the “blue eyes/brown eyes” exercise, made famous by Jane Elliot in 1968,<sup>236</sup> with our fifth grade class: she told us first that all of the blue-eyed children were superior, and the brown-eyed children were, according to new research, less intelligent, less capable, and would be given less freedom and responsibility and more punishment while the blue-eyed children were to be given preferential treatment. Then she switched: she told us that it was a ruse, that she wanted to make sure, before she told us the actual truth, that we knew how the other kids were going to feel before we inhabited our new roles – and she told us then that actually it was the blue-eyed children who were inferior, while the brown-eyed children were better and would be treated accordingly. The children began enacting these pronouncements in that hour or two in the ways that they interacted with one another – beginning to segregate themselves, looking askance at the others. Finally she told us the *real* truth: that the whole thing was an exercise in trying to understand how discrimination felt. Lots of children wept, in shock and relief and hurt, and when she asked us how we were feeling, I sobbed, “I can’t believe I was so gullible!” For years after that I cringed at this response, as I thought I had missed the point, and that my immediate response was a knee-jerk one that hinged on my own pride at being made a fool in public.

But while I was working on this dissertation I realized that actually, there was more insight in the ways that we children articulated the problem than it first seemed. The shock was at being taken in, and at how easy it is not only to invent horrible realities from thin air but to convince people of their truth, so that these ideas take over and get made into reality, are manifested and realized and performed – initially discretely, and ultimately across the *longue durée*, with material and psychic consequences far beyond what seems feasible. Such a realization is in keeping with sociologist Troy Duster’s explanation of “race” as a social construction with material consequences, which therefore is “real.”

One of the reasons I became attracted to these performative returns – and committed to the theoretical questions they lead to, the worlds they imagine and refer to and create, and the historical traumas to which they attend – was on account of their structure of feeling, or perhaps their aesthetic, that seems to have magical qualities. They revolve around phantoms and shadows, saints and spirits, are often married to (and/or re/invent) resistant indigenous traditions; in appearance and genre, they are often spiritual or fantastical, exceeding the realm of the possible, often employing a similar approach to literary magical realism: employing symbols and images that describe the incredible aspects of reality, that launch a critique of reality’s violence, unfairness, and strangeness. They negotiate trauma by representing factual events that shouldn’t be possible but are, that are absurd, violent, and unnatural, like the mysterious transformation of a human body into a commodity, like Europeans colonizing the world and eradicating populations that far outnumbered them. By pointing out the gap between the factual and the seemingly possible, these performances also point out the ways that reality is structured by way of the invention of a system, a logic, that takes people in, that encompasses centuries, embeds itself in structures that people believe are real and natural and thus come to have substantial performative force.

---

<sup>236</sup> Elliot, a third grade teacher in Iowa, enacted this experiment over the course of several days with her students. They became very convinced of their new roles, to the extent that students who were performing well in class when they were told they were the “better” children underperformed very significantly (for instance, answering far fewer questions correctly during timed tests), that the “good” kids ganged up on or froze out the “bad” kids. When it was over they wept with rage and relief and described the experience of becoming the “lesser” group as being like wearing a collar that prevented them from being fully capable of what they could do. Frontline has the video available for free on the PBS website.

Obviously this is not a dissertation that brims over with optimism or hope. I'm not sure that it's anywhere within my capacity to pretend to stand in my position as researcher, or even as newly minted Doctor of Philosophy, and prescribe what viable change could look like – how to subvert structures of racism that are so deeply entrenched in this country that they prefigure everything that happens within it, from the terms of its emergence in the eighteenth century, to the operations of governments and institutions, to banal and routine interactions between individuals in 2011. But I do think that there is valuable wisdom to be gained from what these studies show. If discourse has the capacity to structure reality, to be manifested and enacted through discrete performances and in the *longue durée* of performativity, then intervening in the discourse is, to me, the level at which to conceive the real revolution.

Lasting change, I think, cannot come from the tempting but ephemeral revisions that come about with discrete performances. But if we think in terms of scale, those discrete performances may indeed enact substantial change on the discrete scale of an individual life. And a revolution in our thinking, in the discourse – moments of which may be catalyzed by what one sees in the clarifying vision of a performance, and which certainly is reflected within those discrete performances – manifests in changes that register in the *longue durée* of sedimented social practices. It is the pairing of discourse and its performative manifestation in the world that constitutes and legitimates the material realities of power structures and state policies, and maintains the entrenchment of systematic structures of feeling. If there is hope, it is in the possibility for people to become reflexively cognizant of their own implicatedness in structures of domination, and to understand and become critical of how these structures function. Minds, especially of those who benefit from and perpetuate these structures, must change in order for there to exist a chance for any fundamental paradigm shift. Without that kind of change, no one will fight for a revolution, and without a strong analysis backing up the way that change is enacted, the bad old days will only be reproduced in the new regime, as Carpentier so eloquently and damningly illustrates in *The Kingdom of This World*. The exclusions and limitations of our current imperfect world will plague any future worlds and prevent them from reflecting any sort of real liberation unless we learn how to fundamentally and radically change our thinking now. Thus I think it is imperative that we learn, as Avery Gordon writes, to listen to the ghosts among us: it is imperative that we strive to understand the importance of the fact that they interpellate us and place demands on us, demonstrating the deeply relational nature of the racial state, which positions us all within it and in relation to one another in inherently uneven ways. We can learn much from performative returns if we learn how to listen to and see them, to perceive the critique of the racial state's machinations that are crystallized and made visible through them, while remaining vigilantly critical of the ways in which they sometimes deploy origins to attempt to delegitimize others. As the critical race feminist performative returns wisely articulate, there is enormous possibility within the past's unknowability; the events of the past did not play out through overdetermined teleologies, and I interpret that this logic implies that there is both hopeful and sobering potentiality in the fact that no particular future is inevitable, but depends on our actions and how we allow them to sediment. Thus we are possessed of the opportunity to listen to history and its ghosts, and to heed the analyses built into performances of it: performative returns contain visions and sometimes even blueprints for what the future can or should be, and it is from these freedom dreams, forged in the crucible of grievance and of grief, that their greatest hope for us springs.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

*75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Souvenir Journal*, The Thomas C. Giordano School, Junior High School 45, Saturday, May 20, 1989.

A, Aniolo. Personal interviews, May 31 and June 3, 2006.

A, Joseph. Personal interviews, May 31 and June 6, 2006.

*African American Lives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Host). PBS. Kunhardt Productions & Thirteen/WNET New York. 1 & 8 February, 2006.

*African American Lives 2*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Host). PBD. Kunhardt Productions & Thirteen/WNET New York. 6 & 13 February 2008.

Belmont LDC. 2010. October 30, 2010. < <http://www.belmontarthurldc.com/>>

Biaggi, Mario. Personal interview, May 29, 2006.

C, Joi. Personal interview, June 5, 2006.

C, Joseph. Personal interview, June 6, 2006.

Carpentier, Alejo (author), Harriet de Onís (trans.), and Edwidge Danticat (introduction). *The Kingdom of this World: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux (1<sup>st</sup> ed), 2006.

*CADT I-10 Multi-Use Study*, page 10, Claiborne Avenue Design Team for the Louisiana Department of Highways, in Cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, City of New Orleans, 1976. City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

D, Sal & John B. Personal interview, May 24, 2006.

D, Rocky. Personal interview, May 30, 2006.

D'Erasmus, Rocky. *Fordham Was a Town: a nostalgic look into Fordham's LITTLE ITALY during the Twenties and Thirties*. Illustrations by Charles B. Nardone. New York: Copyright by Rocco D'Erasmus, 1978.

D'Erasmus, Rocky. *Memories of Fordham*. Illustrations by Hank Cutrona. New York: Copyright by Rocco D'Erasmus, 1987.

F, Anthony, Jake L & Tom C. Personal interview, June 6, 2006.

*Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*. Dir. Dawn Logsdon. Written by Lolis Eric Elie. Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Independent Television Service, Louisiana Public Broadcasting, 2008.

G, Frank. Personal interviews, May and June 2006.

G, Stephen. Personal interview, June 8, 2006.

G, Vito. Personal interview, June 7, 2006.

G, Yesenia. Personal interview, June 7, 2006.

Giordano, Frank J. "Ode to Belmont." Unpublished poem, year unknown.

*The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, written by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, Alfran Productions, 1972. Video.

*The Godfather: Part II*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, written by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures: The Coppola Company, 1974. Video.

*The Godfather: Part III*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, written by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures: Zoetrope Studios, 1990. Video.

Haley, Alex. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. New York: Vanguard Press (30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition), 2007.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.

Jenson, Robert, project director/curator. *Devastation/Resurrection: The South Bronx*. Bronx: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1979.

L, Joseph. Personal interview, May 23, 2006.

M, Catherine. Personal interview, May 17, 2006.

M, Gordana. Personal interview, June 5, 2006.

M, Peter. Personal interview, May 25, 2006.

Mazzucco, Melania. *Vita: A Novel*. Trans. Virginia Jewiss. New York: Picador, 2006.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume Contemporary Fiction, 1987.

Msgr. John R. Personal interview, June 1, 2006.

P, Kathy. Personal interview, May 31, 2006.

P, Maria, Carol R, Karen A, Antoinette G, Nancy S, and Angela T. Personal interview, June 5, 2006.

P, Paolo. Personal interview, May 24, 2006.

R, Frances. Personal interview, May 23, 2006.

*Roots* (TV Miniseries). Written by Alex Haley and James Lee. Dir. Marvin J. Chomsky, John Erman, David Greene, and Gilbert Moses. David L. Wolper Productions, Warner Bros. Television, 1977.

S, Joseph. Personal interview, May 23, 2006.

Samtur, Stephen M. and Paula DeMarta Mastroianni. *'Little Italy of THE BRONX': Belmont & Arthur Avenue*. Scarsdale: Back In THE BRONX Publishing, 2002.

*The Sopranos* (TV Series). Created by David Chase. HBO, The Park Entertainment, 1999-2007.

T, Eugene. Personal interview, June 7, 2006.

Tenement Museum. 2010. October 30, 2010. <<http://.tenement.org>>

The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. 2010. October 30, 2010.  
<[HTTP://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis\\_island.asp](HTTP://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island.asp)>

*Treme* (TV Series). Created by Eric Overmyer and David Simon. HBO, 2010-2012.

Ultan, Lloyd. *The Beautiful Bronx, 1920-1950*. Written in collaboration with The Bronx Historical Society. New York: Harmony Books, 1979.

Volkwein, Ann. *The Arthur Avenue Cookbook: Recipes and Memories from the Real Little Italy*. Foreward by Mario Batali. New York: ReganBooks, 2004.

*Walking Distance: A Step By Step Guide Through Belmont*. Bronx: The Belmont Italian American Playhouse, Inc. (BIAP), 1996.

## **Secondary Sources**

Adams, Jessica. *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke U Press, 2005.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

Anaya, Rudolfo and Francisco A. Lomelí, eds. *Aztlán: essays on the Chicano homeland*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

- J.L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, "Lecture II," pgs 14-17. Second Edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1962, 1975. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt and Leon Wieseltier. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
- Berry, Jason, Jonathan Foose, and Tad Jones. *Up from the Cradle of Jazz: New Orleans Music Since World War II. 2009 Edition*. Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2009.
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Bonillo-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Third Edition ed., 2009.
- Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Breunlin, Rachel, Ronald W. Lewis, and Helen Regis. *The House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum by Ronald W. Lewis*. New Orleans: UNO Press/Neighborhood Story Project, 2009.
- Breunlin, Rachel and Helen A. Regis. 2006. "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans," *American Anthropologist* 108(4): 745-76.
- Brown, Michael, et al. *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Burns, Mick. *Keeping the Beat on the Street: The New Orleans Brass Band Renaissance*. Baton Rouge: The Louisiana State University Press, 2008.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519-531.
- Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Campbell, James T. *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 2007.

- Caro, Robert A. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.
- Catanese, Brandi. *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Chavez, Leo. *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Cheng, Anne. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Chiampi, James Thomas. "Resurrecting *The Godfather*." *Melus* 5.4 (1978): 18-31.
- Childs, Dennis. "'You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet': *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix." *American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 271-297.
- Cohen, Erik. "A phenomenology of tourist experiences," *Sociology*, 13.2 (1979): 179-201.
- Coleman, Simon and John Eade, eds. *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1969.
- Crutcher, Jr. Michael E. "Protecting Place in African-American Neighborhoods: Urban Public Space, Privatization, and Protest in Louis Armstrong Park and the Treme, New Orleans." Diss. Louisiana State University 2001. Microfilm.
- De Genova, Nicholas. *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- De Stefano, George. *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2007.
- di Leonardo, Micaela. *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender Among California Italian-Americans*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Dinerstein, Joel. "Second Lining Post-Katrina: Learning Community from the Prince of Wales Social Aid and Pleasure Club," *American Quarterly* 61.3 (2009): 615-637.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Duster, Troy. "Deep Roots and Tangled Branches." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52:22 (2006) B13
- Lessons from History: Why Race and Ethnicity Have Played a Major Role in Biomedical Research, 34 *J. L. Med. & Ethics* 487 (2006)

- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*. New York: Picador, 2010.
- Eng, David L., David Kazanjian, and Judith Butler. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Evans, Curtis J. *The Burden of Black Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Evans, Freddi Williams. *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2011.
- Faris, Wendy. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
- Faris, Wendy. "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism," *Janus Head* 5.2(2002): 101-119.
- Folsom, Tom. *The Mad Ones: Crazy Joe Gallo and the Revolution at the Edge of the Underworld*. New York: Weinstein Books, 2008.
- Foner, Nancy. *New Immigrants in New York*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Fortier, Anne-Marie. "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)." *Theory, Culture & Society* 16.2 (1999): 41-64.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Vintage, Reprint Edition, 1982.
- Fullwiley, Duana. "The Molecularization of Race: Institutionalizing Human Difference in Pharmacogenetics Practice." *Science as Culture* 16:1 (2007) 1-30
- Gehman, Mary and Lloyd Dennis. *The Free People of Color of New Orleans: An Introduction, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed.* Donaldsonville: Margaret Media, Inc., 2009.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.
- Germany, Kent B. *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- Gill, James. *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.
- Glaude Jr., Eddie S. *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000

- *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007
- Glazer, Peter. *Radical Nostalgia: Spanish Civil War Commemoration in America*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1991.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- Goldberg, David Theo. *The Racial State*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Gordon, Avery F., and Christopher Newfield, eds. *Mapping Multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Guglielmo, Jennifer and Salvatore Salerno. *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Guglielmo, Thomas A. *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago 1890-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005
- Halter, Marilyn. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York: Shocken Books, 2000.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. The Time of Slavery. *Southern Atlantic Monthly* 104 (2001): 757-777.
- *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.
- *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Harris, Cheryl I. Whiteness as Property 106 Harv. L. Rev. 1709-1795, 1710-1712 (1993)
- Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Hoffman, Sharona. "Racially-Tailored" Medicine Unraveled, 55 Am. U. L. Rev. 395 (2005)
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Cambridge: South End Press Collective, 1992.
- Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961 and 1989.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.
- *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Jerah. *Congo Square in New Orleans*. New Orleans: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 2010.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Kahn, Jonathan. Race-ing Patents, Patenting Race: An Emerging Political Geography of Intellectual Property in Biotechnology, 92 Iowa L. Rev. 353 (2007)
- Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Kocela, Christopher. 2005. "Unmade Men: *The Sopranos* After Whiteness," *Postmodern Culture* 15(2): 30 pp.
- LeFebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1991. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., reprint 2000.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics, Revised and Expanded Edition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Lott, Eric. "Criticism in the Vineyard: Twenty Years After 'Race,' Writing, and Difference." *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1522-1527.
- Mahler, Jonathan. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning: 1977, Baseball, Politics, and the Battle for the Soul of a City*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
- Mangione, Jerre, and Ben Morreale. *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.
- Medley, Keith Weldon. *We As Freeman: Plessy v. Ferguson*. Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2003.



- Miller, Albert G. *Elevating the Race: Theophilus G. Steward, Black Theology, and the Making of an African American Civil Society, 1865-1924*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28:1 (1989) 1-34.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982.
- *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters*. Ames: Iowa University Press, 1990
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*. Second Ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Orsi, Robert A. *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> St.: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985 and 2002.
- Ossorio, Pilar and Troy Duster. "Race and Genetics: Controversies in Biomedical, Behavioral, and Forensic Sciences." *American Psychologist* 60.1 (2005): 115-128.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Post, Robert C. et al, *Prejudicial Appearances: The Logic of American Antidiscrimination Law*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Regis, Helen A. "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line," *American Ethnologist* 28.4 (2001): 752-777.
- "Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Constested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals," *Cultural Anthropology* 14.4 (1999): 472-504.

- Regis, Helen A. and Shana Walton. "Producing the Folk at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival," *Journal of American Folklore* 121.482 (2008): 400-440.
- Repetto, Thomas. *American Mafia: A History of Its Rise to Power*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004.
- Richards, David A. J. *Italian American: The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative (Volume I)*. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White; The Strange Journey From Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- Schlosser, Eric. "The Prison-Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic Monthly* 282.6 (1998): 51-77.
- Seal, Mark. "The Godfather Wars," *Vanity Fair*: 583 (March 2009), 270-329.
- Selby, Gary S. *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America's Struggle for Civil Rights*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008.
- Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Smith, Michael P. *Mardi Gras Indians*. Forward by Alan Govenar. Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1994.
- Smith, Neil. "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale," *Social Text* No. 33 (1992): 54-81.
- Smith, Theophus H. *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In *Black, White, and In Color: Essays in American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

- Stamp, Kenneth M. *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956.
- Stepo, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study in Afro-American Narrative*. Champaign-Urbana: The Illini Press, 1991.
- Stuckey, Sterling. *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.
- Sublette, Ned. *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008.
- *The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Thomas, Lynnell. "Kissing Ass and Other Performative Acts of Resistance: Austin, Fanon, and New Orleans Tourism," *Performance Research* 12.3 (2007): 137-145.
- Tichenor, Daniel J. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Hill, 1995.
- Waters, Mary C. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Wells, Spencer. *Deep Ancestry: Inside the Genographic Project*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006.
- Wilderson III, Frank B. *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. Boston: South End Press, 2008.
- *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Wise, Tim. *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. San Francisco: City Lights Open Media, 2010.
- Young, James E. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: History, Theory, Community*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to the Present*. Revised and Updated. New York: Perennial, 2001.