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Between Biotechnics and Nowhere: Ralph Ellison, Lewis Mumford, and an Emergent Post-Industrial New York

by

Harry Bartle
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Introduction: The Golden Day

'You will hardly recognize it, but it is very fitting that you came to the Golden Day…'
- Invisible Man[1]

Early in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrator finds himself in a tough spot with one of the white trustees of the school, Mr. Norton, at a bar called the Golden Day. The invisible man tries virtually everything to avoid bringing Norton, already near faint and possibly on the verge of death, into the Golden Day. Unfortunately for our protagonist, Norton's last audible wish, for "just a little stimulant," and the bar's policy not to allow any drinks taken outside, mean that he has no choice but to carry Mr. Norton horizontally inside the Golden Day and administer the stimulant—a double shot of whiskey—among the ranks of the bar's undesirable regulars.

As it turns out, The Golden Day, a whiskey joint with bedrooms upstairs, on the outskirts of the school's Southern campus, is populated by African-American psychiatric patients and prostitutes. However, run-of-the-mill psychiatric patients these are not. Rather, all are formerly well-regarded black professionals. As the invisible man recalls:

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[1] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* (New York : Vintage Books, 1952), 94. Herein *Invisible Man* will be reffered to in parentheticals.

> Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist. One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist. Whenever I saw them I felt uncomfortable. They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I had vaguely aspired myself, and even though they never seemed to see me I could never believe that they were really patients. (74)

Shortly after the narrator and Mr. Norton enter, the patients revolt against their supervisor, a giant of a man named Supercargo—Ellison's cloaked reference to the super-ego— and the Golden Day erupts into madness. Mr. Norton (Northern) is quickly rendered unconscious and upon waking moments later, upstairs, is further traumatized by an ex-physician who confronts the sheltered, naïve trustee about his relationship to the school and the invisible man himself. "You will hardly recognize it but it is very fitting that you came to the Golden Day with the young fellow… You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you, looking for destiny! It's classic!" (74).

In a novel like *Invisible Man*, riddled with deliberate symbolism intended to communicate "on the lower frequencies," the name of this sporting house, The Golden Day, and, consequently all the happens within it, should be read as a direct reference to the prominent social philosopher and public intellectual Lewis Mumford, and his work of earnest idealism, *The Golden Day* (1926), which chronicled the development of the "American personality" through literature and early American history. Ellison's attack here is overtly critical of Mumford's failure to make any mention of the extreme mistreatment of African-Americans in this history, or to comment on the horrors of racism or devastating psychological effects it may have had on certain other American personalities. Ellison plainly charges

Mumford with a backwards kind of racism, a blind idealism— that in its grand ambitions to uncover the "American destiny" overlooks the oppression that was fundamental to the country's rise and that therefore denies African-Americans the humanity of recognition.

The episode is such a fierce critique that it might lead one to believe that Mumford and Ellison were on different ends of an ideological spectrum, that their ideas were irreconcilably different in the way that the dystopic chaos of the Golden Day, the bar, stands in such contrast to the determined idealism of Mumford's work. In fact, Ellison and Mumford were part of a network of associated writers in New York in the 1940s. One was Alfred Kazin, who drew great inspiration from the writing of Mumford, and had a long correspondence with the writer at the same time that he was on the committee that elected Ralph Ellison to the National Book Award in 1953. And, even despite Ellison's apparently unresolved attack on *The Golden Day*, Mumford was one of the writer's leading champions in the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters when the Institute invited him to become a member in 1964.[2] Indeed, upon a closer look, these two writers were strikingly *similar* in a variety of significant ways. This similarity is perhaps best understood through their specific understandings of the social dynamics of the city and the role of the urban environment in the emerging post-industrial America.

Both Ralph Ellison and Lewis Mumford were writers who were deeply committed to the project of modernism and saw in the city a profound potential for eliciting a democratic cultural renewal. Both lived and worked in New York City for most of their lives. Mumford was a native New Yorker, born in Queens in 1895 and

[2] Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 405.

raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; Ellison moved to New York from Oklahoma City in 1936 at the age of twenty-two for what was supposed to be a summer-long jaunt, and ended up staying in Harlem for most of the rest of his life.

Both writers developed foundational theories that shaped their intellectual careers and the large majority of their writing. For Mumford, this theory can be identified as organicism—an evolutionary view of development that stressed the capacity of human communities to respond to and to collectively transform their worlds. For Ellison, democracy played a similar role of master concept and cultural ideal. Indeed, the pluralist theory of democracy that Ellison developed in *Invisible Man* and in his essays was in many ways quite similar to Mumford's evolutionary view of human development. Both stressed the power of diverse, complex, and dynamic communities to resist the dangers of ideological and bureaucratic simplification and to produce a vibrant and coherent society. By the same token, both, too, shared a deep belief in the powers of culture and community to inspire political action and to aid in the task of self-definition and self-fulfillment.

Most basically, perhaps, both were fundamentally urban writers and thinkers. No place, for either writer, was better equipped for the realization of dynamic, pluralist, evolving community than the city. Yet, the urban environment was equally the setting of some of these writers' deepest fears—anxieties that, like their hopes, were closely parallel. Both Ellison and Mumford suggested that the legacies of industrialization had made the city and its inhabitants subject to forces beyond their perception and impact. Both countered their visions of an ideal city with depictions of a dystopian city, the sort of "Nowhere" city that Ellison saw in Harlem in 1948,

where individuals were isolated, alienated, and prey to the social manipulation inherent to capitalism. And yet even so, embedded in the work of both of these writers is the understanding that from disharmony springs growth, that antagonistic cooperation was the means of attaining a truer sense of community and self-achievement.

It was this conviction that redeemed the city in their writings. This redeemed vision, however, often was conspicuously without the industrial characteristics that had helped give birth to the modern city, a separation of the culture of cities from the material context in which it was created, that anticipated the post-industrial metropolis of today, in Mumford's termanology the "biotechnic city." Indeed, it is notable that even at Ellison's Golden Day the patients are all middle-class professionals.

At the time of the writing of *Culture of Cities* and *Invisible Man*, from the 1930s through the 1950s, New York, like a host of other metropolitan centers, was in the midst of profound transformation. Deindustrialization had undermined its primary economic function, and thousands were left to face joblessness or participate in the decentralization that was quickly discrediting the city as a viable place to live for the middle-class. Firmly in place by the 1930s, suburbanization was to leave an indelible mark on national culture, and by the 1940s the American city faced the the threat of possible obsolescence, a crisis that would eventually lead politicians and businessmen to engage in programs of mass-reconstruction.

By this time as well, a rapidly shifting racial demographic had begun to visibly change the face of the American city, hundreds of thousands of African-

Americas were emigrating from the South to the industrial North, and the city, particularly, New York was a place of very real conflict. Poverty was widespread, poor standards of housing were the norm, violence and crime were on the rise, and racial tension among the cities' working-class was high. Some of that tension would erupt in the Harlem Riots of 1935 and '43. Ellison ends his novel with a reimagination of the 1943 riot that set Harlem ablaze and sent out smoke signal of America's broader struggles with race and urban "problems."[3] On these outbursts, as on other issues concerning race, Mumford was almost completely silent.

….

Over the following chapters I intend to demonstrate how similar Ellison's and Mumford's visions of the city truly were, in both their abstract celebrations of its possibilities and their apprehension of its chaotic realities, as New York itself was undergoing great change. In the first chapter, I will investigate Ellison's novel in relation to the forces of mass urban reconstruction and renewal that were taking place around it. In the next chapter, I will trace more clearly what exactly Mumford's understanding of the city was, and where the complexities arise between his theory as represented in *Culture of Cities* and its real-life applications in his essay collection, *From The Ground Up.* Lastly, I will return to Ellison and uncover his own theory of the city, following closely his vision of Harlem and his own position in relation to its people. In conclusion, what should be made clear is that within their writings, these

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[3] Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 74- 83; Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2011), 56.

two prominent twentieth-century intellectuals shared a vision of a city of culture and self-fulfillment removed from the industrial setting that had birthed it.

Invisible Man, Sacrifice, and the Transformation of the City

> *The old city dies and the new city rises on its ruins— not gradually, but in a burst, suddenly— as the butterfly emerges from the cocoon of the caterpillar.*
> — Le Corbusier, on the architect's first visit to Manhattan[4]
>
> *'So we've been dispossessed, and what's more, he thinks he's God.'*
> — *Invisible Man* (274)

The tragedy at the end of *Invisible Man* is that somehow only the narrator is finally able to perceive the true nature of the concluding riot, and see that beyond its ostensibly rebellious intentions, the uprising has been planned as a political tool for powerful interests seeking to exploit Harlem's population for their own ends. What's worse, the invisible man's former organization, the Brotherhood, seems to have orchestrated the chaos— with his unwitting help. "I could see it now, see it clearly, and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free (553)." But yet, despite this realization, his former position within the Brotherhood renders his pleas futile with the riot's leader, Ras the Destroyer:

> 'Can't you see it? They want you guilty of your own murder, your own sacrifice!.... [T]hey used me to catch you and now they're using [you] to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. Isn't it clear…?'
> 'Hang the lying traitor,' Ras shouted.

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[4] As quoted in Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 19.

> 'Don't kill me for those who are downtown laughing at the trick they played—'
> 'Hang him!' (558)

In the Brotherhood's crushing final betrayal, Ellison's charging of the organization with destructive single-mindedness, blindness, and, ultimately, murder in the name of unrevealed political goals seems to go far beyond its immediate target of the Communist Party, which it is usually taken to represent. Although critics and scholars have always understood that Ellison's portrait of the Brotherhood was based closely on his experience with the CP, Ellison himself denied that the organization was merely a stand-in for the Party, and, in fact, *Invisible Man* goes to great lengths to suggest that the dangers the Brotherhood represents are symptomatic of a larger set of threatening attitudes that run through the powerful institutions represented in the novel—the College, Liberty Paints, Wall Street, the Harlem Men's House, etc. [5]

In Ellison's rendition, the Brotherhood comes to stand not only for the dangers associated with the CP (i.e. Marxist ideology or Leninist vanguardism), but also, more generally, the problems inherent to large-scale bureaucratic organizations and the highly rationalized perspectives these organizations tend to encourage.[6] It is therefore not surprising that, in the context of the urban history that shapes the novel's narrative, the Brotherhood resembles the reformers and redevelopers who had appointed themselves leaders of the task of rebuilding New York City.[7] Indeed, if the Brotherhood demonstrates the perils of political arrogance and bureaucratic

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[5] Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 179.
[6] Steven Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 76-81.
[7] Heise has argued that *Invisible Man*'s narrative is shaped by the poverty of Harlem and the neighborhood's housing crisis. Heise, *Urban Underworlds,* 129-130; 135-149.

modernization, Ellison would have encountered both the allure and the threat of such problems not only in the Communist Party but in the local movements of the "redevelopment front" that had undertaken a massive renewal program in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, in both direct and indirect ways, Ellison suggests an affinity between the Brotherhood and the political alliances that championed the slum clearance and urban renewal policies that, at the time of his writing, were remaking Harlem itself.

A central mystery of *Invisible Man* has always been *why* Ellison effectively blames the Harlem Riot of 1943 on the Brotherhood and possibly, through the Brotherhood, on the Communist Party.[8] The Brotherhood speaks of sacrifice, but they never speak to what ends it might be going towards. Jack's rant on its intrinsic value as a principle (And do you know what discipline is Brother Personal Responsibility? It's sacrifice, *sacrifice*, SACRIFICE!") (475), is undermined by his newly revealed glass eye and his previously hidden blindness that has prevented him from even "seeing" the invisible man. In the narrator's final discussion with the Brotherhood, Hambro, the master-theoretician of the organization, also speaks enigmatically of sacrifice:

> 'Look, Brother Hambro,' I said, what's to be done about my district?'…
> 'There's nothing to be done about it that wouldn't upset the larger plan. It's unfortunate, Brother, but your members will have to be sacrificed." . . .
> 'Sacrifice?' my voice said. 'You say that very easily.'

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[8] It is worth noting that in the riot's immediate aftermath, a radical leftist group called the Young Liberators were widely rumored to have been responsbile for the rapid circulation of the news that a young black veteran had been shot down by a white police officer in Harlem. The true impact of group was found to be overblown shortly afterwards. For a more detailed description see Dominic Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1977), 172.

> 'Just the same, though, all who leave must be considered expendable. The new directives must be followed…. It's simple, Brother,' Hambro was saying. 'We are making temporary alliances with other political groups and the interests of one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole.'
>
> 'But shouldn't sacrifice be made willingly by those who know what they are doing? My people don't understand why they're being sacrificed. They don't even *know* they're being sacrificed— at least not by us…'
>
> 'The disciplined members will understand.' (501-502)

In its immediate context, this exchange seems a fairly transparent jab at the inner-workings of the Communist Party, to which the author belonged in 1930s and forties. Ellison, like many other African-Americans, grew fed-up with the Party after its commitment to Civil Rights took a backseat to Soviet-American relations in the 1940s and, like many literary intellectuals on the left, he came to view the Party's emphasis on orthodoxy and top-down managerial control as oppressive.[9] Ellison's departure from the Party was a difficult personal transition and a formative step away from his initial launching pad as a professional writer. This moment of near-hysterical emphasis on the intrinsic value of sacrifice fits well within a widely shared discourse, particularly prominent in New York literary circles that viewed the Communist Party as machine for totalitarian mind control.[10]

But Ellison also broadens this critique to make it a complaint against bureaucratic organization more generally, and, especially in the riot scene that concludes the action of the novel, he links that complaint to a story about the transformation of urban geography. Surely, Ellison meant to indict the failures of

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[9] Thomas Schaub, *The Cold War and American Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 104-105. For alternative view of the same history see Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-3.

[10] Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc: 2000), 397.

political leadership and the evil of political manipulation.[11] But by having those evils culminate in the destruction of a large swath of tenement neighborhoods, Ellison implicitly joins his complaint against the Brotherhood to a related concern about the reconstruction of New York. It may be illuminating therefore to look back at the novel in the context of the American urban moment and the history of the central-city in which it was written. In fact, seen through the lens of twentieth-century urban history, the Brotherhood's language of sacrifice sounds a familiar note amongst the rhetoric that was employed by city planners, local and federal officials, and other advocates of urban renewal from the late 1930s through the late 1960s in New York City.

By the late 1940s when Ralph Ellison was writing *Invisible Man*, American cities were in the midst of a profound transformation. Once the center of economic and cultural life, the American city after the War began a steep decline that saw millions of residents flee for the promises of its less-developed, outlying districts. By the late 1940s, the decline was apparent: people were abandoning the city in vast numbers for the surrounding suburbs, leaving its remaining residents adrift and the nation's municipal governments wondering how best to cope with a changing identity. [12]

With the emergence of the automobile as a fixture of national culture in the late 1920s, the outlying districts around the nation's cities, previously limited to its wealthiest, suddenly became available to a vast array of citizens outside the leisure

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[11] Foley, *Wrestling with the Left,* 275-279.
[12] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

classes.[13] The promise of open space and a more simple, almost agrarian— and in this sense, by some accounts also "American"— lifestyle fast became possible for millions of city residents. To many, suburbs presented a new frontier for development, what Kenneth Jackson has called the "crabgrass frontier," one of closely cropped lawns, and single family, multi-bedroom homes.[14] For equally as many, this new space presented was perhaps less frontier a more of a crucial escape from the early- to mid-twentieth century metropolis, an environment where crime, disease, and unpleasant congestion were becoming the norm.

After the war, the federal government ended wartime rations on gasoline, rubber and other materials crucial to automobile manufacturing, and the return of prosperity saw blockages released in real estate investment, marriage, and general domestic consumption.[15] The result was a rapid rise of a new way of life immediately after the War, shaped by new development, new forms of national consumption, and the predominance of the automobile— all this, when only 30 years earlier the car was still mostly thought of as a "pleasure vehicle," and those same areas would have been considered prohibitively remote for people who still drew their livelihood from the city.[16]

Naturally, suburbanization's success was bound in many ways to the serious struggles of the American metropolis. The "vicious circle" of suburban development and urban disinvestment, of cities bubbling along the edges and slowly dying in the

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[13] Jon C. Teaford, "Suburbia and Post-Suburbia: A Brief History", (*International Perspectives on Suburbanization*. Nicholas Phelps and Fulong Wu, eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 15-17.
[14] Kenneth Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 190-245.
[15] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban*, 41.
[16] Teaford, *The Twentieth Century American City,* 98.

center had first become evident in the 1930s. In the years after the war, it would blossom first into the widely acknowledged problem of downtown "blight" and ultimately into the "urban crisis" of the sixties and seventies.[17] The historian Robert Beauregard refers to this pattern as "parasitic urbanization," a dynamic in which suburban satellite towns across the country began to derive their livelihood from urban centers at the expense of the centers themselves. The results are visible in the statistics: in 1900, less than six percent of the nation's population resided adjacent to central cities, and only a quarter of the Americans lived in metropolitan areas. By the 1970s, after 50 years of decentralization, almost one of every two residents in the nation lived in these outlying towns, and three quarters of the American population resided in metropolitan areas.[18]

In 1936, just as the first real signs of this "parasitic urbanism" were beginning to emerge, Ralph Ellison arrived to a New York City that had been struck by a severe economic depression coupled with a mass exodus of middle-income families and a rapidly shrinking tax base. New York narrowly escaped bankruptcy, but the serious problems with which it struggled were more starkly evident in cities like Detroit, which saw vacancy rates in its the central-city soar to around forty percent and hover near there for years.[19] In response, developers in cities around the country abandoned projects, demolished buildings, and erected in their place temporary parking lots, which they hoped would cover tax burdens while serving an emerging suburban clientele. These "taxpayers", as the lots were called, were indicative of a changing

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[17] Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: It's Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 234.
[18] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban,* 34.
[19] Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City*, 78.

city, an environment in the process of adapting to the daytime, suburban commuter, rather than the urban resident.[20]

Ellison himself was part of a rapidly shifting racial demographic that accompanied the city's economic decline, and played a large role in the shifting cultural perception of the urban environment. In the two decades leading up to WWII, hundred of thousands African-Americans fled poverty and institutionalized racism in the South for the Northern cities and their reputation of prosperity and tolerance. Along with Ellison, 145,000 other Southern blacks settled in New York between 1930 and 1940, while thousands more Puerto Ricans sought similar refuge in the city from the endemic poverty of their homelands.[21] Ellison began his intellectual career in the 1930s as New York and other northern urban centers suffered through the worst of the Depression, but he became a novelist during the 1940s when new, war-generated prosperity brought a fresh wave of black migrants from the south, as the number of black migrants escalated from 900,000 in the 1920s to nearly 1.5 million in the post-war decades. By 1960, two-thirds of all black Americans living outside the South could be found inside the city limits of the nation's twelve largest cities.[22]

Many of these cities saw their pre-existent segregated districts expand considerably into new territory within the city. In New York, the city's black population of 458,000 could hardly be expected to fit within Harlem, the city's well-established, formally segregated black district. By the early 1940s, once solidly Italian or Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island—places like

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[20] Fogelson, *Downtown*, 218-219.
[21] Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal Cold War New York*, (New York CIty: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010) 164.
[22] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban,* 45.

Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville— were becoming destinations for African-Americans. By 1940, 107,000 African-Americans lived in Brooklyn and another 52,000 resided in the other outer-boroughs. These numbers would increase dramatically during the next decades as a million more blacks and Hispanics arrived in the city by 1960.[23] Harlem, the 397 blocks from northern Manhattan between 110th and 155th streets, remained what Claude McKay once called "the Negro capital of the world," but the outlying boroughs were slowly becoming settled by those who no longer wished to face the extreme overcrowding that Harlem offered.[24]

Prompted by this influx of black migrants and the promise of affordable and spacious housing outside the city, huge numbers of white ethnic residents began to abandon their old neighborhoods in the boroughs for the promise of lower middle-class suburbia outside the city in the decade after World War II. African-Americans, however, were systematically shut out of the race to the suburbs by both formal and informal policies.[25] Some communities, like the new mass development of Levittown, New York, explicitly stated in their housing contracts that only "Caucasians" were permitted to take up residency.[26] Most suburban communities, however, relied on real estate agents and brokers to routinely show African-Americans the door or jack up the prices to prohibitive levels. [27]

Thus, during the 1930s and forties, the city's rapidly expanding African-American and Puerto Rican populations, along with New York's other low-income, impoverished residents, were left to a decaying housing stock that was bursting at the

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[23] Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 32.
[24] Ibid,14.
[25] Teaford, *The Twentieth Century American City*, 103.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban,* 34.

seams from overcrowding.[28] Ellison, among other writers representing the African-American minority, repeatedly wrote in essays like "The Way It Is" (1942) or "Harlem is Nowhere (1948)" on the harsh conditions that shaped New York City's black and Hispanic communities at the time. In his essay "Harlem is Nowhere," which described the city's black residents as victims of overwhelming psychic stress and argued for the need for public psychological counseling to counter the trauma, for example, Ellison paints Harlem as a nightmarish labyrinth of poverty and vice in which an uprooted and abandoned people struggles to find its way. The neighborhood was, Ellison wrote, "a ruin" of "crumbling buildings with littered areaways, ill smelling halls and vermin-invaded rooms." In these details, he argued, one could read "the cultural history of Negroes in the North":

> Their story reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology, a people which aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain; but which, in migrating made some fatal error of judgment and fell into a chasm of mazelike passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end over against a wall.[29]

Notably, during these years, Ellison himself sought to move out of Harlem and in later recollections recalled the difficulty of working as a novelist in a loud and crowded community that had little understanding or appreciation for his work.[30] Though his novel was largely set in Harlem and preoccupied with the lives of Harlem's residents, *Invisible Man* was written in substantial part in other locations—in a midtown office building and in Vermont. Like the novel's protagonist, whose path takes him in and out of Harlem, and who ultimately narrates the novel from the

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[28] Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 177-195.
[29] Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," in *Shadow and Act*, 298.
[30]See Introduction to *Invisible Man*, ix.

sealed off basement of an abandoned building on the border of the neighborhood, Ellison spoke from the margins of a rapidly changing community by which he was often frustrated and confused.

Ellison's bleak view of Harlem in the 1940s was part of a larger discourse of the era that was responding to the demographic transformation of the city. Although vilifying the urban poor was already a long-standing in American letters, during the 1930s and 1940s, this rhetoric took an even sharper turn.[31] The vast in-migration of black and Puerto Rican residents coincided with the emergence of new media forms—notably, the tabloid newspaper— that catered to a mass popular audience of middle and working class readers.[32] During the 1930s and forties, the newspaper-reading public was treated daily to stories of "Negro crime waves" and "Negro muggings".[33] Ellison himself seems to have been well aware of this trend. Indeed, he begins *Invisible Man* by situating the novel in relation to the media discourse surrounding the racial transformation of the city. The narrator famously begins his tale by recalling his nearly lethal encounter on the sidewalk with a tall, blue-eyed blond man who fails to see him. "The next day," the invisible man tells us, "I saw his picture in the *Daily News*, beneath a caption stating that he had been 'mugged.' Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!" (5).

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[31] See Josiah Strong *Our Country* (1888) and Edward Bellamy (1885) as two of the most prominent works of the housing-reformist rage of the late nineteenth-century. See Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan,* 72.
[32] Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism* (New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1-6.
[33] Jackson, *The Emergence of Genius*, 271.

As Carlo Rotella notes, this brief newspaper article would have fit increasingly well within the sort of news that urban residents became accustomed to in 1940s and 50s across America's large industrial cities.[34] When the public reads this *Daily News* article, the entire tragic story of the invisible man's painful migration from the Deep South to his eventual settlement underground, below the edge of Harlem— essentially the entire novel, and in many ways, the story of thousands of other African-Americans in the 1930s and 40s who migrated to the North— is condensed into one sensational image.[35] Fittingly, Ellison specifies that the paper in question is the *Daily News*, then the most conservative newspaper in New York City. Choosing the *Daily News* over other popular rags like the *Post* (which was left-leaning at the time) or *PM*, the short-lived tabloid that spoke for New Deal liberalism in New York during the 1940s, Ellison implicitly pointed to the decline of the populist, working-class culture that had flourished in New York during the thirties and early forties and that, in the years after the war, declined rapidly alongside the suburban migration of the city's white ethnic population.

Ultimately, two million white residents left New York between 1940 and 1960.[36] But as early as the end of World War II, business and political elites in New York and other industrial cities had become alarmed about the threat of decentralization and the looming decline of the cities' economic base, and they sought desperately for solutions.

During the 1930s, and especially during the War years, business leaders in New York and other urban center to form associations, like New York's Downtown

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[34] Rotella, 237
[35] Ibid.
[37] Fogelson, *Downtown,* 234-236.

Alliance, to boost the appeal of the city. Such groups promoted a vision of urban downtowns as shopping, business, entertainment destinations for suburban residents. The idea that business interests, planners, and local authorities clung to was that despite the rapid rise of suburbia, the city could remain an essential part of modern life. The thinking was that people *wanted* to come into the city to work, shop, do business, and amuse themselves, but they simply weren't able to at their convenience. Traffic, and the time it took for one to commute from the outlying districts to the central suburbs, soon became the number one target among business interest groups and local governments worried about their city's continuing profitability.[37] Pressure mounted on local governments to construct expressways that would ease the passage of suburban residents into and out of the city. New York, along with Chicago and Detroit, led the way in the development of the new highway systems that would transform the geography of the U.S. in the decades after World War II.

At the helm of highway construction for New York, was the legendary "Master-Builder", Robert Moses, who held over twelve different positions within New York State and City governments during his forty-year career. He ultimately built 627 miles of highway during his forty-year career, and was the reason that by 1964, New York had a more extensive highway system than Los Angeles, a city that has long-been associated with driving.[38] Beginning his highway construction with the early successes of the West Side Elevated Highway, Moses went on to a play a principal role in the construction of the Long Island Expressway, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Cross-Bronx Expressway and over fourteen other highways,

[38] Robert Goldberger, "Robert Moses, Master Builder, is Dead at 92," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1981

displacing thousands of people and countless communities in the process. As the Commissioner of the Triborough Bridge Authority, his was also responsible for the construction of seven different bridges, the Tri-Borough and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge among them. His bulldozer-first policy was to set the standard for highway construction and urban renewal across the country, and his incredible power reached as far as Washington, as his projects would routine gain federal funding and support.[39]

In the 1930s, urban business and political elites soon began to understand that in order to truly combat the emerging irrelevance of downtown, they would have to do more than just lure in the day-time shopper and white collar worker with highways, and set out to make the city a place where middle-class people would want to live again. As this effort gained momentum, developers, business elites, and political leaders looked with alarm at the "dirty collar" that surrounded the majority of the America cities' downtown area. They saw a prevalence of slums, immigrants, and minority groups in their downtown neighborhoods that would pose significant obstruction to the rebirth of downtown as a middle-class haven. The answer seemed simple: "slum clearance" and subsequent redevelopment.

By the early 1940s, most large industrial cities had some experience with slum clearance. In the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New York City housing reformers had indicted the poor neighborhoods of the city as breeding grounds of crime, vice, and disease. They pressed for the destruction of "unhealthy" buildings and the development of new housing laws that guaranteed minimal living standards. But before 1940, little was done to tear down these industrial

[39] Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban,* 18.

neighborhoods. As historian Max Page notes, "The twin pillars of housing reform in the 19th century were the inviolability of private property and limited government action." Slum clearance challenged both of these: it required that the government to expend great amounts of money to remove the unacceptable products of a private real estate market. [40]

The 1930s and forties saw the rise of a coalition of property developers, financial interests, political leaders, and housing reformers—named by historian Joel Schwartz, "the redevelopment front"—who were committed to providing solutions to the long-standing problem of making the city more appealing to the white middle-class. The first step came with the passage of the Housing Act of 1937, which allotted small amounts of federal funding to aid local housing agencies in the destruction and reconstruction of low-income housing, and allowed. With the act's passage, business and political elites caught a glimpse of the potential for an alliance in which government spending and private building would allow large swaths of tenement neighborhoods to be razed and replaced by new housing developments, along with educational, medical, and cultural centers. Thus emerged the epochal Federal Housing Act of 1949—which would provide massive federal funding for the condemnation of privately owned real estate, as well as for the development of publicly subsidized, but privately owned middle-income housing, and for the construction of low-income public housing. As with the contemporaneous construction of highways, bridges, and tunnels, New York City— under the leadership of Robert Moses, who held the "redevelopment front" together and

[40] Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan,* 72.

orchestrated its major achievements—led the way in what would soon become a national trend of mass, urban reconstruction.[41]

At the core of this reconstruction lay a vision of a new, middle-class city from which the problems of poverty and of industrial concentration had been removed. Led by the redevelopment front of local business interests and municipal governments, cities across the country began in the postwar years to vigorously pursue programs of urban redevelopment, demolishing "blighted" areas and replacing them with new buildings that they saw as more appropriate for the modern era, characterized by sleek geometric designs that would effectively sweep iconographic poverty under the rug.[42] In New York, the removal of "blight" became the justification for the neighborhood demolition that made way for the numerous new projects intended to remake the geography of the city, including Stuyvesant Town, the United Nations Headquarters building, and, ultimately, private and public housing developments throughout the city. At the center of all these developments was the legendary Moses, who more than any other single person was responsible for leading the reconstruction of New York in the postwar decades. With what his biographer Robert Caro calls a fierce combination of "imagination… iron will… and arrogance", Moses displaced at least a quarter of a million people—predominantly working class or poor residents—for highway construction efforts and another half million for housing projects. As Marshall Berman notes, Moses became the definitive voice on the direction of postwar New York and the public face of its program for redevelopment. He was able, Berman writes, to "convince a mass public that he was the vehicle of impersonal

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[41] Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City*, 118.
[42] Fogelson, *Downtown,* 342.

world-historical forces, the moving spirit of modernity. For forty years, he was able to pre-empt the vision of the modern. To oppose his bridges, tunnels, expressways, housing developments, power dams, stadia, cultural centers, was— or so it seemed— to oppose history, progress, modernity itself." [43]

During the years when Ellison worked on *Invisible Man*, Moses was at the height of his power and at the helm of the city's of the massive program of redevelopment. During the six years that Ellison wrote from 1945 to 1951, highways, bridges, tunnels, and mass public and private housing developments went up around the city and acres of tenement district came down. These projects were sources of great local pride and sometimes of important public controversy. The most prominent among them was the new United Nations Headquarters Complex (an 18 acre site between 42nd and 48th Streets on the East River), which was built on the rubble of a waterfront district of slaughterhouses, light industry, and tenement housing (the land had been bought-up and then re-sold to the U.N. by David Rockefeller for a dollar in a deal worked out through the mediation of Moses). E.B. White, celebrating the city in his renowned essay *Here is New York* (1949) describes the new UN complex as typical of the new, postwar city and of the promise of its freedom from poverty and violence:

> Along the East River, from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay…. men are carving out the permanent headquarters of the United Nations— the greatest housing project of them all. In its stride, New York takes on more one more interior city, to shelter, this time, all governments, and to clear the slum called war.[44]

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[43] Marshall Berman, *All that Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1982), 294; Joanne Reitano, *The Restless City* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 161-162

[44] White, *Here Is New York* (New York: *The Little Book Room,* 1949), 54-55.

The housing projects to which White implicitly compares the UN complex in this passage were Stuyvesant Town on the lower east side of Manhattan, and Parkchester in the Bronx—both privately owned, middle-class developments that had been enabled by the new legislation and the new political alliances forged by the redevelopment front. Both projects to which, as with the U.N., Robert Moses's leadership was crucial. Stuyvesant Town, owned and operated by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, in particular depended on New York City's support for a massage program of slum clearance. To make way for the project, the city condemned and razed an entire neighborhood, the former Gas House District, home to thousands of working-class residents in the early 1940s. [45]

There is no need to romanticize tenement life. Though the city's tenement districts were often the centers of rich and vibrant, working-class communities, they were also, by all accounts, dirty and cramped, substandard dwellings. In the midst of the housing shortage that paralyzed New York City in the later forties, they were known to be particularly miserable. Residents would be extraordinarily lucky to have a bathroom on every floor. Many buildings had only a single water closet, and there were entire tenement blocks with no bathtub to speak of.[46] The history of the tenement building in the United States is littered with stories of large numbers of people cramped into single rooms, seven person families in two room apartments, stories of such profound congestion that the imagination fails to grasp it.[47]

The new development projects exemplified by Stuyvesant Town aimed to replace these crowded, poor, and unhealthy conditions with clean, orderly, middle-

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[45] Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*, 100.
[46]Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan,* 99.
[47] Ibid.

class living. Indeed, Stuyvesant Town was consciously designed as part of an effort to keep the white middle-class in the city. When in was opened to the public in1943, *The New York Times* called Stuyvesant Town the "Suburb in the City". Metropolitan Life called the development: "a step in the direction of the new Manhattan. . . one in which wholesomeness of residential environment will combine with existing convenience to anchor families, especially those with children, to this borough."[48] He meant white families in particular. Like its sister development Parkchester, Stuyvesant Town initially excluded black tenants—a policy that led to great public controversy in New York and to wide feelings of betrayal among the black citizens of the city.[49]

In fact, the segregation of Stuyvesant Town was representative of a larger dynamic central to the mid-century reconstruction of New York City. In acting to rebuild the city in a way that would be appealing to the vanishing white middle-class, the redevelopment front remade the city in a way that would entrench the city's racial segregation even further. Alongside the construction of privately owned, middle-class housing developments, New York in the 1940s and 1950s saw the creation of massive, low-income, public housing projects, typically far removed from the city center—in locations like East Harlem, Brownsville, and Bedford-Stuyvesant—where black residents, displaced from destroyed tenements, were compelled to relocate. Among the early, important examples of this trend were the East Harlem Houses. Between 1941 and 1964, the New York City Housing Authority—with Moses orchestrating from the sidelines—cleared hundreds of acres of tenements for 16

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[48] Zipp, *Manhattan Projects,* 82-82, 104.
[49] Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943,* 14-16.

housing projects in the East Harlem area. Although they often improved the immediate quality of housing for former "slum" residents, the projects' towers were entirely residential, and displaced thousands of businesses and community institutions. In order to make way for the Benjamin Franklin Houses, between 106th and 109th Streets, and Second and Third Avenues, for example, the city approved the clearance of a neighborhood containing 169 merchants and craftspeople engaged in over forty lines of work, including fourteen grocers, four candy stores, eleven clothing stores, eleven bakeries, ten dry cleaners, eight barber shops, four bars, a bike shop, seven restaurants, three liquor stores, toy stores, hardware stores, travel agencies, print shops, drugstores, butchers, cheese shops, a plumber, several contractors, a pet shop, and a psychic. The project also entailed the demolition of 28 factories and warehouses, storefront offices for social, political, and labor organizations, and 3 churches. A study done in the project's wake confirmed that the large majority of these businesses had deep roots in the community with the average tenure amounting to about 17 years.[50]

In Morningside Heights, at the opposite end of Harlem, similar, if less massive projects were undertaken with the tacit goal of creating a newly robust form of segregation that would contain Harlem's rapidly expanding population and preserve the cultural institutions of the Upper West Side—Columbia University and the Riverside Church, in particular—from the growing "blight" of the neighborhood. Over the course of the latter forties and early fifties, property owners, developers, and civic elites laid the groundwork for a program of slum clearance and private and public housing construction that would create an effective boundary between Harlem

[50] Zipp, *Manhattan Projects,* 259-260.

and the Upper West Side.[51] For writers like E. B. White, as well as for many other commentators at the time, projects like the UN Headquarters, Stuyvesant Town, and the East Harlem Houses seemed aspects of a welcome modernization for a city that had been dogged by poverty and congestion. In their massive scale and the new political and economic alliances on which they depended, these developments seemed to exemplify New York's new status as the world's capital. But equally important to their status as beacons of a new, modern metropolis was the "international" architectural vernacular they helped popularize and the new land-use patterns they spearheaded. All took the new form of "superblock" developments—high-rise towers on green parks that well exceeded in scope the usual limits of a New York City block. Perfectly geometric, dominated by straight lines and right angles, the superblock fit perfectly within what was becoming known to some critics as the "the mass way of life", which was characterized by buildings designed to fit the most people as possible while taking up the least amount of land, and an utter erasure of the buildings that had been there before.[52] The humanity of these designs, however, was to be redeemed by its maximizing "light and air."

Ellison was writing *Invisible Man*— much of time in Harlem apartment on 146th St. and St. Nicholas Avenue— while the East Harlem Housing projects were just beginning to go up, a context which provides a deeper sense of the features of *Invisible Man*'s setting and of what is at issue in the narrator's conflict with the Brotherhood.[53] For if the Brotherhood shares features with the Communist Party that it parodies, in its determination to pursue a program of modernization that requires

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[51] Schwartz, *The New York Approach,* 151-159.
[52] Zipp, *Manhattan Projects,* 323.
[53] For Ellison's 1940s Harlem address see Jackson, *The Emergence of Genius,* 333.

coercive management and the sacrifice of the city's poor and black populations, it also calls on much the same rhetoric and ideology that informed the actions of New York's redevelopment front in the 1940s. The Brotherhood is the epitome of a top-down institution whose commitment to a vision for the "new society" eclipses their concern for the people they lead and which hides behind the mask of this new society a racially charged indifference to African Americans This is the invisible man's striking realization during his final discussion with Jack. Chastizing the narrator for his direct appeal to the crowd, Jack lectures the invisible man on sacrifice, and the Brotherhood's authority to shape the contours of its members lives. The logic of implementation of power imposed by the NYCHA is the same employed by Jack in his final convsersation with the invisible man:

> "For all of us, the committee does the thinking. For *all* of us."
> "But what if I wish to furnish an idea?"
> "We furnish all ideas. We have some acute ones. Ideas are part our apparatus. Only the correct ideas for the correct occasion."
> "And suppose you misjudge the occasion?"
> "Should that happen, you keep quiet…. Let *us* handle the theory and business of strategy," he said. "We are experienced. We're graduates and while you are a smart beginner, you skipped several grades. But they were important grades, especially for gaining strategical knowledge. For such, it is necessary to see the overall picture. More is involved than meets the eye."
>
> Can't he see I'm trying to tell them what's real, I thought. Does my membership stop me from feeling Harlem?
>
> "All right," I said. Have it your way, Brother; only the political consciousness of Harlem is exactly a thing I know something about. That's one class they wouldn't let me skip. I'm describing a part of reality which I know. (470-471)

This portrait of Brother Jack, as an out-of-touch, half-blind, white leader, determining the future of a district that he simply does not seem to know or care much about, carries with it an incisive critique of the sort of modernism that dictated New York

City's urban renewal policy. Jack and the Brotherhood's form of modernism is one of universal theory and the top-down functionality of power—in political terms, the analogue of the urban theory exemplified by Le Corbusier, the architect who was most important to the creation of the UN, and whose architectural theories were evident throughout most of the mass projects that remade New York in the 1940s.[54]

It was Corbusier who was most important to the popularization of post-war superblock planning and to an urban vision that emphasized the separation of people from freeway based automobile traffic. Le Corbusier made famous the notion that modern residential architecture should be *machines d'habitation*— machines for living—in perfect harmony with the demands of everyday life in the modern era, in ways that traditional houses were no longer equipped to do. In theory this is certainly an elegant idea, and much of Corbusier's work is strikingly beautiful, but the aspect of his work that remained most prominent among urbanists from the 1940s through the 60s, was the notion that we are in living in an age utterly different from any other and our built environment should formally reflect this fact. That idea, which was widely adopted by American architects and urban planners at mid-century, is evident, even where not directly expressed, in the visions that inspired the highways, bridges, and tunnels erected by Robert Moses and by the slum clearance and superblock

[54] Zipp, *Manhattan Projects,* 14, 51; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Scott argues for an ideological connection between Leninst politics and Curbusian urban theory.

architecture that he and hisallied among the redevelopment front brought to the city in the 1940s and fifties.[55]

As James Scott explains, the "high modernism" celebrated in Corbusier's theories and urban design is equally evident in the kind of Leninist political vanguardism exemplified by Ellison's Brother Jack. Both, in Scott's view, engage in "seeing like a state"; that is, in response to the actual messiness and complexity of life, they seek to impose projects of radical simplification that will bring new efficiency, rationality, and control to a previously disorderd world. Scott's high modernism is characterized by a few major convictions, the strongest of which is a profound faith in scientific and technical progress to determine the administrative ordering of nature and society. "A supreme confidence in continued linear progress," Scott argues, is the basis by which high-modernist reformers seek to rid themselves of history and begin a new, rational society, scientifically designed for maximum harmony and premium quality of life.[56] For the high-modernists, "all human habits and practices that were inherited and hence not based on scientific reasoning— from the structure of the family and patterns of residence to market values and forms of production—would have to be reexamined and redesigned."[57] This meant that every "nook and cranny" of human life that had been inherited from past generations needed to be reevaluated, including but not limited to "personal hygiene, diet, child

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[55] Indeed, Siegfried Giedion, Le Corbusier's highly influential American champion, expressed admiration for the work Robert Moses in his well-known treatise *Time, Space, and Archiecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), which praised Moses' expressways, among other things, because they "humanized the highway by carefully following and utilizing the terrain, rising and falling with the contours of the earth, merging completely into the landscape."
[56] Scott, *Seeing Like a State,* 90.
[57] Ibid, 91.

rearing, housing, posture, recreation, family structure, and most infamously, the genetic inheritance of the population." [58]

By Scott's account, high-modernists usually were progressives who had come to power with a comprehensive critique of existing society and a popular mandate to transform it. Both their ideology and methodology stemmed from modern technological and scientific innovation—from new techniques in determining statistics about their populations to advancements in construction methods, transportation, and surveillance. Their authority stemmed not from popular legitimacy, which they typically distrusted, but from their commitment to an ideology of progress—from a profound conviction that they could harness the new technologies of the twentieth-century to create a rational society in place of the chaos that seemed to characterize daily life.

In an extended essay on Le Corbusier, Scott is quick to point out the architect's hostility towards any manifestation of the past, and his little patience for the physical environment that centuries of urban living had created. Whereas the nineeteenth-century city presented chaos in built form, Corbusier's rational order and geometric purity was designed to liberate the mind and engender the harmonious society that was made possible by advanced modes of industrial production. "We must refuse to afford even the slightest concession to what is, to the mess we are in now," Corbusier wrote in *Cities of Tomorrow*. "There is no solution to be found there." Robert Moses used just the same justification for his own slum clearance programs, as he once famously responded to a reporter: "When you operate in an

[58] Ibid, 93.

overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat-axe."[59] Scott maintains that that Corbusier's view of the city is structurally parallel to the Leninist vision of revolutionary socialism as a vanguard program for the managerial reconstruction of society. The similarity is evident in Le Corbusier's vision of the "Radiant City." His vision sounds both remarkably similar to the working methods of Robert Moses and to the rhetoric of Ellison's Brother Jack.

> The despot is not a man. It is the plan. The correct, realistic, exact plan, the one that will provide your solution once the problem has been posited clearly, in its entirety, in its indispensable harmony. This plan has been drawn up well away from the frenzy in the mayor's office or the town hall, from the cries of the electorate or the limits of society's victims. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds. *It has taken account of nothing but human truths*. (emphasis added)[60]

He acknowledged the comon complaint that in reality streets intersect at all sorts of angles and that the variations are infinite, "But" as he once replied, "that's precisely the point. *I eliminate all those things. That's my starting point…. I insist on right-angled intersections."*[61] In his highly influential vision of city rebuilding, Corbusier wanted no less than to restructure society based on the order expressed in clean geometric form.

In an early conversation with the invisible, after the two witness an old couple in Harlem being evicted from their tenement home, Brother Jack displays much the same ruthlessness towards the past in the name of a new, master plan.

> 'You made an effective speech. But you mustn't waste your emotions on individuals, they don't count.'
>
> '*Who* doesn't count?' I said
>
> 'Those old ones,' he said grimly. 'It's sad, yes. But they're already dead, defunct. History has passed them by. Unfortunate, but

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[59] As quoted in Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air,* 290.
[60] As quoted in Scott, *Seeing Like a State, 112*
[61] Ibid*,* 109.

> there's nothing to do about them. They're like dead limbs that must be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway…. So they'll be cast aside. They're dead, you see, because they're incapable of rising to the necessity of the historical situation.' (290)

Strikingly, Ellison has Jack deliver this ultra-modernist speech in response to the eviction of the elderly couple from the kinds of tenement apartments that were being razed to make way for Corbusian-style housing projects even as Ellison wrote. Like Corbusier's and Moses' intolerance for the old city, the Brotherhood's plan for the "new society" has no room for its old members. Their concern lies solely in the "future." As Jack's ruthless tree analogy openly displays, their vision for this future doesn't come from compassion or even a sense of duty to humankind; it comes from a desire to impose their superior vision upon the world. The purity of the Brotherhood's vision absolves them from agency in the casting these people aside, as Jack invokes a characteristically high-modernist "force of history" as the justification for sacrifice.

Ellison's take on the dangers of this "high modernism" is rather clearly discernible in the invisible man's later conversation with Jack. Seeking to justify the mass Harlem rally that he organized to mourn the death of Tod Clifton', the invisible man pleads with Jack to recognize the popular needs of Harlem's citizens:

> 'But didn't anyone see what happened today?' I said. "What was that, a dream? What was ineffective about that crowd?'
> 'Crowds are only our raw materials, *one* of the raw materials to be shaped to our program.' (471)

Ellison's is deeply suspicious of the anti-democratic ideology embodied by the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's high-modernist program isn't interested in the reality of Harlem, and as such, denies what Marshall Berman calls "the modernism of

the street"— the notion that a new type of democratic modernism can emerge from the people themselves, one that will better reflect the demands of the modern world than does the rigid plans forged by a small number of arrogant planners determined to impose a grid of strictly logical form onto a world of chaos. Thus, the invisible man counters Brother Jack's high theory with the claim that he has a kind of low knowledge. Although the Invisible Man may have "skipped a few grades" of pure theory, his authority is more than made up for by the fact that he *knows* Harlem. "Have it your way, Brother," he says to Jack. "Only the political consciousness of Harlem is exactly a thing I know something about. That's one class they wouldn't let me skip. *I'm describing a part of reality which I know* [emphasis added]."

And, yet to fully appreciate Ellison's novel, we need to understand that Ellison's narrator is, at least temporarily, strongly drawn to the vision that Jack represents and, though less emphatically, to the kinds of urban redevelopment championed by Corbusier, as by Robert Moses and the redevelopment front. If he becomes an antagonist to the high modernist ideology they share, he does so only slowly and with some reluctance. Importantly, then, both in *Invisible Man* and essays like "Harlem is Nowhere," Ellison comments on the conditions of Harlem tenement life in ways that echo the language of Le Corbusier. Early in his career with the organization, for example, the invisible man describes viewing a Harlem street scene from his window at the Brotherhood's district office, where "just past the jutting wall of a building, and on beyond the monotonous pattern of its brick and mortar," he see a "row of trees, rising tall and graceful in the rain."

> One tree grew close by and I could see the rain streaking its bark and its sticky buds. Trees were rowed the length of the long block beyond

> me, rising tall in dripping wetness above a series of cluttered backyeards. And it occurred to me that cleared of its ramschackle fences and planted with flowers and grass, it might form a pleasant park. And just then a paper bag sailed from a window into the trees and pancaking to earth with a soggy, exhausted plop! I started with disgust, then thought, the sun will shine in those backyards some day. (378)

Like a number of black intellectuals, Ellison may have been drawn to the immediate promises of slum clearence— light, space, air greenery— that were conspicuously absent in Harlem tenement life.[62] There is a certain irony to the way this garbarge "plops!" onto his daydream—as if to remind the narrator that Corbusian fantasies must contend with the messiness of urban reality— but what is perhaps most important is the line that follows this pastoral vision: "A community clean-up campaign might be worthwhile, at that" (378). Ellison's response essentially mocks the language of slum clearence.[63] The site doesn't prompt a vision of reconstructed garden city, but rather a small community get together on a couple of free afternoons.

Another moment in the novel seems to speak directly to the issue of state power and urban blight. Just before the invisible man's first official appearance with the Brotherhood, when he is scheduled to orate to a mass audience, he begins to feel a sudden discomfort and undergoes something of an existential crisis. With his new name, his new blue slacks, and his new objectives from the Brotherhood, the narrator feels forced to shed his old self and struggles to embrace his new identity. Troubled, he goes outside for air:

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[62] Ann Petry, for example, a contemporary Harlemite would have almost certainly sprung for the solutions offered by urban renewal. Her novel *The Street* (1946) goes to great lengths to indict the Harlem's housing stock and indutrial-era neighborhoods for the dily evils she sees in the neighborhood.

[63] Heise, *Urban Underworlds*, 153.

> Without my overcoat it was cold. I crossed the alley to the dark side, stopping near a fence that smelled of carbolic acid, which, as I looked back across the alley, caused me to remember a great abandoned hole that had been the site of a sports arena before my birth . . . . .past the Hooverville, a switch engine idled upon the shining rails, and as a plume of white steam curled slowly from its funnel I saw a man come out of the shanty and start up the path which led to the walk above. Stooped and dark and sprouting rags from his shoes, hat and sleeves, he shuffled slowly toward me, bringing a threatening cloud of carbolic acid. It was a syphilitic who lived alone in the shanty between the hole and the railroad yard, coming up to the street only to beg money for food and disinfectant with which to soak his rags. Then in my mind I saw him stretching out a hand from which the fingers had been eaten away and I ran— back to the dark, and the cold and the present. (337)

In the narrator's fantasy, this leper emerges as a terrifying example of the sickness and pathology that seems to be the result of a ruthless, discriminatory environment. Rising from the ashes of an industrial age—of abandoned buildings, the switch engine, and a railroad yard—this man has been robbed of his physical and psychological humanity by his surroundings. He is the very epitome of the "urban blight" that both the Brotherhood and mid-century urban redevelopers targeted as the grounds for a campaign to reconstruct society. Yet, Ellison is communicating something else to the reader as well here, through the larger sequence of this hallucination. That the narrator has this fantasy at the moment that he is about to speak before the assembled crowd of the Brotherhood's audience suggests that he sees himself as, in effect, the Brotherhood's leper—their emissary from a world of the neglected and forgotten that they would seek to control and repress, just as Trueblood is earlier for Bledsoe and the College. (Ellison underscores the connection with a series of formal parallels. As the leper emerges from a dark hole to confront the narrator, the narrator will subsequently emerge from darkness to speak to the mass rally on behalf of the Brotherhood—as, ultimately, he speaks to the novel's readers

from the underground of his basement). The fact that the invisible man revisits this troubling memory at this particular moment could suggest that this is what the Brotherhood is asking the invisible man to do: to bring to the surface these disturbing figures of poverty and loss as the justification for sweeping social change. He brings the memory of the leper to the forefront of his mind, and then puts the memory aside, much as earlier he brings the suffering and humiliation of the evicted elderly couple to attention— only to forget them on the instructions of Brother Jack.

Ellison emphasizes the stakes of this role as the passage continues in a scene that joins the vision of urban blight to the suggestion of violent state repression:

> I shivered looking toward the street, where up the alley through the tunneling dark, three mounted policemen loomed beneath the circular, snow sparkling beam of the street lamp, grasping their horses by the bridles, the heads of both men and animals bent close, as though plotting; the leather of saddles and leggings shining. Three white men and three black horses. Then a car passed and they showed in full relief, their shadows flying like dreams across the sparkle of snow and darkness. And, as I turned to leave, one of the horses violently tossed its head and I saw the gauntleted fist yanked down. Then there was a wild neigh and the horse plunged off in the dark, the crisp, frantic clanking of metal and the stomping of hooves followed me to the door. Perhaps this was something for Brother Jack to know. (337)

This striking description of the policeman in sequence with the leper, seem to suggest that the policemen are the violent, merciless force behind his misery and plight. The fact that these white policeman, with their leather saddles and metallic, gauntleted fists gleaming, are riding on hostile yet clearly subservient black horses carries with it, Ellison's deepest critique of what the invisible man's role with the Brotherhood. This is the power structure of the narrator's new organization: white men riding black subordinates to exploit the victims of an unjust society. The force of these mounted policemen literally runs the invisible man away from the leper, back into the building

where he is to give his first Brotherhood speech. The link between the policemen— the state— and the Brotherhood is vital here. By speaking for the Brotherhood, the invisible man is essentially aligning himself with the authority.

Ellison's most poignant indictment of the Brotherhood, however, doesn't come until the penultimate segment of *Invisible Man*, in its climactic riot scene— Ellison's fictionalization of the riot that destroyed much of the neighborhood in the summer of 1943. In Ellison's rendition, this event is not the unplanned eruption of frustration at racial injustice. The riot, we soon learn, was part of the Brotherhood's plan; was what Brother Hambro meant by "sacrifice."

"Could this be the answer" he asks in the midst of the riot, "to why we'd surrendered our influence to Ras?" But in his manic state, the narrator isn't quite able to finish the thought. The surrounding devastation is clearly the answer. Here, the Brotherhood-induced riot is performing the same sort of large-scale destruction of slum neighborhoods that was the prerequisite of massive urban renewal projects. Before the Housing Act of 1949, and the arrival of federal funds, the task of raising the money and acquiring the proper permissions for this sort of clearance was extraordinarily difficult— undoubtedly the biggest obstacle facing urban renewal programs of the redevelopment front. Here, the deceived residents of Harlem do it for free.

Ellison seems to be giving us a new lens by which to understand the race riot— the disaster that marked the various climaxes of the "urban crisis" from the thirties to the seventies— as implicit in the "creative destruction" of the urban environment that would eventually make way for the city's industrial to post-

industrial transformation. If, as Rotella notes, the seeming "apocalyptic" rioting in the streets in the 1960s looks "in retrospect to be the painful coming to maturity of postindustrial urbanism as we still known it," then the Harlem Riot of 1943, reimagined at the end of *Invisible Man,* could mark the violent birth of that same urbanism. In this light, the final act of Ellison's novel could stand as testament to his implicit understanding of the riot's place within the larger, economic forces that were reshaping New York in the 1940s.

Seeing this helps us in making sense of one of the most troubling sequences of novel's concluding riot, when the gang led by Dupre burns down a tenement building with the invisible man's help. The scene's dire tone immediately alerts us to the deeply torn, seemingly monumental forces acting upon both the rioters and the narrator.

> Scofield touched my arm. 'Here we is,' he said.
> We had come to a huge tenement building.
> 'Where are we?' I said.
> 'This is the place where most of us live,' he said. 'Come on.'
> So that was it, the meaning of the kerosene. I couldn't believe it, couldn't believe they had the nerve. All the windows seemed empty. They'd blacked it out themselves. I saw now only by flash or flame.
> 'Where will you live?' I said, looking up, up. (545)

The "up, up" has a powerful zoom-out effect on this sequence. Ellison invites us, just briefly, to consider the smallness of these rioters, their vulnerability in the face of these huge tenement buildings, themselves monuments both to the struggles of the daily lives of the people that live there and to the ruthlessness of an exploitative, racist system. This is the internal conflict that seems to tear at Ellison as he writes this sequence— between indicting the system represented in these buildings and sympathizing with the people that live there that is ultimately call them home.

> ‘You call *this* living?” Scofield said. ‘It’s the only way to git rid of it, man…’
>
> I looked for hesitation in their vague forms. They stood looking at the building rising above us, the liquid dark of the oil simmering dully in the stray flecks of light that struck their pails, bent forward, their shoulders bowed. None said ‘no,’ by word or stance. And in the dark windows and on the roofs above I could now discern the forms of women and children.
>
> Dupre moved toward the building.
>
> It didn’t occur to me to interfere, or to question…
>
> They had a plan. Already I could see the women and children coming down the steps. A child was crying. And suddenly everyone paused, turning, looking off into the dark. Somewhere nearby an incongruous sound shook the dark, an air hammer pounding like a machine gun. They paused with the sensitivity of grazing deer, then returned to their work, the women and children once more moving….
>
> Someone pounded my back and I swung around, seeing a woman push past me and climb up to catch Dupre’s arm, their two figures seeming to blend as her voice arose, thing vibrant and desperate.
>
> ‘Please, Dupre,’ she said, ‘*please*. You know my time’s almost here… you *know* it is. If you do it now, where am I going to go?’
>
> He looked down at her, shaking his thrice-hatted head. ‘Now git on out the way, Lottie,’ he said patiently. ‘Why you have to start this now? We done been all over it…And lissen here, the resta y’all,” he said, reaching into the top of his hip boot producing a nickel-plated revolver and waving it around, ‘don’t think they’s going to be any *mind*-changing either. And I don’t aim for no arguments neither.’
>
> ‘You goddam right, Dupre. We wid you!’
>
> ‘My kid died from the t-bees in that deathtrap, but I bet a man ain’t no more go’n be *born* in there,’ he said. ‘So now, Lottie, you can go on up the street and let us mens git going.’ (545-546)

Ellison’s depiction of the “thrice-hatted” Dupre identifies him as acting out three separate identities, all of which contribute to the same destiny. He is at once the angry black rioter, the Robert Moses-esque Brotherhood figure, and, we might venture to say, the forces of capitalism itself, the redevelopment front— all of which want this tenement burned to the ground. Dupre identifies his apartment building as the primary agent of his agonized lifestyle, placing the blame squarely on the tenement for the death of his young child. For this act of vengeance, however, he has to ignore a

pleading, pitiful woman on the verge of giving birth, and we can understand that Dupre's actions aren't being done for the sake of future generations. He is leading the razing of this building out of a personal vendetta— a rage that he has masked as the only rational action capable of challenging the environment that took his child. The delicate nature of Ellison's prose here brilliantly communicates the humanity that lies beneath all this destruction. With "shoulders bowed" and "the sensitivity of grazing deer" Ellison is showing us that beneath the fury of this collective outburst are bewildered humans faced with chaos and the challenge of choosing their future in a world of mysterious and troubling forces.

Organic Urbanism and the City of Life

> *Now that New York is strangling itself, perhaps a few good people will try to unknot the noose before the blood completely stops circulating.*
> — Lewis Mumford, "Fresh Start"[64]

Between his conversations with Brothers Jack and Hambro in the final act of *Invisible Man*, the narrator has a revelatory experience. Trying to shake a couple of malicious pursuers, the invisible man picks up a pair of dark-green sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat as a disguise only to find that he has become one of the most recognizable figures in Harlem, "Rinehart". A number of people repeatedly mistake the invisible man for Rinehart as he moves through the neighborhood, yet, mysteriously, to all of these people, Rinehart seems to be a different person. To one he's a pimp; to another, a numbers runner; to yet others, a rabble-rouser, a preacher, a "spiritual technologist," and so on. At first uncomfortable and disoriented, the invisible man soon realizes that there could be remarkable implications to the social fluidity revealed by this sunglassed, zoot-suitor:

> Can it be, I thought, can it actually be? . . . . It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home in it . . . . And after all this time I had just discovered Jack's missing eye . . . . My entire body started to itch, as though I had just

[64] Lewis Mumford, "Fresh Start", in *From The Ground Up* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), 107.

> been removed from a plaster cast and was unused to the new freedom of movement. (498)

The invisible man's time spent impersonating Rinehart alerts him to a way of life outside of the Brotherhood's strict logic: a world of chaos, but also a world of freedom and possibility. This revelation not only carries with it an alternate theory of history but also a way out of the high-modernist "Logic of Urban Decline" that was so prevalent among politicians and policy-makers after the war.[65] For Ellison, B.P. Rinehart (B for Bliss, P for Protean) represents a new vision of the city, a frightening and exhilarating vision of possibility in chaos, unique to the modern world.[66] The problem with analyzing the Rinehart sequence of the novel, however, has always been that Ellison leaves its implications unclear and more or less unresolved. Before the invisible man can explore the various implications of the freedom of Rinehartism, he finds himself in a destructive riot in which the only escape is a dark underground hole.

A contemporary of Ellison's, fellow New York writer Lewis Mumford, worked out a similar vision of the city of possibility in the immediate pre- and post-war years. Published to wide-acclaim in 1938, two years after Ellison's arrival in New York, Mumford's seminal *The Culture of Cities* traced the formations of the city across history and concluded with resounding optimism over the "new patterns of life" that were afforded by the modern, and in many ways, post-industrial, metropolis.

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[65] Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1964), 26.

[66] Ellison reveals Rinehart's first name in a 1965 essay: "Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke", in *Shadow and the Act*, 56. For Rinehart and chaos see Herman Beavers, "Documenting Turbulence: The Dialectics of Chaos in *Invisible Man,*" in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man*, ed. Lucas E. Morel (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 193-243.

These new, urban ways of life align compellingly with the fluidity of the many-sided Rinehart: "To describe the modern community, one would have to explore in detail the potentialities of life for modern man," Mumford writes in *Culture of Cities.* He even anticipates that it is the artist who will be first to perceive this new urban order.[67] A few years later, in 1947, he would famously continue his writing on cities and the prospect of an "organic urbanism" in his regular "Sky Line" column for the *New Yorker*, just as Ellison was writing his own novel.[68] Where Ellison leaves his vision of Rinehartism unresolved; in the late 1930's, and throughout the forties and fifties, Mumford expounded in great depth on the new forms of urbanism that were uniquely available to the city dweller in the emerging post-industrial era.

Like Ellison, Mumford believed that New York was in dire need of renewal. He was distraught by what he perceived as a dangerously congested metropolis, and yet, he was equally dissatisfied by the predominant renewal efforts led by Robert Moses and the "redevelopment front." As an early and passionate supporter of Ebenezer Howard's "Garden City" ideal, Mumford saw in New York a massive failure to provide its citizens with the proper green-space and recreational areas. Despite the fact that Robert Moses himself had initially come to prominence as New York City's Parks Commissioner and was widely celebrated for the green space he introduced into the city, Mumford would consistently take Moses to task in *The New Yorker* for his highways, housing projects, and bridge construction—all of which, Mumford argued, threatened to add to the congestion of the metropolis. Mumford

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[67] Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 410.
[68] The "Sky Line" essays were collected in the 1956 anthology *From the Ground Up*.

suggested repeatedly that that congestion was strangling the city and preventing it from harnessing its own most vital resource, collective life itself.

Yet, although Mumford was perhaps Moses' most adamant public critic before the emergence of Jane Jacobs in the 1960s, Mumford and Moses were by no means diametrically opposed urbanists. The two men shared a strong conviction in the necessity of a "new form for the city," and both suggested that the form would be achieved through large-scale deindustrialization, decentralization, demolition, and rebuilding. But where Moses' urbanism revealed a deep distrust of the city as a legitimate place to live (he tried to transform New York into essentially a node for regional traffic and exchange), Mumford saw the urban environment as the ultimate form of social organization. For him, the city was crucially a residential and cultural center; although, in many ways, his ideal city fell between popular notions of the conventional metropolis and its outlying suburban communities.

Mumford's unique vision of the city reflected and was the central item in a larger, encompassing theory of history and society that gave the critic a compelling frame by which to understood the features of his world. As Leo Marx explains, that theory can be described as "organicism." The term indicates a philosophical predisposition that, as Marx argues, can be considered the chief ordering principle of the writer's entire, monolithic body of work.[69] Best understood as a theory of "insurgent life", Mumford's conception of organicism approaches humanity first as a biological organism, in a constant state of adaptation and interaction with its environment, and second as a social being undergoing a similar process in relation to

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[69] Leo Marx, "Lewis Mumford: Prophet of Organicism." *Lewis Mumford, Public Intellectual*, eds. Thomas P. Hughes, Agatha Hughes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 168.

its specific social circumstances and heritage. Mumford gleaned the idea from the work of the Scottish theoretician and scientist, Patrick Geddes, whose work as a pioneer in environmental studies strongly informed his later career as a sociologist and urban planner. The "new patterns of life and thought" that Mumford argued should make up the, organic urban order, were dependent on his Geddes-inspired, quasi-biological notion of life and its social implications. As he writes in *Culture of Cities*:

> Each organism has its own line of growth, its own pattern of existence. To maintain its life-shape the organism must constantly alter and renew itself by entering into active relations with the rest of the environment . . . . [T]hus the organism changes, by no matter what infinitesimal amounts, the balance of the environment . . . . Not merely is the organism implicated in its environment in space: it is also implicated in time, through the biological phenomena of inheritance and memory; and in human societies it is even more consciously implicated through the necessity of assimilating a complicated social heritage which forms, as it were, a second environment. [70]

For Mumford, in short, human history reflects a deeper, underlying process of evolutionary development by which the human species grows and develops and modifies its environment. This vision forms the basis for Mumford's view of the history of the city. Beneath the varied developments of architecture and urban form and economic and political activity, history is determined by life, in its "creative and artistic, form-giving aspects."[71] As a sort of twist on the Marxian, technologically deterministic ideology prominent in the 1930s, Mumford argues that although history may create the illusion of moving forwards, it is essentially a cyclical repetition of the organic processes building upon themselves, developing in constant tension with

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[70] Mumford, *Culture of Cities,* 301
[71] Rosalind Williams, "Lewis Mumford as a Historian of Technology in *Technics and Civilization*," in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual*, 47

what he calls "the mechanical." This tension—between the developing organism and its mechanical constraints--is perhaps best illustrated in Mumford's famous argument in *Technics and Civilization* that the clock, rather than the steam engine, was the crucial invention of modernity. Supplanting "organic time," measured by reference to cyclical processes of nature, with a "mechanical," measured conception of social time, the clock, for Mumford, was the "key machine of the modern industrial age," and ultimately responsible for the onset of industrialization that followed in later centuries. [72]

Organicism was at the foundation of Mumford's conception of urban history and culture. As Mumford saw it, the history of city revealed a repeated pattern of historical development in which new patterns of life emerged out of the restrictions of an older urban environment while, simultaneously, building upon all that had come before due. In fact, for Mumford, the city was "man's greatest work of art" precisely because it was the physical embodiment of this organicism, and bore a physical record of life and the passage of time in space:

> Cities are the product of time, they are the molds in which men's lifetimes have cooled and congealed. . . . In the city, time becomes visible: buildings and monuments and public ways, more subject to the gaze of many men than the scattered artifacts of the countryside, leave an imprint upon the minds even of the ignorant and indifferent. . . . . Time challenges time, time clashes with time: habits and values carry over beyond the living group, streaking with different strata of time the character of any single generation.[73]

To this vision of organic development, Mumford joins an emphasis on the city as a unique habitat in which socialization flourishes. In fact, precisely because the city provides a setting in which people can interact in dynamic ways, it creates the

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[72] Marx, "Prophet of Organicism," 175.
[73] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 4.

opportunities for the processes of development that Mumford valued. In the urban environment, the individual is surrounded by evidence of history, and as "time clashes with time," he is able to interact with culture that spans beyond his own generation, outside the boundaries of "the tyranny of the present"—incidentally, one of Ellison's favorite phrases.[74]

Throughout *Culture of Cities*, Mumford describes the urban world as a unique setting in which humanity has the capacity to develop organically and to exceed the mechanical constraints that tend to constrict it. "Mind *takes form* in the city," Mumford writes, "and in turn urban forms condition mind. For space, no less than time, is artfully reorganized in cities: the city records the attitude of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of its existence" (emphasis added).[75] Here Mumford was largely speaking from experience. As a native of Manhattan's Upper West Side at the turn of the century, the writer's childhood explorations through the city resulted in a lifelong dedication to its study, and a philosophy firmly rooted in the external, social world.[76] For Mumford, the exceptional power of the city upon the mind stemmed from a distinctly urban reorganization of space— unique spatial environments like the subway, where the invisible man encounters the Rinehart-types, or the grided uptown streets through which Rinehart is able to move so fluidly, that are exclusively found in cities. This reorganization was the stamp of socio-historic

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[74] "Tyranny of the present" was originally coined by Cicero. He believed that the purpose of education was to enable freedom from such tyranny. Incidentally, the phrase was a favorite for both Ellison and "that other Ralph Waldo"— Emerson.
[75] Mumford, *Culture of Cities,* 5.
[76] Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, & Lewis Mumford*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 21-26.

thought. Thus, for Mumford, man's experience in the city was socialized many times over, through interaction with his environment and fellow citizens.

Indeed, as he writes, in *Culture of Cities*: "The mark of the city is its purposive social complexity. It represents the maximum possibility of humanizing the natural environment and of naturalizing the human heritage: it gives a cultural shape to the first, and it externalizes, in permanent collective forms, the second."[77] Life in the city, then, is marked by a near-constant discourse with some element of culture.

> In the city, the environment takes on a more social form: indeed, through the media of the vocations, groups and personalities so closely mobilized here, one part of the environment can react upon another part of the environment to produce results that would be impossible through direct intercourse and interaction.[78]

This is what distinguishes the city from the village or the countryside: the endless possibility of cultural combinations generated by ceaseless interaction. For Mumford, then, this socio-cultural enhancement was the path to self-transcendence. As Casey Nelson Blake explains, such self-transcendence was at the core of Mumford's cultural politics. He sought always for "a way of contributing to the external world that lay beyond the self, of fusing one's individual subjectivity with the artifacts and cultural traditions that survived beyond individual existence."[79] Such an effort was uniquely possible, he suggested, in the good city.

Crucially, here, Mumford glosses over the fact that at the time he was writing, the city was a place of very real conflict and violence. "Socialization," as evidenced by the Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1943 and many other violent instances, was proving to be an extremely difficult process in the climate of racism and destitution that

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[77] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 6.
[78] Ibid, 318.
[79] Blake, *Beloved Community,* 48.

immersed New York in the 1930s and early forties. When Mumford discusses "history presenting itself" to the city resident, he glosses over the fact that it might be certain people's histories and not others. For Mumford, such divisions across race lines were more or less non-effectual. He speaks of racial differences as "baseless beliefs", but these comments are entirely directed at the rise of Nazi Germany.[80] When Mumford addresses history, he speaks of a collective humanity, unified by his holistic concept of organicism, and completely ignores the issue of race that, at the time of his writing, was nearing a boiling point in New York. Malcolm X remarks in his autobiography that in the city in the early 1940's "one could almost smell trouble about to break out."[81] If Mumford could sense the impending outbursts of the forties, he kept it to himself. He professed unity, collectivity, and the importance of a historical perspective in an era of mounting racial tension. His neglect to address the changing racial demographic of the city either points to an ignorance, or, more likely, a benign dismissal. His interest was in unifying systems of history and city-formation— not racial division.

Mumford's belief that self-transcendence lay in one's relationship to the external world points to his deep faith in the power of community. This faith runs through the course his body of work, and can be traced to his intellectual roots as part of a group of early twentieth century writers known as the Young Americans. The group— which included Randolph Bourne, Van Wyk Brooks, Waldo Frank— was united by a profound commitment to democracy and a Romantic dissatisfaction with the forces of capitalism and industrialization that had come to define their country.

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[80] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 366
[81] As quoted in Capeci, *Harlem Riot of 1943,* 49.

These young critics founded *Seven Arts Magazine* with the mission of "Understanding, interpreting, and expressing that latent America, that potential America, which we believe lays hidden under the present overly commercial-industrial organization."[82] As they saw it, this precious America, by the turn of the century, was in the process of being crushed by "the stampede to normalcy" led by market forces and an increasing distance from a true cultural heritage.

Mumford's alliance with the Young Americans instilled in him a strong belief in the idea of the "beloved community"— the notion, ultimately borrowed from philosopher John Dewey that people could only achieve self-fulfillment in the social world.[83] Mumford strongly asserts this belief in *Culture of Cities*. In genuine community, he writes there, " every part of life feels an uprush of social energy: eating, working, mating, sleeping are not less than they were before, but far more: life has, despite its broken moments, the poise and unity of a collective work of art."[84]

For Mumford and the Young Americans, the revitalized politics of community could only emerge out of shared modes of cultural expression— generally speaking, the arts, language, music, civic meetings, etc. Drawing upon Emerson and the theory of his colleague Randolph Bourne, Mumford argued that this expression needed to be comprised of symbolic interaction grounded in shared, organic experience. This type of symbolic interaction required, in his view, the framework of the small, local community— the kind of community that, in Mumford and his colleagues' minds,

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[82] Blake, *Beloved Community,* 132
[83] Ibid, 114.
[84] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 490.

had defined the American landscape before heavy industrialization in the nineteenth century.[85]

In numerous works of philosophy and culture, Mumford argued repeatedly for his vision throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In *Culture of Cities*, *Technics and Civilization*, and *The Condition of Man* and in many other similarly sweeping overviews of civilizational history, Mumford made the case for organicism and warned against the dangers of mechanism. Time and again, he referred to humanity's uplifting ability to develop its capacities through the kinds of rich and complex social interactions that the setting of the city, in particular, enabled. And just as often, he warned that potential for development was threatened by mechanical or industrial forces that shut down the capacity for socialization and growth. But his views were most directly influential in the architectural criticism Mumford wrote during his tenure at *The New Yorker*. Here he often struggled to fit his mighty concept of organicism into his consideration of particular design and construction projects. Sometimes the approach would pave the way to original, incisive critiques, and at others, it would reduce his writing to hollow metaphor and vague abstraction.

Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in Mumford's writing on the development of the United Nations Headquarters, which was erected on the East side of Manhattan in the late 1940s and early fifties. With his committed belief in the power of the symbol, Mumford saw an incredible opportunity in the design of the UN Headquarters for the expression of a new world order of peace and cooperation. In a 1946 lecture to the Royal Institute of British Architects, before any design had been chosen for the complex, Mumford rhapsodized on the monumentality of the occasion,

[85] Blake, *Beloved Community,* 2-7.

urging the need for the Headquarters to be a "paragon…. of the new world order we are in the course of building." For Mumford, the new UN Headquarters demanded a "clarity of design… growing unity of treatment…studious retention of the human scale…resolute avoidance of the pompous and the grandiose…"—not only for strictly formal or aesthetic value but because they would symbolize and thus enable the development of new modes of human community.[86]

In short, Mumford wanted the UN to be an organic symbol of global cooperation and harmony. He couldn't specify the exact form that would be needed to accomplish such a symbol, but he laid out the bare minimum of his expectations in his RIBA lecture and in *The New Yorker*, just as the international team of architects led by Wallace Harrison and Le Corbusier was submitting their design for review. First, Mumford believed strongly that the UN should be a model city itself, sited within a pre-existing world metropolis. Vatican City, as Lawrence Vale notes, seems to have been both Mumford's formal and spiritual working model. But, whereas the Vatican is sized at only about 110 acres, Mumford called for something still grander and deemed the necessary size for the UN site to be "between 1000 and 3000 acres." At the greatest extent, that is, he envisioned a UN complex that would be nearly four times the size of Central Park. Even at the low end of Mumford's expectations, the site he called for would require the exorbitant purchase of vast tracts of private property and the state-sponsored demolition of miles of pre-existing urban fabric. Thus, although he was later to downsize his proposed site to "the area immediately South of Washington Square," in his site proposals for the UN, Mumford revealed his

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[86] Lawrence Vale, "Mumford and the United Nations Headquarters," in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual,* 259.

inclinations towards the sort of high-modernist city planning that he condemned in his writing on Robert Moses.[87] Mumford was prepared to level a great deal of New York's urban fabric for the sake of an extensive, international symbol of world peace. Thus, he was greatly dismayed over the 17-acre "fleabite" of land in Turtle Bay that Moses and John D. Rockefeller were able to acquire for the UN complex. Mumford used the language of slum clearance quite explicitly to describe the "dismally blighted area" of slaughterhouses and light-industry that made up the East River neighborhood surrounding the site, and he dismissed the approach to the headquarters as a "sordid slum." He would go on to pronounce the site a betrayal of the UN's global significance. "Shabby old Turtle Bay," as a contemporary called it, was exactly the kind of run-down industrial neighborhood that was to be avoided for a complex of such symbolic magnitude.[88] Mumford didn't, however, raise an eyebrow over the fact that the neighborhood's destruction meant the displacement of some 2,600 blue-collar jobs.[89]

Almost everything else about the UN Headquarters deeply troubled Mumford though. He had hoped for a Vatican-like "group of modern freestanding buildings in harmonious aesthetic relationship," arguing that such an arrangement would function as a "modern sacred space" and command the reverence of the visitor in much the same way that St. Peter's did for the fifteenth-century Italian. The constructed complex of the Secretariat, Assembly, and Conference buildings were a far cry from his expectations. Among the many things that offended Mumford was the fact that the

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[87] Lewis Mumford, "UN and Model UN," in *From the Ground Up*, 23.
[88] As quoted in Sean McCann, "Light and Air: Slum Clearance and Midcentury Modernism at *The New Yorker,* (Unpublished manuscript, March 29, 2012), 36.
[89] McCann, "Light and Air," 36.

Secretariat building—easily the most dominant of the three— took the form of the "glass box skyscraper" that was just emerging in midtown Manhattan in the 1940s. Mumford understood the skyscraper through his concept of organicism: as an emergent architectural expression of culturally dominant capitalism and metropolitan congestion, the "cathedral of commerce," as he put in a later article.[90] Indeed, he found the *negative* symbolism in the Secretariat building's form astounding. "As a conscious symbol," he wrote, "the Secretariat adds up to zero; as an unconscious symbol, it is a negative quantity, since it symbolizes the worst practices of New York, not the best hopes of the United Nations." For Mumford, the Secretariat fulfilled none of its potential as the harbinger of the new world order and, instead, spoke to the values of a misguided past, "this skyscraper is an eloquent but unintentional symbol of the general perversion of life values that takes place in a disengaging civilization."[91] Indeed, he wrote elsewhere that "if the Secretariat building will have anything to say as a symbol, it will be, I fear, that the managerial revolution has taken place and that bureaucracy rules the world."[92]

In short, rather than enabling the organic potential of a new urban civilization, to Mumford, the UN Headquarters complex was a clear, visual example of the dangers of mechanism and technocracy. In seeking a novel symbolism to express the formation of the UN, Mumford's faith in organicism led him to expect a form to match. He ignored, however, the *natural* element that was at the foundation of his theory, where a legitimate, new form of architecture could not emerge by fiat, but would have to evolve slowly out of the changing ways of life of a developing people.

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[90] Lewis Mumford, "Municipal Functions and Civic Art," *From the Ground Up,* 147
[91] Lewis Mumford, "Magic with Mirrors," *From the Ground Up,* 43-45
[92] Lewis Mumford, "Buildings as Symbols", *From the Ground Up,* 30.

Contrary to what he had worked out in *Technics and Civilization* and *Culture of Cities*, he was placing cultural expression ahead of the "shared, organic experience" that was necessary for its emergence—as if, by creating a new symbolic form, architects could lead a new way of life to come into existence. Lawrence Vale has argued that he even ignored the basic, conservative tenets at the foundation of the UN Charter, treating the new body less as the international power-sharing arrangement it primarily was and more as a harbinger of a new civilization. By harping on notions of "unity out of diversity", Mumford placed the ideas least in focus at the top of his architectural agenda. Mumford's criticism of the UN, while perhaps justified in its desires, was self-deceiving in its expectations.

Mumford's expectations for the UN Headquarters are related to the eagerness that characterizes conclusion of the *Culture of Cities*, where he predicted the coming of a new "biotechnic" society, in which the "school" would replace "the factory" as the essential "social nucleus" of the city, and the urban environment would function as the "stage" for the "collective drama" of our "associative life" rather than as a centralized area of industrial processes, under which it had expanded to monstrous proportions in the 19th century. [93] Here, in his most prophetic mode, Mumford envisions a modern, post-industrial society in which organic life would flourish and mechanical restrictions would be surpassed. Mumford wanted desperately for the UN to be the herald of the new, biotechnic order. "We have to create more than an

[93] McCann, *Light and Air,* 42.

instrument of government," Mumford said of the UN in his address to RIBA, "we have to shadow forth a new life."[94]

Mumford's writing on the UN revealed a paradox running all through his writing on the city. He envisioned the rise of a new kind of "biotechnic" urban environment in which the social and cultural interaction he prized would flourish, but to achieve this would necessitate the large-scale reconstruction the city in which he lived. Indeed in *Culture of Cities*, the underlying contrast between the organic and the mechanical comes to a melodramatic head in his final chapters where he suggests a great battle between emerging possibilities of socialization afforded by the metropolis and the actual, hellish dystopia created by the large industrial city. Congestion, the over-concentration of people in one urban center, is at the heart of this fear for Mumford. He blames practically every social ill of the twentieth-century city on the massive over-concentration of people in the world's most populated metropolitan centers. In fact, for Mumford, the overly congested, industrial city is typified by "New York in the early twentieth century." In that setting, he sees the most extreme dangers of mechanism:

> Diversion of energy from the biological and social ends of life to the preparatory physical means. Outright exploitation of the proletariat and increasing conflict between organized workers and the master classes. Occasional outbursts of savage repression on the part of frightened bourgeoisie. . . . As conflict intensifies, rise of a coalition between landed oligarchy and a megalopolitan rabble of speculators, enterprisers, and financiers who furnish the sinews of war and profit for class-suppression, price lifting, and looting . . . . . The city as a means of association, as a haven of culture, becomes a means of disassociation and a growing threat to real culture. [95]

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[94] As quoted in Vale, "Designing Global Harmony," in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual* 267

[95] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 290

For Mumford, in other words, the ceaseless development of the industrial city didn't enable but rather threatened cultural and civic life that he saw as the central meaning of urban society. Too many people in one place destroyed accountability among fellow citizens, necessitated time- and life-wasting infrastructure, obliterated the possibility of a common culture or shared experience, created starvation, fueled disease, corruption, and violence, and turned the once beautiful metropolitan "hinterland" into a physical and cultural wasteland.

Predictably, then, Mumford did not take kindly to the massive redevelopment of New York that Robert Moses led from the 1930s through the 1950s. He was consistently bewildered by the unrelenting construction of highways, bridges, and housing projects, which he saw as simply adding to an overwhelming metropolitan congestion. Writing in *The New Yorker* in 1955, Mumford noted with alarm "the transformation that has taken place during the last thirty years in Manhattan—a city that is steadily growing higher, denser, more complex, more clotted, more confused, its chaos solidifying into an insane mess of high buildings placed within a rigid urban framework that is hopelessly out of date."[96] New streets and highways planned for automobiles and new lots designated for skyscraper construction seemed to him "like the tailor's remedy for obesity—letting out the seams of the trousers and loosening the belt—[do] nothing to curb the greedy appetites that have cause the fat to accumulate."[97]

Mumford went against the predominant strain of urbanism in the mid-1950s, taking the pedestrian's perspective to urban design and treating the influx of cars and

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[96] Mumford, "From the Ground Up," 220.
[97] Mumford, "Renewed Circulation, Renewed Life," 219.

commuters to high-rise structures as a critical detriment to the life of the city-dweller. He took great issue with Moses, whose "cities are for traffic," automobile-first ideology, was directly at odds with Mumford's conception of the "biotechnic" society.

> "Our one-eyed specialists continue to concoct plans for highway development, as if motor transportation existed in a social vacuum, and as if New York were a mere passageway or terminal for vehicles . . . . Like any other tool, [the automobile] must be used for some human purpose beyond the employment of the tool itself, and that further purpose represents the difference between carving and mere whittling. Instead of curing congestion . . . [the city government] widen[s] chaos."[98]

Mumford's repetition of the "human" purpose that must be maintained in highway design is indicative of his alternative vision of the biotechnic society characterized by a decidedly human scale. "Instead of maximizing facilities for motorcars, we should maximize the advantages of urban life," Mumford wrote. "Parks, playgrounds, and schools, theaters, universities, concert halls," projects intended for residents of the city, were all more deserving of municipal funds. [99]

Decongestion, for Mumford, did not always simply translate into fewer highways and more parks. Often in his writing, the term carried with it a vision of the decentralized, deindustrialized inner city. In fact, as Sean McCann has noted, Mumford's complaints about "congestion" were sometimes overshadowed by an even more vigorous denunciation of the "legacies of industrialization."[100] In a 1952, "Sky Line" column, Mumford rejoiced at the announcement that Eagle Clothes, Inc., a garment manufacturing company, had "defied the holy principle of adding to New

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[98] Mumford, "Two-Way Flood," 213.
[99] Mumford, "Renewed Circulation, Renewed Life," 220
[100] McCann, *Light and Air*, 40.

York's intolerable congestion" by "desert[ing] overbuilt midtown Manhattan" and moving their manufacturing plant to the Erie Basin neighborhood in Brooklyn. He extolled the benefit of "nearly a thousand workers taken off the crowded streets" of Manhattan for "that much more elbow room," and fantasized about what the city might be like if "a hundred other factories followed suit." Mumford had high hopes that Eagle Clothes would set a precedent for "taking such basic New York trades as garment making and printing out of the midtown area and settling them in low factories in a new kind of industrial district, as spacious and handsome as the planned industrial areas in England."[101] His "biotechnic" vision of Manhattan was predicated upon a large upheaval of the city's industrial manufacturing centers, which, in the early 1950s, still formed the backbone of the city's economy.[102] Here, Mumford seems to be anticipating the national economic transformations that would go on to more visibly shape the metropolis in the coming decades, as industrial manufacturing and blue-collar working-class residents—the longshoremen, pencil-makers, oil-refiners, etc.— gradually moved out of Manhattan and the boroughs, and a middle-class, white-collar economy assumed their place.[103]

Mumford's vision of the decongested metropolis, led him into a career-long devotion to regional urban planning—which, not surprisingly, was centered around his theory of organicism. He dismissed the highly regularized, geometric planning of cities like London and San Francisco, which, he argued, were "true expressions of capitalism and mechanism," and favored instead cities like Grenoble, France and

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[101] Mumford, "Fresh Start," 103-105
[102] McCann, *Light and Air*, 4-6
[103] Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 8-9, 22.

Köln, Germany—medieval cities that, according to Mumford, were more tailored to the benefit of all who lived there. "Superficial observers often regard [pure geometric] plans as the only authentic examples of urban order: while cities that have grown more slowly, with piecemeal changes and modifications, are looked upon as disorderly or even planless. But the more subtle organization of time and space has its own kind of order: the tactics of life, in all its manifestations, will include both types: the formal and adaptive, the mechanical and the vital."[104]

The regional planner, in Mumford's view, was to employ an organic method of planning, a process he defines as moving "from need to need, from opportunity to opportunity, in a series of adaptations that . . .become increasingly coherent and purposeful, so that they generate a complex, final design, hardly less unified than a performed geometric pattern."[105] Several critics have noted, however, how vaguely Mumford glosses over the power structure inherent to his regional plans here. Despite his emphasis on organic form and gradual social evolution, all of his plans for regional cities were like his vision of the UN. They demanded implementation in a top-down manner under a planning authority that would be licensed not only to plan the city, but the entire surrounding region as well. "The task is no less than to rebuild civilization…We must design *cities*," Mumford wrote.[106] Ultimately this meant that the enormous power of development would have to reside in the hands of a small group of people. No matter how earthy his analogies were, Mumford never resolved the tension between bureaucratic authority and his advocacy of "organic" development.

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[104] Mumford, *Culture of Cities,* 236.
[105] As quoted in Leo Marx, "The Prophet of Organicism," 171.
[106] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 481.

Mumford made clear that he believed decentralization was necessary process for oversized cities, and wrote that "[i]nstead of trying to hold [decentralization] back, the big city must try to direct it, to the advantage of both itself and the smaller centers." In order to maintain its relevance, a big city like New York would need to be redeveloped in order to compete with the growing, decentralized communities of the suburbs: "Instead of attempting to put the attractions of metropolitan overcrowding against the lure of the suburb, we must think of rebuilding the interior of the city, with gardens and parks and open vistas, so that it, too, will be desirable and habitable."[107]

This "rebuilding" took inspiration from a number of models of automobile-less urban environments designed for pedestrian use. Radburn, New Jersey—a planned community constructed more or less from scratch in 1928 with designs generated from studies done of Venice and contributions from Mumford himself—was the clear contemporary model. What Mumford particularly liked about Radburn was that it created a walkable, pastoral, small-scale community in which thoroughfares separated wheeled traffic and pedestrians.[108] In a 1955 "Sky Line" column Mumford also cites Central Park as an exemplary model of good urban design.

> If you examine the original plan of Central Park, you are examining a modern city plan, and if you walk through the Mall, noting how the traffic circulates around it, you have only to imagine buildings spaced at intervals along it, in related groups, to understand the principle of the superblock, which should be the minimum unit of land subdivision for the ideal big city, as against the standard New York block, whose

[107] Mumford, "From the Ground Up," 230.
[108] Mumford, "Renewed Circulation, Renewed Life," 223

> inadequate size is one of the chief handicaps to a sensible redevelopment of our metropolis.[109]

The lessons that Mumford takes from Central Park reveal quite clearly the form he hoped a new "biotechnic" city would take. But it also reveals the gray area in his thinking where he appears to abandon or contradict his own theory of organicism. Celebrating the planned design of Central Park, he almost completely dismisses the idea that the actual features of the remainder of New York City might themselves be the product of the "organic processes" that he lauds throughout his other writings. Because he views industrial manufacturing as a mechanical process that is not essential to the cultural and social life of the city, he views the environment that it created—factories, lofts, tenements—as in some way an accidental or foreign intrusion on the urban fabric. Thus, in much of the existing mid-century New York, Mumford sees only overwhelming congestion and the legacy of a now "obsolete" economic order. He writes: "If the city is to become livable again, and if its traffic is to be reduced to dimensions that can be handled, *the city will have to bring all of its powers to bear* upon the problem of creating a new metropolitan pattern " (emphasis added).[110]

But to create such a pattern, New York would need to engage in the very kinds of managerial control of the city he distrusted. What Mumford loved about Central Park was its green-space, its irregular pathways, and its unity of design, but in his search for an utterly renewed urban pattern that looked more like the plan the Park, Mumford essentially undermined the democratic processes that were at the foundation of his concept of organicism. Indeed, Mumford's vision would require a

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[109] Ibid, 223.
[110] Mumford, "Renewed Circulation, Renewed Life," 220

Robert Moses-style demolition of the pre-existing urban fabric. To "alleviate the pressure of traffic," we should be "tearing down all the existing buildings in certain areas," he wrote in a 1955 "Sky Line."[111]

This vision of a renewed metropolitan pattern greatly informed Mumford's appraisal of the efforts of the redevelopment front in housing projects like Stuyvesant Town and Fresh Meadows, Queens. Although Mumford was a dedicated advocate of the superblock and championed the importance of the interplay between housing and green-space, he found Stuyvesant Town a "painful lesson in how not to rebuild New York."[112] Housing 24,000 people on a 61 acre lot, the Moses-led project embodied the very congestion that Mumford found intolerable, and the gigantic thirteen-story buildings that comprised the complex were, to him, "the architecture of the police state, embodying all the vices of regimentation one associates with state control at its unimaginative worst."[113] In 1948, New York's housing situation looked dire for Mumford. In choosing between the post-Civil War "dark, airless, dismal", and exceptionally noisy housing— the kind that Stuyvesant town replaced— and the misused superblock community designed "apparently for people who have no identity but the serial numbers of their Social Security cards" in projects like Stuyvesant Town and the Lower East Side Houses, Mumford felt as in a "nightmare."[114]

A year later, in his "Sky Line" column, Mumford would celebrate the opening of Fresh Meadows, Queens, as a "slice of the City of Tomorrow." Funded by the New York Life Insurance Company and housing 11,000 people on a 170 acres of land,

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[111] Mumford, "Two-Way Flood," 215
[112] Mumford, "From Utopia Parkway Turn East," 4.
[113] Mumford, "Pre-Fabricated Blight," 109.
[114] Ibid, 110.

Fresh Meadows appeared to Mumford a fitting development for his biotechnic order—one that demonstrated "how humane and attractive a modern community can be if the designer's imagination can be applied not to isolated buildings but to the interrelationship of people, trees, greens, parks, streets, and buildings so that they become an organic unity."[115] Largely made of low, staggered one- to two-story row houses, lawns, and various recreational facilities, Fresh Meadows was such a revelation to Mumford that he excused its Stuyvesant Town-esque, pair of 13-story brick buildings, which although a "shock", failed to detract sufficiently from the positives of the community: "Apart from those two dominating thirteen-story apartment houses, the human scale has everywhere been maintained, and the aesthetic qualities are balanced by human qualities: in a community carpeted from end to end with lawns, I could not find, except on newly seeded patches around the skyscrapers, a single keep-off-the-grass sign."[116]

The project's special attention to natural scenery, open space, and the needs of the pedestrian— only a single thoroughfare passed through the site—secured Mumford's endorsement. In a revealing moment, he describes the pleasant surprise he experiences when, expecting to find a "commercial 'busy corner'" at the center of the development, he finds that there are "no buildings at all," but rather a "small plaza with trees and benches and a generous park."[117] Whereas Jane Jacobs would later identify these "busy corners" as crucial to the dynamic of the urban community,

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[115] Mumford, "From Utopia Parkway Turn East, 5.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid, 7.

Mumford wanted nothing more than the ample park space that Fresh Meadows had to offer.[118]

Mumford's near obsession with green-space spoke to one of his greatest fears about metropolitan life, that, in the "paper dream city" of the megalopolis, man is effectively distanced from the raw experiences of life itself.

> As the pavement spreads, nature is pushed farther away: the whole routine divorces itself more completely from the soil, from the visible presence of life and growth and decay, birth and death: the slaughterhouse and the cemetery are equally remote, and their tragic processes are equally hidden. The ecstatic greeting of life, the tragic celebration of death, linger on merely as mumbled forms in the surviving churches. This divorce from nature has serious physiological dangers that the utmost scruples of medical care scarcely rectify.[119]

Mumford's concern for city-form is that it essentially disconnects man not only from the natural world, but also from his natural self. Here, the impact of the British Romantics and the American transcendentalists on Mumford's organicism is evident. As an organism, mankind is a product of the natural world, and thus, can only achieve self-fulfillment when in some kind of contact with nature. Not only does the destruction of nature present "serious physiological dangers" for city dwellers, but in a culture oriented around large industrial cities, Mumford saw the entire nation at risk of losing touch with nature and the shared-experiences that formed their local culture, and feared deeply "a world whose immense potential for variety has been sacrificed to a low metropolitan standardization."[120]

This "immense potential for variety," however, is what would save the city for Mumford. What separates a place like Fresh Meadows, Queens from its suburban

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[118] McCann, 39.
[119] Mumford, *Culture of Cities* 254, 225.
[120] Ibid, 255.

counterparts with even more open, green space to offer, is the fact that, as a piece of the larger fabric of the metropolis, Fresh Meadows was a part of the "contrapuntal organization" that was distinct to the urban environment. Indeed, this contrapuntal organization was based in a unique understanding of the cultural dynamic made possible in the urban environment, a recognition of the "essential human need for disharmony and conflict, elements whose acceptance and resolution are indispensable to psychological growth."[121] In the city, the individual has the advantages of interaction with a spectrum of cultures and differing points of view, and is able to become a "dynamic equilibrium of forces" rather than a "fixed mold." Mumford writes in *Culture of Cities*:

> Before man can become fully humanized, the social man must break up into a thousand parts: so that each grain of aptitude, each streak of intelligence, each fiber of special interest, may take a deeper color by mingling with other grains, streaks, and fibers of the same nature.[122]

The city, for Mumford, performed a crucial function in the culture of vitalism that was at the heart of his biotechnic order. It was in the urban community that "civilization becomes stronger through multi-form twisting into a more complex and multi-colored strand." This is vague, but it is significant to note that economic potential of the city, fully realized in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, meant little to him. The city in the emerging biotechnic society of the late twentieth-century was to be, instead, the "culture of life in its higher manifestations;" it was a geography of self-actualization and possibility, uniquely capable of impacting the

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[121] Ibid, 485.
[122] Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, 480.

development of each individual, paving the way for healthy collective action and civic life, and generating a true "unity out of diversity."[123]

Such an urban environment, however, was only truly possible for Mumford under a planning authority that was willing to recognize this essential function of the city. Indeed, without the planning of benevolent forces seeking to promote the biological necessities of life, the city could also be "crystallized chaos" and a breeding ground for "the fascist cult of death," particularly when left in the hands of those seeking pecuniary gain.[124] He needed an authority with the power to redesign whole cities, an authority that could control its population, industry, and social organization. For a city like New York, the first task would inevitably be to "tear down the shabby, obsolescent" industrial buildings that were clotted at its core, in order to make way for the superblock and the park space that would comprise the biotechnic City of Tomorrow.

[123] Ibid, 492.
[124] Ibid, 12.

Between the Democratic Ideal and Nowhere

"For now we see as through a glass darkly but then—but then—"
—Invisible Man[125]

If Bliss Protean Rinehart represents Ellison's vision of the city of possibility, the dialectical alternative to the Brotherhoodian logic that results in the sacrifice of Harlem, it is a qualified vision. As the invisible man tells us in the epilogue, although Rinehart correctly perceives the chaos at the root of American experience ("Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it"), the invisible man finds his lifestyle distasteful and ultimately misguided (576). Living by the same philosophy as the invisible man's grandfather, a former slave, Rinehart's major flaw is that he doesn't realize that his fate is *intertwined* with that of his city, and ultimately his country: "Weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" asks the invisible man in the novel's epilogue (575). Rinehart correctly perceives the absurd range of possibilities afforded to him by the metropolis, but his instinct towards nihilistic manipulation reveals an indifference to his fellow man that was contrary to

[125] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 491. See Corinthians 13:22 : "For now we see as through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known."

the collective implications of the central idea of the Ellisonian intellectual project, democracy.

Democracy, for Ellison, was a Burkean "god-term" that, as he argues in "Little Man at Chehaw Station," simply in its linguistic formation "nudges us toward that state of human rectitude … transcendent order, perfection." As Americans, "all that we do exists in the magnitude of . . . . [democracy's] intricate symbolism" for Ellison.[126] Indeed, democracy and its implications steered the writer through the course of his intellectual career, and informed the way he navigated questions of culture, identity, and social organization, in a manner quite similar to the formative impact that the ' theory of organicism had on Mumford's career. As evidenced rather explicitly in essays like "The Little Man At Chehaw Station" (1978) or "Going to the Territory" (1979), Ellison understood democracy not simply as a political system, but as an entire theory of history.

Like Mumford, democracy for Ellison, was crucially based in the realm of culture. Issues of equality of wealth or station, or representation in government were ultimately secondary to his larger ideal of democratic cultural exchange and freedom of individual expression. Indeed, as the invisible man tells us in the epilogue, "diversity is the word", and a multi-pluralist ideal of many different cultures existing in unison was at the foundation of Ellisonian project.

Much as in Mumford's case, however, the complications of his pluralistic ideal would become apparent as Ellison attempted to work it out more fully, and are made particularly visible in his understanding of the city. Like Mumford, Ellison's

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[126] Ralph Ellison, "Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *Going to the Territory.* (New York: Random House, 1986), 18.

vision would take on a binary-style understanding that divided quite sharply the good city wherein his democratic ideals of cultural exchange were enacted, and the bad city, best illustrated in his 1948 essay "Harlem is Nowhere" that was a concentration of chaos and oppression. He envisioned an American city without the legacies of industrialization—segregation, institutionalized racism among them— that had made such cultural exchange possible. By celebrating the potential of the urban environment while ultimately discounting its industrial past and economic *raison d'être*, Ellison, like Mumford, was effectively anticipating and imagining the post-industrial metropolis.

At the root of democracy, Ellison placed a central emphasis on the task of achieving individual self-definition, a task that he understood as coupled with an equally profound absurdity. For Ellison, American democracy presented "an incalculable scale of possibilities for self-creation." At the same time, it abounded with uncertain "mysteries," and "pathologies," that ultimately bespoke the underlying chaos of the human condition. For Ellison, this chaos was perhaps nowhere better evidenced than in the cultural history of the African-American people, or in the neighborhood that he lived in the years that he developed as an intellectual and writer— Harlem. Indeed, the classic example of Ellisonian absurdity was to be found near his Harlem apartment on 151st and Riverside, where, in a 1979 essay, Ellison describes once observing a "light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual… who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian, or a mixed-breed American Indian to a strayed member of

certain tribes of Jews."[127] Ellison's fascination with this man is on account of both his improbable display of cultural combinations and the confident vigor in which he makes such an unreal set of eccentricities his own. After watching the man pull up in a "shiny blue new Volkswagen Beetle decked out with a gleaming Rolls Royce radiator", Ellison describes observing him in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station":

> Clad in handsome black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches of English tailoring, he took the curb wielding—with an ultra-pukka-sahib haughtiness—a leather riding crop. A dashy dashiki (as bright and as many-colored as the coat that initiated poor Joseph's troubles in biblical times) flowed from his broad shoulders down to the arrogant, military flare of his breeches-tops, while six feet, six inches or so above his heels, a black Homburg hat, tilted at a jaunty angle, floated majestically on the crest of his huge Afro-coiffed head.[128]

Ellison goes on, in further amazement:

> He proceeded to unlimber an expensive Japanese single-lens reflex camera, position it atop the ornamental masonry balustrade which girds Riverside Park in that area, and activate its self-timer. Then, with a ballet leap across the walk, he assumed a position beside his car. There he rested his elbow upon its top, smiled, and gave himself sharp movie director's commands as to desired poses, then began taking a series of self-portraits. This done, he placed the camera upon the hood of his Volkswagen and took another series of self-shots in which, manipulating a lengthy ebony cigarette holder, he posed himself in various fanciful attitudes against the not-too-distant background of the George Washington Bridge.[129]

For Ellison, this flamboyant man provided a demonstration of the cultural complexity of the American democratic identity, an identity not to be limited to "the somewhat comic clashing of styles" but rather to found in "the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition."[130] The medley of cultural styles from which he chose to present himself was evidence of "the American compulsion to improvise upon the

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[127] Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," 23
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid, 24.
[130] Ibid.

given" and suggested "new possibilities of perfection" in defiance of the "traditional Western aesthetic."[131]

However, the vitality embedded in this 1979 description lies in great contrast to the psychosis through which Ellison framed the same sort of eccentric street style in his 1948 essay, "Harlem is Nowhere." Originally commissioned to report on the newly established Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, being run free of charge in a Harlem cellar, but left unpublished until 1964, "Harlem is Nowhere" is Ellison's portrait of a distressed people lost in the chaos of a "ghetto maze." He structures the piece around a few foundational questions, and a complicated answer: "Who is this total Negro whom the clinic seeks to know? What is the psychological character of the scene in which he dwells; how describe the past which drags into this scene, and what is the future toward which he stumbles and becomes confused? Let us begin with the scene: Harlem."[132]

As Ellison's essay goes on to argue, the working-class residents of Harlem in the 1940s were an uprooted people. They had been torn from the familiar agricultural lifestyle and the clearly defined racial order they had known in the South, and left to wander in the unfamiliar world of the Northern metropolis. The city becomes for Ellison, then, not just a social or economic environment, but a psychic landscape as well. The physical reality of Harlem—its "streets that explode monotonously skyward with spires and crosses of churches and clutter under foot with garbage and decay," and "its crumbling buildings with littered area-ways, ill-smelling halls and vermin invaded rooms"—is a counterpart to the psychological distress that characterizes the

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," 295.

experience of living there for Ellison.[133] In this decaying industrial neighborhood, the "folk sensibilities" that had defined African-American culture in the South have been crushed by the reality of "urban slum conditions" and the "vortex of industrialism."[134]

Part of this vortex, is the "further triumph of technology over humanism." Here, Ellison gives the example of bebop—in his eyes a "near-themeless technical virtuosity"— and the mechanization of daily life in the Northern city, which is characterized by "movements geared to the time clock." Virtually channeling Mumford here, Ellison writes that "without institutions to give him direction…the indiviudal feels that his world and his personality are out of key…The phrase 'I'm nowhere' expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable, recognized place in society."[135]

The result is the "surreal fantasy" that characterizes everyday life in the district. Ellison describes visions of men running through traffic throwing imaginary grenades, tells stories of brutal domestic violence, and recounts an unnerving scene where "two men hold a third while a lesbian slashes him to death with a razor blade."[136] Life in Harlem, Ellison goes on to say has "become a masquerade" evidenced all the more by the "*exotic costumes*" of its residents: "Those who cannot afford to hire a horse wear riding habits; others who could not afford a hunting trip or who seldom attend sporting events carry shooting sticks" (emphasis added).[137]

For Ellison, in 1948, in other words, outlandish fashion styles were not a symbol of a democratic culture but a sign of cultural chaos that led to mass individual

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[133] Ibid, 295-296.
[134] Ibid, 296.
[135] Ibid, 300.
[136] Ibid, 297.
[137] Ibid, 297

destabilization. The cultural medley of Harlem street fashion was a "desperate search for identity" enacted on the city streets; it was, essentially, a confused response to the "forces of segregation", indicative of a negated cultural identity.[138] Harlemites, for Ellison, were a lost people, alienated from their surroundings, whose "whole lives [had] become a search for answers to the questions: Who am I, Why am I, and Where?" As the essay's title suggests, he understood the neighborhood to be a sort of black hole, a "Nowhere", whose people were so lost in the "Northern labyrinth", that they had been stripped of a positive, working identity.

All historical accounts point to Harlem being a desperate and chaotic place in the harsh economic times of 1930s and forties. Persistent segregation abetted the social ills that were emerging all over America's cities in those decades, and in Harlem, the poverty was extreme. In the 1940s, it was the both the most overcrowded and the poorest district in New York. There the unemployment rate was five times higher than in the rest of New York; yet despite that, the average Harlemite still paid more for the neighborhood's notoriously poor housing stock than his white working-class counterpart.[139] Arrests, various diseases—particularly endemic tuberculosis—and criminal violence were wildly disproportionate to the rest of the city as well, and suffered all the more faced with the neglect and outright discrimination among the city's local government.[140]

In the essay, Ellison also hints at a counter-vision of Harlem that will ultimately blossom in the more celebratory pieces he wrote in later decades. The city, after all, he notes, was where "men whose grandparents still believe in magic, prepare

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[138] Ibid, 297.
[139] Chreyl Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 182.
[140] Ibid.

optimistically to become atomic scientists," and more generally where young black children could grow up to hold top positions in middle-class society. Cheryl Greenberg's account *Or Does It Explode?* attests to this; the average level of education did see improvement as the Depression progressed, and a small middle-class endured in neighborhoods like Sugar Hill.[141] In this combined sense, then for Ellison, as the scene of both the "Negro's death agony" and the setting of his "self-transcendence", Harlem was evidence of the dialectic at the heart of modern society, it "explains the nature of a world so fluid and shifting that often *within the mind* the real and the unreal merge" (emphasis added).[142]

Ellison was to grapple with the dueling attitudes revealed in "Harlem Is Nowhere" throughout his career. One way to understand their interaction is to recognize that, in emphasizing the dialectical, as well as psychological and cultural complexity of African-American life, Ellison sought to counter the reductive environmental determinism that he thought characterized the dominant sociology of race in the mid-century United States. Indeed, he formally rejected the notion of strict environmental determinism in a 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's sociological study *An American Dilemma*. Responding to Myrdal's claim that black culture was essentially a by-product of white racism, Ellison wrote:

> "Can a people live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot the Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma? . . . It does not occur to Myrdal that many of the

[141] Ibid, 190.
[142] Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," 297

> Negro cultural manifestations he considers merely reflective might also embody a *rejection* of what he considers "higher values."[143]

As Kenneth Warren has noted, "Ellison was seeking a dynamic, even dialectical account of the Negro that would acknowledge the history of racial repression but not characterize black people as merely prisoners of a repressive environment."[144] Indeed, the dynamic runs through Ellison's essays and fiction. In "Going to the Territory," he remarks "Geography is fate… .[Yet] [i]t is not geography alone which determines the quality of life and culture. These depend upon the courage and the personal culture of the individuals who make their homes in any given locality."[145] Ellison stressed repeatedly, over decades of writing, the power of people to shape their realities and culture, despite the influence of a surrounding environment or social heritage. One of his purest expressions of this dynamic occurs in *Invisible Man* when, shortly after Tod Clifton's death, the protagonist encounters three young men bedecked in flamboyant zoot suits, who, in their styles and attitudes, anticipate the forthcoming portrait of Rinehart. As the invisible man struggles to understand Clifton's death, he begins to become aware of a side of Harlem that he had not previously understood or appreciated. Now, viewing these flashily dressed young men, the narrator sees not the marks of psychosis that Ellison had discussed in "Harlem is Nowhere," but an opportunity to formulate an entire theory of history:

> They were men out of time—unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten…. But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something

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[143] Ellison, "An *American Dilemma*: A Review," in *Shadow and Act*, 315.
[144] Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6.
[145] Ellison, "Going to the Territory," 135.

> uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll, taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand. (441)

Seeing these men on the subway, up from the South just like he was, allows the invisible man a brief glimpse into a vision of history outside of the determinist logic espoused by the Brotherhood and more generally by the Communist groups that Ellison himself was involved with in the 1930s and early 1940s. His alternative to their strictly causal, often economically based understanding, is perhaps made even more clear as the invisible man gets off the subway in Harlem, where the revelation continues:

> Now, moving through the crowds along 125th street, I was painfully aware of other men dressed like the boys, and of girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles. They'd been there all along, but somehow I'd missed them. They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them. I looked into the design of their faces, hardly a one that was unlike someone I'd known down South. Forgotten names sang through my head like forgotten scenes in dream. I moved with the crowd, listening… the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid inadequate words? (443)

Here, Harlem itself presents the invisible man with a chaotic image of urban confusion that is also a true vision of history, evidence of his earlier claim that history moves "not like an arrow, but like a boomerang" (6). This boomerang is enacted on daily 125th street, where all the faces that make up the crowd remind the narrator of a similar face that "he'd known down South." The psychosis-induced "surreal

variations of downtown styles" present themselves here as an artful reworking of conventional sartorial codes. They are evidence of an identity generated not as an irrational response to racism, but as a creative expression of ingenuity.[146] "These fellows whose bodies seemed—what had one of my teachers said of me?—'You're like one of these African sculptures, distorted in the interest of a design. 'Well, what design and whose?" (440). In "Harlem is Nowhere," Ellison had described the fashion and the popular culture of Harlem as part of a broader pattern of behavior also evidenced in violent crime, and he had seen all these features of Harlem life as symptoms of the uprooting and marginalization of African-Americans. In the latter part of *Invisible Man*, Ellison inverts that diagnosis, and views Harlem street life evidence of vitality and creativity. In effect, the closing passages of the novel, along with Ellison's essays, propose a theory of culture and of history to match and counter that offered by the Brotherhood or by any determinist sociology— a theory that sought to account for the assertion of individuality, life, and ultimately, the humanity that was embodied in these sculptures and visibly evidenced for him in Harlem street clothing. This was to defy understandings of "progress", and was instead bound fundamentally to the non-rational and a highly democratic belief in the endurance of the individual. [147]

Ellison's vision here is remarkably similar to the dynamic that informed Lewis Mumford's organicism, which had developed out of the theory of "life insurgent" that Mumford had taken from Geddes. Indeed, the details of how Ellison's

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[146] Heise, *Urban Underworlds*, 163.
[147] Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Black American Authors*, (New York: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1968), 146-147.

dynamic might actually function are effectively summarized in Casey Nelson Blake's account of this Geddes' concept:

> Underlying virtually everything Geddes (and later Mumford) wrote, there was a faith in the creative response of living organisms to their environment: what Mumford called Geddes' philosophy of 'life insurgent.' Geddes held that 'every form of life… is marked not merely by adjustment to the environment, but insurgence against the environment.' It followed that an organism was '*both the victim of fate and the master of destiny*: it lives no less by domination than by acceptance.' In human life, 'this insurgence reaches its apex' because *historical understanding* and *aesthetic experience* enable men and women, on occasion, to transcend their given surroundings. (emphasis added) [148]

Faith in life itself, in the potential of the living to remake and revivify the material world, was the guiding principle behind Geddes' and Mumford's hopes for cultural renewal. For Mumford, the city, in its potential for intricate socialization, was this renewal's ideal and necessary setting. As evidenced by the geography of *Invisible Man* and in essays like "Harlem is Nowhere" and "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ellison seems to have been inspired by a similar idea. In fact, there is a glimpse to be had of Ellison's vision of cultural renewal in *communitas* in his understanding of the fundamental workings of the American vernacular.[149] For Ellison, the vernacular was the medium in which man's "ongoing task of naming, defining, and creating a consciousness of who and what we have come to be" is most apparent. The vernacular was the site of the synthesis of traditions and unwritten histories which are "always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition has worked in the past." Ellison writes, "I see the vernacular as a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are

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[148] Blake, *Beloved Community*, 191-192.
[149] Nathan A. Scott, Jr. "Ellison's Vision of *Communitas,*" in *Invisible Man: A Casebook*, John Callahan, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 114-116

continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves."[150]

Ellison's view of American vernacular culture could be rather easily transmitted into his philosophy on the city. The city, as the concentration of written and unwritten histories and as an entity that owes practically every element of its form to human culture, is the ideal place for a medium like the vernacular to flourish. Fittingly, in *Invisible Man*, the city plays a crucial role in the process of the narrator's achievement of self-definition and is the site in which he is finally able to fuse his agrarian past to his understanding of himself, as for instance, when he buys a yam off of a street vendor, himself a product of another unwritten history:

> I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or what was proper. To hell with all that. . . If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be! (264)

The yam here is essentially imported into the city from a different culture, and presents itself in a such a way that the invisible man can have a meaningful interaction with it in a new and liberating context. Notable, too, the city is where Ellison himself became a writer, after arriving in New York with vague hopes and artistic ambitions. [151] The city then, working like the vernacular as an arena for cultural possibility, revision, and ownership, becomes an environment where "the

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[150] Ellison, "Going to the Territory," 139-140. See Megan Rust Mustain, "Utopian Rhythms: Ralph Ellison and the Jazz Aesthetic," Revista Epaco Academico. http://www.espacoacademico.com.br/096/96esp_mustain-ing.htm#_ftnref25

[151] As the invisible man says, "The freedom to eat yams on the street was far less than I expected coming to the city" (267). For this history, see Jackson, *Emergence of Genius*, 161-263

styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present," and, as a collective effort, is a "gesture towards perfection."[152]

The importance of the collective in the vernacular dynamic is revealing in itself. As in the "Melting Pot" ideal that Ellison would espouse in his second collection of essays, *Going to the Territory*, the vernacular not only benefits from, but is dependent on a variety of cultural influences to retain its vitality and suggests the power of the open community that creates it. Indeed, as Nathan Scott has noted, *communitas*— a vision of community coined by anthropologist Victor Turner that connotes more fluidity than the static "community"— seems to be at the heart of the Ellisonian intellectual project, to a degree quite similar to the importance of community for the Young Americans.[153] In fact, *Invisible Man* provides some of the best dramatic evidence of the Young American conviction that self-transcendence was only possible in accordance with others, most notably when the invisible man is finishing his first speech for the Brotherhood in a Harlem theater house. Giving the speech before he has been able to be indoctrinated, the invisible works with the crowd and builds off of their responses, until he reaches a climatic finish:

> '*Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now… as I stand here before you!* It's something that I'm sure I'd never experience anywhere else in the world. I feel your eyes upon me. I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel… I feel… I feel suddenly that I have become *more human*. Do you understand? Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong… I feel that here tonight, in this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived… SISTERS! BROTHERS! WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS! THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW'S WORLD!' (345-346)

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[152] Ellison, "Going to the Territory," 140

[153] Nathan A. Scott, Jr. "Ellison's Vision of *Communitas,*" in *Invisible Man: A Casebook*, John Callahan, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 114-116

The invisible man's final, emotional declaration is no mere rhetorical device to move the crowd. This explosion of patriotic fraternity points to a communitarian vision of self-realization, only achievable through shared forms of cultural expression and full participation in a democratic culture— the same vision that formed the structural elements of the Young American philosophy.[154] By engaging with a long-standing African-American oral tradition *in accordance* with this large, supportive crowd, the invisible man is able to reach a higher, "more human" feeling that is markedly less concerned with social conceptions of being a "man" and much more concerned with feeling more truly "alive" among his fellow citizens.

However, as with Mumford, Ellison's utopian vision of collective living could turn into a nightmare when applied to the huge populations of the modern metropolis. Indeed, in the prologue of *Invisible Man*, the streets of New York impart a deep sense of alienation in the narrator and ultimately lead him back into his underground hole. The narrator describes a street scene from a previous trip into the outside world:

> You're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy . . . . You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (4)

Critics have always recognized that this scene summarizes Ellison's view of what it's like to be black in a racist society, and thus to be denied the crucial dignity of "recognition" (4). But it's worth noting that Ellison's depiction of the racist society is here inextricable from a classic vision of the metropolis as a chaos of isolated and

[154] Blake, *Beloved Community*, 2-3.

warring individuals—one that could be at home in Mumford's negative depictions of the industrial city. Ellison holds the New York masses, the populace of a congested megalopolis, responsible for much of the narrator's daily sense of invisibility. This is not just the experience of the narrator, however, nor does it seem limited to his experience as an African-American; Ellison's use of the second person in this moment amplifies a universalizing effect. He seems to be suggesting that this is the quotidian for all who live within the New York megalopolis. Strikingly contrary to the cultural affirmation to be found in collective efforts like the vernacular, the narrator's experience in the masses leads him to questioning his own existence.

In a sense, all that is wrong with Rinehartism is also due to the kind of urban congestion that Mumford decried. If Rinehart's fluidity comes from an organic understanding of his urban environment, his nihilism stems from an anonymity that enables him to manipulate his fellow citizens. There is a certain level of hostile indifference to the routine deception that characterizes Rinehart's lifestyle, akin to the "free-floating hostility" that Ellison identifies in "Harlem Is Nowhere" that "permeates the atmosphere" of the neighborhood.[155] Here, Ellison seems to almost share another characteristic with Mumford Throughout his architectural writing, Mumford argues that, if left undirected by benevolent, regional planning, urban design and archicture would take the debasing forms dictated by market forces and displayed by corporate developers. [156] In this mode, Mumford suggests that undeveloped, human creative enterprise results, not in vibrant community, but in a chaotic environment. In Rinehart, Ellison similarly shows how, if lacking benevolent

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[155] Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," 301.
[156] Mumford, *Culture of Cities* , 366.

direction, creative energy can quickly descend into chaos, which is perhaps best evidenced by the novel's concluding, destructive riot.

Rinehart's vision of "hot fluidity" rings true for the narrator, but ultimately Rinehart himself is a false character. He never once makes an appearance in the text. The invisible man says himself, "I wanted to know Rinehart and yet, I thought, I'm upset because I know I don't have to know him, that simply becoming aware of his existence, being mistaken for him, is enough to convince me that Rinehart is real (498)." As Thomas Heise has noted, Rinehart could be something of a racial "phantasm," a "congealed set of social anxieties about race and space that assumes the status of being real through discourse and rumor," a fantasy of the racial underworld "indistinguishable from reality" because the discourse surrounding it, generated by sociological studies like Myrdal's essentially "helps create the environment for this world's emergence."[157] In his many occupations, Rinehart does seem to embody the entirety of an underworld, and the very fact that he lacks an individual character seems contrary to Ellison's democratic ideal. However, the mode in which Ellison describes Rinehart, and ultimately all the other black zoot-suited characters, seems equally revealing about the part that the author himself plays in this discourse. Although the underworld that the invisible man briefly encounters in the Rinehart sequence is supposedly real, it is tinged with a distinct feeling of the unreal or surreal because he is rapidly moving through it on absurd pretenses. Rinehart never actually exists for the invisible man, and he may never have existed in any true form for Ellison.

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[157] Heise, *Urban Underworlds,* 154.

Consider for a moment the distance that characterizes Ellison's description of the flamboyantly dressed man with the Homburg in "Little Man at Chehaw Station" or the people the invisible man watches on 125th Street or the way that the narrator reads the enigmatic young men on the subway: "I studied them closely until they left the train, their shoulders rocking, their heavy heel plates clicking remote, cryptic messages in the brief silence of the train's stop" (441). All of the invisible man's and Ellison's encounters with these people are at considerable distance, and one often gets the impression that the writer, like the invisible man, is trying to piece together the "remote, cryptic messages" transmitting from their clothing and posture rather than engaging with them on a conversational or any sort of personal level. The one exception is Tod Clifton—the invisible man's fellow Brotherhood leader— who "would have known these men better than I. He always knew them" (441). But Clifton is killed before he can make any notable contribution other than his final act, selling paper Sambo dolls on the street in Harlem—a startling regression perhaps akin to the reductionist, stereotype-perpetuating socio-realism that Ellison began to see in the fiction of his former mentor Richard Wright by the late 1940s.[158]

In short, the abstraction that characterizes Mumford's celebration of the city is mirrored by Ellison's similarly distant, idealized view. Up close, in essays like "Harlem is Nowhere" Ellison found Harlem unsettling and at times deeply troubling. Seen from a distance, however, it becomes something to interpret and celebrate. Indeed, in perhaps the same manner that Mumford resembles his nemesis Robert Moses, the invisible man can be seen as resembling his eventual enemy, the Brotherhood, in his assertion that although the men on the subway might be "the

[158] Jackson, *Emergence of Genius,* 350-353, 401.

bearers of something precious", they still need to the cultural stewardship of an intellectual like himself to recognize it for themselves. For the invisible man these men were the "bearers of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated *because* living outside the realm of history, *there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it* (441, emphasis added)." So much as Mumford shares with Moses one important quality—the view that some kind of central planning will be necessary to design the good city out of the wreckage of the bad city—Ellison shares a similar quality with the Brotherhood: the idea that informed leadership will be necessary to give these people the meaning that saves them from the potential chaos of city and the nihilism of modernity.

Crucial as well to our understanding are the routine antagonistic interactions that the invisible man has with the people of Harlem. One of the most revealing examples is when the invisible man is leaving Mary Rambo's Harlem apartment building, and he wakes early to hear a man on the floor below banging on the steam pipes, which have gone out in the dead of winter. "Suddenly I was across the room in a bound, pounding the pipe furiously with my shoe heel. 'Stop it you ignorant fool!' My head was splitting…. If only I knew who it was, I thought, looking for something heavy with which to strike back. If only I knew!" The fact here is that the invisible man *does not know* his neighbor, and to get him to finally quiet down, he reaches for something heavy: a "very black" small, cast-iron bank in the figure of a "red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro" with white eyes and "enormous grin" (319). Quickly, the invisible man grabs the bank and slams it against the pipes in response to his frustrating neighbor.

Here, Ellison seems to be rather clearly suggesting how the invisible man resorts to crude stereotype and racial slur in combating his frustrating neighbors. This could be considered as both an allegory of Ellison's increasing alienation from the protest fiction that dominated the African-American literary scene in the 1940s, *and* as insight into the essence of the invisible man's lasting relationship with the people of Harlem: he doesn't really know them, they frustrate him, and he might occasionally find himself thinking about them in the hateful stereotypes despite the fact that he is African-American himself.

It is crucial also to consider the invisible man's own geography during the writing of his memoirs as well—alone, in a cellar, below the borders of Harlem—which might inform our understanding of Ellison's own relationship to the city and people that make up his novel. Ellison had a complex relationship with Harlem throughout the years that he lived there, and in his insistence in 1948 that "Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth," he could easily have been talking about his own relationship with the uptown district.[159] He was admittedly a suspect character as a writer in the neighborhood, had tumultuous relationships with those who lived near him, and as mentioned earlier, made repeated attempts to escape Harlem's limits as he was working on *Invisible Man*—writing in Vermont, a midtown office building, and at various locations on Long Island in the 1940s.[160] According to his "Working Notes" for the novel, Ellison originally struggled deeply with resolving his narrator's new sense of himself and his Harlem environs, and had originally intended to conclude the text with the narrator

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[159] "Harlem is Nowhere," 296.
[160] Ellison, *Invisible Man* ix; Jackson, *Emergence of Genius,* 333.

being chased off by neighborhood rioters and forced into a decaying building—after which, he must "move to another part of the city, full of resentment" and becomes a Rinehart-like preacher.[161]

In other words, in his first plans for *Invisible Man*, Ellison expected to register his own discomfort with Harlem by imagining a protagonist who failed in his ambition to lead the city's people and who became instead an object of their distrust and violent animosity.[162] The novel was implicitly not to be about the protagonist's deep sympathy with his people, but about his failure to understand them. It was not until Ellison figured out the symbolism of the invisible man's underground cellar that he came up with a more satisfying resolution to the novel. Fittingly, it is only removed from Harlem, in his underground hole, that the invisible man is able to fully "disarm" himself and attain some sense of self-identity. Robert Butler has compared the narrator's descent underground to what the "the frontier was for Thoreau" who urged his readers to become the "Lewis and Clark… of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes."[163] The cellar, by comparison, allows Ellison's narrator to explore his own "lower frequencies" and arrive at a revitalized conception of himself that seems contingent on being alone, away from the whirlwind of Harlem and the pressures of the outside world.

However much the invisible man and Ellison may have benefited outside the city in their personal depths, ultimately both figures felt urged back to Harlem. A

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[161] Ellison, "Working Notes for *Invisible Man*," *Invisible Man: A Case-Book,* ed. John Callahan, 29.
[162] This theme was transposed into the Jolly Dollar bar scene in the final version of the novel as the invisible man-as-Rinehart finds himself in a totally unprovoked confrontation (487-490).
[163] Robert Butler, "Down From Slavery: Invisible Man's Descent into City and the Discovery of Self," (American Studies Journal, Vol. 29, No. 2: Fall 1988), 15.

1947 journal entry on Long Island, for instance—as uncovered by biographer Lawrence Jackson—reveals a grave ambivalence about his locale, despite the fact that he was in the midst of a creative period: "Here the nerves may relax their tension, but the troubled heart finds peace only in spiritual suicide."[164] Indeed, despite the chaos of the city and his alienation from his Harlem neighbors, Ellison's fundamental belief in the power of "antagonistic cooperation," no doubt played a role in his repeated return to his old neighborhood—not just in the 1940s, but also throughout his life. Very much like Mumford's notion of "contrapuntal organization," Ellison's understanding of antagonistic cooperation stressed the power of the many-faceted group to transcend the sum of its parts through interaction and ultimately some form of integration. This understanding was at the root of Ellison's ultimate metaphor for the American experiment and his other artistic devotion, jazz music. After witnessing a number of Brown University students conduct an argument over *Invisible Man*, Ellison compared the dynamic to the inner-workings of jazz-style improvisation:

> For it was as though a group of sophisticated minds were functioning like a group of jazz musicians and were working in a spirit of antagonistic cooperation to explore its hidden possibilities. In a jam session, this process works in such a way that not only is the original theme enhanced, but the listener is compelled to experience a feeling of catharsis.[165]

Antagonistic cooperation was the process by which the American democracy—and the city— flourished for Ellison. Although it generated moments of seeming disaster (i.e. the Harlem Riots), the "delicately poised unity of divergences" that defined the

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[164] Jackson, *The Emergence of Genius,* 340.
[165] Ellison, "Going to the Territory", 129

country ultimately pushed the nation closer to a realization of the democratic ideal.[166] Steven Schryer has suggested that Ellison's account of American identity, based around this multi-pluralist notion of "antagonistic cooperation" or "delicately poised unity of divergences", is a direct echo of the most prominent aesthetic theory that was available to the writer in the late 1940's, the New Critical definition of poetry. For the New Critics, the poem, as expressed in Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), "unites the like with the unlike… . This unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to algebraic formula. It is a positive unity, not a negative; represents not a residue but an achieved harmony." [167] While this may adumbrate Ellison's understanding of a harmony of divergences quite neatly, Schryer's comparison makes a more crucial suggestion as to Ellison's distance from the Harlem that he often wrote about, that Ellison seems not to have drawn these conclusions from opening his window and observing his neighborhood, but rather, retrieved his answers in literature, and could only apply them to his surroundings when he thought of Harlem as something like a poem.

The benefits of the social incongruity of Ellison's (very Mumfordian notion) of "harmony from disharmony" lay in cultural exchange. His most evocative example comes at the end of "Little Man at the Chehaw" station, where he describes an experience he had working for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, venturing into a dark tenement building and overhearing a heated yet unlikely debate in dialect of "foul-mouthed black workingmen" over "which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano." Walking in the apartment to discover four

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[166] Richard Errol Purcell, *Ralph Ellison and the American Pursuit of Humanism*, (Pittsburgh: ProQuest, 2008), 206-211.
[167] As quoted by Steven Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 68.

burly coal-heavers, the young author finally works up the courage to ask one of them for an explanation.

> 'Where on earth did you gentlemen learn so much about grand opera?'
>
> For a moment he stared at me with parted lips; then, pounding the mantelpiece with his palm, he collapsed with a roar of laughter. As the laughter of the others erupted like a string of giant firecrackers I looked on with growing feelings of embarrassment and insult….Finally, wiping tears coal-dust stained tears from his cheeks, he interrupted his laughter long enough to initiate me into the mystery.
>
> 'Hell, son,' he laughed, 'we learn it down at the Met, that's where…'
>
> 'You learned it *where?'*
>
> 'At the Metropolitan Opera, just like I told you. Strip us fellows down and give us some costumes and we make about the finest damn bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Hell, we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans for *years!'*"[168]

This scene is made uniquely possible by its urban setting. Nowhere else would the tenement building, the coal heaver, and the Metropolitan Opera be able to exist in such dynamic relationship but the large urban center in the 1930s. These men are the ultimate representatives of both Ellison's belief in the cultural possibilities enabled by the urban environment, and his faith in the individual to make the most from an incongruous social world. This was the essence of Ellison's idealized vision of the American experiment, and it was to be found in neighborhoods like Harlem on a daily basis where "our old familiar pasts, in juxtaposition with elements appropriated from other backgrounds, incongruously transformed, exert an energy (or synergy) of a different order than that generated by their separate parts. And this with incalculable results... Even more mysteriously they provide for exciting and most unexpected metamorphoses within the self-creating personality." [169]

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[168] Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," 37.
[169] Ibid, 29.

Significantly, however, the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and seventies would take great issue with the kind of cultural interaction extolled here. Writers like Amiri Baracka disparaged Ellison's refusal to acknowledge the power structure that was inherent to his examples of cultural interaction. As with the example of the black coal heavers and the Metropolitan Opera, Ellison almost always framed these encounters in a way that showed African-Americans becoming enlightened by encounters with higher forms of Western culture. Here, once again, Ellison's conception of democracy was made more complicated by his alienation from most forms of popular black culture and was further undermined by his own, quite pronounced taste for high-art, like the grand opera, which was largely devoid of African-Americans. Ellison's major rebuttal was that *all* culture spoke to the human condition in important ways, but by the 1960s and the emergent dominance of ethnic politics, he was well on his way to clashing with some of the most prominent Black Nationalist critics. Consequently, Ellison's vision of the "melting pot" fast lost popularity among those who were outwardly concerned about which cultural forms were being melted faster than others, and the writer suffered increasing isolation from the black intellectual community from the 1960s and onward.[170]

Despite his many issues with the metropolis, Ellison's vision of the unique cultural vitalism enabled by the city is eventually what redeemed it for him. This vitalism could take many forms, but ultimately it was most present on the very streets of Harlem itself, which, notably, reveals an earnest populist streak that lies in contrast to how he was depicted by the Black Arts movement. In a 1965 interview, after being

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[170] See Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. (New York: Knopf, 2007), 381- 492.

asked why he chose to move back to Harlem after returning from his two-year stay in Italy with the Rome Prize and the financial success to afford a more upscale locale:

> A place like Harlem has an expressiveness about it which is almost Elizabethan. Things are revealed in speech in the streets. There's a lot of humor and the language is always feeding back to the past; it's throwing up wisdom, it's throwing up patterns.[171]

Asked the same question in another interview that year—indicative, perhaps of the by then quite visible "urban crisis" that had taken hold of the nation's largest cities—Ellison vehemently dismissed what he saw as the routine sociological reduction of complexity of a Harlem that lay beyond statistics. Instead, he had this to say about the neighborhood that witnessed his transformation into a world-renowned novelist:

> There is something else in Harlem, something subjective, willful, and complexly and compellingly human. It is that "something else" that challenges the sociologists who ignore it, and the society which would deny its existence. It is that "something else" which makes or our strength, which makes for our endurance and our promise. This is the proper subject of the Negro American writer.[172]

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The "something else" that drew Ellison back to Harlem was the same "culture of life in its higher manifestations" that redeemed the city for Lewis Mumford in the final pages of *Culture of Cities*. However, this "something else"—not even nameable for Ellison—existed largely in the abstract. The culture of Harlem that Ellison celebrated was considerably removed from the "sociological facts" that characterized the experience of living there for most people— the "Nowhere" that he describes in 1948. Ellison moved back to Harlem for the *expression* to be found there—*despite* the

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[171] Ellison, "Interview with Richard Kostelanetz, 1965" *The Iowa Review*.Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall, 1989), pp. 1-10.
[172] Ellison, "A Very Stern Disicpline," in *Going to the Territory,* 1965.

legacies of industrialization that had originally been the city's *raison d'être*. This was a vision of a city that transcended its industrial roots and became the center of cultural possibility, but also a vision that crucially neglected the means of production that had drawn people there in the first place. Mumford was even more explicit. His ideal, "biotechnic" city was a New York that had been leveled and rebuilt in the model of Central Park. While the city around him erupted into riot, he remained steadfast in his vision of combining the cultural possibilities of urban social form and the pleasures of the natural world.

Ultimately, both Ellison and Mumford yearned for the same thing that the invisible man does, an "authentic existence", one possible only in true *communitas*.[173] They associated the chaos embodied by a Rinehart with the industrial environment in which he was born, and sought instead a city that was united on a cultural foundation. The two were wary of high-modernist schemes in the hands of the "redevelopment front", but above all, eager to move towards their own culturally infused notions of the democratic ideal. The modern city, lying somewhere in between chaos and culture, nowhere and the biotechnic utopia, was only a glimpse at the possibility of a more perfect tomorrow.

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[173] Nathan A. Scott, Jr. "Ellison's Vision of *Communitas*," 111.

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