THROUGH MURKY WATERS:  
Katrina, Public Housing,  
and the 
Cartographies of Struggle  

by 

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A SONG FOR MANY MOVEMENTS

Nobody wants to die on the way
caught between ghosts of whiteness
and the real water
none of us wanted to leave
our bones
on the way to salvation
three planets to the left
a century of light years ago
our spices are separate and particular
but our skins sing in complimentary keys
at a quarter to eight mean time
we were telling the same stories
over and over and over.

Broken down gods survive
in the crevasses and mudpots
of every beleaguered city
where it is obvious
there are too many bodies
to cart to the ovens
or gallows
and our uses have become
more important than our silence
after the fall
too many empty cases
of blood to bury or burn
there will be no body left
to listen
and our labor
has become more important
than our silence.

Our labor has become
more important
than our silence.

-Audre Lorde
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is not mine. The meditations contained herein are generated and inspired by New Orleans’ displaced public housing residents engaged in daily struggles for home, self, and community. This text is dedicated to the love, strength, and voice that radiate out of their struggles, forging life from the shadows of a Katrina that negated their very humanness. I have learned, in the process of this writing, that my own selfhood is bound with their struggles.

This project owes its architecture to my advisor Demetrius Eudell, whose shared wisdom throughout my four years here has in so many ways shaped my approach towards knowledge. His infinite patience and generous guidance during this process have been invaluable. This project would have been unimaginable without his instruction and support.

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The initial idea for this project was sparked by Joy James, who, during her visit to Wesleyan in October, 2006, remarked upon the discrepancies in understandings of contamination in post-Katrina New Orleans. Her tireless activism and critical reflection have been a rich source of inspiration.

Additionally, if only through their printed words, Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick have been hugely influential in the realization of this text.

I would also like to thank David Stein, whose comments on early drafts were constructive, affirming, and, incisive.

I am deeply indebted to my housemates and loves at 37 Home Ave. for making a home that I am forever excited and thankful to enter. I take my strength from our warmth.

This process would not have been possible without Rosa Seidelman, who points me towards wholeness and gives breath to my vulnerability.
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And I am endlessly grateful to my parents, Julie and Barry Karp, and James and Joni Ansfield. For their unceasing love, their enthusiasm and concern, I am beholden.
Dominant cartographies of U.S. cities have become quite settled in their mappings of urban black holes, to which they alternately assign the universal titles “ghetto,” “inner city,” or “concentration of poverty.” The metaphor “black hole”—that unstated signification found in the coded, de-racialized, or sanitized language of urban studies—is necessarily crude and violent, for these spaces, objects of scholarly and political study in nearly every major city in the U.S., constitute the corporeal and geographical embodiment of *les damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon’s wretched of the earth.¹

The postindustrial Black “inner city” poses a terrorizing ontological threat to the dominant mode of subjective understanding currently shaping the normative U.S. consciousness. These geographies, which I will refer to as urban homeplaces after the essay of the same name by bell hooks,² exist in the dominant imaginary as vacuums of humanity. Place (the dilapidated and abandoned urban void) and body (most frequently the Black welfare mother or the Black incarcerable male) fuse into a single entity, what Sylvia Wynter terms the *conceptual other.*³ The resulting condensation of meaning—dialectical in that the body defines the place and the place the body—marks both the homeplace and the resident as natural sites of anti-humanization. These are the “torrid

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zones,” those uninhabitable realms that are paradoxically inhabited. How this ostensible contradiction is diffused of its dissonance is a central inquiry of *Through Murky Waters*. I argue that the disarmament of the “uninhabitable” paradox lies in the question of humanness: low-capital Black residents of urban homeplaces are not true inhabitants, for they dwell in an unlivable space; and they are not humans, for they are only and can only be *les damnés*, the wretched of the earth.

In this text I employ the politics and poetics of contagion and purification to investigate how urban homeplaces are reciprocally defined next to the bodies of *les damnés*. I map trans-historically and trans-territorially the epistemological linkages between Black bodies and geographies vis-à-vis understandings of defilement and contagion. My cartographical exercise is fueled by meditations on how ideas of inhabitability interface with conceptions of humanness in dominant epistemological and ontological productions of geo-racial knowledge and power. I then follow this phenomenological juncture with regards to the hegemonic projects of purification and governmentality. Focusing on the auto-instituting activities of subjugation, regulation, and containment of subaltern spaces and bodies, I explore how this enterprise constitutes a mode of socio-spatial reclamation and redemption. As a concomitant to these inquiries, I unveil the slippages and incongruities in such narratives. Out of such cleavages, I present alternative cartographical formulations that have been raised in opposition to the dominant discourse.

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4 I use the terms “low-capital” and “mid-capital” throughout the text in place of typical signifiers “low-income” or “middle-income.” This rhetorical decision, suggested by David Stein, aims to push the discussion beyond issues of income, which, as we shall see with regards to the deconcentration paradigm, is an inadequate rubric for determining the status of an individual. Wealth is not simply derivative of income. Capital assumes myriad forms, from house and equity to socio-symbolic capital (race, gender, sexuality, nationality) to educationalist capital (in the form of degrees).
These inquiries are situated in and around Katrina and post-Katrina New Orleans.\textsuperscript{5} I draw upon the terror and violence of the deluge as a lens into the hegemonic task of classifying/knowing filth and purging/sublimating it. Specifically, my research interrogates post-Katrina proposals for the demolition and redevelopment of the majority of New Orleans’ remaining public housing. My objective is to unsettle the logics of the redevelopment proposals by offering an intervention into dominant discourses surrounding Black urban spaces and Black bodies. Accordingly, this is a work of discourse more than it is a reading of policy, intentionality, or accountability. My objective in this study is to unravel and disarm the self-evident syntax of dominant epistemological and ontological formulations vis-à-vis Blackness, belonging, the urban, filth, and cleansing. It is not my aim to trace the inevitability of the event, but rather to locate the Katrina moment within a continuum of knowledge and power. Through such praxis, I hope to support ongoing resident struggles as they continue to nurture and stage counterhegemonic, libratory ways of knowing.

Chapter One introduces my conceptual framework for the project. I construct a genealogy of humanness, uninhabitability, and taint, then link these ideas to the specifics of New Orleans and public housing. Chapter Two considers transhistorical meanings of uninhabitability in New Orleans and the nation, both before and after Katrina. At issue here is filth as a trope binding public housing, the urban, Blackness, and Black bodies. In Chapter Three I draw from these ideas of filth to examine how redevelopment and reconstruction (i.e. the deconcentration paradigm) constitute modes of socio-spatial

\textsuperscript{5} The use of “post-Katrina” should be solely understood as a temporal signifier. In no way do I intend to represent the state of New Orleans as \textit{beyond or healed} from the devastation of the hurricane, floods, disaster response, or pre-existing socio-political and economic conditions. In many ways, New Orleans, as well as many other cities across the nation, are very much stuck in a “Katrina moment.”
purification. In the Epilogue, I document and interpret counter-narratives that have arisen in opposition to the demolition/redevelopment trajectory facing New Orleans.
ONE
“To Die of Thirst Surrounded by Water”¹

Racist pathology is the Muck...murky, toxic waters become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth, flushing out of a coherent and stubborn body long-held fears and suspicions.
-Kara Walker²

Alex Kotlowitz’s nonfictional account of two Black children growing up in Chicago’s Henry Horner Homes, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (1992), performs a representation of decaying urbanity, contaminated water, and corroded public housing that could very well have been broadcast by a major media outlet reporting out of New Orleans in late August, 2005:

Sometimes at Henry Horner you can almost smell the arrival of death. It is the odor of foot-deep pools of water that, formed from draining fire hydrants, became fetid in the summer sun. It is the stink of urine puddles in the stairwell corners and of soiled diapers dumped in the grass. It is the stench of a maggot-infested cat carcass lying in a vacant apartment and the rotting food in the overturned trash bins. It is, in short, the collected scents of summer.³

Kotlowitz’s disembodied portrait reflects a prototypical blueprint of the urban homeplace that traverses journalistic, academic, and popular texts.⁴ The imagery of

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⁴ My use of urban homeplace should by no means be interpreted as a totalization of all Black geographies into a homogenous mass. I do not intend to connote interchangeability, but rather a sense of
Katrina takes root in these representative templates, such that Black bodies wading, surviving, floating, and dying in dark and defiling waters are located in the same nexus of significations as Kotlowitz’s deadly, excremental filth. As Kara Walker’s guide-quote intimates, subaltern corporealities and spaces converge in a filthy, muddled Muck that reinscribes the signifying hegemony of the dominant order. Yet, for Walker, this process is punctured and disrupted by “a potentially new and difficult birth,” a window for subaltern subjects’ libratory rearticulation of belonging, naming, and selfhood.

A primary concern of Through Murky Waters is how dominant configurations of geo-racial alterity are ineluctably fraught with discordance and fractures. In this chapter I present my conceptual framework for approaching and placing such geo-racial *doxa*. I begin by charting what I term the “deconcentration paradigm,” an assemblage of theoretical and practical technologies for knowing, classifying, and *curing* the urban homeplace. From here I trace the central premises of the deconcentration paradigm to the question of the human, drawing primarily from the work of Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick. I link epistemological presumptions currently manifested in redevelopment proposals to dominant ontological schemas that descend from post-1492 and Enlightenment geo-racial codes. Victorian notions of urbanity, filth, and order inform this analysis in a post-Enlightenment context. Refocusing this investigation to the present, I conclude by connecting such inquiries to the Katrina event and public housing.

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shared identity in the midst of similar processes of racialization and subjugation, as well as solidarity in struggle.
The Deconcentration Paradigm as Autopoietic and Dissonant Truth

The mapping of subaltern (urban) spaces has long been auto-instituting exercise of academe. In the perpetual quest to know the other, to integrate the unknowable (i.e. “crack houses”) into dominant frameworks in order to affirm the legitimacy and universality of objective social science, a few scholarly axioms have developed. The first overriding apriorism of contemporary urban studies (as well as geographical, anthropological, and sociological research on urbanity), whether emanating from liberal or conservative perspectives, is that concentrated poverty is an unconditional evil of the cityscape. Most often associated with language of contamination—“blight,” “pollution,” “disease,” “weeds”—concentrations of poverty invoke the most vilified images within the urban imaginary (with the exception of the prison, which is contestably the twin of the urban homeplace, both sharing racialized manifestations of unparalleled surveillance, state control, and erasure/containment). The dominant mode of subjective understanding knows these spaces and their residents as simultaneously contaminated and contaminant. A notion that dates back at least to late 19th century Victorian concerns about city purity in an age of cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid, and smallpox, the employment of metaphors of contamination is a central operating mechanism for the contemporary city. Urban homeplaces define geographically and bodily, metaphorically and materially, what it is to be impure and liminal. Most frequently, dominant debates around concentrated poverty assume as self-evident the despicable nature of these

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5 By “contemporary,” I mean to locate urban studies within a time frame beginning around the mid-1980s, although, as we shall see, the continuities to earlier modes of scholarly knowledge are clearly discernible.
6 Generally, I avoid the use of scare quotes with the terms “concentrated poverty,” “deconcentration of poverty” and their derivatives so as to circumvent what would become an exhaustive exercise. Nevertheless, these terms are herein approached as highly problematic; a major objective of this text is to denaturalize this language and the assumptions it reflects.
geographies and the inhuman (“ghetto-specific”) behaviors that are naturalized to them. These gross assumptions are rarely challenged; they serve as the self-evident foundations of any scholarly investigation. Out of these naturalized doxa springs forth an abundance of scholarly arguments surrounding the origins, implications, and nature of concentrated poverty.

The relatively uncontested epistemological constructions surrounding concentrated poverty carry tremendous ramifications in the realm of urban policy. Since geographies of concentrated poverty are by definition uninhabitable, it follows that poverty should be “deconcentrated.” This ubiquitous trope of urban studies represents the second major premise of most scholarly research conducted around homeplaces. Deconcentration of poverty is not only the preferred treatment for what is often naturalized as a disease afflicting the “inner city,” it is nearly the only imaginable treatment. Scholarly and political consensus around this de-racialized initiative borders on absolute; the debate occurs not over this particular modus, but rather over its methodology and ramifications. Issues of reconcentration (i.e. former residents living together someplace else) are largely disregarded, suggesting that concentrations of poverty are situationally configured as a tainting threat. They are defined by their geographic location (zoning, the profitability of the land they occupy, etc.), their historical relationship to the city, their aesthetic, NIMBYism, their capacity to be regulated, and the potential to attain funds for redevelopment, among other criteria. Deconcentration has been performed through various local and federal initiated policies,

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8 Edward G. Goetz, Clearing the Way: Deconcentrating the Poor in Urban America (Washington: The Urban Press, 2003), 207.
9 Not in my backyard.
including one or a combination of the following: shifting from public housing assistance to housing vouchers (such as the Section 8 program), mixing residents of different income levels within public housing, scattering subsidized housing sites throughout a city, and demolishing and redeveloping large-scale public housing structures.¹⁰

Referred to here as the deconcentration paradigm, this set of theoretical and practical components constitutes a system of symbolic representations through which urban spaces and bodies are understood and contextualized. I argue that deconcentration of poverty is nothing other than spatial and bodily purification of Blackness and the environmental conditions associated with this racial classification.¹¹

Redevelopment schemes—most notably the demolition/reconstruction of public housing—have recurrently precipitated widespread displacement of the lowest capital Black residents living in sites deemed concentrations of poverty. And they must. As I explore in Chapter Three, residents’ bodies and spaces serve as the ground for visions of a rehabilitated space: the purification and redemption of entire geographies rests upon their erasure. Yet this indispensable component of the deconcentration paradigm does not preclude endorsement by residents themselves for redevelopment plans. Some residents have embraced the proposals, which promise to mold an avatar of the American Dream out of geographies normatively deemed dangerous and transgressive. The appeal of such promises for residents is not surprising. Their communities marked by state abandonment, police brutality, and few options for employment and education,
residents may claim innumerable rationales for supporting redevelopment proposals. And despite the empowerment and solidarity that accompanies their liminal geographic status in the forms of community- and self-making (explored in the Epilogue), the redevelopment is represented as sustaining such ties, only in a healthier space. Indeed, a handful of residents do get relocated into the reconstructed developments. Yet the majority of public housing residents will be displaced.

Hegemonic debate over deconcentration seldom hinges on the issue of forced dispersal/migration, which has become a naturalized occurrence in the urban landscape; rather, dominant frameworks, having fully affirmed the uninhabitability of concentrations of poverty (and, by extension, the inhumanity of those who do indeed inhabit those spaces) often celebrate as urban redevelopment and progress the phenomenon known as gentrification (a conceptual and rhetorical formulation whose etymology traces back to 1960s concerns over urban renewal displacement). Concerns over forced dispersal/migration have largely disappeared from the urban scholar’s agenda (where they were once central during urban renewal debates of the 1960s), only to be replaced by myopic discussions praising and prophesizing urban policies that exhibit the principles of smart-growth, sustainability, mixed-income developments, and urban renaissance.

Some have situated this scholarly “epistemological resignation” as a symptom of neoliberal narrativity. In “The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification

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14 The central condition for the survival of a dominant system of symbolic representations is epistemological resignation. This cognitive default reaffirms and provides language for what passes as legitimate thought, even as it determines the process for calibrating legitimacy. In the present context, to
“To Die of Thirst Surrounded by Water”

Tom Slater addresses this trend as a sole function of neoliberal paradigms:

“In keeping with the discursive strategy of the neoliberal project…organized around a narrative of competitive progress, we have apparently arrived in the age of regeneration, revitalization and renaissance...”

There is no doubt that the deconcentration paradigm is distinctly neoliberal. In its public/private partnerships, its formal retreat from welfarist policy, its adoption of new urbanist principles, its discourse of urban progress and in its promotion of personal responsibility and self-discipline, the deconcentration paradigm falls in line with transformations occurring within a neoliberalizing U.S. I draw upon the neoliberal countenance of the deconcentration paradigm, but it is not my central focus. The few existing academic critiques of deconcentration tend to get lost in anti-neoliberal discourse, attributing this phenomenon to the imperatives and ideologies of political economy and the racialization that evolves from them. Certainly, there is much to be said about deconcentration as a nodal point in the U.S. imagining of neoliberal doctrine. Yet much of this research has already been done and has regrettably left uninterrogated systems of symbolic representation that underlie the deconcentration paradigm.

I wish to intervene in this discussion by refocusing the critical lens towards the place of race in representations of the urban homeplace as tainted and of deconcentration as purifying. I posit deconcentration as an exercise of intersectionality—it is a racial project whose logic operates alongside and within class, gender, and sexual

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16 Michael Omi and Howard Winant define a “racial project” as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially
hierarchies. The imagination and execution of deconcentration derives from fundamental notions of what it means to be human in the ontological categorization of post-Enlightenment understanding.

These geo-racial constructions are in direct lineage with auto-instituting premises that have marked dominant European conceptions of American land since the 1492 event. The urban homeplace is painted as the new American frontier, the potentially profitable and undoubtedly treacherous landscape whose every streetcorner gains its meaning from specific modes of racialized thinking derivative of American conquest and subjugation/dismemberment of people of color. Yet within the logic of twenty-first century multicultural doxa, these highly racialized spaces—landscape known by phenotype and phenotype known by landscape, to paraphrase Katherine McKittrick—can only be represented by race-blind language. In this post-1960s moment, the language of poverty has usurped all resonance from the language of race, enabling vigorously de-racialized concepts—“concentrated poverty,” the “underclass”—to acquire their “unimaginably black”\(^{17}\) racial signification only through what is unpronounced and whispered in scholarly or political discourses, or sirened in the mass media.

Once understood as a racial project, deconcentration of poverty can be more appropriately conceptualized as an exercise in spatial and bodily purification than an exercise of gentrification. The latter often presumes that market logics govern the postmodern city. Yet the new trends in population geography and cultural phenomenology that characterize postmodern urban space—a reversal of white and middle-class flight back into the urban core, principles of new urbanism, sustainability,

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\(^{17}\) Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.
and self-help, and a revival of hipness, spectacle, and culture as signifying tropes of city life—are not isolated forces disengaged from images of U.S. urbanity as the new racial frontier. The postmodern city, that hyper-sexualized, creative core identified as much by its exotic imagery as by its commerce, feeds off of notions of Blackness as embodying those same constructions.\textsuperscript{18} The cultural footprint of a “ghetto-specific”\textsuperscript{19} Black presence now displaced (in order to generate pure(r) communities) renders this space trendy and alluring. Hypervisibilized and celebrated in the form of commodified culture, low-capital Blackness is only tolerable when its physical threat is erased, deconcentrated, regulated, and invisibilized.

The central paradox surrounding the deconcentration paradigm grows out of cleavages felt between its two premises—that concentrations of poverty are an unequivocal bad for dominant society and that deconcentration is the only possible cure. Foundational to the first premise is that the residents themselves are the defining marker of these geographies. In other words, it is the presence of a sizable population of low-capital (Black) residents within an enclosed space that constitutes a concentration of poverty. Thus, such residents are the \textit{natural} occupants of these spaces: they define geographies as concentrations of poverty and are defined by the symbolic representations that these geographies bear. There would be no concentrations of poverty without them; their collectivity embodies the markings of “concentration”.

Yet, according to the second paradigmatic premise, these spaces are fundamentally \textit{unnatural}. Understood as spatial pollutants, their extirpation from urban

\textsuperscript{18} For a thorough examination of the postmodern city, see Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith, ed., \textit{Racism, the City and the State} (New York: Routledge, 1993).

\textsuperscript{19} Wilson, \textit{The Truly Disadvantaged}, 14.
geographies is a central organizing initiative of the contemporary city. Moreover, spatial purification of urban homeplaces is imagined and executed only through the displacement of the very residents who define these geographies. An incongruity arises here: the residents who are naturalized to their urban landscape are necessarily displaced from it because the space itself is deemed unnatural. If urban homeplaces are unnatural features of urbanity, where does this leave the residents who are naturalized to these spaces?

The discordance sensed between the two premises would be seemingly extinguished if one were to argue that these residents do not naturally inhabit these spaces. This argument, the liberal response to the aforementioned tension, has been an active theoretical supposition in contemporary debates since William Julius Wilson’s 1987 *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson asserts that although “pathological” or, more precisely, “ghetto specific” behaviors are definitive markings of the urban homeplace, they are not its innate characteristics. Constructing an argument around the structural causations of “social isolation”—his central theoretical concept for representing the problems of the urban homeplace—he depicts the behavioral pathologies resulting from “social isolation” not as fixed and immutable, but rather as specific to the environment in which they arise. He writes that social isolation, a result of structural inequalities, “magnified the effects of living in highly concentrated urban poverty areas—effects that are manifested in ghetto-specific culture and behavior.” Distinguishing himself from “culture of poverty” formulations derivative from Oscar Lewis’s 1965 essay by the same name, he goes on to qualify his contention by introducing the potential for

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20 Lewis’s argument, derived from research in Latin America, asserts structural causation for a “culture of poverty.” He depicts this phenomenon as “both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society.” Although Wilson is
cultural/behavioral transformation: “It would be dogmatic to rule out this possibility, however…as economic and social situations change, cultural traits, created by previous situations, likewise eventually change even though it is possible that some will linger on and influence behavior for a period of time.” Paul A. Jargowsky, an influential theorist on the issue of poverty and space, interprets Wilson’s temporal ambiguities: “Although it is not stated explicitly, Wilson is talking about years, not generations…”

By opening up the prospect of behavioral transformation (if prompted by spatial or socio-economic transformation), the liberal imagination attempts to circumvent the mapping of residents of urban homeplaces as inalterably deviant and pathological. They are not natural figures of the urban landscape, if only because their deviance is prompted by that landscape. This theoretical strategy—favoring environmental over biological causation, the nurture over the nature—marks liberal racial thought, finding its origins in abolitionist discourses and coming to prominence in the early 20th century. The 1960s were fertile ground for this discourse, as evidenced by the work of psychologist Kenneth Clark, who developed the phrase “tangle of pathology” with reference to the myriad problems facing Black communities. Both Clark’s *Dark Ghetto* (1965) and E. Franklin Frazier’s earlier *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) spotlight the behavioral deviance now known to be a blighting presence in Black geographies (the emerging “ghetto” in the former, the family in the latter). Clark’s “tangle of pathology” was soon sympathetic to this argument, he objects to Lewis’s prognosis. Lewis writes that the “culture of poverty…tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their life-time.” Quoted in Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 13.

21 Ibid., 138. (Emphasis in the original.)


adopted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who wrote in the paradigmatic *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (the Moynihan Report), “…at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.” Clark and Frazier, and to some extent Moynihan, coupled their interpretations of pathology with scrutiny of the socio-political structures that they traced as the cause of the “tangle of pathology.” In a way, then, Wilson actually retreats from where they had already gone.

Wilson vehemently distinguishes his analysis from what he sees as the pitfalls of the “culture of poverty” thesis—the sense of semi-permanent, nearly genetic inheritance of deviant traits. Yet his attack on the “culture of poverty” thesis does not target Lewis’s presumptions of site-specific deviance (Jargowsky actually admits that “Wilson has done more than anyone to call attention to the ‘tangle of pathology’ in the ghetto,”). Rather Wilson speculates on the endurance and longevity of homeplace pathology. Liberal analyses of urban homeplaces continue to take this point for granted—rarely is Wilson’s diagnosis of pathological and “ghetto-specific” behavior called into question.

It is necessary to note that the deconcentration paradigm is not a uniquely liberal formulation. Its basic premises have been historically marked by bipartisan support, and it has achieved the status of academic *doxa* within research conducted across political spectrums. Yet, with the exception of a few major conservative theorists, including

26 Jargowsky, *Poverty and Place*, 190.
Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray, much academic research on urban homeplaces and deconcentration carries a liberal bent, meaning that it follows in W.J. Wilson’s footsteps in recognizing that concentrations of poverty represent an absolute societal failure and positing the *unfixed* nature of “ghetto-specific” behavior. Conservatives Mead and Murray break from Wilson over the issue of causality; their iterations of pathological determinants ignore Wilson’s focus on structural considerations in favor of individual malfeasance, except in the case of welfare services (such as public housing), to which they assign culpability for entrenching and rewarding pathological behavior. Articulating this individual culpability, Mead writes, “poverty often arises from the functioning problems of the poor themselves, especially difficulties in getting through school, working, and keeping their families together.”

I argue that this liberal position, central to the deconcentration paradigm, reinscribes notions of *naturalized* Black pathology, even as it attempts to articulate “ghetto-specific” behavior as acquired and potentially transformable. The liberal environmental thesis, by rendering the troubles of the place responsible for the pathology of the person, engages dominant and interconnecting narratives of subjugation involving Black geographies and Black corporealities. The environmental thesis paints the urban homeplace as an inevitable and absolute landscape of dispossession, devoid of agency and hope, thus reifying notions of Black geographies as unconditionally deviant, criminal, impure, and *other*. By mapping Black pathology as an

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overwhelmingly spatial (“inner city”) phenomenon, the environmental thesis attempts to shatter deterministic links between genetics and behavioral deviance. In other words, Black pathology, although real and treacherous, is not innate, but rather a function of spatial dysfunction. A disease, it was transmitted through the torrid zone.

I by no means wish to discourage a structural critique. Rather, I am concerned with how the environmental thesis employs such a critique to reaffirm Black alterity, thereby upholding the structural and epistemic premises that have legitimized the subjugation and dismemberment of people of color since the 1492 event. In what follows, I attempt to unsettle spatialized “ghetto-specific behavior” discourse by tracing this self-evident truth of the deconcentration paradigm to the questions of humanness and space taking form in the post-1492 period.

*Terra Nullius and Geo-Racial Poetics*

In imagining the urban homeplace within the narrow terms of dispossession, these constructed “landscapes of despair” borrow from narratives that originated in the context of the 1492 event, which splintered feudal geographic schemas. As Sylvia Wynter illuminates, the feudal, pre-15th century conception of the world was shaped by a “binary opposition...inscribed in an ostensibly unbridgeable separation between the *habitable* areas of the earth (which were within the redemptive grace of the Scholastics’ God and His only ‘partial providence for mankind’), and the *inhabitable* areas of the earth (which

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The earth was nonhomogeneously conceptualized: only the geographies under God’s grace were habitable, and no human action could disrupt this providential spatial binary. Europe constituted the “temperate” zone, for it was capable of sustaining human life, while all geographies peripheral to these blessed and redeemed lands were considered too hot or incompatible for human habitation. According to the feudal cosmological understanding of the earth, these peripheral geographies constituted the “torrid zones” and were thought to be wholly submerged under water. This geographical dichotomy arose from interpretations of the Biblical Flood, the aftermath of which was understood to have determined the areas suitable for habitability. Within this schema, the uninhabitable areas (or all spaces surrounding the island of habitable land whose center was Jerusalem) were left as a depository for the waters of the Flood and “in the terms of Christian-Aristotelian physics, the more spiritually degraded and heavier element of earth, had to be submerged in its natural place under the element of the lighter element of water.” In sharp contradistinction to these areas, the lands composing the “temperate zones” and containing European peoples were redeemed by Godly intervention to rise above their “natural” place under the water. This providential redemption enabled these areas to contain land and support human life.

With Columbus’s voyages, geographies previously known only by their uninhabitability (by lying West of Europe), were “discovered,” and, through a series of transformations in the European cosmogony, the Americas were deemed potentially habitable. The condition for this ontological transformation in geography—the Americas’ categorical shift from the “torrid” zone, underwater and too hot for

32 Ibid., 22.
habitation, to the “temperate” zone, landed and capable of sustaining human life—was an epistemological revolution that could support such a rupture in the dominant mode of feudal European knowing. This lay humanist revolution, which coincided with Copernicus’s challenges to the astronomical foundations of feudal European spatial thought (removing the earth from the center of the universe, positing its mobility, and, in so doing, nullifying discourses of human helplessness and lack of agency before the Christian God), sought to impose humanist notions of utopian geographies and systems of being onto the earth through homogenization of land. Wynter writes, “there could be no longer habitable and uninhabitable, inside the sheepfold, or out. All was now one sheepfold, and if not, was intended to be made so.”33 Within this revised system of symbolic representations, the Americas were not endlessly uninhabitable, for they could be transformed to sustain European habitation. Yet as they stood—unkempt, wild, savage—they took on all the meanings of chaos that haunted the humanist imagination.

The project of homogenizing land through subjugation, regulation, and consumption is a fundamental exercise of American history. The border between geographies safely in the grips of societal control and geographies of chaos is the frontier, that elusive physical site that threatens the dominant social order even as it simultaneously offers essential societal nourishment: the possibility for expansion and affirmation of bourgeois discourses on progress. Frontier narratives span from Puritanical physiphobia of the “desolate wilderness” surrounding early New England colonies34 to the imperialist language of Manifest Destiny marking 19th and early 20th

33 Ibid., 28.
century conversations on expansion. Discourses on the urban homeplace descend directly from these narratives. Constructed as a unitary site of dispossession, the urban homeplace is defined not only by its gross uninhabitability, but also by its potential for ontological transformation. By proceeding with discourses on dispossession, the liberal environmental thesis demands spatial revitalization and purification in much the same way Columbus demanded homogenization of American land.

A crucial vulnerability in Columbus’s schema, the negotiation of which has determined the way in which colonization has been imagined and rationalized, was the unmistakable empiricism that these lands were indeed inhabited. Columbus's reaction to the existence of Tainos and Arawaks on the island soon named Hispaniola was to “see the New World peoples in the way his earlier learned antagonists had ‘seen’ the ‘uninhabitable’ torrid zones,” as Idolators, non-Christians, anti-humans. In this way, the European project of homogenizing land and rendering it inhabitable was conceptualized and legitimized through the ontological certainty that no humans were previously occupying it. Such certainty derived from now-outmoded spatial schemas that dichotomized the torrid and the temperate. The torrid found corporeal signification in the idolatrous indigenous populations. These geographies were available for European exploitation precisely because, within the feudal Christian imagination, “non-Christians have no rights to possess or negotiate any dominion in the then-existing international context, and their land is objectively a terra nullius (no man’s land) that may be occupied

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and seized by Christians in order to exploit the richness meant by God to be shared by all humankind.”

The conceptual space occupied by *terra nullius* continues to carry a stronghold on the dominant imaginary. In the wake of the Enlightenment, the bourgeois rearticulation of this status began to signify notions of proper land use, a designation informed by the demands of the nascent capitalist market. Understandings of *terra nullius* took on significations of unprofitability, non-engagement with the market, and more generally, deviance from the prescribed, rational behavior of the proper bourgeois subject. This shift is evident in early 19th century American conversations on westward expansion, which rested upon images of “virginized” open grasslands untouched by American Indians. Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* proves to be particularly useful in illuminating the interplay between constructions of *terra nullius* and the peoples inhabiting it. Jefferson’s depiction of American Indians as impediments to U.S. progress was partly based on his belief that they did not engage in agriculture, his optimal status criterion for ecological maintenance. Their incapacity to reap profit from land, to tame it and *know* it rationally all played into constructions of American Indian savagery, affirming their inability to possess land. Once marked as *terra nullius*, land inhabited by American Indians becomes exploitable for Europeans in much the same way that American Indians themselves were rendered idolators, enslaveable, and displaceable: American Indians inhuman, their land uninhabited. Katherine McKittrick elucidates this formulation: “In naming them ‘terra nullius/lands of no one’ and mapping them as

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‘peopleless’ voids, the uninhabitable was abstracted by cartographic translations of where and who can constitute the terms of normal habitability.”

As *terra nullius* became more and more associated with subaltern populations, signifying their presence even as it denied their humanity, this geo-racial classification merged into a mutually constructed mode of spatial/corporeal organization upon which a new, distinctly “New World” epistemology was born. McKittrick reimagines Wynter’s geographic discussions, demonstrating that the pre-1492 geographic binary, between the European temperate zone and the other torrid zone, between what constituted a geographic site of habitability as opposed to an “ungeographic” site of uninhabitability, was eventually projected corporeally onto the subaltern populations encountered by Europeans in the Americas, an encounter that shattered pre-existing geographic schemas. As the temperate/torrid dualism began to splinter, “This geographic dichotomy, unraveled into New World cultural exchanges that settled into a rigorous nonhomogeneous human model. Humanness became a classificatory text, distinguishing white, native (nonwhite), African (native/Other/nigger) from one another and identifying subtypes of human Otherness, such as class, gender, sexuality.” In this way, Columbus’s insistence on geographic homogeneity—the capacity for all lands to be inhabited, subjugated, and rationally known by the feudal European optimal status criterion of white male property holder—arose only through ontological compromise: the cross-application of now obsolete geographic distinctions (temperate/torrid) onto racialized human classificatory models in the text of self/other.

Subaltern populations, then, were approached and integrated into the dominant mode of subjective understanding only through their geographical analogues of

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40 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 129.
41 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 130.
nonhomogeneity that marked pre-1492 conceptions of space. It is out of this schema that racial hierarchies attained their meaning, for whiteness became the signifier for humanity, and, as Wynter notes, Blackness “came to serve as the nec plus ultra sign of rational human being.”42 Wynter’s employment of nec plus ultra/nothing further beyond, is a reimagining of the spatial signification of the Latin, which, according to the mythology, was inscribed on the Pillars of Hercules at the Straits of Gibraltar, warning sailors against traveling beyond the European sphere. Applied to the question of the human, nec plus ultra denotes, relative to the European optimal status criterion, the polar opposite of humanity, so near to oblivion as to almost be nonexistent. In this system of symbolic representations, Blackness is defined next to the model of the human by its lack of such status.

Wynter follows this classificatory model through the Enlightenment, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and Darwin’s bioevolutionary revolt, when secular principles served to reinscribe these hierarchies in the discourse of objective rationality, thus articulating the question of the human in the new language of eugenics and racial-cum-national progress: “This premise is that of a bioevolutionarily determined difference of genetic value substance between one evolutionarily selected human hereditary variation and therefore eugenic line of descent…and a series, to varying degrees, of its nonselected and therefore dysgenic Others.”43 This, remarks Wynter, is W.E.B. Du Bois’s color line, which, “by making conceptualizable the representation…of a bioevolutionarily selected line of eugenic hereditary descent, the symbolic construct of ‘race’ mapped onto the color line has served to enact a new status criterion of eugenicity on whose basis the global bourgeoisie legitimates its ostensibly bioevolutionarily selected dominance—as the

42 Wynter, “1492,” 36.
43 Ibid., 39.
alleged global bearers of a transracial line of eugenic hereditary descent—over the global nonmiddle (or ‘working’) classes, with its extreme Other being that of the ‘jobless’ and ‘homeless’ underclass, who have been supposedly discarded by reason of their genetic defectivity by the Malthusian ‘iron laws of nature.’

Wynter’s understanding of post-Enlightenment gauges of humanness is brought to the fore by Victorian attitudes towards urbanity, race, filth, dysgenics, and order. In the following section, I address this orientation as a necessary point of inquiry before arriving at our current focus in New Orleans.

“All Pervading Filth”: The Sanitary Idea in the Victorian City

The century following the Enlightenment witnessed a major shift in attitudes about the body. As Darwin’s bioevolutionary narratives saturated Enlightenment infatuations with bourgeois progress, rationality, and the systematic ordering of the universe, the confines of humanness were molded to these imperatives in the form of the color line, the eugenically-coded rubric of race. At a time when feudal modes of governmentality were quickly disintegrating in favor of surveillance and panopticism, new regimes of bodily discipline arose out of heightened interest in the autopoietic truth of eugenicity.

In Michel Foucault’s reading of this transformation, the body became a critical site of power generation, the major physico-symbolic referent through which disciplinary

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44 Ibid., 40.
46 It is necessary to note that the precursors to these narratives held strong sway over Enlightenment minds, as evidenced by late 18th century Lamarckian and Buffonian contributions to evolutionary theory. Darwin’s ideas were not born into a creationist vacuum.
and regulatory discourses operated. Foucault named “biopower,” “brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge/power an agent of transformation of human life.” Out of these biologized political technologies and the new bioevolutionary model of humanness arose a new conception of eugenicity, which refracted pre-existing concerns over racial purity through an Enlightenment rationality and in so doing provided a scientific, legitimating, and hegemonic language for mapping, knowing, and pursuing bodily/racial cleanness, a status defined by an equally studied signification—bodily/racial taint. The 19th century sciences of Social Darwinism and eugenics most explicitly display the power held by this discourse, but, true to Foucault’s understanding of biopower, eugenicity is traceable in nearly any pursuit of scholarly knowledge. Its ubiquity was not limited to academic discourse, as eugenicity entered the epistemological lexicon and became a common sense trope upon which everyday knowledge was predicated. This discourse molded not only the material parameters of humanness as a physiological text, but also the language and symbolic system upon which humanness was written. My focus in tracing this discourse is Victorian England. As Erin O’Connor explains, “It is by now a truism that the Victorians saw the human body as a source of ultimate truth, a way of knowing the world. In an era of optimistic positivism, the body was felt to naturalize social hierarchies based on race, gender, and class, and so to provide biological justification for the rigid social ordering built into capitalism and global expansion.”

49 Gossett, *Race*, 144-175.
The poetics of purity and taint, already a central symbolism feudal Christian thought (i.e. in the imagery of salvation and original sin), merged seamlessly with the discourse of eugenicity and biological determinism that was encoded onto secularized, Enlightenment conceptions of humanness. Accordingly, the embodied nature of filth became a mainstay of this new discourse, inspiring an entire politico-scientific apparatus whose aim was to diagnose, categorize, and act upon bodies and bodily behaviors known as filthy. There was no way to speak of filth without speaking of tainted bodies, just as there was no way to understand tainted bodies outside the poetics of filth. Nineteenth century racial thinking took shape from this epistemological link, finding its deepest popular resonance in the language of hygiene, cleanness, and filth.\(^ {51}\)

The tainted state of alterity delivered meaning and urgency onto a new model of being, an optimal status criterion under constant threat of contagion. Out of bourgeois fears of racial impurity, disease, moral degradation, and pollution, was born a new mode of humanness realizable only through proper bourgeois behavior, status and the embodiment of whiteness. Anne McClintock alludes to the emergence of this status in her discussion of Victorian fetishism of soap. She outlines how the purifying symbolism evoked by soap—which attained true commodity status in this era—was informed by the cultivation of emergent middle class values, including, “monogamy (‘clean’ sex, which has value), industrial capital (‘clean’ money, which has value), Christianity (‘being washed in the blood of the lamb’), class control (‘cleansing the great unwashed’) and the imperial civilizing mission (‘washing and clothing the savage’).”\(^ {52}\) Soap became the mark of the white bourgeois subject, a necessary consumptive tool for pursuing the fulfillment


\(^ {52}\) Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 208.
of bourgeois selfhood. In the sense that cleansing oneself in the appropriate fashion was
the mark of humanness, soap, and more generally the hygienic regime, served as a
disciplinary and regulatory mechanism, instilling in the body politic a mode of subjective
understanding in which the discourse of purity configured which thoughts and actions
were deemed normative or transgressive.

This poetics of filth and purity found their greatest resonance in Victorian
England’s ballooning cities. Taint and cleanness became a primary discourse for knowing
the urban body, contributing to the Victorian handling of race, class, gender, and
sexuality amidst drastic fluctuations in the social order. The pressing concerns of
Victorian urbanity—disease, industrial pollution, unsafe living and working conditions,
destabilized gender order, prostitution, immigration, and the colonial connection—were
frequently negotiated through this discourse, which served as a rationalizing tool in
tracing the causality of these societal dilemmas. Inasmuch as these filthy crises exposed
the contradictions of the Victorian city, filth offered a language for contextualizing and
naturalizing them, freeing the systemic from culpability and provoking epistemological
resignation. This process absolved the systemic, incriminating instead the moral and
genetic characteristics of those principal figures of embodied urban filth (most notably
the prostitute, the pauper, the immigrant, and the diseased), as well as their physical
surroundings. This individualizing process mapped filth onto these bodies and declared
this condition a natural consequence of moral/behavioral and genetic malfunction, or, as
I discuss below, urban dissolution.

The foregoing discussion about Victorian corporealities and their relation to the
poetics of contamination is incomplete without an examination of the place of space in
this discourse. Body was fastened to geography through this poetics, blurring the already
overlapping texts of the human and the city. The notion of environmental causality—the major link I wish to flesh out between Victorians and contemporary regimes of georacial regulation—arises out of this juncture. Before addressing this confluence, I will briefly look at Victorian attitudes towards an increasingly unruly urbanity.

The city often haunted Enlightenment thinkers, symbolizing an anarchic, indefinable, and uncontrollable mesh of bodies and structures. Typically represented as antithetical to the natural realm, the city was all that nature was not: toxic, human, degraded, fallen. Yet even in its hazardous fluidity and unruly rapidity, the city represented a fundamental human achievement: domination over an equally treacherous nature and implementation of human knowledge models onto the natural world. The city typified the promise and perils of the Enlightenment **episteme**. To subdue and organize the city and its constituents was to impose Enlightenment modes of rationality onto a social and physical landscape, a task that was forced to come to terms with the patently chaotic motions of Victorian urbanity. New models of governmentality idealized an arrangement of Victorian space that reflected Enlightenment ideals. Like Foucault’s panopticon, the city grid was to be calculated, homogeneous, and standardized, a geographical form that would most effectively facilitate and regulate the behavior of urban residents. This environmental determinism, the subject of the subsequent section, supposed that behavioral norms would take form in harmony with structural organization.

The ideal of a hyper-regulated utopian space can be understood as a reaction of the bourgeoisie to the inescapable disorder of the urban environment. Slums, pollution,
and disease trespassed over the city’s social boundaries, resisting even the most zealous efforts of the bourgeoisie to avoid these environmental hazards. Once outside the domestic realm, the bourgeois subject was vulnerable to the uncontrollable matrix of the street. As Stallybrass and White observe, “the streets were a ‘mingle-mangle’, ‘a hodge-podge’, where the costermonger, the businessman, the prostitute, the clerk, the nanny and the cross-dressing sweeper jostled for place.”55 A language of geographic filth germinated to categorize and place these threats. Such conceptions of taint, contamination, and purity continue to inform the modes through which corporealities and urban geographies define each other.

Locating the origins of vice in the physical surroundings of the impropriety, the environmentalist position departed from pre-Enlightenment understandings of vice as a result of fallen nature, of an ingrained, cursed disposition. As Foucault emphasizes, this development arose in tandem with new concerns for the health and cohesion of the social body, preoccupations that were thought to be best mediated through the state. Pamela K. Gilbert observes that new technologies for analyzing and measuring the populace, which formed the shape of the social body, “divided society into masses of standardized or deviant individual bodies.”56 These new classificatory mechanisms enabled an epistemic shift away from the phenomenon of fallen nature, which assumed that one’s status was providentially designed, to a new mode of extra-humanization of agency. By offering statistical practices for diagnosing, studying, and regulating the social body according to scientific principles, these technologies made available an

understanding of vice and moral degradation that looked to geography (instead of the
divine) in reckoning with breaches of the social order. The body was central in this
secularized formulation; as a malleable subject that takes form from the environment, it
was a canvas for socio-environmental manufacture.

As this metamorphizing epistemology opened up new possibilities for the human
subject, it simultaneously reinscribed genetic differential as a primary mode of
understanding the body and its continence. The environmentalist thesis did not do away
with genetico-behavioral causality for social transgression. In its most extreme versions,
it obscured it; in its more typical manifestations it aligned environmental determinism
alongside biological and ethical determinisms. The eugenic coding for full humanness
was always implicit in late 19th century sanitary reformist thought, whether it was
discussed outright or camouflaged by geographical poetics of filth.

As an epistemic phenomenology, the poetics of contamination supplies a
discourse for engaging the question of the human alongside the quandary of the city. A
primary mode of articulating both the bourgeois anxieties of socio-spatial dissolution and
the hegemonic reactions to a fundamentally unstable city, this poetics served as threat to
and savior of the dominant system of symbolic representations. Filth condensed these
bountiful and immensely visible incongruities into a template so graphic and haunting
that it remains a fundamental technology in contemporary urban discourse.

Filth and Uninhabitability in 21st Century Urbanity

Following the lead of McKittrick, I argue that the geo-racial poetics of filth
continues to shape dominant conceptions of urban space and subaltern bodies. It is this
enduring cartographic exercise—the mapping of the urban homeplace and its residents
as sites of uninhabitability and deviance within the liberal environmental thesis—that ensures that Black pathology remains fixed and immutable within the dominant mode of subjective understanding. Black pathology is invoked by the liberal environmental thesis by employing resurrected and refined discourses that have historically shrouded representations of Black bodies. The Black corporeal presence within the dominant imaginary is marked by alterity—it is at once contaminating, contagious, liminal, exotic and dangerous. The deployment of these discourses in urban studies, even when understood to be transformable and structurally-induced, confirms the base inhumanity of residents. Discourses on “inner city” pathology typify discussions of late 20th and 21st century urbanity. The liberal penchant for structural musings, while attempting to locate the origins of this pathology outside of the individual residents themselves, nevertheless accepts Black deviance as the defining characteristic of entire geographies. Furthermore, this preoccupation with pinpointing the structural roots of “ghetto-specific” pathology understands the question of the city as a question of materiality—that is, in terms of access to employment, schools, housing, and other “opportunities”—and in so doing ignores the systems of thought that operate within these material considerations. Left uninterrogated are the ontological schemas that guarantee the material status of “impoverished” inner city dwellings and dwellers, as well as the epistemological systems that govern the modes through which this status is interpreted, named, and known. Few prominent analyses of the urban take into account the symbolic, concerned as they are over the material. In turn, this epistemological resignation relegates liberal analyses to base acceptance of post-Enlightenment conceptions of what constitutes humanness and what sites stand capable of supporting human habitation.

57 Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 14.
The deconcentration paradigm—a convergence point between the disciplines of urban studies, sociology, and geography—is constructed from hegemonic epistemological modes of knowing and not knowing. Its paradigmatic status in the present moment reflects the confluence of rationalized, systematized technologies for classifying bodies, spaces, and behaviors according to dominant post-Enlightenment logics of eugenicity, biopower, and objectivity. Shaped around this paradigm, liberal theorizing of the urban homeplace takes for granted the inhumanity of low-capital Black residents and the uninhabitability of their homes. Articulated through the language of pathology, urban Blackness is marked by its overwhelming deviance from the proper behavior of the model bourgeois subject. No matter how temporary this status is argued to be—years for Wilson, generations for Lewis—and regardless of its ostensible causal elements, the status remains the same. Residents are constructed as inhuman, ineligible for admission into the ranks of what Wynter terms *propter nos homines*, those who meet “the conditions both of *humanness*, the mode of the *nos*, and therefore of the cognitive phenomenon defining of the human, in other words, the mind.” Concentrated poverty discourses readily invoke the cognitive and behavioral alterity of homeplace residents, thus engaging in a naturalization process that serves to confirm and reinscribe the projection of pathology onto Black bodies. That the criminality and impurity marking understandings of Black bodies in the urban homeplace are deemed unfixed does not obstruct the profound signification that occurs when these discourses are reaffirmed.

Geographical considerations are paramount in understanding how this naturalization process occurs despite the ostensible liberal efforts to escape genetic/biological determinisms characteristic of eugenic discourse. In marking the

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urban homeplace as uninhabitable, the bodies occupying it are, in turn, rendered inhuman in the bioevolutionary poetics of dysgenic human status. This relationship ensures schematic consistency in the sense that the essential condition for the spatial status uninhabitable is the occupier’s inhumanity, and conversely, the implication of the occupier’s inhumanity is the production of an uninhabitable place. McKittrick explicates this correlation: “Post-1492, what the uninhabitable tells us, then, is that populations who occupy the ‘nonexistent’ are living in what has been previously conceptualized as unlivable and unimaginable. If identity and place are mutually constructed, the uninhabitable spatializes a human Other category of the unimaginable/native/black.”

Since space attains meaning from body, and body from space, the liberal/conservative engagement of discourses on behavioral pathology complements the liberal/humanitarian concern for spatial unlivability, thus reinscribing the naturalness of both, and in so doing, creating the requisite ontological atmosphere for the reproduction of bioevolutionary narratives that render poor Blacks genetically inferior, deviant, and other. It is within these narratives that the deconcentration paradigm arose and continues to reassert its legitimacy as the contemporary rearticulation of the frontier scenario. It is within these narratives that the displacement of thousands of Blacks across the U.S. becomes an inevitable, unremarkable fact.

Public Housing as Torrid Zone

As the central physico-symbolic referent in the concentrated poverty debates, public housing stands as one of the most contested urban terrains of the late 20th century, and the first few years of the 21st indicate that this distinction is in no danger of obsolescence. Lawrence J. Vale has argued that by the end of the last century, “the
projects’ became the most vilified domestic environment in the United States and...their residents came to carry [this] broadly shared stigma. 59 This assertion certainly reflects an unmistakable demonizing trend in urban studies, but it fails to account for the rise of the prison industrial complex as a concomitant to what Loic Wacquant terms the “hyperghetto,” a relationship he depicts as a “wedding of ghetto and prison into an extended carceral mesh.” 60 If Foucault’s concept of surveillance is a key indicator of the modern prison, public housing certainly exhibits the same panopticism, with police stations often positioned within the housing developments themselves and warrant-less searches a mainstay of residents’ daily lives. More significant for the purposes of this study is the inverse relationship between prison and public housing vis-à-vis population trends. As the prison population balloons to well over two million in 2007 (quadrupling since 1980), the number public housing residents dwindles every year.

With what one scholar has called “the end of public housing as we know it,” the last thirty years have seen a sharp reduction in state subsidized housing, especially in the form of large-scale, single-site developments. 61 The eradication of public housing in the form of project-based assistance is the central preoccupation of the deconcentration paradigm, boasting almost unanimous support amongst policymakers and academics. This project has not gone unchallenged, however. Deconcentration has proven to be a volatile and unpredictable endeavor for politicians and developers, who have encountered substantial resistance to their plans. A multitude of local, highly organized, and resident-led efforts have emerged, attempting to stem the tide of the initiative.

Although this mode of urban therapeutics often continues unabated, these grassroots struggles often challenge the very basis of deconcentration, contesting the epistemological conditions necessary to render public housing residents *displaceable*.

It is within this understanding of a contested paradigm that I introduce the language of the urban homeplace into *Through Murky Waters*. The prevailing view of urban homeplace as “always already fraught with discourses of dispossession”⁶² often holds little sway over its residents who call it home. Dominant deployment of hegemonic namings reflects the base assumptions of the deconcentration paradigm, marking these spaces as *uninhabitable* and in so doing, denying the humanity of residents. Unlike “concentration of poverty,” “ghetto,” or “inner city,” terms often inflecting dominant notions of *irreversible, unconditional* desperation, “homeplace” signifies the spaces inhabited by communities and residents engaged in real struggle against systemic forces that render them conceptually other. It is necessary to note that these terms are often used by residents themselves. Yet the rhetorical monopoly claimed by “ghetto” or “projects,” while attesting to the dominance of hegemonic namings, does not indicate that residents are themselves reproducing the meanings tied to these epithets in dominant discourse. Rather, reconfigurations of these names can signify notions of liminality, community, and empowerment. Even so, I use homeplace so as to avoid recapitulating dominant significations. My positionality—as a white college student on a middle-class trajectory—puts me in a much more precarious place in terms of this recapitulation. In using urban homeplace, I recognize that for many people, public housing is home.

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bell hooks utilizes this term to signify the trans-historical struggle of establishing a home amidst the horrors and perils of existing as the antithetical embodiment of humanity:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.

She goes on to describe how the stripping of homeplace is also a trans-historical phenomenon:

An effective means of white subjugation of black people globally has been the perpetual construction of economic and social structures that deprive many folks of the means to make homeplace.

In this text homeplace signifies hooksian connotations of struggle and community formation as these meanings interact with the exigencies of the deconcentration paradigm. Residents of homeplaces are neither figures of dispossession, devoid of agency, nor are they romanticized effigies of resistance against oppression. Neither of these constructions recognizes the humanity of residents, who struggle for selfhood and community in contexts that deem both their bodies (vis-à-vis race, gender, class, and sexuality) and their environments as antithetical to dominant understandings of humanity and land. Elizabeth Higginbotham reflects on the imperative to negotiate dualistic, positivist conceptions of agency in representing Black women and families: “In our eagerness to counteract the negative stereotypes, we must not create a different one, which also fails to reflect accurately the varied lives of Black women….although Black families have developed survival strategies, which do satisfy certain needs, other needs

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63 hooks, “Homeplace,” 42, 46.
are left unmet.”64 In this text, then, the rhetorical use of urban homeplace aims to express the *inhabitance* (as opposed to the *uninhabitability*) of these geographies, as this status relates to the palpable threat of displacement. I expand upon these ideas across *Through Murky Waters*, particularly in the Epilogue.

High profile public housing struggles have become common markers of the redevelopment trajectory, attracting local and sometimes national attention for what has become a routine challenge to the logic of the deconcentration paradigm. At the present moment, post-Katrina New Orleans figures as the most controversial site for the demolition/redevelopment procedure. Although New Orleans’ proposed public housing redevelopment does in some ways represent a departure from the standard practices around the country, it can be characterized more than anything as an extreme version of a national trend.

The extent to which Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath represent a departure from the everyday violence defining the United States in the early 21st century is tragic in its negligibility. Post-Katrina New Orleans, undoubtedly an urban calamity of unprecedented extremes, should nevertheless be understood as an intensified mirror of the state and epistemic terror that are constitutive of the dominant order. I seek to demonstrate that the demolition and redevelopment of the city’s four largest public housing developments, extensions of the federal effort to eradicate public housing, are predicated on the projection of racial/sexual taint onto these structures. I argue that the substantial consensus claimed by the phasing out of public housing owes to the

racialized/otherized space occupied by public housing within the normative imagination. The structures, defined in part by the centuries-old images of criminality, dysgenic impurity, and delinquency mapped onto Black bodies, have become piercing representations of these elements, thus rendering both housing structure and resident body ontological contaminants of the city.

My argument revolves around frequently discordant notions of contamination and their interplay with the proposed redevelopment of lands currently used for public housing. Research conducted in New Orleans during July and August, 2007, suggests that the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), in receivership from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is co-opting environmental and social justice discourse in justifying the demolition and redevelopment of the city's four largest public housing developments. HANO argues that the presence of the contaminants mold, lead, and asbestos, along with structural damage to the buildings, warrants the demolition of these developments amidst an unprecedented housing crisis and per capita homelessness exceeding four times pre-Katrina levels. In addition to claims of contamination and structural damage or obsolescence, redevelopment advocates have employed the aforementioned scripts of concentrated poverty discourse in presenting the demolition/redevelopment as an opportunity for citywide redemption and health. With the housing structures deemed uninhabitable, the redevelopment is routinely framed as an exercise in environmental and housing justice. As of this writing in April, 2008, demolition has commenced in some of the buildings and has been scheduled in others. Despite the often violent struggles undertaken by anti-demolition residents and advocates, dominant redevelopment discourse has maintained the project's humanitarian foundations.
Numerous observations conflict with this egalitarian posturing. First, the outcomes of similar redevelopments, both locally and nationally, suggest that the proposed demolition would ensure the permanent displacement of the majority of the 5,000 families who lived in the developments before Katrina, many of whom were evacuated out of the city with no means of returning. Furthermore, all three environmental toxins cited by HANO as proof of the uninhabitable state of the developments were present within these structures in hazardous quantities before Hurricane Katrina. A multitude of studies have already challenged the uninhabitability of the housing developments post-Katrina, asserting both the structural soundness of the buildings and their capacity for toxin abatement, especially relative to other, more damaged structures in the city that have been rehabilitated. Finally, HANO has placed a number of former residents back into some of the housing developments on a temporary basis to mitigate the effects of the city’s housing crisis. In this sense they are inhabited, even as they are argued to be uninhabitable by the same organizational entity responsible for permitting residence.

These reflections suggest that the housing authority’s sudden cultivation of concern for the environmental safety of the developments and their residents should be viewed as a co-optation of environmental and social justice discourse, effectively enabling this programme of urban renewal to precipitate nothing more than urban removal. The residents’ sudden susceptibility to environmental contamination also leaves them vulnerable to displacement, the neighborhood vulnerable to spatial and social purification. It is necessary to note here that I do not offer a dissection of the duplicitous intentions of HANO, HUD, or any private institution or actor. I turn the lens of this text not towards intentionality, but towards the systems of thought through which New
Orleans’ rendering of the demolition/redevelopment trajectory attains meaning and is legitimated.

I argue that the contamination eliciting demolition is not so much environmental as it is social, a trope that figures integrally in the (not uniquely) post-Katrina project of socio-spatial purification. The racialized mythologies of pathology, crime, disorder, and blight that shroud representations of public housing in normative discourses render these developments existentially threatening to the purity of the whiter and wealthier areas surrounding them, such as the French Quarter. A palpable fear of societal contamination—low-capital Blackness—traverses the deracialized parlance of the deconcentration paradigm, attracting bipartisan and trans-ideological support in the effort to eradicate public housing.

The deconcentration paradigm draws on the tropes of contagion and purification in a context that is already ripe with such poetics. The imagery of Katrina is the imagery of contamination. To a significant degree, this assemblage of symbolic representations delivered to Katrina its resonance within popular discourse. In locating this event within a continuum of purity politics and poetics, understandings of Hurricane Katrina were locked into a central site of signification within the present *episteme*. The Katrina moment became an exercise in socio-spatial purity, pursued through discourses on contaminated bodies and urban space.

The politics and poetics of contamination offer a key mechanism for diagnosing, categorizing, and knowing the troubles of New Orleans. In turn, this diagnostic mechanism governs the modes of addressing the question of the urban in a post-disaster city. This semiotics—which determines the who, where and why of contagion—gives meaning to the liberal/reformist/humanitarian understanding of urban
renaissance. Although the poetics of contamination is common to deconcentration projects nationwide, its deployment in New Orleans carries a particular salience and logic, as the imagery of the floodwaters left a profound metaphorical residue even after the streets were drained. Toxicity has entered the realm of fetish, becoming the terrain in which reconstruction policies and languages attain meaning. When, in a particularly spectacular manifestation of this phenomenon, a Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality inspector publicly consumes a spoonful of dirt to prove its innocuous qualities, there remains little doubt that notions of toxicity and purity, taint and decontamination, shape the contours of competing discourses on the state and future of post-Katrina New Orleans.65

TWO
Cartographies of Taint

"It's totally wiped out...It's devastating, it's got to be doubly devastating on the ground."
-George W. Bush

"You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals...many of these people, almost all of them that we see are so poor and they are so black."
-CNN's Wolf Blitzer

…it is not yet clear whether their old neighborhoods will ever be safe enough to inhabit.”
-The Urban Institute, on poor Black neighborhoods, including the Lower Ninth Ward and public housing

Even before Hurricane Katrina touched the shores of the inner Gulf, the National Weather Service predicted a sustained period of unlivability for New Orleans, cautioning, “Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks...perhaps longer.”

Anxieties over the uninhabitability of the city aroused national panic after the levees ruptured, a concern that was informed by the media’s presentation of footage marked with despair, struggle, anger,

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vulnerability and death. As analogies to the cities of the Global South began to circulate, popular conversations began to utter the language of racial, class, and gender inequality to a degree unprecedented in recent years. The observation that a large population of New Orleanians had remained despite a mandatory evacuation, and that nearly all those faces presented as spectacle by the camera were Black, provoked a momentary departure from the deracialized and pathologized language that was customarily employed to confront the essential contradictions of postindustrial urbanity. If the normative understanding of the “inner city” dilemma calls upon deracialized constructions of behavioral alterity and spatial misuse, Katrina exposed the cleavages of these assumptions. The significance of race and gender in the urban question became palpable, somewhat legible, and subject to discourse. Moreover, as criticism of evacuation plans and disaster response swelled, culpability for material deprivation heretofore projected onto subaltern bodies was redirected toward the state. And Blackness was mapped onto the disaster with connotations of state abandonment and neglect, thus opening up the discursive possibility for Black victimhood.

This anomalous performance of concern for low-capital Black subjects fed upon an imagery of state underdevelopment and backwardness typically reserved for nations of the Global South. In what seemed to be a reversal of media templates, those well-worn U.S. media images of urban desolation, disaster, flooding, and Black bodies floating in ruin were transposed from their characteristically remote positioning onto a major U.S. city. With its intimations of governmental failure, Black irreproachability, and feminized victimhood, this appeared to be a major departure from standard portrayals of U.S. urbanity. The everyday violence marking the urban homeplace is most often invisibilized (through prisons, zoning, etc.), commodified (i.e. the marketing of Black deviance), or rationalized (through the discourse of pathology); its normative representation either precludes sympathy or injects a severe
cautiousness into the resulting humanitarian sentiment. Because the conditions of low-capital
Blacks are known to be determined or exacerbated by their own genetico-behavioral traits
(even in liberal formulations emphasizing structural causation), the material inequalities
depicted or suppressed in normative representations of the urban homeplace are naturalized,
legitimized, and disassociated from the systemic and epistemic forces that guarantee these
materialities. Yet in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Black poverty became hypervisible
and somewhat less criminalized, governmental malfeasance became a known fact, and
humanitarian narratives began to sympathize with the Black single mother stranded on the
rooftop, the imprisoned Black male trapped behind bars with floodwater up to his chest.

These observations indicate that popular discourse shifted to account for the
devastating imagery of Katrina, but I will argue here that it remained firmly within the logic of
master narratives that spawned the Katrina moment and established a hermeneutics for its
mapping. From the outset, humanitarian sentiment was tenuous and riddled with
contradictions, eventually fracturing from the accumulation of incongruities that rose to the
forefront of popular discourse on Katrina. In the same breath that a media outlet interrogated
discriminatory evacuation plans, it would question why those left behind neglected to evacuate
in the first place. Similarly, the oft-mentioned scarcity of drinking water and food did not
stymie the national hysteria over “lootings,” a transhistorical and racialized paranoia that, in this
instance, criminalized Black residents for taking rations necessary for survival. A corresponding
panic arose from rumors of a massive escape from Orleans Parish Prison. As this convulsive
climate gave way to martial law and a “shoot to kill” order, popular sympathy for those left
behind found itself lost in its own humanitarian contradictions. Joy James traces the ease with
which humanitarian concern found itself complicit with what became a police city, “Vilifying
and policing, containing and punishing black bodies seemed more important to state officials
than saving black lives in the days and weeks during which state officials and media sought to interpret and assign blame for human loss."

Narratives of governmental malfunction, class inequality, ecocide, and Black victimhood soon encountered their epistemological limitations, offering little resistance to and often merging with latent and centuries-old racial phantasmatics. The left-behind became the refugee, the survivor became the looter, and the flooded city became not the signal of a fundamentally violent system of thought and being, but of a momentary lapse in state effectiveness. Even accounts that stressed the human causality and differential impact of the event were apt to fall upon the language of natural disaster, thus inviting a language of bio-evolutionary telos into this indictment: “Hurricane Katrina was deemed a ‘natural disaster,’ but the language that propped up this supposed naturalness only served to naturalize poor and black agony, distress and death.”

The South End Press Collective suggests that national advocacy for the emergent regime of hyper-discipline and criminalization described by James was a reaction to the momentary nakedness of the central contradictions of U.S. urbanity: “…quickly ‘the story’ devolved into something else, where the reality of tremendous human suffering and ecological devastation was eclipsed by the scandal of revelation itself: the image of an American city looking ‘like a third world country’ for everyone to see.” Victimhood, then, was not owned by those drowning, dying, and wading, but rather by the state and nation. Black bodies served as the ground for concerns that governmentality had been destabilized—their visibility suggested not necessarily that the state had failed them, but that the state had failed to contain them, the

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6 McKittrick and Woods, “No One Knows,” 2.
floodwaters, the media. The prospect of “a third world country” transplanted onto American soil was a potent and terrifying image, carrying with it all the fears of disorder, impurity, and disease that governed the colonial, slaveholding, and now neocolonial and neoliberal imaginary. The myriad narratives that arose out of and elided with the Katrina event more often than not found their common denominator in the imagery and language of “third-worldedness,” a genre of (un)nationhood that seamlessly weaves pathologies of sexuality, gender, race, and class into an articulation of collective and non-territorial filth. Kara Walker’s meditations on the hermeneutic challenge posed by Katrina (and its subsequent defusing) is useful in understanding how this deployment of filth pervades not only in the ubiquity of direct discursive referents, but also in the cracks in these narratives:

…the narrative of Hurricane Katrina had shifted precariously away from the hyperreal horror show presented to the outside world as live coverage of a frightened and helpless populace (relayed by equally frightened and helpless reporters) to a more assimilable legend. Lately, the narrative of the disaster has turned to ‘security failures,’ or ‘the question of race and poverty,’ or ‘rebirth.’ I’ve heard harrowing anecdotes of survival and humorous tales of rancid refrigerators. And always at the end of these tales, reported on the news, in newspapers, and by word of mouth, there is always a puddle—a murky, unnavigable space that is overcrowded with intangibles: shame, remorse, morbidity, silence.8

This chapter maps filth next to transhistorical meanings of uninhabitability in New Orleans, beginning first with its history as a liminal, transgressive space. Out of this discussion, I offer a brief charting of filth that synthesizes a number of semiotic theories dealing with this trope. From here, I address the construction of uninhabitability in New Orleans after Katrina, which flows into an analysis of the contested contamination of New Orleans’ public housing. I conclude with broader reflections on the corporeal and geographical space occupied by the trope of contagion in concentrated poverty and public housing debates.

8 Walker, After the Deluge, 8.
An Intrinsically Profligate City

Projections of a sinister “third-worldedness” onto the New Orleans landscape are not unique to Katrina. Since its acquisition by the United States in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the city has been positioned as an outlier amongst the nation’s cities. Maintaining its *sui generis* reputation for its topography, racial makeup, sexual (un)conventions, architecture, colonial past, economy, music, and gastronomy, New Orleans has long vexed U.S. fantasies of homogeneity and regulated difference. Often considered a Caribbean city, this designation has less to do with its geographic location than it does the shared colonial past with Caribbean islands.9 Beginning in 1718 as a French colony, relinquished to the Spanish Crown in 1763 only to be reacquired by the French in 1801, New Orleans has housed a large Creole population since its founding. Racial ambiguity is thus a centerpiece of the city. Alongside Creoles—descendants of American Indians, African slaves, French, and Spanish—arrived a racial hierarchy often considered more elastic than the racial ideology implemented in mainland English colonies. With multiple, often overlapping tiers (i.e. quadroon and octoroon, one-fourth and one-eighth Black, respectively), this racial hierarchy seemingly stands in contradistinction to the “one drop rule,” the juridico-systemic formulation of white racial purity that marks the U.S. imagination. Analogously, segregation patterns up to the mid-20th century deviate from the neighborhood-based model found in many U.S. cities. Instead, the city developed what may be termed a system of micro-segregation, with sets of Black households positioned in the neighboring periphery of the more affluent, primarily white

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boulevards in which many Blacks found employment as domestic workers. Yet although this is not a space of strict racial binary, the two poles—inconceivable Blackness and idealized whiteness—nevertheless stand intact. Although unrealizable, whiteness retains its power as a central operative myth, rendering humanness a status determined (in part) by what it means not to be Black.

Out of this surrogate racial order emerged modes of racial governmentality as severe and exacting as any in the U.S. These regulatory mechanisms were even more indispensable to the preservation of the dominant order because of the city’s population anomalies. By the late 17th century New Orleans featured the largest settlement of free Blacks or gens de couleur libres anywhere in the U.S. And within the first five years of the city’s founding, Black slaves outnumbered French colonists, establishing a Black majority that lasted until the later years of Reconstruction, reappeared in the 1950s with suburbanization, and then dwindled in the post-Katrina diaspora. These population trends reflected the city’s status as the largest slave market anywhere in the region. The code noir and the subsequent Black Codes policed racial and sexual practices and thoughts in this majority Black city, upholding the parameters of propter nos even as they affirmed the validity of Constitutional egalitarianism vis-à-vis gens de couleur.

Additionally, the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which codified and spatialized white bodily integrity and Black contagion in the post-Emancipation U.S., took form out of the Louisiana landscape.

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and was in many ways a New Orleans proceeding. And until well after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, blood supplies remained segregated according to the state one-drop rule.

Regardless of the severity of its legal-racial codes, New Orleans has been an emblem of nationalist fears of racial and sexual deviance for as long as it has been a U.S. city. A self-fashioning space of decadence and freedom, it has touted its singular libratory appeal since the mid-19th century, when local elites first actively sought to stimulate a tourist industry. Its notorious reputation as a “bastion of commercial sexuality and sex across the color line” was first nurtured in the years preceding the Civil War, and by Emancipation its prostitution districts had become institutionalized matrices of racial/sexual surveillance and deviance, as well as state-sanctioned projects in the new technology of bio-evolutionary race-making.

Inasmuch as the city is known to be a physical forum for the practice of racial and sexual pathologies, its very topographical existence is intimately tied to liminality, excess, and waste. Geologists Kolb and Van Lopik characterize the swampy region housing New Orleans as “a land between earth and sea—belonging to neither and alternately claimed by both.” Set three feet below sea level and carved out of what is often branded as unlivable marshland, the city has tested notions of uninhabitability since its inception.

New Orleans is an engineered island amidst miles of bayou, established for its strategic shipping location despite the unremitting threat of flooding and hurricanes. The parallels between this ecological

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20 Quoted in Lewis, *New Orleans*, 34.
engineering of a livable space (for the trading of slaves and other consumptive activities) and the development/reification of genres of humanness are unmistakable. As Jeffrey Myers observes, “To maintain the illusion of separateness and superiority, the Euroamerican self must constantly display its mastery over the material world, denigrating beings, human and nonhuman, whose essential physical sameness to the animal body to which itself is bound threatens its erasure.” What Myers calls “physiphobia” gains meaning from and contributes to notions of racial superiority—the project of knowing, subjugating and homogenizing land is coextensive with the project of fashioning differential modes of humanness. This Wynterian formulation is clearly discernible in the original manufacture of New Orleans out of an unlikely landscape in response to the exigencies of French colonial and slave-trading geopolitics. The 19th century maintenance and expansion of the city despite recurrent ecological obstacles served both to uphold this geopolitical function, as well as to nurture its emergent biopolitical activity as a hub of racial and sexual transgression and classificatory generation.

New Orleans’ geo-racial field of meaning is shaped by its position at the mouth of the Mississippi River, a topographic “sphere of literal expulsion where waste and pollution are forced from the nation’s industrial core.” The last metropolis before the river splinters at the Delta, New Orleans, more than any other city, comes into contact with and takes form around a channel responsible for expelling the nation’s detritus. This singular distinction, along with its abundance of chemical processing plants, has earned the 80-mile downriver stretch from Baton Rouge to New Orleans the moniker “Cancer Alley” by environmental justice advocates.

23 Myers, Converging Stories, 16.
24 Grey, “(Re)Imagining Ethnicity,” 133.
Stephanie Houston Grey contends that the patina of racial and sexual decadence encapsulating the city is informed by a geographic allegory of pollution and discharge that results from its degraded location. Connecting this allegory to New Orleans’ carnival culture, Grey demonstrates how local elites have marketed its Fallen status to tourists since the mid-19th century, commodifying interracial sex and hedonistic attractions through metaphors of “pleasure, waste, pollution, and decadence.”

The carnival typifies this consumptive process, drawing its appeal from an imagery of carnal and exotic Black and American Indian bodies and cultures, even as its profits go to the white business owners who have choreographed Mardi Gras and other festivals since the middle of the 19th century. Yet along with their libidinous branding, these festivals and the city that hosts them pose a terrifying threat to racial and sexual orders. Grey notes, “While the carnival is a site of release and sexual freedom, it also represents a site where the biopolitics of blood and alchemy threaten to destabilize existing racial hierarchies.”

Long before Katrina, then, New Orleans was mapped as a contagion marking the national landscape. It is useful, before further examining this historical representation and its contemporary deployment vis-à-vis Katrina and public housing, to move towards an understanding of filth that will assist in the contextualization of this discourse.

Placing Dirt

The conceptual space occupied by filth and the filthy in the normative consciousness has been subject to careful scholarly dissection in recent decades, a scrutiny provoked in part by Mary Douglas’s 1966 anthropological study Purity and Danger. Here, Douglas initiates a deconstruction of pollution that continues to be a concern of critical race, feminist, queer, and

26 Grey, “(Re)Imagining Ethnicity,” 134.
27 Ibid., 135.
postcolonial theorists interested in the epistemological unmapping of the abject body. Douglas puts forth a view of dirt that emphasizes its utility in the maintenance of social order, its constructedness, and its association with morality. Her focus is on modes of taboo behavior and embodiment that have been culturally constructed as polluting. Taking for granted that “There is no such thing as absolute dirt,” she goes on to argue that the function of dirt in a society (along with its purging) is to “create unity in experience.”

Douglas understands dirt to be an organizing tool, constructing order by consolidating the most destructive and feared elements of a society into a compelling designation of otherness: “Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.” It is therefore the function of dirt to provide a symbolic referent for the transgression of societally-sanctioned behavior and embodiment. Douglas describes a dirt that upholds the social order by representing all the dangers of transgression. It is this very physico-symbolic threat that is embodied by dirt: “we…justify our pollution avoidances by fear of danger.” Moral systems grow out of this danger of contagion, equipping ethical values with the potent imagery of transgressive filth.

Douglas’s elaboration on pollution has been expanded, updated, and reworked in more recent scholarship. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) utilizes Douglas’s analysis in articulating how filth is embodied in gendered form. Kristeva’s abject body meets Douglas’s taboo behavior in their mutual transgression of normative behavior and embodiment. Kristeva’s focus is the filthy maternal subject, a discussion that brings Douglas’s study to a more bodied subjectivity. Pursuing an understanding of the psychological dynamics of abjection, Kristeva emphasizes an issue mentioned but unaccentuated by Douglas: the

29 Ibid., 35.
30 Ibid., 69.
impossibility of cleanliness. She describes the abject as “something rejected from which one does not part,” and continues, “[the subject] finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.”\(^{31}\) Kristeva’s abject is liminal and ambiguous, distanced from the subject yet constantly threatening it: “abjection acknowledges [the subject] to be in perpetual danger.”\(^{32}\) Working off of Douglas’s symbolic understanding of filth, Kristeva elucidates that “It is…not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”\(^{33}\) Kristeva’s abject is an irrational force, unyielding to normative boundaries and disruptive to the dominant symbolic system.\(^{34}\)

The work of Douglas and Kristeva is useful in understanding how filth helps to establish and mold the parameters of an unrealizable purity of the self, even as it offers an evocative set of imagery that renders otherness (Douglas’s taboo and Kristeva’s abjection) dangerous, liminal, and inferior. Both demonstrate how filth acts as an auto-instituting force, generating and naturalizing distinctions between self and other. Expanding upon Douglas’s intimation that filth and cleanliness are not diametrically opposite each other, some scholars have embraced filth as a contradictory and elusive force that exhibits all of the incongruities of the dominant mode of subjective understanding. Michael Taussig argues that dirt is nothing other than contradiction,\(^{35}\) a contention elaborated by David L. Pike in his discussion of the Victorian sewer: “The cherished principles and categories that define the world above mask their inherent instability by placing underground as filth anything that does not fit those


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 65.

definitions.” Filth is the detritus of the social system, disclosing the cracks in the metanarratives upon which the system maintains its hegemony and rationality. This capacity to unveil the vulnerability of the normative system of symbolic representations simultaneously empowers filth and ignites a societal paranoia over its potential power. Filth is dangerous precisely because it threatens the sanctity of the logics governing the social order.

Even as the construction of filth offers to the filthy the power of contradiction, it offers to the dominant order a new, exotic power of liberation. William A. Cohen introduces this double-natured filth, “both dangerously polluting and bounteously providing.” He suggests that the dominant gaze discovers in the contaminant/contaminated the lure of the exotic, a sensation that dialectically complements the fear and danger it provokes. As I discuss later in the chapter, this dynamic is perhaps best evidenced by the menacing yet seductive presence of the filthy Black homeplace in the dominant imaginary.

Cohen goes on to argue that in addition to the lure/fear dialectic, filth proves to be “bounteously providing” as a mode of coping with social instability. At once capable of condemning a threatening or unstable element and naturalizing the existence of this repudiated thing, the discourse of filth vindicates the systemic from any culpability in its creation. This formula is highly pronounced in the 19th century sanitary campaigns of Victorian cities that condemned the pathology, genetics, or environs of the poor for the diseases of the city: “if such urban filth was felt by righteous enforcers of middle-class hygiene to be unimpeachably

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poluting, the very moral and sanitary campaigns to which it gave rise testify to its utility, for it was an endless resource, conceptually and ideologically.38

For Cohen, “Filth represents a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity, and material objects converge.”39 Out of this convergence, I employ this poetics to investigate how the question of the human is shaped by (and shapes) the representation of urban space.

**Toxic Gumbo: The Construction of Uninhabitability After Katrina**

The Katrina event was fodder to a discourse of contamination already written into the foundations of New Orleans. With racial and sexual transgression constitutive of its being, the city was as much threatened and enlivened by the defilement of the body politic as it was by the cyclical depositing of effluvium by an outraged and unwieldy Mississippi. Katrina’s floodwaters unlocked these meanings, buoying not only bodies, cars, and homes, but also a matrix of multiple and contradictory understandings of disaster shaped by a question posed repeatedly and apprehensively by the media: What is in the water? The answer was laden with the polluted confirmation of oil dependencies, autopoietic toxicities, climate change and centuries of precarious city expansion and marshland depletion, yes, but it also gnawed at contradictions that delve much deeper than these narratives of green (un)sustainability might suggest. Images of a water-blanketed city consolidated memories of the past’s forced migrations and extirpations, calling forth the Biblical Flood alongside slave ships, Emmett Till’s corpse being dragged out of the neighboring Tallahatchie River alongside Hurricane Betsy’s 1965 obliteration of the Ninth Ward. Katrina’s water figured as a substance of sojourn, alienation, and death in a space whose bedrock was cast out of Black bodies as slaves. This

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38 Ibid., xx.
39 Ibid., viii.
meaning was produced contemporaneously with reincarnations of bourgeois Victorian hysteries over cholera and other water-borne diseases, anxieties that conveyed racialized, apocalyptic visions of an orderless urban void. Contaminating floodwater merged with tainting body, prompting the unasked questions: Are Black bodies and spaces really vulnerable to toxins? Can a Black body be further contaminated?

The floodwaters thus destabilized established modes of governmentality even as they spoke to the everyday violence safeguarding dominant conceptions of propter nos. For the complex of subjectivities involved in the Katrina event, the sea blanketing New Orleans was simultaneously lethal, commonplace, disciplinary, providential, illuminating, and as we shall see in the next chapter, purifying. Floodwaters became the contested stuff of rapidly igniting debates over the habitability of the city.

The murky pool that cloaked the city for weeks signaled a wholesale yet potentially reclaimable “failure of containment” that temporarily undressed not only the state, but also the modes of thought in which state logics operate. The breach of the levees corresponded with the breach of state regulation, and narratives of lawlessness erupted out of this simultaneous fracturing of hierarchies of domination. The floodwaters figured as the principal trope for this rupture in the established boundaries governing the order of the city. In their transgression of their leveed borders and their capacitation of social pathologies (the looting,

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40 Declaring cholera as a “master trope for urban existence,” Erin O’Connor proposes that the disease was metonymical for the unruly by-products of a radically transforming urban and epistemological landscape. Classifying cholera as a production of the working class, sanitary reformist critics pathologized poor bodies as atrophied and designated their neighborhoods as the breeding ground for the epidemic. O’Connor also explores how cholera symbolically reflected Victorian distress over racial purity amidst heightened immigration and involvement in contaminating colonial archipelagoes, a symbolism infused with the more material exigencies of industrial pollution: “Depicting Asiatic cholera as a kind of biological warfare, medical and popular accounts of infection emphasize the transformative violence of the disease with a metaphors of miscegenation, a penetrative model of pathology that saw victims as infected with blackness itself.” O’Connor, Raw Material, 6-7, 26, 43.

41 Walker, After the Deluge, 9.
beating of tourists, and raping of babies that tantalized (trans)national media coverage)\textsuperscript{42}, floodwaters tested the question of borders, a literal muddling that fed upon the poetics of filth. The terror of urban disorder was largely extracted from the terror of dirt, of toxic waters and uncontained toxic bodies.

The Katrina moment thus symbolized a dreadful and alarming contravention of the optimal status criterion of urbanity. Accordingly, popular response was shaped by this understanding of the event. Relief and reconstruction efforts over the next few weeks and years operated and pronounced their legitimacy through the tangible and metaphoric meanings now owned by this shocking and anarchic Muck. Contamination not only became and remains a keyword of the post-Katrina era, but is itself constitutive of the technologies and ideologies that characterize the contemporary moment. Deployed by a multiplicity of positionalities, contamination is the common ground of discourse for conflicts over the state and future of the city, although its meaning is contingent upon the context in which it is invoked.

My interest here is how certain geographies and bodies in New Orleans have retained the sticky meanings of contamination far after the floodwaters were pumped out of the city, becoming paragons and islands of uninhabitability. It is necessary to note, before going further, that the terrain of discourse is not restricted to the hegemonic project of naming that is the primary focus of this chapter. Tied to this project is a profusion of contested sites in this semiotic process; these geographies were no sooner termed contaminated than they were termed neglected, pristine, rehabilitable, or home. How certain spaces are configured as tainted, and where the pores in this configuration arise, is my concern here.

Flooding 80\% of the city, Hurricane Katrina’s waters touched nearly all

neighborhoods in Orleans Parish. Flooding patterns both map with and against socioeconomic considerations. The least affected areas, such as the French Quarter and parts of the Garden District, are the highest locations in the city and have tended to house the city’s affluent residents, including much of the white population as well as the Creole elite. A class analysis, however, fails to explain the course of the floodwaters. Katrina’s waters devastated New Orleans East, which was built on low-lying, recently converted marshland in the middle of the 20th century. By and large, East was occupied by college-educated Black homeowners and held the “overwhelming majority of the wealthiest sector of the black community.”

Furthermore, large pockets of the whiter, wealthier districts Uptown near Tulane University also incurred substantial flooding. Scott Frickel, reflecting upon the indeterminacy of the floodwaters, notes, “Even as the storm’s catastrophic destruction exposed in New Orleans the deep racial and economic divisions that characterized the evacuation and rescue efforts, levee breaches across the city wrecked neighborhoods wealthy, middle class, and poor.”

The path of the floodwaters is a telling sign of the supreme transgression embodied by the Katrina moment. In their disregard for the spatial boundaries of humanness, they point to fundamental instabilities in the organization of this urban space. Although the Katrina event most lethally and cataclysmically affected New Orleans’ Black residents, a singularity that overlapped with gender, sexuality, class, and nationality, its spatial path of destruction did not strictly adhere to these criteria of humanness. That is, Katrina both exposed the pre-existing

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44 Ya Salaam, “Below the Water Line,” xiii.
46 I submit this observation cautiously. I should clarify that I am referring specifically to the physical presence of the floodwaters in spaces that had previously been known as optimal sites for habitability. For the most part, the residents and owners of these sites had evacuated the city far before Katrina neared the city. Thus, my treatment here of the floodwaters is not an attempt to map suffering next to the -isms, but rather to demonstrate the gravity of this “failure of containment.”
conditions that rendered certain populations more susceptible to the violence of this event, even as it demonstrated that the rigid hierarchies mandating these conditions are themselves volatile and conflicting. Uninhabitability was unmoored from its geographical designations and its corporeal analogues; as a system-organizing status, it had defied containment and had ostensibly infected spaces formerly known as untainted. In one major environmental justice study, the authors cautioned that “without extensive cleanup and remediation of toxic sediment, nearly 75 percent of the city will be unfit for families with children.”

In the aftermath of Katrina, the explosion of scholarly attention on housing and contamination has most frequently interrogated how certain areas were more vulnerable to the ravages of the disaster. The Lower Ninth Ward, as one of the most devastated sites in the city, has become the scholarly favorite for advancing this argument. Scholars’ focus on socioeconomic disparities in susceptibility and impact is urgent and necessary, but potentially nearsighted in its frequent disregard for the narratives that have arisen out of these same critical tools. Too often, this research stops short, satisfied with substantiating the claim that Katrina magnified/illuminated injustices that pervade throughout the U.S. Insofar as this contention has become axiomatic (not only amongst left-leaning academics, but also amongst policymakers of multiple political persuasions and in the media), it has lost nearly all meaning. The maturation of “a more assimilable legend” has entailed a circumvention of power, representation, and episteme as heuristic matters worth interrogating, an avoidance that has

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enabled a profound reinscription of the central narratives momentarily disrupted in the immediate wake of the storm.49

Following the lead of Joy James, Katherine McKittrick, Jordan Flaherty, Dylan Rodríguez, Neil Smith, K. Animashaun Ducre, and other activist/scholars, I suggest that a counterhegemonic reading of the Katrina event must attempt to denaturalize the systems of thought that gave rise to it. To continue with the example of the Lower Ninth Ward, a possible means of disrupting these narratives might supplement the undeniably pressing questions of inadequate disaster relief and planning, housing and food shortage, toxicity, and insurance woes with questions of historical continuities, governmentality, and the phenomenology of representation. Specifically, in the context of this research, I attempt to recognize how certain areas of the city are less habitable and more vulnerable than others without losing sight of how inhabitation is reconfigured and deployed to sustain the governing logics of the system of symbolic representations. To a nearly encyclopedic extent, the former inquiry has been addressed and deemed indicative of injustice. Most frequently, such a conclusion intimates that manipulation of state policies (from greening the state to promoting deconcentration of poverty) would prevent another Katrina moment. I by no ways wish to deny that policy adjustments can and do have major impacts on Katrina survivors (most topically, the reopening of public housing), and that these changes merit and demand struggle. Yet greater regulation and authority by a masculinist, heterosexist, eugenic, and decentralized state will do little to obstruct ontological and epistemological matrices of violence. Thus, my argument has less to do with indictments of state neglect and accountability than it does with the discourse that composes the event.

49 Kara Walker, After the Deluge, 8.
Before proceeding, I feel it necessary to touch upon the tensions between an analysis of dominant discourse and the living, acute “truths” (to riff on Fanon) that complicate the metaphorical domain in which this research primarily operates. The following discussion of contagion and uninhabitability attempts to denaturalize concepts that may aspire to represent pain, death, and inequality, such as the underclass and contaminated spaces. It is not my intention to erase the experiences, suffering, and dangers that may be signified by these concepts. I aim rather to interrogate how such signifying technologies perpetuate dominant systems of thought and the material severities attached to them. I pursue this objective acknowledging, in the words of McKittrick, that “Space cannot be simply metaphorical, cognitive, or imaginary, as this risks undermining those underlying experiences that are unrealized, very real, and critical of real spatial inequalities.”

One year after Katrina, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) supplied an anxious New Orleans with a “clean bill of health.” According to Robert D. Bullard, considered a co-founder of the modern Environmental Justice Movement, “Government officials concluded that Katrina did not cause any appreciable contamination that was not already there.” Even before that, during the Spring 2006 mayoral election, social and political interests encouraged and endorsed a Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) press release that assured residents that New Orleans contained “no unacceptable health risks.”

To the extent that the scientific assumptions and methods grounding these

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50 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 17.
52 Quoted in Frickel, “Hurricane Katrina, Contamination,” 182.
pronouncements are to be taken as valid, there exists no epidemiological or toxicological consensus about the safety of Orleans Parish for human habitation. Scott Frickel, a sociologist of science who has followed contamination issues post-Katrina, reports that, “at a minimum, the floodwaters contained a complex mixture of contaminants. Some areas of the city soaked for weeks in a bath of heavy metals such as arsenic, lead, mercury, and zinc along with Escherichia coli and fecal coliforms, overcoated by a thin layer of petroleum-based volatile organic compounds (VOC).” Moreover, the recurrent EPA claim that contamination does not exceed pre-Katrina levels, and is therefore “outside of its mission,” is highly alarming even if it is accurately reflective of contaminant levels. Numerous studies have suggested that pre-Katrina levels of lead and asbestos in many parts of the city (up to 40%) were too hazardous for habitation. This has led Bullard to conclude that the EPA, LDEQ, and policymakers are engaged in a “poison politics,” assuming a position that “dirty neighborhoods should stay dirty forever.” Although the case of New Orleans’ public housing contradicts Bullard’s formulation—suggesting not that “dirty neighborhoods should stay dirty forever,” but rather that the designation of “dirty” is itself an imagined concept—his argument reflects the unresolved and slippery front of divergent contamination claims.

Denaturalizing contamination entails an interrogation of the knowledge webs that constitute and legitimate it. It is critical to note that the extent to which the data produced by the EPA and LDEQ are reliable in determining the habitability of an area is itself disputable. I will quote Frickel at length, as his analysis is useful in considering the limitations of this approach:

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53 Frickel, “Hurricane Katrina, Contamination,” 182.
54 Bullard, “EPA Gives New Orleans a Clean Bill of Health.”
56 Bullard, “Let Them Eat Dirt.”
Environmental testing collapses time and space. Testing happens in geographical space, yet strips away the social history of those locations. Test results replace that history with numerical values that signal the presence or absence of specific contaminants, which then are interpreted in terms of probabilities of a future effect or effects. Thus, past and future are condensed into a one-dimensional present largely devoid of social and historical context. This is in part why experts can explain away lead found in post-Katrina sediment as being “the same here today as you would expect in any urban area, whether it is Los Angeles or New York or New Orleans.” This statement begs the question of acceptable risk associated with lead levels in any major American city, including New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina….it is important to be clear about what more testing will and will not achieve. In part, at least, the obstacles to usable knowledge are deeply embedded in the machineries of knowledge production itself.

Frickel’s formulation of testing as a “socially negotiated and organized cultural practice” speaks to the constructedness of contamination discourses. If the meaning of contamination is utterly malleable, it is a heuristic imperative to negotiate the acute urgency of residents’ claims of toxicity next to dominant narratives of contamination, some of which may themselves be accepted by the residents in question. At the present moment, nowhere is this tension more palpable than in the discourse surrounding the redevelopment of the four largest public housing developments in the city.

“Contaminated Communities”

As of early August 2005 New Orleans contained about 7,100 units of public housing, although nearly 2,000 of those were vacant due to disrepair, leaving only 5,146 units occupied. The redevelopment plan introduced in the months following Katrina slates 5,000 units for demolition, all of which are located in the four public housing developments Lafitte, B.W. Cooper (Calliope), C.J. Peete (Magnolia), and St. Bernard. Set to become mixed-income and often mixed-use housing sites, these four will join five other housing developments already

58 Ibid., 183.
redeveloped (pre-Katrina), leaving only one housing development, Iberville, as the sole full-use public housing development in the city.60 These figures are indicative of municipal and national measures aiming to phase out public housing from subsidized housing programs. Although this initiative can be traced back as far as Nixon’s 1973 moratorium on public housing expansion, New Orleans’ experience with the tangible reduction of units begins in the mid-1990s, before which the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) housed 13,500 units.61 The intricacies of the proposed redevelopment will be discussed in the next chapter. My concern here is with mapping contamination in the discourse surrounding the habitability of these developments.

Amidst a “housing crisis of historic proportions,” entailing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the devastation of tens of thousands of homes, the debates around the city’s public housing stock—in many ways continuous with national debates about these programs—take on an unprecedented gravity.62 As early as December, 2005, city officials and residents began clashing over the livability and safety of the developments, initiating a struggle that continues to make international headlines in April, 2008.63 HANO, under direction of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), has boarded up the housing developments and constructed fences around them, forbidding access by residents (they must undergo elaborate and often unfeasible bureaucratic procedures to retrieve their possessions) and allocating only a marginal number of units for

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61 Vale, From the Puritans to the Projects, 333; Advancement Project, “Primer on New Orleans Public Housing.”


temporary housing.\(^{64}\) HANO and HUD have situated the Katrina event within the specific discursive realm of opportunity, advancing a vision of the post-Katrina housing landscape that follows the logic, “Residents deserve something better than what they had.”\(^{65}\) Such a vision rests upon a highly contested set of assumptions about New Orleans’ public housing, both pre- and post-Katrina.

On February 28, 2008, HUD released a statement in response to criticism by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Housing and Independent Expert on Minorities for its handling of the redevelopment. Rebutting charges of consultation failures, misinformation, and forced displacement, HUD reiterated its core philosophy regarding public housing: “We do not want to relegate thousands of minority and low-income families back into the sub-standard conditions of New Orleans’ public housing conditions only made worse by Hurricane Katrina.”\(^{66}\) Two threads run throughout HUD, HANO, and developer documents defending the “sub-standard conditions” thesis. First, official literature supporting demolition treats the physical failure of the place as the primary grounds for uninhabitability, followed discursively by arguments invoking the social dysfunction of public housing. The two strands are thoroughly, incontrovertibly linked in their production of a field of meaning bound up in the question of the human and assembled from the trope of contamination. As a narrative strategy, I treat each separately, beginning with the spatial-structural thread.

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\(^{64}\) HANO has consistently failed to meet its promised numbers for temporary units. Although HANO has pledged to open up to 2,500 units for temporary shelter—that is, until demolition—it has not come close to realizing these numbers. As of February, 2008, only 1,800 units are occupied, and these numbers themselves were realized only after substantial resident agitation and litigation. Bill Quigley, “Myths and Facts About Public Housing in New Orleans,” NewOrleans.Indymedia.org, 17 December 2007, http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2007/12/11634.php (accessed 4 April 2008).


\(^{66}\) Ibid.
Among the thousands of government and developer documents recording the physical desolation of the four sites, the most revealing and pertinent is the Environmental Justice Study released by HANO in March of 2007. Conducted by an outside agency, U.S. Risk Management, this HUD-contracted study is designed to “investigate the Environmental Justice issues as required by Executive Order 12898.” The mandate to which the document refers was signed by Bill Clinton in 1994 and was developed to create a legal sanction supporting environmental justice. Yet according to one official at U.S. Risk Management, the HUD decision to contract the study is unrepresentative of the customary procedure for similar redevelopment projects, including those previously enacted in New Orleans.

This anomalous study was undertaken individually for each of the four developments, although the text is essentially identical in all versions. From the outset, it is clear that this document intends to employ the logic of environmental justice to validate demolition. The report opens sharply, “Damage to the housing developments as a result of Hurricane Katrina has made the development uninhabitable for residents,” and then launches into a litany of physical injuries incurred by the buildings during the disaster. Broken windows, cracking brick, splintered roof tiles, rain damage, and flooding of the first story are described in meticulous detail. Soil samples around the developments are discussed, indicating that “a lead and arsenic contamination problem existed in this area that required immediate cleanup.” Asbestos is also mentioned, as are the dangers posed by mold growth.

In HUD and HANO literature, as well as in popular discourse, lead and mold stand as the most emphasized toxic hazards. The prominence of lead in the discourse can be attributed

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68 Georgette Mahler (pseudo.), telephone conversation with author, 11 August 2007.
69 HUD, Enviro. Justice Study, 1. (Emphasis mine)
to pre-Katrina concerns over lead contamination in public housing, the entire city, and, more broadly, the nation. In many ways, lead typifies anxieties over the toxicity of urban space.\textsuperscript{71}

Mold, a graphic and visible mushrooming of black mass up walls and onto ceilings, has become a central image and concern of post-Katrina New Orleans. Remarkably upon the enormous attention claimed by black mold in the reconstruction process, as well as the dearth of scientific literature on the subject, Frickel writes, “…mold replaced chemical contaminants as a major focus of local public health campaigns, [and] fungal geneticists acknowledged that existing science about the vast majority of known molds and fungi is thin.”\textsuperscript{72} The unparalleled scrutiny provoked by mold is evidenced by a HUD press release on May 3, 2006, when top New Orleans public housing authority (PHA) officials Donald Babers and William C. Thorson cite mold alone as the rationale for not using development units for temporary, emergency housing: “while some units appear safe from the outside, they are not. Unit inspections show that more than half the units have mold, which is a health hazard. Safety is our top priority.”\textsuperscript{73}

HANO’s claims of spatial-structural uninhabitability have emerged contemporaneously with resident and housing advocate protests, producing an unremitting conflict over the meanings of livable space. To the extent that post-Katrina New Orleans has become a stronghold of left-leaning activism,\textsuperscript{74} debates around public housing have figured as a key rallying issue since, at latest, the summer of 2006. Bringing together, however tenuously,

\textsuperscript{71} A class action lawsuit raised by Lafitte residents for lead poisoning was initiated in the early 1990s and is still open. Laura Tuggle, interview by author, tape recording, New Orleans, LA., 30 July 2007.
\textsuperscript{72} Frickel, “Hurricane Katrina, Contamination,” 182.
\textsuperscript{74} In the years following the storm, as more and more nonnative volunteers have remained in the city longer than expected (pejoratively termed “volunteer fallout” vis-à-vis their role in gentrification), it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish locals from outsiders. In this sense, activism is neither locally-grown nor agitated from the outside, Katrina-specific nor continuous with historical struggles; it is all of the above.
residents in diaspora and returnees, housing advocacy firms, prison industrial complex
abolitionist groups, environmental justice attorneys, church groups, anti-violence organizations,
and others, this patchwork coalition, eventually morphing into the Coalition to Stop the
Demolition in late 2007, has blazoned a broad, multifaceted critique of the redevelopment
effort. This movement (or, more appropriately, network of movements) has earned more
national and international media attention and galvanized more grassroots and legislative
support than nearly any other local U.S. struggle in the last year. Strategies vary from
nonviolent direct action to demonstrations, from a class action lawsuit to federal Congressional
legislation. In the Epilogue, I discuss these oppositional politics in greater depth. Here I am
specifically interested in borrowing from anti-demolition literature to present counterevidence
to HANO’s claims of spatial-structural uninhabitability.

One of the most visible and galvanizing sites of dissent, the class action lawsuit
Anderson v. Jackson was filed in October, 2006, by eighteen residents on behalf of nearly 4,000
households whose homes would be demolished by the redevelopment plan. Proffering a
complex, multifaceted, and intersectional interpretation and objection to HANO’s proposal,
this litigation contains an abundance of counterevidence to the PHA’s assertions of toxicity
and disrepair.75 The plaintiffs initiate their defense by pointing to the ambivalence and
inconclusiveness of HANO’s scientific evidence: “HANO’s own evaluations confirmed that
many public housing units were ‘livable,’…and reported minor to moderate damage at most
developments.”76 They then assert the structural integrity of the buildings, citing their solid
foundations and brick walls, which withstood floodwater, rain, and wind damage better than

75 My discussion of the conflict surrounding habitability claims is mostly drawn from documents
associated with the lawsuit, if only because this is the most visible and public forum for these specific
disputations. My focus on the lawsuit should not be interpreted as an assignment of greater weight to this
oppositional tactic over other threads of the struggle.
76 Anderson v. Jackson, “Plaintiffs’ Combined Memorandum in Opposition to HANO’s Motion for
Summary Judgment and In Support of Plaintiffs’ Cross-Motion for Partial Summary Judgment,” Filed 17
many other structures in the city that have already been rebuilt.

Contentions of structural soundness are complemented by architectural considerations that marshal the buildings’ historical worth, their aesthetic and artistry, and their divergence from archetypal public housing design. Frequently quoted in the litigation is the *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff: “Solidly built, the buildings detailed brickwork, tile roofs and wrought-iron balustrades represent a level of craft more likely found on an Ivy League campus than in a contemporary public housing complex. They would be almost impossible to reproduce in the kind of bottom-line developments that have become the norm.”77 No more than four stories tall, all four housing developments slated for demolition depart from the stereotyped edifice of the public housing high-rise. Plaintiff discourse has exploited this structural departure to lengths unforeseen by HANO, aggrandizing at least one development, the Lafitte, to the level of architectural monument.78

Another direction of plaintiff deposition has involved assembling a compendium of evidence demonstrating the non-toxic state of most units. An affidavit delivered by licensed mold assessor David Martinez amplifies arguments that had been made by the residents themselves for over a year. Martinez details that the C.J. Peete was untouched by floodwaters, and the Lafitte received only 2 inches, figures indicating that both developments made out much better than most of the city. In the Lafitte, “The great majority of the units had no visible mold growths and the mold that did appear on a minimal number of walls is anticipated to be analyzed as a common allergen. This allergen has amplified due to the uncontrolled


78 Plaintiffs and others involved in the opposition have argued that the Lafitte is modeled after the famous Pontalba buildings in Jackson Square, the oldest continuously rented apartments in the United States. HANO has frequently denied this claim.
climate in these units over the past year.”79 The C.J. Peete contained even less mold. The B.W. Cooper and the St. Bernard took in a few feet of water, but the second and third floors of both developments were in “very good condition.”80 In all cases, the mold growth that did appear was overwhelmingly attributed to the year the units had sat locked up without ventilation.

Plaintiffs also turned to scientific authorities to dispute HANO’s concerns over lead in the soil, countering that pre- and post-Katrina studies revealed no difference in the concentration of lead in lands surrounding public housing.81 Moreover, some housing advocates have contrasted the sudden cultivation of concern for lead poisoning with HANO’s pre-Katrina ambivalence about this issue. So acute was the lead poisoning problem before Katrina that a class action lawsuit was filed against HANO.82 John Turnbull, a major figure in the redevelopment of the Lafitte development, explained the incongruities in HANO’s record on environmental pollution as self-serving duplicity. Turnbull, an executive with Providence/Enterprise, the HANO-contracted developer for the Lafitte, noted to me in an interview, “When those [Environmental Justice] reports were prepared, it was done in a way to tell us everything that’s wrong with these buildings. It reads this way in that, ‘You tell us everything that’s wrong with these buildings because we think we need to tear them down,’ instead of, ‘Help us figure out what’s the most economical way to fix these up. And how are we going to compare that with the cost of tearing them down?’ That sort of happened by default, anyway. The other thing was that there are ways of doing environmental reports that exaggerate the negatives and you can propose solutions that may not be as burdensome as it sounds.” Turnbull explained his astounding transparency regarding HANO’s deceit as not

80 Ibid., 4.
82 Tuggle, interview.
incompatible with his position in the redevelopment. For Turnbull, the failures of public housing far preceded Katrina and could be traced not as much to the toxicity or deterioration of the site, but rather the social conditions it used to house.83

Speaking on the ostensible inconsistency in Turnbull’s position, political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr. noted to me in an interview, “I have come to the view that the design problem with public housing for poor people is the occupants.”84 This observation introduces the second strand of HANO’s “sub-standard conditions” thesis, which centers upon the social environments associated with public housing and reverts to those exhausted formulas of concentrated poverty discourse: crime, drug use, familial structure, dependency, overpopulation, over-densification, isolation, and lack of role models. Public dialogue over the demolition of subsidized developments in most U.S. cities generally features these themes at the forefront of the debate, but in post-Katrina New Orleans they have carried less prominence than structural toxicity and disrepair narratives.85 The cultural stigmas marking public housing are still tremendously intoxicating, but nevertheless stand secondary to the physical opprobrium of the structures. At least two dynamics account for this propensity. First, the residents have already been displaced; their physical invisibility echoes in their (relative) discursive invisibility in the dominant imagination. Second, the profound resonance carried by the metaphors of contamination and ruin in the post-Katrina discursive landscape are more readily and visibly fastened to the structures than the residents. That is, the oft-mentioned dilapidation of public housing offers a steadier, more legible embodiment of contamination. This representative faculty notwithstanding, such modes of embodiment are themselves tied to

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84 Adolph Reed, Jr., interview by author, tape recording, New Orleans, LA., 3 August 2007.
the bodies of disappeared residents.

The prominence of the spatial-structural imagery certainly does not preclude a more corporeal imagining of contamination. The discourse on cultural/racial pathology retains its potent significance, but is deployed more as a threat of return than as a proximate, contagious menace. In this sense, the politics of visibility represent one of the harrowing ironies of post-Katrina New Orleans, a dynamic articulated by the New Orleans chapter of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence: “Perhaps one of the more insidious effects of invisibility is that mainstream populations and government agencies will not acknowledge that you are gone. Hypervisibility and misrepresentation, on the other hand, will ensure you do not come back.”86 Since embodied pathology is primarily articulated through the memory of occupied public housing (as well as the discursively related and more recent imagery of Black looters and rapists during Katrina) instead of its inhabited presence, such hypervisibility is deployed with as much vigor, but with less frequency.

That the coded language of Black pathology makes its way into the “Environmental Justice Study”—a forum for contemplating environmental toxicity—is a testament to the politics of hypervisibility in the post-Katrina era. Remaining within the language of contamination and contagion, the document proclaims, “the condition of the Lafitte Housing Development has diminished and like many housing developments in the country, it has been infiltrated with crime, drugs, and poverty.”87 The comments of Sheriff Jack Strain, of St. Tammany Parish across Lake Ponchartrain, are more unequivocal in their equation of Blackness with filth. Protesting against the presence of Black New Orleans’ public housing residents in his suburban, mostly white parish, Strain condemned the “thugs and trash from

87 HUD, Enviro. Justice Study, 8.
New Orleans,” and declared that those with dreadlocks or “chee wee hairstyles” should “expect to be getting a visit from a sheriff’s deputy.”

Developer John Turnbull’s views on the Lafitte Development, whose redevelopment he oversees, deviate little from these characterizations:

And when you have a lot of people living in a place in very few social structures, you can’t force people to get along and behave like people or deal with each other as human beings. They start to take advantage of each other. And when you have large concentrations of real estate when that happens, you get really bad conditions. It’s almost predatory behavior. And the predator behavior doesn’t just emanate out, it sort of infests….to create a whole sort of separate, almost thuggish culture….It’s not a concentration of poverty, it’s a deconcentration of society.

Strain and Turnbull’s virulent ad-libs depart little from normative understandings of public housing around the nation. Dialogue emanating from academic, legislative, and media domains presents a nearly unanimous front against block-style federally subsidized housing, a consensus reflecting its uncanny capacity to neutralize partisanship and ideological polarities. Public housing becomes monstrosity in its correlation with concentrated poverty: “in many cities public housing has fostered the concentration of poverty in inner-city neighborhoods, sometimes single-handedly creating massive ghettos.”

That these sticky meanings remain embroidered onto the brick of New Orleans’ public housing developments despite the absence of most residents raises urgent questions about the geo-racial meaning of contamination in post-Katrina New Orleans. In order to further unsettle these significations, it is necessary to trace the cartographical axes of space and body in concentrated poverty discourse.

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89 Turnbull, interview.
Perverse Geographies

The academy’s first longstanding, official endeavor to nurture a scholarship of the slums manufactured a set of *doxa* that persists in shaping the epistemic premises of urban studies. In the 1920s, Robert E. Park and the Chicago School initiated a mechanism for study that “accepted as a given that the ghetto can be satisfactorily analyzed in essentially *privative terms*,” such that its behavioral and architectural, genetic and sanitary failures become tantamount to its very being. This model of inquiry birthed the school of human ecology, which posits a connection between environment and behavior. Though anachronistic and outmoded, the logics of human ecology continue to brand urbanist thought, providing the ideological framework that links the culture of poverty thesis to the underclass debates.

The slum became the “cause, symptom, and symbol” of the hazardous instabilities in American cities, a geographical distinction that arose from and worked through the body of the slum dweller. William Julius Wilson’s reiterations of this formula in the language of the underclass and concentrated poverty reignited liberal scholarly energy in the poverty issue, most of which has gone into deciphering the causes and effects of this phenomena. Because “concentrated poverty” constitutes an immense synthesis of meaning, the exercise of delineating causes and effects is often tautological. This theoretical slippage testifies to the limitations of such scholarly pursuits.

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93 Lawrence J. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects*, 57.
94 As Wilson recounts, liberal attention to poverty issues waned in the aftermath of the Moynihan Report, which complicated the exercise of staking out a liberal position. Wilson's argument here is valid, insofar as the liberal position is equal to matters of state policy. What Wilson mentions but dismisses is the leftist attention to the phenomenology of poverty and the deconstruction of its language.
Among causal assessments, the spatial mismatch theory has been particularly prominent for the last few decades. This argument germinates out of the language of opportunity, claiming that residents’ physical distance from high-paying jobs with benefits, capital investment, and quality education, healthcare, and housing is the primary source of their situation.96 How the spatial mismatch first evolved is highly contested. Scholars have pointed to one or more of the following: the transformation from an industrial to service economy,97 historical segregation patterns,98 contemporary racist attitudes,99 the flight of the Black middle class,100 and the collapse of public institutions and the semi-welfare state.101 These lines of inquiry are certainly critical and productive. The study of how urban homeplaces arose amidst disinvestment, racial covenants, redlining, and other pernicious policies and attitudes is indispensable. Yet their deployment in the context of the deconcentration paradigm tailors these observations to fit narratives of demonization. The spatial mismatch thesis is most often deployed as a liberal formulation, attempting to redirect the causality dialogue away from individual pathologies and towards structural indictments. As I discussed in Chapter One, this line of reasoning is most often predicated on the assumed deviance of Black residents.

The cardinal text of spatial mismatch theory, Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged*, also rejuvenated the liberal penchant for elucidating the behavioral pathologies of the Black poor. In Chapter One I explored how Wilson’s resurrection of this penchant in the context of the underclass debates veered away from the insight and structural critique offered by earlier

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97 Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 12, 135.


100 Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 7-8, 55-57.

theorists, such as Frazier and Clark. Wilson reclaimed the previously (liberal-)denounced Moynihan Report as within the domain of liberal analysis, thus centering the study of the underclass and “ghetto-specific behavior”\textsuperscript{102} within spatial mismatch theory.\textsuperscript{103} As structural and behavioral causality merged, the strengths of 1960s liberal critiques were neutralized and eroded. It has since become evident that the structural and behavioral arguments are too intertwined to have a causal relationship; they are, rather, cyclical. This blurring revealed the weakness in the dualities liberal-conservative, cause-effect, and structural-behavioral.

New Orleans is spatially congruent with concentrated of poverty discourse. According to Census 2000, the city places second in data measuring the cities highest in concentrated poverty.\textsuperscript{104} In identifying the causes for New Orleans’ current spatial/demographic trends, concentrated poverty discourse has honed in on a combination of the following structural observations: the massive suburbanization of the city since the 1950s, which, as of 2000, has entailed a 2/3 reduction in the city’s white population (since 1950) and the isolation of the Black middle class away from lower class Blacks;\textsuperscript{105} Hurricane Betsy, which flooded most of the Lower Ninth Ward and other parts of the city in 1965 and provoked many whites to leave the city;\textsuperscript{106} the oil bust of the 1980s, which caused mass unemployment for much of the city’s Black workforce;\textsuperscript{107} and urban renewal projects from the 1950s to the 1970s that demolished

\textsuperscript{102} Wilson, \textit{The Truly Disadvantaged}, 14.
\textsuperscript{103} Since the late 1980s, the behavioral analysis has dominated the debate, obscuring even the weak structural critique offered by the concentrated poverty paradigm. See Margaret Weir, “From Equal Opportunity to ‘The New Social Contract’: Race and the Politics of the American Underclass” in \textit{Racism, the City and the State}, ed. Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith (New York: Routledge, 1993), 93-107.
\textsuperscript{104} Alan Berube and Bruce Katz, “Katrina’s Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty Across America,” The Brookings Institution, October 2005, 3.
\textsuperscript{105} Lewis, \textit{New Orleans}, 124; Ya Salaam, “Below the Water Line,” xiii.
\textsuperscript{106} Germany, \textit{New Orleans}, 5.
\textsuperscript{107} Lewis, \textit{New Orleans}, 121-137.
chunks of Black neighborhoods and isolated them from the rest of the city, such as the Superdome, the interstate I-10, hotels, and a new casino.108

Layered within these valid and nefarious observations are tacit pronouncements about the behavioral pathologies of the inhabitants. “Tipping” is a sound example of these assumptions. Suburbanization and the exodus from Orleans Parish to neighboring parishes is rationalized as a product of racial “tipping,” which posits an inverse, causal relationship between the influx of Black residents and “white flight.” Public housing figures centrally in this argument, since its desegregation and subsequent transformation to an entirely Black tenancy is connected to the “Blackening” of the surrounding neighborhoods.109 As a demographic and teleological formula, “tipping” presumes that Blackness graphs naturally and linearly next to ghettoization. In other words, Blackness naturally and inevitably begets the ghetto. There is no surprise in this equation, for the idea of the contemporary U.S. ghetto can only arise out of Blackness. And behind this logical injunction lies the contagious germ of Black bodily pathology.

The elided face of concentrated poverty discourse does not signal a scholarly foundering, a mishap in an otherwise redeemable theoretical enterprise. It indicates total conceptual failure. Liberal/leftist theorists have been unsuccessful in offering an emancipatory analysis of the urban question precisely because the emblem of their discourse—concentrated poverty—is overwhelmingly complicit and immersed in specific modes of knowing that safeguard the dominant criteria of propter nos. The copious pages dedicated to enumerating the causes or effects of concentrations of poverty are wholly incapable of breaking out of the

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epistemological covenants that mold and regulate the geographical, corporeal, as well as the hermeneutic and metaphoric borders of the urban homeplace. Causation is a fruitless pursuit if the referent is itself rife with instabilities.

There can be no structural indictment without a pathological subject, no pathological subject without state structures that can be located for critique. In other words, the deviant resident of the Black homeplace (and the Black homeplace of the deviant resident) serves as the ground for a liberal assessment of the state. The paternalistic logics of concentrated poverty discourse operate through the public housing development, the perverse Black body, reaffirming the atrophy of both. In so doing, these formulas preserve the *episteme* that generates the state policies and attitudes they seek to critique.

A constitutive trope in this semiotic process, contagion figures as the mucilage between public housing resident and structure. The two are set next to each other, indistinguishable, as this adhesive set of meanings surges toxicity fluidly between them. I will consider three interrelated (and perfectly inseparable) motifs that display this slippage: criminality, dependency, and decay.

Public housing as tainted and obsolete anachronism is reciprocally defined with Blackness as contaminating criminality. Only after 1960s Civil Rights agitation to desegregate public housing, after which Black residents became the majority (and in New Orleans, the entirety) of its inhabitants, did it acquire the nefarious, irremediable reputation it now claims.\(^{110}\) Similarly, the underclass as a discursive phenomenon arose out of the post-1960s era, a symbolic front that facilitated the erosion of the semi-welfare state.

\(^{110}\) In *From the Puritans to the Projects*, Lawrence J. Vale argues that public housing has been debated and often revolted since its inception in the 1930s, but its current association with an utterly abominable underclass first arose in the 1960s.
In the late 1970s and 1980s, the concept of the underclass was formulated, popularized, and legitimized by journalists whose graphic descriptions of a “nation apart” took their shape around the essentializing photographs of these “urban knots that threaten to become enclaves of permanent poverty and vice.”

The underclass was formed around the spaces most associated with it—the dilapidated facades, streetcorners, crack houses, welfare offices, and park benches featured in films, newspapers, and TV journalism. These geographic blueprints fused with behavioral pathologies to generate a spatiality of removal and periphery that was defined not always by distance, but unconditionally by difference. Notice the elision between space and body/culture in *Time*’s 1977 special, “The American Underclass”: “Behind [the ghetto’s] crumbling walls lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachables: the American underclass.”

Contagion floods the geographies of the underclass, marking this totalized space as a menace not only to the centers of dominant cartographical maps—the Central Business Districts, the established, respectable residential quarters, the gentrifying enclaves—but also to the deserving poor. The undeserving/deserving schema posits two types of poverty—those (criminally) able and those (sympathetically) unable to be self-sufficient—and out of this division generates a status-organizing principle that reaffirms the sanctity of the proper bourgeois subject by rationalizing the material deprivation of the former, *les damnés de la terre*, as natural. Distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor arose out of Elizabethan poor laws and were reorganized and rationalized in the 19th century according to a post-Enlightenment *episteme*. Enlightenment restructuring of criminality in many ways initiated a discursive turn away from providentially determined

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iniquity and towards a criminality of contamination. Criminality was no longer deemed to be
divinely sanctioned, but was rather contracted through heredity and/or environment (the latter
comprising physical/cultural surroundings, moral atmosphere, and status).\footnote{Foucault, Discipline and Punish; also Nicole Hahn Rafter, Creating Born Criminals (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997).}

This classificatory technology, which continues to dominate understandings of
poverty in the context of the underclass debates,\footnote{Michael B. Katz, The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 195-196.} follows the logics of contagion in its
persistent effort to differentiate and separate the undeserving from the deserving poor
and so as to prevent the former’s contamination. As Michael Katz demonstrates, the
underclass is “little more than the most modern euphemism for the undeserving
poor.”\footnote{Ibid., 196.} In this contemporary incarnation, Black male joblessness, out-of wedlock
childbirth and teen pregnancy, drug use, and other “ghetto-specific behavior”\footnote{Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged, 14.} fuse in
ahistorical, de-institutionalized, and de-racialized terms to fabricate a criminal, sexually
perverse, productively and consumptively sterile, fecund, and prototypically monstrous
Black body.

Public housing, the physiognomic emblem of urban Blackness, becomes a “storage
facilit[y]” for such unconscionable Blackness.\footnote{Lawrence J. Vale, Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 8.} In the wake of Katrina, with such “storage
facilities” no longer viable as enclaves of containment (due not necessarily to floodwaters, but
rather to food, water, medical and informational deficiencies), residents without the means to
leave the city\footnote{Fifty-five percent of those who did not evacuate had no access to a car. Manuel Pastor, et al., In the Wake of the Storm, 33.} recreated a flood conceivably as menacing to the dominant order as the sea
blanketing New Orleans. Their scramble to the Superdome, however, was temporarily foiled
by Mayor Ray Nagin, who refused to open the complex out of apprehension that the mostly Black mass of survivors would deface the entertainment complex with graffiti. Blackness and defacement equivalent, Nagin, under immense pressure, eventually opened the Superdome at the last minute.\\(^{119}\)

The same post-Enlightenment eugenic discourse that aligned Blackness and Black spaces with criminality produced new meanings of dependency that culminated in an analogous discursive linkage. As industrialism equated wage labor with normative behavior and independence, the jobless became icons of dependency. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon expound upon this process, which tied the pauper, the slave/native, and the middle class white housewife together as distinct but overlapping embodiments of dependency in the mid-19th century. Sketching the trajectory of dependency discourse through the 1980s, they reveal how these three meanings were condensed and transfigured into the Black welfare mother within the underclass thesis. The transmutation was instigated in part by neoliberal, multicultural and pro-feminist ideologies, which declared illicit all political and legal dependency: “there is no longer any self-evidently good adult dependency in postindustrial society. Rather, all dependency is suspect, and independence is enjoined upon everyone.”\\(^{120}\) Out of this meritocratic vision arises a conviction that “poor, dependent people have something more than lack of money wrong with them. The flaws can be located in biology, psychology, upbringing, neighborhood influence; they can be cast as cause or as effect of poverty, or even as both simultaneously.”\\(^{121}\)

The Black welfare mother, conjured up in the oft-mentioned phrase “children having children,” has figured as a paragon of dependency since the 1965 Moynihan Report, which

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\\(^{119}\) Mike Davis, “Poor, Black, and Left Behind,”
\\(^{121}\) Ibid., 328.
pathologized her both for her independence vis-à-vis Black men and her dependence vis-à-vis the state. Technologies of Black sexual/familial control locate the Black welfare mother within a long line of embodied transgression, as well as within a corresponding geography of embodied deviance. This is the public housing development, which, as Clare Cooper Marcus remarks, has long been the nexus of debates around homeownership and governmental interference in private markets: “America is the home of the self-made man, and if the house is seen…as the symbol of the self, then it is small wonder that there is a resistance to the State’s providing houses for people.” Renting, much less federally-subsidized renting, has never been an enviable position in the U.S. As Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia demonstrates, property ownership sits at the core of U.S. attitudes about space and body. Jefferson writes that those who could not rely on “their own soil and industry…for their subsistence” were dependent, a state that “begets subservience and venality” and “suffocates the germ of virtue.” The singularity of public housing’s vilification largely emanates out of the hegemonic correlation of humanness, rationality, individuality and ownership. The debauched icon of the state’s welfarist propensities, public housing garners more objections than any other federal housing program, although it receives the least government subsidy.

Long testing narratives of individualism, ownership, and independence, public housing only became associated with terminal, contagious poverty and sexuality when its resident base transformed in the wake of Civil Rights struggles. Beginning with militant Black riots in the late 1960s, which coincided with the suburban exodus of much of the Black middle class, urban Blackness was totalized spatially and corporeally into a proxy for densified poverty and all its

122 Ibid., 327.
124 Vale, From the Puritans to the Projects, 118.
125 Quoted in Vale, From the Puritans to the Projects, 95.
126 Ibid., 7.
associated behavioral ills. To put these transformations in the context of New Orleans, two major incidents, both occurring in 1970, consolidated fears of racial unrest. The first was a shootout at the Desire Housing Development (now demolished) between the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) and the Black Panther Party (with help from residents, the skirmish was arguably won by the Panthers); the second was the legendary sniping confrontation between Navy veteran Mark Essex and the NOPD, which involved the deaths of ten people. As postindustrial understandings of dependency assumed a particularly Black valence, the block-style housing development subsumed and became an icon for the myriad critiques of welfare. Public housing became not a place to live, but rather a place to be infected by this racialized dependency. Like the crack hysteria of the 1980s, dependency is an addiction cradled and produced by public housing.

Inasmuch as criminality and dependency—those enduring variants of eugenic thought—traverse historical representations of the city, decay stands as the *nec plus ultra* of urban spatiality. The decay of the city is the decay of civilization, the reincarnation of Adamic original sin. Both perpetually imminent and always already realized, the narrative of urban decline naturalizes the systems of thought and material atrocities of U.S. cities.

As postindustrial decay has become synonymous with concentrated poverty, the bodies, landscapes, and behaviors associated with the urban homeplace have fused into one homogenous, blighting entity. “Ghetto-specific behavior,” the tainting substrate of concentrated poverty, condenses under the category of behavioral pathology numerous overlapping and unstable valences that are employed to account for the contradictions of an urban that is at once inevitably decayed and paradoxically inhabited. The bodies and spaces of the urban homeplace (via the text of their culturo-behavioral difference) become the ground

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for vindicating dominant ontologies and epistemologies from any culpability in the manufacture of a decaying metropolis.

Robert A. Beauregard paints this systemic absolution as an unequivocally racial and nationalist phenomenon: “urban decline is a virtual stand-in for race and the two are frequently indistinguishable…As the focal point of America’s social problems, race displaces decline from the political economy of cities and relocates it in the cultural deficiencies of racial minorities. The discomfort caused by race and the fears engendered by decline’s impact on civilization reappear in the discourse at the symbolic and material juncture where urban decline touches national decline.” Beauregard’s comments are insightful, but he overlooks how sexuality, gender, and class are tied into this apocalyptic vision. In tune with this putative racial-cum-national decline are anxieties fixating upon the perversity of the urban homeplace: feminized Black “children having children,” dependent upon the state for their debauchery; hypersexualized, demasculinized, and jobless Black men gallivanting fluidly between the prison and the urban homeplace; and, in the context Katrina, Black men raping babies.

U.S. performativity of “third-worldedness” in the Katrina moment operated through images of racial-cum-national decay. New Orleans was left veiled not only by floodwaters, but also by a mass of unregulated Black bodies. For the dominant mode of subjective understanding, here was an anarchic concentration of Blackness that recalled panic over Maroon communities as well as the banal, nationwide consternation over enclaves of Blackness/concentrations of poverty. Controversies over public housing in the following years have necessarily been formed out of this terror. With these structures understood as intrinsically contaminated/contaminant before Katrina, this event reconfigured the discursive landscape such that there was no way to conceive of public housing or its displaced residents

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without invoking this metaphors. In the midst of a city’s “rebirth,” these developments condense not only memories of a briefly uninhabitable city, but also all that was wrong with New Orleans before Katrina. They are enduring geographies of decay.

Decay is dysgenesis, the corporeal and geographical contamination of propter nos homines. In this sense concentrated poverty attains its resonance and terror through its equivalence with dysgenic contagion. The sole identity of the public housing development is defilement (a defilement that we shall see is “both dangerously polluting and bounteously providing”\(^{130}\)). According to David Theo Goldberg this “faceless space,” is mapped only for the purposes of evasion and evisceration in space and episteme: “we’ always know where the project is, if only to avoid it…Its external visibility serves…as a form of panoptical discipline – vigilant boundary constraints on its effects which might spill over to threaten the social fabric.”\(^{131}\) As a project of geo-racialization, the concentration of poverty absorbs the signs of blight, contradiction, hybridity, and decay to such a degree that there is no place for it. Its very meaning is a negation, for it is named only to be erased. In this sense, McKittrick’s aphorism about Black female placelessness extends also to Black geographies more generally: “She is seemingly in place by being out of place.”\(^{132}\) Blackness, imputed as congenitally and ineluctably ghettoized, has no place in the city, if only because it must be a site of degradation and taint.

Contagious and contaminated Black geographies are pitted as the inevitable product of Black behavior/genetics, inequitable political economy, historical discrimination, and an assortment of other formulations that naturalize and totalize bodies and geographies according to a dysgenic logic. A faceless and placeless topography materializes where this inevitable space of defiled inhabitance meets putative uninhabitability. Unavoidable yet unnatural, produced but

\(^{131}\) David Theo Goldberg, “Polluting the Body Politic: Racist Discourse and Urban Location,” in Racism, the City and the State, ed. Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith (New York: Routledge, 1993), 53.
\(^{132}\) McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, xv.
monstrous, predetermined and at the same time out of place, concentrations of poverty imperil
the purity of dominant logics, bodies, and spaces. By definition, they must be excised.
THREE
“We Don’t Need Soap Opera Watchers Right Now”: The Deconcentration Paradigm And a Telos of Geo-Racial Purity

All the stains and blackest dyes of sin and pollution can be washed away for ever, and the darkest sinner be made to shine as the brightest angel.

-Ottobah Cugoano

We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.

-Rep. Richard H. Baker (R-LA)

Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically... I’m not just speaking for myself here. The way we've been living is not going to happen again, or we're out.

-James Reiss, Chairman of Regional Transit Authority

As his narrator hungered to make sense out of “the tragedy of a city burning,”

John Edgar Wideman introduces us in the novel Philadelphia Fire to the distorting prism of the urban:

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4 Reiss, responsible for the city’s public transportation, such as its buses, has frequently been blamed for the city’s poor evacuation plans. Christopher Cooper, “Old-Line Families Escape Worst of Flood And Plot the Future,” CommonDreams.org, 8 September 2005, http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0908-09.htm (accessed 4 April 2008).
Demographics, statistics, objectivity. Perhaps a view of the city from 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.5

In recapitulating the banal longing for urban rationality, the narrator lets on not simply to the impossibility of this task, but, more importantly, to the inescapably contorted and muddled image that it produces. From “up-high” the narrator imagines his lens “catching everything within its distortion,” as though legibility and opaqueness, universality and specificity were not Janus-faced, but rather appallingly engrained in one another, a matrix of unfathomable complexity. The dominant order resolves the narrator’s tension—the question of the urban—with “demographics, statistics, objectivity,” borders, and color lines whose only hope of inventing “some semblance of order” is to reinscribe Fallen status on those bodies, behaviors, and spaces known as disorderly and filthy, even as they designate others still as pure and redemptive.6

My aim in this final chapter is to examine the reconstruction event as a dominant effort to “disentangl[e] ourselves from this miasma.” My concern is with how New Orleans’ post-Katrina reconstruction maps trans-historically and trans-territorially as a purification of Blackness. I begin with a broad exploration of three major tropes of the reconstruction effort—green sustainability, choice, and authenticity—as convergence points for a discourse of opportunity and cleansing. This discussion offers a point of departure for a trans-historical mapping of purification that draws upon ideas of body

integrity during post-Civil War Reconstruction. From here I bring into focus the federal initiative to phase out public housing since the 1990s. This leads us to New Orleans’ public housing, which I map as a purifying event first by looking at the spatial-structural dimensions of redevelopment proposals, and then by examining the socio-spatial cleansing envisaged within dominant discourse.

*Katrina as Redemptive Moment*

The language of the reconstruction effort is the language of opportunity. If discordant notions of contamination constitute the primary mode of conceptualizing the terrors of Katrina, opportunity stands at the crossroads of competing visions for the future of the city. Behind the shield of optimism, dominant renderings of opportunity discourse convey unambiguous ideas about who, what, and where will belong in the post-Katrina landscape. I will consider three themes that run across dominant opportunity discourse in the citywide reconstruction effort: green sustainability, choice, and authenticity. Although my focus is on the normative performances of this discourse, it is critical to note that all three are contested and often deployed in recast form by displaced residents and allies.

The story of Katrina has become, for many, the story of ecocide. Within blooming narratives of green (un)sustainability, there is no way to speak of Class 5 hurricanes without addressing global warming, no possibility of contextualizing the levee ruptures without also discussing marshland depletion, oil dependencies and reckless chemical manufacture. Such narratives are claimed by a multiplicity of distinct positionalities, from green-ed oil corporations (i.e. Beyond Petroleum) to residents previously inhabiting the Lower Ninth Ward. I am interested in how the deployment of
these arguments in dominant discourses has drawn on ideas of health and purity in imagining a post-Katrina New Orleans devoid of contaminating practices, bodies, and spaces.

Indictments of ecological mismanagement have translated quite smoothly into the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans. Insofar as the city’s very existence is understood as an affront to the natural ordering of things, certain geographies have been pinpointed as egregiously abusive to an already defiled environment. This politics of sustainability, which has framed the reconstruction effort from the outset, represents nothing other than a contemporary gauge of inhabitability.

The Lower Ninth Ward is the prototypical geography displaying this classificatory technology. For close to a year, municipal, state, and federal officials seriously considered leaving the largely lower-class Black neighborhood as greenspace. Mayor Nagin’s Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) commission, which offered the first official, comprehensive vision for the city, was founded upon the eco-principle of “shrinking the footprint of New Orleans,” a downscaling made possible by transforming periphractic urban homeplaces into greenways.7 Amidst the ensuing controversy, the BNOB commission defended the motion, claiming that the demolitions served to “protect the public health and safety.”8 Governmental vacillation on the proposal restrained serious relief work until months after the storm, preventing residents from entering their homes until December, 2005.9 New Orleans East, predominately Black and middle-class, faced similar proposals. Horticultural historian Lake Douglas advised,

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“much of East New Orleans, which was severely flooded, was at one point swamps. Maybe it should become swamps again.”  

Because of the immense opposition they provoked, these recommendations were discarded by the summer of 2006 in favor of the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), which abided by Mayor’s Nagin’s eventual assurance that he would “rebuild all of New Orleans.” The UNOP, now the recognized blueprint for the reconstruction process, remains firmly within the discourse of health and sustainability. Envisioning a “safer, stronger, smarter City (sic),” the UNOP promotes green building and smart growth.

Sustainability has also become a fixture of post-Katrina concentrated poverty discourse. In their influential Brookings Institution publication, Alan Berube and Bruce Katz identify the post-Katrina era as an “unprecedented opportunity to rebuild a New Orleans that is more inclusive, more sustainable, and more economically healthy than its predecessor.” Likewise, in his article, “Ending Concentrated Poverty: New Directions After Hurricane Katrina,” F. Barton Harvey of the Enterprise Foundation urges the city to “rebuild...in a smart, sustainable way.”

Green building has thus become a nearly axiomatic preoccupation of liberal-leftist discourse in the post-Katrina era. Its temptation feeds off of its capacity to combine neoliberal ideas of consumption and lifestyle with universalist conceptions of the “global commons,” “spaceship earth,” and other iterations that relay a sense of

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common fate in light of global climate change. Terming this seductive ideology “ecoliberalism,” Giovanna Di Chiro notes, “The expression of the global commons signifies a neoliberal environmentalism...in the terms of making the world environmentally secure for unrestrained capitalist accumulation on a planet of finite resources and limited ecosystemic resilience (in the name of ‘sustainable development’).”

In post-Katrina New Orleans, the ecoliberal rendering of sustainability serves to vindicate a restructuring of the city that will make permanent the displacement that occurred in the wake of the floods. Often downplayed in these formulations are the differential impacts of environmental degradation (Who was left behind in toxic waters?) and the politics of causality (To what extent are the consumptive roots of environmental degradation profiting those most affected?). More importantly, ecoliberalism eclipses alternate modes of conceptualizing sustainability and conceals the linkages between unsustainability and subaltern bodies. The fantasy of a “common future” obscures the ways in which bodies are differentially bound up within binaristic views of nature as either Fallen/defiled or Edenic/sublime. If the contaminated geographies titillating ecoliberal imaginations in post-Katrina New Orleans are largely defined by memories of past inhabitants now dispersed, the purification of such spaces relies on the sustained absence of these bodies. Lake Douglas’s ahistorical contention that New Orleans East “was at one point swamps” and thus “should become swamps again” draws on a discourse of health and sustainability that legitimates a green vision of the city, founded

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18 All New Orleans was at one point swamps. Lewis, New Orleans, 19-36.
on the purging of those who defiled the landscape in the first place. In this sense, the
ecoliberal notion that “we are all in this together” applies only to those bodies human
eough to be included under the rubric “we”—propter nos homines. Borrowing from
Wynter, what is “common” in this discourse is the determination to homogenize and
regulate space according to the new logics of sustainability, a project that draws on
radically uncommon grades of humanness.

Ecoliberalism demands a recoloring of New Orleans to the tint of pure/green.
Choice weaves in and out of this vision, marking dominant sustainability narratives as
well as other neoliberal ideas about the future of New Orleans. The “disaster industrial
complex” that developed out of Katrina’s wreckage is the most conspicuous example of
this organization of freedom. The official reconstruction effort has fervently observed
the doctrines of free trade and has portrayed this allegiance as a fulfillment of resident
agency. Naomi Klein dubs these trends “disaster capitalism” and links them to the
transnational project of opening up markets according to neoliberal doctrine. In post-
Katrina New Orleans, such “economic shock therapy” (Klein is borrowing from
economist Milton Friedman) exploited “the window of opportunity opened up by the
first shock [the Hurricane itself] to push through a rapid-fire attack on the city’s public
services and spaces, most notably its homes, schools and hospitals.”

Spitting melodies of opportunity, government officials and developers called for
a “flat-tax free-enterprise-zone” with “comprehensive tax incentives and waiving of

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regulations.”21 Relief and reconstruction tasks were privatized.22 The Davis-Bacon Act, which secures the prevailing regional wage on public works projects, was repealed at the behest of George W. Bush.23 Undocumented workers were lured to the city en masse only to find themselves performing dangerous jobs with poor pay and shoddy accommodations.24 Residents had little to no access to reconstruction jobs.25 Land speculators first started bidding on property as early as August 29, 2005.26 And many public institutions, including the only public hospital and 102 of the city’s 117 public schools, were shut down or privatized.27

Discourses on choice delve deeper than these outward incarnations of free trade neoliberalism. Neoliberal renderings of agency serve, more profoundly, as regulatory technologies: to choose is the mark of a rational subject, to provide a choice is the sign of a democratic nation-state. Displacement and diaspora slip effortlessly into this language of agency, self-determination, and governance. Promises of choice in housing and jobs lured evacuees onto buses without the slightest indication of their destination.28 And as we will examine, the deconcentration paradigm also embraces choice as an ideal...
only achievable through the dispersal of poverty.29 Resoundingly, “poor blacks were congratulated on having moved to a ‘better place’ where they might start over.”30 These associations between choice and erasure, opportunity and forced migration, raise serious questions about this understanding of agency.

Inderpal Grewal addresses the connections between choice, neoliberal governmentality, and freedom. Working off of Nikolas Rose’s “powers of freedom,” she writes, “If Rose’s notion of governmentality takes shape in sites where freedom marks the modern individual whose practices of making choices constitute modes of regulation, that individual can only be in dynamic relation to a site of unfreedom in which the loss of ‘choice’ and the loss of ‘freedom’ is always a threat and thus acts as another mode of regulation.”31 Grewal continues, “the powers of freedom…are undertaken not simply with the sovereign right to kill but also through the right to save.”32

Impoverished Black evacuees acutely experienced these two loci of power vis-à-vis both the state and the (non-state) social. “They left us here to die,” wrote Lower Ninth Ward residents stranded in an elementary school for five days, while all federal agencies (with the exception of the Coast Guard) hesitated to enter the city.33 Houston Grey’s observation that, “the catastrophe was not to be addressed via outreach and rescue but through strategies of containment,”34 is not limited to the state, for white

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32 Grewal, Transnational America, 198.
33 James, “Afterword,” 158; Grey, “(Re)Imagining Ethnicity,” 131.
34 Grey, “(Re)Imagining Ethnicity,” 130.
vigilantes took to the streets of predominately Black geographies, “hunting 'looters.'”

When those who survived such necropolitics finally fell under the guardianship of state and nonprofit agencies, they discovered that they now had the choice to leave the city, an option that reaffirmed the “the right to save” even as it devastated family and support networks and blindly scattered residents across the country. Choice became simultaneously a disciplinary mode of containment and evisceration. Those who stayed discovered the fragility of their chimerical citizenship, often finding themselves homeless (i.e. Lower Ninth Ward residents kept out of their neighborhood for three months), jobless, and unable to contact their dispersed friends and family. By the same token, those who left commonly found themselves without the resources to return.

In keeping with an understanding of filth as “both dangerously polluting and bounteously providing,” the absence of most of the city’s impoverished Black residents has been both celebrated and vaguely lamented within dominant discourses. The Katrina diaspora expunged crime, blight, drugs, and dysfunction from the imagined city, but it also disappeared the bodies attached to the city’s cultural trophies, including jazz and creole cuisine. This tentative mourning is evident in the Urban Institute’s primer on rebuilding affordable housing: “…much of what creates the unique and vibrant New Orleans culture grows directly out of its lower-income and minority communities.”

Explicit here is the sense that New Orleans cannot be rebuilt authentically without the exotic cultural offerings of the Blackness now displaced. These anxieties are to a great extent informed by the city’s economic dependency on tourism, an industry shaped

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around racial/cultural commodification. As I explored in Chapter Two, since the middle of the 19th century, New Orleans tourism has fed off of the city’s association with racial/sexual perversity. Its most seductive attractions—binge drinking, carnivals, jazz, Congo Square—have, for the dominant order, shifted between benign urban charisma and destructive pathology. Authenticity swells out of this tension, and for this reason is constantly in danger of defiling the city.

Post-Katrina, themes of “authenticity,” “uniqueness,” and “distinctiveness,” continue to be projected onto the landscape, enabling New Orleans to recapture its historic claims as a space where visitors can indulge and “Laissez Les Bons Temps Roule,” “Let the Good Times Roll.” Yet the meanings of these identities have been refashioned. “Authentic” New Orleans has been cordoned off to the French Quarter, Garden District, and other spaces deemed healthy and uncontaminated. Kevin Fox Gotham describes this process: “tourism professionals are implementing new urban rebranding campaigns to present an image of ‘authentic’ New Orleans as clearly demarcated, disconnected, and segregated from flooded neighborhoods.” In isolating authenticity to spaces deemed safe and unpolluted, this marketing deviates little from the city’s pre-Katrina cultural tourism. Public housing and the Lower Ninth Ward were never on tourist maps before Katrina; what has changed is that the lingering memory of floodwaters and bodies, not their physical presence, is the criterion distinguishing inauthentic/dangerous places. Given the absence of these spaces and bodies, it is the cultural residue of Blackness—music, history, cuisine, and the occasional street performer—that bestows authenticity onto the city. By extracting and marketing non-

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40 Ibid., 836.
corporeal signs of Blackness, widespread displacement of the city’s Black residents has thus been imagined as an opportunity to assert the safety/health of New Orleans without compromising its authenticity or edginess.

The opportunity of the Katrina moment, then, was the opportunity to cleanse the city according to the regulatory logics of sustainability, choice, and authenticity. Many residents and observers have pointed to this opportunistic discourse as evidence of premeditation, a sort of Machiavellian engineering of disaster. This argument finds precedent in the intentional blowing of the levees in the 1927 Mississippi Flood (and widespread suspicion that the same occurred during Hurricane Betsy in 1965), the ample evidence that 2004’s Hurricane Ivan demonstrated the incapacity of many residents to leave the city without transportation assistance, and the barrage of scientific warnings about the vulnerability of the city and levees to a direct-hit hurricane. These legitimate observations may indeed point to a sinister intentionality behind the construction and handling of the disaster. Yet I am less interested in exposing the deliberate calculation behind the event than I am in mapping this event within the episteme in which it arose.

What dominant discourses on sustainability, agency, and authenticity confirm is that the purification of New Orleans since August, 2005, has been molded around a

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“We Don’t Need Soap Opera Watchers Right Now”

“racially hygienic collective fantasy”\(^{45}\)—a redemptive motion away from the city’s seemingly magnetic attraction to all things defiled. Dylan Rodríguez collapses this enterprise: “the fundamental logic governing the discrete geographic and human drowning of a post-segregation, though effectively apartheid, New Orleans is animated by the sturdy symbiosis between black disposability and American nation building.”\(^{46}\) For Rodríguez, Black “social death” or “black bodily and geographic liquidation” is “an epochal articulation of democracy, state-building, and nationalist well-being.”\(^{47}\) Preservation/restoration of the “sanctity of white bodily integrity” relies upon Black expendability (in the forms of containment and erasure) to excise tainting blood, spaces, images, behaviors, and sex out of geo-racial fantasies.\(^{48}\) Performed through a multicultural syntax, this spectacle of “death and dying” prompts Joy James to ask, “Can there be lynching without a formalized lynch party?”\(^{49}\)

The Contagion and the Cure

In gesturing to post-bellum technologies of racial/sexual containment, James brings into focus the continuities and ruptures between the Katrina moment and post-Reconstruction modes of regulation and order. In what follows, I am interested in fleshing out this correspondence as means of linking the phenomenon of contagion to the teleological motion of purification. Drawing from post-Civil War Reconstruction modes of governmentality, I hope to demonstrate the centrality of the purification exercise to the autopoietic functioning of the dominant order.

\(^{45}\) Sexton, “The Obscurity of Black Suffering,” 126.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 135.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 136.
\(^{49}\) James, “Afterword,” 160, 161.
Saidiya V. Hartman’s work illuminates the centrality of contagion in constructing post-Emancipation regimes of discipline and regulation. Discussing the bio-evolutionary conversion to a free-labor economy from one based on chattel slavery, Hartman notes, “The work of molding the freed into rational and moral subjects is explicated primarily in terms of social and bodily dangers, the threat of disorder, and the dangers posed by the physical proximity of sensual and childish men ruled by passions.”50 The instability engrained in this newly-unfastened status-organizing principle—the putative suggestion that Black subjects could become free, rational laborers—is clearly visible in two Louisiana-born (post-)Reconstruction prototypes, the post-Emancipation labor system and *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Louisiana is acknowledged as the progenitor of the free-labor system most often associated with the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned lands (the Freedmen’s Bureau).51 Hartman chronicles how the Freedman’s Bureau, one of the few institutions aiding freedpersons in their transition out of chattel slavery during Reconstruction, often backed coercive measures to pressure freedpersons into free-labor contracts. Fears of vagrancy, idleness, dependency, and depraved conduct shaped these initiatives, which served to discipline and regulate the bodies and behaviors of freed Blacks.52 *Plessy v. Ferguson* codified this governmental technology in spatial terms: “According to the Louisiana statute and majority opinion in *Plessy*, the safety, health, morals, and comfort of the public were predicated on the banishment and exclusion of blacks from the public domain. If the public good was inseparable from the self-certainty

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51 Ducre, “Hurricane Katrina,” 66-68.
of whiteness, then segregation was the prophylactic against this feared bodily intrusion and dissolution.”

Where the continuities lie between Plessy and the deconcentration paradigm, and what I wish to extract from Hartman’s analysis, is the idea of spatial purification and control. Speaking on the phenomenon of purification, Mary Douglas influentially remarked, “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.”

Douglas’s formulation captures the design and execution of Plessy, a juridical instrument for mollifying the disruption of truth provoked by Emancipation and refashioning the dominant mode of subjective understanding as it transitioned from one notion of order (based on chattel slavery) to another (based on the universal promise of free labor). Plessy embraced late 19th century ideas of eugenicity, juridically linking nationhood with whiteness through the text of purity. Racial hygiene became banal task shared among all civilized nations. More to the point, it was precisely racial hygiene—undertaken coextensively with gender, sexual and class regulation—that defined civilization. It was this era—the late 19th century through the Second World War—that saw dramatic increases in state-sanctioned and epistemologically-mandated sterilization, incarceration/institutionalization, and medical experimentation according to distinct bio-evolutionary postulates. Plessy encoded and codified the logics of these measures, submitting, in the words of Hartman, that “the wholeness of the social body was made

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53 Ibid., 199.
54 The historical fractures in this analogizing exercise, specifically James’s question about a mobless lynching, will be discussed later in the chapter.
55 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 4.
possible by the banishment and abjection of blacks, the isolation of dangerous elements from the rest of the population, and the containment of contagion.”  

The decision’s first manifestation as a juridical code in New Orleans served to segregate the famous Storyville or red-light district, such that sexual deviance became surveilled and disciplined according to the color-line.

The epistemological premises reflected in Plessy have endured through Brown v. Board, branding Black bodies and geographies as contagions to be contained, banished, and extinguished. As we saw in the last chapter, the poetics of filth, figuring centrally in the construction of Blackness as a proximate threat, is most currently deployed through deracialized abstractions such as pathology and contamination. It is useful to look towards the ideas of Henri Lefebvre to link these contemporary iterations of contagion to the project of purification vis-à-vis urban redevelopment: “In connections with the city and its extensions…one occasionally hears talk of a ‘pathology of space,’ of ‘ailing neighborhoods,’ and so on. This kind of phraseology makes it easy for people who use it—architects, urbanists, or planners—to suggest the idea that they are, in effect, ‘doctors of space’. This is to promote the spread of some particularly mystifying notions, and especially the idea that the modern city is a product not of the capitalist or neo-capitalist system but rather some putative ‘sickness’ of society.”

Lefebvre here is indicting popular conceptions of abstract, individualistic space for their diversion of critical attention away from matters of political economy. For Lefebvre, the metaphors of health/disease serve to reify systemic inequalities derivative from late capitalism, and in

58 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 199.
so doing position the dominant creators of knowledge—“architects, urbanists, or planners”—as the only the conceivable healers.

I will manipulate Lefebvre’s argument to implicate not just political economies, but also systems of knowledge that produce capitalism alongside other status organizing principles—race, gender, and sexuality. As discussed in the Chapter One, I argue that purification of space is a central operative exercise of the dominant socio-symbolic order since the 1492 event. Recalling Wynter’s explanation of the geo-racial restructuring that occurred at the end of the 15th century (“there could be no longer habitable and uninhabitable, inside the sheepfold, or out. All was now one sheepfold, and if not, was intended to be made so.”62), I submit that the effort to homogenize and regulate space operates through understandings of humanness.63 Within the dominant system of symbolic representations, defiled geographies holding and containing contagious bodies are terra nullius/no man’s land. Uninhabitable and ontologically uninhabited, these spaces define and are defined by the anti-humans who are located in or mapped to them. Exploring the tension between the abstract impossibility of an uninhabitable space (for, paraphrasing Wynter, all can be made into one sheepfold) and the epistemological indispensability such uninhabitability (for they correlate to the autopoietic truth of different grades of humanness), McKittrick proposes the existence of “different degrees of inhabitability.” Elaborating upon Wynter’s premise of a 1492 geo-racial restructuring, she writes, “This geographic transformation…does not fully erase the category of ‘uninhabitable,’ but rather re-presents it through spatial processes as a sign of social difference.”64

64 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, 131.
Gradations of inhabitability are negotiated through regimes of spatial and bodily discipline, which regulate different spaces and bodies in contiguous and divergent ways. Geographies of humanness (the French Quarter, the Garden District), exhibiting optimal status criteria for livability, are marked as provisionally pure spaces even as they may harbor bacchanalia and sexual perversity. The protective borders of pure spaces—police, “tipping” discourse, property values, physical barriers, etc.—are erected from within and without these enclaves, guarding from both internal and external taint. Notice how Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglass’s 1954 decision on *Berman v. Parker* is marked by his exhortation to *maintain* a pure space as well as his assumption that this space is *already* defiled: “The community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well balanced as well as carefully patrolled…if the community were to be healthy, if it were not to revert again to a blighted or slum area, as though possessed of a congenital disease, the area must be planned as a whole.”65

Geographies of anti-humanness and uninhabitability—in our case Black geographies as urban homeplaces—are regulated according to the logics of containment and erasure. Post-Katrina, with the taint of these spaces now derived from memory instead of corporeal presence, *containment becomes erasure*. This “racially hygienic collective fantasy”66 imagines an expungement of uninhabitability and the bodies that designate spaces as such. I turn once again to McKittrick for instruction on this transfiguration of space: “To transform the uninhabitable into the inhabitable, and make this transformation profitable, the land must become a site of racial-sexual regulation, a geography that maps ‘a normal way of life’ through measuring different degrees of

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inhabitability.”67 I have discussed how the entirety of post-Katrina New Orleans is drastically undergoing this transformation according the logics of sustainability, choice, and authenticity. I am now interested in focusing this conversation on New Orleans’ public housing, which has long been the fulcrum of debates over spatial purification.

The Extirpation of Public Housing

Though difficult to contemplate in this era, the construction of public housing was once conceptualized as a positive arrangement against a disorderly environment. Public housing was considered by its advocates to be poles apart from the slum that had been normatively known as a blighting presence in U.S. city centers since the mid-19th century.68 Inasmuch as public housing was defined against the conglomeration of debased meanings projected onto the slum, it was also their spatial replacement—a prominent alternative in the project of slum clearance. Public housing offered homogeneous superblocks that stood in contradistinction to the labyrinthine (anti-) design of the slums. By ordering space according to a rational model (and in so doing facilitating visibility and surveillance), these housing developments promised to remedy epidemics attributed to the slums’ poor sanitation.69 Visibility enabled a regulatory regime capable of erasing the symbolic contagion of the slums. Public housing was imagined to be an “operation aimed to excise urban cancer, not only for the benefit of the patient but for the good of the body politic. By replacing a ‘whole section’ of blighted cells, this surgery would be radical enough to send the disease into permanent remission.”70 More than just a structural-spatial recasting, public housing attempted to sterilize and filter the

67 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, 130-1.
68 David Ward, Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American Ghetto.
69 Vale, Reclaiming Public Housing, 8.
70 Vale, From the Puritans to the Projects, 154-155.
collective bodies inhabiting that space by creaming from the resident pool.

Developments were intended to house only the most deserving of the poor, those who needed a bit of temporary aid in securing for themselves the grail of self-sustainability and property ownership.71

New Orleans was the first city in the nation to receive funding for the construction of public housing.72 HANO was established in 1937, and by 1940, six developments had been built: the Calliope, Lafitte, Magnolia, and St. Bernard for Black residents and the Iberville and St. Thomas for whites.73 Segregation, which was encouraged by federal housing agencies, was but one mode of regulation that earned public housing its favorable reputation in relation to New Orleans’ slums. Elaborate screening procedures and severe penalties for illicit behavior marked New Orleans’ developments as not only some of the most esteemed public housing in the nation, but also one of the best housing options in the city.74

The de-segregation of the developments following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made possible an entirely Black resident pool, imbued in public housing parallel meanings to those mapped onto early 20th century slums.75 Abjection followed Blackness into the structures, eventually spawning in 1986 the city-commissioned Rochon Report, which pressured HANO to eliminate up to half of public housing units. Although, upon publication, the Rochon Report met with a hostile political environment, its recommendations would be realized in the 1990s.76

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71 Vale, Reclaiming Public Housing 8-9.
74 Ibid., 1268-1270
75 Ibid., 1280.
U.S. welfarist policies incurred massive overhauls in the 1990s, indicating the collapse of the semi-welfare state and the ascendance of neoliberalism and the new hyper-penality. Eschewed was an already dubious commitment to internal state aid, embraced was a discourse of personal responsibility, empowerment, and self-discipline. These transformations impacted a wide-range of state services, particularly federal housing policy. Foremost amongst these changes was HUD’s development of the HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI program, which precipitated the demolition and redevelopment of tens of thousands of public housing units. The official aim of the program is to “improve the living environment for public housing residents,” an objective that is pursued through mixed-income developments, public-private partnerships, new urbanism, and more stringent standards for residency. Henry Cisneros, HUD Secretary under Clinton, empowered HOPE VI by repealing the one-for-one replacement rule, which had demanded a replacement unit for each unit demolished. Cisneros’ repeal of the mandate enabled the new mixed-income developments to abandon previous efforts to re-house all those residents that had been living in the development prior to redevelopment. Along with the revocation of the one-for-one rule, new policies were designed to filter out “problem” tenants. These included the one-strike law, which enabled local housing authorities (PHAs) to “evict any household with a member who uses illegal drugs or is involved in drug-related criminal
activities.” Additionally, HUD eradicated subsidized housing policies that reserved public housing for the lowest income applicants, thus empowering PHAs to “cream” from the applicant pool. These transformations prompted a formalized and extensive withdrawal from project-based assistance (public housing) in favor of tenant-based assistance, such as Section 8 and other housing voucher programs.

These federal maneuvers had colossal repercussions on New Orleans’ public housing. From the 13,500 units offered by HANO prior to HOPE VI, only 5,146 units were occupied at the time Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Another nearly 2,000 units were intact but vacant due to disrepair. The transition into tenant-based subsidized housing through Section 8 and other voucher programs did not correct these unit losses. The last time HANO had opened up its waiting lists for public housing—in 2003—8,000 families rushed to get their names registered. Because of the tight window, many were not even able to submit their names. The same scenario occurred with the Section 8 list, last opened in 2001. Receiving over 19,000 applicants, HANO closed its records after only two weeks.

Proposals to redevelop the four housing developments that are our focus follow the HOPE VI trajectory, although they are not official HOPE VI projects. Each redevelopment features a (separate) public-private partnership between local nonprofits, HANO, and developers. And all four are slated to become mixed-income developments, containing market-rate units, scattered-site “affordable” units in the immediate neighborhood, and traditional public housing. Affordability is measured by percentage of

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84 Ibid., 916. (Emphasis mine.)
85 Goetz, *Clearing The Way*, 59
87 Advancement Project, “Primer on New Orleans Public Housing.”
89 Ibid., 7.
area median income. Pre-Katrina, public housing residents averaged around 10% of the area median income. Redevelopment definitions of affordability are appreciably more lenient, regarding up to 80% of area median income as affordable. Because of these definitional discrepancies, as well as the elimination of the one-for-one replacement rule (with the exception of the Lafitte), only a small fraction of the units will be rented at prices comparable and affordable for former residents. Thus, of the 1,400 units previously making up the St. Bernard, 160 will be priced comparably for the average former resident. In C.J. Peete, 723 units become 154. In B.W. Cooper 1546 become 154. And in Lafitte, 896 units become 276. In addition to these dismal numbers, the redevelopments will contain around 100 to 150 tax-credit units (more for the Lafitte), some of which are located in scattered sites outside of the development. The remainder of units constructed will be sold at market-rate prices. Such numbers are staggering, especially considering HANO’s estimates that 60% to 75% of former residents desire to return to their units.

Responding to criticism over the potential displacement of public housing residents, former HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson remarked, “They’re human beings with the same sense of worth that we are. I think they deserve to live in decent, safe and sanitary housing. And by demolishing those buildings, and rebuilding them, and

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90 Tuggle, interview.
92 Turnbull, interview.
93 The number of proposed market rate and tax-credit units are listed as follows: St. Bernard—145 market rate and 160 tax credit; C.J. Peete—123 market rate and 133 tax credit; B.W. Cooper—123 market rate and 133 tax credit; Lafitte—244 market rate and 292 tax credit. Bill Quigley, “Twenty-Seven Legal Problems With HANO-HUD Demolition Plans; HUD, Envir. Justice Study, 11.
94 Bill Quigley, “Twenty-Seven Legal Problems With HANO-HUD Demolition Plans;” Turnbull, interview.
integrating them body socially and economically, we’re giving them a better start.” I detect two threads in this immensely laden statement. Both configure the signified Black bodies and geographies as the ground for articulating visions of an uncontaminated georacial landscape. The first envisages an architectural renaissance, a retreat from structural obsolescence and sticky meanings of contamination. The second imagines a purified social realm, predicated on the doctrines of racial/economic integration, diversity, antiracism, choice, and order. Although the two threads are utterly inseparable, they serve as useful typographical tools in delineating the symbiotic interactions between space and body in the construction of a discourse of purity.

Demolition as Effacement

“We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” Although Representative Richard H. Baker’s (R-LA.) overheard remark aroused national furor, few other public statements more transparently reflect the epistemological circuits governing the redevelopment project. Considering the continuities between Baker’s use of “cleaned” and dominant conceptions of pure geographies, the uproar provoked by his comment is curious. I suggest that this abnormally immoderate reaction was informed by its poor timing. The remark was made and publicized less than two weeks after the levee break, a period when “ethnic cleansing” was, for once, in the vocabulary of major media outlets’ domestic coverage. Baker threw salt on the nation’s fresh democratic wounds and rendered overly legible the

purifying dimensions of the disaster and reconstruction. Although the city’s public housing was, for the most part, not flooded and relatively undamaged, it was by no means “clean,” insofar as this term signifies tangible properties of spotlessness. Widespread recognition of such rhetorical dissonance explains the sweeping condemnation of Baker’s remark, for his insinuations blatantly drew upon symbolic (and tacitly corporeal) meanings of cleanliness and, by extension, belonging. I must reiterate that what is exceptional in his remark is not his symbolic coding of geo-racial purification, but rather the upset it provoked. In the months and years following the storm, as national humanitarian sentiment dwindled, Baker’s words have proven to be a disturbing antecedent to a terrain of discourse taking shape in the vocabulary of purity.

Architectural and spatial integrity are central to the ideal of cleanliness pronounced in Baker’s utterance. If the displacement and invisibility of former residents (discussed below) suffuse his allusion to a sanitary geography, the physical presence of the housing structures stands as a somber reminder of the disgraceful past preserved by these particular spaces. The fulfillment of the socio-spatial purification hinted at by Baker, then, is contingent upon complete erasure of the buildings. Demolition becomes the disciplinary apparatus for veiling memory and excising taint. Redevelopment, in turn, testifies to human mastery over space, bodies, and, to be sure, the definition of humanness.

The demolition/redevelopment trajectory finds its discursive underpinnings in the reification of uninhabitability. As explored in the last chapter, HANO, HUD, developers, and state officials have endlessly asserted the impossibility of rehabilitating the developments. Contamination, structural damage, and architectural/ideological obsolescence are cited as certification of the developments’ irremediability. Although
anti-demolition struggles have taken pains to document not only the potential of the buildings to be rehabilitated, but to be rehabilitated at lower cost, these claims have been lost in the dominant discourse. The plaintiffs in *Anderson v. Jackson* estimate that the “extensive modernization” of all units at B.W. Cooper, including units vacant prior to Hurricane Katrina, would be $135,308,760, compared to the $221,750,040 needed to raze and redevelop the buildings. Repairing the units without modernizing them would cost significantly less, as HANO itself has acknowledged: “the per unit cost [of repairs] is relatively low.” Similar estimates have been drawn for the other three housing developments. Despite the ostensible cost-effectiveness of structural rehabilitation, HANO and HUD view this option as fundamentally inimical to the project’s objectives. One HANO lawyer in the *Anderson* proceedings noted, “If HANO were to merely repair the storm damage to these old, obsolete, deteriorated housing developments, they would still be obsolete. They would still be high density.”

New urbanist design offers a “spatial fix” to what have become inexorably blighting structures. New urbanism, the official aesthetic/philosophy of HOPE VI, defines itself against suburban sprawl, promoting traditional urban forms, “livable” neighborhoods, community cohesion, green building, public transportation and pedestrian traffic, and mixed-use structures. It has in many ways guided conversations around New Orleans’ reconstruction, with new urbanist crusader Andrés Duany active

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98 *Anderson v. Jackson*, “Plaintiffs’ Combined Memorandum,” 2, 4-6.
103 Ibid., 5, 7.
in the citywide planning effort. As a vehicle for deploying sustainability and health discourse, new urbanism displays all the anxieties encircling the purification of the city: “The new urbanism is supported by discourses of neotraditionalism, environmentalism and communitarianism which have taken a strong hold on American urban planning and design in recent years—proclaiming goals of producing ‘livable’ or ‘safe’ cities, they compound nostalgia, insecurity and paranoia in the relations between race and space.”

The embrace of new urbanism by the redevelopment proposals reveals the elasticity of the doctrine’s sustainability and communitarian discourse. For instance, much of the land now containing the St. Bernard Development will be converted into two 18-hole championship golf courses, a nine-hole “VIP” course, and a golf training center for children. Although this proposal does not necessarily reflect a prototypical new urbanist model, it is not anomalous—mixed income, communitarian, and neotraditional design are all integrated into the proposals. The St. Bernard, with 1,546 units, was the city’s largest public housing development before Hurricane Katrina. After the redevelopment, which will also reconfigure the adjacent City Park, only 410 units will remain on the site, many of those selling at market prices. As housing transitions into fairway, it becomes immensely clear that new urbanism constitutes an architectural mode of spatial purging, a completion of what Katrina initiated. The Times-Picayune, the city’s major daily, depicts the project as virtually settled: “While they face criticism and

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104 Mike Davis, “Gentrifying Disaster.”
105 Kennedy, Race and Urban Space, 5.
107 The inclusion of a golf course or other private venture is by no means atypical—it has been done in other new urbanist projects in Atlanta. In the New Orleans context, the 1996 HOPE VI redevelopment of the St. Thomas Development, now River Gardens, entailed the construction a Wal-Mart next door to new mixed income developments. Less than half of the units were restored. See Bragert, Hope VI and St. Thomas; also Elliott, et al., “Framing the Urban.”
108 Bill Quigley, “Twenty-Seven Legal Problems.”
questions from displaced St. Bernard residents, the Bayou District Foundation leaders
don’t face the wrenching prospect of relocateing people. The more than 1,000 families
living in the 52-acre complex before Katrina flooded the neighborhood are gone, and St.
Bernard is shuttered.⁹⁰⁹

The project of homogenizing and regulating these spaces demands demolition,
for their status as “torrid zones” disqualifies public housing from rehabilitation. These
structures are irremediable precisely because they are configured as paragons of
uninhabitability. The purification of the space they occupy depends not simply on the
disappearing of certain bodies, but also on the total effacement of their structural
existence. In this sense, rehabilitation and demolition are not at all contradictory in
dominant formulations—they are one and the same. Because the rehabilitation of public
housing is definitionally impossible, demolition is prescribed; yet at the same time,
demolition serves to rehabilitate the socio-spatial milieu associated with public housing.
Dominant deployment of rehabilitation thus serves as a regulatory technology, reifying
normative conceptualizations of deviant and pure behavior/body/space and sanctioning
a praxis of purification/othering. At the same time, rehabilitation discourse confirms
governing codes of personal responsibility, meritocracy, and agency in its invocation of
elasticity and change. In this case, rehabilitation intimates that even public housing
landscapes can be rendered docile and transformed into a disciplined geography.

In this schema, purification/rehabilitation is synonymous with progress, a
teleological motion away from obsolescence and towards spatial legibility, control, and
health.¹¹⁰ This treatment excises not only the physical structure, but also the memory of

¹⁰⁹ Warner, “New Orleans Proposal,”
¹¹⁰ For more on demolition as a positive motion against obsolescence and tradition, see Spiro
it, for discursive demolition demands the renaming and resignifying of entire
geographies. It has been argued that public housing translates as what Neil Smith calls
the “new urban frontier,”\textsuperscript{111} the contemporary rendering of Frederick Jackson Turner’s
socio-spatial dialectic between civilization and otherness: “American social development
has been continually beginning over again on the frontier…In this advance the frontier is
the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”\textsuperscript{112}
Smith’s recoding of Turner’s 1893 script locates contemporary attitudes towards urbanity
within a continuum of conquest. Because the fulfillment of the frontier narrative hinges
on the subjugation and regulation of transgressive socio-spatiality, public housing’s
erasure has become a pivotal task of urban governmentality.

\textit{“We Don’t Need Soap Opera Watchers Right Now”}\textsuperscript{113}

The paternalistic logics of New Orleans’ redevelopment discourse assert their
legitimacy through the principles of benediction and rehabilitation. In this sense, purity is
attained through the performative bestowal of equality and opportunity onto Black
bodies and spaces. Choice, health, sustainability, integration, and anti-racism are
foundational to this hegemonic project. What follows is a dissection of these more
patently social elements of the redevelopment discourse.

The broader deployment of the language of choice in the citywide reconstruction
effort (discussed earlier in this chapter) is reproduced in the dominant discourse
surrounding these four housing developments. A HANO/HUD-commissioned study
examining the outcomes of the post-Katrina evacuation announced, “Katrina and the

\textsuperscript{112} Quoted in Smith, \textit{The New Urban Frontier}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{113} Remark by former New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas. Quoted in \textit{Anderson v. Jackson}, “Plaintiffs’ Combined Memorandum,” 14.
evacuation it caused potentially provided opportunity and choice to at least some of the disrupted public housing families. The storm forced these families to select new neighborhoods and new living conditions and thereby the possibility to escape the throes of concentrated poverty, crime, poor schools, and the host of other social ills that characterized their traditional public housing developments.”

This argument folds seamlessly into Grewal’s analysis of choice as a technology of governmentality and exposes the infirmity of liberal causation claims. Hurricane Katrina—not state malfeasance, let alone epistemological injunction—“forced these families to select.”

Putting aside the extra-humanization of agency and naturalization of suffering implicit in this assertion, I am concerned with how it constructs the act of choosing as the mark of rational beingness, even as it acknowledges that choice is itself imposed from outside the body. There is no inconsistency in this statement. Lattices of multicultural, neoliberal, and meritocratic logics render Black residents of the urban homeplace pathological for their dependency, criminality, dissolution of humanness—their refusal to perform rational citizenship in the free market, to realize Homo economicus. The deconcentration paradigm mends this affliction not only by making available the ideal of choice, but by forcing residents to engage this decision, if only because their homes are now demolished. Out of this performance of choice—which culminates in imprisonment and homelessness as routinely as it does in state-subsidized relocation—the deconcentration paradigm enshrouds itself with the proof of its legitimacy and magnanimity. Moreover, in its fulfillment of meritocratic and neoliberal narratives of agency, the forced injection

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of choice equips the imagined post-Katrina landscape with the outfittings of a pure and redemptive socio-spatiality.

Choice, of course, had very little to do with how the redevelopment was conceived, drawn up, and endorsed. Even those former residents who were not dispersed around the country were given no occasion to offer input into the proposals. An internal email from top HANO officials states that “it would be swell” if the agency “could cut two months off the process” by circumventing negotiation with residents.115 Because of HANO’s abysmal communication system, most residents kept up to date on the fate of their units through the media and diasporic information networks.116 Additionally, the intricacies of the plan itself leave little room for choice. The few residents who do secure a unit in the redeveloped buildings have no options for placement. With an extremely tight rental housing market, returned residents with Section 8 vouchers are similarly limited in their selection. In many cases, those with housing vouchers are unable to find an apartment at all.117 These circumstances confirm nationwide redevelopment trends. HOPE VI, the virtual equivalent to the New Orleans redevelopment trajectory, rarely fulfills residents’ housing choices. And, on average, HOPE VI redevelopments house only 11.4% of former residents.118

Alongside neoliberal fantasies of choice, hegemonic multiculturalism’s veneration of racial and economic diversity stands as a centerpiece of the dominant redevelopment discourse. I will quote Turnbull at length, for his opinions are not only reflective of

116 Tuggle, interview; Anderson v. Jackson, “Plaintiffs’ Combined Memorandum,” 2, 8.
117 Sarah McMorris, interview by author, tape recording, New Orleans, LA., 1 August 2007.
normative understandings of the mixed-income approach, but their authority and visibility shape the field of discourse in New Orleans:

If they are next to people who have got a little bit more competent skills at getting through life, a little more competent household values...you hope there's some adaptation to it, people start to see that there's good role models. So you try to have ideally neighborhoods with very successful families and families with less income and they're all living along, not undistinguished from each other, but everyone can be along, compatible...to work within a social structure.

We're trying to bring a little bit higher income level back into the Lafitte site, so we've got a little more heterogeneity all the way through...we're trying to have a smattering of well managed rental housing that's affordable and places where people can actually own small homes and move in...

I would hope that it gets mixed race, this is the right neighborhood to do it because we've got the French Quarter right next to Treme right next to the medical district right next to downtown. This is the center of the melting pot that sort of disappeared. The little hole in the doughnut here. It'd be wonderful if the neighborhood gentrified because it's been going downhill for so long, it'd be nice to be stable.

Putting aside, momentarily, Turnbull's transparency vis-à-vis gentrification (and, by extension, displacement), I will take his argument at face value and assume that former residents will actually be present to reap the benefits he sketches. Even on its own terms, Turnbull's reasoning falls flat. No studies have indicated that exposure of low-capital Blacks to mid-capital newcomers has any affect on employment or education outcomes. Bewildered, some urban policymakers have accounted for this empirical failure by pointing to the relative lack of interaction between the two groups, yet have ignored how the structural design and theoretical premises of mixed-income

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119 For example, John A. Powell writes of the “need to attract middle-class housing stock” into concentrations of poverty. Powell, “Race, Poverty, and Urban Sprawl,” 64. Similarly, in recalling the positive Black middle class presence in the urban homeplaces prior to the 1960s, Wilson notes, “…the very presence of these families during such periods provides mainstream role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a visible alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception.” Wilson, The Undeserving Poor, 56.

120 Turnbull, interview.

developments ensure these socio-spatial trends. Little research has addressed the physical barriers constructed between public housing renters and home owners—they are nearly always built in separate complexes, and heavy police presence and community regulations certify that the partition is upheld. Tackling the conceptual bankruptcy of what he calls the “peer effects” thesis, Lance Freeman concludes, “spatial proximity does not necessarily equal social proximity.”

The failure of the “peer effects” thesis is not an issue of miscalculation, but rather an inevitable product of its accumulated contradictions. This central postulate of the deconcentration paradigm, resting as it does upon the spatial mismatch hypothesis, assumes that by doctoring space and minimizing geographical distance between classes (to abide by its de-racialized language), their economic and behavioral difference will be mitigated. According to this template, opportunity and behavioral normalcy, hauled into the urban homeplace by the influx of “role models,” are thereby transmitted to the deviant inhabitants. Such a formula—what has been called a “spatial fix”—is premised upon the transhistorical conceptualizations of socio-spatial pathology discussed in the last chapter.

The “peer effects” thesis is the contemporary incarnation of the “civilizing mission,” that enduring paternalistic phenomenon that refracts the purifying event through the self-interest of the purified. In this context, economic and (implicitly) racial integration constitutes the civilizing apparatus. Unspoken in this formulation is the assimilationist presumption that Black residents would never choose to live amongst other

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122 Ibid., 932.
123 Tuggle, interview.
125 Crump, “Deconcentration by Demolition,” 593.
Blacks, but rather, given the choice, would always opt to live with whites (and if not, should be made to select this option). Segregation becomes the new Original Sin, the impetus for a purifying ritual that habitually relies on the coercion of Black residents for societal redemption.¹²⁶ The disinfecting substance of the cleansing is whiteness, capital, and masculinity. Through this process, deviant corporealities and spaces are diluted, contained, and invisibilized according to the self-evident logics of eugenicity.

Such deployment of mixed-income and social-mix narratives is in keeping with Jasbir K. Puar’s interpretation of multiculturalism as a regulatory discourse: “the centrality of multiculturalism and diversity to the discourse of citizenship coupled with the surveillance, domestication, quarantine, and containment of the corporealities that attempt to approximate these democratic ideals…enables the emergence of liberal multiculturalism not only as a consumptive project and as a process of inclusion, incorporation, normalization, and assimilation, but more perniciously as a form of governmentality.”¹²⁷ Post-Katrina New Orleans experiences this project dialectically: even as the salvation/containment of low-capital Black evacuees hinges on the whiteness and humanitarianism of other (whiter) cities, returnees are cleansed/assimilated/regulated by the inundation of whiter and wealthier bodies in their neighborhoods.¹²⁸

Puar’s multicultural governmentality is at once on the perpetual brink of realization and forever recuperating from its immanent fractures. Because, as Bennett and Reed observe in the context of Chicago’s Cabrini-Green Housing Development,

¹²⁶ See Michael R. Tein, “The Devaluation of Nonwhite Community in Remedies for Subsidized Housing Discrimination,” University of Pennsylvania Law Review 140, no. 4 (1992); also see Bell, Silent Covenants.


¹²⁸ This final bit of analysis is influenced by a related argument made by Mike Davis in “Who Is Killing New Orleans.”
“We Don’t Need Soap Opera Watchers Right Now”

“the area’s putative isolation is more rhetorical than geographical,” no spatial manipulation can fully purify these sites of geo-racial otherness.129 Since Blackness is always already ghettoized, these modes of epistemologically-resigned urban therapeutics can never wholly realize their objectives (i.e. the failure of the “peer effects” thesis). In the same vein that Black geographies are uninhabitable but paradoxically inhabited, these spaces are thoroughly uncontainable but necessarily contained. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this tension has been resolved by a project of wholesale displacement that is both unprecedented and cyclical; that is, the reconstruction event more generally, and the redevelopment of the city’s public housing in particular, recreate and inflect upon a continuum of forced migration that has shadowed the rubric Black since its invention.

National discourses around mixed-income communities are underpinned by tacit assumptions that the redeveloped space will house only a fraction of former residents and that those who do return will be of a specific ilk. The eradication of the one-for-one replacement rule and disciplinary measures such as the one-strike law guarantee that only certain bodies will be permitted into the envisaged social mix. In post-Katrina New Orleans, this preferential exercise carries unparalleled potentiality for exacting selection and comprehensive displacement.

In this context, state officials and developers have been particularly blunt in their endorsement of purification; that is, Turnbull is not alone in his candid support for gentrification and whitening. In a press-conference about New Orleans housing, former HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson announced that New Orleans is “not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again.” He later added that, “Only the best

residents should return. Those who paid rent on time, those who held a job and those who worked.” Later in the same press conference, Jackson, who is Black, conceded the racial undercurrents of this last statement, remarking, “If you said this, they would say you were racist.” Former New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas, speaking of the politics of public housing reoccupancy, similarly warned that those who do not work would not be welcome in the redevelopments and added, “We don’t need soap opera watchers right now.” In filtering out the unwanted (the undeserving from the deserving), these discursive mechanisms institute parameters of belonging that become synonymous with a functional, orderly, and healthy post-Katrina New Orleans. This discursive construction of belonging is enforced by severe eligibility criteria (no felonies, steady employment, solid credit history), strong police presence around the developments (any unauthorized entry by former residents is considered trespassing), and the myriad obstacles frustrating residents’ right to return.

The allure of the redevelopment proposals is therefore derivative from their embodiment of spatial and corporeal progress, their indication that the city is indeed purging its filth. As noted earlier, the success of this project is contingent upon the rebranding of the city’s famed authenticity, erotic appeal, and transgressive ethos. Because erasure of Black bodies and spaces through displacement, containment, and redevelopment threatens to collapse this titillating veneer, the reconstruction event must sublimate the physical Black base of enticement/transgression into a non-corporeal mold. The post-Katrina moment offers for the dominant order an opportunity to extract

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the benign cultural residue of Blackness without tarnishing the geo-racial integrity of the
purifying community.

The deconcentration paradigm fulfills this re-branding through its discourses of
diversity, multiculturalism, and social mix. Although the paternalistic and charitable
“peer effects” thesis constitutes the primary deployment of these tropes, the less-visible
and more blatantly opportunistic underside of mixed-income discourse accentuates the
raw appeal of the urban. Diversity becomes the consumptive spectacle marketed to mid-
capital purifiers/gentrifiers. The enduring traces of graffiti, hip-hop, and jazz history,
now regulated and commodified, immerse newcomers in an authentic, enticing, and
normatively liminal space.132 In preserving these cultural residues, the project of spatial
purification becomes the protector of these selectively valued ephemera. By the same
logic, incoming bodies assert their belonging as safe, civilizing, and protective presences.

This exercise is not uniquely imagined as an infiltration of optimal
corporealities—white, mid-capital, heterosexual families—into perverse Black
geographies. Such a formulation is complicated first by the movement of Black mid-
capital youth and young families into low-capital Black spaces. These trends reflect the
ascendance of what Lance Freeman terms the “neosoul aesthetic,” which, “subscribe[s]
to values that elevate authenticity and diversity and abhor the mass-produced cookie-
cutter suburbs prevalent across much of America.”133 Freeman’s analysis suggests that
the neosoul aesthetic recreates the dominant attraction to normatively liminal spaces, but
imparts this predilection with a yearning to engage cultural legacy and Black identity.
After Katrina’s destruction of many mid-capital Black neighborhoods, this scenario

133 Freeman, There Goes the Hood, 56.
becomes even more likely. Much more has been written about a second complexity in the corporeal trajectory of geo-racial purification, the (white) queering and resultant dislocation of Black geographies.\textsuperscript{134} The fictive legitimacy of queer geographies, whose place-less and face-less character parallels Black geographies, hinges on a consumptive performativity of white bodily integrity. This establishment of a homonormative space of accumulation, hipness, and erotic spectacle feeds off of the lingering racial/sexual perversity of Black bodies now displaced.\textsuperscript{135}

Such considerations point to the performative marrow of the deconcentration paradigm. That purification can be staged by tainted bodies suggests that the “racially hygienic collective fantasy”\textsuperscript{136} does not demand a body politic composed solely of optimal corporealties. The more critical project is to protect and further the supremacy of the autopoietic truth upon which the dominant order operates. Although the bodily fulfillment of the optimal status criteria certainly constitutes a telos of the bio-evolutionary project, it is necessarily impossible, for the threat and menace posed to the dominant order by contagious and liminal others is matched in significance by that order’s hunger for such transgressive entities. The epistemologically-mandated, indispensable presence and classification of othered bodies (and the irreconcilable necessity of such classification) demands modes of governmentality that can negotiate


\textsuperscript{136} Sexton, “The Obscurity of Black Suffering,” 126.
and regulate aversion and abjection. Tossed around in this disciplinary discourse are narratives of choice, diversity, and tolerance that serve to uphold dominant epistemological postulates. I reiterate McKittrick’s interpretation of this governmentality, as it relates to geo-racial subjugation: “To transform the uninhabitable into the inhabitable, and make this transformation profitable, the land must become a site of racial-sexual regulation, a geography that maps ‘a normal way of life’ through measuring different degrees of inhabitation.” Abject bodies are thus included in re-habilitating contaminated socio-spatial landscapes if and only if they can perform cleanliness; that is, they must reaffirm and wear the consumptive and regulatory logics of multiculturalism and neoliberalism to stake their spurious claims at humanness. This purification is thus not a negative motion against threat and otherness, but rather a positive exercise in constructing/reifying power and knowledge.

Certain bodies and geographies are, by necessity, incapable of fulfilling this performativity. And herein lies the source of the ontological contagion mapped onto the urban homeplace. Behavioral pathology discourses access this specific performative lack—a negated beingness informed also by heredity and space—in charting entire georacial landscapes as “unimaginably Black” and fundamentally defiled/defiling. Yet it is precisely this nexus of abjecting signification that enables the proper functioning of the dominant episteme through its legitimation of the auto-instituting premises upon which all that is pure is defined. As Wynter notes of the liminal other, “such a category, because it served to ‘trigger’ and motivate each order’s subjects behavioral adherence to the pathway or the ‘cure’ prescribed by the supraordinate telos and ‘sense of right’ generated

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138 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, 130-1. (Emphasis mine.)
139 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, 5.
from the mode of lack that it empirically incarnates, is the indispensable condition of the autopoietic functioning of each system. It is also the indispensable condition...of the truth of its order of knowledge...”

Adapting Wynter’s argument, I suggest that the integrity not only of white bodies and white spaces (as understood to be metonymical with *pure* bodies and spaces), but also of the dominant order of knowledge and power is held in the semiotic balance. Thus, the self-evident defilement besmirching Black geographies and corporealties sustains the synaptic workings of the dominant *episteme* by fueling the teleological parade I have termed the deconcentration paradigm. It is therefore the very act of conceptualizing geo-racial taint/pathology/contagion/dysgenics that upholds the *telos* of purity and the necessitated purification rituals (and, as an extension, the sanctity of the epistemological order), even as it ensures the failure of this purifying exercise.

“*The floodwaters,*” bemoaned former Lafitte resident Michael Matthews, “*will never fully drain from New Orleans.*”

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141 Michael Matthews, interview by author, tape recording, New Orleans, LA., 5 August 2007.
EPILOGUE
Towards an Unmapping and Recentering
Of the Urban Homeplace

_They tried to make a brand new map without us/ But the tourists come down and spend too many dollars/ And no matter how you change it, it will still be ours_

-“Sky’s the Limit,” Lil’ Wayne

The Katrina event has verified the explosiveness of the U.S. necrospace, both in the immense suffering that was in the same instant visibilized and epistemologically camouflaged, and in the self-making that has traversed the far-reaching struggles ignited and reinvigorated by the disaster. Homelessness, starvation, imprisonment, forced community fracture, and other atrocities indispensable to the governing order interface with alternative modes of knowing, indicating that knowledge is produced and power is refashioned by subaltern bodies and in subaltern spaces even as state and epistemic terror impede such counterhegemonic articulations. The already-commenced demolition of some of the city’s last affordable housing affirms Kalamu Ya Salaam’s reminder that “a disaster is not a revolution.” The urban homeplace becomes the battleground in which divergent meanings, namings, and conceptions of belonging vie for resonance and sovereignty, while simultaneously producing each other.

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1 Lil’ Wayne, “Sky’s the Limit,” Da Drought 3, Young Money Entertainment CD.
2 It is necessary to note that they are only “alternative” relative to the hegemony of dominant epistemological and ontological formulations. These positionalities are, more precisely, entral to such formulations.
Post-Katrina, public housing has figured as one of New Orleans’ most salient “cartographies of struggle,”¹ a site that is routinely considered to hold in its balance the fate of the city. Following McKittrick’s injunction to recognize “both ‘the where’ of alterity and the geographical imperatives in the struggle for social justice,” I present this Epilogue as a vital but wanting documentation/interpretation of anti-demolition struggles.⁵ As lenses into alternate ways of knowing the urban homeplace, these struggles offer liberatory possibilities for reconfiguring dominant epistemological assumptions. Of course, they are already reflective of such reconfigurations, for they have been generated by the selfsame positionalities that are deemed anti-human by the dominant order. My representation of these modes of understanding (necessarily shaped by my own positionality and the medium of this project), serves as an exhortation to move beyond the dominant narratives that I have aimed to unsettle in Through Murky Waters.

Over the past several years, former public housing residents, neighbors, homeless allies, and advocates have marshaled a commanding and trenchant, yet often discordant front in opposition to the redevelopment proposals. Camps within this front have at various moments adopted, reified, contested, and redrawn dominant maps of taint and trajectories of purification. Because the Coalition to Stop the Demolition and the multiple other groups involved in the opposition are often characterized more by polarity than solidarity, I do not treat their synthesis as a cohesive body. Residents

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¹ I borrow this phrase from both Chandra Mohanty and Katherine McKittrick: Chandra Mohanty, Feminism without Borders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 43; and McKittrick, Demonic Grounds.

⁵ For me, a great weakness of this project has been my ineffectiveness at pairing a cartography of the dominant discourse with an examination of counterhegemonic modes of knowing. Originally I had planned on weaving the analysis found in the Epilogue throughout the entire text. Yet I have come to accept that this project is as much about process as it is content. I have learned that my bifurcation into dominant/counterhegemonic has not only weakened the text, but my own conceptualization of the dynamics discussed.

⁶ McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, xix.
themselves are divided about the demolition: some have welcomed Section 8 support and wish to remain out of public housing and/or out of New Orleans, others welcome mixed-income developments, and others still have taken up arms in opposition to the redevelopment. I am not interested in conducting an “anatomy of a mobilization”—a play-by-play charting of the continuities and fissures within what could be dubbed a prototypically inharmonious social justice movement. I am rather concerned with documenting voices that have burst open and rendered legible the interstices of the dominant discourse.

Drawing from my involvement as an ally in these struggles since the summer of 2007, I chronicle alternate modes of knowing public housing geographies. Most of those quoted here were involved with Homeless Pride, a homeless union demanding the immediate reopening of all public housing and the distribution of disaster vouchers to all homeless residents of the city. This “grassroots organization by, for and of homeless people,” established an encampment in the park directly outside New Orleans City Hall on July 4, 2007 and remained there until the city evicted the union on December 22, 2007. According to Leroy Miles, an organizer of the union, “the goal is to sleep a lot of homeless people who wants to be here, who needs to be here, who wants to help this movement, this protest to get the mayor, the city council to open up these houses that

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7 Tuggle, interview.
8 Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 117.
9 Elements informing these conflicts include: the presence of a vocal, but hardly representative anti-war turned anti-demolition group of middle-aged, middle-capital white activists who have been frequently derided as “white saviors” and whose visibility has discouraged the involvement of resident and non-resident activists alike; disputes over protest tactics, with attempts to effect legislative change often at odds with attempts to establish a broad-base of resident support; and dissonance between residents who support the mixed-income approach and those who associate this design as intrinsically linked to displacement.
10 From a recruitment flyer distributed on July 20, 2007.
just sitting there with nobody living in them. Just sitting there. And that’s what we need.”

During the six weeks I spent cop-watching for Homeless Pride, I conducted interviews with quite a few of those involved. My perspective and research is also shaped by my involvement with the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF) and Critical Resistance.

The question of habitability is the locus around which anti-demolition campaigns have organized. Habitability claims serve as points of departure for the counterhegemonic project of transmuting notions of humanness. In asserting the right to return to their homes, anti-demolition residents challenge matrices of knowledge and power that render them permanently out of place and anti-human. At stake in the struggles surrounding public housing is not only residents’ capacity to inhabit and therefore regulate space, but their license to live at all. If public housing geographies and residents’ bodies are normatively defined through their reciprocal abjection, both are also tied up in Mohanty’s and McKittrick’s “cartographies of struggle” as sites for reimagining knowledge, agency, and power. Wynter addresses this creative potentiality in terms of the ocular: “…the liminal category is the systemic category from whose perspective alone, as the perspective of those forcibly made to embody and signify lack-of-being, whose members, in seeking to escape their condemned statuses, are able to call into question the closure instituting the order and, therefore, the necessary ‘blindness’ of

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13 Berkeley Copwatch, the first police accountability organization in the U.S., defines copwatching as follows: “Our main goal is to reduce police violence by directly observing the police on the street, documenting incidents and keeping police accountable. We maintain principles of non-violence while asserting the rights of the detained person. We provide support to victims whenever possible. We also seek to educate the public about their rights, police conduct in the community and issues related to the role of police in our society.” Berkeley Copwatch, “Who Are We?” http://www.berkeleycopwatch.org/ (accessed 4 April 2008).
its normative...subjects.” Deviation from and confrontation with the self-negation assumed and mandated by the dominant mode of subjective understanding is thus both an act of self-making and space-making, as well as an unlacing of the operative logics of the dominant order.

The Katrina event left anti-demolition residents with the task of fighting a rearguard battle—they must work not only through the deep ideological trenches dug against public housing (in a trans-Katrina time/space), but also against the post-Katrina notion of “starting anew.” Because the praxis of reconstruction is dominantly fashioned as a linear, forward movement (purification), residents are relegated to the discursive position of “return.” Residents must negotiate the friction between claiming their former homes and mounting/maintaining an oppositional politics against the state and epistemic violence that impacted their lives before August, 2005. Complicating this tension is the liberal/humanitarian penchant for deploying a discourse of opportunity, which, while treating the Katrina event as a liberating moment, perpetuates the diaspora, sustains dominant systems of thought, and assumes that nothing associated with pre-Katrina public housing merits restoration. Residents must therefore stake a position between the brutality marking the urban homeplace (trans-Katrina), the violence of displacement (post-Katrina), and the celebratory, paternalistic discourse of opportunity and health that professes to resolve the foregoing issues. Such is the liminal position from which anti-demolition voices have been forced to embark.

15 The dominant imagination has conflicting attitudes regarding the “return.” Although it is favorably infused with normative conceptions of authenticity (as discussed in Chapter Three), it also signifies the dreaded homecoming of les damnés de la terre/the wretched of the earth.
“You can’t clean what you cannot open, because it don’t have no doors,” announced former C.J. Peete resident Denise Felix during HANO’s “Resident Consultation Meeting on Proposed Demolition/Disposition Activity.” In observing the irreversibility and stickiness of tainting significations, Felix points to the teleological logic of the redevelopment trajectory. Felix’s was one of many voices denouncing the cyclical syntax of the redevelopment proposals at this late 2006 consultation. Although the developments had been boarded up and fenced in, many residents had accessed their units either by way of the official, tedious HANO procedure or through one of the numerous resident-led occupations, which enabled residents to claim their possessions and begin cleaning their units. Having more often than not discovered their units in fair condition, residents at the consultation accused HANO of falsely portraying the buildings as contaminated and structurally-unsound.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, this line of argumentation constituted a major component of residents’ opposition to the demolition. Anti-demolition residents borrowed from the dominant discourse of rehabilitation to assert their own entitlement to reoccupy their units. Structural rehabilitation, for them, is not only possible and cost-effective, it is critical. In an unexpected discursive turn, rehabilitation discourse attains counterhegemonic potential. Rehabilitating public housing becomes a means to rehabilitating the city, a vehicle for ensuring the state is fulfilling its widely-held expectations: housing the homeless and internally-displaced. Such a discourse, based as it

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18 Their reinterpretation of this trope extinguishes the false dichotomy between a rehabilitation project that ensures demolition and a demolition that enables rehabilitation (see Chapter Two).
is on the slippery and often hegemonic formulas of rights, citizenship, and rehabilitation, nevertheless executes a strategic performativity.

Of course, this approach is not without its performative contradictions. Residents are put immediately on the defensive, forced to make a case for a semi-welfarist institution that the neoliberalizing state has shunned as tainting and lawless. Moreover, anti-demolition struggles have habitually deployed a discourse of rights and citizenship as an avenue for indicting the state for its failure to satisfy its governing dictates. Such an argument runs the risk of recuperating and reifying ideas of proper state governance, regulation, and masculinist *protection* of its citizens that serve as ideological foundations of the deconcentration paradigm (as a neoliberal, anti-welfarist agenda that transmutes these ideas according to the mantra of self-help). In other words, welfarist discourse is precariously complicit with the hegemony of the state and the systems of thought that auto-institute this governmental body.¹⁹ Yet, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan highlights in the context of institutionalized women in India, such a “Foucauldian view that institutions are *constitutively* regulatory…would not answer a situation in which Indian women, caught in the travails of a rapidly changing society, are desperately *in need of* the services of institutions like shelters, short-stay homes, hostels, old age homes, and vocational training centers that only the state can provide in the numbers and at the cost that can answer to such a massive (and as yet unrecognized and unmet) demand.”²⁰ Anti-demolition discourse, analogously, treads this discursive ground strategically and out of necessity. Welfare is recoded as a right, an entitlement. But it is also denounced as a regulatory and necropolitical technology. Residents’ demands for their homes dovetail

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with their frequent refusal to reoccupy an institution that is governed through the logics of spatial containment, imprisonment, and hyper-criminalization (i.e. the one-strike rule). In this sense, residents have refused to choose between *inhabitation* of a geography marked by state/epistemic violence and renunciation on the one hand, and *displacement* from a space that has been dominantly reclaimed and redeveloped on the other.

By remaining within this dominant vernacular, residents have staged a normatively convincing argument that has galvanized widespread support. Welfare may be a dirty word in neoliberal parlance, but as the Katrina event has demonstrated, dominant discourse has not completely abandoned ideas of governmental accountability (as evident in critiques of evacuation plans and disaster response). In the charged political atmosphere of the 2008 presidential elections, support for New Orleans’ public housing has become a mark of progressivism. This *cause célèbre* has attracted statements by Barack Obama, John Edwards, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, the US Human Rights Network, and multiple national unions.

Residents have both deployed and transfigured dominant understandings of welfarist space. In remapping public housing, residents have spotlighted faces of these geographies conventionally veiled within popular discourse. Of course, nothing is exceptional about divergent positionalities vis-à-vis public housing. At issue here is

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21 As former C.J. Peete resident and Homeless Pride member David Nolbert articulates, “First of all they privatize the prison system. Say we have a hundred acres of land, we can build a prison. It’s like cattle. Give me enough cattle, I can get money from the federal government to house people for doing crime. It becomes a dictatorship. You put signs in drug free zones, no trespassing zones. I can’t come see my family because I’m not allowed back here to the projects. If I have a friend back here I can’t come. The police stop me: I’m trespassing. I create a crime. To me that’s dictatorship. They capitalize off that and it’s wrong for them to do that but they think it’s a wise thing. But it’s another way of modern day slavery.”


visibility. Post-Katrina, New Orleans’ public housing has claimed visibility not only as a site of taint but also as a site of struggle. As a concomitant to this transformation, alternate cartographical formulations have discovered newfound representation in popular forums. Accordingly, public housing has come to signify not only defilement, pathology, and disorder, but also empowerment, community and solidarity. The strength of these alternative formulations thus derives from their capacity to distort and vex dominant conceptions of public housing.

Whereas concentrated poverty discourse derides the predominately post-1960s phenomenon of intergenerational residency (as evidencing genetic-cum-cultural dependency), residents have renamed their long-term presence as legacy, and in so doing have granted public housing a history. During an interview at the Homeless Pride encampment, union member Sharon Fulford reflected on her childhood in the C.J. Peete, “Take my family. I had four sets of families. We was all right across from each other. You could walk out my backdoor and straight over to my sister’s door. My grandmother and ma lived with me, but over next door was another set that could just as well be blood. We kept each other going and had that community, even when the shit happened.” Fulford remembers her home as a constant source of solidarity: “We had each other’s backs when things got real bad, if there was some kinds of violence amongst our residents or outsiders, or when the police came to try to tear us apart by bringing us off to OPP [Orleans Parish Prison].”

Fulford’s normatively illegible subjectivity was rendered suddenly visible by the protests surrounding public housing. The very notion that public housing could be a home has been vehemently emphasized. Here is where the “return” gains its discursive

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power, for in maintaining the affirmative existence of a space to restore, anti-demolition discourse has transcended dominant formulas of public housing as negation of space, of residents as negations of beingness. Fulford’s insistence that C.J. Peete was her home is an act of resignification, a motion also discernible in the following passage by former Lafitte resident Ashley Nelson, who at eighteen had her book *The Combination* published as part of The Neighborhood Story Project, a New Orleans-based “community documentary program”: “I live in what can be considered a community: a bunch of people of all ages living together. Yet people don’t call where I live a community; they call it the ghetto.”

Nelson’s writing of public housing as a human and habitable geography emerges as a subtle counterposition to the discursive violence contained in hegemonic deployments of the epithet “ghetto.”

As Nelson’s words reflect, of primary significance in the project of challenging dominant geo-racial formulations has been visibilizing the state and epistemic terror inflicted onto public housing/residents via abandonment, forced segregation, police brutality, and now demolition and displacement. “...The fellah, the unemployed man, the starving native do not lay a claim to the truth; they do not say that they represent the truth, for they are the truth,” wrote Fanon. And so proceeds the counterhegemonic course of resident-led anti-demolition struggles. As Homeless Pride member Tyrone Hall relates, “You invisible to City Hall, the police just a small stepping stone. To City Hall, you just a small insect to them. To put some bugspray on to go away...They want you to die, just fade away. That’s what society wants you to do. Like they ain’t human. Like they ain’t human.”

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25 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 49.
anti-demolition residents have mounted an acute indictment of epistemic forces marking
them as defiled, of the state that boarded up their homes and rendered them homeless,
and of the nonprofit industrial complex that placates and neutralizes dissent (as Hall
noted, “…organizations, they call it ‘helping the homeless people.’ I don’t see nobody
scooping these people up, putting them in housing…but all they’re doing is what? You
go there, you get some raggedy clothes, a sandwich, a little hot twelve o’clock meal, and
they say then, ‘Well we did something for you.’ You feel good about that?”).

The tremendous visibility earned by anti-demolition protests has certainly
disrupted the ocular politics referenced and condemned by Hall. Although oppositional
postures have attracted national media coverage since the summer of 2006, the
December, 2007 protests figure as the most charged juncture of the struggles at the
point of this writing. With the demolitions originally scheduled for mid-December, anti-
demolition residents and allies staged an intensive, multifaceted assault on the razing
activity. The ensuing melee witnessed activists tying themselves to buildings with
bulldozers looming over them,27 the NOPD tazing and pepper-spraying hundreds locked
out of City Council proceedings,28 and the widespread dissemination of an anonymous
flyer reading, “For Every Public Housing Unit Destroyed A Condo Will Be
Destroyed.”29 New Orleans made international headlines for weeks, frequently drawing a
publicity of state failure and Black victimization that recalled the narratives dominating

27 “Bork Chained to Bulldozer at B.W. Cooper Homes,” InfoShop News, 19 December 2007,
28 “Clash Over Public Housing Closure in N.O.” MSNBC.com, 21 December 2007,
29 “Tensions Rise Over Public Housing,” Nola.com, 10 December 2008,
2008).
the immediately post-Katrina moment. Significantly, the reincarnation of such
hegemonic narratives was, this time around, generated by an oppositional politics, not an
ecological catastrophe. The attention drawn to these struggles testifies to the residents’
success in rendering their plight, their homes, and themselves visible. Although such
visibility is compromised by residents’ lack of control over the terms of their
representation, it nevertheless performs the task of blurring and debilitating the
hegemonic project of demolition. To a nearly unparalleled extent, the self-evident logics
of the deconcentration paradigm have been vexed, muddled, and denormalized.

If these cartographies of struggle have witnessed a freeing up of discursive space
for a politics of opposition, which I argue they have, it is critical to recognize their
simultaneous socio-spatial capacity as a site for “forging community.” Residents’
construction and staging of a counter-discourse is infused with the urgency of recouping
support networks that were fractured or destroyed by the Katrina event. David Nolbert,
born in the C.J. Peete Development, notes the significance of political struggle in
restoring community and selfhood. Addressing his involvement as a member of
Homeless Pride, he told me:

These people want to be a part of something and to be able to have a movement
to have to bring people together…You allow yourselves to get involved, your
voice to be heard in government. People are finding that out: ‘I am somebody.’
Because we’ve been shut off for so long dealing with the government. Now you
want to know what government is doing. Become part of something. And it’s a

December 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-
dyn/content/article/2006/12/07/AR2006120701482.html (accessed 4 April 2008); also Ethan Brown,
“New Orleans’ Epic Housing Crisis,” Guardian.co.uk, 20 March 2008,
http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/20/hurricanekatrina.usa (accessed 4 April 2008); and
“Clash Over Public Housing,” MSNBC.com.
31 With the possible exception of Chicago’s Cabrini-Green controversies. See Bennett and Reed,
“The New Face of Urban Renewal.”
32 I adopt here Joy James’ notion of “forging community” out of transcendent
ideological/spiritual/tangible struggle. Joy James, Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics (New
Nolbert’s identification of political struggle with enfranchisement, community, and personhood transfigures dominant understandings of space so as to enable a trans-territorial understanding of community and empowerment. Inasmuch as geo-racial purification is understood to break up “concentrations of poverty” (Black geographies, Black communities), Nolbert’s trans-territorial interpretation of belonging and community rejects this central postulation of the deconcentration paradigm. With public housing boarded up and condemned, the physical terrain of community all but erased, and intraspecificity and shared identities constrained by the diaspora, Nolbert’s is a liberatory and counterdiscursive narrative. And he is not alone. The very existence of Homeless Pride (defined by the safe and police-free zone it occupies) indicates that the preservation/forging of community through participatory struggle has figured as a paramount objective of anti-demolition residents.

The fissures in the master narratives visibilized by residents’ struggles have not triggered a suspension of the redevelopment plans. With demolition commenced in some of the buildings and scheduled for others, the resilience of the deconcentration paradigm becomes palpable. As I have explored, such potency derives from the socio-spatiality of Blackness as a marginal, peripheral entity to be contained, erased, and transcended (in this case, through the geo-racial metaphors of contagion). Yet, as Katherine McKittrick relates in reflecting upon Sylvia Wynter’s unmapping of inside/outside dualities, Black geographies and bodies are anything but peripheral within dominant cartographical formulations: “subaltern lives are not marginal/other to

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33 Nolbert, interview.
regulatory classificatory systems, but instead integral to them.”34 And herein resides the acuity of anti-demolition discourse, for in rendering themselves and their homes visible and indispensable to the reconstruction of New Orleans, residents have asserted their own centrality to dominant modes of subjective understanding. Even their attempted erasure is a constructive, affirmative motion towards the purification of the city and the sanctification of the optimal status criterion of beingness.

“They can’t rebuild this city without us, they just don’t know it,” Sharon Fulford observes with indignation. “We are this city—it was made by us and around us. They make it how they want it, it still built out of public housing. Even when we was bussed away, the city was made around us. It within us, we within it.”35

34 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxv.
35 Fulford, interview.
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