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ETHICS AND URBAN REALITIES:
AMERICAN FICTION SINCE 1984

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ABSTRACT
ETHICS AND URBAN REALITIES: AMERICAN FICTION SINCE 1984

When critics and reviewers praise contemporary urban films and television productions, they often do so by comparing these texts to 19th-century realist and naturalist urban novels. David Simon’s HBO series *The Wire*, for example, has been lauded for its similarities to Dickens’s multilayered and realist vision of London. Unfortunately, these commentaries usually fail to acknowledge developments in contemporary U.S. urban fiction, perhaps in no small degree because much of this fiction explores the experiences of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. *Ethics and Urban Realities* challenges general assumptions about the state of U.S. urban fiction implied in commentaries on *The Wire* and made more overt in essays such as Tom Wolfe’s “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel” in which Wolfe blames poststructuralism for the supposed death of the urban novel. These faulty assumptions suggest why, despite the renewed “ethical turn” in literary studies, literary criticism has not engaged satisfactorily with the ethical frameworks of recent U.S. urban fiction.

I argue that contemporary U.S. urban fiction is deeply invested in the ethics of urban life and that attentive readings of the fiction can promote strategies for developing more sustainable, peaceful, and healthier cities. Novels by Thomas Pynchon, Walter Mosley, David Treuer, John Edgar Wideman, Karen Tei Yamashita, Ernesto Quiñonez, Don DeLillo, William Gibson, and Octavia Butler, among others, disrupt thinking about U.S. cities in terms of “crisis” and “renaissance.” These two buzzwords pervade journalistic debates, historical writings, and popular representations of U.S. cities. Crisis discourse tends to frighten people about urban life, while the discourse of urban renaissance tends to make them complacent. Urban fiction puts needed pressure on these terms by showing how genuine crisis conditions affect lived experiences and how renaissance is conceptually and ethically limiting. My project, however, is not merely deconstructive and disruptive. It also assesses the ethical values that permeate U.S. urban fiction since 1984. These most prominently include commitments to inter-class and inter-racial contact, to what I term preemptive care, and to genuine creation in opposition to mindless consumption.


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Ethics and Urban Realities: American Fiction since 1984

Introduction

In a brilliant comedy sketch called “Being Taken to the Ghetto,” the famous African American comedian Dave Chappelle describes how one night at three o’clock in the morning his limousine driver had to take an unexpected trip. Riding along, Chappelle begins to notice what he characterizes as the “familiar symptoms” of ghetto life: liquor and gun stores, dilapidated buildings, and crack addicts, whom he claims check out the limousine like the dinosaurs from Jurassic Park. The skit narrates the reading of a city space, suggesting how effective reading is tied to personal safety, but also to ethics. All of the ghetto-life signifiers in tandem with Chappelle’s material circumstances and temporality—sitting in a limousine in an impoverished and almost certainly dangerous neighborhood at three o’clock in the morning—click together in Chappelle’s mind to produce feelings of discomfort and fear. Ethics becomes especially central when Chappelle sees a “baby” selling “weed”: hyperbole for sure, but one that, as the audience’s reaction seems to confirm, has a certain plausibility to it. Chappelle claims to be shocked by the baby’s presence, but he states that he is not going to fall for the “old baby on the corner trick.” Nonetheless, a sense of moral responsibility for the baby soon overrides Chappelle’s conditioned caution, as he asserts, “I can’t let the fear ruin my morals.”

Underneath Chappelle’s comedic dramatization of inner-city deprivation and fear—the humor cannot be adequately conveyed here (one must watch the sketch)—is serious social commentary and insight into the complicated relationship between ethics

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1 To view the sketch, go here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLSHwzFUyz8.
and urban realities. As the conclusion of the sketch in particular highlights, however, choosing morality over fear—whatever “morality” might mean and regardless of one’s subject position—can be difficult. One thinks of wealthy and usually white liberal parents choosing to send their children to private rather than crumbling public schools, or perhaps the young adult drug dealer, as portrayed, for example, in David Simon’s stunning HBO series *The Wire*, who has few options but to “play [the game] or get played.”

While fear understandably and frequently overpowers morality, the choice to “do the right thing,” as Spike Lee would put it, can be easier and more feasible than many of us would probably like to believe. When Abraham Ebdus in Jonathan Lethem’s novel *The Fortress of Solitude* calls for an ambulance for a drunkard whom passersby on a Brooklyn sidewalk could not, for over a week, confidently identify as living or dead and visits the man in the hospital, he makes a choice that is simply unimaginable for many. Within the larger context of post-World War II U.S. history, millions of people chose to leave cities for various reasons—to get away from publicly intoxicated homeless people certainly among them. Most of these reasons, moreover, exemplified the confluence of fear and ethics. For many middle- and upper-class families, fear of minorities and inner-city violence combined with the security and economic incentives of living in suburbia. These motives prevailed against an ethics of equal opportunity, mutual responsibility, and color blindness, while the older American cities rotted.

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2 Omar, a violent and intelligent character who makes his living by mainly stealing drug dealers’ stashes, speaks this line to a detective on episode 5.1. *The Wire* brilliantly shows how the pressure to play the game or get played affects all aspects of society, not just the drug trade.

3 For important sources on the history of suburban development in the United States, see Jackson and Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck.
Dominant and popular representations of U.S. cities have provided ideological support for this tenor of anti-urbanism that prizes flight, individualism, and privatization. They tend to join ethics and anti-urbanism by arguing that impoverished urban residents are the ones most responsible for their hopeless and miserable living conditions. If these residents simply lived more ethical lives that embraced the Protestant Work Ethic, they would enjoy the American Dream. The denial of responsibility for the decline of cities links ethics to urban realities, as this 1968 letter to a Philadelphia editor vividly illustrates: “It is ridiculous to suppose that those of us in the suburbs have any responsibility to help in the current Philadelphia school crisis. We did not create the problems of the inner city and we are not obligated to help in their solution” (qtd in Jackson 278). The rhetoric of former Secretary of Education and author of various books on morality William Bennett similarly promotes an ethics of flight and denial. In a 1994 speech, Bennett argued that problems of urban blight, crime, and “nihilism” reflect “America’s spiritual despair.” Bennett relates an anecdote of riding in a cab with an African driver who bemoans the violence and incivility of inner-city Washington D.C. Bennett’s solution for the cabby’s dilemma is telling, if lacking in practicality: “move outside of Washington; things should improve.” Of course, “things” here does not refer to structural conditions, such as schools, housing, or job opportunities, affecting Washington D.C.’s most impoverished residents; rather, “things” refers to the cabby’s

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4 This includes a range of sources including popular journalistic accounts such as Charles Murray’s Losing Ground, popular Hollywood hits such as Seven, and TV news reports about urban crime and drugs. For a detailed discussion of significant sources of anti-urbanism since the 1980s, see Macek.

5 Bennett’s books assert a range of neo-conservative positions. For similar examples that justify an ethics of flight, see Macek’s “Catastrophe is Now: The Discourse on the Underclass” from Urban Nightmares (71-138).
personal situation if he could manage to move to the suburbs. Bennett’s comments evoke an important facet of popular memory’s perception of what U.S. cities were like in the second half of the twentieth century: sites of joblessness and unemployment, abandoned factories, violent and nonviolent crime, drug abuse, and despair.

Urban decay and crisis are not the only images informing the popular memory of American cities of the period since around 1984. Images of yuppies and of extreme wealth associated with the “Reagan Revolution” and the information age are significant, as is a new breed of mainly urban elites who David Brooks calls bobos—bourgeois bohemians. Bobos “are affluent yet opposed to materialism. They may spend their lives selling yet worry about selling out. They are by instinct antiestablishmentarian yet somehow sense they have become a new establishment” (41). Meanwhile, anti-urbanism of the sort expressed in the letter to a Philadelphia editor continues. For many conservatives, cities are bastions of both inner-city pathology and dangerous leftist thinking and attitudes. The former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin reinforced this persistent strain of anti-urban rhetoric and flight ethics when she stated during the 2008 presidential campaign that she preferred speaking in small towns rather than in cities because real Americans with real values live in the former.6

While Palin claims that important values like patriotism and community are intrinsic to small-town America and antithetical to urban culture, others, of course, find small towns to be overly repressive and oppressive. The relationship between fear and urban realities is, then, not one-directional. By this I mean that while fear of the city is deeply ingrained in the popular imagination, cities can also help to release people from

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6 On Palin’s anti-urbanism, see this article from the *Washington Post*: http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/10/17/palin_clarifies_her_pro-amer.png.http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/10/17/palin_clarifies_her_pro-amer.png
fears associated with living in smaller communities that provide a limited range of social and professional opportunities and can be unforgiving toward transgressive behavior. Major cities have become havens for many gays and lesbians seeking to escape the bigotry and narrow social norms that prevail in many small towns and suburbs. In addition, escaping one’s history and constructing a new identity can, for some, be easier in cities, which can offer what Joyce Carol Oates calls a “gift of anonymity” (18) not available elsewhere. This sense of anonymity can produce mixed results in terms of ethics. Anonymity can liberate, allowing for the unleashing and enjoying of repressed desires as well as the formation of exciting subcultures; however, it can also alienate, fostering indifference and hostility toward others.

Since the World War II era, mainstream journalistic and political texts have tended to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of urban life in terms of a “crisis” versus a “renewal” or “renaissance” binary. A series of urban riots embodying urban crisis erupted in the 1960s. Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral* represents one significant literary example depicting the causes and effects of 1960s urban rioting (Roth focuses on Newark, 1967). Riots accelerated white flight and fears. As a result, they helped drain cities of both substantial taxes and hopes (however hollow) for genuine

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7 Of course, there were exceptions, with some journalistic writing vividly documenting ethical problems facing urban dwellers and local governments. For examples, see Lukas, Anderson and Hevenor, and Davis. Nonetheless, mainstream journalism primarily represented cities in ways that appealed to suburbanites’ prejudices and fears (Macek 171-198). Most successful politicians also appealed to voters’ prejudices by embracing a platform of “getting tough on crime.” Those who tried to articulate more nuanced positions regarding urban problems were usually doomed to political failure, as the 1988 Michael Dukakis campaign illustrates. On the pervasiveness of the rhetoric of “renaissance,” which mainstream journalism, city governments, real estate and tourist agencies all used, see Teaford’s work in particular.
“renewal.” Most recently, “renaissance” has replaced “renewal” in hopeful discourse about U.S. cities. The meaning and significance of urban renaissance cannot be separated from the urban conditions of the mid-1970s when U.S. cities “seemingly touch bottom” (Beauregard 4). In the 1970s in particular, many major cities struggled with job and population losses, increased crime, stymied federal support, abandoned buildings, and pervasive neglect. New York City almost went bankrupt, arson destroyed much of the South Bronx and other urban areas, and racial tensions simmered over the issue of public school bussing. Regarding the frequent use of “urban crisis” for conveying these conditions, Robert Beauregard convincingly argues that, “by claiming an intractable crisis, commentators severed their moral ties to places in decline and thereby reneged on their social obligations . . . the practical advice . . . became extreme—abandon the city!” (151).

Beginning in the late 1970s, and continuing through the present, however, several American cities started becoming fashionable again; still, fashionableness is not necessarily contrary to abandonment. The continued decline and exodus of heavy industry from cities, booms in service, information, and technology economies, and disenchchantment with suburban life all contributed to the renewed attractiveness of cities.

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8 Urban renewal included such projects as building city parks, public housing projects, and highways, sometimes through established, vibrant, and healthy urban neighborhoods. For a review of urban renewal in the United States, see Short (19-29) and Teaford (145-67).

9 This was also a time of significant discrepancies between growing Sunbelt and declining Rustbelt cities. For a statistical study of these differences, see McDonald.

10 The first two episodes of season three of The Wire illustrate this point. Dockworkers from season two have become homeless, marking Baltimore’s death as a significant industrial hub, while the mayor publicly celebrates demolishing housing projects, constructing up-scale condominiums, and developing a service economy that does not provide living wages for much of its workforce.
Luxury condominiums, enticing retail shopping and cultural centers, and trendy restaurants served as additional important lures. Increased demand for clean, safe, and exciting city spaces in places such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco caused housing and rents to skyrocket, forcing long-term residents to seek housing elsewhere. Cheap housing in run-down areas brought artists who eventually attracted yuppies, who in turn made the cost of living too high for artists to remain. For the most part, commentators and city politicians hailed these developments as part of an urban renaissance, which signified optimism for an end to crisis that for many once suggested urban obsolescence. Baltimore “called itself Renaissance City,” Detroit “boasted of its Renaissance center,” Pittsburgh “claimed to be in the midst of its second renaissance” (Teaford 9), and Providence, under the leadership of mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. also “began to call itself the Renaissance City” (Short 58). The main problem with renaissance rhetoric, however, is its power to diminish awareness of the persistence and development of urban ills: the urban renaissance “euphoria of the 1980s and 1990s suppressed broad recognition of the cities’ fundamental problems” (Beauregard 234). As Cory Booker pointed out during his 2002 run for mayor of Newark, the symbols of urban “renaissance,” such as newly constructed skyscrapers and demolished public housing projects, do not capture the “substance” of most urban residents’ reality. Gentrification and yuppy and white-collar prosperity coincided with increased homelessness, the crack

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11 See the documentary film *Street Fight* directed by Marshall Curry.
and AIDS epidemics, dangerous and exploitive underground economies, and the U.S.’s achievement as the world’s leading incarcerator.\textsuperscript{12}

While descriptions of cities in crisis often ascribe pathologies to ethnic minorities and to counter-cultural communities, the rhetoric of urban renaissance tends to romanticize changes and overlook persistent damage in urban landscapes and communities.\textsuperscript{13} *Ethics and Urban Realities: American Fiction since 1984* challenges this crisis versus renaissance binary, asserting that the ethics of urban life is crucial—perhaps even more so now than ever before as the planet is more urban than at any other time in history—and that both the writing and analysis of urban fiction can illuminate ethical dilemmas in unexpected and productive ways. I agree with Beauregard that the reigning urban discourse of decline has worked mainly to legitimize the status quo: “by isolating decay and decline in the cities, the discourse . . . subverts a society-wide sharing of responsibility for the dire city conditions faced by those too poor and too powerless to flee. Moral obligations vanish. The plight of female-headed households in Harlem is disconnected from the affluent families in Scarsdale” (244-45). Even more relevant here,

\textsuperscript{12} Short adds that the so-called urban renaissance “has saved the downtowns of many cities from further devaluation, but most inner-city residents have seen little direct benefit” (65).

\textsuperscript{13} New Urbanism represents an important part of renaissance discourse. The foundational text is *Charter of the New Urbanism* by Congress for the New Urbanism. It provides an alternative to urban sprawl that promotes mixed housing, walkable neighborhoods, plenty of public space, and central and vibrant downtowns. Critics range politically: some worry about the movement’s collectivist tendencies, while others contend that it does not do enough to combat sprawl or promote sustainability. For an balanced ethnographic critique of the most famous example of New Urbanism in practice, Celebration, Florida, see Ross. Gentrification has also had a major impact on cities since the 1980s. It is the process of reinvesting in impoverished areas, “the revaluation of inner city space” (Hackworth 99). The “gentry” (middle- and upper-class people) and often big businesses move in at the risk of displacing long-term residents and well-established small businesses. For important studies on gentrification, see Neil Smith, Freeman, and Dávila.
the discourse of urban crisis and renaissance generally encourages privileged people to “leave moral choices aside as they ponder where and how to live and invest. The discourse allows them to live comfortably with their choices” (245). On the one hand, standard crisis arguments and representations promote one to embrace a Hobbesian and social Darwinist worldview emphasizing that urban life is inherently nasty, brutish, and short, and that society is the survival of the fittest—if you don’t make it, you have only yourself (and your biology) to blame. On the other hand, standard renaissance arguments and representations can lead one to see the trees of prosperity for the forest of desperation.

The fiction under analysis in this study challenges the legitimacy of this comfort that popular and mainstream media usually endorse. Many of the literary examples that I discuss deconstruct the crisis versus renaissance binary; challenge an ethics of flight, individualism, and privatization; and question popular imagery of cities as fundamentally nightmarish. Popular culture and media, in contrast to the fiction I analyze, has generally supported ideologies that ignore the structural forces contributing to urban crisis. Other than a few important exceptions, urban films and TV programs since the 1980s, especially the most popular ones, have tended to imagine “cities as breeding grounds for criminality, bloodshed, and moral chaos that can only be tamed by merciless superhero vigilantes” (Macek 201). Hollywood and TV programming (including the news media as well as comedies and dramas) have been all too willing to supply consumers’ high

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14 Many experts agree that the most important of these forces includes the transition from an industrial to a post-Fordist economy.
15 Notable exceptions include the TV dramas *Hill Street Blues* and *The Wire*, and most of Spike Lee’s oeuvre. Horror movies such as *CHUD*, *Wolfen*, and *Mulberry Street* also provide provocative structural critiques.
demand for reactionary representations of U.S. cities. Fiction, however, continues to provide a significant—if less influential—medium for exploring the relationship between ethics and urban realities. While literature of all kinds is certainly not innocent of appealing to readers’ prejudices and fueling anti-urban agendas, the best examples continue to diagnose social urban problems and strengths in provocative ways.

Urban fiction looks closely at day-to-day urban living and by doing so explores difficult ethical questions that mainstream journalistic and political writings often downplay and even ignore. In response to the 1985 firebombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia in particular and urban crisis in general, John Edgar Wideman’s novel *Two Cities* asks, “Why did evil prosper round here and children die?” (54). Similarly, the illiterate female narrator Precious of Sapphire’s novel *PUSH*, which concerns sexual abuse and the failures of society to support its impoverished minority urban youth, wonders, “How what happen to me could happen in modern days” (124). While these questions are certainly not unique to fiction, my study shows how the forms of fiction provide stimulating and supple ways of exploring ethical dilemmas. Variability of form enables fiction to articulate interiority as well as multiple viewpoints more precisely and convincingly than other media. Fiction can work affectively to elegize “the suffering of those who otherwise would remain out of sight, out of mind” (Lee 2) and cognitively to provide a significant “form of social knowledge” (Felski 104).

Despite the renewed “ethical turn” in literary studies, literary criticism to date has not engaged satisfactorily or even directly with the ethical frameworks and

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16 For useful examples documenting this turn, see *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* edited by Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack;
implications of recent U.S. urban fiction. Important studies demonstrate how urban fiction since World War II can be usefully situated alongside theoretical insights into temporality and spatiality, of violence, and the role race plays in producing urban space. Critics have also insightfully analyzed urban fiction’s interventions in debates over multiculturalism and postmodernism. Other points of analysis, however, are less vital. Debates over the extent of particular writers’ pro- or anti-urbanism (most usually concern the latter) seem to me to be exhausted or at least much less urgent than ethics. Similarly, questions about whether certain contemporary writers are more modernist or postmodernist, as Michael Bérubé has noted, are not particularly useful. Such classification of writers into literary schools is central to Richard Lehan’s *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, an accomplished and ambitious study on the relationship between the transformation of urban function (preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial) and the development of urban literature (romance, realist, modernist, and postmodernist).

What Lehan gains in breadth, however, he loses in depth, as he develops the argument that “the rise of the city” is “inseparable from various kinds of literary movements—in particular the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes: comic realism, romantic realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism” (3). Lehan applies this theory of urban literary production to the canon of works by writers ranging

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*Ethics, Literature, Theory: An Introductory Reader* edited by Stephen K. George; and “Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics” by Lawrence Buell.

17 On the time and space issue, see Clontz. Inner-city violence is the central issue in Giles’s work. Liam Kennedy addresses race and space relationships. James Kyung-jin Lee connects urban literature to multiculturalism, while Dubey inserts African American urban literature into debates about postmodernism.

18 See Bérubé’s essay, “Teaching Postmodern Fiction Without Being Sure That the Genre Exists.”
from Daniel Defoe to William Gibson. Despite its 1998 publication date, *The City in Literature* fails to acknowledge the impact of feminism, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies on literary scholarship. While *The City in Literature* usefully maps important formal developments within canonical urban literature, it ignores significant contributions that do not fit within the book’s categorizing principles. Casual readers are likely to conclude that after modernism, the only U.S. urban novels of value are those using the hallmark gestures of postmodern writing including parody and pastiche, metafiction, and fragmentation for the purpose of exploring the limitations of language and the instability of identity. Lehan’s construction of literary history, thereby, neglects significant contemporary works marked by the persistence of the conventions of romance, realism, naturalism, and other modes, including protest fiction and satire. Lehan’s tidy categorization can cause critics and general readers to overlook the diversity of contemporary urban literature as well as the continuing significance of that literature. Adding to this problem, when critics and reviewers praise contemporary urban films and television productions, they often do so by comparing these texts to 19th-century realist and naturalist urban novels. *The Wire*, for example, has been lauded for its similarities to Dickens’s multilayered and realist vision of London. Unfortunately, these commentaries overlook developments in contemporary American urban fiction, perhaps in no small degree because much of this fiction explores the experiences of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Focus on the interrelations of ethics and form in contemporary U.S. urban fiction has the potential to provide a more accurate (but also messier) mapping of

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19 An exception to this is Lehan’s very brief discussion of the collection edited by Susan Squier, *Women Writers and the City* (Lehan 289-90).
the literary scene as well as a concrete and welcome challenge to the perception that contemporary fiction is primarily nihilistic, narcissistic, and apolitical.

Before delineating this study’s organization and central claims, I want to clarify my use of the term “ethics.” This project follows recent work attempting to resuscitate ethics without embracing uncritically concepts that have been marked by essentialist and universalist thinking. Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, has historically been conceived as dividing into deontological, utilitarian, and Aristotelian branches. For deontologists, ethical judgments must consider an agent’s intention to fulfill his or her moral duty, while for the utilitarians, ethical values derive entirely from the consequences of our actions: we are ethical to the extent that we increase overall happiness and decrease overall misery; the Aristotelians, meanwhile, stress the fostering of particular virtues. Debates concerning moral laws, rules, guiding principles, and virtues dominated ethical thinking before the linguistic turn in continental philosophy. Deconstruction and post-structuralism, starting at the end of the 1960s, uncovered shaky metaphysical assumptions undergirding traditional humanism and ethics. Especially since the Paul De Man scandal in the late 1980s, however, literary studies has witnessed a return to ethics (that is, scholarship dealing explicitly with ethics), but one infused with faith in the irreducibility of the Other and deep suspicion of categorical ethical imperatives.

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20 For examples, see Eaglestone and Nealon.
21 For a helpful introduction to these branches, see *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings* edited Louis P. Pojman.
22 For significant examples of work representing an “ethical turn,” see Booth, Harpham, Siebers, and Andrew Gibson.
I regard ethics as endless praxis rather than the following of static prescriptions and the search for universals, as “a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others’” (Garber et al. viii). We must not jettison contemplation of essential, age-old ethical questions, however, in the face of post-structural demystifications: How ought I to live? For whom am I responsible? What is justice? This study narrows these slightly by focusing on various writers’ stances on the following questions: how ought I to live amid urban realities? What are my responsibilities to urban Others? What constitutes a just city? I grant, nonetheless, that ethics and literature are not likely to provide reassuring or certain answers to these age-old and vital questions. Resistance to easy answers is part of what makes both ethical inquiry and literature valuable. Seeing literature as deeply connected to ethics in this way supports Geoffrey Harpham’s claim that ethics is “the point at which literature intersects with theory, the point at which literature becomes conceptually interesting and theory becomes humanized,” (33) and that “ethics does not solve problems”; rather, “it structures them” in telling ways (37). Literature provides an important medium for the structuring of ethical problems, for it, as Sir Philip Sidney’s “Apology for Poesy” should remind us, is discursively elastic, flitting between the specificity of history and the generality of (moral) philosophy. Likewise, Tobin Siebers argues, “the complicated statements of literary forms . . . contribute to moral philosophy because they present it with an example with which to test its laws as well as an instance of practice and particularity to temper the generalities of ethical theory” (22).

23 Also see Tina Chen’s essay, “Towards an Ethics of Knowledge.”
*Ethics and Urban Realities: American Fiction Since 1984* analyzes the ways that contemporary American writers explore and structure ethical dilemmas related to living and working in, planning, and governing U.S. cities. In addition to the more general questions listed above, I analyze writers’ treatment of the following. What is the relationship between ethics and the diminution and increased corporate control of public urban space? What stances against urban inequalities are most ethical? How (if at all) should urban elites help the urban poor? The writers that I examine explore these and other pressing questions from the perspective of lived experience through various forms, including historical fiction, hardboiled detective writing, techniques associated with modernist and postmodernist writing, social and psychological realism, satire, metafiction, and speculative fiction. Each mode is often directly related to, but not predictive of, the ethical imperatives or frameworks of texts.

My method for analyzing writers’ explorations of the relationship between ethics and urban realities is primarily multi-disciplinary and historicist. To draw out texts’ significant ethical commitments, I rely on historical, sociological, and urban studies scholarship, as well as journalism and popular culture. This historical approach can help readers better understand how novels intervene in particular debates and problems. For example, one can develop a more enriched understanding of Ernesto Quiñonez’s work (and its ethical implications) by studying it in relation to urban studies scholarship on gentrification. Literary history provides another useful context. Walter Mosley’s debt to Raymond Chandler, for example, can help us to apprehend Mosley’s contribution to hardboiled fiction. His work adds an interesting ethical dimension to the hardboiled
tradition, undercutting some critics’ belief that detective fiction is inherently conservative.

I try to let the books suggest the most useful approaches rather than let a specific approach or theorist determine my readings of texts. My purpose for analyzing fiction is not to legitimize the arguments of ethical theorists such as Immanuel Kant or Emmanuel Levinas or urban theorists such as Edward Soja or Jane Jacobs. Instead, I try to think through what it means to study literary writers as theorists of ethics and cities. Moreover, I do not attempt to provide comprehensive readings of each text; rather, I attend closely to the parts of works that address in implicit and explicit ways the relationship between ethics and urban realities. Through this approach, I put various urban texts in conversation with each other, giving readers a strong sense of the range and stakes of contemporary U.S. urban fiction.

Chapter I, “Ghosts of Cities Past,” analyzes the ethical implications of historicizing the city in contemporary U.S. urban fiction. I argue that for most of the writers studied, “always historicize” is an ethical imperative. This imperative, though, does not require resorting to a naïve version of realism, and historicization serves different ethical purposes for different writers. Mosley’s historicizing impulse, for example, uncovers the roots of contemporary urban crisis (such as the rage that fueled the L.A. riots). For Mosley and the other writers examined in this chapter, historicization is directly tied to imagining and developing a sense of renewed community without romanticizing the past. The chapter focuses on Thomas Pynchon’s Inherent Vice, Mosley’s Devil in a Blue Dress and Little Scarlet, and David Treuer’s The Hiawatha. These writers search for usable urban pasts.
The three middle chapters study texts that take place around the time of their composition. Chapter II, “Blight, Crisis, and Urban Justice,” examines how a range of contemporary texts can be situated alongside the rhetoric and reality of urban blight and crisis. Texts analyzed include John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*, Richard Price’s *Clockers*, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*. The issues of most significance include inner-city violence, poverty, rage and despair, the “underclass,” drug trafficking, AIDS, homelessness, and immigration. I also discuss the relevance of a “biopolitics of disposability,” Henry Giroux’s coinage regarding the U.S. government’s response following Katrina, to this fiction’s ethics. The chapter demonstrates the range of devices that urban novelists continue to use for the sake of ethical engagement. Through techniques such as juxtaposing private and public selves, social and psychological realism, postmodern appropriation, and magical realism, the texts suggest important ways of reading and responding to U.S. cities’ starkest realities.

Chapter III, “The Ethical Crisis of Gentrification,” provides an intermezzo linking chapter two, which focuses on fiction dealing with the lives of the urban underserved, and chapter four, which scrutinizes the ethical implications of urban affluence. Ernesto Quiñonez’s novels *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* display important ambivalence toward changes in the urban landscape and social relations brought about by the gentrification of Spanish Harlem. For many, gentrification signals the necessary transition from urban crisis to urban renaissance, but Quiñonez’s novels expose this view as overly simplistic and ethically thorny.

Chapter IV, “Privilege, Renewal, and Urban Justice,” analyzes how texts including Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Brett
Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* offer occasions for exploring both urban elites’ moral obligations and the meaning of urban renewal and renaissance. The issues of most significance include disparities in wealth, the ethics of participating in the stock market, the relationship among race, place, waste, and fear, and what Samuel Delany terms “interclass contact.” A character’s claim in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, “If you want to live in New York, you’ve got to insulate, insulate, insulate” (56) is challenged in many of these texts, which expose what they see as the ethical failings of both the ethics of flight and ideologies claiming greed to be good.

Chapter V, “Ghosts of Cities Future,” focuses on portrayals of future cities in speculative fiction and discusses the value of contemporary urban fiction in general. Fictional future cities usually take the form of dystopias or utopias. The former point to ethical problems with the present organization of cities, while the latter envision ways of achieving a more ethical society. “Always speculate” about the short- and long-term effects of current social practices and attitudes emerges as an ethical imperative for these texts generally, including William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Octavia Butler’ *Parable of the Sower*. If, following W. E. B. Dubois, race was the central issue of the 20th century, including the century’s urban fiction, many recent urban speculative fiction writers claim sustainability as the key problem confronting the 21st century. Literature’s value, as these texts imply, derives in large part from its ability to imagine not only the past and the present, but the future as well. Urban sustainability might depend on imagination as much as it will on information.

This study is not exhaustive. Urban fiction is massive, and any attempt to analyze all available examples from 1984 to the present is neither practical nor desirable. I do not
make the arrogant claim of selecting the “best” texts, but as Rita Felski argues, evaluation remains inescapable: “we are condemned to choose, required to rank, endlessly engaged in practices of selecting, distinguishing, privileging, whether in academia or in everyday life” (20). I do depart somewhat, though, from Tom LeClair’s assertion that “the best individual [contemporary urban] novels should have the postmodern qualities of cities, should be cities of words.” I find this attitude limiting because its elevation of complex forms excludes otherwise arresting urban texts. The fiction analyzed in this study all include a major U.S. city as a central feature, influence, or character—not just as peripheral material—and deal in some stimulating way with the relationship between ethics and urban realities. One goal has been to balance breadth and depth. While this study does not provide an encyclopedic presentation of its topic, it analyzes more fiction than is usually the case in such studies. Critical books on recent U.S. urban fiction tend to analyze a handful of books closely, which has its advantages; unfortunately, such an approach can suggest a limited range of fictional production and close off trans-fictional dialogue.

The reader will also notice that I have blended “high brow” choices with “low brow” genre writing. Too often, literary criticism separates literary and generic writing. I

24 LeClair develops this argument in his stimulating review of recent New York City fiction found here: http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictionspresent/gentrified.

25 When I refer to urban or city fiction, I have in mind books that focus on showing how a significant metropolitan area puts pressure on the lives of characters. Wolfe articulates this idea in “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel.” Thus, my sense of what counts as urban is much more specific than the U.S. census, which defines urban locations as settlements “with more than 2,500 people” (Short 1).
also reject the tendency of arranging texts based on writers’ ethnicities.\textsuperscript{26} This project argues for putting diverse voices in conversation with each other. While differences are real, they are not always as stark as one might wish to believe; more important, only by studying them in relation to each other can they be properly compared and understood. I also embrace Marge Piercy’s resistance to blind conformity when it comes to making and accepting aesthetic judgments that unreflectively dismiss works for being polemical or didactic.\textsuperscript{27} Such works sometimes have the most to offer in terms of understanding the relationship between ethics and urban realities.

Unfortunately, current scholarship disregards the role of any kind of fiction in developing such an understanding. While Steve Macek provides a thorough and insightful overview of the mass media’s—including journalism, film, and advertising—portrayal of U.S. cities since 1980 in \textit{Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, and The Moral Panic Over The City} (2006), he completely ignores the role of literature, including in the conclusion, where he argues the following:

\begin{quote}
those committed to fighting urban inequalities will have to pay closer attention to cultural representations of the postindustrial city and their ideological ramifications. They will have to conscientiously challenge and critique the distorted, stigmatizing pictures of the urban underclass and the inner city produced by Hollywood, television, and the Heritage Foundation and respond effectively to middle-class paranoias . . . They will have to strive to give voice to the destitute and marginalized . . . whose views are so often missing from public
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} For these insights, I am especially indebted to Kathryn Hume’s \textit{American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960}.

\textsuperscript{27} See Piercy’s essay, “The City as Battleground: The Novelist as Combatant.”
political debates and the mainstream media. And they will have to devise and popularize nonstigmatizing vocabularies in which to talk about poverty, urban disorder, and crime; vocabularies that underscore the relationship between conditions in the inner-city and the destructive, antisocial logic of the capitalist system. (304-5)

*Ethics and Urban Realities: American Fiction since 1984* shows how several works of urban fiction have already engaged with the tasks that Macek urges. With the claims of this introduction in mind, I argue that attentive reading of urban fiction can promote strategies for developing more sustainable, enriching, peaceful, healthier, and just cities. The most compelling urban fiction of the last twenty-five years portrays contemporary urban society as daunting and extremely complex; while one might expect this fiction to paralyze readers, it actually attempts to do the opposite: move people to positive action despite a growing sense of one’s smallness and limited agency in a globalized, hierarchical, and sprawling world. While discourses of postmodernism have usefully deconstructed values such as truth with a capital “T” and meaning with a capital “M,” *Ethics and Urban Realities: American Fiction since 1984* highlights the critical values pertaining to urban life that contemporary U.S. urban fiction *constructs* and celebrates through visions summoning ghosts of cities past, present, and future.
Chapter 1

Ghosts of Cities Past

The controversial and politically active rock band Rage Against the Machine alludes to George Orwell’s *1984* in its 1998 album *The Battle of Los Angeles* when Zack de la Rocha sings, “Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past.” These lyrics from an album deeply committed to uncovering urban injustice are useful for thinking about the purposes of much recent U.S. urban historical fiction. Novelists have revised dominant historical and popular narratives of U.S. cities, recognizing a connection between memory and the workings of power in the present. If one remembers the L.A. riots simply as an instance of, as George Bush, Sr. put it, “random terror and lawlessness” or “the brutality of the mob, pure and simple,”28 future instances of urban unrest are likely to be interpreted similarly. Many urban historical fictional texts perform powerful revisions of events such as urban renewal and removal, urban riots, and multiethnic contributions to cities’ landscapes. Many suggest agreement with Jameson’s dictum “Always historicize!”29 and his sense that a debilitating crisis with historicity, “a perception of the present as history,” characterizes today (*Postmodernism* 284); however, a range of U.S. urban fiction since 1984 seriously undermines claims that the most one can expect from contemporary fictional historical texts is nostalgia and cultural embodiments of the logic of late capitalism.30

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28 George Bush made these statements in his address to the nation about the riots.
29 See Jameson’s *Political Unconscious* (9).
30 This is the general gist of Jameson’s claim in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Moreover, Jameson sees depthlessness and pastiche as defining characteristics of postmodern cultural products.
Certainly, yearning for an urban past that is lamentably gone features significantly in a range of recent city novels including Diane McKinney-Whetstone’s sentimental novel *Tumbling*. The novel describes an urban renewal scheme that breaks up an African American community in Philadelphia and in my view advances what Michelle R. Boyd describes as the reimagining of “contemporary black identity through nostalgia for the Jim Crow past” (xiii). Nonetheless, I argue that many recent texts use the past not as a balm for escaping an unsatisfactory present or for boosting tourism. Rather, they aim to give readers a better understanding of relations among past, present, and future. This deeper historical understanding—cognitive, affective, and imaginative—of the ways that history can both paralyze and inspire activity becomes a foundation for ethics.  

In this sense, Freidrich Nietzsche’s “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life” provides an important framework for analyzing the commitments of contemporary historical urban fiction: Nietzsche contends that “the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people and a culture” (10). What is more, “life requires the service of history,” but it must also rely on the power of imagination and willpower: “to use the past for life and to refashion what has happened into history” is essential to human and social development, “but with an excess of history man ceases . . . and without that cloak of the unhistorical he would never have begun and dared to begin” (11). The novels that I analyze in this chapter are not especially interested in romanticizing the past (despite the marketability of such a move) or reconstructing seemingly objective historical narratives. Instead, they seek ways to mix what Nietzsche calls the “historical” with the “unhistorical” for the purpose of increasing ethical activity.

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31 For studies on the role of history in contemporary fiction, especially see Cowart and Elias.
Several important urban books since around 1984 historicize U.S. cities. Edward Jones’s short story collections *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar’s Children* explore the dynamics and history of African Americans living in the nation’s capital, disrupting two dominant narratives: the U.S. postal-stamp version of Washington D.C. as locus for democracy and amazing monuments and the crisis version of inner-city D.C. as a long-time and hopeless pathological war zone. The collections focus primarily on various characters rather than on plot or ideas. Getting to know people as individuals rather than as objects or symbols is fundamental to each collection’s ethics. Attention to the changes within a specific urban place is also important in Stuart Dybek’s short story collections *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* and *The Coast of Chicago*. “Blight” from the latter examines the politics behind the urban renewal of a Polish and Mexican Chicago neighborhood. The story opens, “During those years between Korea and Vietnam when rock and roll was being perfected, our neighborhood was proclaimed an Official Blight Area” (43). The story questions Mayor Dailey’s rhetoric, posted on signs throughout the neighborhood, depicting urban renewal initiatives as providing improvements “FOR A GREATER CHICAGO” (44). Jonathan Lethem’s sprawling *Fortress of Solitude* also springs from a very specific neighborhood focus. It narrates Dylan Ebdus’s childhood on Brooklyn’s pre-gentrification Dean Street. Dylan is this book’s invisible (white) man growing up in a majority African American and Puerto Rican block. He returns to the neighborhood as an adult and interprets gentrification in terms of colonization and a bombing, describing the minority working-class residents that remain as “refugees in their own land” (424). The novel further links urban renaissance to the blossoming of a

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32 For relevant criticism, see Kennedy and Beuka on Jones.
carceral society; when the protagonist returns to his old neighborhood, he learns that most of his local childhood buddies are either in prison or working as security guards.\textsuperscript{33}

Historical urban fiction of New York City is produced through widely differing approaches in Caleb Carr’s bestselling \textit{The Alienist}, E. L. Doctorow’s \textit{Billy Bathgate}, and Toni Morrison’s \textit{Jazz}. \textit{The Alienist} stands at over five hundred pages, exploring serial killing, criminology, class disparity, and sexuality at the end of the 19th century. \textit{Billy Bathgate} is a sort of coming of age story about a poor kid from the Bronx who becomes involved in one of the city’s most powerful gangs. \textit{Jazz} is a tautly written, psychologically compelling portrait of cultural transition during the Harlem Renaissance. While Morrison’s novel focuses on violence within an African American community in Harlem, William Kennedy’s \textit{Ironweed} examines Irish American identity and politics in Albany during the Great Depression; the novel can be seen as using the 1930s to comment on the U.S.’s homeless problem in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{34}

While one could make a case for analyzing any of these texts in terms of ethics and urban realities, this chapter focuses on Thomas Pynchon’s \textit{Inherent Vice}, Walter Mosley’s \textit{Little Scarlet} and \textit{Devil in a Blue Dress}, and David Treuer’s \textit{The Hiawatha} because of the ways that each text foregrounds ethics and the realities of city life to engage critically with the past. Each novel revises dominant narratives of both urban and literary history, suggesting how history can help readers develop close readings of contemporary urban realities. The first three novels evoke ghosts of Los Angeles,

\textsuperscript{33} For an insightful analysis that addresses some of these issues in the novel, see Godbey. \textsuperscript{34} On the allegorical dimensions of \textit{Ironweed}, see Giamo. For an analysis of late 20th-century New York City historical fiction, including \textit{The Alienist} and Kevin Baker’s \textit{Dreamland}, see Tamar Katz.
presumably “a city with no past because it never misses a chance to tear it[self] down,” while *The Hiawatha*, set in Minneapolis, emphasizes the role that American Indians have played in building America’s 20th-century cities; nonetheless, *The Hiawatha* is less polemical than the other novels. It advocates through both form and content an ethics of singularity and constant becoming.

**Zombies, Vampires, and L.A. Real Estate: *Inherent Vice*’s Ethical Investments**

While the relationship between cities and ethics has been relatively important to Pynchon’s entire body of work, it takes center stage in *Inherent Vice*, a novel set mainly in metropolitan Los Angeles in the spring of 1970: “Nixon’s in the White House, Reagan is governor of California, and Charles Manson and his groupies are about to go on trial for mass murder. Whichever way you look at it, the 1960s are over.” Hardboiled detective fiction conventions combine with Pynchonian playfulness and paranoia to historicize the death of the hippy era (and all its dreams of a more peaceful and loving world) alongside the triumph of a vicious, right-wing, corporate takeover that, according to the novel, dominates the present era. The novel explores thorny issues such as urban growth and removal, especially the ethics of real estate development and conquest. While most commentators have focused on the novel’s nostalgic bent and lament along with its predictable politics, I argue that Pynchon’s historicizing impulse goes beyond a simple nostalgia of irrevocable and heartbreaking loss; rather, it emphasizes how we ought to find ways for the past to haunt the present if there is to be any hope for the future.

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35 See Kimble’s documentary “Bunker Hill: A Tale of Urban Renewal,” which has been compiled with the longer documentary, *The Exiles*.
36 See Lehan and Clontz.
37 See Thomas Jones’s review of the novel.
38 For examples, see Menand, Anderson, and Rosenbaum.
The novel’s ethical-political concerns recall an outstanding example of Los Angeles film neo-noir: Roman Polanski’s film *Chinatown* (1974). Like *Chinatown*, *Inherent Vice* depicts the loss of an American Eden. Los Angeles has historically signified a paradise of “celestial sunshine, curative oranges, and fast fortune” (Babener 273). *Chinatown* and *Inherent Vice* add to a substantial film and literary tradition, especially evident in film noir and hardboiled detective writing, of debunking Los Angeles’s most powerful myths. Set in the 1930s, *Chinatown* shows how tangled and powerful forces in the early 20th century brought about Los Angeles’s (and the nation’s) dark present (the 1970s), while *Inherent Vice* depicts how a similar set of forces triumphed at the beginning of the 1970s, contributing to the society (and cities) we have today. A central conflict in both texts revolves around the public’s right to water (*Chinatown*) and land (*Inherent Vice*). *Chinatown* pits former business partners, the robber baron and city father Noah Cross against civic engineer Hollis Mulwray. Cross believes in private control of Los Angeles’s water system, but Mulwray supports the public’s right to water. The aptly named Cross is gradually revealed as duplicitous, violent, and greedy. He manipulates the water system to produce drought-like conditions within and without Los Angeles in order to lead voters to support the building of a dam that will primarily flood his coffers. Moreover, his incestuous relations with his daughter (whom Mulwray marries) connote “a pathological fusion of capitalism and lust” (Babener 277). Rape of land and daughter are juxtaposed, crossed. Nefarious groups that are expected by law to maintain a certain level of separation, including city politicians, the LAPD, and business tycoons, intermingle in ways that weaken the public’s power to shape Los Angeles’s present and future.
A similar set of relations and problems (minus the incest theme) drive *Inherent Vice*. Readers are led to see real estate magnate Mickey Wolfmann as the novel’s Noah Cross figure. Wolfmann’s first name evokes the Disney mouse that resides southeast of Los Angeles, suggesting that both the mouse and the real estate developer represent wolves in mice’s clothing. At the beginning of the novel, the private investigator and protagonist, a pot-smoking, sandal-wearing, surf-music aficionado, Larry (Doc) Sportello learns that Wolfmann has been kidnapped. Doc’s Aunt Reet, a real estate broker, describes Wolfmann as the “biggest of the big, construction, savings and loans” businessmen with “untaxed billions stashed under an Alp someplace.” She claims that he is “technically Jewish but wants to be a Nazi” and “becomes exercised often to the point of violence at those who forget to spell his name with two n’s.” He is associated with developers who “make Godzilla look like a conservationist” (7). Throughout much of the novel, Wolfmann contrasts with the hippy culture in which Doc participates and which Pynchon arguably romanticizes. The novel elegizes the fall of the Los Angeles area as a center (though not as important as San Francisco) of hippy values, including the sharing of drugs, sex, food, and shelter, as well as an aversion to the Protestant Work Ethic and Republicans. Corporate values—a mixture of greed, private ownership—have prevailed in their place. The novel wonders about this loss in terms of the present: “Was it possible, that at every gathering—concert, peace rally, love-in, be-in, and freak-in, here, up north, back East, wherever—. . . dark crews had been busy all along, reclaiming the music, the resistance to power, the sexual desire . . . for the ancient forces of greed and fear?” (130). The Los Angeles of the book’s setting is portrayed as “almost” being “allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers . . . and taken instead and
held hostage to the future we must live in now forever” (341). Who and what are the “evildoers,” and if the future is as bleak as these passages suggest, what would be the point of trying to live ethically?

Of course, the title *Inherent Vice* immediately announces ethics as a concern. In Pynchon’s novels, the most pernicious vices have typically included, in varying degrees, bureaucracy, corporatization, technology, war, right-wing politics, capitalism, and The System (all of which are interconnected). Indeed, these are all presented negatively in *Inherent Vice*. The title has overlapping significant meanings. Winston Churchill’s claim that “The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries” coheres with the novel’s interests, but not its attitudes. Entropy, another long-standing concern in Pynchon’s works, provides an additional probable source. The law of entropy, of the universe’s progression toward disorder, can be viewed as matter’s “inherent vice.” These two meanings—capitalism and entropy—interrelate in provocative ways that are directly tied to developing an ethics of urban life and planning. The novel challenges us to think about Churchill’s assertion as well as about what might be entropic about current city planning, city culture, and capitalism.

Pynchon uses horror genre imagery of vampires and zombies to explore these issues. As a counterpoint to Churchill’s assertion, we might recall Karl Marx’s famous statement that “Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (342). The initial vampire reference in *Inherent Vice* links Wolfmann to Robert Moses, the famous and often vilified urban

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39 Literally, “inherent vice” is an insurance industry term referring to an essential but invisible defect.
planner responsible for some of New York City’s most significant expressways and bridges. Sharon Zukin sees Robert Moses as a “twentieth-century Baron Haussmann who would destroy all reminders of New York’s uneven origins in his pursuit of sanitized, efficient new beginnings” (13). In the novel, underneath “a looming portrait of Mickey Wolfmann,” who is “shown with a distant stare, as if scanning the L.A. Basin to its farthest horizons for buildable lots,” reads the following inscription: “ONCE YOU GET THE FIRST STAKE DRIVEN, NOBODY CAN STOP YOU.—ROBERT MOSES.”

Doc, pretending to be someone connected to Wolfmann’s financial interests, sees the portrait while interviewing Wolfmann’s wife, whom he suspects to be behind the kidnapping. Regarding the inscription, Doc states, “I thought Dr. Van Helsing,” the vampire-killer in Bram Stoker’s Dracula, “said that” (58). To perceive Wolfmann and Moses as vampire killers is to connect them to conservative positions that see state interventions (as well as grass roots resistance to development schemes) such as welfare as sucking capitalism’s life force.

The novel portrays real estate developers as Los Angeles’s true vampires and as the serpents in the Californian garden. As with some of Pynchon’s other works, a shadowy conspiratorial organization produces the greatest sense of terror in the novel. The Golden Fang embodies this force in Inherent Vice. If we trust the private intelligence operation document that Doc accesses via an early version of the Internet, the Golden Fang is a boat formerly called Preserved that had engaged “on some spy mission against Fidel Castro.” Soon thereafter, “under the name of Golden Fang, she was to prove of use to anti-Communist projects in Guatemala, West Africa, Indonesia, and other places whose names were blanked out. She often took on as cargo abducted local
‘troublemakers,’ who were never seen again” (95). Thomas Jones says of the Golden Fang, “most people call it, more prosaically, capitalism. And it’s everywhere.” Indeed, the capitalist system, while adapting over time, has preserved its fundamental features while gaining a global reach of power and connections that have proven supremely capable of extinguishing outside threats. The Golden Fang, backed by the CIA, not only grows and distributes massive amounts of heroin on a worldwide scale; it also profits from the demand for rehabilitation facilities and services. The organization is a model of vertical integration, getting its customers “coming and going, twice as much revenue and no worries about new customers—as long as American life was something to be escaped from, the cartel could always be sure of a bottomless pool of new customers” (192).

The Golden Fang’s brand of vampirism does not bode well for city residents in particular, as evident in the scene in which Doc returns some heroin for a guarantee that one of his associates will not be harmed (Doc could have accepted cash instead). When Doc is about to meet the “operatives,” he notes that they “were cleverly disguised . . . as a wholesome blond California family in a ’53 Buick Estate Wagon.” They embody “a nostalgic advertisement for the sort of suburban consensus that [the Golden Fang] prayed for day and night to settle over the Southland, with all non-homeowning infidels sent off to some crowded exile far away, where they could be safely forgotten” (349). Pynchon bewails the triumph of this suburban consensus that the novel suggests contributed to the electoral successes of the Reagan, Clinton, and the two Bush presidencies, all of which neglected several important urban issues. 40 Moreover, one cannot help but assume that

40 On Ronald Reagan’s presidency, which boasted of America as still a “city upon a hill” despite growing inequalities, see Collins. On George Bush, who worried more about the destruction of property than police brutality and racism during the L.A. riots, see Hunt.
deep awareness of a post-9/11 context suffuses the novel: the particular “infidels” and the coerced “consensus” have changed but the game and the real “evildoers” remain essentially the same.

Evildoing in *Inherent Vice* is most importantly connected to acquiring and developing real estate. The current system of land ownership requires real-life “zombies,” *Inherent Vice* contends, in order for the crimes of real estate deals to be forgotten and the machinations of the power structure to go unnoticed and unquestioned. The novel’s ethics, thus, calls for a readership willing to be haunted by the “long, sad history of L.A. land use” (17) and to be dezombified. The lyrics of an apparently silly, fictitious surfer song sung by one of the characters supports this reading of the way vampires and zombies, the latter known for dining on brains, interrelate in the novel: “Vampire gang’s all / Flashin their fangs, it can / Do funny thangs, to your brain—and so / What if it feels, / A little head over heels, / No big deal, you’re not real- / -ly insane—” (242). The isolation of “real” at the end of the verse suggests at least two possible meanings. “You’re not real” speaks to the fluidity of identity and to the fact that one is not really or essentially a zombie—one has to become or has to perform as a zombie. The more compelling but less obvious meaning, however, pertains to real estate. Pynchon seems to be evoking the idea—as will become clearer shortly—that as the word is not the thing and the map is not the territory, there is also nothing “real” or, more precisely, “natural” about the way real estate operates.

On Clinton’s questionable record concerning crime and welfare, see Macek. On George W. Bush’s support of a “biopolitics of disposability”—with the Katrina disaster serving as supreme example—see Giroux.
An amusing section of dialogue provides additional evidence that highlights Pynchon’s investment in playing seriously with these ideas. Doc has just learned that his cousin’s relatively new and unknown band Beer will be opening for the famous surfer group The Boards at an upcoming free concert. Doc finds this to be “groovy,” but his friend Denis feels that The Boards are “totally evil”:

“Well, maybe the label they’re signed with [is totally evil],” Scott admitted . . .

“Even Doc thinks they’re zombies”

“That’s probably true,” Doc said, “but you can’t always blame zombies for their condition, ain’t like there’s guidance counselors going around,” “Hey, kid, you ever consider career opportunities with the undead—“

“Mine told me I should go into real estate,” said Scott “like my mom.”

“Your mom’s not a zombie,” Denis pointed out.

“Yeah, but you should see some of her co-brokers . . .”

“Just so’s you examine her regularly for bites,” Doc advised, “which is how it gets transmitted.”

“Anybody understand why they call it “real” estate?” wondered Denis, who was now rolling a joint.

“Hey Doc,” Scott remembered, “I saw that Coy again, that used to play with the Boards, who was supposed to be dead only later he wasn’t?” (297).

This scene brings together a number of the novel’s ambiguities, such as confusion about who counts as zombies and as vampires as well as zombies’ responsibility for their condition. Moreover, becoming “evil” is tied to becoming a zombie, and one way of
doing so is through selling yourself to a “label” or corporation whose mission is the bottom line regardless of what happens to people or to art.

The novel describes Coy, The Boards’s saxophone player, as becoming a zombie at the same time he commits to working as a spy for counter-subversive agencies. Pynchon intertwines zombieism, counter-subversive repression, and “selling out.” Coy gets removed from a Nixon “Fascism for Freedom” (122) televised rally, which distresses Doc because the incident can lead viewers to make unfair generalizations about hippy culture as a whole. With the help of a Zen exorcist, however, Coy realizes the error of his ways and is effectively dezombified. Coy’s dezombification is also, significantly, tied to becoming “officially off of everybody’s payroll” (363). Listening to a lounge song with Doc causes Coy to reminisce about his recent experiences, suggesting a key component of the novel’s ethics: “I can sure relate to that lyric, man. Like, you make these choices? You know for sure you’re doing the right thing for everybody, then it all goes belly-up and you see it couldn’t have been more wrong” (160). This passage evinces sympathy toward the mindless ordinary zombie-like people who mean well but know not what they do; in this sense, Inherent Vice supports a combination of deontological and utilitarian ethics. Since, according to Pynchon’s worldview, soul-sucking, vampiristic bureaucracies and corporations rule the world, contamination is very likely; therefore, intentions should be a necessary part of evaluating ethical behavior. The text suggests that Coy, who lacked awareness of the horrors committed for the sake of “national security,” meant well, acting as he did to overcome his drug addiction and to support his wife and daughter. Coy’s role as parent is imperative here: the novel dramatizes parents as sometimes having to negotiate with double-edged ethical dilemmas. Resisting the system while also
supporting one’s family can be an extremely difficult balancing act. In fact, Pynchon is perhaps most poignant and convincing in scenes underscoring the values of family and childrearing: Doc cannot help but sympathize with Coy’s daughter, “Amethyst, who ought to have something more than fading Polaroids to go to when she got them little-kid blues” (162).

Despite seeing ethics as inextricably tied to intentions, the novel still holds people responsible for their choices. *Inherent Vice* portrays people as all too willing to commit nasty deeds when the money is right: “kindness without a price tag [comes] along only rarely” (39). One of the most memorable passages does not involve outraged paranoia resulting from society’s disastrous turn toward greater fascism and capitalism: rather, it entails Doc’s reflections on the effects of ordinary people’s (zombies, in effect) choices. Doc knew people

like the operatives who’d dragged away Coy Harlington the other night at that rally at the Century Plaza . . . he’d seen enough of them in the course of business. They went out to collect cash debts, they broke rib cages, they got people fired, they kept an unforgiving eye on anything that might become a threat. If everything in this dream of prerevolution [the 1960s] was in fact doomed to end and the faithless money-driven world to reassert its control over all the lives it felt entitled to touch, fondle, and molest, it would be agents like these, dutiful and silent, out doing the shitwork, who’d make it happen. (130)

This is both hopeful and pessimistic. The system does not inevitably lead people to behave in predictable ways, nor does it usually *force* people to do its shitwork. If you are an “agent,” you have agency. To deny one’s agency is to live in bad faith, as Sartre would
put it; in other words, it is to live as a zombie. Dezombification, according to the novel, requires becoming aware of one’s own complicity as well as thinking through the implications not of “who” one is “working for” but “what” (314).

Nonconformist agency has its costs, though. While the novel expresses some optimism for one’s capacity to transform from a zombie into an interesting and ethical subject, it is rather pessimistic about the likelihood of a successful transition from vampire into something less parasitic. In this regard, the novel explores the problems of trying to change the current system of private property and real estate toward something more equitable. On this point, Wolfmann proves different from *Chinatown*’s Noah Cross. Wolfmann’s story, rather, turns out to be another version of the Amazing Grace epiphany: he once was blind but now he sees the depths of his crimes. The system, a.k.a. the Golden Fang, however, overpowers Wolfmann’s attempts to change it.

Before Wolfmann was kidnapped, he was working on plans to build a city “someplace out in the dessert.” He wanted to name it “Arrepentimiento. Spanish for ‘sorry about that.’ His idea was, anybody could go live there for free, didn’t matter who you were, show up and if there’s a unit open it’s yours, overnight, forever, et cetera et cetera . . .” (248). The new city would be Wolfmann’s “penance for having once charged money for human shelter” (249). Coinciding with Wolfmann’s kidnapping, however, the developer has a change of heart after the Golden Fang reprograms his brain. In effect, the vampire becomes a zombie, and, consequently, the system’s security is restored. The following Emily Dickinson poem encapsulates the novel’s overall vision:

> Much Madness is divinest Sense –

> To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –. (209)

The L.A. real estate industry is clearly the unethical madness lurking throughout Inherent Vice. Wolfmann’s idea of free shelter, the novel suggests, exemplifies “divinest Sense,” yet the developer is “handled with a Chain” for being “straightway dangerous” to a system that overwhelmingly benefits those with wealth and power. The novel haunts its readers with ghosts of L.A.’s actual and unrealized past, presenting a utopian vision that opposes the use of land for the creation of great wealth. In addition, the novel suggests that readers ought to be haunted by the various legal crimes involving real estate that have occurred (and continue to occur) throughout Los Angeles’s history. As the novel states, examples include “Mexican families bounced out of Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium . . . [and] American Indians swept out of Bunker Hill for the Music Center” (17). Los Angeles’s most conspicuous skyscrapers, which dot Bunker Hill, as well as its remarkable entertainment and athletic complexes, are presented as usurpers within a haunted landscape. Similarly, as Tariq, a member of the Black Panther party and

41 Mike Davis performs a related project in his work describing pre-industrial L.A.’s utopian settlements (City of Quartz 3-14). Furthermore, one can feel a similar haunting by reading the 1930 report by Frederick Law Olmstead Jr and Harlan Bartholomew. The planners advocated abundant parks and public spaces throughout the L.A. region. Until recently, few knew that such a plan even existed. See Hise and Deverell.
42 For one recent example, see the documentary film, The Garden.
43 James Ellroy’s White Jazz, another provocative recent L.A. detective novel, shares Pynchon’s disgust with the city’s handling of real estate deals.
one of Doc’s clients, states, before World War II, “a lot of South Central was still a Japanese neighborhood. Those people got sent to camps, we come on in to be the next Japs.” Pynchon explores the continuation of this cycle, as Wolfmann’s major real estate initiative before his epiphany requires bulldozing the predominately African American neighborhood where Tariq lives. Tellingly, Tariq interprets the development of Channel View Estates, as “White man’s revenge [for Watts]. Freeway up by the airport wasn’t enough” (17). The name of the development suggests TV watching and, thus, zombie-like unawareness of any relationship between real estate ethics and multiethnic history.

*Inherent Vice*’s recovery of histories hidden beneath the glamour of Los Angeles’s most popular imagery suggests that as the urban unrest at Watts provided an opportunity to exploit citizens’ fears and consequently buttress elites’ wealth and power, perhaps so has the more recent 1992 uprising. What ghostly history lies beneath L.A.’s most recent so-called downtown renaissance? By drawing readers’ attention to the relationship between ethics and ethnic history, the novel advocates the need for closer readings of the contemporary urban environment. Such readings would certainly examine the significance of Los Angeles’s (and other cities’) redesigning of public benches to prevent homeless people from sleeping on them; the city’s paucity of public restrooms; the urban design strategies that help prevent Latina/o residents in particular from neighborhoods adjacent to downtown from being able to walk downtown.44 Both riots and the counter-measures that follow them bring us closer to the novel’s view of the system’s ultimate inherent vice—a view linking capitalism and entropy: instead of trying

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44 See Davis’s “Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space” and Soja (298-322).
to remove the causes of urban rage and misery, the system constantly applies band aids to
tame the disorder created by the system itself.

Despite the novel’s pessimistic and cynical outlook regarding the present power
structure’s effects on urban residents’ lives, I disagree that “there’s something profoundly
bleak about the [novel’s] inability to take anything seriously. Since the conspiracy is
inescapable, there’s nothing to do except laugh at it. Squint the right way, and what
looked like wry indulgence morphs into nihilism” (Jones). As I have shown, however, the
novel takes a number of issues very seriously, playfully using vampire and zombie
figures to do so. The portrayal of dezombification suggests that people can do a lot more
than laugh through absurdity and helplessness, and emphasis on the values of family,
friendship, and generosity show that the novel is far from nihilistic, or that it believes in
nothing. As Doc’s rival throughout much of the novel Bigfoot Bjornson of the LAPD
claims in what I see as the novel’s main point, “What goes around may come around, but
it never ends up exactly the same place . . . Like a record on a turntable, all it takes is one
groove’s difference and the universe can be on into a whole ’nother song” (334). Inherent
Vice may not embrace a clear revolutionary project, but it affirms a few core values, by
looking backward, as necessary for a better future.

**Riots, Racism, and Ethnic History: Little Scarlet and Devil in a Blue Dress**

Like Pynchon in Inherent Vice, Walter Mosley uses hardboiled detective writing
conventions to explore relations between ethics and urban realities. Los Angeles is the
central setting, but unlike the best-known early 20th-century hardboiled Los Angeles
writers, Mosley and Pynchon insist on connecting ethics to ethnic histories. The focus on
and fictional historicization of Los Angeles is significant because Los Angeles has
historically represented the future more than any other U.S. location. If history is just one
damn thing after another, as Henry Ford presumably remarked, then dwelling on the past
must be a waste of time and surely no ethical imperative. Mosley’s and Pynchon’s
historical texts, however, expose the “one damn thing after another” thesis as
ideologically enmeshed with corporate interests that control the present. Following
Orwell’s logic, corporate forces wish to see the past as devoid of useful alternatives to the
current way of doing things. For Mosley and Pynchon, recuperating and revising the past
and connecting it to the present functions as an essential tool of liberation, or as Mosley
states, “As long as we cannot think beyond the image created for us by the media and the
selective memory of authorized history, we will live in gilded chains, our eyes blinded by
electric images, our ears plugged into earphones” (Workin’ 35).

The theme of unrealized dreams also connects Pynchon and Mosley. While the
loss of the 1960s countercultural dream of peace and love is central to Inherent Vice,
disenchantment with the dream of freedom, justice, equal opportunity, and the end of
racism composes some of Mosley’s main concerns. Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels,
which cover the late 1940s through the 1960s, insert into historical record the impact of
African American and multiethnic migrations to Los Angeles. These novels can be seen
as fictional dramatizations of Mosley’s belief in the “sanctity of others” (What Next 41)
amidst a system that clearly does not value all lives equally. While both the forces of
capitalism and democracy continue to serve as powerful mechanisms for bringing diverse
peoples to Los Angeles, Mosley urges disentangling the two from each other: “survival of
the fittest is the slogan for capitalism, while justice and fair play are the watchwords of
democracy” (What Next 125). Mosley’s fiction emphasizes the moral stakes of maintaining this distinction.

In addition to incorporating a significant historical component to hardboiled detective writing, Mosley foregrounds how the genre is especially well suited for exploring ethical dilemmas tied to city living. The solitary private investigator, a key element of the genre, encounters and thus exposes the reader to a world of urban vice, corruption, and violence. The combination of settings, characters, and conflicts highlights how urban pressures interact with ethical codes, often leading the narrator to face what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, calls “the madness of the decision” that has no clear or absolute right response (25). Furthermore, the genre allows for interrogations of the line separating criminality from legality (Lock 82). Regarding his choice of genre, Mosley states, “Mysteries, stories about crime, about detectives, are the ones that really ask the existentialist questions such as ‘How do I act in an imperfect world when I want to be perfect?’ I’m not really into clues and that sort of thing, although I do put them in my stories. I like the moral questions.” The most important mystery at work in his fiction, then, is not whodunit but that of “the liberal democratic state: how to achieve liberty and justice for each and for all” (English 4). For Mosley, the moral questions are usually tied to the legacy of North American racism, which his texts portray as an infectious disease contaminating all aspects of urban life. In what follows, I analyze how Little Scarlet, a novel in which the 1965 Watts riots serves as the central historical event, presents the ethics of rioting or urban violent protest. I interpret how the novel allegorizes both the 1992 L.A. riots and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. While Little Scarlet can be seen as an ethically engaged rewriting of the famous Watts riots, I
argue that a key aspect of *Devil in a Blue Dress* is its revisions of both the Africanist and Mexicanist presence in hardboiled fiction, and, by extension, of Los Angeles. In so doing, the novel attempts to develop a vision of a more ethical multicultural urban America.

In *Little Scarlet*, the police ask Easy to help them on a case in which a black woman, Nola Payne, a.k.a. Little Scarlet, has been murdered. They believe that Nola died at the hands of a white man who was beaten during the riots, but they fear that releasing any information about Nola’s death would only reignite black residents’ rage. As Doc’s unique position as a hippy insider and private investigator allows him to function as a useful intermediary in *Inherent Vice*, Easy’s racialized status and his awareness of both black and white worlds enable him to negotiate the demands of working for the LAPD—an organization that has hardly treated him well in the past—and riot-stricken communities. As such, he is the “moral guide to the events in the novel” (Avril 145). His status as economic outsider to the working-class Watts community—Easy is a property owner and lives in middle- and upper-class West Side L.A.—and racial insider allows him to wear class and racial masks to his advantage (Lock 82). Easy’s own history certainly matters in terms of acquiring masks as well as empathy. He grew up in the rural south, where putting on masks for whites was a matter of survival. He also fought in World War II, which acquainted him with numerous cultures and added to his education concerning the fiction of race. Indeed, “Easy’s broad sympathy connects him with Chicano, black, young, and Jewish acquaintances across his largely Watts/South Central environs” (Gray 494). Easy’s sympathy and empathy, it is safe to assume, is meant as a model for the reader. In the Easy Rawlins novels, hardboiled elements attempt to bridge the large gap that Mosley perceives between the nation’s progress in technological
achievement and its “moral intelligence” (Workin’ 69). In Little Scarlet, the key issues involving moral intelligence include the causes of urban unrest and terrorism, the role of race and gender in the dominant society’s assessment of how much a human life is worth, and the function of mainstream media in representing these issues.

Mosley has commented that “What we remember about Watts and its environs that hot summer is not nearly important as what we forget” and that “the lesson [of the riot], for black and white, was taught but not learned.” Little Scarlet develops these ideas through Mosley’s revision of the hardboiled form, where the first-person point of view serves as the main device for rewriting urban history. Both Easy’s distance from the actual rioters and his subject position as an African American affect his perception of the uprising. The lesson that was taught but not learned, according to Easy, has to do with the roots of urban rage. As Easy states in the second paragraph of the novel, the riot was “a five-day eruption of rage that had been simmering for centuries” (3). The news media capture part of the eruption, but fail to account for root causes. The novel examines these causes by putting Easy in conversation about the riots with a number of characters.

When, for example, a white principal from the school where Easy works as a custodian wonders why people would “want to burn and destroy their own community,” (82) Easy explains,

You got working men and women all fenced in together, brooding about what they see and what they can’t have. Almost every one of them works for a white man. Every child is brought up thinking that only white people make things, rule countries, have history. They all come from the South. They all come from racism.

45 See “What We Forget About Watts.”
so bad that they don’t even know what it’s like to walk around with your head held high. They get nervous when the police drive by. They get angry when their children are dragged off in chains. (82-3)

These words have a strong impact on the principal, who tells Easy that she needs some time to “think about what’s happened and . . . about what [Easy has] said” (83).

In contrast to Easy’s sensitivity to the historical forces driving the riots and to his willingness to engage in dialogue, the media and political elites advance one-sided representations: “Deputy Commissioner Jordan was a terror on the TV. He called the rioters thugs and criminals who had no respect for property and no reason to riot other than their own immoral desires to loot and destroy” (22). Similarly, “Lyndon Baines Johnson declared that the rioters in the streets of L.A. were no better than [Ku Klux] Klan riders” (192). As Easy tells his daughter, the news does not “talk about why people are mad” (44); “his point of view was never aired.” He “didn’t want the violence but [he] was tired of policemen stopping [him] just for walking down the street.” He hates the “destruction of property and life, but what good was law and order if it meant [he] was supposed to ignore the fact that our children were treated like little hoodlums and whores?” (45).

The novel is ultimately ambivalent about the significance of the riots. On the one hand, Easy reflects, “The city had gone up in flames but maybe that was like a forest fire, cleansing the underbrush, making room for new growth” (291). On the other hand, “There was no real winner. Fear on one side, defeat on the other” (267). The optimism derives from Easy’s hope that the riots could serve as a wake-up call and as a mechanism for inspiring serious dialogue (they do this for a few characters, both black and white),
while the pessimism is rooted in Easy’s awareness of the country’s (and the city’s) long and brutal racist past. *Little Scarlet* dramatizes post-riot intensifications of racial fears. The Nola Payne case demands that Easy visit white neighborhoods, where combinations of racism and pride in vigilante justice create uneasy tensions for the protagonist, who constantly feels like he is a “criminal by color” (235). The reader is perhaps reminded of the not-so-race-neutral signs in mainly white neighborhoods that warn “suspicious people” that they are not wanted and are possibly being watched. A similar set of forces and ambivalences as portrayed in *Little Scarlet* was at work following the 1992 uprising, which, like the 1965 riots, was driven by an incident of police brutality.\(^{46}\)

*Little Scarlet* was published in 2004, and its connections to the terrorist attacks of 2001 are perhaps as strong as they are to the 1992 uprising. In his nonfiction book, *What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace*, Mosley draws various analogies between the worldwide desperation that helps motivate global terrorism and U.S. urban outrage related to African American oppression. He defines a “modern terrorist” as someone whose main purpose is “to make a statement and to instill fear” (58). Accordingly, Mosley views the Watts riots as follows: “young people (and some old) poured gasoline into beer bottles, added a rag and flicker and made a statement that had lain fallow in their hearts for more years than they had been living, a statement that had been whispered by ancestors so far back that its first utterance had been the murmur of slaves” (“What We Forget About Watts”). “Statement” is key here, suggesting that close readings of the meanings of terrorism are an ethical obligation—at least for one who wishes to live in a more peaceful and just future. The 1965 riots and the attacks on the World Trade Center,

\(^{46}\) The acquittal of police officers responsible for the beating of Rodney King sparked rioting in 1992.
Mosley suggests in his fiction and nonfiction, embody explosions of the system’s inherent vice.

In *What Next*, Mosley expresses concern over his readers’ failure to see connections between historically rooted African American rage and the outrage felt by many of those targeted by the current war on terror. Mosley’s goal is not to condone acts of violence—“to understand a crime is not to forgive it”—but to appreciate their causes (59). As the white store owners in *Little Scarlet* “could not see how it is that black people could be so mad at them” (79), Mosley urges his multiethnic readership not to be blinded by simplistic explanations of contemporary terrorists (they hate freedom and the so-called American way of life) and instead to consider why much of the rest of world sees the United States as “economic invaders who attempt to control everything that many people elsewhere in the world see as sacred” (54). Accordingly, in a passage addressing his African American readers in particular, Mosley claims, “We must seriously consider the possibility that we number among the ranks of the Enemy” (52). The imperative, thus, is to highlight parallels between the logic of America’s racist past and its corporate present: “Like the riots of 1965,” Mosley claims, “Ignorance, coupled with fear, fuels America’s racist opinions of the Middle East” (67). For Mosley, the ethical implications are clear: if U.S. Americans are not more critical of urban unrest and global terrorism, they risk becoming “enmeshed in a logic of violence and murder that will put [them] on par with the slavemasters of old” (84).

As *Little Scarlet* argues that the media and dominant political and economic institutions often fail to acknowledge the causes of terrorist acts, the novel also exposes

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47 One interesting film that explores this fear’s effects on urban life is McCarthy’s *The Visitor*. 
the myth of the lines, “all men are created equal.” The novel emphasizes how race, class, and gender in U.S. society influence the value placed on an individual life, a reality that can have a particular force in urban areas. As one homeless character in the novel explains, “You know, it was better bein’ poor down south. At least there you could go back to the country and find a barn to sleep in, catch some fish, sumpin’. Here they would just as soon see you starve” (197). Easy soon discovers through the course of his investigation that Nola Payne is not the victim of a white man, but a homeless “black the ripper” (169) named Harold who has been killing black women who have had relations with white men. Harold is partly portrayed as a victim of a racist society. His murders are seen as revenge for the abandonment he felt from his light-skinned mother who devoted her life to passing as a white woman. As a result of her self-hatred and her desire to make it in the white world, she rejected Harold, acting as if her black maid was Harold’s birth mother. Internalized racial hatred for one’s self is thus depicted as a serious social problem with wide-ranging consequences.  

Easy soon discovers a pattern—Harold’s M.O.—linking Nola’s murder to at least twenty-one other black women’s deaths. The novel makes the point that if these had been white women, the LAPD probably would not have been so slow in detecting the pattern and would have been much more active in finding the killer. This situation greatly disturbs Easy, who has a frightening daydream emphasizing the dominant society’s view

48 Easy states, “I didn’t hate her for hating herself. If everybody in the world despises and hates you, sees your features as ugly and simian, makes jokes about your ways of talking, calls you stupid and beneath contempt; if you have no history, no heroes, and no future where a hero might lead, then you might begin to hate yourself, your face and features, your parents, and even your child. It could all happen and you would never even know it. And then one hot summer’s night you just erupt and go burning and shooting and nobody seems to know why” (271).
toward black women in general: “I was walking through a full meat locker, wearing only a T-shirt and cotton pants. It was freezing in there. The carcasses were black women hanging from hooks . . . Women I had known from Texas to California as lovers and co-workers, neighbors and friends. They were naked and hard . . . hung in rows that went on forever” (198). When Easy has lunch with his friend Juanda, she asks, “Why didn’t somebody stop Harold?” Easy answers, “Because nobody cares about black people bein’ killed . . . Nobody cares about you, girl. A man could cut your throat and put you in the river and if a cop see you floatin’ by he wouldn’t even drag you in because he might get his shoes wet” (219). The apathy Easy encounters with the serial murders affects his perception of morality to the point where he would accept seeing his angry, impulsive, and violent friend Mouse “in the white house” (215).

The fact that the murderer is African American and not the white man initially suspected is significant because it allows Mosley to disassociate race from character while exposing the far-reaching effects of racism. After Nola’s death, readers are first given Nola’s aunt’s perception of the murder: “She was screaming that a white man had murdered her niece. No matter how much they tried to calm her she kept shouting that a white man had raped and killed her niece” (24). Miss Landry, the aunt, is tormented by guilt for not teaching Nola about the supposed nature of white men. While the white man Peter Rhone did not kill Scarlet, the novel teaches how Landry’s own past with sexual abuse influences her perceptions. Peter Rhone, however, turns out to be a sympathetic character who loved Scarlet, and she loved him back. The novel explores the sources and exposes the flaws of static views of race. *Little Scarlet* shows the causes behind rioters
shouting with glee, “Burn, baby, burn!” and “Get whitey” (5), but it ultimately challenges the static view of race that such catchphrases endorse.

Like *Little Scarlet, Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first of the Easy Rawlins novels, rewrites aspects of urban American history with an eye toward the present and future, but it does so with greater focus on how one ought to live within a world such as Los Angeles’s impressive cultural, ethnic, and class diversity. Comparing the way that Mosley and Raymond Chandler, one of Mosley’s literary ancestors, handle these issues can contextualize *Devil in a Blue Dress* and help draw out its views on ethics. While critics have been correct in pairing these writers—both Chandler and Mosley use hardboiled conventions to describe the corruption and violence of Los Angeles and its surrounding areas—they have not sufficiently appreciated the various ways each writer expresses a radically different vision of America’s multicultural future. The critical emphasis has been on black and white racial representations within each writer’s fiction, but this limited focus has some drawbacks.

For example, Roger A. Berger’s application of Toni Morrison’s theory of an “Africanist Presence” haunting American literature to Chandler’s work overlooks the complex racial dynamics of Chandler’s Los Angeles. Berger makes the attractive claim that “just as there has always been an Africanist presence in American literature, so there has always been a black presence in [white] American hardboiled detective fiction.” Chandler, however, limits his depiction of African Americans to the opening scene of *Farewell My Lovely* (1942): “blacks have virtually no presence in Chandler’s L.A. novels” (284). Berger suggests that the significance of this “no presence” is the same as with the writers whom Morrison analyzes: Chandler’s racial absences circulate an
ideology invested in denying humanity to African Americans. I argue, however, that this invisibility is historical, demographic, and geographic as much as it is the result of Chandler’s unconscious and conscious racism. Moreover, I insist that an important difference between Mosley and Chandler’s L.A. texts is Mosley’s concern for documenting an Africanist and Mexicanist presence in Los Angeles.

Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels fill in an historical gap concerning the African American presence in Los Angeles. They almost exclusively describe post-WWII Los Angeles because historical accounts have neglected African Americans’ “great migration” to the city. As Mosley explains, “I want to map that migration through the deep South and to the West of black people. Because one of the things—and this is because we haven’t been that involved in the center of the literary world, people of color—a lot of our histories are left out of the fiction” (Moyers). Hence, the more likely reason—as opposed to the “Africanist presence” thesis—that Chandler includes hardly any African American characters also explains why Mosley describes African American communities after WWII: Chandler’s 1930s and early 1940s settings preceded the great migration of African Americans to Los Angeles, while Mosley’s post-WWII novels occur during that significant historical transformation of L.A.’s urban space and culture.49

Mosley’s work clearly draws on but also revises hardboiled conventions most famously employed by Raymond Chandler. Stephen Soitos defines “hardboiled” as a term used to describe writers who shared writing styles and a white male worldview. . . the writing was terse, direct, and violent, and the worldview reflected the sentiments

49 For more on African American migration to Los Angeles, see especially Sides and Flamming.
of a white middle-aged man, who was shrewd but not formally educated, dedicated to his task, and extremely alienated in a threatening urban atmosphere. The hardboiled detectives shared a commonality of disillusionment with the police and government. They were fatalistic, violent, chauvinistic toward women.

(20)
What most noticeably distinguishes Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* from Chandler’s work is a deep awareness of the continued presence of history as well as the use of techniques such as black vernacular to articulate a vision of community that is absent from traditional hardboiled texts. Chandler and Mosley both configure a Mexicanist presence that has been ignored by literary critics, yet has haunted and influenced Los Angeles since its inception.

To understand Chandler’s racial renderings, a review of the history of Mexican migration to Los Angeles in the first half of the 20th century is useful. While Mosley documents African Americans’ migration from primarily Louisiana and Texas to Los Angeles during and after WWII, Chandler’s fiction appears at the time of the first great Mexican migration to the Southwest. Douglas Monroy estimates that at least 1.5 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States during the first three decades of the 20th century largely because of economic opportunities in the U.S. and the devastation wrought by the Mexican Revolution (1911-1920). By 1930, Los Angeles had a Mexican population of 97,116 and an African American population of 38,894. Dramatic growth in the city during the 1920s resulted in a native-born white population of around 891,736 (21-22). While the economic boom of the 1920s created a demand for cheap, mainly Mexican, labor, the economic downturn of the 1930s promoted an atmosphere of
xenophobia that tolerated massive deportations of and violence against Mexican Americans (citizens) and Mexicans. In what historians call the Mexican Repatriation, for example, approximately 50,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported from the United States between 1931-1934 (Balderrama and Rodríguez 82). Written during the Great Depression and intense anti-Mexican sentiment, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* registers its era’s anxieties about the so-called “Mexican problem.” When, at the beginning of the novel, the hardboiled detective Philip Marlowe enters the Sternwood mansion to receive an assignment on a blackmail case, he observes a portrait of whom he believes to be “General Sternwood’s grandfather” (4). The man is “stiffly posed . . . an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican War.” When Chandler evokes this Mexicanist presence here and elsewhere, he suggests but does not develop a connection between ethics and ethnic histories.

The novel interrogates the sources of Sternwood luxury, recalling Balzac’s claim that the “secret of great wealth with no obvious source is some forgotten crime, forgotten because it was done neatly” (103). Sternwood wealth is predicated on two things: military conquest (the Mexican-American War) and exploitation of natural resources (oil).

I [Marlowe] could just barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money. Most of the field was public park now, cleaned up and donated to the city by General Sternwood. But a little of it was still producing in groups of wells pumping five or six barrels a day. The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I didn’t suppose they would want to. (21)
Chandler’s descriptions of General Sternwood’s grandfather’s portrait and the oil fields emphasize discrepancies between appearance and reality that are crucial to his novel’s overall vision of Los Angeles, including the city’s Mexicanist presence. The glorious “full regimentals” worn by the Sternwood ancestor disguise the injustice and brutality of conquest, while the “public park” on former grounds used for oil production covers up the exploitation that made Sternwood wealth possible. While Chandler criticizes the Sternwood’s distance from the labor and earth that created the family’s wealth, he does not give voice to the oppressed. Chandler leaves readers to imagine the “smell” of “the stale sump water” instead of stressing its social significance. In other words, he attacks the upper class without documenting the oppression that gives rise to the decadence that Marlowe deplores. The Mexicanist presence in *The Big Sleep* is like the “Mexican orchestra” that plays in the novel, “with nobody . . . looking at them” (135), solely to cover up Eddie Mars’s illegal casino: it is certainly there, but Chandler does not invite readers to listen seriously or sympathetically to it.

Chandler configures the Mexicanist presence in more overt ways than dimly evoking the history of U.S. conquest and capitalism, however. An important character, Joe Brody, whom Marlowe at first suspects of murdering Geiger, a man at the center of a pornography racket, is Mexican or Mexican American. In addition, Marlowe refers to another character, Lash Canino, who may or not be of Mexican origin and is possibly Italian—as the “brown man” (186-87). Chandler’s characterization of Brody emphasizes the color of his skin above all other traits: his “great deal of domed brown forehead . . . might at a careless glance have seemed a dwelling place for brains.” When Marlowe

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50 The 1946 movie version, however, portrays Brody as one of California’s Anglo golden boys.
attempts to enter Brody’s apartment, he observes Brody’s “long thin brown fingers”
holding “the end of the door” (77). As Marlowe quarrels with Brody over possessing the
naked photos of Carmen Sternwood, he continues to note Brody’s “brown face . . . as
hard as a piece of carved wood” (82), his “brown hand” (90), and his “brown poker face”
(91). Chandler’s obsessive attention to Brody’s pigmentation reinforces white readers’
preoccupations with race. While never specifically identifying Brody’s origins, Marlowe
ultimately obtains the photos by threatening to contact immigration authorities, who
could deport Brody: in response to Brody’s question, “Everything’s smooth, ain’t it?”
Marlowe replies, “Why, sure. This is a free country. You don’t have to stay out of jail if
you don’t want to. That is, if you’re a citizen. Are you a citizen?” (92) Brody’s response,
“a blend of foxiness, doubt, and frustrated anger” suggests that he is not. In the end,
Marlowe helps free Brody from being prosecuted for Geiger’s murder; nonetheless,
Chandler’s characterization of Brody conveys a Mexicanist presence that associates
Mexicans and Mexican Americans with stupidity and criminality.

While Brody turns out not to be as sinister as expected, the other “brown man” is
the most violent character in the novel. Lash Canino does Eddie Mars’s dirty work,
including killing suspected enemies through cyanide poisoning. Even though Canino’s
brownness might be more attributable to style than to race (he wears all brown clothes,
drives a brown car), Chandler, as in his portrayal of Brody, repeatedly draws attention to
color: “the brown man moved his eyes . . . lowered them again almost shyly . . . The man
in brown strolled over . . . The brown man and I were two strangers chance-met, looking
at each other across a little dead man named Harry Jones. Only the brown man didn’t
know that yet” (187-88). The Big Sleep’s rendering of Brownness and Chicano identity
reinforces fears that were encouraged by both the desperate economic conditions of the Great Depression and a long history of Anglo animosity directed toward people of color.

Walter Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels, meanwhile, take place in post-WWII Los Angeles, the time and place of significant African American migration. Violence and discrimination pushed thousands of African Americans to Los Angeles, which became the second leading manufacturing city in the nation during the war (Sides 37). As Sides explains, “the vast influx of African Americans from the South permanently transformed Los Angeles. Small and isolated enough to be virtually invisible to white Los Angeles before World War II, the city’s black population grew so fast that even the most determined could not ignore it” (44). The “most determined” people included those who composed the Anglo power structure, which felt increasingly uneasy about the city’s more pronounced black presence, as it had always felt “uneasy about its Mexican-ness” (Paredes 239). Mosley’s transformation of the hardboiled detective genre imagines a future of intercultural alliances. His historicization is especially intriguing because of his own contemporary context: a period of persistent anti-immigrant sentiment and often-tense relations between Latinos and African Americans (Acuña 127-31).

Unlike Chandler, Mosley emphasizes the significance of race in obtaining justice. I focus on Mosley’s depictions of Mexican characters, as they clearly distinguish him from Chandler, but, to appreciate his vision of community, we should note Mosley’s attempt to document a multicultural Los Angeles. Devil in a Blue Dress alludes to Japanese (51), Jewish (53, 136-38), Chinese (188), and, of course, most notably, African American influences on Los Angeles history and character.
*Devil in a Blue Dress*, in contrast to *The Big Sleep*, expresses concern over the disposability of Mexicans to the L.A. power structure. To gain wealth and power, the politician Teran attempts to use his knowledge of Daphne Monet’s past to blackmail his rival and Daphne’s boyfriend, Todd Carter. Teran picks up Easy in a black Cadillac to get information regarding Daphne’s whereabouts. Teran treats the Mexican boy who rides with him as a pet and sexual playmate. Easy narrates: “A small boy climbed over the seat. He was wearing soiled briefs and dirty white socks. His skin was brown and his thick straight hair was black. The almond-shaped eyes spoke of China but this was a Mexican boy” (78). Daphne informs Easy that “a while ago I met [Teran], and he was buying a little Mexican boy from Richard.” Daphne’s motivation for murdering Teran is rooted in her own experience—she, too, was molested as a child. Chandler also refers to an L.A. sex trade in children, and, like Mosley, he expresses disgust. Mosley, however, racializes the trade to underscore and denounce the power structure’s attitude toward the disposability of Mexicans.

In addition to documenting the sexual abuse of Mexican children, Mosley historicizes Mexican contributions to Los Angeles’s development. Mosley’s portrayal of Mexican characters emphasizes similarities between African American and Mexican American experiences; as a result, Mosley’s vision of a more ethical urban future imagines a productive alliance between these two groups. To escape trouble for a while, Easy and Daphne visit Easy’s Mexican friend Primo in East L.A.. Easy describes Primo as a “real Mexican, born and bred. That was back in 1948, before Mexicans and black people started hating each other. Back then, before ancestry had been discovered, a Mexican and a Negro considered themselves the same. That is to say, just another couple
of unlucky stiffs left holding the short end of the stick” (177). Primo and Easy share a bond that Mosley suggests can provide a powerful weapon against oppression. Mosley’s remark that Black-Brown relations were better “before ancestry had been discovered,” meanwhile, critiques nationalist movements, both within Chicano and African American communities.

Chandler’s configuring of a Mexicanist presence and use of hardboiled detective conventions conveys a pessimistic view of community characterized by rupture, deception, greed, and the failure to relate to multicultural difference. Marlowe’s sense of community is solipsistic: after rejecting Carmen Sternwood’s advances, the detective states, “this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it everything was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that” (158). In contrast to Chandler’s hollow and depressing view of community, Mosley simultaneously revises the hardboiled genre and the historiography of Los Angeles to portray a more nuanced Africanist and Mexicanist presence and a more hopeful view of the possibilities of community. Mosley’s historicizing impulses imagine a more vital and viable and less violent and degrading America.

The respective belief in and rejection of multicultural communities in Devil in a Blue Dress and The Big Sleep, however, should not be seen as expressing formal qualities intrinsic to the detective genre. Major critics of hardboiled detective fiction have interpreted the genre as inherently conservative, while the major study on African American detective fiction views black appropriations as essentially progressive and liberating. Stephen Soitos, for example, claims that African American detective novelists
are not only liberatory: “there is no detective protagonist as collectively complex as the blues detective” (29). On the issue of how detective writers develop their visions and voices in relation to the dominant conventions of their genre, Andrew Pepper argues that “the crime novel offers no easy, clear-cut answers; it neither advocates revolution nor the status quo” (7). Thus, Chandler’s Mexicanist presence is not the direct result of formal constraints, nor does his configuration of this presence in itself prove that Chandler is fundamentally conservative and reactionary.51 Similarly, when Mosley evokes sympathetically a concrete Mexicanist presence that appeals to multiethnic alliances, he challenges Soitos’s generalization that “Black detection redefines the past in terms of an Afrocentric orientation, suggesting African American continuity with an African past” (50). As my readings of Devil in a Blue Dress and Little Scarlet have shown, Mosley does not show any interest in advancing Afrocentrism. Instead, his ethics is generally cosmopolitan: evoking ghosts of cities past produces encounters with difference that enable readers to see themselves as citizens of the world.

The Ethics of Demolition, Witnessing, and Becoming in The Hiawatha

While Mosley disassociates character from race, David Treuer in The Hiawatha disentangles American Indian identity from place and nature. The novel alternates between Minneapolis and what is probably the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota, the author’s birthplace, between time periods from the 1950s to the early 1980s, and between various points of view told from third person limited. These devices allow the reader to gain a sense of each character’s lostness: neither the city nor the “dusty” and “dried-up” reservation nourishes community or a sense of individual wholeness; the past,

51 On how the genre’s formal qualities supposedly contribute to conservative ideological objectives, see Stephen Knight and Porter.
especially an incident of fratricide, lends a powerful and even paralyzing weight to the present, but cause and effect ultimately elude cognition; insight into interiority evokes empathy but in tandem with a baffling disorientation regarding ethics. At moments the novel invites us to read it through particular conventional patterns including canonical American Indian fiction and urban literary naturalism, yet its various strategies eventually arrest such readings. It is didactic at times, but rarely polemical. Considering the novel’s many moments of undecidability, ambivalence, and ambiguity, how might one grasp its ethical commitments?

Like the other texts analyzed in this chapter, The Hiawatha attempts to demolish particular narratives of urban history. Its descriptions of urban American Indians—over half of whom live in cities—disrupt the popular view of American Indians as a nearly vanished and banished people inhabiting impoverished reservations or getting rich from owning casinos. The novel historicizes the major 20th-century relocation project involving American Indians. While the U.S. government promoted assimilation and tribal attenuation by shipping American Indian youth to boarding schools in the 19th century, it sought these same goals by relocating thousands of American Indians to cities in the middle of the 20th century. Maladjustment often followed, but so too did a largely invisible American Indian middle class. Relocation coincided with the massive urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, which the novel cynically notes: “At the same moment the disease that struck the cities was given a name, urban blight, Eisenhower hatched a plan to bring Indians there. His idea for relocation, with color brochures and an official name in capital letters, had sounded so worthwhile” (30).

52 For more on the history of relocation and urban American Indians more generally, see Fixico.
Urban renewal often entailed the building of skyscrapers, the seminal symbol of 20th-century urbanism. Skyscrapers loom large in *The Hiawatha*, which narrates the construction of Minneapolis’s tallest building, the IDS Tower. As the Wikipedia entry for the Tower made clear before I edited it to note the significance of American Indian labor in its construction, American Indian contributions to America’s skyscrapers goes largely unnoticed. Nonetheless, Native men served as “high steel workers who made the city, who urged it from the ground” (30); “They’d worked in Chicago on the Sears, in Saint Louis and Kansas City. They had raised this new breed of buildings from the ball-tumbled rubble of ten cities.” Furthermore, “the Indians worked the longest shifts during the summer and the winter freeze. They were assigned the most extreme parts of the frame”; “The IDS wanted to be noticed and admired, as did the Indian crew,” (79) yet come ribbon-cutting time when the public observes the final product, as Simon the protagonist and construction worker notes, the building will “be theirs. It’ll be all theirs. They’ll have some black man in a uniform at the desk. And they’ll tell him not to let me in. They’ll tell him to ask me my business” (130). In contrast to Gateway, a gritty and working-class neighborhood that essentially gets demolished during urban renewal efforts in the early 1960s—“at least it [Gateway] was honest. At least it wore its sins for all to see” (85)—the novel shows how a city’s downtown revitalization intertwines with the occlusion of certain historical details, instructing in what it calls “real history: the record of human dross” (156).

53 See Fixico (77-80).
54 For background on Gateway and the destruction of some of the neighborhood’s most significant pieces of architecture, including the Metropolitan Building, the first skyscraper built west of Chicago and whose demolition is depicted in *The Hiawatha*, see
The novel also provides a critical reading of highways, which have been fundamental to urban renewal and suburban flight. At the same time that American Indians were being relocated to cities, Eisenhower ratified the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. *The Hiawatha* not only uses the highway as a symbol for divided selves and a wrecked family; it also explores critically the social effects of highways on urban environments. In the Twin Cities, Interstate 94 broke up communities, including Saint Paul’s Rhonda, a predominately African American middle-class neighborhood. The case of Rhonda was no isolated incident in the history of urban renewal, however, which James Baldwin famously called “Negro removal.”

The novel depicts how the interstate divides South Minneapolis, where most of the city’s American Indians live, from downtown. Treuer’s portrayal of the interstate supports Marshall Berman’s observation that while the “distinctive sign of nineteenth-century urbanism was the boulevard, a medium for bringing explosive material and human forces together; the hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism has been the highway, a means of putting them asunder” (165). *The Hiawatha* displays highways not as inevitable and intrinsic components of urban infrastructure, but as things that should be read critically. Highways are not necessarily markers of progress.

The novel connects highways to violence, urban blight, and suburban growth. Highway traffic kills a deer in the novel’s opening scene. While by “1981,” a time of major urban decline throughout the Midwest, “death is not interesting to the Southside of Minneapolis,” a deer, “a sliver of life, wild and strange” running through a church

Larry Millett’s *Lost Twin Cities* and this YouTube clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRe8u9nTdPo.

55 See *Conversations with James Baldwin* (42).
parking lot, certainly is (3). The scene of awe is missed by workers who commute from the suburbs, “bill collectors and door-to-door men [who] have kids and pets, they have Edina and Maple Grove, White Bear Lake and Bloomington, strung like pearls around the withered heart of the city” (4). Awe, however, soon turns to horror, as the deer leaps over the fence separating the neighborhood from the freeway and into traffic: “the men hear the bone mulch . . . the legs mill on broken joints, a gout of blood erupts from between the pages of its limbs . . . The deer is lofted once more before it falls limp on the litter-strewn shoulder, its head among the brown winter weeds where black garbage bags have caught fast and flutter like crows” (5). Highways take on added significance later in the novel when the narrator describes their relationship to class and race warfare: “The houses stop along the overpass and he can remember when they kept stretching toward downtown. The city planners expressed regret when they were torn down, but everyone knew that they wanted I-94 as a buffer between downtown and the creeping decrepitude of South Minneapolis” (85). Through its readings of the symbols and realities of urban renewal, especially skyscrapers and highways, *The Hiawatha* performs a critique of urban renaissance rhetoric, haunting readers with ghosts of the Twin Cities’ past.

The novel’s ethical investments do not stop with its revisions of urban history; it also engages with literary traditions, aiming to transform them. Most important, as Padraig Kirwan has demonstrated, *The Hiawatha* challenges many assumptions of Native American fiction. In particular, the novel rejects the “return of the native” motif that is found in many American Indian novels such as *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*. The city is not inherently alienating, but urban design strategies and particular kinds of

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56 Of course, this pattern is not unique to American Indian novels. *Odysseus* and many other texts “throughout literature in general” employ this pattern (Kirwan 4).
politicking can certainly make it so. The novel disrupts “preconceived notions concerning the Native’s ‘natural’ relationship with place” (Kirwan 6). None of the characters feel at home in the city or on the reservation. In fact, the novel’s closing scene, where Simon is running by himself to no specified place within railroad tracks, can be read directly against the concluding running scene in *House Made of Dawn* in which Abel reconnects with tribal roots and consequently develops a sense of wholeness (Kirwan 18). Such wholeness is never suggested for any of the characters in *The Hiawatha*. Moreover, the novel rejects completely the convention of “establishing a natural symbiosis” between Native characters and nature (Kirwan 7).

Urban literary naturalism also serves as a useful signpost for analyzing how *The Hiawatha* explores the relationship between ethics and urban realities. Literary urban naturalist fiction, such as Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, tends to bombard readers with details of urban life to show how environmental forces determine human choices and downfalls. *The Hiawatha* often suggests a similar project only to defer following through with the logic of naturalist fiction. The novel includes no shortage of urban realities putting pressure on ethical codes, however. As early as the second paragraph, *The Hiawatha* suggests an affiliation to literary naturalism, as it describes families freezing to death in abandoned houses, cops shooting “teenagers point-blank,” crowds of homeless people, “crumbling apartments”—in sum, a “tide of misery” sweeping “the neighborhood” (3-4). Such realities strain ethical codes, no doubt. Betty, the widowed mother of four kids who will lose her home because of eminent domain, sleeps with the landlord to pay the rent. Nonetheless, the

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57 On the homing-in pattern in American literature, see Bevis.
novel’s central action—Simon killing his brother Lester with an axe—is not described in terms of environmental influence. Certainly, job and urban stresses likely played a role, but the novel does not seem particularly interested in environmental forces. In other words, the murder is not presented through the same logic that leads Maggie from Crane’s novella to prostitution. Further and perhaps needless to say, the murder is not portrayed as an evil man making a conscious evil choice. Moreover, while guilt bothers Simon, he is not tormented like Raskolinkov is after killing the pawnbroker in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, nor is *The Hiawatha* at all like the railing protest fiction of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The murder is ultimately inexplicable; Simon cannot comprehend his motive, nor does the text suggest one: rather, we are left with the idea that “the truth is so incomplete, so unsatisfying, not to mention painful” (99).

The novel’s engagement with and, in a sense, attempted demolition of certain literary conventions supports Treuer’s controversial nonfiction book, *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual*, which argues, “Native American fiction does not exist” (195). *The User’s Manual* contests what Treuer sees as a contemporary critical-literary obsession with viewing literature produced by American Indians from more of an anthropological (with particular interests in “the terrible twins” of “identity and authenticity”) than a formalist lens (4). 58 *The Hiawatha* can be seen as experimenting with the *User’s Manual*’s premises. Most important, both contain implications that might best be understood as embracing an ethics of becoming, of singularity, and continuous change and questioning conceptualized by Deleuze. The creation of new subjectivities (Karnicky 25) and urban horizons, the novel suggests, depends on demolishing certain

58 For a devastating critique of Treuer’s critical positions, see Krupat.
aspects of both literary and urban history. Treuer’s novel seems to concur with Deleuze’s contention that the whole purpose of literary writing ought to be “to bring something to life, to free life from where it’s trapped, to trace lines of flight” (Negotiations 140-1). It is no coincidence, then, that the novel ends with a literal line of flight.

After dropping off his dying nephew Lincoln at his mother’s house, Simon sets fire to the car that he has stolen from his girlfriend and then finds himself running within railroad tracks. “His legs burn,” but he, surrounded by wondrous nature, finds his body’s sweet spot in a moment of near or actual transcendence. The ending is neither happy nor sad, as we are encouraged to see Simon as neither good nor evil. Rather, as Treuer himself explains, “his run at the end . . . asks for witnesses, asks for the reader to notice what has never been noticed, to see what is rarely seen . . . Simon’s individual humanity in all its terrible glory. More often than not, Native American characters are asked to represent rather than be” (“A Conversation” 55). The novel’s ending also evokes the famous Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem entitled “Hiawatha.” The Hiawatha in the novel names a passenger train that has been demolished, but before it was destroyed served as the site of Lincoln’s conception; the train, thus, “is where the modern city and the ‘ancient’ Indian (in terms of image) meet” (56-7). Further, “the train functions as a tunnel back to Longfellow’s poem. If you remember, Hiawatha was so fast he could outrun an arrow to the target. The questions have always been can Simon outrun his own crime, and where will that leave him?” (57). The line of flight, then, connects to two key effects: it is Simon’s singular individuality being witnessed for the first time as well as

59 Lincoln has just shot a man who also shot him while trying to exact revenge against his mother. He did not mean to kill anyone, however. Simon’s sole goal is to prevent Lincoln from going to prison (293).
Treuer’s attempt to free American Indian fiction from the shackles of particular literary conventions: to reorient “the directional flow of the novel form as Indigenous artists create it” (Kirwan 11). Deleuze embraces a similar project. He finds error “in thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life; the flight into the imaginary, or into art. On the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon” (Deleuze and Parnet 49). While *The Hiawatha* explores seriously the ethics of literary and literal urban demolition and the ethics of witnessing tied to making visible what was heretofore invisible, its ultimate ethical aim seems to be “to create life” free from restrictive frameworks.

In this sense, the novel interrupts the cycles and patterns of the urban world highlighted by Mosley and Pynchon. These are the cycles of demolition and rebuilding for the sole purpose of profit without regard to community or historical preservation, but they also pertain to the tightening of control and the worshiping of predictability. *The Hiawatha* portrays the worship of the predictable as deadly to craftsmanship. When Betty lands a job as a hospital cook, she enjoys the craftsmanship involved in preparing and making the food. Soon, however, the hospital’s desire both to increase savings and predictability leads it to “contract for the starchy white bread and brown dinner rolls steeped in the curdled gravy.” Consequently, the “turkey and roast beef come wrapped in plastic and are considered safe only after they have been blasted by the steamer at four hundred degrees. The vegetables [that the hospital cooks] used to uncrate and spend hours chopping by hand, over which Betty and the other cooks would chatter and gossip,

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60 Simon’s working in a the boiler room at a hotel seems to nod to other famous texts concerned with invisibility, especially Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground.”
arrive now in great plastic sacks, like body bags” (28). This decline in craft is similarly lamented in the hospital’s treatment of its patients and in the private and public construction of urban homes. Imagery of the decline in urban craftsmanship locates the “ability to create” (30) as a fundamental human need, agonizing over how to shift the forces of death, predictability, and control toward an ethics of becoming.

The death of craft motif continues near the end of the novel, where the narrator, seemingly out of nowhere, evokes the modern shopping mall for which the Twin Cities played a pivotal role: “for the first time [with the 1956 Southdale Mall] the cities were creating something unseen elsewhere in the world” (296). Treuer reads critically into the perception of the Southdale Mall as indicative of “progress and development” (297):

There were speeches and accolades, music played by nervous, poorly taught high school students. In the center of the mall, next to the food court stood a wooden statue of an Indian, a benediction for the shoppers, turning consumption into something noble. The civic pride, the carnival of excess spoke to two desires held by leaders and shoppers alike: to prove their Americanness and hence not their European roots, and to vault the area from being a mere mercantile center to one of genuine modern commerce. Their desires were universal, their realization of them ridiculously parochial . . . the only emotion allowed them is hope, made (like the merchandise they are forced to consider) out of plastic. (297-98)

The highly organized, “climate-controlled,” and “excessively lit” (296) mall represents a milestone in the development of both urban identity and urban function. No longer do U.S. Americans and their cities make things so much as they consume them, and this is no accident, the novel contends:
the city, the Mall, the buildings and streets, much like the reservation up north, have been designed to sluice not just [Simon’s] happiness, but everyone’s into predictable channels. A stable home, caring parents, a good job, close friends, quiet nights. It would have been good to know that our modern existence is designed to ask only for these meager returns, when beyond the dim dome of lights, off the trail a few yards, just around the bend, lurk much larger, much meaner alternatives. How poorly we are prepared to do well. (298)

The novel is clearly invested in creating subjectivities beyond mere consumers or ethnic types. Indeed, rigorously-controlled and highly-profitable malls have spread into dangerous and impoverished inner-cities, where skilled entrepreneurs can take advantage of population density. As Mike Davis claims about a particular mall in South Central Los Angeles, “the crowd is lured by visual stimuli of all kinds, dulled by Muzak, sometimes even scented by invisible aromatizers. This Skinnerian orchestration, if well conducted, produces a veritable commercial symphony of swarming, consuming monads, moving from one cash-point to another” (“Fortress Los Angeles” 179). The city of consumption presents a distinctive type of urban reality, severely limiting people’s sense of what it means to do well. The urban reality of consumption makes us feel content with our being, yet always, at the same time, desirous of more possessions. It aims to blind us to alternative possibilities. Evoking critically the ghosts of cities past, as the writers in this chapter have done, can expand one’s sense of how to read, live, and create. Doing so illuminates “how great the plastic power of a man, a people, or a culture is” (Nietzsche 10). The alternatives are not always pleasant, easy, or convenient, but at least they rest on becoming instead of stagnation and zombie consumerism. The next chapter analyzes texts
that summon ghosts of cities present related to urban blight and crisis. These ghosts
attack our blindness and complacency by producing encounters with stark urban realities.
Chapter 2

Blight, Crisis, and Urban Justice

“Urban blight” captures a landscape of abandoned and condemned buildings, crumbling infrastructure, vacant factories, and garbage-strewn areas inhabited—if at all—mainly by impoverished classes and criminals. In addition to its descriptive power, however, the term can be easily exploited for political and economic purposes: labeling an area “blighted” helps justify “slum clearance” and “urban renewal,” additional terms that can shape attitudes toward cities. “Urban crisis,” meanwhile, usually evokes a crime-ridden world of gangs, welfare dependency, out-of-control schools, and hostile relations with law enforcement. It often connotes cultural pathology rather than an inherent vice of capitalist accumulation. Accordingly, popular rhetoric and representations link blight and crisis to discussions of the so-called urban underclass. Rather than mourning America’s bleakest urban realities, audiences are usually meant to respond with fear and revulsion toward urban despair and dysfunction. Such responses, however, as the writers in this chapter suggest, are ethically worrisome, for they endorse an ethics of flight that often blames victims. Such responses tend to embrace a sheltered and complacent existence as opposed to one that interrogates the interrelations between prosperity and indigence and then tries to do something about those relationships.

Significant representational and ethical issues face artists attempting to portray urban blight and crisis. How can one represent the grim realities that constitute so much of inner-city life without essentializing group behavior? Where is the line between educating an audience about urban ills and exploiting urban victims? The film version of Sapphire’s novel *Push* activated critical engagement with these questions. Ishmael Reed
argued that the film entitled *Precious* reinforces stereotypes of African American urban communities as pathological and black males as sexual predators. Reed, in his typically polemical and hyperbolic style, goes so far as to claim that the movie “makes D.W. Griffith look like a progressive.” Still, he raises an important point when he asks why commentators would see *Precious* rather than Dorothy Allison’s bleak portrayal of poor southern whites in *Bastard out of Carolina* as an occasion for initiating genuine dialogue about race. Another critique denounced the successful film as “poverty porn,” a catchy term that can apply to several box office hits, including the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, which the *New York Post* hailed as “Slumderful!” According to photographer Roger Burks, poverty porn includes “words and images [of poverty] that elicit an emotional response by their sheer shock value.” Shocking imagery of urban suffering can sell well but rarely does much directly to alleviate urban injustice. In the case of U.S. urban film productions, poverty porn usually harnesses the guilt felt by privileged elites while subsequently releasing its intended viewers from such guilt through a focus on rare and quite implausible success stories. In my mind, *Precious* deserves some praise for not ending on an especially unrealistic note.

Film reviews and box-office sales indicate both the critical and commercial success of such films that might be labeled “poverty porn.” Mainly for the purpose of contrast to the fiction that composes this chapter’s focus, I’ll briefly describe some of these films. Clint Eastwood’s critically acclaimed *Gran Torino* from 2008 exemplifies poverty porn while furthering an anti-urban agenda. It powerfully and seductively depicts

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61 Reed, “The Selling of *Precious*.”
62 See Lumenick.
63 See Massey’s interview with Burks, “Writing the Wrongs.”
a depressed, fearful, impoverished, and abandoned Detroit that stands in stark contrast to when the city’s industrial might made it the “arsenal of democracy.” Rather than expose the structural and racial contributors of Detroit’s decline, however, the movie endorses vigilant justice and stoic masculinity that call to mind the values celebrated in Eastwood’s westerns from over half a century ago. Ideologically, *Gran Torino* is similar to the *Death Wish* series, which promotes a thoroughly individualistic, vigilante, and violent reaction against urban threats. Films that fit somewhere near the category of poverty porn also include those that film critic Barry Keith Grant calls “the yuppie horror film,” which dramatize and reinforce yuppies’ and suburbanites’ fears of crossing into urban zones marked by countercultures and the underclass. Notable examples include *After Hours*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Bad Influence*, and *Judgment Night*.\(^64\)

Other urban films since 1980 that address blight and crisis range from saccharine feel-good success stories that hail the coming of the great white messiah (in this case, a female ex-marine who becomes an inner-city school teacher) such as *Dangerous Minds* to the immensely cynical response to urban turmoil in the dystopian thriller *Escape from L.A.*\(^65\). The latter does not completely endorse getting tough on crime and demonizing urban residents—predictable motifs in so many Hollywood productions. Rather, it depicts a theocratic American empire that hands out life sentences for relatively minor so-called sins. While the film valorizes its Rambo-like protagonist—as in the *Death Wish* series—it also stages competing viewpoints regarding what makes a good society. In the exiled island prison community of Los Angeles, a charismatic leader reminiscent of Che

\(^{64}\) See Grant’s essay, “Rich and Strange: The Yuppie Horror Film.”

\(^{65}\) For a hilarious parody of the plot of *Dangerous Minds*, see the sketch “Nice White Lady” found here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVF-nirSq5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVF-nirSq5s).
Guevera attempts to overthrow the American empire by appealing to standard socialist ideas such as greater sharing of available wealth. It turns out, however, that the leader is as ruthless and hypocritical as the American imperialists he excoriates. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The film imagines no alternatives to a repressive society, repeating the phrase, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Unlike feel-good urban films that promote complacency, films like *Escape from L.A.* register the cynicism associated with the decline of the social movements of the 1960s. Cynicism, however, tends to motivate and reinforce paralysis. The fiction writers in this chapter see urban paralysis as something worth struggling against.

Recent urban fiction stands apart from both the majority of films since around 1984 and dominant media representations of urban blight and crisis. Mike Davis argues that mainstream media tend to “bury and obscure the daily economic violence of the city [by] ceaselessly throw[ing] up specters of criminal underclasses and psychotic stalkers.” These representations include “sensationalized accounts of killer youth gangs high on crack and shrilly racist evocations of marauding Willie Hortons,” and they matter because they “foment the moral panics that reinforce and justify urban apartheid” (*City of Quartz*, 224, 226). I focus in depth on three novels that sensitively explore urban blight and crisis. Their strategies disrupt the typical agendas of dominant representations. In other words, John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, and Richard Price’s *Clockers* all compellingly search for ways to make cities more just through an array of formal imperatives. The texts provide a sampling of the impressive range of the ways that literary form and ethics intersect. They underscore the real-life commitments of contemporary U.S. urban fiction.
Mapping an Ethics of Interdependencies in *Philadelphia Fire*

Near the end of Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*, the narrator Cudjoe wonders, “Why wasn’t the entire city mourning? Where was the mayor and his official delegation from City Hall? The governor? The president?” (195). The event meriting mourning, according to Cudjoe, is the 1985 firebombing of the MOVE organization’s house in west Philadelphia that killed eleven people, including five children (Wagner-Pacifici ix); additionally, “fifty-three houses were destroyed, [and] 262 people [were] left homeless” (Wideman 97). A small crowd gathers on Independence Square to commemorate the disaster, for which Cudjoe believes “a dog hit by a bus” (191) would have attracted more attention. A call to mourning is one ethical practice that the novel advocates in response to the particular MOVE tragedy and to the situation of urban blight and crisis overall. Wideman’s novel worries deeply about the long-term effects of forgetting horror, while it simultaneously questions its own ethos, its right to intervene, comment upon, and try to change the most devastating aspects of urban America. The anxious tone is inseparable from the novel’s stances.

*Philadelphia Fire* evokes a landscape of urban decay amidst the city of brotherly love. Rampant poverty, violence, deteriorating schools, and broken families compose some of city’s most salient characteristics throughout the novel. MOVE blamed the dominant system for these conditions: it celebrated “the holy Tree of Life. How we all born part of it. How we all one family. Showed us how the rotten system of this society is about chopping down the tree. Society hates health. Society don’t want strong people. It wants people weak and sick so it can Use them up . . . Society’s about stealing your life juices and making you sick so the Tree dies” (10). MOVE activists practiced
vegetarianism, rejected technology, and refused to send their children to schools, which they saw as institutions of bondage. The means used for their ends, however, irritated neighbors. MOVE spread its messages over loud speakers and expressed its back to nature lifestyle by rejecting conventional standards of hygiene.

The need to reflect critically on urban history, especially its horrors, is not limited strictly to urban historical fiction, the focus of chapter one. Fiction that is set more or less during the time when it was written also often evokes and grapples with relations between past and present. *Philadelphia Fire* is a premier example. Obsessing over the meaning of the MOVE bombing, the demanding novel suggests connections to WWII bombings and the Nazi-led genocide, the Vietnam War, the history of African American lynchings, Christopher Columbus and related North and South American colonial enterprises, rubber plantations in Africa, American Indian removal and genocide, and North American slavery. While these events are alluded to through a fragmented structure, I see the ethics of the text as rooted in an attempt to perceive the particular MOVE catastrophe as a node within a larger historical network. In this sense, the novel performs a type of cognitive mapping to help readers pause and discover an overarching logic linking MOVE to the long history of colonialism. *Philadelphia Fire* urges readers to participate in the difficult and ethical work of forming meaningful connections that resist the passive habits of mind promoted by cities of consumption.

Page-turner fiction that focuses primarily on plot can also foster passive habits of mind. Such texts serve mainly as escapes from reality rather than as attempts to apprehend or enact the process and difficulty of coming to terms with reality.

*Philadelphia Fire*, with its polyphonic voices, intense self-reflexive and anxious tone,
many allusions, and fragmented pacing and imagery, is surely no page-turner. As Robert A. Morace asserts, “the aesthetics of page turning may be insidiously related to the politics of forgetting” that Wideman’s book contests (106). Page-turner fiction, as with the city of consumption and with the worldwide culture of multinational capitalism more generally, promotes passive and essentially uncritical reflection about the world’s swirl of events. Wideman’s style, in contrast, requires readers to slow down their lives and to “take pleasure in the thickness of experience” (Hume, ‘Dimensions’ 723). Along these lines, serious literature plays an important role because it is not primarily instrumental. As Wideman has stated, literary art celebrates and develops humans’ “capacity for wonder, for play, for imagination.” It is these traits that “modern civilization, mass civilization is eroding, crushing” (Rowell 54). Accordingly, Wideman’s work interrupts “the accelerated push of contemporary life” (57).

Of course, Wideman’s use of challenging techniques to apprehend contemporary reality and to disrupt “collective amnesia” (Trueheart 2) are not the only ones available to fiction writers. In fact, Philadelphia Fire subtly alludes to such a debate within the realm of urban fiction. After the successful publication sales of his huge 1987 novel The Bonfire of the Vanities, Tom Wolfe justified and promoted his novel’s enterprise in “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel.” Wolfe’s manifesto endorses the page-turner quality of realist urban fiction and laments what he sees as the feeble state of contemporary fiction, concerned, he claims, more with language as a game than as a tool for illuminating the individual’s relationship to society. Only the social realism of writers like Dickens, Zola, and Dreiser can redeem this sorry state of affairs: “At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American
literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property” (55). Wolfe unashamedly embraces a rhetoric of colonialist logic, calling for aggressive and violent intervention. The great realist author must conquer a country’s materials, attitudes, conflicts, and people through a documentary style capturing a nation’s zeitgeist. Wolfe’s piece assumes that rejecting the realist novel necessarily involves averting one’s eyes and commitment to social reality (48).

Wideman questions the usefulness and arrogance of Wolfe’s ideas in the final section of *Philadelphia Fire*. In response to dire urban conditions, the narrator, apparently a voice taunting J.B., a homeless man who claims to have fought in Vietnam and attended college, insists,

What we need is realism, the naturalistic panorama of a cityscape unfolding. Demographics, statistics, objectivity. Perhaps of a view of the city on high, the fish-eye lens catching everything within its distortion, skyscraper heads together, rising like sucked up through a straw. If we could arrange the building blocks, the rivers, boulevards, bridges, harbor, etc. etc. into some semblance of order, of reality, then we could begin disentangling ourselves from this miasma, this fever of shakes and jitters, of self-defeating selfishness called urbanization . . . Realism: the stolid arbitrariness of the paltry wares we set out each morning in the market square to make a living. (157-58)\(^6^6\)

This represents a version of the rational modernist scientific worldview. I read the passage satirically. While, without question, Wideman’s novel searches for ways out of

\(^{66}\) While I read this voice as ironic and satirical, Berry reads it more literally (168).
the “self-defeating selfishness called urbanization,” its association of “realism” and “objectivity” with “arbitrariness” suggests how realism, which the passage links to empirical investigation, “is just another ideology” due to its naïve confidence in both objectivity and the transparency of language (Clontz 150). Worse, empirical and “realist” approaches to urban problems can be particularly susceptible to objectifying and profiting from urban residents, or as an ex-MOVE member bitingly says when Cudjoe is interviewing her, “You mean you’ll do your thing and forget Simmie [a child and lone survivor of the bombing]. Write your book and gone. Just like social workers and those busybodies from the University. They been studying us for years. Reports on top of reports. A whole basement full of files in the building where I work. We’re famous” (20).

If Philadelphia Fire rejects Wolfe’s social realism as an ideology that is more problem than solution, what sort of aesthetic and ethical positions does the novel support? In a telling passage, the narrator who is focusing on Cudjoe, a writer from Philadelphia who resided in Greece ten years prior to the bombing, remarks, “he must always write about many places at once. No choice” (23). This imperative to write about many places at once—clearly including places from different times—closely follows Jameson’s suggestive idea of cognitive mapping as an essential strategy for imagining a world outside of global capitalism. Jameson claims that since “new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness . . . those fundamental realities are somehow ultimately unrepresentable or . . . something like an absent cause, one that can never emerge into the presence of perception. Yet this absent cause can find figures through which to express itself in distorted and symbolic ways” (“Cognitive Mapping” 350). Jameson’s description of cognitive mapping essentially articulates
Wideman’s vision in *Philadelphia Fire*. The novel’s rejection of devices including linear narrative and omniscient and detached points of view—devices that Wolfe endorses—in tandem with its use of “distorted and symbolic” methods of representation showcase Wideman’s anguished attempt to present and to make some sense of a contemporary world in crises. The bombing of the MOVE house does not represent an extreme event that need not be included on anyone’s cognitive map; rather, for Wideman, it serves as a significant node warning, “more fire next time.”

The key to avoiding cataclysmic fire and to the novel’s ethics involves mapping the attack against MOVE to a larger historical network. As underscored in a scene where the character John Wideman watches the fire on TV in his comfortable Wyoming home, the mass media promotes passive critical dependency regarding the interpretation of events. *Philadelphia Fire*, in contrast, through its attempt to write about many places at once, juxtaposes various historical atrocities to foster an ethics of interrelations. In other words, Wideman’s novel mishmashes images of 1980s Philadelphia with images associated with a range of horrifying historical events. These include descriptions, following Conrad, of workers getting their hands chopped off, of gypsy families that have been “urban-removed” (24), and of WWII death camps where “Zyklon B drifts down quietly, casually as the [slave-catcher’s] net . . . you’re coughing and gagging and puking and everybody [is] in a funky black stew rolling round on the floor” (177).

One early instance of this juxtaposing impulse comes from Margaret, who lives near the MOVE house: “My place still standing. Smoke and water tore it up inside but at least it’s still standing. Next block after mine looks like pictures I seen of war. Look like

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67 See Lewis’s essay, “*Philadelphia Fire* and *The Fire Next Time*: Wideman Responds to Baldwin.”
the atom bomb hit” (16). This may seem like an extreme comparison, but photos of the fire were confused with those of the Dresden bombing (Morace 104). Whether the damage of the fire is compared to Hiroshima or Dresden, Wideman’s point is the same: some lives are valued more than others, and dominant ideologies help naturalize this view. The bombing is, after all, first called, “the holocaust on Osage Avenue” (7), a description that draws on the literal meaning of holocaust as destruction or sacrifice by fire as well as the well-known WWII Holocaust. While the street name is historically accurate, it is also symbolically significant for naming a Native American tribe. The novel mentions the street name several times, equating MOVE with Indian removal and mass murder, and suggesting that the 1985 bombing represents an historical instance of the return of the repressed: “Street named for an Indian tribe. Haunted by Indian ghosts—Schuylkill, Manayunk, Wissahickon, Susquehanna, Moyamensing, Wingohocking, Tioga—rivers bronzed in memory of their copper, flame-colored bodies, the tinsel of their names gilding the ruined city” (159). To further this association, a scene in part two links a racist joke on Johnny Carson’s The Tonight Show with the slaughter at Wounded Knee (135-6).

The attacks against MOVE members and historically against Native Americans share a commitment to destroying difference. Those who refuse to assimilate and learn their place must be eliminated. Urban renewal justifies one case, manifest destiny the other. Ultimately, Philadelphia Fire confronts a system that regards segments of cities’ populations as disposable. Henry Giroux develops a similar critique in response to the Katrina disaster. His descriptions of the contemporary moment usefully explain key forces at the heart of Wideman’s novel:
The central commitment of the new hyper-neoliberalism [where the free market is God] is now organized around the best way to remove or make invisible those individuals and groups who are either seen as a drain or stand in the way of market freedoms, free trade consumerism, and the neoconservative dream of an American empire. That is what I call the new biopolitics of disposability: the poor, especially people of color, not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies but are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society (6).

Giroux’s coinage, “biopolitics of disposability,” is especially persuasive when we consider such unpleasant, yet mostly invisible, realities as the “planet of slums” that Mike Davis and others have written about, and other urban realities of a smaller scale such as Rudolph Giuliani’s mission of making Manhattan’s homeless population invisible for the sake of tourism and other profit motives. Giroux’s language suggests that much of post-industrial society’s surplus labor force consists of throwaway people—garbage, in a sense. Their bodies are no longer deemed useful to apparatuses of power since they do not advance production, high-tech information exchange, or consumption. Furthermore, alternative ideologies that can emerge from the subject position of disposability can threaten the dominant system. Philadelphia Fire challenges the biopolitics of the city’s brutality as well as readers’ sense of the Otherness that they can accept into their lives.

The novel explores the relationship between urban renewal and a biopolitics of disposability most clearly in the scene where Cudjoe has lunch with a long-time friend, Timbo, now the mayor’s cultural attaché. Timbo supports the mayor’s commitment to urban renewal, to turning Philadelphia into a cultural and educational hotspot that will
attract businesses and wealthy consumers: “Area like this University City wasn’t nothing but a gleam in a planner’s eye a few years ago. Look at it now. Look at what it’s gonna be. Can’t argue with progress (79). But *Philadelphia Fire* does argue with progress, including urban renewal as well as advancements in civil rights. Cudjoe and Timbo’s lunch at a sumptuous restaurant leads them to discuss the current state of race relations and its connections to urban renewal: “Things have changed [since the Civil Rights Movement] . . . Never used to be more than a few black faces in a five-star restaurant like this. Now every third chair occupied by a brother or sister . . . Make their white companions look like poor relatives from the country” (76). Nonetheless, Timbo remarks, We still got sections of this great metropolis where nobody don’t love nobody. Too ugly. Too mean. No time for love. Niggers scuffling and scheming twenty-four hours a day to survive. That shit ain’t changed. In fact since dope been king it’s worse. Much worse. Some of us, a few really, are doing better, moving up. A handful doing damned well. But them that ain’t got and never had, they worse off than ever. S.O.S., man. Rich richer and poor poorer. Some of these pitiful bloods off the map, bro. And they know it. And they ain’t too pleased about it. (79)

Timbo, even though he insists that, “Sooner or later, one way or another, them and their dreadlocks [MOVE members] had to go” (81), explains how gains in both the Civil Rights Movement and urban renaissance have significant limitations. Conspicuous gains have a tendency to cover persistent degradations. The point about the people “off the map,” or disposable, adds to Wideman’s enterprise of expanding readers’ cognitive maps.
He wants us to consider the *incalculable worth* of those relegated as disposable.\(^{68}\) They are relegated as such because they generally fail to follow what Don DeLillo in *Underworld* calls the “mandate of the culture,” to “consume or die” (287). They are either financially unable to meet this mandate, or they find, as MOVE victims did, it incompatible with living a fulfilling and ethical life.

*Philadelphia Fire* shares an additional connection to *Underworld* in its fascination with the significance of waste. Both novels associate the extraordinary waste produced as part of multinational capitalism with the disposability of particular populations—humans as waste. Wideman, like DeLillo, considers what a society’s trash (or what it regards as trash) says about itself. Taking out a week’s worth of trash at a dump site at what is probably Staten Island reminds Cudjoe of the Middle Passage. He equates gulls at the dumpsite with sharks: “He’d read that sharks trailed the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard. Gulls screech and glide above the refuse of the islanders” (60-1). *Philadelphia Fire*, in its project to write about many places at once, entwines garbage with the victims of slavery, the MOVE bombing, and urban renewal. While areas around downtown and the University of Pennsylvania are booming and gentrifying, figurative and literal “garbage dumps” are developing “over in the north and in the west where people [have been] forced to move” (79). Margaret Jones angrily challenges the city’s biopolitics of disposability: “Eleven human beings dead for what? Tell me for what. Why did they have to kill my brothers and sisters? Burn them up like you burn garbage?” (17). The most vivid employment of waste imagery appears

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68 I heard Bill Ayers, the education scholar and activist, use the term “incalculable worth” at a lecture at Harrisburg’s Midtown Scholar Bookstore on February 5, 2010. The term echoes “inherent” or “inalienable worth” without any implicit theology.
during Cudjoe and Timbo’s lunch. Cudjoe is quite amazed by the feast spread before and around him. Ultimately, this amazement connects moral responsibility and the demise of consumer society:

How many hands, how much time and trouble required to fill the stomachs of two black men who probably weren’t that hungry in the first place? A wave of shame and humiliation . . . What would he say to a starving person about this meal, this restaurant, this possibility of excess made real by the city? . . . Accumulating. Bloating. Smiling and chattering while piles of bones, hunks of fat, discarded gristle and cores, skins and decorative greens and sculpted peels, corks, cans, bottles, grease, soiled linen, soggy napkins, shells, what was consumed and unconsumable, waste and rot and persiflage heaped up, the garbage outweighing him, taller than he was, usurping his place. Eaten by refuse faster than he can cram it down his throat . . . the experience of being swallowed. (92)

This ominous passage vividly illustrates another dimension of the cognitive map *Philadelphia Fire* develops for the sake of promoting an ethics of seeing interdependencies. It raises moral questions that many of us would like to ignore—e.g., what would a starving person say about this meal—while suggesting that the inherent vice of the consumerist system will soon cause consumers to be consumed by a force of their own creation.

Children compose that terrifying force in *Philadelphia Fire*. The novel explores how society’s central priorities—consumption and profit—have contributed to the neglect of children. The novel portrays children as too often left to their own devices because their usually single-mother parents must work long hours for little pay at an
unfulfilling job to make ends meet. Additionally, the urban public school system is in shambles, and children are being socialized from various sources to value material possessions above all else. The novel presents a logic along the lines of the chickens coming home to roost in its rendering of a kids’ terrorist group, Kaliban’s Kiddie Korp. Wideman is clearly drawing connections between this group’s disregard for human life and the white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan. Wideman uses this most recent version of the KKK (Kaliban’s) to criticize society’s failed nurturing of children, to warn of “the fire next time,” and to promote dialogue about the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. While civil rights legislation in the 1960s improved minorities’ access to jobs, housing, and education, Wideman worries that gains have caused people to overlook the persistence of vicious ideologies. The values that the youth group has internalized from adult society are not justice and equality for all, but greed, materialism, and power (89). A pamphlet articulating the group’s ideology, that “Olds are Vampires. They suck youngs’ blood,” justifies the group’s “perfect right to Money, Power, Things” (91).

As Pynchon creates surfer-music lyrics to develop his points about the relationship between ethics and urban realities, Wideman incorporates his own raps. Hip hop, of which rap is an integral part, originated in the post-industrial city. Wideman’s lyrics reflect rap’s complicated relationship to dominant society’s values. Overall, critics have celebrated rap’s capacity for progressive critique and for providing a voice to the voiceless—Public Enemy’s Chuck D famously called rap black people’s CNN—but critics have also condemned examples that glorify violence, materialism, and sexism. The

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69 See Tricia Rose’s seminal study of hip hop culture, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.*
source of the rap voice in the novel is not entirely clear, but it expresses sympathy if not outright affiliation with Kaliban’s Kiddie Korp. A confrontational, direct, and in-your-face style that performs multiple voices delivers the messages. Regarding the MOVE bombing, one rap goes, “Shame if babies have to burn / But life is hard, they got to learn / Give them primitives five minutes to leave the premises / If they don’t comply, come down like Nemesis . . . Down they went in bullets, water, and flame / It was Murder One by another name . . . Dreads coming back / Somebody’s gotta pay / Somebody’s gotta pay / Somebody’s gotta pay” (161).

The emergence of Kaliban’s Kiddie Korp exemplifies what Derrida calls “a return of the worst.” Despite important civil rights legislation and lofty rhetoric, society’s residual horrors do not leave unless properly confronted. Along these lines, Roberto Esposito usefully links Freudian theory to biopolitical theory. In the novel’s terms, the fall of Jim Crow society represents a sort of expansion of brotherhood. Beheading the great white father of white supremacy, as both Esposito and Wideman warn, however, is not necessarily or inevitably liberatory: rather, the new generation is possibly “destined to reproduce the distinctive features” of “the dead fathers.” Those who have gained power risk becoming “prisoner of the repetition” of oppressive ways (Esposito 173). Being imprisoned within a network of repetition functions as an additional essential component of the novel’s strategy of cognitive mapping. *Philadelphia Fire* insists on seeing the MOVE bombing in terms of a long history of colonialism. As Kathryn Hume states, “In classic Vietnam terminology, the Philadelphia police seem to have pursued a strategy of destroying a neighborhood in order to save it” (“Black Urban Utopia” 20). J.B. further

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70 See *Negotiations*, 106-116.
overlays urban crisis with Vietnam, “where half his crew” was “killed.” As for the half that survived, they “came home juiced, junkied, armless, legless, crazy as bedbugs. Fucked over good in Asian jungles while this Philly jungle fucking over J.B. . . . Casualties just as heavy here in the streets as cross the pond in Nam” (173).

A ghosting technique adds to Wideman’s project of writing about many places at once. A rich man named Richard Corey, an allusion to the famous Edwin Arlington Robinson poem, appears near the end of the novel. As in the poem, this character commits suicide, but he does so by jumping off the roof of the Penn Mutual Savings and Loan Building. The building is significant because it evokes William Penn and his dream of a tolerant and peaceful Philadelphia, as well as finance, a crucial part of the FIRE economy, or finance, insurance, real estate. J.B. perceives him, amusingly, but perhaps unfairly, as “A goddamned stingy Republican like most of these three-piece private-enterprise trickle-down pee-pee commuters” who “don’t see shit [they] don’t wanna see” (176). The modernist, industrial ghost of Richard Cory haunts this postmodern, post-industrial novel, as does the KKK’s transmutation, suggesting a hidden economic violence eating out the city’s heart. Ghosts appears as well during the memorial service at the end of the novel. Cudjoe “populates” the “nearly empty” square “with ghosts”: “It’s 1805, a Fourth of July rally . . . black Philadelphians, descendants of the 150 slaves who arrived in 1684, emigrants and migrants who’d been drawn by the Quaker promise of tolerance, are out in force to celebrate the nation’s liberation from British tyranny.” Even “before the party begins,” however, “blacks are hooted, shooed and beaten from the square” (190). Wideman’s many ghosts suggest some of the various ways that the present continues to be held hostage by the past.
What is the ultimate end of Wideman’s cognitive mapping in terms of negotiating ethics and urban realities? How can the present be freed from a past so rooted in a biopolitics of disposability? While *Philadelphia Fire* resists easy answers and classifications, and it seems to expect readers to work through the fragmented text and multiple voices in order to derive their own answers, section II lends itself particularly well to locating one of the novel’s central messages. The section focuses on the narrator’s attempt to stage a production of *The Tempest* in west Philadelphia with the community’s children. The play is an attempt to give colonized Caliban a voice, to flip the script of the grand colonialist narrative, or as Wideman puts it, to “Derail de tale” (131). To derail the tale that the novel connects directly to the MOVE disaster, however, Wideman argues that one must know *and feel* the history of the tale, including the ways in which it haunts the present. One must learn to hear “the history of an intricate hurt [and perceive] all those neat, clean means that can be trotted out to accomplish the most vicious ends” (131). The novel’s aim toward teaching and helping readers see and hear this history, to combat “official silence[s]” (114) is inseparable from its form of mixing voices, places, and times. Form is content, which suggests that the search for alternative aesthetics is tied to a search for alternative ways—at the levels of both policy and art—of addressing blight and crisis.

The novel’s anxious tone and fragmented structure enact what Bill Ayers argues regarding the necessary steps of ethical action.\(^7\) To see what is wrong with the world, people must first “open their eyes.” The form of *Philadelphia Fire* assists in this step, as it interrupts readers’ typical processing (from newspapers, for example) of events. Next,

\(^7\) These steps were described at the same lecture cited in note 68.
Ayers contends, one has to act with as critical a mind as possible. The novel makes this point when John Wideman in *The Tempest* section asks, “What’s the point? Doing it. That’s the point. Why not?” (133). Ayers, like Wideman, however, recognizes the commonness of failure and cautions against actions built upon too much confidence—that is, step three. Perhaps MOVE did not do enough to doubt its actions, its means. Margaret seems to agree: “even though he [MOVE’s leader] did it wrong, he was right” (14). Ayers believes that his own radical group, Weather Underground, failed to doubt and question its methods of promoting change. Perhaps if the people directly responsible for the MOVE bombing did more to doubt the justness of what they probably viewed as a necessary but unfortunate action, eleven people would have lived. In the novel’s powerful condemnation of society’s “colossal failure of will and imagination,” (116) it never ceases to remind its readership that the road to urban hell is indeed paved with good intentions.

**Urban Social Cancers in *Tropic of Orange***

In a sense, Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* takes Wideman’s project a step further by exploring the relationship between ethics and transnational urban realities. In contrast to Wideman, Yamashita uses magical realism and an often exuberant tone to develop her urban vision. The novel inserts the voices of generally invisible populations into its narrative: successful and struggling Asian and Latino/a immigrants, border crossers, the homeless, and homeless activists. *Tropic of Orange* embodies an alternative to representing Los Angeles as “either an exhilarating or nihilistic, sun-drenched or smog-enshrouded, a multicultural haven or a segregated ethnic concentration camp . . .” (Murphet 8). Yamashita’s text exemplifies fundamental traits of postmodern fiction,
playfully bringing together various literary traditions and sources, including both “high-brow” and “low-brow” material. Formal elements rollick together in a way suggestive of postmodern urban rhythms: fast-paced, chaotic, jarring, occasionally exhilarating. Magical realism and several other strategies deconstruct an ethics of purity and property to embrace a more anarchic and borderless view of the future. From this embrace, the novel exposes urban crisis as an effect of the dominant society’s moral failures.

Urban life that supports relationships based on notions of purity is unjust, unrealistic, and unsustainable, according to Yamashita’s novel. By “purity,” I mean the desire, both personally and spatially, for class, ethnic, racial, and national homogeneity. 

_Tropic of Orange_ intervenes in discourses about “illegal aliens,” who are often represented as an invasive species taking over natives’ jobs, diminishing public funds, and contaminating traditional values. The novel briefly alludes to California’s Proposition 187, which aimed to “keep illegals out of schools and hospitals.” The narrator notes, however, that lawmakers “could pass all the propositions they want.” Undocumented people “weren’t gonna just disappear” (161). Controlling national borders is as futile a task, the novel argues, as Rafaela’s attempt in the opening scene to keep insects and other creatures out of Gabriel’s house next to the Tropic of Cancer in Mexico. It “made no difference if she closed the doors and shutters at the first sign of dusk or if she left the house unoccupied and tightly shut for several days. Each morning when the house was thrown open to the sunlight, she knew that she and the boy [her son, Sol] had not slept alone that night” (3-4).

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72 The emphasis on horrifying conspiracies vividly recalls aspects of Pynchon’s style and vision. For criticism that discusses key allusions and intertextuality in _Tropic of Orange_, see Adams, Sadowski-Smith, and Rody.
Spatial planning such as the building of highways, freeways, and boulevards separating the affluent from the poor also symbolically endorse a quest for purity, the novel suggests. In this respect, the novel’s values match Richard Sennett’s in The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life. Sennett claims that attempts to purify selves and cities by sheltering them stymie personal and social growth, causing people to deal inadequately with the unknown. Sennett argues that commitment to purity during moments of social and economic crisis in particular leads to the “overwhelming feeling of ‘us’ being mortally threatened” by an Other. This feeling fosters an “inability to deal with disorder without raising it to the scale of mortal combat” (46). Tropic of Orange dramatizes an obsession with purity and order when it depicts the government bombing an emergent homeless community that has been occupying abandoned but not disowned cars on the Harbor Freeway since two major oil spills occurred there. The desire for social purity and the consequent inability to tolerate disorder, difference, and ambiguity are central concerns of Tropic of Orange, as they are in Philadelphia Fire.

Depictions of the contemporary immigrant experience in Los Angeles show how the demands of everyday life can override concerns about ethics. To become a “pure” American, one must acquire property. For many immigrants, acquiring property involves embracing the Protestant work ethic, which Tropic of Orange suggests can blind people to urgent ethical matters. Bobby Ngu, a “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown,” (15) exemplifies this aspect of the contemporary immigrant experience. Bobby arrived in the United States by pretending to be a Vietnamese refugee in Singapore at the end of the Vietnam War. In the United States, he works extremely hard to get ahead. He’s “Always working. Hustling. Moving. . .
Daytime, works the mailroom at a big-time newspaper. Sorts mail nonstop. Tons of it. Never stops. Nighttime got his own business. Him and his wife. Cleaning buildings. Clean those buildings that still got defense contracts. Bobby’s got clearance. Got it for his wife too” (16). The catalogue device captures his experience, which represents many other immigrants working in Los Angeles:


The staccato rhythm of these fragments enacts the exhausting and hectic pace of Bobby’s life. Bobby’s efforts do reap some rewards, as he eventually opens up his own janitorial business, and he is able to pay tuition for his younger brother and spend five thousand dollars in earnings to help his cousin from China enter the United States (without his support, she would have almost certainly become a sex slave). Nonetheless, his obsession with work causes his wife Rafaela to leave for Mexico with their son. The pressure to do more than make ends meet—to consume to prove one’s worth and to show one’s love—prevents Bobby from investing in relationships and from opening his eyes to many of the inequities that surround him. The Protestant work ethic, internalized by immigrants like Bobby, according to the novel, functions as an ideological apparatus that helps keep
dominant power structures secure. Rafaela, however, as a result of reading Leftist literature and observing and talking with other immigrants, starts thinking about social justice—she joins the group Justice for Janitors—and she begins to want more out of life than work, consumption, and the experience of feeling invisible. Bobby, who supports a self-interested ethics, dismisses Rafaela, but her leaving begins to alter his perspective, causing him to consider the possibility that maybe “she was right” (80) about the flaws in his worldview and lifestyle choices.

The pressures and dangers that are felt by the underserved of Los Angeles, the novel insists, reveal ethical reasoning to be a sort of luxury. In other words, especially for invisible populations haunted by violence and the possibility of deportation, the prescription “just gonna survive” (203) prevails. The self-interested egoism and social Darwinism embraced by corporate culture is, thus, more likely than wealth to trickle down to the vulnerable masses. At one point, Rafaela finds herself thinking, “Someone was always at the bottom. As long as she was not, did it matter?” (117). The novel maintains that this question matters deeply and that interrogating the concepts of purity and property can reveal both how and why. Interrogating ideologies of property includes documenting the ways U.S. global economic policy has pushed so-called illegals into the country. Bobby’s family’s economic viability dwindles abruptly when an American bicycle company sets up shop in Singapore and causes Bobby’s dad’s bicycle factory to go out of business. One of Bobby’s jobs in Los Angeles involves disposing of shredded documents from a company that makes bombs. The company has likely contributed to worldwide turmoil that fosters legal and illegal immigration to the United States (159).
Numerous allusions to the history of colonialism in the Americas and to NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) further Yamashita’s descriptions of globalization’s discontents. This is not to argue that the novel is necessarily against globalization or free trade, but it unquestionably supports confronting the contradictions and injustices entwined with recent global economic restructuring. For example, after Bobby buys a pair of Nikes for his cousin, he notes how his “Cuz is staring at her new Nikes. Made in China. Nikes get in. But not the [cousin’s] bro” who is likely dead (230). A simultaneous devotion to property and purifying borders—controlling the economies of foreign lands and insatiably consuming the goods produced there—creates, Yamashita contends, horrifyingly unethical social arrangements. Awareness of these arrangements provokes one of the narrators to ask two interrelated questions: “Is it a crime to be poor? Can it be illegal to be a human being?” (211).

Yamashita’s portrayal of L.A.’s homeless crisis explores how these questions relate to the values of purity and property. Buzzworm, an eccentric, African American Vietnam War veteran and unofficial social worker, pushes for raising consciousness about the plight of the homeless who include “Forty-two thousand citywide. Hundred-fifty [thousand] countryside. That enough homeless for you? Some jive radio show host saying should put ’em all to sleep.” The radio show host claims that he would even be pleased to see the Nazis perform the job (92). The Nazis detail links quite widespread antipathy against the homeless to the desire for purification. Street benches further symbolize such a desire; they are intentionally curved in a way “that won’t support a sleeping homeless person” (107). When a homeless community takes over the abandoned cars surrounded by two stupendous fires on a mile of congested freeway, the spirit of
carnival contrasts with the cool ethos of L.A.’s renaissance. Regarding the renaissance’s central signifier, the city’s skyline, Buzzworm estimates that about one-third of L.A.’s skyscrapers stand empty while the city fails to deal adequately with its homeless population (109). If a fire heads toward a poor or homeless area, little is likely to be done; if it heads toward Malibu or some other wealthy place, however, municipalities would probably combine forces, even drawing on the poor’s tax base, to extinguish the fire (113). Property—cars, skyscrapers, and real estate—trumps the value of human lives. An atmosphere of doom results from “the utterly violent assumption underlying everything [about the freeway crisis]: that the homeless were expendable, [and] that citizens had a right to protect their property with firearms” (122). In the end, “the bombs bursting in air” (240) illustrate the fragility of communities attempting to live in ways distinct from the ideals of purity and property. Ultimately, in her depictions of carnival and repression, Yamashita reverses deployments of the term “crisis.” The media in the book even labels the takeover of cars the “Harbor Freeway Crisis” (234). Yamashita, in contrast, finds beauty and possibility in the homeless community that she creates, highlighting a different kind of crisis in the dominant culture’s ethics and imagination.

Interspersed with these scenes of Los Angeles are chapters taking place near the Tropic of Cancer in Mexico. The Tropic of Cancer’s border, made real by a silk string that cuts through an orange, literally moves north at the same time that Rafaela, Sol, and the mythical figure Arcangel head toward the United States on a bus. Arcangel, an old-looking man with supernatural strength and over five hundred years of experience, uses

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73 Mike Davis addresses these issues in “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn” from *Ecology of Fear* (93-147). Davis’s work certainly informs the novel, as Yamashita even has Buzzworm reading from *Quartz City* (80), clearly a playful and suggestive allusion to Davis’s *City of Quartz*. 
his political poetry to spread history lessons that raise awareness of globalization’s urban
discontents. His voice is like graffiti in the Southwest declaiming, “we didn’t cross the
border. The border crossed us,” a perspective that sees Los Angeles as Mexico’s second
largest city. Arcangel performs as El Gran Mojado (The Great Wetback), a wrestler
scheduled to fight against SUPERNAFTA. He reads his poetry to crowds eagerly
awaiting the fight: “Have you forgotten 1848 and the / Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo? /
With a stroke of the pen, / México gave California to the Gringos.” He represents a local,
indigenous voice protesting (neo)colonial dominance: “Let’s see if this
SUPERSCUMNAFTA is not a / coward! / He is only concerned with the / commerce of
money and things. / What is this compared to the great / commerce of humankind?”
(133). Arcangel challenges SUPERNAFTA’s rhetoric of progress, the view that
globalization and free trade improve everyone’s quality of life. His poetry evokes the
brutality that has made L.A’s (and the “first” world’s) splendor possible, a history of
unfair trade relations in which “Everybody’s labor got occupied in the / industry of
draining their / homeland of its natural wealth. / In exchange / they got progress, /
technology, / loans, and / loaded guns.” (146). The novel both affirms and finds
Arcangel’s perspective to be outdated, however. He does not win the fight against
SUPERNAFTA; rather, both fighters die simultaneously during the match. The draw, as
Claudia Sadowski-Smith explains, symbolizes, “the possibility that when the signifiers of
first-world imperialism and third-world under-development destroy each other and the
borders they represent, new ways for imagining a different kind of continental future may
emerge” (67).
New and more just imaginings of urban life, the novel suggests, depend upon developing less rigid attitudes about the significance of borders. Criticism of borders suffuses the novel, starting with the opening epigraphs to Jean Renoir’s 1937 masterpiece film *Le Grande Illusion* and to Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s poem, “Freefalling Toward a Borderless Future.” Relevant to the issue of borders is Buzzworm’s work that involves promoting peace between rival gangs battling over turf (L.A. is notorious for its violent gang cultures). The gang scenes highlight a contradiction in contemporary attitudes about borders. Most of those who fervently support tougher restrictions against immigrants find gangs’ attitudes toward urban “turf” to be absurd and the killing to be barbaric; yet, as the novel suggests, the “steel structures, bared wire, infrared binoculars, / INS detention centers, border patrols, rape, / robbery, and death,” (198) distinctive features of life along the border, are all seen as necessary costs of a necessary war. These border realities are relevant to urban life not only because so many of Los Angeles’s residents (and urban residents elsewhere) have lived and live with them; they also connect to urban life in that they exemplify a widespread trend of erecting various kinds of borders, including gated communities and security systems, both of which are particularly prominent in the Los Angeles metropolitan region.

*Tropic of Orange* suggests that when people become less interested in building and controlling borders, they open themselves up to extraordinary experiences. The magical realism of the text symbolizes this, but so too does a vision of the city as sublime. Sections on Manzanar, a former surgeon who has become homeless of his own volition and who has named himself after a WWII Japanese American internment camp, best represent the text’s evocation of the urban sublime. He spends much of his time on
the overpass of the Harbor freeway as a musical conductor, with the city’s infrastructural layers and the freeway’s traffic inspiring his art. The city’s sublime layers, for Manzanar, began within the very geology of the land, the artesian rivers running beneath the surface, connected and divergent, shifting and swelling. There was the complex and normally silent web of faults—cracking like mud flats baking under a desert sun, like crevices in aging hands and faces. Yet, below the surface there was the man-made grid of civil utilities: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay; electric currents racing voltage into the open watts of millions of hungry energy-efficient appliances; telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks. (57)

The city’s beautiful and terrible layers of connectivity awe Manzanar. His conducting seems to be most importantly an attempt to get other city residents to sense and to care about the city’s sublime power. As a result of his performances, people throughout the city begin to hold “branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks” for practicing their own conducting (238). The metaphor of conducting expresses optimism about human agency. Be awed by the city’s amazing layers, the text suggests, but do not let them overrun your life and your sense of what is important. Conducting stands for paying attention and creating your own layers, your own cities. In essence, then, Yamashita evokes the sublime city and the creative imagination to imply alternatives to “the blasé outlook” that, as Georg Simmel notes in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” the conditions of urban life can brutally promote (Simmel 14).
To be clear, I do not see the novel as being so naïve as to believe that less rigid adherence to border ideology and greater appreciation of the urban sublime will alone overcome the conditions of urban blight and crisis.\textsuperscript{74} While these values are certainly crucial in the text, *Tropic of Orange* warns fiercely against feel-good multiculturalisms. The characterization of Emi, an irreverent, lively, materialistic, and techno-savvy TV news producer most directly expresses this critique. During her quite dramatic death scene, Emi states ironically, “If we can just get along, maybe all our problems will go away” (251). Her mocking of Rodney King fits with her behavior throughout the novel, including her claim at a Japanese restaurant with her boyfriend Gabriel that “cultural diversity is bullshit” (128). Emi exposes how privilege and blindness can impair one’s multiculturalist views. A woman next to Emi tells her to “calm down” when Emi explains to the chef how she hates “being multicultural” (128). The woman claims to love diversity, and she loves L.A. because it represents a “true celebration of an international world” (129). After Emi hears the woman’s opinion, she notices that “the woman’s hair was held together miraculously by two ornately-lacquered chopsticks.” To emphasize the absurdity of the woman’s fashion choice, Emi has a waiter bring over two forks and then asks the woman, “Would you consider putting these in your hair?” (129). The woman, a caricature of someone not unknown in trendy urban spots, functions as one of the most

\textsuperscript{74} We also must not ignore the fact that free trade, an open border policy, is responsible for much urban blight, such as in Detroit where approximately one third of the once booming metropolis remains vacant. While this situation has more than one cause (see Sugrue), one central factor is the outsourcing of automotive jobs to Mexico. Anti-border enthusiasts should also consider how their views about national borders mesh with their views on gentrification, an issue that comes up briefly in *Tropic of Orange* (82-84). Support for one and opposition to the other presents an uneasy tension in logic and values.
ethically suspect characters in the book, perfectly embodying what bell hooks means by “eating the Other.”

As in Robert Frost’s famous poem “Mending Wall,” *Tropic of Orange* explores the “something” that “doesn’t love a wall,” which the novel, like the poem, posits as unnatural. With its play on the Tropic of Cancer, *Tropic of Orange* urges readers to consider the social cancers that cause cities to be ethically lacking. Foregrounding how ideologies of purity and property impede one from both living a richer life and from inhabiting a more just city, the ethical urban subject, according to the novel, is someone like Frost’s speaker, the man who wants to know “Why” his neighbor believes that “good fences make good neighbors.” The person who fails to question borders, purity, and property, in contrast, can be like the neighbor in the poem, a person “who moves in darkness,” blindly supporting platitudes (113). Despite its scenes of magic, the novel provides at least one quite practical suggestion for moving out of this metaphorical darkness—that is, urban walking. Setting her novel in a city known for its automobile congestion and for being very unfriendly to pedestrians, Yamashita imagines the potential benefits of maddening traffic jams: “So people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he [Buzzworm] did. He even noticed a couple examining the base of a palm tree, then looking upward with some kind of appreciation” (219). Urban walking can enable one to question border ideologies, to appreciate the sublime as well as the mundane aspects of cities, to feel closeness with nature, and to experience genuine contact with human difference. This zany and original novel suggests an updating of what

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75 See hooks’s essay, “Eating the Other” (21-40).
Henry David Thoreau claimed in his essay “Walking”: attentive and engaged urban strolls contribute to “the preservation of the world.”

**The Urban Underclass and the War on Drugs in Clockers**

Price’s *Clockers* portrays post-industrial urban America through the techniques of psychological and social realism. The novel takes place in 1989 in Dempsy, New Jersey, a fictional city of about 300,000 mainly blue-collar and welfare-dependant residents (31). Like Wolfe’s realist novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Clockers* focuses on the ways that the pressures of private and public urban life influence individuals’ choices and ethics. Both Price and Wolfe rely on descriptive detail, characterization emphasizing interior states, dialogue, and a suspenseful plot to achieve these ends. Unlike *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, however, *Clockers* delves more deeply and sympathetically into an underserved sector of U.S. society: an underclass stuck in crumbling, drug-infested, crime-ridden, and isolated public housing projects. While Price is rooted in realist traditions and Wideman in modernist and postmodernist ones, both writers share a commitment to leading readers to open their eyes to urban realities that are too often ignored or represented in misleading and dishonest ways. In particular, Price challenges stereotypes and representations that demonize members of the U.S. urban underclass.

Particular scenes as well as general themes from the cable TV shows *The Wire* and *The Corner*, both of which Price helped to write, derive from *Clockers*. *The Wire*, which recalls the broad urban realist vision of Dickens and Zola in TV form examines in depth particular institutional relationships, while *Clockers* focuses more on how two specific characters from different positions in urban society negotiate challenging

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76 Thoreau wrote, “In wildness is the preservation of the world” (19). On the subject of urban walking, see de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (91-110).
circumstances. Declining institutions, such as the manufacturing economy, are no doubt important to the novel’s vision, but they are more central to The Wire. Nonetheless, both the novel and the TV show are committed to exposing a broken society, especially the failure of the war on drugs and the myth of the American dream. Another intertextual link is Spike Lee’s film adaptation of Clockers. Unlike Price who alternates between a cop’s and a drug dealer’s perspective, Lee attends more closely to the lives of drug dealers and users. His film arguably captures the devastation of crack dealing and addiction on inner-city communities more powerfully than any other cultural production to date.

Price’s implicit formal ethical imperative for realist urban fiction, as evident in Clockers, is to portray multiple perspectives. This has the potential of promoting multiple character identification and readerly sympathy in ways less achievable through an omniscient or third person limited viewpoint. It can also enable readers to see and question connections among various levels of society. Clockers alternates its focus between Strike Dunham, a 19-year-old crack dealer who works for Rodney Little, and Rocco Klein, a homicide investigator who is looking forward to his retirement in a few months. Strike also looks forward to retiring from clocking (he’s been doing it for nine months when six is considered impressive). Price explores the social and personal forces that lead these characters to make the choices and adopt the attitudes that they do. Strike is not your stereotyped drug dealer. He budgets well, maintains a neat and plain appearance, does not enjoy and rarely participates in violence, and he stutters when nervous, which is quite often. The stresses of the job exacerbate an untreated and painful ulcer. Strike dreams of doing something beneficial for kids someday. Prices’s portrayal forces readers to encounter Strike as psychologically complex and to empathize with how
the city closes “in on him . . . like a bloody-knuckled fist” (245). As the novel progresses and Strike finds himself in serious trouble for basically no fault of his own with three quite powerful men on both sides of the law, the reader shares Strike’s anxiety and fear.

Some readers might object to the ethics of sympathizing with a drug dealer, especially of a substance so addictive and harmful as crack. Price, however, demands that readers consider the forces at work in such a choice. Ultimately, he (and Rocco) adopt an ethics of “moral luck,” a term coined by the ethics philosopher Thomas Nagel. Nagel insists that moral judgments must take into consideration how “What we do is . . . limited by the opportunities and choices with which we are faced, and these are largely determined by factors beyond our control” (295). Rocco reaches this exact epiphany at the end of the novel when he decides to help Strike light out for the territory and thereby possibly help him avoid getting killed or living a life of some combination of street crime and imprisonment. Strike’s opportunities and choices are severely limited. He is a high school drop out from a system that was not educating him anyway. Consequently, he can join a lucrative drug trade, or possibly the military although he would probably not meet weight or other physical requirements, or a low-paying service-sector job. He intends to sell drugs for the short-term only, just long enough to earn enough money to remove himself and his family from public housing. His brother, Victor, meanwhile, chooses the service sector route. He works two miserable jobs—one as an assistant manager at a chaotic fast food restaurant and one under the table at a New York City boutique where black youth call him “security nigger” (428). Victor is a competent and considerate worker, yet his jobs do not allow for much savings—his ultimate goal is to move out of the projects with his girlfriend and their two kids. He seems doomed to a life similar to
his mother’s. She, who has asthma and a bad stomach, rails against Rodney’s point that the drug trade is one of the few ways that poor black men can make it in U.S. society. Still, one is less likely to demonize Strike when his choice is seen in relation to his mother’s life, for whom, “work had always been a kind of religion . . . Strike couldn’t remember a time growing up when his mother didn’t have two jobs, sometimes three—everything from geriatric care to waitressing to supermarket cashiering” (27). Descriptions of the mother and Victor challenge prevailing assumptions that the projects predominately house lazy welfare recipients. Further, they help contextualize Strike’s choice of entering a very tempting underground economy, exposing the American dream as a lie that simply does not apply to many urban residents’ lives.

Readers also sympathize and identify with Rocco, a tough, witty, and overall decent detective who struggles with the emotional strains of the job. The long hours of dealing with mostly unpleasant and hostile people and the witnessing of several murder scenes a year take their toll and keep Rocco from spending as much time with his daughter and his wife as he would prefer. Still, the job has its thrills, which, like Rodney’s line of work, can be addictive. Rocco views the central murder case of the novel, in which he believes Victor to be wrongly charged, as a mission that can restore his sense of balance, that can help him reap a “few small gifts of connection” (327). Rocco seeks “salvation through obsession” and to “discover a way to live beyond the time clock” (385). The murder occurs at a fast food joint called Ahab’s, and unfortunately when Rocco acts like the famous fictional whaling ship captain, his obsession blinding him to important facts, he nearly gets his Moby Dick, Strike, killed for a crime that he did not commit.
Price effectively conveys how work stresses influence one’s ethics. Rocco entered the police force to try to make a positive difference in the community he was serving. He quickly becomes disillusioned, however, and learns to accept a pessimistic understanding of the underclass. This long quotation demonstrates Rocco’s distinctive working-class voice:

I’m like twenty-one, twenty-two, and we get a call. Lafayette Houses, there’s a kid screaming in an apartment, door’s locked . . . I get up there, Housing’s just popped the lock. We go in, there’s a three-year-old kid handcuffed to a burning hot radiator, nobody else in the house. . . . We call the ambulance, cut the cuff, they take the kid to Christ the King. . . . I just stay in the room . . . finally in comes the mother. That’s forty more minutes the kid would have cooked if we didn’t get in, OK? . . . she’s fuckin’ got them heroin eyes, right? . . . She looks at me. I look at her. There’s like this moment, you know? . . . she tears ass. I chase the fucking bitch down six flights of stairs. (96)

At the bottom of the stairs, Rocco’s veteran partner, who is worried that Rocco might overreact in the arrest, blocks Rocco’s way. The partner wants Rocco to be less zealous in order to prevent burn out. As the veteran officer explains, “Rocco, that lady you were gonna brain? Twenty years ago when she was a little girl I arrested her father for beating her baby brother to death. The father was a real piece of shit. Now that she’s all grown up? She’s a real piece of shit. That kid you saved tonight. If he lives that long, if he grows up? He’s gonna be a piece of shit . . . it’s the cycle of shit and you can’t do nothing about it. So take it easy and just do your job” (96). Details such as these help excuse the crude jokes that the cops, including Rocco, make at homicide scenes. Evoking the ethos of the
blues, Rocco explains to an idealistic actor who has been following him for research on a movie, “you got to laugh to keep from crying, you know what I mean?” (129).

The realities of the drug trade also affect characters’ ethics. Sometimes, participants’ claims regarding ethics can be seen merely as rationalizations for selling; however, they also often provide useful insight into the relationship between ethics and urban realities. When one becomes immersed in a world where living past thirty is noteworthy, one’s sense of how to live can be deeply affected. Strike adopts a code that emerges from the fact that working in the drug “business was like walking blindfolded through a minefield. It was hard to know what to do or what not to do, but in order to survive Strike went by three unbreakable rules: trust no one, don’t get greedy, and never use product” (23). In addition, Strike tries to follow “rule number four, which was kind of a balancing act with rule number one: you got to have someone watch your back” (23). Rodney, the most terrifying presence in the book, states his ethic more bluntly: “Nobody lives forever, so you got to learn not to give a fuck.” (454). Price provides no easy solutions for overcoming the egoistic and self-interested ethical codes of the streets; however, he does show how the theory of self-interest is riddled with holes when applied to the underground drug trade, if not elsewhere. What is good for one is rarely good for many. He presents the current war on drugs as unwinnable—Dempsy’s prison is at 350% capacity, yet the drug trade continues to flourish—and suggests that structural conditions contribute most significantly to the nihilism and selfishness that conservative anti-urbanists tend to blame for dire city conditions.

Nonetheless, Clockers intervenes in underclass debates without unreflectively dismissing conservative views. The views that Price develops in the novel align best with
sociologist William Julius Wilson’s analysis of the underclass. Wilson argues that his book *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* “dares to take culture seriously as one of the explanatory variables in the study of race and urban poverty—a topic that is typically considered off-limits in academic discourse because of a fear that such analysis can be construed as ‘blaming the victim’” (3). Wilson also considers in depth how structural forces, especially the history of anti-black racism in combination with global economic restructuring, have increased joblessness and decreased wages for inner-city residents most severely (8). *Clockers* engages with an argument that has been central to underclass literature—that the failure to delay immediate gratification is a primary cause of urban poverty and crime. Rodney expresses this when he tries to educate his workers on how to make money: most of the small-time dealers “want all the money now. They kill the golden goose, the return customer, because they never see past the next two minutes. . . . get ten dollars, run out and buy a ten-dollar ring” (4). Rodney develops the delayed gratification thesis even more vividly in the following passage: “people get killed around here ‘cause they can’t see two minutes in front of they nose. Somethin’ feels good now, that’s all they want to know about. But you know, if you fuck that girl her boyfriend gonna kill you. If you get high off that product you supposed to be sellin’, if you get greedy, go into business for yourself when you supposed to be out there for the man, well, the man gonna kill you” (64). Most people would agree that thinking beyond a “two minute clock” (300) is important, but the novel complicates the instant gratification thesis. Rocco, too, embraces this viewpoint when he helps out his cop friend at the local liquor store (Price suggests that the cop and store function as additional parasites on the community). Rocco notes how one of the customers keeps buying one
can of beer instead of a six-pack. Rocco finds this amazingly stupid since buying single items costs considerably more in the long run. Rodney, however, explains to Rocco how the circumstances of the street cause people to do things that appear illogical to outsiders: “the man got no money to sit in a bar, pay bar prices, leave a tip an’ shit. See that street out there? That’s his bar. Sit on a nice stoop, watch the girls go by. An’ you the bartender. See what I’m sayin’?” (251).

Price’s use of shifting perspectives also enables readers to imagine specific places and people that often go unnoticed within America’s declining post-industrial landscape. To use Wideman’s language, these places fall off the mental maps of most people of privilege. Clockers describes life at a grungy hotel used mainly by prostitutes and drug dealers and an abandoned hospital in which addicts (many of whom have AIDS) scrounge the place for scrap metal. A cop owns the salvage yard nearby. Rocco visits the ironically named Royal Motel in search of a suspect in the murder case: “To Rocco, everyone here looked irreparably damaged: they were too thin, too skittish, too aimless. It seemed to him that the Royal was less a motel than a kind of hospital ship, a quarantine ward of the soul” (180). Witnessing the despair and dysfunction at the motel causes Rocco to feel “up to his eyeballs in the nothingness of people’s lives, the objects and odors, the petty game plans and deceptions, underwear and tinfoil, dope and booze, all the shitty little secrets, the hiding places, everything adding up to a stain on a sidewalk, the only evidence that these people had ever existed” (187).

Rocco witnesses even worse misery when the case takes him to a “haunted baby hospital” that is now closed but happens to have been the site of Rocco’s birth (214). The decaying hospital’s isolation evokes a sense of haunting similar to viewing abandoned
factories in Flint, Michigan or a similarly declining rust belt city. The hospital, instead of bringing babies into the world, now houses a population of the undead: “these people were at the bottom of the junkie chain, too weak to support themselves with violence or fast reflexes and too sick to survive prison. Most had the Virus, although Rocco guessed that not a one had been tested. Nobody wanted to know for a fact, but they all walked around as if they had already died.” They live merely for “the only thing that had ever given them comfort, even though it was the same thing that had killed them: intravenous drugs” (214). The irony of the setting is further amplified when we discover that from hospital windows one can see “the arm of the Statue of Liberty sticking straight up . . . like a prosthetic device” (219). The accumulation of these images suggests a profoundly unhealthy society where real liberty does not exist for most people. Strike’s story is even occasionally compared to slave narratives (204, 310, 537). Arguably the more significant comparison in the novel, however, is that between the drug trade and the general principles of capitalist exchange.

Price shows how the drug trade mimics the logic and strategies of legal economic exchange in the U.S, thereby calling for critical readings of legal as well as illegal methods of trade and profit. Early in the novel readers learn about the three essential ingredients for producing crack cocaine: Arm and Hammer baking soda, Chore Boy scouring pads, and McKesson alcohol (along with the actual drug, of course) (25). Since crack is such a high-demand commodity, most stores in Dempsy carry the “trinity, no matter how skimpy and random the stock behind the counter. Not only did they carry it but they charged double what it would cost in a wealthier neighborhood—supply and demand being what they were. Rodney was a full-service ghetto capitalist: he’d sell you
the bottles on the street and the paraphernalia in the store” (26). Furthermore, like the mainstream economy, the drug economy employs “marketing novelties” to maintain customer support and to boost profits. These include gimmicks like “two-for-one Happy Hours, Jumbos, Redi Rocks and Starter Kits” (8). As in the corporate system, where the CEO receives a disproportionate percentage of total profits, the drug kingpin benefits most substantially from his business: “Strike had to split the bottle profits with Rodney, sixty percent for Rodney, forty percent for Strike and his crew, but any kind of shorts— theft, usage, breakage, police—came out of Strike’s end” (193). By informing readers of the means and structure of the drug economy, Price suggests a system rotten at its core: the drug economy thrives because it has mastered the strategies of the dominant economy. Both systems exploit addictions—to drugs, things, sex, money, power—that, the novel suggests, would be less tempting in a more just, peaceful, and equitable society. As such, the greatest beneficiaries of the dominant system have the most to lose in the face of more justice, peace, and more equal opportunities because people would have fewer reasons to consume that which provides escape from a dissatisfying and often disturbing reality.

This all points to the need for a new “game,” a metaphor for the drug trade in particular and society in general that appears a few times in Clockers and throughout The Wire. Regarding The Wire, Jason Mittell argues that “Within the show’s portrait of Baltimore, the game is played in all venues, the corners, City Hall, the police station, the union hall,” and secondary and higher levels of education, “by a range of players—street level junkies looking to score, corrupt politicians filling campaign coffers, cops bucking
for promotion, stevedores trying to maintain the docks,” and professors seeking tenure.

Even more forcibly than *Clockers, The Wire* challenges its audience to think about similarities between street and corporate crime. As Omar, a street criminal who earns his living by robbing drug houses, tells an expensive defense attorney serving one of the drug kingpins, “I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase. It’s all in the game though, right?”

*Clockers* urges the need for a new game by appealing to its readers’ sense of pity and fear for characters who the dominant media often demonize. It also makes this appeal through describing Victor’s interest in creating a new sport called “Aroundball.” When we first meet Victor at a bar, he doodles possible names and rules of the game on a napkin. Clearly, imagining the game provides momentary escape from stressful urban realities; Victor first imagines the game in a dream; eventually, it becomes his “obsession” (112). For readers, however, the game should suggest the urgent need for creative rethinking about urban social structures. What those structures might look like the novel does not elucidate. While readers do not gain from the novel a programmatic sense of how to promote more just and ethical cities, they do learn how the status quo fosters addictions to drugs, money, things, and power. In the end, *Clockers* is essentially a naturalist novel, but it leaves important room for agency, as in the key moment when Rocco chooses to drive Strike out of town in a *Huckleberry Finn*-like ending. It argues that the doctrine of moral luck can actually promote agency: this doctrine “forces itself on us when we see how everything we do belongs to a world that we have not created” (Nagel 301). Partly as a result of Price’s focus on multiple perspectives, the novel’s formal ethical imperative, we begin to understand how one moment a hardworking and decent man can

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77 See “‘All in the Game’: The Wire, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic.”
be doodling about an imaginary game with team names such as “WASHINGTON WARRIORS and DALLAS DEVASTATORS” (112) and the next he can be speaking on the phone with his mother about a murder he just committed: “Mommy, I was gonna lose my mine. I couldn’t take it no more” (581).
Chapter 3

The Ethical Crisis of Gentrification

The previous chapter analyzed novels that put substantial pressure on the meaning of urban crisis. This pressure attempts to change crisis conditions and to inspire creative alternatives to the “game” of multinational capitalism, which all of the books depict as rigged. For some people, gentrification, the transformation of run-down urban areas into upscale and vibrant locales, represents the most practical alternative to urban crisis. This chapter shows how fiction can usefully intervene in that discussion. Gentrification has been a fundamental facet of U.S. urban life since the 1980s. Real estate developers and tourism boosters generally applaud these changes because they bring more money, safety, cleanliness, and elite culture to previously downtrodden and dangerous urban places. Nationalist and socialist cultural critics and left-wing political activists, however, have generally viewed these changes more critically. They allege that gentrification contributes to displacement of long-term and often minority residents as well as the diminishment of “authentic” urban milieus. Fiction provides an important medium for grappling with these different perspectives, as evident in Ernesto Quiñonez’s novels, Bodega Dreams and Chango’s Fire. The former searches for a viable ethics in face of the specter of gentrification, while the latter devotes considerable attention to the ethical obligations of both long-term residents familiar with the realities of urban crisis and gentrifiers who are usually ignorant of their new neighborhood’s past. Both novels provide quite nuanced and challenging critiques of the renaissance/crisis binary, provoking readers to see gentrification, which has been associated mostly with renaissance discourse, as a complex ethical crisis.
As urban studies scholar Lance Freeman has shown, long-term residents’ attitudes are often shaped by the historical drawbacks of urban renewal schemes as well as decades of policies that denied inner-city and predominately minority residents’ access to loans, insurance, and even quality supermarkets. This awareness of history at a time of increased gentrification “breeds cynicism,” but the chance for neighborhood revitalization “breeds hope” (4). Neoliberal policies that promote the free market and privatization contribute to gentrification because they allow private companies to control what was formerly controlled by the city or the state. Under Ronald Reagan’s support of de-regulation and privatization during the 1980s, New York City’s rents skyrocketed and homelessness increased in tandem with the construction of luxury condominiums and reductions in social services (Smith 9). During the Reagan era, the combination of these forces turned the Lower East Side, known as Loisaida to Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, into “the site of the most militant antigentrification struggle in the United States” (6).

Quiñonez dramatizes how this struggle has moved north to East or Spanish Harlem, the northeast and historically working-class section of Manhattan. Spanish Harlem has been late in having to face the tide of Manhattan’s gentrification. Julio Santana, the narrator of Chango’s Fire, explains his sense of the neighborhood by alluding to The Wizard of Oz. He sees Spanish Harlem as representing a contemporary Oz, a more exciting place than “home,” while Dorothy signifies white gentrifiers who want “to come to Oz.” The crucial problem in Quiñonez’s fiction, however, is that Oz seems to be “running out of room” (53). In a neighborhood with “the second largest

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78 For a detailed description and analysis of anti-gentrification struggles in the Lower East Side in the 1980s, see Neil Smith’s “Class Struggle on Avenue B: The Lower East Side as Wild Wild West” from The New Urban Frontier (3-29).
concentration of public housing units in the city” (Dávila 28) and during a time when such housing is less available under what Bill Clinton has labeled the end of “the era of big government,” the future of Spanish Harlem as a Puerto Rican cultural and political stronghold remains in jeopardy. As Arlene Dávila, author of Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City, explains, “East Harlem is now one of the last open frontiers for development in the city, and local residents are feeling the crunch” (28). These socioeconomic realities raise thorny ethical questions about economic justice and the relevance of culture and historical struggles to the habitation and preservation of urban space.

While Dávila’s book is important for analyzing the relationship between neoliberalism and gentrification in Spanish Harlem, her use of the term “frontier” demands scrutiny. The use seems to draw on the rhetoric of real estate agencies that celebrate opportunities awaiting prospective gentrifiers. Neil Smith analyzes this rhetoric, especially its parallels to Westward Expansion, in The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City: frontier language “rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement” (23). Other Spanish Harlem residents have also questioned the ideological significance of applying “frontier” rhetoric to gentrification. Artist Brett Cook-Dizney abhors the term “urban pioneer” to describe Harlem gentrifiers because it suggests that “no one’s been here!”—just what rhetoric during westward expansion implied about American Indians.

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79 Timothy Williams and Tanzina Vega add to this economic picture: while the average Manhattan resident makes $56,056, the average Spanish Harlem resident makes $26,499. A transcript of Clinton’s famous radio address from January 1996 can be found on CNN’s website: http://www.cnn.com/U.S./9601/budget/01-27/clinton_radio/.  
80 See editorial by Lenore Skenazy.
Quiñonez develops a similar criticism when he equates Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem to American Indians living on reservations: *Chango’s Fire* describes the city’s projects as “reservations” that “were built not so much to house us as to corral us. To keep us in one place. We were being slowly but surely relocated” (6). Increased consumer demand for real estate in former or gentrifying ghettos such as East Harlem is comparable to the discovery of “gold” (7) or some other valuable natural resource on Indian reservations. This extension of the Westward Expansion analogy to gentrification suggests parallels between pernicious business and government alliances during the conquest of the American West and similar alliances in the present; the prevailing economic and political structures of both periods further exploit and limit opportunities for the country’s most vulnerable people.

Unlike American Indians, Nuyoricans—Puerto Ricans born in and around New York City—cannot make indigenous claims to Spanish Harlem. Not until the major post-WWII migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City did East Harlem shift demographically from a primarily Italian to a Puerto Rican neighborhood. Puerto Ricans have historically lived in other parts of the city including the Lower East Side, Hell’s Kitchen, Chelsea, and Williamsburg, yet only in East Harlem have they maintained a continuous and strong presence. Consequentially, East Harlem “became the de facto center of cultural life” for Nuyoricans (Williams and Vega). During the 1990s, however, the Puerto Rican population of East Harlem declined from approximately 43,000 to 35,000. At the same time, Mexican and Dominican populations increased considerably as

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81 Nonetheless, displacement has affected East Harlem’s Puerto Rican residents. Arlene Dávila notes how urban renewal and the construction of projects in the 1950s and 1960s contributed significantly to Puerto Rican displacement (31).
Asian and white populations also grew. This demographic shift is the source of mixed feelings from East Harlem’s long-term and former residents, causing some middle- and upper-class Puerto Ricans to return to Spanish Harlem with the hope of preserving the neighborhood’s distinctively Puerto Rican cultural life. Rents, of course, have also risen as the neighborhood’s demographics have changed and as privatization of the housing market has accelerated. A two-bedroom apartment in East Harlem that cost $600 a month in the 1990s could easily go for $2,200 in the first decade of the 21st century (Berger “Puerto Rican Rebirth”).

Quiñonez’s two novels explore the significance of these demographic and economic changes. *Bodega Dreams* presents gentrification as an ominous specter, while *Chango’s Fire* illustrates its decidedly mixed effects. *Bodega Dreams* asks how to promote Puerto Rican empowerment within Spanish Harlem at a time when the nationalism of the Young Lords no longer seems tenable.82 *Chango’s Fire* further develops this problem by documenting Spanish Harlem in the process of gentrification: the novel examines how to respond to the migration of more racially diverse (whites and minorities other than Puerto Ricans) and more economically mobile populations (undocumented workers and “yuppies”) into Spanish Harlem. Quiñonez’s history lessons, central to both novels, counter real estate and tourist industry propaganda that whitewashes or exoticizes local, historical struggles for social justice. Dávila documents this real estate whitewashing when she describes private investors’ attempts to rescue

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82 The Young Lords was a Puerto Rican nationalist group—similar to the Black Panther Party in its political orientation—that advocated human rights and fair distribution of social services and was founded in Chicago in the 1960s. The Young Lords eventually spread from Chicago to other U.S. cities—most significantly in New York. For a history-memoir of the group in New York City, see Melendez.
Spanish Harlem from the connotations of ghetto life by calling the neighborhood trendier and less ethnic names such as Upper Yorkville or Spaha, which echoes the notoriously trendy SoHo (58). *Chango’s Fire* highlights this phenomenon, noting that Julio’s friend and lover, the white gentrifier Helen, has named her art gallery, SPA HA GALLERY (104).

The fact that Helen owns a gallery relates significantly to the context of gentrification because art (along with tourism) has the potential to bring needed money and employment to Spanish Harlem. Nonetheless, art and tourism can also taint public perceptions of Puerto Rican history. As Julio observes in the middle of *Chango’s Fire*, “I see a huge tour bus full of white people stop in front of the Salsa Museum on 116th and Lexington. The tour guide, a white guy, erroneously says, ‘There are many salsa museums all over Spanish Harlem.’ I want to ask him, where? Because there’s only one. And I watch how these white people enter the museum, as if they are entering a pyramid in Egypt.” Julio then asks, “who in their right mind would visit Spanish Harlem in the 70s, when it was burning? When did it become cool to visit this neighborhood? Is it cool?” (99). The comparison between tourists in Egypt and in Spanish Harlem argues for a connection between an American Orientalizing impulse, as seen in the history of U.S. cinema and pulp fiction, and tourists’ consumption of Spanish Harlem at present. When tourists visit the pyramids, they gawk at a culture long dead and gone; commodifying present cultures can make them seem dead, too. In both instances, consumers remain ignorant of history, especially injustices, and exposure to difference feeds curiosity rather than promoting mutual understanding.

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83 On the history of the New York City fires to which Julio alludes, see Jill Jonnes.
Dávila also objects to the distortion of Puerto Rican history, culture, and political presence in programs such as the Empowerment Zone Tourism Initiative, a private-public initiative implemented to promote development, but that also threatens local businesses (2). Dávila notes, “there is indeed a sense of ‘aesthetics’ at play” in such initiatives that tend to support “that which is sanctioned according to ‘universalist’ aesthetic standards or is rightly packaged in ‘safe’ and ‘efficient’ ways” (104). As Dávila and Quiñonez suggest, tourism often encourages passive consumption that romanticizes history and elides any recognition of the connection between past and present struggles, following what Fredric Jameson, borrowing from Jean Baudrillard, calls “the logic of simulacrum.” This logic promotes “a cultural form of image addiction which . . . effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project” (*Postmodernism* 46).

Possibly even more dangerous, tourism that presents Puerto Ricans as just another ethnic group in a long line of people who have inhabited East Harlem “is not solely deployed to communicate inclusiveness, but also to justify gentrification as a natural and inevitable process” (Dávila 107).

Quiñonez’s novels express ambivalence toward this issue. In *Bodega Dreams*, Quiñonez appropriates a canonical work, *The Great Gatsby*, suggesting parallels between unbridled capitalism in the 1920s and finance capitalism in the 1990s (the latter is one of gentrification’s driving forces). William Irizarry (Willie Bodega), a former Young Lord but now drug lord with the dream of creating a Puerto Rican middle-class community in Spanish Harlem, parallels Jay Gatsby, while the narrator, Julio Mercado (Chino),
parallels Nick Carraway. But unlike Gatsby’s dreams, Bodega’s are more collective than individualist, and, unlike Carraway, Chino is married. At the beginning of the novel, both Chino and his wife Blanca attend Hunter College and hope to leave Spanish Harlem. Bodega’s influence, however, rubs off on Chino, who, by the end, seems committed to remaining in the neighborhood and to helping future Latino arrivals.

Two dreams drive the novel’s plot: Bodega’s dream to develop a more just society within the neighborhood that he loves and his dream to marry the woman he loves, Veronica Saldivia, the novel’s Daisy Buchanan. *Bodega Dreams* and *The Great Gatsby* both depict crime in threatening masterminds. *The Great Gatsby* portrays the underworld through the Jew Meyer Wolfsheim, whom Gatsby claims rigged the 1919 World Series. *Bodega Dreams* tricks us, and we only see late in the novel that Nazario, an astute lawyer working with Bodega, sits in the center of a web of crime. Nazario uses Bodega’s drug money (questionable ethical means) to renovate abandoned buildings that will provide Spanish Harlem residents with affordable housing (ethical ends). While Wolfsheim in *Gatsby* is responsible for creating profound disillusionment with America’s supposedly pure pastime, baseball, Nazario helps a community survive and prepare for a better future. The Nazario-Bodega team works much like an urban political machine of the late nineteenth century whose illegal activity helped communities and crooks alike. Long-term residents who are threatened by gentrification and rising rents receive affordable housing, while Bodega and Nazario gain the support of a community that is very unlikely to report Bodega’s drug dealings to the police. Bodega and Nazario’s dream of creating an upwardly mobile Puerto Rican middle class in Spanish Harlem crumbles,

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84 On the significance of the terms *mercado* and *bodega*, see Dalleo and Machado Sáez (69-72).
however, when Veronica’s Cuban husband, John Vidal, comes to New York to bring
Veronica back to Miami. Veronica, who has changed her name to the more Anglo-
sounding Vera, shoots Vidal, and Bodega agrees to take the blame, but is in turn shot by
Nazario, who now hopes to rule the neighborhood.

Quiñonez first acknowledges his central target—neoliberal policies that
encourage gentrification without concern for poverty or history—in “Round 4: The Fire
This Time,” a title that alludes to the Bible as well as to James Baldwin’s famous
and Chino’s long-time friend, Chino reflects on the political significance of his
neighborhood’s material and economic circumstances:

Spanish Harlem needed a change and fast. Rents were going through the roof.
Social services were being cut. Financial aid for people like me and Blanca who
were trying to better themselves was practically nonexistent. The neighborhood
was ready to boil. You couldn’t see the bubbles yet, but they were there,
simmering below the surface, just waiting for someone to turn up the heat and all
hell would break loose. The fire next time would be the fire this time. (38)

The language and tone here recalls Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem,” which asks,
“What happens to a dream deferred?” In particular, the notion of a fire to come recalls the
last line of Hughes’s poem, which answers the initial question with an ominous
suggestion: “does it explode?” (Hughes 268). Neoliberal policies have facilitated the
political and economic conditions evoked in the passage. While the Negro spiritual “Oh
Mary, Don’t You Weep” warns about the effects of human sin—“God gave Noah the
rainbow sign/ No more water, the fire next time!”—and Baldwin’s book admonishes a
nation to confront its illusions about race and itself, *Bodega Dreams* warns about the effects of unbridled capitalism in the twenty-first century. What remains debatable, however, is whether *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* provide viable ethical alternatives to neoliberalism and gentrification.

Bodega represents one possible response to the threat of gentrification. According to him, appropriating capitalist strategies is key to improving the neighborhood’s material conditions without wholesale gentrification. Bodega conveys these attitudes through compelling rhetoric that mixes historical analogy with advertising’s catchy sloganry. During Chino’s first meeting with Bodega, Bodega declares,

> Nazario and I know that we are livin’ in the most privileged of times [the 1990s] since the nineteen-twenties, since Prohibition . . . Joe Kennedy was no different from me. He already had enough money in the twenties but he still became a rumrunner. Alcohol is a drug, right? Kennedy sold enough booze to kill a herd of rhinos. Made enough money from that to launch other, legal schemes. Years later he fucken bought the kids the White House. Bought it. Yeah, he broke the law. Like I’m breaking the law now, but I get no recognition because I am no Joe Kennedy. (25-26)

While Bodega’s comments ignore or indicate unawareness of Joe Kennedy’s racialization as an Irish Catholic, they show Bodega believing that his own racialization has prevented him from having a chance at upward mobility. The United States’s history of racism, according to Bodega, has limited his and other Puerto Ricans’ chances of benefiting from the enormous economic growth of the 1990s. Bodega continues his speech with a history lesson about the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican nationalist group that demanded fairness
in the distribution of social services and “jobs, real jobs. We wanted education, real education, for our little brothers and sisters, b’cause it was too late for us” (32). Bodega concludes his sales pitch with a memorable and almost convincing slogan: “Willie Bodega don’t sell rocks. Willie Bodega sells dreams” (33).

Bodega also links his neighborhood revitalization project to the failures of Great Society liberalism. When Chino objects to Bodega’s methods—“Yo’r sellin’ that stuff to your own people”—Bodega responds, “Any Puerto Rican or any of my Latin brothers who are stupid enough to buy that shit, don’t belong in my Great Society.” Of this, Chino thinks, “Who did he think he was, Lyndon Johnson? . . . Bodega was a lost relic from a time when all things seemed possible” (30-31). Bodega’s dream to combine capitalist strategies with socialist intervention and nationalist pride seems tainted by a nostalgia less tenable in the age of neoliberalism than perhaps ever before. Quiñonez’s fiction is haunted by the crisis in imagination that Jameson describes as fundamental to neoliberal postmodernity, the period when, according to Slavoj Žižek, it is supposedly “much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism.” In Bodega Dreams, Bodega’s death signifies the end of a nationalist, grassroots project as well as the impossibility of long-term change through underground means.

If Bodega is the nostalgic capitalist with a conscience, Nazario functions as the archetypal American robber baron/philanthropist, but one with an ostensibly nationalist

85 For a useful analysis of Jameson’s thinking on imagination, see Alexander R. Galloway.
87 Similarly, Dalleo and Machado Sáez claim that “by killing Bodega in the end, Bodega Dreams suggests the death of a way of seeing the world as well as the end of an historical moment” (67).
agenda. He agrees with Bodega that to “attack the Anglo . . . You had to play by his rules and, like him, steal by signing the right papers” (106), yet unlike Bodega, he realizes “this is not the sixties. The government isn’t pouring any money in here anymore” (107).

Nazario recognizes that he cannot, in the age of neoliberalism, count on government programs to save Spanish Harlem from what he sees as a pending yuppie invasion. Instead, capitalists with nationalist politics like himself must invest in the neighborhood’s most valuable resources, its people and its Manhattan real estate. Nazario states,

This neighborhood will be lost unless we make it ours. Look at Loisaida, that’s gone. All those white yuppies want to live in Manhattan, and they think Spanish Harlem is next for the taking. When they start moving in, we won’t be able to compete when it comes to rents, and we’ll be left out in the cold. But if we build a strong professional class and accumulate property, we can counter that effect.

(106-07)

Nazario finds ideological support for his project in the history of U.S. conquest. In a conversation with Julio, Nazario echoes Balzac in expressing what he sees as the central truth of U.S. history: “Behind every great wealth, Julio, there’s a great crime. . . .

America is a great nation, I have no doubts about that, but in its early days it had to take some shady steps to get there. Manifest Destiny, that was just another word for genocide” (159-60). Nazario’s understanding of property relations—that they drive history, and that euphemistic rhetoric hides their most brutal effects—causes him to see no point in trying to get outside of what he regards as fundamental laws, which outweigh any ethical misgivings.
Chino adds to the historical analogies that *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* layer so well. As he admires the amazing view of Manhattan at night, Chino looks “down on the East River” and imagines “explorers in their ships arriving at the shore and making deals with the true native New Yorkers, the Indians. A twenty-four-dollar rip-off, I said to myself. Bodega and Nazario were just reversing the roles. They were buying the island back at the same bargain rate. They were getting it while it was still cheap” (161). Historical analogies throughout *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* have an ethical import: they attempt to defamiliarize the past, pushing readers to form connections that have been invisible heretofore and to question conditioned judgments about power relations and the natural order of things.

The depiction of Nazario as both Christ and Satan furthers his characterization as philanthropist/robber baron in the tradition of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. The novel conveys this most directly when Nazario appears at Blanca and Chino’s burning apartment, which Bodega subsidized. As Chino watches the fire “grow more stubborn” and he thinks about being “Displaced. Disoriented. No insurance, no new place, everything lost,” Nazario—whose name itself evokes Jesus of Nazareth—turns up like Jesus, but as Christ emerging from the harrowing of hell:

Something happened. Someone appeared. Someone who looked like he came out of the fire itself. Slowly, like a mirage from a desert sandstorm, a figure emerged walking toward the people. A tall, elegant man came into focus with his arms outstretched and a face of pure empathy. . . . When the people saw him, they rushed him. They all wanted to touch him as if his touch could make the blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak. (144-45)
Nazario inspires hope, yet a deal with him is like a deal with the devil, leading to a wide range of horror, including, we soon learn, Bodega’s murder. Moreover, Julio, who at first believes that rival drug lords committed the arson, concludes that “Nazario must have set that fire himself. That’s why he was at the scene so quickly, presenting himself to the tenants as if he were Christ” (210). The portrayal of Nazario as ultimately sinister and self-interested points to Quiñonez’s rejection of his politics.

The burning of Chino and Blanca’s building in *Bodega Dreams* provides a background to be developed more fully in *Chango’s Fire*, which engages with similar issues, but is not a sequel to *Bodega Dreams*. In both novels, real estate agencies and landlords read vacant lots as spaces where investment is likely to pay off when demand for housing is high and supply is low. The following passage, from Chino’s point of view, conveys the conditions of urban crisis that enable gentrifiers to take over neighborhoods:

> You lived in projects with pissed-up elevators, junkies on the stairs, posters of the rapist of the month, and whores you never knew were whores until you saw men go in and out of their apartments like through revolving doors. You lived in a place where vacant lots grew like wild grass does in Kansas. . . . All you knew was that one day a block would have people, the next day it would be erased by a fire. The burned-down buildings would then house junkies who made them into shooting galleries or become playgrounds for kids like me and Sapo to explore.

(4-5)

These material facts also describe the impoverished and dangerous environment where Julio Santana (not Mercado from *Bodega Dreams*), the protagonist of *Chango’s Fire*,
spent his childhood. To help support his parents and to pay for his education and mortgage, Julio commits arson as part of an insurance scam that destroys valuable property. Plot complications, however, push Julio into a Catch-22 where his boss requires Julio’s building to be set on fire. Like Chino in *Bodega Dreams*, Julio struggles with the ethical dilemma of whether the ends justify the means, as he attempts to build a life for himself without also harming the community that he loves and respects.

The first two thirds of *Chango’s Fire* unfolds as a leftist-radical novel seeking to thwart gentrification and Latino displacement. City planners, in particular, are portrayed as ruthless landlords (or villains in cahoots with landlords), racist and indifferent to the plight of the poor. The novel opens with an epigraph by Robert Moses, the urban renewal proponent, calling for the leveling of New York’s most notorious “slums.”

The novel condemns the power structure that employs euphemisms to describe and shape people’s thinking about urban planning: they “call it Planned Shrinkage, Benign Neglect, Model Cities, Urban Renewal, or whatever they want. It means one thing: slum-clearing for industry and expensive housing, the burning of ghettos” (116-17). A provocative but flawed analogy elaborates this cynical vision:

> Like tooth decay, it’s a slow process, but in time, when all the original teeth have been left to rot and pulled out, brand-new gold crowns can be put in their place. You keep burning a neighborhood down, you keep cutting services. With all the unhappiness, crime will rise. Now you can blame the people who live there for the decay of the neighborhood. The landlords will sit on the burned buildings, vacant

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lots, waiting it out, because sooner or later the government will have to declare it an empowered zone and throw money their way. (117)

Quiñonez compounds this attack against real estate machinations and government apathy with criticism of the media, which emphasizes the absence of individual responsibility and the prevalence of group pathology as accountable for problems in Spanish Harlem: “in the news, we were being punished for being junkies, thieves, whores and murderers. The evidence of God’s wrath was the blocks upon blocks of burned buildings we supposedly brought on ourselves” (11).

In addition to articulating various leftist-radical attitudes toward U.S. capitalism and imperialism, the novel stages other possible political responses to gentrification. A nostalgia for the glory days of salsa music shapes Julio’s dad’s existence, but the fond remembrances are useless romanticizations, as are dreams of returning to Puerto Rico. In a letter to Julio, Helen provides the most pointed critique of nostalgia: “You go around talking all this history of your neighborhood and trying to fix everything partly because you are somewhat responsible for its demise. In your head, Julio, what you have romanticized the most are the days when everything was allowed to be broken” (264).

Another position is articulated through Maritza, who runs a church for undocumented immigrants. Her socialist racket offers her parishioners illegally obtained U.S. citizenship certificates as well as left-wing ideology disguised as organized religion. Maritza deceives the people she claims to save from patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. Julio underscores her hypocrisy when he refers to her as “the most feminist of all feminists [yet] she is dating a guy who complains that this is the only country where you go to jail if you hit your wife” (199). And Papelito, the santero and gay man at the botanica across
the street from Julio, adds that Maritza is “buying” her parishioners “so they can agree with” her, “doing exactly what” she hates—“playing God” (234).

The portrayal of Pentecostalism is equally scrutinized, as the religion’s dogmatism diverts people from confronting and comprehending social forces. Nonetheless, the depiction of Christians in each novel is simultaneously sympathetic and critical. The ethics of militant activist squatters is yet another position considered within *Chango’s Fire*. While the squatters’ opposition to economic exploitation and their stance to “renovate the buildings, not the people” (246) seems to be valued, their violence against the mentally impaired Trompo Loco for inhabiting what they regard as their space undermines the justness of their politics: Maritza sees them as “those people [who] did to [Trompo Loco] what they hope the person who owns that building doesn’t do to them” (163).

The uncovering of various kinds of hypocrisy is central to Quiñonez’s ethics and politics. Instead of blindly embracing anti-gentrification rhetoric and politically radical activities such as squatting, Quiñonez criticizes both the powerful and the exploited. Greg, a white man living in Harlem, functions as the well-intentioned liberal who tries too hard to fit in. When Greg visits Maritza’s church, he asks, without learning about either Maritza or her church, about the contribution box’s location, mainly because he wants others to notice “his generous act” (199). The novel contrasts Greg, an excellent Monopoly player, with Julio’s warm and witty Spanglish “Scrabble family” (144). Greg defeats Helen by purchasing “hotels on Mediterranean, Baltic, Connecticut, Vermont, all the cheap avenues.” The scene seems to endorse the view that, like good monopoly players, good capitalists (and gentrifiers) follow the premise “that it’s okay to steal if the
rules let you” (143). This language recalls the point in Bodega Dreams that getting ahead is much more about signing the right papers than embracing the Protestant Work Ethic. While Greg does not technically “steal,” in life or in Monopoly, Quiñonez’s negative characterization reveals an attitude that the law’s primary purpose is not to ensure economic justice in the sense of fairness for as many people as practically possible, but to protect property and property-holders. Playing Spanglish Scrabble, in contrast to playing Monopoly, means exploring the boundaries of language, community, and, implicitly, the rules of the game—both traditional Scrabble and global capitalist society.

In addition to critiquing liberal white gentrifiers such as Greg, Quiñonez challenges the priorities and activism of Spanish Harlem’s Latino community. When Helen follows Julio’s advice and attends a community board meeting, for example, she explains that “there were about twelve people there. Just twelve, Julio. I’m saying to myself, they talk all this stuff about gentrification and they don’t really give a hoot. Look at these empty seats. Not only that but the board meeting wasn’t about white people like me moving in[,] they were discussing the next block party” (173). Quiñonez presents Helen’s view seriously, yet as June Dwyer suggests, “the block party, by informally celebrating the culture of Spanish Harlem, may well be just as effective a counterweight to the community’s gentrification as a protest or petition would be” (132).

The depiction of Helen throughout Chango’s Fire foregrounds the ethical obligations of gentrifiers. At the beginning of the novel, she represents the white yuppie invader. Her initial refusal to let Julio into the building that Julio partly owns89 leads Julio to think, “I want to turn street on her and just rip her to pieces. Listen white bitch, I don’t

89 Since a significant portion of Julio’s earnings comes from illegal means, however, the name on the mortgage is actually Papelito’s.
have to prove I live here. I lived in this neighborhood years back, when this very block was burned and broken. So move out of the way and go back to that town in Middle America where you came from” (15). The passage continues with Julio situating his rage within the history of U.S. racism generally and white flight specifically. Julio notes a significant double standard: while long-term residents of his neighborhood are expected “to accept” whites “moving” into Spanish Harlem, “blacks and Latinos” have historically been discriminated against and scorned when entering white suburbs: “how they’d stare at us with evil eyes. Tell their kids to stay away from our kids. Made sure their daughters stayed away from our sons. They never welcomed us into the great American Dream (16).

The emphasis on racial fear and demythologizing the American dream into a nightmare fictionalizes and places into contemporary context the central premises of James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin’s arguments, Quiñonez suggests, apply to conflicts over gentrification, where “it is the innocence which constitutes the crime,” (Baldwin 6) and “we are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare” (89). *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire*, instead of dramatizing whites’ fears of the Other encroaching upon the suburbs, present upper and middle-class whites as Other, as objects of terror and intruders who threaten the economic, social, and cultural stability of Spanish Harlem. Although legislation has eliminated *de jure* discrimination grounded in white supremacy, Quiñonez, like Wideman in *Philadelphia Fire*, identifies and challenges a new post-civil-rights-era enemy, what Robert Fitch calls FIRE—finance, insurance, real estate. This powerful web of forces dominating postmodernity’s
economic and political landscape must be interrogated, *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* insist. In *Chango’s Fire*, Quiñonez, once again, appropriates James Baldwin’s rhetoric to opposed FIRE. The epigraph for the final section comes from *The Fire Next Time*: “For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here and will again” (qtd. in *Chango’s Fire* 259).

The portrayal of Julio and Helen’s relationship in *Chango’s Fire* suggests microcosmically a way of sorting through complex tensions related to history, gentrification, and FIRE. Helen must learn how the history of racism and economic exploitation help explain “why . . . some people in this neighborhood [are] so mean” to her (48), regarding her as “the embodiment of the Evil White Empire” (68). Julio’s dialogues with Helen, in turn, lead him toward a deeper understanding of shared histories. Their dialogue causes Julio to appreciate common struggles between Midwesterners and New Yorkers: Helen’s dad worked for a company that “sent him to take care of farms that people had lost to the bank by defaulting” (102). The novel, thereby, insists on genuine dialogue as a necessary strategy for reducing ethnic, cultural, and spatial divisions.

Both *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango’s Fire* end on optimistic notes despite the fact that both protagonists find themselves in circumstances where they have to return to the projects. Some readers will undoubtedly find this clash between the novel’s tone and the realities of neoliberalism disappointing—as representing a compromised politics supportive of melting pot assimilationism. I challenge such a dismissive reading.

Indeed, the ending of *Bodega Dreams* seems to reverse the novel’s earlier radicalism. When Chino agrees to let a new immigrant stay at his apartment until the man
can find a steady source of income, the novel appears to have lost its sense of structural critique and turned its politics instead toward an ethics of individual help. Similarly, while the collectivist outpouring at Bodega’s funeral evokes a future built on community solidarity rather than the cutthroat individualism of capitalism, the ending celebrates Spanglish, not a specific economic or political program that might radically transform society. On the night of Bodega’s funeral, Chino dreams of Bodega speaking of a new and improved Spanish Harlem:

What we just heard [Spanglish on the street] was a poem, Chino. It’s a beautiful new language. Don’t you see what’s happening? A new language means a new race. Spanglish is the future. It’s a new language being born out of the ashes of two cultures clashing with each other. . . . Words that aren’t English or Spanish but at the same time are both. Now that’s where it’s at. Our people are evolving into something completely new. . . . Just like what I was trying to do, this new language is not completely correct; but then, few things are. (212)

On the one hand, this scene strikes me as sentimental and intellectually lazy in ways not dissimilar to Crash and other uplifting and unrealistic Hollywood urban dramas. On the other hand, though, it, like The Hiawatha, affirms a compelling ethics of becoming that recognizes the fluid nature of reality without acquiescing to a particular version of reality. In this sense, both Spanglish and Santería serve the same role in Quiñonez’s fiction: they present literal and metaphorical alternatives to contemporary urban realities. Like Spanglish, Santería has “adapted and transformed itself into something new. It is this instinct of survival that lives to this day in botanicas all over the country” (76). In
contrast to other religions that are preoccupied with the afterlife, Santería provides an ethical model for contending with dramatic change, such as gentrification, in this life.

By the end of *Chango’s Fire*, Papelito sees Julio as a son of Chango, the god of thunder and lightning. Inspired to learn the ways of the saints, Julio develops a sense of self-empowerment and control. Readers should not assume, however, that the novel’s affirmation of Santería renounces political engagement and functions solely to celebrate a mode of living that allies itself with an ideological premise of the American dream—that strict moral conduct is key to success. Instead, while the novel does not deny the importance of strict moral codes, the portrayal of Julio as Chango’s son provides a compelling alternative to FIRE as well as to the burning rage of 1960s activist radicalism. While Julio has quit his job as an arsonist—a position that made him an accomplice to neoliberalism—his new role subtly threatens neoliberalism: Chango is the god who will “take revenge on anyone who offends or hurts one of his children.” He will demolish the property of the aggressor “in a raging inferno” (González-Wippler 70).

Spanglish and Santería figuratively embody the ethics of Quiñonez’s fiction, valuing flexibility alongside ethnic pride and many voices over hierarchical arrangements in which the few rule the many; they represent quests “to live in truth” (*Chango’s Fire* 228) and strategies for promoting compassionate, creative, and practical alternatives to oppressive social structures; finally, and most important, they signify acceptance of the inevitability of change without falling for a crucial ideological underpinning of capitalism: that gentrification and other changes resulting from capitalist forces are inevitable, and, therefore, natural. The following passage from *Chango’s Fire* illustrates how the novel deconstructs capitalist doctrines of inevitability. In response to the claim
that the “nature” of New York City is change, Julio counters, “Fifth Avenue never changes. . . . It always stays rich and white. It hasn’t changed. Fifth Avenue will only change when they want it to change. . . . neighborhoods like mine, though, they change all the fucking time” (204).

All of the novels studied in this and the previous chapter search for positive ways to confront a system obsessively committed to the bottom line—arguably the central crisis of contemporary urban life. The more radical moments in these novels polemically and provocatively challenge inequalities that make life worse for millions of people. Their challenges foreground the historical roots of urban crisis and blight, especially racism and economic exploitation. Writers’ various strategies simultaneously underscore the complex relations between form and content as well as ethics and urban realities. *Clockers* and Quiñonez’s novels rely heavily on the techniques of realist, urban street literature, while questioning the nationalist agendas widely associated with that mode of writing.  

*Philadelphia Fire* uses modernist and metafictional techniques to come to terms with urban blight and crisis, while *Tropic of Orange* shows how a postmodernist repertoire relishing in magical realism can effectively portray and suggest alternative to the present.

Part of what makes these books ethically stimulating, in contrast to “poverty porn,” is the ways in which they put into stark relief the problem of protest during the age

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90 For instance, the subtitle for one of the sections of *Bodega Dreams* is “My Growing Up and All That Piri Thomas Kinda Crap.” This title simultaneously alludes to J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Piri Thomas’s urban classic, the autobiographical *Down These Mean Streets*. As Salinger proposes a break with the verbosity of Dickens—“all that David Copperfield kind of crap” (1)—Quiñonez’s line suggests a desire to transform the conventions of nationalist urban fiction.
of neoliberalism. *Chango’s Fire*, for example, comments directly on the commodification of urban crisis when Helen describes seeing the successful musical *Rent*:

> The theatre was full of all these upper-middle-class residents of Westchester or Long Island, all excited that for one night they were about to live through an urban struggle. We were going to see poor New Yorkers deal with addiction, homelessness, squatting, evictions, real estate gouging, AIDS. . . . In Bloomingdale’s there’s a *Rent* boutique, so you can “look poor,” . . . like it’s cool to be poor. (174-75)

This struggle between protest and commodification corresponds in logic to the situation in Spanish Harlem that Dávila documents in *Barrio Dreams*: the commodification of Puerto Rican culture and history risks attenuating perceptions of the connections between past injustices and present inequalities.

These novels challenge forces that, from the novelists’ points of view, unfairly benefit from recent geopolitical changes. In their search for more just cities, the novels attack real estate and tourist agencies, governments committed to unwinnable wars, skewed trade and immigration policies, ideologies of purity and property, and neoliberal policy makers. In so doing, they provide social history of a kind lacking elsewhere, “a secret revenge, too, on the privileged who grew up safely in healthy streets like those of the Upper East Side, who felt so intelligent reading Balzac and Dickens, not caring that those same stories were happening [and continue to happen] in their neglected backyards.” In the next chapter, I examine the ways that authors explore ethical questions that relate most directly but certainly not entirely to the lives of privileged

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91 From Ernesto Quiñonez’s part autobiographical, part social criticism essay, “The Fires Last Time.”
urban elites. How do ethics and affluence intersect? While the elite characters in these books are more likely to read stock market reports than they are to read Balzac or Dickens, their authors explore important questions centering on the ethics of urban privilege.
Chapter 4

Privilege, Renewal, and Urban Justice

The previous two chapters focused on urban blight, crisis, and gentrification in contemporary U.S. urban fiction. In particular, they analyzed writers’ depictions of underserved populations. This chapter examines fictional narratives of urban residents with significant wealth and connections. Contemporary urban fiction on urban privilege, unlike earlier novels of manners set in cities by writers such as Edith Wharton and Henry James, intensely questions elites’ obligations to so-called urban Others. Simultaneously, the texts in this chapter provocatively engage with the rhetoric and realities of urban renewal and renaissance. People with “wealth and connections” drive this rhetoric, as persuasive visions of “urban renaissance” can lead to lucrative investments.

An important moment in urban renaissance rhetoric occurred on the cover of Time Magazine in August 1981. The cover included a quotation by James Rouse, developer, among other significant projects, of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, proclaiming, “Cities are fun!”92 The fiction analyzed in this chapter engages with this quotation on various levels and points of view: are “fun” and “renewed” cities any more just than cities of the past? What is meant by “fun,” anyway? Does it refer to sanitized consumerist paradises, and does it have any connection to promoting a sense of community? Discourse about urban renaissance often relates “fun” with “livability,” yet when we talk about “livable” cities, do we mostly just mean more livable for those of privilege, or for all? Should cities really be about “fun,” or can they be about much more because of their promise to develop

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92 See issue from August 24, 1981. For the cover illustration, go here: http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19810824,00.html.
humans capable of handling pain, the unpredictable, and the confusing, experiences that are essential to adult growth?

Richard Sennett and Samuel Delany both provide intriguing responses to this question. In *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*, Sennett contends that the commercial, cultural, and human diversity of the best urban places forces encounters with difference that help people adeptly handle uncertainty and ambiguity. Sennett locates the lack of such encounters fostered by pro-segregation (class, racial, and functional) urban planning, suburban sprawl, and small-town clannishness as fundamental to the culture’s general immaturity and attraction to violence. Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* exposes the greedy, fear-mongering, and puritanical urges behind a supreme instance urban renaissance propaganda: the demolition and redevelopment of most of infamous Times Square in New York City. Writing at the end of the 1990s, Delany attacks the “economic ‘redevelopment’ of a highly diversified neighborhood with working-class residences and small human services . . . into what will soon be a ring of upper-middle-class luxury apartments around a ring of tourist hotels clustering about a series of theaters and restaurants, in the center of which a large mall and a cluster of office towers are slowly but inexorably coming into being” (149). Distancing himself from the charge that his critique exemplifies misplaced nostalgia—he writes movingly about the horrors of crack in the mid-1980s, for example—Delany perceptively sees “lurking behind the positive foregrounding of ‘family values’ . . . a wholly provincial and absolutely small-town terror of cross-class contact” (153). The greatest ethical and pleasurable qualities of cities, Delany argues, come from interclass contacts. Development plans claiming to promote urban renaissance
risk reducing these contacts: “Given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will” (121).

The values articulated by Sennett and Delaney are of great importance to the novels analyzed in this chapter. Elites in Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, for example, are depicted as stunted adults who are unable to relate to difference as a result of their insularity, which breeds ignorance, indifference, and more. Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, meanwhile, explore the relationship between subjectivity and experience in dense urban environments. Nick Shay in *Underworld* is most alive as a troubled youth in the Bronx and most passive, disconnected, and complacent as a successful adult living in suburban Phoenix. Henry Park in *Native Speaker* has urban experiences that awaken him emotionally and make him more aware of the connection between his privilege and underserved populations. All the texts share Sennett’s concern with how “to make good use of affluence,” and with the ways that many elites are plagued by voluntary “emotional poverty rather than material poverty” (107). This chapter illuminates how recent urban fiction addresses the relationship between privilege and urban renewal/renaissance, focusing on the ethical obligations that come with privilege.

John Edgar Wideman raises some of these issues in an interview. He is particularly invested in the thorny question of African American success: “There is a whole issue of what happens when anybody, any black person in this country, gains a skill, gains an education, gains some sort of power; whether it’s a doctor, lawyer,
businessman. How does that individual success relate to the fact that most people are far from successful in those economic terms, and how does success perpetuate a system that is in fact oppressing so many black people?” He adds, “What is our responsibility, to ourselves, to the ones we left behind? Do we have to leave them behind? Are there ways we can be successful without perpetuating the class and racial hierarchy that produced this?” The connection between success and class and racial hierarchies, as they pertain to city life and as depicted in four important novels, serves this chapter’s central focus. Perhaps critical reading of these and other challenging urban texts can promote effects similar to Sennett’s vision of the value of urban life: “The great promise of city life is a new kind of confusion possible within its borders, an anarchy that will not destroy [people], but make them richer and more mature” (108).

**Insulation and Irish Machismo in *The Bonfire of the Vanities***

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* is one of the most noteworthy urban novels of the last thirty years. A bestseller, the novel describes New York City of the 1980s essentially as a “Tale of Two Cities” (505). People like Sherman McCoy, the book’s protagonist and millionaire Wall Street bond salesman, live in spectacular splendor on the Upper East Side, while people like Henry Lamb, one of the novel’s central victims, live in destitution in the projects of the notorious South Bronx. Wolfe brings these worlds together by applying the “stylistics of the New Journalism, a brand of reportage . . . to the exigencies of the realist novel” (Master 210). Wolfe uses a satirical and boisterous tone, detailed social observations, an abundance of dialogue, and myriad exclamation points to convey his panoramic view of New York City as an urban jungle gone to hell. *The Bonfire of the*  

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93 See James Kyung-Jin Lee’s “When the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority” (231).
Vanities represents Wolfe’s attempt at a "a novel of the city in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written of Paris and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels of London, with the city always in the foreground, exerting its relentless pressure on the souls of its inhabitants" (“Manifesto” 46). For Wolfe, the urban realities of the “ME decade” do not bring out admirable behavior. The pressure to “make it [money] now” (Bonfire 60) not only revises Ezra Pound’s slogan to “make it [art] new”; it places greed, conspicuous consumption, and the drive for power and prestige as supreme urban values. Wolfe’s satire on several levels of New York society, however, expresses little if any concern about urban inequalities and little hope for the future of American cities. He exposes a world gone wrong, but his attempt at a panoramic novel certainly falls short. Specifically, The Bonfire of the Vanities completely ignores the problem of New York City homelessness, and it does not, unlike Clockers, for instance, demonstrate understanding of the dynamics of the drug trade or the interiorities of any member of the underclass.

Criticism has either showered the novel with praise for its daring and revealing portrayal of New York City in the 1980s or lambasted the book for its insensitive and reactionary depictions of women, minorities, and gays. My analysis tries to reconcile these positions, arguing for the value of each while affirming the book’s central place in recent U.S. urban fiction. The Bonfire of the Vanities is important both for its virtues and vices as well as for its relationship to the several urban novels that follow it.

Wolfe’s satire is wide-ranging. He attacks Park Avenue yuppies like Sherman McCoy and his wife, Judy, an interior decorator eager to impress those at the top of the social ladder. Sherman sees himself as a “Master of the Universe” (12), raking in several

94 For a persuasive negative critique of Bonfire, see Masters. For a more positive view, see James F. Smith.
million dollars a year and living in “the sort of apartment [that] ignites flames of greed and covetousness under people all over New York and, for that matter, all over the world” (10). His wealth provides him a deep sense of entitlement and superiority. He believes that he deserves an affair or two, especially since his Midwestern wife, so blessed to be married to him, is approaching forty: “If Middle Age,” Sherman’s name for Judy early in the novel, “wishes the continued support and escort of a Master of the Universe, then she must allow him the precious currency he has earned, which is youth and beauty and juicy jugs and loamy loins” (72). Wolfe mocks Sherman’s extreme egoism, but not necessarily his sexism. Sherman’s belief in himself as a powerful and invincible force crumbles as the novel unfolds. For much of the text, Sherman represents a pathetically fearful man of privilege caught in the snares of a vicious urban system. As I will discuss later, though, while Wolfe satirizes Sherman’s stereotyped yuppie traits during the first half of the novel, he ultimately celebrates his protagonist’s renewed sense of manhood.

Elite society is further attacked for its shallowness and obsession with status symbols. The wealthiest New Yorkers “hemorrhage money,” an oft-repeated phrase in the novel, starting when Sherman becomes acutely aware of his expenses and enormously mounting debt after losing his job. Wolfe draws substantial attention to the status significance of particular cars, suits, and shoes. Attending and sending their children to the best and snootiest private schools, inhabiting the most opulent apartments on the most exclusive streets, showcasing extremely luxurious decor—these are the things that matter most to the elites in The Bonfire of the Vanities. They are vain indeed, and they show no interest in the ethical implications of their affluence. On the exclusive parties in which
one’s status and one’s wealth determine one’s value to others, Wolfe writes, “the hive buzzed and buzzed” (351). The women are treated especially harshly. Wolfe classifies those attending ritzy parties as “X rays”—emaciated middle-aged women obsessed with their weight—and “Lemon Tarts”—the young, sexy, and ditsy women whom older wealthy men date and often marry as their second or third wives.

Wolfe’s satire reaches into the realms of the law, the press, and social activism. All are portrayed cynically, for Wolfe has their representatives claiming motives that mask actual intentions. The D.A. and the central public defender, Larry Kramer, claim to seek fairness for all New York residents regardless of race, gender, or income, but the D.A.’s concern for reelection trumps any ethical misgivings. Meanwhile, Kramer, a married man of modest means who experiences a mid-life crisis, desires most desperately the attentions of an attractive female juror and the thrill of being known as a warrior for justice, even if that fame requires breaking legal protocol. Wolfe presents sensationalistic yellow journalism as alive and well and eager to demonize figures like Sherman McCoy and romanticize people like Henry Lamb, the victim of a hit and run accident committed by Sherman and his mistress. The press depicts Lamb as an honor student who represented the Bronx’s next great hope, a young man “struck down on the threshold of a brilliant future” (321), even though being an honor student at his school basically requires showing up and not causing disturbances. The publisher of the tabloid The City Light claims that his newspaper exposes the inequities that daily eat the city’s soul, yet Wolfe indicates that the publisher just wants high sales. The City Light’s reporter on the McCoy case, Peter Fallow, ultimately wins the Pulitzer Prize, another target of Wolfe’s cynicism, as the novel carefully points out major flaws in Fallow’s reporting.
Wolfe launches some of his most memorable and savage attacks against social activists. Reverend Bacon, a caricature of the famous civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton, receives especially severe treatment. He represents a racist demagogue, distorting urban realities for the benefit of his own political and economic advancement. While he wishes publicly to highlight an important difference between his and Sherman McCoy’s ethics, he embezzles $350,000 from an Episcopal church, then invests at least some of that money with Pierce & Pierce, the firm that McCoy works for (159). Wolfe portrays Bacon’s followers as lazy, raucous, childish, animal-like, and solely self-interested, a “yammering” “raggedy horde,” despite their rhetoric advocating racial and economic justice (585). Their demonstrations depend entirely on the presence of news cameras. When newspaper crews arrive on the scene of a protest, the demonstrators “lounge about the van, their rage, if any, about the injustices wrought upon Henry Lamb successfully contained” (305). Wolfe consistently casts protesting as insincere performance. As a result, readers are encouraged to view everything that Bacon and activists like him say with skepticism. Bacon argues, for example, that the contemporary U.S. urban ghetto is “the story of” society’s “negligence” (161) of underserved residents’ needs; since this claim comes from him, however, readers are not expected to take it seriously. Furthermore, even if Bacon’s argument is persuasive, Wolfe does not worry much about it, as his narrative pushes readers to sympathize most strongly with McCoy’s dilemmas, not with those of the South Bronx. Wolfe’s satire, then, often successfully and humorously highlights central flaws of the urban world, yet his reliance on caricature prevents him from delving into many of the complexities of urban conflict.
Wolfe’s failure to capture thoroughly and persuasively important aspects of contemporary urban life is most evident in his treatment of race and gender. The novel is filtered almost entirely from the perspective of white males. Wolfe is especially concerned with how urban racial Others threaten white masculine identity. To dramatize this threat, Wolfe satirizes white masculine insecurity while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes of people of color. While reading the pivotal scene when Sherman gets lost in the South Bronx after taking a wrong turn while trying to get back to Manhattan from the airport, I am reminded of Dave Chappelle’s statement, “I can’t let the fear ruin my morals.” Wolfe dramatizes, in a sense, fear ruining Sherman’s morals during the hit and run episode, but Wolfe does not side with Chappelle. Rather, Wolfe reinforces racial fears, suggesting Irish machismo as the most appropriate and effective response to these fears. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* thereby furthers what Zygmunt Bauman calls mixophobia, “a highly predictable and widespread reaction to the mind-boggling, spine-chilling, and nerve-racking variety of human types and life-styles that meet and jostle for space in the streets of contemporary cities” (67). Bauman notes that “keeping distance has become the most common strategy in the urban struggle for survival” (66), which rests on “segregationist urges” (67). These urges, though, do not prepare privileged urbanites like McCoy for the disorienting fear that’s felt when crossing over into what Michael Schwarzer terms “ghost wards,” abandoned, dangerous, and extraordinarily eerie urban spaces.\(^{95}\)

The South Bronx is the central ghost ward in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe’s realism provides quite detailed observations of the blighted landscape: “What [Sherman]
saw . . . shocked him. It was not merely decrepit and sodden but ruined, as though in some catastrophe. To the right an entire block was nothing but a great hole in the ground with cyclone fencing around it and raggedy catalpa trees sticking up here and there” (469). “It was as if he [Sherman] had fallen into a junkyard” (81). The terrain is “utterly empty . . . entire blocks of the city left without a building left standing. There were streets and curbing and sidewalks and light poles and nothing else.” A “ghastly yellow gloaming” dominates the scene when Sherman and Maria get lost (84-85). The desolation and unintelligibility of urban space adds to their frantic quest for a sign leading them out of hell and back into Manhattan. The sighting of several “dark faces,” a descriptor used at least three times (84,86), most significantly enhances their fear. Sherman’s own racist preconceptions certainly augment his terror, which Wolfe captures through a fast-paced style that includes many ellipses and exclamation points. Sherman imagines seeing a woman’s head stuck in a fence, a perception that clearly results from connecting cannibalism to dark Others (81). Wolfe ridicules this fear—Sherman congratulated himself on his egalitarian attitudes moments before his confrontation in the urban “jungle” (74). Nonetheless, the novel does not appear to reject Sherman’s deep suspicion of racial Others nor his violent defiance of perceived threats. All in all, Wolfe captures the ghostly and desolate landscape of the 1980s South Bronx without delving into the residents’ struggle for survival or the historical forces, such as Robert Moses-led urban renewal, that contributed to the area’s neglected and depressed state.

According to The Bonfire of the Vanities, the central narrative of 1980s New York City is racial decline in which people of color have increased both their power and numbers. Regarding the conditions of the South Bronx, the Jewish D.A. states, the
residents “are all black and Puerto Rican . . . You don’t even see any old Jews walking around down there anymore or any Italians, either, and this is the civic center of the Bronx.” Weiss turns more nostalgic as he continues: “In the summertime the Jews used to sit out on the sidewalk at night right over there on the Grand Concourse and just watch the cars go by. You couldn’t get Charles Bronson to sit out there now. This is the modern era, and nobody understands it yet” (505). A fundamental part of the “modern era” involves populations of the “Third World” encroaching on the city. As the narrator frantically states in the novel’s opening scene,

Do you really think this is your city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think money will keep it yours? Come down from your swell co-ops, you general partners and merger lawyers! It’s the Third World down there! Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians, Hondurans, Koreans, Chinese, Thais, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Panamanians, Filipinos, Albanians, Senegalese, and Afro-Americans! Go visit the frontiers, you gutless wonders! . . . do you really think you’re impregnable? . . . do you really think you’re insulated from the Third World?” (7).

The imagery of a “third world” takeover arouses fear, which helps to explain the unfortunate lumping of “Afro-Americans” with populations from the “third world.” In the face of new urban realities, especially those produced by the fourth great wave of U.S. urban immigration, the novel pits an ethics of insulation against the more combative code of Irish machismo. In one of the more famous lines of the novel, the narrator describes the ethical code of yuppies, “the new breed, the young breed, the masterful

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96 See Wolfe’s “Stalking” (52).
breed” as “Insulation! That was the ticket. That was the term Rawlie Thorpe used. ‘If you want to live in New York,’ he once told Sherman, ‘you’ve got to insulate, insulate, insulate,’ meaning insulate yourself from those people” (56). The narrative arc of the text, however, challenges this code. Wolfe alludes to Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Masque of the Red Death” to remind elites of their futile dream of insulation from the racialized poor. Sherman gradually learns how the logic of insularity has poorly prepared him to face, understand, and negotiate with an essentially antagonistic urban society.

Opposing an insulatory ethics, Wolfe praises the ethics of an older, more rugged generation represented by Sherman’s dad who wasn’t going to let “those people” “drive him off the New York City subways.” A voice representing support for an ethics of insulation asks the rhetorical question, “Why file into the trenches of the urban wars” when one can afford to take taxis everywhere and hide away in well-fortified luxury apartments? (56). Wolfe’s implied answer seems to be that if elites don’t emerge from their bubbles and fight back, the city will be lost. Their only hope, Wolfe suggests, is to embrace a code of Irish machismo.

Irish Machismo in the novel embodies stubborn and aggressive defiance, political incorrectness, and loyalty, especially of the “if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” variety. McCoy’s lawyer, Thomas Killian, calls this type of loyalty the “favor bank,” which ultimately does not help McCoy as planned because a new racial politics aimed at making McCoy the sacrificial lamb of the city’s machine has replaced an earlier Irish-centered model. Nonetheless, the novel seems to respect the “favor bank” (390) and “Irish machismo,” “the dour madness that” grips the police department and “the Homicide Bureau of the D.A.’s Office” (375). These codes and attitudes contrast sharply
with the selfish interpersonal codes of Sherman’s elite friends who worry most about what will happen to Sherman’s apartment when he appears to be on the brink of a nervous and financial breakdown. A supposed friend visits him appearing sympathetic, only to tell Sherman, “As I say, if I can be of any help, let me know. With the apartment, is what I mean” (547). In the world of New York’s privileged elites, love thy property and the chance to earn a quick buck trumps love thy neighbor, which is more likely to be a part of Irish ethics, especially if the neighbor is Irish, of course. Sherman’s downfall causes all of his friends and colleagues to forget about him and his family: his wife “can’t even make play dates for [their] daughter” (550). His downfall leads to an important realization, which he expresses to his lawyer: “All these ties you have, all these people you went to school with and to college, the people who are in your clubs, the people you go out to dinner with—it’s all a thread Tommy, all these ties that make up your life, and when it breaks . . . that’s it!” (550). Sherman’s social alienation and despair even cause him to contemplate suicide. A transformation takes hold, however, following a visit from his co-op president who asks Sherman to move out on grounds that the demonstrators outside the building are upsetting the other tenants. Sherman’s aggressive and colloquial language stresses this change: “Until that sonofabitch came up here, I was thinking of blowing my brains out. Now I wouldn’t dream of it. That would solve all his problems, and he’d dine out on it for a month and be damned sanctimonious while he was at it. He’d tell everybody how we grew up together, and he’d shake that big round bubble head of his. I think I’ll invite those bastards [the demonstrators] . . . on up here [into his apartment] and let ’em dance the mazurka right over his big bubble head” (558). From this point on, McCoy takes center stage as the novel’s unequivocal hero. Killian responds
enthusiastically to Sherman’s transformation: “‘Ayyyyyy,’ said Killian. ‘That’s better. Now you’re turning fucking Irish. The Irish have been living the last twelve hundred years on dreams of revenge. Now you’re talking, bro’” (558).

Wolfe’s challenge to insulation ethics and his embracing of Irish machismo is a far cry from other writers studied here who also reject urban insulation. Wolfe’s urban vision is very different from Mosley’s portrayal of urban riots and race relations, Yamashita’s deconstruction of the ideologies of purity and property and celebration of a borderless future, and Price’s depictions of an oppressed underclass with interiority. Despite these significant differences, I contend that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* should not be dismissed outright on grounds of the novel’s political incorrectness. Such dismissal can cause one to overlook some of the novel’s valuable insights into the relationship between ethics and urban realities. Wolfe is convincingly sympathetic, for example, in his portrayal of the pressures felt by civil servants trying to support families while fulfilling their job duties within a chaotic, maddeningly bureaucratic, and hostile urban environment. As a result, he challenges the knee-jerk liberalism of people oblivious to the daily grind, cruelty, and suffering experienced and witnessed by civil workers such as public attorneys, judges, public school teachers, social workers, and others. For example, after Kramer describes a despicable defendant to his wife and her long-time liberal friends at a trendy restaurant in SoHo, the listeners “start looking at him as if he had become something awful . . . a covert reactionary . . . And he knew in an instant there was no way he could explain to them what he had seen over the past six years” (246). Wolfe also captures the culture’s obsession with money; big money makers and strivers, always characterized as male, are supposed to feel ashamed about leaving work at closing
The one thing you never did was simply go home to the wife ’n’ kiddies’’ (323). The novel even briefly challenges a central component of urban renaissance propaganda: “Before [Sherman] . . . rose the great bowl of Yankee Stadium. Beyond the stadium were the corroding hulks of the Bronx. Ten or fifteen years ago they had renovated the stadium. They had spent a hundred million dollars on it. That was supposed to lead to ‘the revitalization of the heart of the Bronx’ What a grim joke!’ (38). Considering that the Yankees recently built the most expensive ballpark in Major League Baseball history, costing over two billion dollars, over one billion of which was paid for with taxpayers’ money, one should indeed be critical of the rhetoric promoting such projects.97 The Bonfire of the Vanities, nonetheless, espouses a major imbalance similar to sports fandom and ballpark rhetoric associated with urban renaissance. When readers cheer on Sherman McCoy at the end of the novel, as in a Yankees World Series victory, they risk losing sight, and perhaps Wolfe wants this, of a number of important issues. Arguably most important, they are less likely to question Wolfe’s narrative of racial decline when a narrative of industrial decline and federal fiscal abandonment would have been more appropriate. In the next section, I show how The Bonfire of the Vanities sets up crucial aspects of Don DeLillo’s Underworld, which unquestionably challenges Wolfe’s point about the superiority of realist fiction in terms of dramatizing the realities of contemporary urban life. While Wolfe takes up race as his central focus, DeLillo turns to waste alongside an array of issues related to urban privilege and misery. First, though, he turns to baseball.

97 The breakdown of costs can be found here: http://www.fieldofschemes.com/documents/Yanks-Mets-costs.pdf.
Resisting the “Standard Response” to Crisis and Renaissance: DeLillo’s *Underworld*

*Underworld*, a massive and complex novel, embodies DeLillo’s supreme love letter to New York City.\(^9\) The novel bursts with images and narratives of the joys and excitement of urban life. As an ambitious novel charting under-histories of the United States during and after the Cold War, however, success stories and the privilege that follow them are marked mainly by flight from gritty ethnic urban enclaves. Nick Shay, the novel’s protagonist, grew up in the raucous streets of the Bronx, but he lives his adult life in a suburb of Phoenix, that ultimate American sprawl city. He notes twice that he lives “a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Pause. Like someone in the Witness Protection Program” (66, 209). *Underworld* maps a nation’s transformation from strong community ties associated with life in the Bronx in the 1950s and New York’s heyday of graffiti in the 1970s to “these wild privatized times” (802) in which technology and consumption interfere with urban community and the exuberance of city life. Still, the novel does not fully romanticize the 1950s; it notes historically widespread race and gender discrimination and prejudice, proclaiming, “let’s not forget how some things get better” (232). The novel also includes several images highlighting contemporary urban crisis. Moreover, DeLillo’s love letter to New York is radically different from, for example, Woody Allen’s films, which affectionately document the artistic and neurotic lives of privileged New Yorkers. DeLillo’s urban vision contrasts in compelling ways with both Allen and Wolfe’s depictions of privileged urban life.

Differing from Wolfe, DeLillo’s vision is broader, and it is not centered on racial decline;

\(^9\) A wealth of criticism has focused on a range of topics: on the novel’s relationship to modernism and postmodernism, see Nell; on paranoia, see Peter Knight; on waste and capitalism, see Helyer’s “‘Refuse . . .,’” Gleason, and Evans; on Cold war culture, see Myers.
instead, it concentrates on the continuing value of city life in an era of globalization. Cities are not just playgrounds, though, and refusing to see them as such, alongside refusing to see them as waste zones, is fundamental to *Underworld’s* complex ethical framework.

Baseball figures prominently throughout *Underworld*, especially in the opening section, which describes the historic October 3, 1951 playoff game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers in which the announcer Russ Hodges famously shouted, “The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!” after Bobby Thompson hit a three-run homerun in the bottom of the 9th inning. *Underworld* notes how Thompson’s shot “heard ’round the world” coincided with the Soviet Union’s second blast of an atomic weapon, which significantly heated up the Cold War. DeLillo proves a master of crowd scenes throughout the prologue. Cotter Martin, the African American adolescent who sneaks into the game and, after a struggle with a white man, takes home the ball hit by Thompson,

is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands of the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game. (11)

This first page of the novel exudes love for the city and wonder at the power of a game to create a profound sense of connection. Nonetheless, as John N. Duvall has argued, *Underworld* simultaneously promotes and critiques the nostalgia evoked in the opening
crowd scenes. We might be reminded of William Carlos Williams’s poem “At the Ball Game” in which the crowd epitomizes “beauty” and “delights” in “uselessness,” while the speaker recognizes how its massive thoughtlessness can serve transcendent, amazing experiences as well as the cause of Fascism (57). Ross Hodges in the novel adds, “When you deal with crowds, nothing’s predictable” (Underworld 15).

The sense that contemporary life has become more predictable than ever before draws DeLillo most strongly to the urban past. Following the section in which DeLillo highlights the crowd’s sense of community and exuberance, how “[a]ll over the city people are coming out of their houses. This is the nature of Thompson’s homer. It makes people want to be in the streets, joined with others, telling others what has happened” (47), the narrative shifts to privatized and predictable Phoenix and Los Angeles settings in 1992. What is more, the novel describes a game between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the San Francisco Giants, two teams that formerly resided in New York City. In contrast to the opening scene at the Polo Grounds in Upper Manhattan, a “mid-century moment that enters the skin . . . lastingly” (60), the ballgame experience in section I is sanitized, quiet, and detached from any sense of crowd connection. Differences between scenes showcase a 20th-century trend of shutting down interclass contact. While the prologue revels in the excitement and unpredictability of the city, section I depicts (and, in my reading, laments) the triumph of suburbia, privatization, uniformity, and predictability. These developments in the novel represent a sort of social death for both individuals and communities, thus pointing to an overlooked significance to DeLillo’s allusion to Pieter Bruegel’s 1569 painting “The Triumph of Death” in the prologue. Inserted into a 20th-

99 See “Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology.”
century context, the novel uses the painting to indicate the dawning of the Cold War, where a fear of apocalypse reigns. It also, however, foreshadows the fate of the Bronx, especially in the south, following the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, post-WWII suburbanization, and disinvestment in the borough. Death triumphs as the city faces blight and crisis; it simultaneously triumphs in the numbness and blandness associated with Nick’s privileged adult existence and, more broadly, the nation’s suburban turn. Nick attends the 1992 game with colleagues from the waste management company that employs them. They have “Stadium Club” seats, which separate them from the masses: “We were set apart from the field, glassed in at press level, and even with a table by the window we heard only muffled sounds from the crowd. The radio announcer’s voice shot in clearly, transmitted from the booth, but the crowd remained at an eerie distance, soul-moaning like some lost battalion” (91). This scene includes no sense of profound and joyous connection, as in the prologue; instead, it highlights insulation as fundamental to contemporary urban privilege.

The triumph of suburbia and privatization are presented dialectically with urban crisis. DeLillo creates images of 1970s New York, often thought of as the nadir of urban crisis, as well as struggling South Bronx residents in the 1990s. The images directly challenge the pathological imagery of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and, as in the work of Wideman, draw compassionate attention to the plight of children growing up in severely depressed urban environments. The Lower East Side preceding gentrification is soaked with fear, leading baseball memorabiliast Marvin Lundy to sense if you “look at them, they kill you. One look where you catch their eye, it gives them the right to end your life” (188). Urban decay and fear provoke Nick to return to the Bronx (where he can never go
“home” again) to convince his mom, Rosemary, to move away to live with him, his wife, and children in suburban Phoenix. The cars surrounding his mom’s apartment are like “mobile sound” bombs as a result of the music blasting from them, and children ride tricycles in hallways reeking of urine and in which dirty needles lie on the floors and patches of what is probably blood are visible on the walls (211). Playgrounds have a desolate eeriness to them, while hookers in spandex roam the streets quite freely (213). Rosemary has difficulty leaving the place where she has a deep connection and past, but she ultimately acquiesces to Nick’s wishes, thereafter spending most of her awake time watching TV in an air-conditioned room. Nick embraces the standard “common sense” response—flight—to seemingly hopeless urban conditions.

The novel also creates characters who remain amid the dangers and decay of the Bronx despite having other options. In a reversal of Sherman McCoy’s ridiculous masculine response to urban threats in The Bonfire of the Vanities, Sisters Edgar and Gracie present a model of how to negotiate fear rather than letting it ruin one’s morals. The women provide groceries to the needy in a neighborhood of vacant lots, crumbling buildings, and wasting, invisible lives, which DeLillo often evokes in sentence-long paragraphs that force the reader to absorb slowly scenes of urban horror:

“They saw a man with epilepsy.

They saw children with oxygen tanks next to their beds.

They saw a woman in a wheelchair who wore a Fuck New York T-shirt.”

The nuns also encounter “babies without immune systems . . . and babies born addicted—she [Edgar] saw them all the time, three-pound newborns with crack habits who resembled something out of peasant folklore.” The impoverished locals “paid rent for
plywood cubicles worse than prison holes. They [Edgar and Gracie] saw a prostitute whose silicone breasts had leaked, ruptured and finally exploded one day, sending a polymer whiplash across the face of the man on top of her, and she was unemployed now, living in a room the size of a playpen” (246). Gracie and Edgar support a deontological or duty ethics of serving God by serving the poor. The “faces and bodies” of the people they encounter “have enormous power” (801), a power that Levinas articulates in his work on how the singularity of the Other’s face most strongly commands an ethical response.\footnote{For example, see \textit{Otherwise Than Being} (89-97).}

The neighborhood inhabited by the people that Edgar and Gracie serve is known as “the Wall, partly for the graffiti façade and partly the general sense of exclusion—it was a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239). It represents the dialectical inverse of a gated community and the flipside of urban life downplayed and forgotten in the celebrations about urban renaissance, which are strikingly silent in \textit{Underworld}. The name “the Wall” also suggests Wall Street. The narrative highlights this connection in a scene when a group of children in a run-down building are watching, as a result of one child pedaling a bike connected to a generator connected to a TV, “the stock market channel” (812). \textit{Underworld} suggests a connection between actions on Wall Street and the conditions of the Wall. The graffiti façade depicts local children who have died from “TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, abandonment at birth—left in dumpsters, forgot in car, left in Glad Bag stormy night” (239). The novel focuses on Esmeralda, a child who lives at the Wall. She has “a sort of feral intelligence,” embodying a diamond in the rough (244): “She lives wild in the inner ghetto . . . a girl who forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags
behind bodegas.” She “is sometimes seen running through the streets and weeds, a shadow on the rubbled walls of demolished structures, unstumbling, a tactful runner with the sweet and easy stride of some creature of sylvan myth” (810). The nuns want to find and help Esmeralda, who appears to have significant potential. They fail in their mission, however, because “[s]omebody raped Esmeralda and threw her off a roof.” This tragedy leaves Gracie obsessed with the question, “Who do I kill?” (814). In face of extreme adversity, however, the nuns find ways to help numerous “[u]nknown lives” (245) in the South Bronx.

Gracie and Edgar’s efforts, while riddled with doubt, contrast with the behaviors in the novel of tourists and tourism companies that the novel attacks. Rather than helping renew cities after the worst days of urban crisis, urban tourism represents a kind of mindless and unethical consumerist practice. It is part of an urban renaissance machine committed entirely to profits rather than to improving the quality of urban life. When Gracie and Edgar are driving around the South Bronx performing various duties and errands, they spot “a tour bus in carnival colors with a sign in the slot above the windshield reading *South Bronx Surreal*. . . . About thirty Europeans with slung cameras stepped shyly onto the sidewalk in front of the boarded shops and closed factories and they gazed across the street at the derelict tenement in the middle distance.” The sight of the bus makes Gracie “half berserk,” leading her to shout, “It’s not surreal. It’s real, it’s real. Your bus is surreal. You’re surreal” (247). The novel seems to endorse Gracie’s outrage and to call for more of it, seeking ways to address the cruelties of the city without turning urban crisis into a commodity absorbed by the logic of capitalism.
Another key character who decides to stay in the Bronx is Albert Bronzini. He spends his life as a high school science teacher, a chess tutor for Nick’s talented brother Matt, and first husband of artist Klara Sax. More important, he is the novel’s central flâneur, its urban walker. Walking offers an ethical practice that enables people to perceive and interact with their environments in positive ways.\textsuperscript{101} Walking can simultaneously enrich the self and the city. As Rebecca Solnit, author of \textit{Wanderlust: A History of Walking}, asserts, “Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord” (5). Politically, “Walking is about being outside, in public space, and public space is also being abandoned and eroded in older cities, eclipsed by technologies and services that don’t require leaving home, and shadowed by fear in many places (and strange places are always more frightening than known ones, so the less one wanders the city the more alarming it seems, while the fewer the wanderers, the more lonely and dangerous it really becomes)” (10-11). Walking connects Bronzini to various people who contribute to the city and who represent integral parts of DeLillo’s love letter: bakers, barbers, butchers, grocers, and street vendors, among others. These connections forge an important realization about the present-day Bronx: “There are things here, people who show the highest human qualities, outside all notice, because who comes here to see?” (214). Most significant, Bronzini notes, “I’ve been walking around. It’s a complicated thing. I find myself trying to resist the standard

\textsuperscript{101} Evans argues that Bronzini is an “Americanised version of Benjamin’s flâneur, he [Bronzini] can justly claim to be master of an art—‘This is the only art I’ve mastered . . . walking these streets and letting the senses collect what is routinely there’ ([DeLillo] 672)—whose raw material is reality itself, the unpredictable and singular elements of ordinary life, the endlessly varied sights, sounds, and smells of a living city neighbourhood” (Evans 127).
response” (213). Ethics in Underworld similarly hinges upon resisting the standard responses to urban crisis and renaissance. While the rhetoric of urban crisis often promotes the standard response of flight and despair about inner-city urban conditions, and the rhetoric of urban renaissance encourages complacency by downplaying persistent injustices, Underworld explores urban “narrative[s] that” live “in the spaces of the official play-by-play” (27). Charity work and walking represent two ethical responses, both of which produce important interclass contacts, in the face of dominant narratives about U.S. cities. Art represents a third response.

DeLillo’s love letter to New York City is simultaneously a meditation on the value of art. Art, especially painting, sculpture, stand-up comedy, and film, appears significantly in numerous scenes, but for an ethics of urban space, graffiti is the most important art form in the novel. Underworld celebrates “the great gone era of wildstyle graffiti,” 1970s New York City. This era marks a key moment in the rhetoric and reality of urban crisis, as graffiti served as an important scapegoat for political and business elites’ diagnosis of the city. Instead of confronting immense problems with city services, including a neglected subway system, unemployment, poverty, crime, and low graduation rates, mainstream media and Mayor Ed Koch targeted graffiti vandals as responsible for many of the city’s problems (Austin 143-44). DeLillo, however, portrays graffiti as a powerful expression of resistance to the status quo. The novel reinforces Joe Austin’s belief that graffiti art in New York City during the 1970s represented an “important grassroots urban mural movement” (5). Underworld captures this movement by focusing on fictional Ishmael Muñoz, an extremely talented graffiti artist. Muñoz appears later in the novel as an AIDS victim and as a key player in the charity work of Sisters Edgar and
Gracie. DeLillo, through the character of Klara Sax, connects “a graffiti instinct” to a “survival instinct” where artists “show who [they] are” (77) in the face of mass conformity, mass consumption, and massive blindness toward oppressed populations.

Muñoz tags himself as “Moonman,” and seeks to “vandalize” people’s “eyeballs” through his art (435). As some believe that poems must be read aloud to be fully appreciated, *Underworld* articulates an aesthetic theory for appreciating subway train graffiti:

> You have to stand on a platform and see it coming or you can’t know the feeling a writer gets, how the number 5 train comes roaring down the rat alleys and slams out of the tunnel, going whop-pop onto the high tracks, and suddenly there it is, Moonman riding the sky in the heart of the Bronx, over the whole burnt and rusted country, and this is the art of the backstreets talking, all the way from Bird [Charlie Parker], and you can’t *not* see us anymore, you can’t *not* know who we are, we got total notoriety now . . . we’re getting fame, we ain’t ashamed, and the train go rattling over the garbagy streets and past the dead-eye windows of all those empty tenements that have people living there even if you don’t see them, but you have to see our tags and cartoon figures and bright and rhyming poems, this is the art that can’t stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face—like I’m your movie, motherfucker (440-41).

DeLillo blends bop (connected to Charlie Parker) and hip-hop styles to articulate a sort of graffiti manifesto that counters anti-graffiti rhetoric. The “you” in the long passage clearly stands for urban elites dedicated to using the city as a site for promoting their own
wealth at the expense of others and as a playground for the rich. DeLillo depicts graffiti as an important protest against urban inequalities, suggesting that anti-graffiti campaigns for the sake of urban renaissance mask sinister intentions of hiding and denying, rather than addressing, the city’s starkest realities.

DeLillo’s love letter to New York City, then, expresses love for a deeply flawed partner. What is not so clear, however, is if the city can be changed in substantively positive ways. One wonders, too, if the novel’s affection for graffiti carries into support for graffiti artists’ ethic of not tagging over others’ work (Austin 54-55) and how cities might be different if this code were applied to attempts to renew the city more generally. *Underworld* surely suggests that genuine renewal of city life depends on a sort of renewal of the self and vice versa. In one of the novel’s most famous passages, Nick, looking back on his life in the Bronx, comments, “I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on this earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked the real streets and did things slip-bang and felt angry and ready all the time” (810).

The novel, when looked at as a whole, partly endorses this romance with a life of disorder, disarray, and aliveness, implying an inextricable connection between the nature of the city and subjectivity; however, it simultaneously urges ethical responsibility embodied in the nuns’, Bronzini’s, Moonman’s, and others’ responses to urban realities. These responses, moreover, illuminate the importance of the novel’s repetition of “everything is connected.” The connectivity of everything might be a necessary fiction, but DeLillo’s deployment of it suggests, following Paul Tillich, that “sin is separation”
(Tillich 195); therefore, attempts to shield the harsher realities of urban life from one’s purview are sinful as well. It only makes sense, then, that as the novel opens with a dazzling crowd scene, it essentially closes with one, too. In an astonishing moment, germaphobe Sister Edgar “yanks off her gloves” during a working-class crowd’s witnessing of what appears to be Esmeralda’s divine image illuminated “onto a billboard” by the lights of a passing train. The image lasts for “less than half a second,” yet it provides an “angelus of clearest joy” that moves Edgar to shake and pump hands “with the great-bodied women [around her] who roll their eyes to heaven” (822). This face-to-face interclass embrace encapsulates the novel’s sense of what matters: contact, openness, and singularity—all of which the cauldron of urban life best provides. The dialectical positioning of urban privilege and urban misery in Underworld indicates that interpreting “everything is connected” simply as an expression of postmodern paranoia rather than as a moral statement with significant ecological implications would be a serious misreading of the novel. I return briefly to Underworld in the conclusion of this chapter. First, though, I turn to the most controversial novel in American fiction of the last thirty years.

**Urban America’s Pathologies in American Psycho**

If ethical criticism once solely meant using fiction to locate models of ethical behavior, none are likely to be found in Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho, which, along with Oliver Stone’s Wall Street, arguably captures the zeitgeist of 1980s privileged urban America more stunningly than any text of the era. Critics and activists, however, viciously attacked the book when it was published in 1991, calling it misogynistic,
pornographic, barbaric trash.\textsuperscript{102} No doubt, the novel’s gruesomely graphic descriptions of violence, including of genital mutilation, cannibalism, and necrophilia, can be classified as extreme. As a whole, reviewers deemed the text unethical, but over time critics have focused on the novel’s rendering of a truly savage milieu. On this point, Sonia Baelo Allué has noted that the novel makes a telling intervention in crime fiction. In standard examples of the genre, the killer is caught at the end, whereby the social order is restored, providing the reader as well as the other characters in the text something to celebrate. Patrick Bateman, the Wall Street stockbroker serial killer, a Master of the Universe and a quintessential “boy next door” (Ellis 11, 20) of \textit{American Psycho}, however, remains free at the end of the novel, which suggests that Bateman embodies the dominant social order so he need not be caught. Similarly, Carla Freccero argues that “through the serial killer . . . we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate the violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or in the social order (48). Tony Williams sees the novel as a postmodern revision of literary naturalism derived from Zola: “Although Patrick is a fictional character . . . the beast that created him,” an urban and national culture reveling in greed, narcissism, and materialism, continues to flourish (419). My own analysis extends these readings by focusing on the ways that \textit{American Psycho} pathologizes urban America. The book’s final line, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399), most forcefully suggests its appeal to ethics: in one sense finishing the book signifies a beginning for hope, as readers are implicitly called upon to do what they can to depathologize urban worlds outside the literary text.

\textsuperscript{102} For a summary of these attacks, see Eberly (103-131).
American Psycho connects to both The Bonfire of the Vanities and to Underworld in remarkable ways. In his mid-twenties, Patrick Bateman is a major player for Pierce & Pierce, the same name that Tom Wolfe uses for the Wall Street investment firm where Sherman McCoy works. American Psycho takes place in 1989, a few years after McCoy leaves the firm, but McCoy’s fame remains intact, as evident when his name comes up in a conversation among Bateman’s friends (49). The name Pierce & Pierce, of course, suggests physical violence, implying that certain kinds of investments represent metaphorical slayings. “I made a killing” is usually seen as a good thing, after all. While McCoy sells bonds, Bateman specializes in “mergers and acquisitions,” which he purposefully calls “murders and executions” in one of the most famous puns of the novel (206) showing Ellis to be more invested than Wolfe in advancing critiques of capitalism. We can think of Underworld as a direct challenge to one of American Psycho’s thematic pronouncements. Bateman justifies his lifestyle in part with the creed, “our lives are not all interconnected” (226). DeLillo’s work, in contrast, repeatedly stresses the interconnectivity of everything. DeLillo emerges as a pragmatist when these two texts are put together: the philosophy of interconnectivity might not be provable, but it is one that represents a crucial step toward reducing the spread of Patrick Bateman-like beings. Moreover, “Wall Street” is a brand of heroin in Underworld: both the stock market and the drug poison society’s most vulnerable populations.

Arguably the most unsettling scene in American Psycho, and one that highlights an essential unethical component of contemporary urban life, resonates powerfully with The Bonfire of the Vanities. Bateman decides to revisit the apartment of Paul Owen one hundred and sixty-one days after supposedly murdering two prostitutes there (366). Upon
arrival, he notices that the key he stole from Owen, a competitor stockbroker whom Bateman claims to have murdered, no longer allows him entry into the building. With some help from the doorman, Bateman eventually runs into Mrs. Wolfe, the real estate agent showcasing Owen’s apartment. The encounter is tense, eerie, and awkward, leaving both the reader and Bateman wondering exactly what Wolfe knows. As for the apartment itself, “the torrents of gore and the blood that washed over” it are, of course, gone. Everything looks pristine despite the “dozens of bouquets in glass vases” that “fill the apartment” (369). Bateman asks Wolfe if the apartment is Paul Owen’s, and she replies that it isn’t. She catches Bateman in a lie when he claims to have seen an advertisement for the apartment in the New York Times even though no such ad was ever posted; all the while Bateman holds a surgical mask in anticipation of appalling stench. She warns him twice, “Don’t make any trouble” (369, 370). The agent’s name is wonderfully heavy-handed, associating the real estate business with animal ferocity. It also evokes both the author and content of The Bonfire of the Vanities, which similarly displays the callousness of the New York City real estate industry. Ellis has created an urban renaissance scene par excellence, suggesting the horror that gets removed from consciousness and the disposable lives that disappear in the process of urban renovation.

Clamoring over expensive real estate is one way American Psycho presents an urban world in transition, from “crisis” to “renaissance.” Imagery of 1980s urban crisis—homelessness and the AIDS and crack epidemics in particular—suffuses the novel, yet most critical attention has seen these details as mere background. In its opening pages,

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103 Pynchon, meanwhile, might be alluding to both books in his creation Mickey Wolfmann.
104 For an exception to this claim, see Conley.
the novel confronts us with Tim Price’s irritation over seeing twenty-four beggars in one day alongside an urban environment that includes, according to Price’s summary of the day’s newspaper, “babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway . . . baseball players with AIDS, . . . mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies on the streets, baby-sellers, black market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses—” (4).

These realities capture a period of major federal disinvestment in cities. While in 1981, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had 32.2 billion dollars to spend, it had only 7.5 billion in 1988. During the same time, total federal funds devoted to big city budgets plummeted from 22% to a meager 6%. These funds dwindled mainly because of a shift in attitudes and policies about the role of government that were best embodied and articulated by Ronald Reagan during whose presidency wealthy elites enjoyed substantial tax breaks. Tellingly, in one scene of the novel, Bateman is on the phone with his lawyer trying to get additional tax breaks (382).

“Bridges” were indeed collapsing, as the mentally ill (through deinstitutionalization), veterans, and the poor could depend less and less on governmental aid. While the band Huey Lewis in the News was singing “Hip to Be Square,” a “masterpiece” (357), according to Bateman, privileged urban American society, epitomized by Bateman’s hero Donald Trump, was embracing the code that it is hip to be greedy as well as ostentatious with one’s possessions.

Homeless people receive shocking, cruel treatment in the novel. While most urban dwellers and visitors prefer to deny homeless people’s existence and while New

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105 See Dreier.
York City currently spends $500,000 “each year on air, bus, and train tickets” to remove them from the city,\(^{106}\) Ellis does not let readers forget about homeless people’s strong presence in 1980s urban America. He juxtaposes Bateman and his friends’ lavish and outrageously priced dinners with images of desperate beggars (51) who are often brutalized, as when the yuppie characters dangle money in front of the indigent before putting the bills back into their expensive wallets. John Conley has noted that some of the homeless characters could have previously resided at Tompkins Square Park, which, as mentioned in chapter three, became a focal point for New York City’s transformation from urban crisis to renaissance. A riot broke out there in August 1988 as the result of police evictions of homeless people, who had set up encampments in the public park. The conflict was concomitant with and inseparable from the Lower East Side’s extensive gentrification, which caused protesters to carry signs reading, “Gentrification is Class War.” On December 14, 1989, the coldest night of the winter, “the entire park population was forcibly evicted, their belongings hauled away by city sanitation trucks” (Conley 117).

The first scene of overt violence in the novel describes Bateman cruelly attacking an African American homeless man, Al, and the man’s dog. Al, who sits on a sewage grate (for free heat) two blocks north of Tompkins Square Park, keeps next to him a sign that reads, “I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME” (128). Bateman offers the man his hand and suggests a willingness to provide money and food, but he insists on asking, “Why don’t you get a job?” Al is crying while stating, “I’m so hungry.” He is cold and cannot find a shelter (129). Bateman blames Al for these problems:

\(^{106}\) From Harper’s Index (13), Harper’s Magazine, October 2009.
“Listen. Do you think it’s fair to take money from people who do have jobs? Who do work? . . . Get a goddamn job, Al . . . You’ve got a negative attitude. That’s what’s stopping you” (130). Bateman parrots the right-wing rhetoric of individualism and anti-government aid, which is surely presented ironically considering that Bateman’s elite education and high-paying job resulted mainly from his family’s wealth and connections. Moreover, Bateman never narrates himself doing any actual work. In his office, he plays with various gadgets, flirts with and harasses his secretary, and spends considerable time focusing on what he can do to maintain and improve his already extremely fit, good-looking, and stylish appearance. Al, in contrast to Bateman’s sleek look, lives in rags and, more important, reeks of excrement, which repulses Bateman, who is blind to how gentrification and “renaissance” coincide with reductions in the number of available public restrooms (Conley 130-31). Before stabbing Al several times and then torturing the dog, Patrick expresses a suspect ethical principle: “Al . . . I’m sorry. It’s just that . . . I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you” (131), a point made painfully more specific when Bateman calls Al a “crazy fucking nigger” (132). I say “suspect” because Bateman does (apparently) kill people, such as Paul Owen, who inhabit the same social, class, and racial spheres; certainly, his reasoning here and elsewhere displays a void of empathy and an excess of narcissism. Regarding the significance of this scene, Conley claims, “Perhaps nowhere in recent American fiction are we presented with such a ludicrously violent literalization of the ‘war on poverty’” (131). Ellis, in other words, suggests that Bateman functions as an extreme representation of New York City’s renaissance, which eliminates traces, as with the blood and guts left behind in Paul
Owen’s apartment, of anything that impedes the accumulation of wealth. Ellis’s aggressive, graphic style underscores these lost traces.

The style also seeks to overcome a blasé response to urban realities. In addition to its violent imagery, tedious lists of consumer items litter the book. A reader rarely passes a page without learning of the numerous brand names of characters’ possessions. This catalogue device enables Ellis to stress a central point of the novel: “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in . . . I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface—food, clothes—that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive.”107 These lists easily annoy and over-stimulate us, as they should. The novel provokes reflection about why we are more likely to put up with obsessive attention to the trivial details of consumerism in actual life than we are in novels. We are likely to gloss ever more quickly through these lists, which reflect the endless minutia of an urban world that contrasts notably with the inspiring, hypnotic work of an exuberant Whitman catalogue singing the vibrant energy of American life. We, like the characters in American Psycho, become infected with a blasé attitude, a defense mechanism against being “swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism” (Simmel 11) of urban, multinational consumerism. As Simmel elaborates, “there is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves (14). The rapid narrative

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107 See interview with Cohen.
jump cuts in the novel, such as the radically abrupt transitions from brutal murder to music review, capture the fragmented nature of contemporary urban realities.

The swift, stimulating, and confusing realities of dense urban life combines with the impersonal nature of a money economy to transform our “mental tendencies” (13), Simmel argues, reducing “all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level.” Furthermore, “To the extent that money, with its colourlessness and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values, it becomes the frightful leveler—it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money” (14). This transformation in being and thinking suggests how the novel operates logically as naturalist fiction. The blasé attitude, which Simmel unpacks, causes a decline in one’s capacity for making distinctions (the difference between murders and mergers, for example). Ellis emphasizes the triumph of the blasé attitude in the several moments in which characters fail to take Patrick’s numerous confessions seriously (141, 295, 313, 330, 338, 367, 377). The impact of the city’s stimulants, especially in the realms of media and advertising, has become even more potent since Simmel wrote his essay at the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, under the pressures of a dense and chaotic urban environment, the world and its inhabitants become more and more interchangeable, which Ellis dramatizes through various encounters of mistaken identity among characters in the novel, and which Bateman expresses directly: “everyone is interchangeable anyway” (379). Despite the book’s naturalist logic, which is signaled immediately in the opening epigraph to Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, one should not see
*American Psycho* as fundamentally anti-urban. The city per se is not the problem; rather, what Ellis most takes to task is a city that glorifies and embraces the codes of Patrick Bateman’s heroes, who turn out to be different versions of himself: real estate mogul Donald Trump and President Ronald Reagan.

Bateman as Reagan works at the level of form as well. As Elizabeth Young has persuasively argued, Bateman, the all-American boy next door, “is an extremely unreliable narrator” (94). The opening chapter is titled “April Fools,” after all. By the end of the text, readers cannot definitively determine whether Bateman’s serial killing is real or takes place solely in his imagination. When Bateman finds himself in a shootout with the police, our suspension of disbelief is undoubtedly tested, as it is in other scenes. Nonetheless, throughout *American Psycho*, Ellis exposes a human capacity for astonishing denial and complicity. Reagan sometimes confused movie scenes with actual history, and the reliability of some of his grand narratives—trickle-down economics and “welfare queens,” for example—are clearly questionable. Reagan further celebrated the Horatio Alger narrative of the American Dream, of personal mobility resulting solely from hard work and good character. Bateman’s own success and trajectory, not to mention developments since the publication of *American Psycho* of a dwindling middle class, increased unemployment, stagnant wages, and rising tuition costs, forcibly challenge that narrative’s reliability. Reagan enjoyed evoking John Winthrop’s “city upon the hill,” yet his means for achieving his vision often exacerbated life for underserved urban residents. Social programs were slashed, incarceration rates increased, and indifference to and ignorance about AIDS prevailed, all developments that Bateman supports. To conclude, Ellis’s novel simultaneously challenges myths of urban
Mercy, Conscience, and Cool Caring in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*

Chang-rae Lee’s novel *Native Speaker* has rightly received considerable critical attention, yet the centrality of the relationship between ethics and urban realities has been mostly overlooked. The novel certainly lacks finger-wagging gestures (and this is probably part of its appeal). Nonetheless, I shall argue that conscience, which is never labeled as such, functions as the elephant in the book, and Lee embraces an ethics that is compassionate, yet skeptical without being cynical. Lee focuses on the relationship between ethics and immigrant urban realities, especially as it relates to urban success stories. He explores this relationship by situating his work within famous literary precursors including Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Walt Whitman’s poem “The Sleepers,” by reworking literary modes including the spy and immigrant novel, and by subtly evoking competing ethical codes. Compared to other writers in this study, Lee’s lyricism is closest to Treuer’s, and his skepticism toward the possibility of radical social and political change to Pynchon’s, yet the urban vision in *Native Speaker* is distinctively his own.

Unlike the other writers in this chapter, Lee focuses on Korean American identity and the New York City borough of Queens: each represents overlapping narratives of invisibility. Despite being the most diverse, the largest in area, and the second largest borough in population (just behind Brooklyn), Queens remains relatively marginal in
both New York City literature and the popular imagination. Lee challenges this status of invisibility in his novel by dramatizing residents’ struggles for a decent life. In this sense, the novel performs an ethics of witnessing the “countless unheard nobodies” (83) who are engaged in the “painstaking, plodding” (55) labor that feeds and makes the city run. Native Speaker witnesses newcomers to Queens “in the street or on the bus or in the demi-shops” and articulates a “need” “to undo the cipherlike faces scrawled with hard work, and no work, and all trouble” (170). Writing about Queens also involves deromanticizing popular immigrant success narratives. As Henry Park, the protagonist, spy, and narrator of the novel, observes regarding his first-generation father’s hard-won wealth: “My father like all successful immigrants before him gently and not so gently exploited his own” (54). Henry’s own privilege rests in large part on inheriting this legacy, which affects his conscience.

Regarding the importance of invisibility in terms of Korean American identity in Native Speaker, Tina Chen has shown how Lee echoes Invisible Man, particularly in this passage that concludes the first chapter of Native Speaker. Henry describes himself as follows: “I am an amiable man. I can be most personable, if not charming, and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me” (7). Henry is amiable and invisible by choice and because of historical and cultural pressures. Amiability helps him slide through dominant society without major problems and contributes to his quite stable and privileged lifestyle—stable, that is, until his son dies in a tragic accident and his wife, Lelia, leaves

108 The successful TV show King of Queens has surely and unfortunately influenced the popular imagination’s perception of Queens. Native Speaker’s focus on the diversity and challenges of contemporary Queens provides a useful counterpoint to such sugarcoated TV imagery.
him. Henry’s dual amiability and emotional restraint contribute to an identity formation of opacity that damages his relationship with his wife and eventually leads to a crisis in self-understanding. Lee’s linking of invisibility and amiability, moreover, suggests his engagement with the myth of the model minority, which praises Asian Americans for their strong work ethic and respectful social behaviors. This myth, as scholars have argued, represents a not-so-subtle way of pitting Asian Americans against other minority groups in order to maintain and justify inequalities embedded in the status quo. Henry adopts the traits of a model minority to his and his company’s advantage, but work and personal experiences eventually help produce a crisis in conscience regarding the central “challenge for us Asians in America. How do you say no to what seems like a compliment?” (193).

Indeed, this question has particular salience to Asian Americans, but also to the ethics of urban life more generally. The novel emphasizes that compliments do not always reinforce ethical deeds although they are often expressed in language associated with ethics as well as the supposed good life. For example, in the Korean American community that Lee creates, success is mainly tied to one’s profession and income, so working on “mergers and acquisitions” (191) and participating in suburban (white) flight are widely considered key components of the good life, as they are in dominant society. At work, Henry is told to do the “right” (44) thing by following orders regardless of any qualms of conscience that he might have, and his boss and coworkers praise him when he

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109 James Kyung-Jin Lee states, “The model minority myth first gained popularity in 1965 and 1966, when a series of articles in Time and U.S. News & World Report celebrated the quiet tenacity of Japanese and Chinese Americans just as the Civil Rights Movement was entering its most visibly radical phase” (“Where the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority” (245)).
performs his job well. Henry’s work as a spy for “multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, and individuals of resources and connections” (18) afflicts his conscience despite the positive reinforcements, but the hazards of simply quitting (226) are too strong. Play it safe, follow orders, do not question the dominant social order, and one will have a reasonably good chance at a decent life with the possibility of generous rewards. At what cost, though? These issues relate to Henry as they do to a rising global urban middle class in places like India, China, and Brazil, where participation in the global economy can require complicity with forces of inequality alongside escape from grinding poverty. Lee’s poignant portrayal of Henry’s ethical dilemma recalls aspects of Pynchon’s paranoid vision. What is more, the novel’s apparent support of Henry’s decision to leave employment as a spy after finishing one final mission evokes an updated version of Pynchon’s ethic in *V* applied to Henry’s particular circumstances: to “keep cool but care” (394).

Before Henry pursues a life of keeping cool while caring, however, he agrees to spy on John Kwang, a charismatic and rising Korean American Queens politician with a real shot of becoming New York City’s future mayor. For many of the city’s residents, Kwang represents a uniting force in a painfully divided metropolis and the possibility of making the city more just and democratic by attending to the concerns of the voiceless. His downfall, however, suggests the novel’s skepticism toward radical change under the current system. Kwang embodies a powerful utopian impulse in the novel, a flawed but nonetheless engaging model for how to improve urban conditions. “Before I knew of him, I had never even conceived of someone like him” (139), states Henry. Lee thus suggests the power of fiction to create new possibilities at both the level of politics and
character. Kwang’s political rhetoric, which aims in particular to reconcile divisions between Korean grocers and African American customers employs anaphora and first-person plural pronouns to articulate both a critical and hopeful message: “Let us not think about the mayor today. Let us not think about the inaction of his administration in the face of what he says is a ‘touchy situation’” Rather, “Let us show compassion for the mayor’s position . . . He just found out what’s on this side of the East River . . . Let’s not accept [his] kind of imagery. Let’s think instead of what we have to bear together” (150-51). Kwang cleverly opposes the mayor’s apparently limited vision of the city—that Manhattan is what really matters. Doing so brilliantly appeals to mutually-felt grievances among a divided population. These attacks promote a sense of difference (Queens versus Manhattan) to forge feelings of unity among Queen’s residents. Learning to live together while at the same time fighting for justice, according to Kwang, requires residents to see hatred toward others as symptomatic of self-hatred and to recognize group histories as a crucial source for developing empathy. He urges his Korean listeners to understand that “the blacks who spend money in your store and help put food on your table and send your children to college cannot open their own stores. . . . Why? . . . Because banks will not lend to them. . . . Because these neighborhoods are troubled, high-risk.” He adds, “We Koreans know something of this tragedy. Recall the days over fifty years ago, when Koreans were made servants and slaves in their own country by the imperial Japanese Army. How our mothers and sisters were made the concubines of the very soldiers who enslaved us” (152-53). The force of his appeal, to underscore “histories that all of us should know” (153), is rooted in rhetorical eloquence as well as in describing realities rarely voiced in the public sphere. Kwang’s entrance into the world of politics and the
hope he signifies compel the question, “Can you really make a family of thousands?” (326). Kwang suggests that historical understanding alongside genuine face-to-face interclass and interracial contacts are necessary to promote urban justice and to create urban “families” that overcome entrenched barriers.

Henry’s mastery of amiability, alongside his overall competence and ethnicity, enable him to rise quickly within Kwang’s staff. Henry and Kwang are drawn to each other, and this only intensifies Henry’s crisis of conscience. Kwang will have to deal with his own troubled conscience after he authorizes the bombing of his headquarters in retaliation for another close staffer’s betrayal. Eduardo, a spy whom even Henry did not suspect, is killed along with a German immigrant woman who was not expected to be at the office. This incident raises problems with distinctions. Who is more ethically at fault, Glimmer and Company, the spy agency for which Henry works, or Kwang’s political operation, which seemed to have so much potential for progressive change? As Chen claims, “as part of its deconstructive project, Lee’s text emphasizes repeatedly the impossible distinctions between criminal and victim, spy and subject” (182). The bombing marks the beginning of Kwang’s downfall, which slowly reveals weaknesses in character. The novel espouses skepticism toward the possibility of a single figure bringing radical change to society—an important perspective in the age of Obama—yet it is not cynical. This matters because the novel’s skepticism without cynicism underpains an ethics of mercy, which is key to the novel’s constructive project.

Living amid urban realities can be merciless, Native Speaker regularly reminds its audience. Lee focuses in particular on cruelties imposed on taxicab drivers and undocumented immigrants. The novel describes a surge in murders of cabbies, a
particularly vulnerable group, many of whom do not speak English fluently: “What they have in common are the trinkets from their homelands swaying from the rearview window, the strings of beads, shells, the brass letters, the blurry snapshots of their children, the night-worn eyes. I wonder if even the Cuban could beg for his life so that the killer might understand. What could he do? Have mercy, should be the first lesson in this city, how to say the phrase instantly in forty signs and tongues” (246). This insight significantly shifts immediately to Henry noting a news story about “a small freighter” running aground “off far Rockaway in the middle of the night.” It includes “fifty Chinese men who have paid $20,000 each to smugglers to ship them to America. Men are leaping from the sides of the boat, clinging to ropes dangling down into the water. Rescue boats bob in the rough surf, plucking the treaders with looped gifts. The drowned are lined up on the dock beneath canvas tarps. The ones who make it, dazed, soaked, unspeaking, are led off in a line into police vans” (246-47). This scene is almost certainly based on an actual 1993 incident involving the smuggling ship Golden Venture and three hundred prospective Chinese immigrants. The “passengers on the Golden Venture were imprisoned for periods extending into years, and the last of the . . . detainees were not released until fifty-three of them were pardoned by President Clinton on March of 1997” (Corley 62).

Lee’s concern for invisible populations in these scenes carries into the novel’s denouement, which captures both a nativist renaissance and an absence of mercy on the part of the Immigration Naturalization Service (INS). Henry’s rise within Kwang’s staff eventually includes responsibility for organizing one of Kwang’s major projects, a ggeh, or Korean money club. Members contribute to the ggeh, which can help provide funds for
starting a business or paying a tuition bill for a son or daughter. Kwang, with his Whitman-like embrace of the city’s tired, poor, and huddled masses, however, revises the club to include more than Koreans. The *ggeh* depends on trust, yet it works because “reputation is always worth more than money.” Henry keeps careful, detailed records: “I have steadily become a compiler of lives. I am writing a new book of the land” (279). These records in combination with required personal interviews with *ggeh* users promote interclass contact enabling Henry to get to know a largely undocumented and silent population. They signify something else entirely, however, when the INS gets its hands on them after Henry provides printouts to his boss. As the INS spokesperson says to the media at the end of one of the novel’s final chapters about the one hundred or so undocumented people connected to the list, “we have hit all the suspected illegals and their families at their residences early this morning. It should be pretty much over by now. We have them all” (330). The taut, frightening succinctness in the director’s language speaks to his agency’s lack of mercy.

*Native Speaker* provides a sympathy machine drastically different from that produced by government and media outlets. Regarding the significance of the *ggeh*, Henry states that Kwang “was merely giving to them just the start, like other people get an inheritance, a hope chest of what they would work hard for in the rest of their lives.” The INS incident affects Henry’s ethics, which foregrounds this point: “My citizenship is an accident of birth” (334). Working with Kwang has made Henry more like Whitman, someone deeply aware of the accident of birth and whose words from the poem “The Sleepers” open the novel: “I turn but do not extricate myself, / Confused, a past-reading, another, / but with darkness yet.” Henry turns away from his work as a spy, but he cannot
extricate himself, his conscience, from the consequences of his actions. He, like everyone, can never claim with certainty an absolute reading of self, of other, of city; we are left with much darkness. Accordingly, when fellow Kwang staffer states, “Don’t make a mistake with your life, Henry Park,” she asks the impossible (264). The impossibility of such a command, from the novel’s vantage, insists on an ethics of mercy.

Yet this ethics is not built on any naïve sense of trust, as in, show mercy to all regardless of one’s own safety and self-interest. On this point, the novel stages a dialectic between transparency and opacity. It is Henry’s opacity—to others as well as to himself—that leads to his estrangement with Lelia, who is openly emotional and seems to embrace a willed blindness of her own: “she can’t hide a single thing . . . she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy” (159). Before boarding a plane to begin a trip that she says will give her time to think clearly about her marriage with Henry, she hands Henry a poem that she has written, characterizing him as a “surreptitious / B + student of life / . . . illegal alien / emotional alien . . . / Yellow peril: neo-American / . . . stranger / follower / traitor / spy” (5). This poem, which draws on a the history of racist discourse, alongside the lingering grief following the couple’s son’s death, occasions the introspective tone of the entire novel. This tone is integral to the ethical project of *Native Speaker*, modeling how to come to terms with one’s past and present and thereby develop a sense of how to live in the future. While masked identity and total self-possession are

110 Henry states, “we” Koreans “perhaps depend too often on the faulty honor of silence, use it too liberally and for gaining advantage. I showed Lelia how this was done, sometimes brutally, my face a peerless mask, the bluntest instrument” (96). Regarding what I see as Lelia’s willed innocence, she, for example, objects to Henry’s work—“I just see it as something not good” (127)—yet she fails to grasp any similarities between Henry’s projects and her entrepreneurial father’s. Her father has quite possibly committed dirty deeds that contributed to her own comfortable and privileged life.
flawed ways of being in the world, according to the novel, so too is absolute openness, perhaps especially in heterogeneous, globally-connected, and competitive urban environments. One crucial objective of spies at Henry’s company is to use their amiability to open up their targets, to make them transparent and therefore vulnerable. This point is most eerily captured in a scene describing Henry’s training shortly after Glimmer and Company hires him. The scene undercuts sympathy we might have for Henry, as it shows that he knew exactly what sort of work would be expected of him. The incident involves Glimmer’s Pete Ichibata spying on an engineering doctoral student, Wen, who had “organized rallies against the hard-liners in Beijing in the flag plaza of the UN” (174). Pete and Henry present themselves as a reporter and photographer respectively working for a Japanese newspaper. Pete bonds with the homesick student. Pete kept on him, talking so gently and sweetly that he seemed all the more furious in his discipline, and I thought he had to be murdering himself inside to hold the line like that. We had been there nearly an hour. In the second hour Wen broke. He opened like the great gates of the Forbidden City. Pete led us inside the walls. We got whole scrolls of names, people both here and in China, and even names of contributors (all of them minor, not even the stuff of trivia) who helped the students by paying for flyers and banners and the renting of meeting halls. (174-75).

Henry is enthralled but unaware of the meeting’s true significance until “Wen said the name of the girl he loved,” at which point Henry recognized “immediately that she was doomed” (175). While Henry’s story warns against an urban ethics built on opacity and
disregard for the implications of one’s actions, Wen’s naivety cautions against
transparency that is grounded in the failure to be sufficiently paranoid.

For Jack, Henry’s coworker and elder adviser, whose main role in the novel
involves motivating Henry to do his job effectively without considering ethical
implications, paranoia is a reasonable response to globalization. Globalization justifies
Jack’s ethics of insular self-interest, an ethics that denies much room for agency. He tells
Henry, “People like us can see just a small part of things. This is inescapable.” (288). For
him, interconnectivity means denial rather than the acceptance of responsibility: “A bad
thing can happen in the world. We do what we’re paid for and then who can tell what it
means? I flush a big one down the dumper and next week some kid in Costa Rica gets a
rash. What the fuck am I supposed to do? And then everyone asks, who’s to blame?”
(45).

Native Speaker challenges Jack’s ethics of globalization. With Henry choosing to
help Lelia with her work as a speech therapist for immigrant children at the end of the
novel, Native Speaker does seem to push for trying to figure out the wide-ranging
meanings and effects of our actions and incomes. Differing from both the dominant
neoliberal narrative of urban renaissance and the traditional spy narrative, Native Speaker
is wary of endorsing the status quo. Nonetheless, it confidently remarks, “the city . . .
must always be renewed” (304). Renewal for the novel, however, does not mean
Disneyfication and the creation of a consumer paradise; rather, it involves embracing
multiple languages and dialects, rejecting “an old syntax” (196) of exploitation and
wealth accumulation in favor of mercy, interclass contact, and keeping cool while caring.
Keeping cool does not mean absolute withdrawal, however; instead, it seems to mean
doing things that nurture youth, mercy, and community. As in *Underworld*, rising
mobility and wealth lead to the diminishment of community engagement, interclass
contact, and urban pleasure in *Native Speaker*. Certainly, Lee’s novel is not particularly
affirmative and optimistic. As James Kyung-Jin Lee observes, with Kwang’s downfall, the
work to expand public space and a public discourse is abandoned, and Henry’s
reconciliation with Lelia is predicated on his retreat from any activity in the
public domain and into the comforts of private space. We are left with the death
of a political movement, replaced and displaced by hesitant narrative therapy. . . .

Lee’s narrative suggests movement into the space of privatized enclosures. (253)
This movement need not be inevitable and forever, however, as the novel emphasizes in
its vexed search for ways “to speak truthfully and not be demonized or made a traitor”
(197). Narrative therapy, meanwhile, provides a useful strategy for promoting an ethics
of urban privilege. The introspective and melancholic tone, the engagement with and
revision of literary traditions, and the dramatizing of difficult ethical dilemmas all enact
the process of developing a viable ethics of urban privilege that keeps alive hope for
making cities more just and livable for all.

With the exception of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and unlike the previous two
chapters, the texts in this chapter do not endorse specific ethical-formal imperatives, such
as always historicize and always write from multiple perspectives. Still, while Wolfe
wants to replicate, with a satirical edge, the literary modes of the past (realism and
naturalism) for the present, Ellis, DeLillo, and Lee revise old modes and create new ones;
As with their revisions of literary modes, these writers re-imagine urban renaissance and
renewal. DeLillo, in *Underworld*, has penned a historical, avant-garde, religious, comedic, and hopeful novel, a “shamelessly sentimental jock novel,” that is simultaneously “maddeningly cool . . . a self-reflexive exercise in language, a vast and enclosing playscape in which a writer manipulates voices to create a stunning jazz-like improv, and a collage of styles” (Dewey 10-11). Ellis takes the tropes of crime fiction and the gothic novel and develops them into a viscerally painful critique of a particular kind of urban privilege. Lee articulates his ethics of urban privilege through an introspective tone that models changes required at the personal level in order for cities to be truly “renewed.” Experimentations at the level of style, then, are not merely playful, even though playfulness of various kinds is valued in these books. Instead, experimentation in this body of urban fiction offers machinery for constructing as well as for deconstructing values.

The intertwining of play, style, and ethics takes us back to one of this chapter’s starting points: the meaning of fun cities. In a sort of updating of the ethos of Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” *American Psycho* shows how what is fun for one can be the source of intense pain and humiliation for others. *Underworld* dramatizes how the supposed fun of certain forms of urban tourism maintains urban inequalities, yet it sees in urban art and art in general a potential for exhilarating fun that can awaken minds and consciences. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* captures the fun of defiance, and *Native Speaker* portrays the excitement of urban political organizing. The sources of fun and the good life in these novels usually serve social and community needs while enriching the self. When developments celebrated as
part of urban renewal or renaissance fail to serve these functions, the novels generally contend or imply, they ought to be challenged.

The novels ultimately link urban renaissance and privilege to Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness.” Both deprived and privileged urban residents have had their beings “thrown” into the world, and therefore luck serves as the strongest root of privilege, the novels insist. They agree with Zadie Smith’s point that recognition of “the extreme contingency of culture,” (“Speaking in Tongues”) or one’s “thrownness,” is crucial to ethical growth. When Nick in Underworld looks at the baseball that might or might not be the one Bobby Thompson hit to help the Giants win a pennant, he “thinks about losing. He wonders what it is that brings bad luck to one person and the sweetest of good fortune to another” (99). Later, he similarly thinks about his wife Marian “in her Big Ten town [as a youth], raised safely, protected from the swarm of street life and feeling deprived because of it—privileged and deprived, an American sort of thing” (344). Urban fiction remains a vital site for showing what it means to be both “privileged and deprived,” sometimes shocking readers to heightened awareness of one’s own responsibility and good or bad fortune. While Underworld in particular and the texts in general in this chapter argue that “you have a history . . . that you are responsible to . . . You’re responsible to it. You’re answerable. You’re required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention” (DeLillo 512), the final chapter analyzes the ethical imperatives and implications of two novels that describe future urban realities.
Chapter 5

Ghosts of Cities Future

Enormous ethical stakes attach to demographers’ and urban geographers’ predictions about the future of urban life. Currently, for the first time ever, more than half of the world’s population lives in urban environments, and this figure will probably increase substantially in the years ahead. Within the next twenty-five years, “an estimated 5 billion of the world's 8.1 billion people will live in cities,” many of them in megacities, metropolitan areas usually defined as containing more than ten million people. Perhaps more significant, approximately “two billion of these five billion urban residents will live in slums, primarily in Africa and Asia, lacking access to clean drinking water and working toilets, surrounded by desperation and crime.”\(^{111}\)

Worldwide, cities provide better economic opportunities than the countryside, yet a surplus of workers does not bode well for improving workers’ conditions and wages. Fiscal crisis and trends in the United States suggest similar, although probably not as extreme, future problems in U.S. cities. The slashing of budgets and the threats posed by the potential of global climate change and other ecological concerns raise challenging questions about one’s responsibilities for the care of cities. While dire and chaotic conditions in Chicago’s South Side do not match those in Lagos, Nigeria, workers in some “developing” countries, such as China, Brazil, and India, stand a better chance than many U.S. urban residents of obtaining decent-paying blue-collar jobs that at one time made declining cities such as Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit economic powerhouses. At least the future

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appears bright for “ghetto tourism” and the prison industrial complex as more and more areas risk looking like the sections of East Baltimore depicted in *The Wire*.

Reflections about future cities must take into account natural disasters’ power to exacerbate substantially unstable economic and political situations. The negative effects of such disasters, as exemplified by Hurricane Katrina, can be multiplied without proper foresight and investment in infrastructure. Recently, Port-au-Prince and much of Japan illustrate the horrifying consequences that major earthquakes can have on cities, and major U.S. cities, such as San Francisco, remain at risk of similar catastrophe. The unnatural devastation of war, meanwhile, continues to unleash ruin and tragedy upon residents in cities such as Kabul and Baghdad. Although giant sections of St. Louis look like bombs might have annihilated them, urban realities in war-torn places are far removed from the consciousness of most U.S. Americans.

Technology affects our visceral (and hence ethical) response to war as well as the impact of natural disasters on human lives, and it will, of course, continue to transform cities around the world. Ridley Scott’s astonishing film *Blade Runner* adapted from Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* set a bar for dystopian visions in which urban crisis intersects with intensive technological change. The film presents a hyper-urban society run by multinational corporations. *Blade Runner* appeals in particular to U.S. Americans’ fears of Asian economic dominance. The police force seems everywhere but so too does crime. Sophisticated advances in technology do nothing to reduce Los Angeles’s overall grime, perversity, and inequalities. In fact, they enable these realities. Cyborgs, or “replicants,” whose existence provokes complex questions about what it means to be human, roam dangerously and illegally through
seedy city streets where holograms promote the latest gadget or means of urban escape for privileged humans. Colonies in space represent the new suburban refuge from the sprawling, congested, and polluted city.

The imagined negative impact of technological developments represented in *Blade Runner* and other speculative fiction urban texts since the film’s release in 1982 failed to anticipate the general popularity surrounding the near ubiquity of lap tops, cell phones, and iPods in cities (and elsewhere) today. Many people find that such devices make cities more pleasant, allowing users to block out (while nonetheless sometimes contributing to) both urban noise and the city’s undesirables. Music conveyed through tiny ear plugs replaces the city’s roar, while urbanites feel more connected to whomever they are communicating with in cyberspace than to the person sitting next to them on the train or bus: “cyberspace pulls the user into the receding space of the electronic matrix in total withdrawal from the world” (Boyer 11). Important questions loom about the relationship between virtual and urban spaces, a central theme explored, for example, in William Gibson’s seminal 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. Does belief in or submission to the obsolescence of the real contribute to our acceptance of and complacency toward abandoned, dying cities? If cyberspace replaces the thrill of connections once mainly sought in crowded and heterogeneous urban spaces, does urban life even have a future?

Speculative fiction provides a stimulating lens through which to contemplate these dilemmas. It forces encounters with possible futures that we ought, the dystopian texts contend, to find ways of avoiding. These futures include terrifying images of dead public sectors unable to educate or provide health care for the masses; uncontained urban sprawl and overpopulation; the death of agency and privacy resulting from the triumph of
technology controlled by multinational corporations that care only about defeating 
competition and maximizing profits. This bath of imagery appears consistently in 
cyberpunk works by William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and John Shirley, among others. 
Both conservative and radical writers summon frightening visions of ghosts of future 
cities. The evangelist Pat Robertson’s apocalyptic novel *The End of the Age* imagines Los 
Angeles as a Satanic paradise that God eventually and gleefully destroys through a 
tsunami. Carolyn See’s feminist novel *Golden Days* imagines Los Angeles destroyed by 
nuclear war and patriarchy but glimpses of utopia can be found in the ashes of New Age 
matriarchal wisdom. Jonathan Lethem brings together hardboiled detective writing and 
cyberfiction in his novel set in future Oakland, *Gun, with Occasional Music*. Evolved 
babies and animals, a gangster kangaroo, and karma scores that affect one’s quality of life 
appear in this weird novel portraying future urban life as quite repressive (asking others 
questions is generally forbidden, for example), seedy (a la Raymond Chandler), and drug 
addicted.

Sarah Schulman’s speculative New York City novel *The Mere Future* imagines 
how the election of a female mayor makes the city seemingly more equitable, humane, 
and democratic. Through THE GREAT CHANGE, housing is made affordable for all, an 
urban reality that revolutionizes the quality and ethics of urban life: the mayor understood 
“That nothing good can happen between fellow citizens—no program, no idea, no change, 
no hope, no chance—if people do not have a home. . . . The transformative consequence 
on New York City life was immediate and complete. The impossible burden [paying for 
rent] was lifted from people’s skulls” (27-8). With the support of the people, the mayor 
also bans chain stores and billboards. This post-Obama-election novel, however,
produces a shock of recognition when the omnipresent world of advertising moves increasingly inward; people “have nicer things to look at when walking down the street,” yet advertising, by far the top employer in the near-future city, invades people’s homes and consciousness through their mail and computers more than ever before. The novel is AMC’s dramatic series *Mad Men* meets metafiction, crime and science fiction, and lesbian love story. Schulman explores interesting alternative possibilities to the status quo through a vision laced with cynicism symbolically about both Obama’s platform of change and contemporary urban renaissance: despite the apparent radical new realities spawned by THE GREAT CHANGE, the “same companies were making more of the same money, our same minds were being similarly enslaved. The same famous still had fame, and those with power remained powerful. It was all just prettier and a bit more fun” (174).

Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* represent two speculative fiction texts that fit extremely well with many of the issues raised in this study. *Neuromancer* creates classic cyberpunk, which “foregrounds the provisional status of all definitions of value, rationality, and truth in a radical rejection of the Enlightenment ethos. It amalgamates in often baffling ways the rational and the irrational, the new and the old, the mind and the body, by integrating the hyper-efficient structures of high technology with the anarchy of street subculture” (Cavallaro xi). Cyberpunk draws on the ethos of punk rock to create a new kind of speculative fiction:

punk artists, like all artists wishing to express a specifically ‘urban’ perspective, were forced constantly to face the same problem facing Western . . . artists: how to find a suitable means of somehow making the human participants in their work
not seem overwhelmed by the inhuman immensity lying all around them. This helps to explain the gesture of punk (and of cyberpunk) toward images and storylines which can hopefully break through this anonymity while paradoxically expressing it. (McCaffery 297)

*Neuromancer* combines the anticipated rise of cyberspace with the intensification of urban life and the dominance of multinational capitalism. Gibson explores the relationship between urban and virtual realities, and by so doing he raises troubling ethical dilemmas for subjects, whose agency becomes increasingly impossible to locate. *Parable of the Sower* differs radically from *Neuromancer* in its more accessible style as well as its lack of attention to technology, including computers. Nonetheless, both novels stress the ethical significance of empathy, the need to imagine alternative social formations, and the dangers of irrevocable urban crisis alongside the corporatization and militarization of everyday life.

Brian McHale argues that “postmodernism’s shift of focus to ontological issues and themes has radical consequences for literary models of the self. A poetics in which the category ‘world’ is plural, unstable, and problematic would seem to entail a model of the self which is correspondingly plural, unstable, and problematic” (253). *Neuromancer* offers a brilliant example supporting McHale’s claim, as the slipperiness between virtual reality and “real” reality as well as between human and machine identities provoke cognitive disorientation. This slipperiness is certainly “problematic” in terms of ethics, too: how do we discern responsibility within ontological destabilization and without any confidence in a stable self?
Neuromancer does not provide clear answers to this daunting question, but the novel frames it in ways worth analyzing and that draw attention to the ethics of urban life. Future cities in the novel are generally grim by most standards, yet they can be exhilarating as when one hustles on the black market. Virtual reality, like the drug use prominent in the book, provides an escape from the city’s most crushing aspects; however, the ontology of cyberspace remarkably resembles the stimulations of urban life: when Case, the novel’s protagonist and “cyber cowboy,” or computer hacker, believes near the beginning of the book that some not-very-nice fellows are chasing him for money owed, the narrator reflects,

in some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the Matrix [cyberspace]. Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei [the center of Night City in Japan] as a field of data, the way the matrix once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties. Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market. (22-23)

The black-market urban spaces of Neuromancer—as opposed to the multinational corporate ones—and the matrix are both sublime: terrifying, awesome, and unknowable. They offer labyrinthine spaces that disorient subjects, but such confusion also makes thrilling experience possible. They paradoxically induce extreme affective states: the blasé effect that Simmel describes resulting from overstimulation as well as the euphoric state of seeming transcendence. Both spaces promote interclass contact, too, but
suspicion dominates interpersonal relations. This suspicion is integral to the extremes of
the novel’s future cities: it is inseparable from the threat of death, a key source of intense
excitement.

Gibson’s future urban world includes “interzones” where these excitements are
most likely to happen, and “where art [isn’t] quite crime, and crime not quite art” (58).
Interzones contrast with the homogenized urban spaces ruled by multinational
corporations seeking to eliminate residual and emergent subversive cultural formations.
Corporations have homogenized the majority of urban space, as Chiba City, Paris, New
York, and Atlanta seem to lack major differences in the novel. Case is from “BAMA, the
Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis,” which might or might not be part of the
United States (57). This leveling of spatial distinctiveness parallels the loss of human
individuality felt in the text. Humans have their neurons renewed and removed just as
city spaces figuratively do, both for the sake of securing corporate interests. After all,
“Power, in Case’s world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that
shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. . . . You couldn’t kill a
zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the
ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory” (265).

Nonetheless, hacking, for which the interzones illegally provide necessary
equipment, threatens the security of corporate spaces. As David Harvey states, “those
who have the power to command and produce space possess a vital instrumentality for
the reproduction and enhancement of their own power” (*Urban Experience* 261).

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112 According to Gibson, “the United States . . . cannot be proven to exist in the world of
*Neuromancer*. It’s deliberately never mentioned as such, and one vaguely gathers that it’s
somehow gone sideways in a puff of what we today would call globalization . . .” (ix).
Hacking represents a possible shift from disempowerment to empowerment through the invasion and potential appropriation of space. Hacking serves as a key crime in the novel, but its combination of technical and imaginative skills place it near the category of art. *Neuromancer* troubles distinctions between crime and art as well as between the ethics of legal crimes and illegal activities. The novel leads us to see the Tessier-Ashpool corporation as an evil gothic empire; in contrast to the flexible multinational corporations mentioned above, the T-A family represents decadence, incest, and insulation; both entities share monopolizing impulses, and their nastiness is, as far as we can tell, entirely legal. Nonetheless, we cannot call the novel Manichean, as in so many earlier science fiction texts, since a clear inverse image of virtue and the good do not emerge. Case, the focus of our identification, works for money, survival, and the chance to regain access to the matrix, not revolution, and he pursues these ends through just about any means available. Moreover, the text’s ethics becomes increasingly ambiguous as Case and his partner Molly assist with the merging of two powerful Artificial Intelligences, Wintermute and Neuromancer. If the novel consistently suggests opposition to corporate mergers, what are we to make of the merging of the AIs? The merging signals a moment, according to the novel’s tone, that calls for neither cheering nor lamentation. Regardless of the murky moral lines depicted, something magnificent surely occurs when Tessier Ashpool’s defenses are successfully hacked, and Wintermute and Neuromancer unite like “rain sizzling across hot pavement” (342).

The merger articulates a dialectic between being and becoming that serves as a central focus in the novel. The apparently thrilling unity creates a new being but without clear ends: “Things aren’t different. Things are things” (350). But the struggle to merge
and the merging itself seem worthwhile somehow. The novel suggests that people take a similar approach to living: that they embrace life as a dynamic process despite having no idea how things will turn out; that they focus on being as much as they do on becoming. Instead of dominant values of devoting one’s life to the pursuit of clear goals, especially power, money, and status, we “are being invited . . . to base life on challenge, on using our wits, on developing expertise, on cultivating highs of all sorts” (Hume, American Dream 218). This invitation is certainly context-bound. It results directly from the challenges to self, to agency, and to ethics of inhabiting a world in which the individual has extremely little power in the face of corporate-technological control. Neuromancer offers vivid alternatives to wallowing in helplessness. One such alternative is the formation of subcultures that defy the corporate-military machine. The Rastas are the most prominent of these. They fled Los Angeles for outer space to create a more a cooperative and caring community. The Rastas Aerol and Maelcum play a crucial role in helping Molly and Case although the assistance the former provide is not entirely selfless.¹¹³

Helplessness and limited agency in the novel come mainly from corporate-technological control. Even more important, though, is how this control helps produce the militarization of everyday life. Neuromancer includes subtle but consistent details supporting the intermingling of finance, cyberspace, and militarization. Case notes that most AIs are “military, the bright ones, and we can’t crack the ice [intrusion countermeasures electronics]” designed to prevent hacking (125). Neuromancer invites us not only to consider being over becoming; it provokes a reading of the contemporary

¹¹³ For an in-depth reading on the subversive political potential of this group, see Fair.
world as militarized. As Paul Youngquist compellingly argues, perceiving “a pattern of militarization in everyday life is one of the preoccupations of... Neuromancer...” Global capitalism is a world war made costeffective... The virtual reality of Neuromancer is built out of military information technologies” (202). Militarization is the crisis that matters most in Neuromancer. Learning to read the signs of militarization provides one important step toward resisting it.

Probably at the risk of sounding naïve, the many critics of Neuromancer have avoided claiming that the novel sides with any sort of definitive ethic. Indeed, the complex range of powerful forces impinging on the individual in Neuromancer make extrapolating an ethic difficult. I argue, however, that in contrast to “keep cool but care,” we can think of Neuromancer as endorsing the position to keep hot and try to care while recognizing that society’s organizing principles determine that most likely all one can realistically do is follow Molly’s lead: “What I always think about first, Case, is my own sweet ass” (40). What she thinks about first, however, is clearly not what she thinks about all the time. Keeping hot means immersing the self in the excitements of virtual and urban spaces, including interclass contact, but without harming others, if possible. Molly and Case provide a model of cooperation and care. They also demonstrate how technology might foster empathy, as Case uses a “simstim” switch enabling him to feel what Molly feels as she traverses dangerous areas of cyberspace. Nonetheless, what seems unresolved is whether the disembodied experience of cyberspace can (or ought to) replace the embodied experience of urban space. Case feels liberated when he smashes his computer with his shuriken (351). Disembodiment also reduces the face-to-face singular contacts that both Levinas and Delany see as essential to human growth and
ethics. If cyberspace is a “consensual hallucination” (Neuromancer 6), then what is urban space? Neuromancer suggests that it is no hallucination and that important changes must occur to defeat the threats of homogenization, militarization, and widespread urban misery resulting from crushed agency.

Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower explores similar issues minus detailed attention to technology. While Neuromancer’s elliptical and fast-paced style immerses readers into a confusing world as preparation for confronting present and future dizzying urban realities, Parable of the Sower works more directly as training for the future at the level of content. It presents a devastated society in which many of the contemporary problems diagnosed in urban studies scholarship have intensified. Butler’s main method of extrapolation embodies a formal-ethical imperative. She closely observes present-day trends in order to envision their direction. These particularly include the rising authority of privatization, corporatization, and deregulation. Butler dramatizes the dystopian consequences of a gutted public sector, one of which includes an intensification of urban crisis and the general obsolescence of cities, excluding company towns.

Like John Edgar Wideman’s Philadelphia Fire, Parable of the Sower warns of a “return of the worst.” It communicates this warning through the tropes of science fiction, sentimental new age writing, and slave narratives. Butler’s deployment of these tropes stresses the importance of learning from the past—about the system of sharecropping, for example—as well as extrapolating from the present. My analysis of the dystopian world of Parable of the Sower uncovers the ways that Butler articulates an ethics of preemptive care, but Butler’s ethics is not without thorny contradictions and a strain of anti-

\[114\] For analysis of the novel’s genre conventions, see Phillips, Wanzo, and Allen.
urbanism. *Parable of the Sower* presents compelling images of an avoidable future urban hell as well as an occasion for reflecting on the difficulties of creating caring and sustainable urban communities.

The novel, published in 2000, initially takes place in 2024 in fictional Robledo, California, a diverse, run-down suburb twenty miles outside of Los Angeles. It centers on a middle-class gated community struggling to survive and keep out a desperate underclass that includes addicts of a drug that promotes widespread arson. The big city’s squalor and violence has spread beyond its borders: “Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous.” Nonetheless, Los Angeles represents the ultimate social cesspool, an “oozing sore,” (109) “a carcass covered with too many maggots” (10); gangs dominate a city in which only the very wealthy can afford police and fire protection. Butler extrapolates from the contemporary world of gang violence, gated communities, declining suburbs and cities, and growing gaps between rich and poor to envision dystopic social spaces that help readers apprehend their own contemporary realities in extreme. The invasion and ultimate destruction of Robledo signifies Butler’s rejection of gated communities as both a responsible and sustainable response to contemporary problems. Suburban and urban gated communities exploded in the United States in the 1990s, despite decreasing urban crime rates, “from four million in 1995 to eight million in 1997 to sixteen million in 1998.” Los Angeles, Dallas, and Houston metropolitan regions “have over one million walled residential units” (Low 15). As Setha Low argues, “Gated residential communities . . . intensify social segregation, racism, and exclusionary land use practices already in place in most of the United States” (11). Even though society’s consensus in the novel is
that choosing to live “without a wall” is “crazy” (Parable 10), the novel’s protagonist and narrator Lauren Olamina perceives the “neighborhood wall [as] a massive, looming presence nearby. . . . as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective” (5).

Lauren’s family lives in a walled community struggling to survive because of widespread unemployment, inflation, and dangers outside their fragile neighborhood. Butler anticipates a future in which “middle class” signifies less usefully than it does even today. In the novel’s future, living in a gated community still represents privilege, but of a much more vulnerable and less comfortable kind than in the present or in the novels discussed in the previous chapter. Potable water is expensive, coffee is a luxury, and finding work to match one’s education is increasingly difficult. Despite these challenges, Robledo’s residents are better off than the masses of “disposable” people living outside its wall and in Los Angeles. Butler suggests that, without appropriate intervention, urban realities of the future spell disaster for inter-personal ethics. A gutted public sector in which access to quality education and employment is increasingly rare turns the masses into sociopaths, as Lauren states in her description of the relationship between Robledo and the outside world: Walled Robledo is “like an island surrounded by sharks—except that sharks don’t bother you unless you go in the water. But our land sharks are on their way in. It’s just a matter of how long it takes for them to get hungry enough” (50). Extremely unstable conditions drive some people to roast human limbs for sustenance (271-72).

While deregulatory, privatizing, and corporatizing forces are, according to the novel, largely responsible for Butler’s dystopic world, political leaders contend that an
intensification of those forces represents the only plausible solution. Butler, however, 
emphasizes everyday people’s responsibility for current problems and for coming up with alternatives: in particular, she cautions against inactivity, obliviousness, and denial. After all, the characters in the novel elect their political leaders, and the majority has chosen a libertarian’s dream in President Donner, mainly because of his “plan for putting people back to work.” He aims to overturn “minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board.” Lauren is suspicious, however. She wonders about “those suspended laws . . . Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people—as long as you provide them with food, water, and a space to die?” (27).

The revival of the company town figures prominently in Butler’s dystopic vision. One company, KSF, takes over the coastal town of Olivar: after a long process, “the voters and the officials of Olivar permitted their town to be taken over, bought out, privatized.” The company can now control “formerly public land,” which was bought for “pennies,” in the pursuit of profits gained from “farming and the selling of water and solar and wind energy over much of the Southwest.” They won’t pay their workers much, but employees accept low wages for “security . . . [and] a guaranteed food supply.” News of KSF seduces some Robledo residents to the idea of applying for employment in Olivar. Nonetheless, people who “know about early American company towns in which the companies cheated and abused people” view the development skeptically, one demonstration of Butler’s commitment to the value of historical knowledge. As with sharecropping, “debt slavery” is one likely consequence of taking a job with KSF (121). In this regard, Butler’s vision of urban America’s future is bleak: “This country is going
to be parceled out as a source of cheap labor and cheap land. When people like those in Olivar beg to sell themselves, our surviving cities are bound to wind up the economic colonies of whoever can afford to buy them” (129). This might seem extreme, but recent events tied to current budgetary problems suggest that such takeovers are not just possible in science fiction, in the past, or in “third-world” countries. Detroit and Benton Harbor, Michigan, for example, have had their local governments’ powers drastically diminished as a governor-appointed and corporate backer has been named emergency financial manager. Benton Harbor, a city of about 10,000, more than 90% African American, is “home to the corporate headquarters of appliance giant Whirlpool . . . the city lost its last manufacturing plant this year [2011], almost half the population lives below the poverty line and the public lakefront has been privatized as part of a luxury golf development backed by the Whirlpool corporation.”

It is not yet a company town, however. Instead, many residents deal with the worst of both worlds: no job prospects alongside no voice over matters of public concern and public space.

Dystopic imagery in *Parable of the Sower* is counterbalanced with the arguably utopian vision of a new religion and ideology, out of which might emerge thriving and sustainable communities. Lauren conceives the religion Earthseed and the values attached to it when she is only fifteen years old. She strongly counters dominant views and actions (or, more so, lack of actions), which she sees as ethical failures. In particular, Earthseed takes to task those unable to recognize the power and dangers of denial, those who fail to take action against dystopian threats, and, related to the first two, those who embrace the idea that “the good old days” (8) will someday return. Lauren fights against the growing

115 See Melzer.
belief that people “can’t do anything about” (54) the negative changes in society. At the same time, others simply believe that problems such as urban blight, unemployment, and crime will solve themselves, often through Christian faith alone. Rebutting this, Lauren insists that people must “stop denying reality” and “hoping” that social decline “will go away by magic” (58). President Donner succeeds because of people’s faulty notions about the nature of change and the realities of the past: He “asks these people to ignore their recognition that the very reason the land and atmosphere they have inherited are so ravaged is because of the original quest for development in the first place.” Lauren envisions Earthseed as a viable alternative to the ideology of “progress and development” that remains dominant today and that bears the most responsibility for the book’s terrible setting (288).

Lauren articulates her vision through the book (within *Parable*) *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. In opposition to denial, nostalgia, and inactivity, *Earthseed* proclaims, “Belief / Initiates and guides action— / Or it does nothing” (47). The core belief guiding any practical ethical action is that change governs all life; therefore, one must learn to accept change as well as to negotiate with it. While *Underworld* arguably depicts God as connection, *Earthseed* pronounces (in the opening passage of *Parable of the Sower*), “All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change” (3). Lauren reaches these conclusions by studying physics (especially the law of entropy), her own life, and Eastern religions that stress the ephemeral nature of reality. Her philosophy/theology articulates the core beliefs that people must uphold, the novel suggests, in order to renew a strong sense of community and to make human life more sustainable and compassionate. This belief system explored
in the novel cuts a couple of different ways politically. Understanding and embracing change, on the one hand, can serve capitalist agendas that have few qualms about urban renewal. Change (and development) is the nature of cities, so resistance is futile, proponents of this notion of change might declare. On the other hand, attention to and working with change can foster the sort of creative thinking and adaptability needed for urban justice to flourish.

Toni Morrison advances a similar idea in her gothic/utopian novel *Paradise*, which provides a useful comparison to Butler’s project in *Parable of the Sower*. Mostly set during the bicentennial, 1976, *Paradise* stresses the dangers of failing to adapt to changing circumstances. Too much commemoration of glorious past deeds can certainly contribute to these dangers. The novel juxtaposes two communities: the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, which was created as a result of humiliating racist encounters with whites and light-skinned blacks (push forces) and Indian removal and Westward migration (pull forces), and the Convent, where women from different class and racial backgrounds attempt to free themselves from various personal traumas. The unconventional behaviors and characteristics of the Convent women threaten the patriarchal community of Ruby, which ultimately destroys two attempts—their own and the Convent’s—at creating a paradise on earth. Morrison’s novel promotes messages similar to *Parable of the Sower*: that “God’s not going to do your work for you” (Morrison 98) and that striving for utopia entails “endless work” (318). Similarly (but in contrast to Ruby’s leaders), Earthseed promotes “adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without
positive obsession, there is nothing at all” (1). In addition, Earthseed’s followers are admonished to “Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed” (196).

It is in Earthseed, whose passages are interspersed throughout the novel, where Parable of the Sower articulates its New Age and didactic components most forcibly. The novel’s pedagogical and sentimental impulses overlap to produce a text that twists New Age philosophy, which claims personal transformation as the key to social change. As Rebecca Wanzo states, however, despite “the many characteristics that it has in common with contemporary New Age works,” Parable of the Sower “makes a radical departure from New Age text[s]” in that “it distances itself from the” individual in order to focus on the possibilities of collective action (83). The New Age qualities, still, are likely to annoy readers eager to read urban fiction that in some way reflects the complexity of urban worlds. I agree with Wanzo, however, that “Butler ultimately presents the moral that the project of producing populist texts for mass consumption cannot be left to those with unproductive or dangerous dreams, and abandoned by those who truly desire revolution” (85). Texts such as Parable of the Sower, then, should be central to mappings of the urban fiction landscape as well as discussions about the ethics of urban living.

Another key component of the novel’s ethics is the value it places on empathy. The text deals with this directly, as Lauren actually suffers from hyperempathy syndrome. Lauren explains, “I feel what I see others are feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome.’ Big shit. It hurts, that’s all I know. Thanks to Paracetco . . . the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I’m crazy. . . . I’m supposed to share pleasure and pain, but there isn’t much pleasure around these days” (12). Lauren’s syndrome makes her
very reluctant to inflict pain on others, even when she and her fledgling Earthseed community are physically threatened. Despite this, the novel does not specifically endorse pacifism. In describing her group’s ethics to prospective new members, Lauren states, “we don’t kill unless someone threatens us . . . we don’t hunt people. We don’t eat human flesh. We fight together against enemies. If one of us is in need, the rest help out. And we don’t steal from one another, ever” (301). Butler’s depictions of hyperempathy syndrome provokes the question, “if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture?” (115). This question has interpersonal as well as broader social implications. California’s future in the novel is presented in ways similar to Mexico’s present in terms of economic struggles and migrant populations. California’s residents seek a better life in Oregon and Washington because of the dire conditions and limited opportunities in their own state. Paralleling the lives of many border crossers from Mexico today, characters in the novel have “to sneak into Oregon if [they] get in at all. Even harder to sneak into Washington. People get shot everyday trying to sneak into Canada. Nobody wants California trash” (82). Imagining the future for Butler involves finding ways to appeal to readers’ empathy for a wide range of people struggling to survive today.

The Earthseed community represents a tiny part of a mass of people moving north. The northern migration, in tandem with other details in the novel, evokes patterns particularly associated with slave narratives. Because Lauren has educated herself about the history of North American slavery, she can readily identify social developments that closely align with slavery in the past. Families in debt to their bosses on farms and factories risk having their children sent away to work off the debt. These children are also
often forbidden to learn how to read and write (218). Women are particularly vulnerable in Butler’s dystopic society. Rape is common in both domestic and public places, and law enforcement of the crime is essentially nonexistent. Some women find greater safety as, for all intents and purposes, slaves; they work for and sleep with relatively well-off men, often as one of their multiple wives. Corporate mergers in the novel, meanwhile, allow agribusiness to thrive, leading to a return of the sharecropping system. Resisting the different “version[s] of slavery” (37) depicted in the text, Lauren determines that she is “not going to spend [her] life as some kind of twenty-first century slave” (170).116

As in famous U.S. slave narratives of the past, such as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs, Parable of the Sower stresses the value of literacy and the desire for escape. The former empowers the latter while increasing the chance for creating communities capable of living up to Earthseed’s ideals. Nonetheless, the novel gets particularly thorny on these points. When Lauren and her small group of Earthseed followers journey through dystopian dangers to Northern California, their trek in certain respects resembles standard narratives of the underground railroad and the great northern urban migration. Readers surely sense that the group is on its way to a drastically better, if not exactly utopian, life: when the group arrives at its destination, an isolated area that one of its members, Bankole, has rights to, Lauren optimistically remarks, “we can build a community here” (319). Yet, based on the typical pattern of slave narratives and the great northern migration, one should be more skeptical of this community’s promise than the overall tone seems to suggest. Disillusionment will probably follow, as the group is likely to be stigmatized and

116 Allen also analyzes the novel’s relationship to slave narratives of the past (1356).
brutalized. Indeed, the novel’s sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, dramatizes Christian fundamentalists attacking and destroying the Earthseed community. Furthermore, one wonders about the extent to which the new community, isolated as it is, will replicate the failed community of walled Robledo. Utopian impulses are thus undercut, while readers are implicated in having too much optimism about the ease with which just and liberatory communities can take root.

In order to prevent a return of the worst, *Parable of the Sower* puts all of its ethical cards into the concept of what I am calling preemptive care (as opposed to preemptive strikes). According to the novel, preemptive care is the crucial key to a more just urban (or non-urban) future. Lauren argues that a “community’s first responsibility is to protect its children—the ones we have now and the ones we will have” (321). Lauren sees taking care of damaged children as imperative: “if someone doesn’t help [three-year-old] Amy now, someday she’ll do something a lot worse than burning down her family’s garage” (34). Hurt people hurt people, the novel consistently attests, while, according to *Earthseed*, “kindness eases change” (167). Social and political care ought to follow the same principles as interpersonal preemptive care. Cuts in education and science programs such as space exploration are especially likely during times of economic stress, and, as a result, “No one is expanding the kind of exploration that doesn’t earn an immediate profit, or at least promise big future profits” (84). Thinking long-term while rejecting profit-driven (at least in the monetary sense) agendas, then, is fundamental to Butler’s ethics in *Parable of the Sower*.

While valuing adaptability, diversity, and preemptive care certainly seems preferable to some of the codes that currently prevail in cities, another thorny facet of the
novel’s vision is its precise attitude toward the value and future of urban life. As a whole, the book seems anti-urban, yet not unequivocally. The ultimate vision of Earthseed is to take residence among the stars, not among ruined cities that have been renewed: “It’s a destiny we’d better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs—here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities (222). The novel holds up the pastoral idea represented in Bankole’s land while presenting cities as fearful and unpleasant: “You tiptoe through cities. You keep up a steady pace, keep your eyes open, and try to look both too intimidating to bother and invisible” (272). Bankole’s land, in contrast is “dangerous, sure, but, hell, it’s dangerous everywhere, and the more people there are packed together in cities, the more danger there is. [Granted, this] is a ridiculous place to build a community. It’s isolated, miles from everywhere with no decent road leading here, but for us, for now, it’s perfect” (319). *Parable of the Sower* suggests that cities have tipping points after which any hope for social harmony and sustainability disappears; when that tipping point is reached, terrible urban realities produce inescapable dangers and fears, making ethical dilemmas and the search for urban justice irrelevant; the only viable option left is to start small while acknowledging the likelihood of failure.

*Parable of the Sower* is an urban sprawl and post-urban novel, a theological novel, a dystopian/utopian novel, a sentimental novel, a neo-slave narrative, and a New Age novel. It provocatively explores the relationship between ethics and urban realities. What is even more provocative for the sake of the discussion here, however, is the novel’s argument about the value of fiction, which affirms this project’s thesis. *Parable of the Sower* provides a sort of toolkit for surviving social catastrophe—at both practical
and ethical levels. Lauren advises people to study “any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps [one] learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful” (59). This last line is no throwaway, and this study has tried to show how “some fiction” is indeed “useful” for thinking about the ethics of urban life. Certainly, the philosophy of Earthseed presents a compelling view because “it deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action” (219). In response to the objection that the Earthseed “God doesn’t care about you at all,” Lauren says, “All the more reason to care about myself and others” (221). This study has repeatedly shown how U.S. urban fiction emphasizes the value of caring for self and others in its search for more just cities. Of course, Butler is drawing on the famous Biblical parable for the title of her novel. Butler’s appropriation emphasizes the need to keep trying and to keep caring. That parable, stripped of theology or not, continues to provide important ethical guidance directly applicable to reading, writing, and teaching urban fiction, as well as living and working in urban places:

Hearken, Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred.  

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117 This passage is from Mark 4:3. See Butler (343).
I conclude now by discussing the seeds that the novels examined in this study attempt to sow.
Conclusion

The seeds planted by the novels analyzed in this study are not explicitly revolutionary. They emphasize ethics more than politics but they do not necessarily insist on separating the two. We have not encountered proletarian novels comparable to Native Son or even single-issue novels similar to the 19th-century’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Most of the books portray multinational capitalism and the concomitant commodification of everyday life as the central problem of their age, but they do not expect, nor do they usually push very strongly for, drastic immediate change. Nonetheless, they do not accept helplessness, and they do push for social change. They do this partly by challenging Francis Fukuyama’s thesis that the fall of the Soviet Union produced “the end of history,” the end of viable alternatives to free-market capitalism. Almost invariably their seeds are composed of skepticism but not cynicism; they are not seeds of nihilism, and they are, as discussed in my analysis of Parable of the Sower, prominently seeds of preemptive care.

Dominant ways of classifying and thus of perceiving U.S. cities as undergoing crisis or a renaissance are not conducive to an ethics of preemptive care. Crisis discourse tends to frighten people about urban life, while the discourse of urban renaissance tends to make them complacent. Threading together these various books of different genres, ethnic and class backgrounds, and focus highlights one major achievement of U.S. urban fiction since 1984: the fiction dismantles this problematic binary (crisis versus renaissance) of conceiving U.S. cities. Urban fiction puts needed pressure on these terms; it shows how genuine crisis conditions affect lived experiences (and inevitably ethics), and how renaissance is conceptually and ethically limiting. Visions of urban naissance, however, attempt to imagine a non-commodifiable, non-nostalgic (generally), and
ethically rewarding and committed vision of future cities. This latter point encapsulates a central aim of many of the best U.S. urban novels since 1984.

These novels’ content and formal strategies emphasize the persistence of crisis at times of apparent renaissance. Celebrations of urban renaissance fail to provide, as Christine Boyer has noted, “a map of the city linking together the poorer neighborhoods with the enclaves of the well-to-do.” Fiction creates such maps. Urban renaissance discourse fails on this account by no accident; it presents economic extremes between rich and poor as “random disparities” (113) rather than as inextricable realities. Contemporary U.S. urban fiction generally writes about, following John Edgar Wideman, many places at once. It stages multiple viewpoints and explores interconnections through various means of juxtaposition. By disrupting the crisis versus renaissance binary, several relatively recent novels attempt to carve out an urban vision that endorses neither nostalgia for the crisis days of the 1970s, as expressed in Luc Sante’s essay “My Lost City,” for example, nor Disneyfied values embodied in the New Times Square. Sante laments Giuliani’s sanitization of New York, yet like the forces of Disneyfictation, Sante sings the praises of the city as playground. Contemporary U.S. urban fiction resists both of these views, stressing the ethical significance of cities as potential sites of human maturation and social transformation.

The strongest urban texts resist simplistic answers and conceptualizations of U.S. cities. Urban fiction’s version of preemptive care, for example, stands in stark contrast to what the famous urban commentator Richard Florida would mean by the concept. This difference highlights one key way urban fiction interrupts the acceptance of seductive answers. Florida is best known for his books about the “creative class”—privileged
people, thirty percent of the U.S. adult population according to Florida—whose skills and creativity drive economic development. The class includes scientists, computer programmers, professors, artists, financiers, and businesspeople. They use sophisticated cognitive and imaginative skills to solve complex problems. Many of them inhabit or seek to inhabit thriving urban areas with strong economies and a high quality of life.

Florida argues that cities can best care for themselves by supporting the three Ts, “technology, talent, and tolerance.” Florida insists that when cities embrace and invest in the three Ts, they will draw members of the “creative class” who will then contribute to cities’ overall economic vitality and quality of life. Unfortunately, all people’s emotional attachments to places and “low-income minorities . . . have little place in Florida’s universe.”

Recent U.S. urban fiction offers a version of preemptive care emphasizing the incalculable worth of people and the importance of nurturing urban residents, especially children, as opposed to devoting a city’s limited resources to attracting talented people from elsewhere.

Contemporary U.S. urban fiction provides important tools for reading urban spaces and people. Historical novels can haunt us through evocations of what is missing and of what could have been. We read Bunker Hill, South Central Los Angeles, and Downtown Minneapolis differently after reading Pynchon, Mosley, and Treuer. We question the inevitability of particular urban developments. Novels set in the present can force a shock of recognition that demands a mode of reading distinct from the reflexive responses endorsed by politicians, mass media, and most urban Hollywood blockbusters. Perhaps we see homeless people and immigrants differently after reading Tropic of

118 See Macgillis.
Orange (perhaps we simply see them). Perhaps our reading of the forces behind and the participants of the underground economy changes after reading Clockers. Perhaps we even find aspects of ourselves in Sherman McCoy from Bonfire of the Vanities or, even more frighteningly, Patrick Bateman in American Psycho, characters whose authors push readers to reflect seriously on the moral challenges of affluence. These and other urban novels instruct us to read urban narratives and representations of urban life critically and without rushing to judgment; they showcase narrative representation itself as a crucial site of struggle in the search for more just cities. In other words, they rattle a propensity toward “avisibility,” what Youngquist defines as seeing without perceiving (204).

Speculative urban fiction texts offer similarly powerful encounters, as when Schulman forces awareness of the near omnipresence of advertising, Gibson of the twin forces of technological control and militarization, and Butler of current trends toward versions of slavery. Demands at the level of form, which provoke confusion and assert ambiguity as fundamental to our lives, can prepare readers for handling the daunting complexities of contemporary urban realities.

I close by focusing on three quotations, two from Sapphire’s novel Push and one from a 1979 interview with James Baldwin. In a discussion with her teacher about the “realism” of The Color Purple, Precious, the teenage mother and Harlemite who is learning to read and write, responds, “Izm, smizme! . . . I don’t know what ‘realism’ mean but I do know what REALITY is and it’s a motherfucker, lemme tell you” (83). Elsewhere, Precious comments that stories ought to “tell the truth, else what’s the fucking use?” (3-4). Harlem-native Baldwin expresses a relatively similar view of reality and narrative. His position resonates strongly with this study’s central claims about the value
of U.S. urban fiction since 1984; it speaks to this fiction’s seeds and its potential fruit:

“The morality of the world in which we were born has failed. [I]t’s difficult to say what a writer, a witness, should do... You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world... The world changes, according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way... people look at reality, then you change it.”\(^{119}\) Despite worries about the supposed “death of the novel” and laments about the lack of serious social content in contemporary fiction,\(^{120}\) U.S. urban fiction since 1984 includes a wide range of simultaneously ethically-engaged and formally-impressive texts. These texts display urban reality as a “motherfucker” while courageously trying to “change” that reality. The novels analyzed in this study unflinchingly explore the sometimes-overwhelming conditions that Sapphire and Baldwin evoke while showing useful ways of negotiating with those conditions. At the same time, they are testaments to, in their multitudinous ways, the amazing *possibilities* of urban life.

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\(^{120}\) Regarding this latter point, see McClure.
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