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Uptown, Downbeat: Mobility, Masculine Self-Fashioning and Occupations of Space in African
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Uptown, Downbeat: Mobility, Masculine Self-Fashioning and Occupations of Space
in African American Urban Narrative Discourse (1962-1972)

Julie Cecilia Godin

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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May we be blessed with setting out, all of us together, for yet other shores.

Abstract

This project examines neglected African American urban narratives produced by male writers from the mid-1960s to mid 1970s, in order to document and interrogate how the production of subjectivities and masculinities are shown to intersect, in these works, with vectors of mobility and modalities of spatial occupation. The study begins with the mobile culture of the Blues, and highlights sophisticated Blues stylings to trace the operation of a language of vagrancy—a discourse of malleability that opens the masculine subject to multiplicity and detachment. It then examines the spectacular, transient, and materialistic player of the urban “barbershop books,” and details, in Robert Beck’s Pimp: The Story of My Life, and in Donald Goines’s Whoreson and Daddy Cool, the exhausting, destructive experiments that permit display and re-invention on the “street.” This vision is supplemented with urban texts that address the subject’s inhabitation of densely peopled space and the enigma of fleshly occupation in urban arrangements of troubling proximity. The work examines Chester Himes’s Blind Man With a Pistol, Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, and Down these Mean Streets, by Piri Thomas, in order to consider the excessive traces of bodily inhabitation and the provocative yet repulsive closeness of an enigmatic neighbour. It then turns to George Cain’s poetic Blueschild Baby and Robert Beck’s Mama Black Widow, to interrogate how these texts address the death drive and delineate the possibility of inhabiting the ruined ghetto with an insistent impulse to endure and resist. Finally, the work considers two texts, Robert Deane Pharr’s S.R.O. and Herbert Simmons’s Man Walking on Eggshells, in which segmented space, proliferating multiplicities, and emergent subjects invite a reading informed by the vocabularies of Gilles Deleuze. The project ends by reading the urban subject as a stylish, agile principle of released motion, creative doubt and active engagement with differences and potentialities.

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Introduction

I took the canteen from my knapsack and gave it a shake. The light sloshing sound echoed in the darkness. Maybe a quarter left. I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. May Kasahara was probably right. This person, this self, this me, finally, was made somewhere else. Everything had come from somewhere else, and it would all go somewhere else. I was nothing but a pathway for the person known as me. (Murakami 262)

Everything that happens to us brings its own duration and extension, and both are vaguely surrounded by a marginal 'more' that runs into the duration and extension of the next thing that comes....It is the same with spaces. On a map I can distinctly see the relation of London, Constantinople, and Peking to the place where I am; in reality I utterly fail to *feel* the facts which the map symbolizes. The directions and distances are vague, confused and mixed. Cosmic space and cosmic time, so far from being the intuitions that Kant said they were, are constructions as patently artificial as any that science can show. The great majority of the human race never use these notions, but live in plural times and spaces, interpenetrant and *durcheinander*. (William James, "Pragmatism and Common Sense")¹

In the novel S.R.O. (1971), by African American author Robert Deane Pharr, Sid Bailey, the text's narrator and the alcoholic resident of a welfare hotel, is urged by his junkie friends and

by the lesbian couple who lives next door to his rented room, to sober up so that he can write a book. As these inhabitants of the hotel-- marginal hustlers, cheap-wine drinkers and addicts-- begin to suggest what he should include in the imagined text, Sid reacts:

“Naw,” I said. “When I write there’s not going to be a junky or a lesbian in the whole damn story. I’m going to write about men screwing women and not each other. And they are all going to drink whiskey like most colored people do.

Besides, if I write anything it’s going to be a play and not a book.”

“Nobody will go see it,” Lorraine said. (335).

The irony of this little outburst is not lost on the reader of S.R.O who, halfway through the work of close to six-hundred pages, has yet to encounter subjects such as those proposed by Sid.

Instead, the Single Room Occupancy hotel of Sid’s first-person account throngs with those who inhabit a plateau of non-normative self-definition, and whose presences are developed in destitution and addiction. The vision proposed by Sid is completely antithetical to the rhetorical and cultural moves performed by the text that constitutes his voice. Remarkably, it is

immediately tagged as unappealing: “Nobody will go see it,” declares Lorraine, a good-natured junkie who wants to advise the fledgling author. Again, a rich vein of irony opens here, as we consider that S.R.O has been out of print for most of its thirty-six year existence (regardless of its apparent adherence to the aesthetic concerns voiced by Lorraine, in her request that Sid “be sure to put in about...us junkies....and all that kinda jazz” [335]). Despite having been reviewed by Jan Carew, upon publication, in the New York Times, S.R.O. is a text that simply vanished. Yet Carew had initially signalled an unusual, fascinating and repulsive intensity about the text:

“You’ll probably hate it,” he wrote, “but you won’t be able to put it down.”² We now know that

the novel was seldom picked up. It has received no critical attention, since 1971, despite having been reprinted in 1998 as part of W.W. Norton's "Old School Books" series.³

S.R.O. joins a large and varied group of texts, written by African American men, and foregrounding the urban milieu, that have been elided from literary canons, cultural surveys and studies, or critical examinations of African American literature. Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim), Donald Goines, George Cain, Robert Deane Pharr—all are writers who have received almost no attention from readers, critics or theorists of African American culture. While some critics, such as Todd Boyd (9) and LaMonda Horton-Stallings have invited study of the neglected works produced by these men, these scholars have chosen to approach the texts in terms of a positioning in hip-hop culture. "I will not call [Goines's work] 'the novel' or 'literature'," asserts Horton-Stallings, "but a ghetto neo-slave narrative" which demonstrates that hip-hop culture "does indeed have a written text" (178). Since hip-hop cultural forms are generally inseparable from productions of the city as the imagined milieu of black presence par excellence, it is not surprising to find that hip-hop culture has to some extent been responsible for keeping these authors within the cultural fabric of urban resonances, if only with contemporary "name drops." Mark Anthony Neal detects, in the work of Bilal Sayeed Oliver, for instance, such a referencing of Goines and Beck (the author, as Iceberg Slim, of Pimp: The Story of my Life) (50). He reads these fleeting signals as confirmation, within hip-hop performance, of an artist's "ability to 'pimp' from the deepness of a black masculinity that is alternately virile, vibrant, visceral, viscous, and vicarious" (Neal 44). It seems then, that what remains of Beck and Goines, is a circulating residue which causes these narrators of the urban space to be allied with a still urgent, still relevant telling of "the Life," but also to be charged—unfairly, as I will show—with exhibiting a troubling commitment to the production of "images and representations" somehow

“too negative, too guttural, too animalistic, and too ‘ghetto’” (Horton-Stallings 182) for the practises of literary scholarship.

My opening quote from S.R.O. is striking for denoting a prescient sense of the problematic, enigmatic lack of responsive readers and scholars that has greeted the urban narratives of this period. While I do not seek to advance a theory explaining the obscurity that has befallen male authors of a significant, compelling cluster of African American urban narratives produced from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, I note that Robert Deane Pharr, George Cain and Piri Thomas all received initial attention from a mainstream press that included their work as “Books of the Times.”⁴ Robert Beck and Donald Goines, as we shall see, were bestselling authors of affordable paperback “barbershop books,” while Chester Himes, exiled in France, was courted and endorsed by Marcel Duhamel and his Gallimard Série Noire (Bell 858). Despite such initial signs of cultural validation, we now find ourselves retrieving these works from an uncanny pocket of oblivion, a deserted ghetto indeed.

My own work, informed by a desire to return these rich, varied, and compelling works to the critical gaze, has consistently confronted a significant impediment to productive, multiple readings of urban narratives: the question of authenticity. This issue is particularly troubling when the black male author of a given text is perceived to be somehow producing his life as text, as has been the case with Eldridge Cleaver, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis and to some extent George Cain and Robert Deane Pharr.⁵ As we undertake the recuperative task of retrieving these texts, we must be mindful of a further element that my opening excerpt from S.R.O. invites us to consider, namely the possibility of reading these works of the urban space in recognition of their sophistication, their artifice, their refusal to represent (with all of the subtext that this word carries in African American culture),⁶ and their self-aware indication of the gap that stretches

between texts and what “most colored people do.” If we take into account Neal’s remarks concerning Goines and Beck, we also discover that the creation of narrative inflected by urban space is understood to converge with the production of masculinities from a chaotic, immeasurable array of possibilities. As we shall see, these neglected ghetto narratives texts do not proffer the static vision invoked by Sid in my opening excerpt. What S.R.O tells us, and what each of the narratives and cultural manifestations examined in this project alerts us to notice, is the extent to which these texts stage magnificent, chaotic performances of masculine self-fashioning—complex, mindful, sophisticated work, experimented in a ghetto space always understood to be replete with historical and cultural content.

The material history and presence of the black urban space, or ghetto, of course subtends any examination of African American culture in the years of what we will be addressing as the ghetto’s so-called “crisis.” We know that between 1910 and 1970, millions of Southern Americans moved to the North and the West, in what has been thought to constitute the most significant American demographic occurrence of the 20th century.⁷ It is understood that black migrants were much more concentrated into urban environments than their white counterparts, and that this concentration into increasingly crowded areas, in a phenomenon of “hypersegregation” within northern cities, created what we now refer to as the black ghetto.⁸

This extreme concentration of African American communities into designated urban neighbourhoods has shaped black culture in untold ways, along subtle channels and manifest routes, as we shall see, and the inauguration of the “street” moment in black life reaches us as revelation, disillusionment, cynicism, and confrontation. Amiri Baraka (writing as LeRoy Jones), in Blues People, describes the arrival on the street as an experience of utter strangeness that matches the displacement of the Middle Passage in terms of communal shock:

It must have been as strange as that initial trip their ancestors made centuries before into the New World. Now the Negroes had not even the land to walk across. Everywhere were cement, buildings, and streets filled up with automobiles. Whole families jammed up in tiny, unbelievably dirty flats or rooming houses. But the sole idea was “to move,” to split from the incredible fabric of guilt and servitude identified so graphically within the Negro consciousness as the white South (105) (emphasis added).

Claude Brown, in Manchild in the Promised Land, asserts a similar moment of disconnect, in which the vector of migration turns upon itself, suddenly confronted with containment, with a stasis that is anxiously imagined:

it seems that Cousin Willie, in his lying haste, had neglected to tell the folks down home about one of the most important aspects of the promised land: it was a slum ghetto.....there were too many people full of hate and bitterness crowded into a dirty, stinky, uncared-for closet-size section of a great city... The children of these disillusioned coloured pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—the disappointments, the anger. To add to their misery, they had little hope of deliverance. For where does one run to when he’s already in the promised land? (viii) (emphasis added)

Brown suggests, in this ironic introduction, what crucial stakes are set by the operation of the spatial in managing a brutalizing “inheritance,” and his narrative indeed follows that entry into the ghetto with a picaresque tale of circulation and delinquency. That tale, however, redeems the mobile, dissident subject by taking him out of the ghetto, and placing him on a path up and out of the urban neighbourhood. Yet his opening question remains, inviting us to examine ghetto

narratives produced by writers of his generation, and to pay close attention to the texts that stay with the subject who has nowhere to run to, who does not engage with “uplift,” striving, or other ways of “making it.” That male subject, as we shall see, is emphatically not simply a man “screwing women” instead of other men and drinking whiskey “like most colored people do”—he is rather a complex alloy of self-invention, style, doubt, resistance and fracture, as is S.R.O.’s Sid Bailey.

My first chapter opens our journey towards the urban space by examining the Blues, a cultural manifestation that circulates along the paths of the twentieth century’s vast migrations, and eventually traverses urban centers where black neighbourhoods and ghettos swell and thrive. In following the wandering bluesman, I make a case for the evacuation of traditional readings of the blues, which insist on the release of “raw,” unmediated emotional content as a marker of necessary authenticity. Drawing from lyrics and performances by Robert Johnson, Eddie “Son” House, and Muddy Waters, I highlight the mindful stylings, ironies, and distortions that allow the bluesman to oppose any fixed formulation of identity or enclosed systems of thought by practising a productive detachment. In the bluesman’s stylistic, rhetorical and performative sophistication, I detect the operation of a spatial language of vagrancy—a discourse of mobility and malleability that opens the masculine subject to inconsistency, multiplicity and detachment. In that untethered, modernist flux, the bluesman performs modalities of self-fashioning that liberate the subject from final destinations.

The cool detachment of the bluesman’s engagement with masculinities gives way, in my second chapter, to the icy cold aesthetic of the spectacular, transient, violent and excessively materialistic player of the “barbershop books.” The two bestselling authors of this sub-genre of ghetto narrative, Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim) and Donald Goines, provide compelling material

for my reading of the urban male subject in ruin and splendour. In Pimp: The Story of My Life, Whoreson and Daddy Cool, we discover variations of the dazzling, chaotic, and exhausting experiments that permit display and re-invention on the “street.” Far from Southern agrarian roots, the urban “player” is ever mobile, seeking his next “fix,” playing all and risking all. Predatory and yet always in flight, drugged yet penetrable and uncontained, he loses himself in the inconsistencies of “the Life.”

In my third chapter, I supplement such visions of the cold, magnificently displayed masculine subject with the heat of the densely peopled space, and the enigma of fleshly occupation in urban arrangements of troubling proximity. Chester Himes’s Blind Man With a Pistol features the intense physical occupations of an urban configuration that is shaped by the excessive, at times grotesque traces of bodily inhabitation, and by the provocative yet repulsive closeness of an enigmatic neighbour. In Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, a rhetorically multivalent persona reacts to that enigma. With fantasies of embodiment, and scenes of penetration and violation, the cultural is transformed into the fleshly. Down these Mean Streets, by Piri Thomas, completes the chapter by providing further experimental workings of an embodied life, one that traverses homosocial milieus and depends on the Other for both racialization and masculinisation of the subject.

Chapter four allows such fleshly visions of a crowded neighbourhood to conduct us towards an uncanny region that palpitates with an insistent surplus. In George Cain’s poetic, impressionistic Blueschild Baby, I read in the urban space a monstrous dimension where the stubbornly mobile addict can defy and derail imposed order and symbolic imperatives. In his encounters with the “living dead” of heroin and the aberrant, erupting figure of a renegade killer, the subject uses his “road to hell” as a vector towards unformed, insistent and liberating life.

Robert Beck's much darker Mama Black Widow proffers a ghetto colonized by the deadening discourses of emasculation, disempowerment and the inexorable workings of a machine-like Fate. To oppose these, and to resist an already defeated script of uplift, the text proposes a disruptive, cross-dressing, sacrificial subject. Deeply enmeshed with inscriptions of the death drive, these texts delineate the possibility of inhabiting the ruined neighbourhood with an irrepressible, insistent impulse to endure in enjoyment, pain and anger.

The space of ruin, the "end of the rope" occupies my final chapter, and in recognition of the extent to which these texts' urban visions of segmented space, their proliferating eruptions of multiplicities, and their emergent subjects correspond with the vocabularies of Gilles Deleuze, I undertake a Deleuzian reading of Robert Deane Pharr's S.R.O. and Herbert Simmons's Man Walking on Eggshells. My exploration ends with the urban subject as a stylish, agile principle of released motion, creative doubt and active engagement with differences and multiplicities.

As I signal here the significance of style, and stylings, I want to conclude these remarks by returning to what remains a persistently difficult question, and one that we should be confronting as we concern ourselves with discussions of race and marginality. As I have mentioned, the texts addressed in this work have been, for the most part, neglected, forgotten, or dismissed for decades. In the case of several, as I will show, what little commentary has been offered on each work has required that the text function as an authentic transcription of the author's psyche. A concurrent, persistent fiction demands that the ghetto narrative proffer "real," unmediated access to a ghetto space somehow "brought to life" in the text.⁹ In other words, these texts have been received into the cultural fabric of modern narrative as unmediated, captured slabs of raw "stuff," wrenched from the street, ripped from the individual (the "real" Mingus, or the "innocent" Cleaver) and slapped between two covers for the reader to consume.

But the valorization of an imagined “true” ghetto voice that might convey a harsh landscape of suffering in the name of racial justice only obscures the artistry, the rhetorical subtleties, the ironies and self-conscious creative apparatuses brought to bear on an admittedly bleak urban landscape. We may have to ask ourselves for what submerged reasons readers have felt justified in thus obliquely denying the artistry and rhetorical sophistication enacted in these neglected African American urban narratives. In that context, my endeavor, my mission, if you will, is fervently, tirelessly to underscore a contrary approach: an examination of elaborate, complex, sophisticated stylings that situate the individual as a self-aware, seeking and detached subjectivity, liberated from deadening discourses, always mobile and engaged with what William James identifies as “plural times and spaces.”

Chapter I: Troubled in Style: Circulating Blues and the City

“Heroic nonchalance” is how Albert Murray, writing in 1976, captures the blues musician’s performance during the revelry of the Saturday Night Function, where “primary emphasis is placed on aesthetics, not ethics....What counts is elegance (not only in the music and the dance movement but in the survival technology inherent in the underlying ritual as well)” (Stomping 42). These qualities of aesthetic posturing, nonchalance, elegance, seem foreign to much of the usual popular perception of “singing the blues,” usually imaged as a cathartic outpouring of “raw” emotion by some unsophisticated, lone, “haunted” musician. Such a prototypical emotionally transparent bluesman is precisely what Paul Oliver, in Conversations with the Blues, finds Louisiana producer J.D. Miller describing, as he tells of having had “boys come in....and sing and actually they had the blues so bad they were cryin’ when they got through. They really had their heart and soul in it.” To his “way of thinking,” he asserts, “that’s a good blues man” (118) This equation of blues expressive performance with the authenticity of some raw, unmediated emotion remains one of the most enduring and problematic takes on black culture, one that permeates popular discourse of Blues veneration as well as academic, high-powered uses of folk tradition.

Yet when our shared musical culture summons the “cool” of a wandering bluesman, his seemingly casual ease in handling a guitar and wearing a rumpled suit as he effortlessly brings forth syncopated, sophisticated compositions—the indescribable alloy of style, detachment and technical brilliance that has so thoroughly obsessed white musicians from Eric Clapton to Van Morrison—we see that the bluesman’s performance functions as a flashpoint across which competing subject positions constantly materialize and shift. More importantly, if we evacuate

the notion of an “authentically black” cultural category that showcases some essential production of black identity, we challenge the schematic “scripts” and essentializing demands that have attended the deployments of a blues aesthetic by black musicians.

1.1 Authenticity, Tradition and the Residuum

Readings of the blues as foundational cultural matrix, master text, essential conduit to traditional, ancestral wisdom and “pure” culture continue to proliferate. In fact, invocations of the Blues in cultural studies and popular culture have become so commonplace and so vague as to threaten to dissolve its usefulness as a point of reference.¹⁰ Genuflection at the shrine of the blues and veneration of blues culture as a touchstone of true, authenticating, expressive “blackness,” are rituals that cannot be ignored, and that too often give rise to repetitive, problematic formulations of complex African American cultural modalities.

No reading of blues culture can proceed without some attention to Houston Baker’s Blues, Ideology and African American Literature. Baker’s ludic and recuperative work establishes the “blues matrix” as a “vernacular trope for American cultural explanation in general” (14) and as a force that can achieve its effects “as a fluid and multivalent network” (9). In defining his vision, Baker is careful to specify that this matrix effectively functions only when a “translator,” an “investigator” can bring to bear “adequate explanatory perception” (9). He calls attention to his own valorization of vernacular manifestations in American culture, and invites other readers to join in the inventive play that “successfully converges with blues force to yield accounts that persuasively and playfully refigure expressive geographies in the United States” (11). The adequate reading or perception which he invokes seems to be one which seeks a tradition of “comprehensive, vernacular expressiveness in America” (13) and which finds in

blues culture “explanatory possibilities” which center on expressions of change, movement, unlimited and unending possibility (8), but also of “resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity” (13). Although Baker claims that his work constitutes “the crossing sign’s inviting ‘X’” (14), and challenges understanding to an “unlimited play,” his call to investigation is one which carries its own script of prior immersion in a blues tradition: an investigator of African American expressive culture must always already be “blues-oriented,” “charged with blues energy” and adequately trained to “‘(heat) up’ the observational space” (10) in just the proper way.

My concern with Baker’s work flows from a desire to begin my own investigation by moving away from projects which announce the deployment of master tropes, sweeping explanatory processes and unifying traditions. My thoughts here draw from Sandra Adell’s observation, not only of the ways in which Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates “fall short of their emancipatory goal of freeing Afro-American literature from the hegemony of Eurocentric discourses,” but more compellingly, of how both critics “bring into sharp relief....a nostalgia for tradition” (137). “To summon a tradition,” argues Adell, “is to search for an authority, that of the tradition itself” (137). By imposing “formal networks of principles” (119) that announce and confirm their own inescapability and authenticity, both Gates and Baker, as Adell suggests, create paradigms in which “the disruptive play and subversiveness of the Signifying Monkey, like that of the blues in Baker, has been tamed, while the figures of the male and female slave and all they represent have been reduced to the figure of that lyin(g) monkey, and all in the interest of a ‘theory of tradition’” (134). Such projects, while valuable in enriching reading strategies and contextualizing African American expressive culture, remain based on the principle that fragments of “true” and “truly black” culture exist “out there” to be grasped, explicated, re-appropriated, if only we wield a critical tool equal to the task, and preferably a tool

fashioned out of the same authentic tradition that already subtends and justifies the critical vocabulary's application. Baker and Gates' projects, as has been underscored, tend to present themselves as self-constitutive elaborations of master-tropes, "obviousnesses" that have been barely suppressed "all along." These can now be deftly drawn from a traditional expressive and experiential bedrock that simultaneously produces the literary/cultural artefact and the critical stance, granting Baker and Gates final authority to define and evaluate our access to "blackness." I contend that we can benefit from loosening our hold on such definite claims to authority, whether that authority be based on an understanding of rural, folk tradition, or on an essentialized racial articulation, an "'original' mythical locus that is inhabited by the gods" (Adell 132).

I want to challenge some of the most enduring, solidified and celebrated readings of blues culture by refusing to allow gestures towards the usually invoked registers of "black identity" to be made. My principal concern is to clear away invocations and uses of blues culture that confirm essentialist accounts of identity—accounts that elaborate the Southern, rural bluesman as accessible conduit to "authentic blackness." According to that script, when the bluesman performs, some crucial essence of African American identity is emitted in a "natural emotional expression" (Charters, The Country Blues 207) that reaches its listeners undiluted, almost unbearable in its potency. Such is the "power" of the blues aesthetic in praxis, affirms this credo, that to penetrate this "gigantic field of feeling" is to be "in touch with the roots of black people" (Palmer 276-7), and to discover an idiom that has "articulated some of contemporary America's highest aspirations and darkest secrets with incomparable immediacy" (17).

Yet when commentators reiterate the "power," "force" and "emotional impact" of blues performative moments, they also concede deep, lingering mysteries at the center of the blues

aesthetic. Why is it that blues compositions, formulated “not just by black people, but by the poorest, most marginal black people” (Palmer 17), only exceptionally make any reference at all to the repressive social and political order that has attended their creation and policed their creators? We can note the recurrence of self-consciously illogical metaphors and similes, the abundance of apparent non sequitur, and the proliferation of contradictory lyrics within any one blues composition. As David Evans asks, in Big Road Blues, “why does Charley Patton sing in one stanza that he has women that will take him in and in another that he can’t feel welcome anywhere he goes?” Evans goes to much trouble to explicate certain songs and categorize the lyrics according to what he terms the “principle of contrast.” Yet even despite his willingness to clarify difficult texts, he concedes that many compositions install the singer’s extraordinarily boastful hyperbolic verbal presence, and, simultaneously or alternatively, his extraordinarily self-pitying expressive modalities. Critics and folklorists of the blues tradition, to whom patchworks of “riffs,” and stylistic or lyrical referentiality are obvious, track the studied reworking of “traditional” lyrics that are lifted from one composition and transposed into a myriad other songs. As Evans posits,

Many blues singers....rely on a vast body of traditional lines, stanzas, vocal melodies, and instrumental parts for composing many of their blues. A few dozen to a few hundred of these elements may comprise the bulk of a performer’s blues repertoire. To compose a blues he combines perhaps five or six of these stanzas with a tune and instrumental part. Usually the stanzas are only loosely related in theme or even inconsistent or contradictory. (144-5)

How should we respond to lyrics that persistently misdirect and disjoint narrative order, or that systematically overburden and sabotage metaphoric economy? How do we account for a

traditional strategy of mumbling, garbling, slurring and otherwise obscuring “lyrics of the very highest poetic quality” (Murray 79) or thematic significance? A thorough and uncompromising interrogation of blues culture at some point is confronted by a complexity, a fluidity, a multiplicity in the blues performance, which in fact flies in the face of any essentialist reading grounded upon the shared, transparent and essentially foundational roots of the so-called “Blues People.”

1.2 Albert Murray and the “Wayward Particular”

I am suggesting that we consider, instead of some inexorable fabric of authenticity linking bluesmen to one another and to the “kingdom of culture,”¹¹ the possibility that these complex voices might instead be enacting what Ross Posnock terms “the wayward particular” (Color and Culture 26). Indeed, let us begin by setting aside the scripts and demands that tend to permeate any assessment of a blues performance—scripts of emotional outburst, unsophisticated venting of earthy language, rural purity of expression, and the demands of a defined, predictable persona. “[Blues singers] were the life of the party,” writes Robert Palmer in this conventional register, “the toast of the back of the town; they got as much to drink and as many women as they could handle, and sometimes more. They knew the worst of times, but during the best of times they sported eye-catching clothes, jewellery, a wad of greenbacks, even a fancy automobile” (Deep Blues 17-8). The bluesman’s authenticity, thus typified and crystallized, establishes the categories of “blues singer” and more generally of “black male subject” as dependant upon the fulfillment of an established account that draws cultural potency from invocations of its own undeniable “truth.” If we reiterate such constructs, do we not enable the policing of what constitutes these categories? How can we fail to perceive how reductive,

limiting and problematic any claim to the “authenticity” or rootedness of one aspect of living experience and human subjectivity becomes, particularly when that facet is always anchored in the bleak Southern soil of impoverishment, superstition, and boundless resilience paired with boundless emotivity? The lyrics and performative modalities of the blues have been too consistently marshalled to the solidification of such general, repetitive and constraining scripts of black identity. Yet what blues discourse does is more complex, more subversive and more challenging than merely give voice to the unmediated experiences of a categorized, rural, marginalized subject.

Novelist and critic Albert Murray, in his remarkably audacious Stomping the Blues, persistently reminds us that blues is the domain of style, of technical brilliance and sophistication. Those who sing and play the blues, he argues, “do so not to publicize their most intimate secrets and most personal embarrassments but because music is their profession and blues music is an idiom for which they feel they have some aesthetic affinity and technical competence” (54). Style, mannerisms, “ritual ‘jive talk’” and “ceremonial gestures” are persuasively reviewed by Murray: Louis Armstrong, with his panoply of “professional mannerisms,” and pianist James P. Johnson, whose apprenticeship as a performer begins when he becomes conscious of developing his “skill at role-playing,” deploy “entrance routines,” signature moves, sartorial codes and other signs of a studied style (238). Murray underscores the extent to which blues stylings always work against equations, approximations, correspondences—“sometimes the lyrics mock and signify weeping even as they pretend to weep” (51), and the bluesman’s riffs, digressions, elaborations and counterstatements open onto more, “as if to say; yes, yes, yes, and also and also” (205).

I contend that blues discourse in fact works against constructs that would serve to project an “already in place, authentic, and originary” self (Posnock 23), and offers instead the recurring, disruptive vision of a self that has the “power to bewilder categories” (29). Escaping the “grid of identity and difference” (23), blues culture rehearses and assays what the “logic of identity” suppresses: the “stubborn crudity of experience which remains inassimilable to or denigrated by philosophy’s closed systems” (23). While Posnock emphasizes a pragmatist, cosmopolitan effort to theorize identity outside of a secure, essentialist, foundational system of “blood inheritance,” his explorations of the “black public intellectual” and the so-called “race man” are congruent with my thoughts on bluesmen. Once we situate blues culture as a “technology of survival” (Murray 76) that valorizes the residuum—that which William James terms “the more”—the excess that “always escapes” inclusion (*Writings* 760, 776), we see that any formulation of “authentic blackness” is defeated by the excesses and wanderings of blues performative play, variation, overstatement, distortion and irony. Black modernist intellectuals, asserts Posnock, “in an endless fight against racialized, proprietary notions of culture,” “had to devise, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, their own counterlogics to ventilate the suffocating demands of the ideology of racial ‘authenticity’” (27). Bluesmen, also imbricated in modernist upheavals and reconfigurations, self-consciously toy with proprietary claims to cultural authenticity only to dislocate and destabilize identity by staging their own “power to bewilder categories” in shifting enactments of the “wayward particular.”

1.3 Blues Walking Like a Man

Wayward, untethered, uncontained, the blues comes to us as a discourse of departure, migration, mobility. As Paul Oliver observes, reading into the blues signs of great historical

shifts, the singer's statement of an intention to leave is liable to countless re-formulations: "He is 'going to leave this town,' to 'walk down the dirt road,' or to 'catch the next thing smokin'" (Blues Fell 45). Robert Palmer also provides his own cluster of famous formulas which he reads as conflating movement and transformation: "'Leaving this morning if I have to ride the blinds,' 'Gonna get up in the mornin', I believe I'll dust my broom,''I'm goin' down to Louisiana/Baby behind the sun.'" The lyrics I have gathered for my own discussion of blues culture all speak to refrains of mobility and all utilize spatial language to assay and develop the bluesman's strategic and stylistic manoeuvres. Yet ever and again, as I aim to make clear, the blues lyric's reiterations of movement, migration or wandering should not be read strictly as measures of individual or communal displacement. I prefer not to cast blues culture into the mold of the "migration narrative," by which the music, its entry into a cosmopolitan milieu, and its "resulting transformation and transformative activity" according to Farah Jasmine Griffin, "all mirror the experience of the migrant" (Griffin 53).

The construct of "migration narrative" imposes the reaching of "safe places," havens that are created by the transformative workings of community upon a bleak, alienating modern destination (Griffin 54-5). While I find seductive Griffin's claim that urban blues performance enacts a cultural embrace by which 'migrants are healed, informed, ministered' (55), I do not see such performance as resisting the modernist fragmentation of the subject, but rather as rehearsing it, engaging with it in playful, stylish, "cool" expressive modalities that can demystify uprootedness and circulation, and foster a "heroic nonchalance" that is supportive. To claim that the blues, as "migration narrative," provides "coherence and order" and stability (Griffin 54) is to underestimate the subversive meetings of conflicting, inconsistent, ironic, garbled and jarring material. The blues performance does not choose a final destination, a safe haven: once Muddy

Waters is established in Chicago, he sings that he is “going down to Louisiana,” or “going back down South.” “Let’s go home,” or “put us in the alley,” call out displaced Southerners to James P Johnson’s band during dances, to indicate that they want “breakdown” music (Jones [Baraka] 108). Blues vagrancy does not cease.

The bluesman “keeps moving” precisely because his lyric always goes on to the next thing, because in performance he mumbles and obscures a crucial line that could serve as “resting place” and because his refrains function as points of divergence from which contrasting, conflicting, new excursions take flight. That refrain, the repeated line, the recycled, borrowed verse, all compose the stylings of blues as “free,” “cool,” and detached. “When the modern work of art develops its permutating series and its circular structures,” writes Gilles Deleuze in Difference and Repetition, “it indicates to philosophy a path leading to the abandonment of representation” (68-9). James A. Snead, in an insightful article titled “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” attributes the suppression of repetition to the tyrannies of representational systems:

Blatant repetitions of the folkloric, traditional and mnemonic sort that had characterized European oral poetry, medieval sagas and other forms of narrative right into the late sixteenth-century baroque literature began to be transformed into the pretence of an external reality being depicted, culminating in literary realism in the late nineteenth century....In a sense, all representational conventions such as literary realism suppress repetition and verbal rhythm in the telling in favour of the illusion of narrative verisimilitude. Thus, they would portray an outside world, exhaustible in its manifestations. (73)

The blues flaunts such representational codes and strictures, and therefore wanders into expressive modalities where “Smokestack lightning” is “shining just like gold,” and where the blues comes “loping like a mule” or “walking like a man.” Repetition, so hypnotically present in blues lyrics but also intratextually within blues culture, should be read not as a gesture towards a model of stability, or an arrival, but rather as “the act by which the very idea of a model or a privileged position is challenged and overturned” (Deleuze, Difference 69). In black culture’s handling of repetition, asserts Snead, if there is a goal, “it is always deferred” (67). The refrain, then, does not ground the blues lyric into a fixed and final destination, but is rather present in a different way in every assemblage, every arrangement, passing from one to another, opening one onto the other, exceeding every one (Deleuze and Guattari, Plateaux 400-1)¹². The blues singer who is always “leavin” here,” “movin on down the line,” is voicing a cultural investment in the nomadic, and his stylistic deployments unmoor him from tyrannies of static representation. “The writer uses words,” write Deleuze and Guattari, “but by creating a syntax allows them to become sensation that makes everyday language stutter, or tremble, or scream, or even sing: it is the style, the ‘tone,’ the language of sensations, or the foreign language within the language, that calls for a new people to come” (What is Philosophy? 176). The new people of modern African American culture, like Ralph Ellison’s displaced zoot-suited “transitional men” in Invisible Man, perform mobility across the modern spaces of a declining, mechanized rural South and a booming urban “crucible,” and their “heroic nonchalance” will soon come to habitate the spaces of urban narrative discourse .

1.4 Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Modernists

Since blues culture has indeed migrated from a rural, agrarian milieu to sudden agglomerations of urbanized African Americans, the “downhome” folkloric content and performative dimensions of Blues culture have enduringly been figured as uniquely authentic. Yet the elements that constitute and reinforce that claim to authenticity need to be unpacked and examined. Undoubtedly, a nostalgia for folk culture is correlative to the modern occupation of urban spaces, and the rural South is ceaselessly figured, both in blues culture and in academic commentary on that culture, as the familiar “downhome” counterpoint to a communal experience of displacement and cultural impoverishment in the Northern cities. Amiri Baraka (as LeRoy Jones) thus writes of the era of the great migrations, in his Blues People, that:

The Northern Negro, i.e., the one raised in the North, had from the outset of his life been exposed to the kind of centerless culture to which the new Northerners were just now adjusting. The young Negro who had always lived in the North was never aware of a “purer” Negro culture than the consciously diluted model that existed there. Before the great movements North, many northern Negroes were quite purposefully resisting what could be called their cultural heritage. (108-9).

Martin Favor, in Authentic Blackness, challenges what he reads as an enduring insistence, in African American literary and cultural history, on the centrality of folk consciousness. Quoting Wilson J. Moses with approval, Favor points to an “anti-elite elitism” by which folk interpretation, or what Moses terms “proletarian-bohemian interpretation,” has been “granted a sort of moral superiority” (Moses) over other parameters and frameworks for reading black culture. Favor condemns a valorization of the South, by W.E.B. DuBois and subsequent

intellectuals, as a symbolically charged locus of the “spirit that underlies and best describes the black experience,” so that the deceptive call to young intellectuals is to “Go South....and discover the true meaning of blackness” (15) or the “purer,” folk-centered model of African American culture that imagines a shared heritage.

The fascination exerted by such a construct of folk consciousness is typified by the discourse surrounding an “authentic” country genius and rural Southern prodigy, the figure of Robert Johnson, so-called “king of the Delta blues singers.” His lyrics of cursed wanderings and demonic influences are recurrently read into scenarios of a suitably violent, dissolute life and mysterious death. As a result, Robert Johnson has come to provide an iconic center in the endlessly repeated quest for some Southern locus of the rural, isolated, primeval subject whose life is ruled by elemental imperatives and occult forces. Robert Palmer, in Deep Blues, presides over the summoning Robert Johnson at the crossroads, in a “reading” of the quintessential “Cross Road Blues” that speaks volumes about the critical enterprise that deploys the Johnson figure:

Johnson finds himself alone at a country crossroads, attempting to flag a ride as the sun sets. He has ample reason to be afraid. He’s in a part of the country where he isn’t known....In blues lore, the crossroads is the place where aspiring musicians strike their deal with the Devil, and Robert claimed to have struck such a deal....Anyone who’s ever stopped at a deserted Delta crossroads in the dead of night knows what a spooky experience it can be. Everything’s empty and black—black bottomland stretching away for miles in every direction, cloudy black sky above—and unnervingly quiet (126).

Palmer draws largely from a folk story casting the lone, cursed bluesman as a doomed wanderer whose eerie talents are attributed to supernatural forces—a folk story that was widely circulated by and about several Delta musicians,¹³ and that finds its place in countless accounts of blues history. Yet testimony by Johnson’s contemporaries suggests that Robert Johnson was not an outcast whose every mysterious move remains buried in enigmatic silences, but rather a busy journeyman musician who collaborated with others, taught younger guitarists his craft, and developed his own skills through exposure not to devilish pacts, but to well-known phonograph records.¹⁴ Regrettably, despite its impressionistic digression into the Southern landscape, Palmer’s “decoding” of “Cross Road Blues” evacuates much of the anomalous and unsettling content of the lyric. By flattening out the song’s inconsistencies and smoothing each disjointing line into a continuous, “obvious” description (“anyone who’s ever stopped....knows”), and casting this vignette into the traditional “pact with the devil” narrative modality, Palmer substitutes a trite appeal to folklore as monolithic, univocal and predictable for the song’s slippery, evasive, contradictory elements [Lyrics: See Appendix A.1]. I read each three-line verse as opening onto paradox, onto the denial of bounded, descriptive vignettes, and onto the residuum that gathers around any subject’s claim of a stance. From the very opening section, the singer tells of going down to the crossroads, which folklore identifies with the devil and his well-known negotiations with those who cautiously and quietly wait (Spencer 27-8), and there, falling on his knees, asking the Lord for mercy. Invoking the authoritative script of blues damnation, Johnson immediately undercuts its supremacy by yoking it to the gestures and words of devout prayer. As so often is the case with blues lyrics, the speaker here foregrounds the shifting assemblage of personas and identities by using “I,” “Bob,” “you,” “Babe” in ways that defy predictability and threaten a unified narrative thrust or a central, contained subjectivity: “I

believe to my soul now/Poor Bob is sinkin down.” Likewise, the shifts from “I went down,” “fell down” to “standing,” “sinking,” and “you can run,” sabotage quite effectively any stable sense of positioning. Going to the crossroads here is traveling to some kind of non-place which only opens to gazes horizontally to East and West, and vertically to the paradoxical “rising sun going down.” Time itself is collapsed into a co-existence of flashing, fragmentary moments much more complex than Palmer’s insistence on the “dead of night.”

Indeed, Robert Johnson’s disjointed and layered narrative fragments at the crossroads seem to exemplify Edward Pavlic’s introductory remarks on the subject’s position in modernist projects. In Crossroads Modernism, Pavlic writes:

At the crossroads, the relationship between internal and social identities is disrupted, broken, reimagined, and possibly renewed....the universe doesn’t offer stable locations for people to ‘be’ or ‘stay’ themselves. Instead, they situate modern subjectivity in innovative spaces patterned to support improvised methods of becoming.... “(w)ithout boundaries.” (xvii)

While it emphasizes Johnson’s voicing of “personal struggle in a paradoxical, prophetic image” of his own death (“risin sun goin down”), Pavlic’s appeal to “the unsolvable contradictions at the heart of the Afro-American blues self” (36)(emphasis added) strikes me as dangerously reductive. My concern here is to attempt an evacuation of the types of mythologizing scripts that would once again impose upon Robert Johnson’s lyrics a “voicing of struggle” and a “prophetic” scope—a refusal in other words to fix and point to a “heart” of the “Afro-American blues self.” What Johnson’s verses rehearse, in a lyric like “Cross Road Blues,” is the trying out of several vocabularies—the internal “struggle” script, the religious formula, the appeal to community, the

lovelorn lament—but also the refusal to allow any one version of “poor Bob” to be couched in stable, definite language that would define “the heart” of a “self.”

Established readings of Robert Johnson demand that we approach the bluesman as an earnest, haunted conduit for psychic pain, a man who grants us access to the posited “heart” of a tragic “Afro-American blues self” (Pavlic 36). To the contrary, I would argue that much of Robert Johnson’s oeuvre resonates with a richly ironic refusal to perform the spectacle of psychic revelation. We should keep in mind that Johnson’s most famous lyric, during his lifetime, was a racy number quite devoid of lugubrious content: “Terraplane Blues,” his hit song, deploys the (again, quite standard) rhetorical strategy of transposing the insistent banter of seduction into an absurdly extended “automotive” trope, but with the disjuncting shifts and inconsistencies so crucial to blues expression:

I'd said I flashed your lights mama, your horn won't even blow

I even flash my lights mama, this horn won't even blow

Got a short in this connection hoo-well, babe, its way down below

I'm on hist your hood momma, I'm bound to check your oil

I'm on hist your hood momma mmmm I'm bound to check your oil

I got a woman that I'm lovin, way down in Arkansas (Johnson).

The tone here is playful, as demarcations leak and blur: “your lights” become “my lights” and the speaker simultaneously announces his intention to cross the boundaries of his lover’s body, just as he abruptly projects himself in a totally other emotional, physical space (“I got a woman that I'm lovin, way down in Arkansas”). Again, the bluesman slips out of the familiar discourse of sexual invitation to suddenly re-constitute himself anew in a denial of simple intimacy. The ironic distance that he exercises, both in using a facetious, impersonal trope and then declaring

that he is presently “lovin’” a woman who is far away, suggests that he is really elsewhere, unattainable. These tactics mediate the script of blues expression as outpouring of psychic pain, and foreground instead the slippery unreliability of a stance or a persona.

Yet what may seem soundly observed with regards to the earthy lyrics of “Terraplane Blues” becomes more problematic when we turn to the emblematic “devil” songs of Robert Johnson. “Hellhound on my Trail,” for example, has been heard as a prophetic, anticipatory narrative of the bluesman’s impending demise, and as indicia of the psychic pain of one who considers himself doomed to a spiritual downfall (Palmer 127). Yet when I listen to Johnson sing this number, and I read the lyrics closely, I am haunted, not by visions of Hellfire, but by a persistent question: could his performance be grounded in irony? [Lyrics: See Appendix A.2] Although the first verse is plaintive enough and allows Johnson to clearly enunciate his own “call and response” variations of the repeated “hail” and “Hellhound” phrases, the second verse opens the song to increasing humming and mumbling of lyrics in an elastic, flowing vocal sound. As he imagines a temporal slippage that would alter the calendar—“if today was Christmas eve and tomorrow was Christmas day”—Johnson engages in an increasingly sophisticated vocal performance, with rhythmic humming, a playful spoken address, and a bending of syllable and sound to the irrepressible beat of the composition. The Christmas Eve/Christmas Day dyad introduces a transitory revelry that serves only to “pass the time away,” while the haunting agent of displacement, the pursuing hellhound, is re-inscribed as the familiar superstitious prank of his “little sweet rider” sprinkling “hot foot powder all around (her) daddy’s door.” The “rider” who has cast a “downhome” spell that makes her “daddy’s” mind seek to ramble “every old place (it goes)” is addressed directly, but that immediacy falls away when a woman’s presence is summoned to counteract the diffuse and open-ended menace of a “rising wind” and “leaves

trembling on the tree.” Once again, the bluesman manipulates and rehearses competing vocabularies and scripts of wandering, mutability, agency, damnation, Christian ritual and voodoo superstition, with a seductive appeal to sexual closeness as one salutary script through which displacement, longing and transition—time itself (“what a time we’d have”) can be reimagined. If we cease to demand that Robert Johnson come to us as the humourless, uninflected voice of “tormented isolation” (Werner 211), we release the disruptive energies of lyrics that shift and transform the speaking person’s construct of self to the point of dismantling any central “Me-ness”: to “keep me company” is retold as the strangely distancing “to keep my company.”

1.5 Truth or Style: “What Do You Reckon It Said?”

Any casual listener of such Blues lyrics and stylings, especially in the famous, iconic performances recorded by Johnson and other bluesmen such as Eddie “Son” House, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton and Muddy Waters, at once notices that these expressive moments are anything but haphazard and unpolished bursts of subjectivity. After all, as David Evans reminds us, “the context of the singing contradicts the feelings expressed in the songs.” When Robert Johnson, who often succeeded in assembling large crowds around his one-man show, famously sings “Nobody seemed to know me/Everyone just pass me by,” he is referencing a cluster of simultaneously internal and external experiences of alienation that cannot be understood as immediate, stable and unprocessed.

The fact that there exists an undeniable tradition, within the culture of blues performance, identifying Blues singing with the unmediated, immediate release of an accessible identity, a “heart” or “truth,” has circumscribed explorations of the strategies by which a bluesman might

develop, assert and “shake up” his style. Moreover, we cannot discount the extent to which commercializing discourse and popular perception have foregrounded the blues singer’s “spontaneity” and “truthfulness,” as performed in an assortment of self-representing gestures. Albert Murray writes that those who admire Bessie Smith, for example, “seem to do so not because they esteem her as the great professional that she was (whose stylistic innovations represent the very highest level of idiomatic refinement) but rather because they regard her as a natural phenomenon with a deeply stirring voice that was the greatest vehicle of honest expression precisely because it struck them as being untrained and hence unstylized” (Stomping 212).

Blues singers who comment on their art are often said to claim that their performances reveal unadorned “truths” or are simple tellings of actual incidents (Evans 133-4). Yet blues culture also returns persistently to a cultivated distance between the singer and his array of materials. “I ‘sung ‘em on many a day and never thought I had ‘em,” claims Rubin Lacy; “I was playin’ ‘em because everybody loved to hear me play ‘em and I loved to play ‘em” (Evans 239). Such a distance, a refusal to be constrained in the modalities by which a performance might be launched, expands into a willingness to dwell in possibility, open-endedness, multiplicity—while you’re making blues, claims Booker White, “you want to have your mind a little mixed up” (Evans 254). Perhaps one of the most compelling accounts of the bluesman’s commitment to a proliferation of “truths” which can hang clustered in the moment of performance is the following “recipe” offered by Big Bill Broonzy: “Now take a knife. How many things can you do with a knife? You can cut fish, you can cut your toenails, I seen guys shave with it, you can eat beans with it, you can kill a man. There. You name five things you can do with a knife, you got five verses. You got yourself a blues” (qtd. in Evans 138).

Yet predictably, technical blues commentary will usually valorize more thematically stable, “consistent” blues moments, rather than a singer’s practise of releasing songs that seem “incomprehensible, a jumble of thoughts and phrases that flow out” (Evans 141). David Evans, often a very sensitive critic and recorder of traditional blues, cannot refrain from observing that Napoleon Strickland, who usually favours “structurally loose,” spontaneously uttered compositions, is “apt to produce blues of great beauty” when “he is able to organize his thoughts while singing” (141-2). Still, when a blues lyric seems to “tell a single story” (Evans 141) and to anchor its unfolding content with familiar performative markers of a fixed organizing subjectivity, the bluesman might unleash a song that pressures and bursts the lyrics’ schema of containment.

Let us consider, for example, Eddie “Son” House’s rendition of the “Death Letter” blues—a composition and performance that come together with precisely the types of disjointings that jar and challenge our monolithic readings of blues culture. Here we apprehend several of the key elements required by a classic country blues script: a chilling, tragic theme, a vivid expression of loss and loneliness, a wealth of morbid details, a forceful, dramatic vocal performance in the grand Delta tradition.

Accompanying himself on a guitar that he slaps and plays with rapid slide sequences that seem to power and rush his vocal delivery, Son House gives voice to a man whose female lover has unexpectedly died, and who hurries forth to attend her burial. House’s complex performance, I would argue, is unsettling precisely because of the way in which its stylistic choices unmoor immediately available meanings of mourning and work against a master script of displayed, indulged loss. As the song begins, House’s rhythmic accompaniment almost runs away from his vocals, which seem to lag and, in trying to catch up, to stumble in a mumbling of

the most crucial part of the lyric: “I got a letter this morning, how do you reckon it read?/ It said hurry, the gal you love is dead./ I got a letter this morning, and how do you reckon it read?/ You know it said hurry, hurry, ‘cause the gal you love is dead” (House). With each subsequent, harrowing verse, a portion of the singer’s account is strangely obscured, rushed, distorted, until it is repeated a second time, more distinctly:

I grabbed up my suitcase, took off down the road,
When I got there, she’s layin’ on the coolin’ board,
 I grabbed up my suitcase, and I said I took off down the road
 I said, but when I got there, she was layin’ on the coolin’ board.
 Well, I walked up right close, looked down in her face
I said good ol’ girl, you gonna lay here till the judgement day,
 I walked up right close, and I said I looked down in her face,
 I said good old girl, gonna lay here till judgement day. (House)

The song’s most intense opening moment is thus marred, disturbed by a rhythmic urgency that renders the second line, announcing the lover’s death abruptly after the initial question, almost unintelligible. My contention is that such mumblings and obscurings of a repeated line, which Son House practices throughout this performance, in fact serve to destabilize and unfasten the song’s emotional center, by denying the richly emotional display of a static, accessibly plaintive modality. When the slurred line (here underlined) is then repeated clearly, more distinctly, with the cue “I said” to introduce its reiteration, the singer plays the openness of unintelligibility against the re-positioning of a calmer, clearer version of the “killer” line. Which is authentic? Which is “true”? How can we fail to hear the modulations of a “technology of survival” at once “robust and delicate” in its delineation of a grieving subject? Son House’s deceptively unadorned

singing style jars and muddies the master script of Delta lament, so often read into this music by those who, in Albert Murray's estimation, regard the blues song only as "the anguished cry of the victim, displaying his or her wounds and saying that it is all a lowdown dirty shame" (Stomping 254). A "downhome" Delta singer, Eddie "Son" House may appropriate an articulation that corresponds to the "less artificial," but as Murray reiterates, "it is all a matter of stylization" (209).

1.6 Blues Silences

If we hear these stylizations in the blues performance, and if we commit ourselves to teasing them out, hearing them work against our favoured scripts, letting them decenter a tradition of reception and enjoyment that demands spontaneous crudeness and immediacy, we begin to accept what we can construe as a blues evasion of dogma. Much blues criticism and commentary has turned to the question of implied or expressed ideological content in blues expressive culture. After all, as David Evans notes, "the man/woman relationship is the most prominent topic" of blues verses, and almost no attention is devoted to "perhaps the biggest problem of all, racial discrimination" (29). Samuel Charters, writing in 1975, asserts that the "major themes of the blues—lonely travel, family disorientation, poverty," simply mirror a fundamental social instability in African American communities, but do so always "through the blues obsession with the love relationship" (Legacy 17). Paul Oliver offers a more elaborate theory of censorship and coding, as he asks "can it be assumed that the blues contained no appeals for racial solidarity, no protests at discrimination, no inflammatory outbursts, no burning declarations against lynching?" There may be several repressive or deceptive mechanisms at work, posits Oliver:

On record there is virtually no direct evidence of outspoken protests and such text collections as there are give fragmentary hints only. But this may be an indication of the problem encountered by the collector in obtaining uninhibited songs that have not been modified for his ears....On record the blues singer may have acted as his own censor, or the company executives may have frustrated the recording or prevented the release, of any such songs. From recordingsit seems that the blues singer is often content to state a fact of his experience rather than to protest about it. But it is also possible that allusion, symbol and the employment of concealing imagery may have enabled him to give covert expression to prohibited material. (Screening 11)

David Evans offers compelling testimony to a blues evasion of topical content in his account of Henry 'Bubba' Brown, who organized the first black labour union in Mississippi during the 1940s, in a context of brutally segregated social practises. Brown was also, as it turns out, a blues singer, but his blues, according to Evans, would not have offered a clue as to Brown's ideological commitments: they "dealt with the typical themes of love, loneliness, and so forth." "His songs," suggests Evans "served other purposes than protest against discrimination" (29).

If field hollers, work songs and spirituals incorporate both protest against oppression and hope for justice, why is it that the blues seem above all concerned with emotional and sexual relationships? We could theorize, as Oliver does, about a contestatory subtext which grounds expressions of sexual longing and emotional upheaval into a more "worthy" sense of social and political disaffection. Such an approach would read the blues "worried mind" of a "never satisfied" subject as self-consciously displaced—a purposefully oblique sign of dissatisfaction with a definite oppressive order. The "no-good evil-doer" of the blues complaint would

therefore be construed as a coded icon of Southern white supremacy and capricious legal and social control.

Yet such a reading raises fundamental problems. For one thing, we know that many work songs and hollers pointedly address the experiences of injustice and exploitation. There is therefore no social or cultural need for the blues to provide disguised outlets for contesting white dominance. As an early example of a decidedly unambiguous work song, we might consider this relevant transcription provided by Amiri Baraka in his Blues People: “Oh, Lawd, I’m tired, uuh/ Oh, Lawd, I’m tired, uuh/ Oh, Lawd, I’m tired, a dis mess” (60).

Work songs, writes Baraka, often use as their measure “the grunt of a man pushing a heavy weight or the blow of a hammer against stone to provide the metrical precision and rhythmical impetus behind the singer” (67). The singers who engage in these (for example, African American convicts working in Southern prison farms) do not sing blues: “the form of (their) singing itself is dictated by the work” (67). Blues lyrics are not shaped by the rhythms of work in this way, though they incorporate repetitions that can be construed as internal echoes of the call and response practises of African music and African American spirituals (Jones [Baraka] 46). Baraka argues that in fact “early blues developed as a music to be sung for pleasure, a casual music, and that was its strength and its weakness” (67).

If outright, violent contestation, rather than pleasure, is to be staged, a tradition of African American folk expression turns away from the daily imperatives of stultifying work, and towards the heroic, violent exploits of a figure typified by his spectacularly “inflammable toughness” (Bryant, Bad Land 11): these are the songs, tales and ballads that pay homage to the “badman” who, according to Jerry Bryant’s detailed study of this figure, boasts of great physical strength, complete recklessness, in addition to a “volcanic psyche....poised constantly on the edge of

violence” (Bad Land 12). Bryant includes, for example, this lyric devoted to the exploits of badman Bolin Jones, collected in 1926:

Bolin Jones wuz
 A man of might
 He worked all day
 And fit all night.
 O Lawsy, Lawsy,
 He’s a rough nigger,
 Han’ to his hip,
 Fingers on de trigger.
 Lay ‘em low,
 Lay ‘em low,
 When Bolin’s ‘round,
 Mind whar you go. (Quoted in Bryant, Bad Land 12)

The “badman” of folklore is a figure of anarchy, fury and transgression, who clashes with established repressive mechanisms. In the case of the famous “Stagolee,” for example, some renditions of the tale specify that “the deputies the sheriff attempts to form into a posse are so intimidated by the famous badman they refuse to help with his arrest” (14).

The bluesman, much more subtle and flexible in his transgressive strategies is, as I have mentioned, primarily invested in verbalizing modulations of loss, desire, jealousy and heartbreak. His is not the discourse of disproportionate violence and capricious destruction. If explicitly dissident voicings such as those touched upon here can flourish into a richly referential and openly acknowledged heritage, why then would blues lyrics incorporate strategies of

censorship and encoding in order to function as disguises for other, “deeper” meanings? After all, the blues, particularly the country blues, were originally sung, like work songs and spirituals, within the community, and more specifically in this case, in settings that would guarantee the de facto exclusion of white outsiders (like the “juke joint” or the sharecropper’s cabin).

Even more problematic than such interrogations, in light of my discussion of blues discourse, is the implication of positing a disguised ideological subtext. Such a reading of blues lyrics implies that there is a “true” final sense that lies beyond excessive, elaborate, metaphorical, hyperbolic and playful verbal performance—a contention which, as I have argued, flies in the face of blues practices. Where lyrics rehearse the collisions, slippages and malleability of established scripts that each could be construed as capturing “the heart of the Afro-American blues self” (Pavlic 36), any attempt to reach towards an explanatory über-script is misguided. The blues lyric is about letting go, giving up the claims to a single, expressible “heart” of either resignation or protest. Amiri Baraka, when he invokes the possibility of the bluesman singing for pleasure, invites us to consider that the blues specifically opens a cultural dimension where enjoyment is not structured according to the demands of a dominant power. The “world” of the blues, in effect, reaches us as a construct devoid of white people, and I would suggest that blues lyrics perform important cultural work by reiterating, reworking, “riffing” modalities of subjectivity (loss, desire, fear) that are not always instrumentally caused by an oppressive machinery of racism. The performative dimension inhabited by the bluesman is, crucially, one where he is not bound, determined, defined in terms of the losses, desires and fears instilled by Jim Crow. Blues expressive manifestations are never univocal, as Albert Murray reminds us: “in the performance of a blues ballad,” he notes, “the chances are that even the most solemn words of a dirge will not only be counteracted by the mood of earthy well-being

stimulated by the beat but may even be mocked by the jazziness of the instrumentation.” Such is the “ambiguity” of blues stylizations, argues Murray, that “there is no need to choose between the personal implication and the social” (68).

1.7 “Everybody Knows I’m Him”: Masculine Transitional Theatrics

In Albert Murray’s celebratory and open-ended reading of blues culture, “musicians play music not only in the theatrical sense that actors play or stage a performance, but also in the general sense of playing for recreation, as when participating in games of skill. They also play in the sense of gambolling, in the sense that is to say, of fooling around or kidding around with, toying with, or otherwise having fun with” (Murray 87). The playful, ironic, stylized juxtaposition of vocabularies and subject positions which are enacted in the blues extend to a self-consciously complex and unstable fashioning of masculinities. Of course, women too have been extremely influential and significant figures in the realm of blues performance: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday, for example, have been very popular and powerfully resonant voices, and their influence has traversed American culture at large. But without denying these achievements, I want to examine masculine blues discourse of men, in an effort to pressure the implications of a man’s expressive performances as they reveal themselves in lyrics and enactments that borrow, repeat, transform and trouble formulas of power and agency. My journey into blues masculinities will center on the figure of Muddy Waters, a singer whose signature songs include “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man,” “I’m a Man,” “Mannish Boy,” as well as “My Pencil Won’t Write no More,” a cryptic phallic riddle conflating impotence, displacement and frustration with an almost Lacanian “letter gone dead.”

In the mythical discourses of blues history, Muddy Waters (Mc Kinley Morganfield) is thought to represent the successful migration of country blues traditions to an urban setting and a modern electrified, amplified sound. Leaving the Delta to establish himself in Chicago, Muddy Waters is said to have been “setting the pace” for an electric rendering of Delta tradition. According to Robert Palmer,

....in the city, Muddy adapted to survive....For the public, Muddy became the bedroom root doctor, the seer-stud with downhome power and urban cool. But he never lost sight of the Delta foundations he mined so deeply in his singing and playing and in lyrics like “Flood,” and his audience loved him for that, too. Through all the changes—the rhythmic “pep,” the flashier lyrics, and a more and more flamboyant performing style—he kept playing his unmistakable slide guitar and singing his old Delta favourites. (169)

Palmer cites here performative shifts that foreground both the trappings of a certain construct of rural, Southern authenticity, and the flashy, flamboyant displays of an urbanized culture that requires the signs of “cool.” In this hybrid subject posited by Palmer, I cannot help but see the young “men of transition” of Ellison’s Invisible Man, men who “speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams,” and are “perhaps the bearers of something precious” (381). The modern, stylized performances of urban black manhood are here figured as steeped in encodings of pre-migration rural culture. Yet, drawing from a script of theatrically staged urban ceremony, “men of transition whose faces (are) immobile” (381) also typify an emotional distancing that speaks to modernist enactments of blues masculinity—enactments that cannot affix the parameters of a subject in “jived up language” without also performing a rendition of “country glamour.”

In what Ross Posnock calls the “modernist crucible of the city,” the bluesman rehearses a claim to power that is complicated and enriched by the vocabularies of “downhome” male discourse. Yet, as we have seen, blues performance works against the stability of any given stance, and as we shall see, the self-mythologizing male boastings of blues culture are not exempted from an urbanizing effect. The spectacle of a transitional concatenation of masculine potencies and displays occurs in one of Muddy Waters’s most famous performances, his version of “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man” (originally written by Willie Dixon). In an interview with Robert Palmer, Muddy Waters states that he has felt a sort of communal pressure, an obligation to reference folkloric Southern superstitions: “When you’re writing them songs that are coming from down that way, you can’t leave out something about that mojo thing....When I was singing it, I didn’t believe in it no way. But even today, when you play the old blues like me, you can’t get around that” (97-8). Playing the “old blues” in an urban setting, he must produce for his audience an homage to charms and magic from “down that way.”

In “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man,” [Lyrics: see Appendix A.3] the performative interplay that shapes the assertion and recognition of the singer as having unusual power—his masculine “charm” and his voodoo “charms”—depends on public reiteration. The singer performs his claim to a stylized, hyperbolic masculine designation of power, and simultaneously (in an inversion of Robert Johnson’s “Nobody seemed to know me”) installs recognition of this claim: “You know I’m the hoochie coochie man/Everybody knows I’m him.” Nonetheless, much of the song accumulates as many varied and contradictory invocations of magic as can be brought together in the space of three verses: these range from matriarchal acknowledgement of his predestined powers, to the possession of acquired spells (“a black cat bone” or John the Conqueror root), to an excessive increment of signs which designate the man himself as a good

luck “charm.” The result is an overburdened, exaggerated compendium of superstitious claims, with the recurring refrain pointing to the ritual of revelation and recognition even as it occurs in the moment of performance.

Yet what exactly is being recognized remains unclear. Is it the singer’s charm and prowess, or the ancient cosmology invoked? “He gonna make pretty womens/ Jump and shout/ Then the world wanna know/ What this all about” (Appendix A.3) becomes, in the second verse, the more ambiguous: “Then the world will know/ The hoochie coochie man” (Appendix A.3). As with other blues lyrics examined here, we are confronted with strange slippages of speaking identity and striking mechanisms of verbal distancing. How can we pinpoint the slippery subject designated by “I” when “Before I was born” is immediately followed by “I got a boy child’s comin’”? And how can we fail to note an insistent refrain that asks “everybody” to equate “I” with “him”?

Of course, the conflating of charm (“make you girls lead me by the hand”) with traditional “charms” (the mojo hand), the mirroring of the esoteric seventh hour of the seventh day with seven hundred dollars—which reminds us that mojo charms are indeed a commodity, but also that they are figured in folklore as gambling aids—these devices serve to destabilize any established construct of virility. Is one born a “son of a gun,” or will a man “mess with you” only once he has somehow acquired masculine totems of power, whatever these might turn out to be? The final verse refuses to resolve this question. After establishing a dizzying build-up of portentous, evocative signs (and here again I am reminded of Ellison’s Invisible Man, where Peetie Wheatstraw’s “speil” is performed very similarly), the singer swiftly turns against the cosmic weight of the moment and towards his practical status as a lucky gambler, a “good luck charm”: “He was born for good luck/ And that you’ll see/ I got seven hundred dollars/ Don’t you

mess with me” (Appendix A.3). The sexual, virile power reiterated in the refrain therefore remains dependant upon its own spectacular revelation. What does it mean to be the “hoochie coochie man”? It means that “you know I’m him,” and “everybody knows I’m him.” The “hoochie-coochie man” exists only in that he reveals himself—he is, simply, the fact that he is “known.”

Delving further into the implications of masculine verbal presence in blues discourse, I now turn to an early song of Muddy Waters that was recorded in the Southern plantation where he lived, “I Be’s Troubled” [Lyrics: See Appendix A.4]. This lyric was then re-worked after his move to Chicago, and re-issued as “I Can’t Be Satisfied.” Once again, any search for a thematic consistency or a unifying “story” to hold together the utterings made here would be misguided. No one statement can, or should explicate or clarify this lyric. What each verse of the song stages is some implication of impermanence and incompleteness as the singer’s invoked transitions (“I’m gonna pack my suitcase/And make my getaway,” “You’re gonna have to leave my way”), contrasts (“She gonna jump and shout....And I come walkin’ out”) and intensifications (“I got real worried gal/And she drove it to my head”) are framed by a buildup of traditional blues expressions of subjectivity that collectively stylize the loss of mastery. Gathered in the elaborately polished vessel of the singer’s performing voice, questions instead become layered: who is leaving, “quitting” whose way, and who is telling, talking, saying to whom? Who is being addressed or designated in the assembled patchwork of “baby,” “girl,” “you” and “she”? In the perpetually renewed present of “never being satisfied,” the subject’s agency with respect to self-mobility, and self-expression within the internal space of his own “head” is rendered uncertain, “troubled,” an inconstant thing. The subsequent re-worked version of the song in no way evacuates this instability, but introduces three new verses:

Well I'm goin' away to leave
Won't be back no more
Goin' back down south, child
Don't you want to go?
Woman I'm troubled, I be all worried in mind
Well baby I just can't be satisfied
And I just can't keep from cryin'
Well I feel like snappin'
Pistol in your face
I'm gonna let some graveyard
Lord be your resting place
Woman I'm troubled, I be all worried in mind
Well baby I can never be satisfied
And I just can't keep from cryin'
Well now all in my sleep
Hear my doorbell ring
Looking for my baby
I couldn't see not a doggone thing
Woman I was troubled, I was all worried in mind
Well honey I could never be satisfied
And I just couldn't keep from cryin'

(Waters, "I Can't Be Satisfied," Muddy Waters on Chess, Vol.1: 1948-1951)

From the insistent, redundant opening line to the brutal threat and the disjointed obsessiveness of sleeping/searching—hearing/blindness, the lyric rehearses scripts of departure and return, vengeance and despair, longing and frustration that indeed collide to deny the possibility of satisfaction. If the urban bluesman functions as a transitional, hybrid, troubled and troubling performer of the rural and the urban, his repertoire of masculine self-fashionings includes leaving, killing, searching, crying, etc. in stylized sequences that are never satisfied.

Repetition, in these drawn out, rhythmic verses, functions as it does in the even more hypnotic lists of “Mannish Boy,” in which the singer spells the words “man” and “boy” so stylishly, so tortuously, that the words, indeed the very letters dissolve to be reconfigured into difference. And with each repetition of the statement “I am a man,” an “excessive” system links “the different with the different, the multiple with the multiple, the fortuitous with the fortuitous, in a complex of affirmations always coextensive with the questions posed and the decisions taken” (Deleuze Difference 115). It is a game that knows no limits.

Blues masculine subjectivity, like the “dance program” proposed by Albert Murray, is “a rehearsal for another of a never-ending sequence of escapades as is suggested by the very fact that each not so much begins and ends as continues: And one and two and three and four and another one and a two and a three and a four and also and also and also” (Stomping 254). The blues engages with masculinities just as it does with other discourses that would fix, immobilize and define its community, culture and speaking subject. Like the Peetie Wheatstraw of Ellison’s Invisible Man, the bluesman can “teach....some good bad habits” (155), and the habit of contradicting himself, of being “troubled” and unstable in displaying his panoply of stances, gestures, and stylings, grants his discourse the ability to traverse rural, segregated space, to travel along clandestine as well as legitimate channels of migration, and to circulate in the city, where it

continues to promise that “it’s leavin’ tomorrow.” The blues performance speaks of vagrancy, just as it rehearses its unmooring from enclosed systems of thought, final destinations, crystallizing subjectivities. Diffused across a field of modern social, cultural and discursive migration, the blues aesthetic rehearses, playfully but always in new formulas of sought recognition, myriad versions of what Peetie Wheatstraw accomplishes for the narrator of Invisible Man: “yet I found a certain comfort in walking along beside him, as though we’d walked this way before through other mornings, other places” (154) (emphasis added). The spatial language that carries the bluesman’s ironic distance, stylish detachment, restless obscurings and excessive, distorting repetitions is one of the modalities by which he renews his untethered presence in the modernist flux.

Chapter II: “Freeze Your Map and Keep it That Way”: The Barbershop Books

In a modern, urban Northern setting which could still resonate with the migrant bluesman’s stylings of “cool” ironic detachment, and with the “jived up transitional language full of country glamour” envisaged by Ralph Ellison (381), narratives of post-war masculine self-fashioning display an “icy” cold aesthetic that takes the place of playful country-fed “cool.” As the post-industrial urban milieu solidifies into an “inner city,”¹⁵ about which accounts of decline “spring from the overlap of orders in time and space” (Rotella 26), a figure of spectacular delinquency, “icy” superficiality and material excess marks the repudiation of “downhome” cultural cues and expressive modalities. In a series of immensely popular yet critically neglected texts, designated alternately as “subaltern texts,” “toast novels” or “barbershop books,” the ironic journeyman blues singer disappears from narratives of the modern city, in favour of an equally restless but violently, obscenely problematic, transient but showy urban “player.”

The “barbershop books” disrupt and complicate scholarly expectations by proffering versions of black male subjectivity that embrace the performative contradictions of superficial materialism –versions of the “icy,” predatory urban subject that circulate in popular culture (such as Blaxploitation films and “gangsta” rap) but that so much of the African American literary canon (from Ellison’s Invisible Man, to Baldwin’s If Beale Street Could Talk, and Toni Morrison’s Jazz) has conspicuously refused to take up. Barbershop books describe a post-industrial city in which the gestures and signs of urban “cool” outline a measure of the subject’s removal from any Southern agrarian roots.

Undoubtedly, the modern “cool” urban pose owes much to a studied, deliberate rejection of the humble, emotional icons of traditional minstrelsy¹⁶ and sentimental, racist entertainment

that many urban African Americans would associate with Southern culture. As many writers have noted, the advent of post-war “cool” jazz signals the shift from the production of predictable, “good time” dance tunes to the creation of cerebral, complex musical excursions into technical bravado, performed before seated, quiet listeners.¹⁷ The masters of “cool” jazz, like Charles Mingus and Miles Davis, would not smile, sing, or banter with an audience. They were anti-minstrels, often seeking the icy effect of narcotics and the exclusive company of other initiated musicians. Extremely self-conscious and aware of physical encodings of performance, these musicians performed “cool” as a style, a stance, a modality for the display of a black man’s reclaimed sense of self-mastery and competence. As Miles Davis notes in his Autobiography, “although I loved Satchmo, I couldn’t stand all that grinning he did.”¹⁸ Dick Pountain and David Robins suggest that an African American cool aesthetic recurs in the “personal style” of musicians who “deployed cool as a body armour against the discrimination, patronization and neglect they experienced from the mostly white-owned entertainment business” (41). This “armour,” tightly fastened to the mobile occupant of the “barbershop” texts’ “fast track,” freezes his face into a stylized “mask” that, paradoxically, does not facilitate the constitution or the containment of a hidden, true, “inner self,” nor does it cover the inconsistencies that permeate his performative gestures of self-fashioning.

2.1 Not To Become Everyone

African American “barbershop books” are not easy to write about. This may account for an almost complete critical void that has, for years, met the reader seeking to find some inroad towards a fruitful and rewarding apprehension of these texts. Until one stumbles upon this cache of material, the only clues to its existence are culled from rap lyrics, or obliquely, as a result of a

French fascination with all things American and urban, and French publishers' willingness to issue stylishly packaged translations of "cult" black authors such as Donald Goines and Robert Beck. Bluntly recounting tales of extreme violence, of criminalizing circulations across aberrant spaces, of exploitative relationships founded upon a numbingly overpowering materialism, the "barbershop books" of African American literature are not granted the critical recognition accorded to, say, Chester Himes's hardboiled detective novels of domestic Harlem. Pimp: the Story of My Life, The Naked Soul Of Iceberg Slim, Trick Baby, Daddy Cool, Whoreson, Dopefiend: the works of Robert Beck and Donald Goines are huddled in a twilight world of subgeneric obscurity, and defy the application of well-honed scholarly approaches even as they deploy compelling vernacular, populist, defiant voices. In Born In a Mighty Bad Land, Jerry Bryant classifies these texts as "toast novels," linking them to the oral, casually delivered narrative verse of convicts and "street poets": "the toast chronicles the heroes of the street; defines, celebrates, exaggerates, and often ridicules them; exemplifies behaviour to be avoided or emulated; lays out the rules for pimps and whores....dramatizes the accumulation and loss of wealth; and recounts the transformation of brilliantly clothed macks into threadbare tramps" (90). The "toast novels," according to Bryant, were never destined for a mainstream readership, and were mostly published in cheap paperback form by Holloway House. Holloway, notes Bryant, allowed Robert Beck to become "one of the first popular black authors made successful by a nearly exclusively African American readership" (124). Donald Goines, apparently inspired, while incarcerated, by Beck's Pimp, has been even more popular: "his sixteen titles, all still in print, have sold in the millions" (Bryant 124). Yet despite the loyalty of a specialized, initiated audience, the writers of Holloway's list inhabit a "cultural underground" (Bryant 124).

My own desire to examine these texts is paired with an equal measure of discomfort. Undeniably—to re-work a 1960's catchphrase— these books refuse to be “a credit to the race.” They do not uplift, they do not apologize or even explain. In their chaotic, disruptive energies, their dissident stances and vernacular power, they make apparent that the “barbershop books” mean to placate or pacify no identifiable group. We are made acutely uncomfortable by their recourse to stereotypical constructs of black male criminality and predatorial violence, and we may, as Richard Simon notes, express concern regarding “the failure of audiences to recognize their own complicity in perpetuating those images, a failure fully understandable in light of the internalized self-hatred of oppressed peoples” (238). Yet our pressuring of the cultural material that these immensely popular texts communicate should not be tainted by hierarchizing critical moves that place the reader above the text, in the conceit of “‘getting it’ better than the lumpen masses” who massively consumes it as a “facile catharsis machine” (Simon 238). Such readings would depend on a flat and frustrating conception of the text as a “pipeline for delivering meaning, rather than as a social field for constructing, negotiating, and contesting it.”

Indeed, the reader is unsettled largely because, while they inscribe a powerful spirit of contestation into the modalities of self-fashioning, the “barbershop” books refuse to walk a line, hold a position, or take a stand. As Richard Simon argues in his consideration of the “Blaxploitation” genre, it might be said that in the very processes by which production and reception of so-called “subgenres” are enacted, marginalized subjects “continually theorize themselves” (244). Proffering extremes of masculinist discourse, resolutely shaping a concatenation of racial nightmares, identified by the very street-names that signify stigma (“pimp,” “whore’s son,” “trick baby,” “dopefiend”), these texts have been embraced by a specific, initiated readership just as they have been marginalized by critical practise—a practise

that has overlooked the disruptive strategies of cultural performances which embrace the moves through which, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “ce n’est pas tout le monde.... qui fait de tout le monde un devenir” (Plateaux 342). Not everyone becomes everyone, or makes of “everyone” a becoming.

The subject who does not choose “becoming-everyone,” is termed, by Deleuze and Guattari, “anomalous” (“Anomal”). The anomalous is a “phenomenon of boundaries” (Plateaux 299), they propose, and the subject who traces and occupies that dynamic line is mobile in terms of the boundary created between himself and the “tribe” or “pack.” At times that boundary is defined, or “doubled” by this individual, who partakes of another order of being, and who does not belong, or has never belonged to the group (300). Such a liminal marker of the group acts as threat, as initiator and outsider, is found to be constitutive of the group, and to exercise powers of “sorcery” that are derived, not by filiation, but by the workings of a pact, an alliance, a bargain (Plateaux 302). The “politics” of this potentiality, this “sorcery,” argue Deleuze and Guattari, are elaborated through connections that are not those privileged by the family, the religious institution, or the State. They rather express the workings of minority groups, or bands of those who are oppressed, suppressed or in revolt (Plateaux 302). Deleuze and Guattari warn that those who reject the “becoming-everyone” remain embedded in ambiguity, since their own “becomings” will constantly be appropriated, used or destroyed by institutions (the State, the church, the family) that seek to “break” these processes, or reduce them to “totemic” relations (303). Thus presented, the “anomalous,” threatening yet fascinating, clandestine yet conspicuous, excluded yet necessary, indeed populate my readings of the “barbershop books.” Anomaly resonates both with the narratives’ embrace of delinquency and inconsistency, and with their problematic cultural mandate, as we shall see. Yet before we examine the anomalous

“sorcerer’s” order of becoming, we must relate these invocations of boundary and liminality to a more precise interrogation of what spatiality does, besides providing a metaphoric language that facilitates discussions of alterity.

2.2 Marginality and Spatial Experience

In The African American Male, Writing, and Difference, W. Lawrence Hogue identifies Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) as an author of “subaltern African American texts,” texts like Nathan Heard’s Howard Street, that are informed by “the swinging life—the non-Freudian, non-middle-class, non-Christian, non-humanist” (196) cosmology embedded in a culture and a community that is envisaged by “mainstream American intellectuals, writers and critics....as a place that is Other than reason, that is negative, that is different and less” (172). This transposing of culture and community as “a place,” this location of “the Life,” —irrational, negative— as “the street,” this blurring of subjectivity and spatiality offers an entry into the permeable, unstable construction of subjectivity that occurs in the so-called “barbershop books.” Identified with a specific invocation of male space—the barbershop offering to men what the beauty parlour signifies for women within the urban community—the “barbershop books” speak a disturbing array of violent, exploitative, grotesquely materialistic narratives of black subjectivity. Such texts, notes Hogue, are “radically Other....to American.... middle-class regime(s)” (195), and as I have suggested, are not granted “cultural capital” by critics or “reinventors of the African American canon such as Houston Baker, Louis Gates or Robert Stepto” (194). Undoubtedly, argues Hogue, part of any critic’s discomfort with texts such as Beck’s Pimp or Heard’s Howard Street resides in their refusal to generate or rehearse a “dominant African American journey from the subaltern” towards an accessible construct of “the black experience” (171). There is no no

racial uplift, no “movin’ on up” or noble, community-affirming axis of ascent to these narratives, but I would suggest that there is mobility without verticality.

While Hogue insists on the stasis paralysing “Howard Streeters” who are embedded, crystallized into stagnation, there are in Beck’s and Goines’s texts, relentless, anxious circulations on the “fast track” of addicted and addictive movements towards the new “cop,” the next “fix” and onwards. Instead of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as an “arborescent” model of the territorial, texts such as Beck’s Pimp and Goines’s Whoreson reject the stratifying forces of “causalities, hierarchies, framings” (Plateaux 414) in favour of a transverse movement that short-circuits order (415). That mobility across shifting urban assemblages, as we shall see, encounters heterogeneity, reversed causalities and mismatched forces (414). It is the pre-eminence of this spatial “vector” that works through the fibre of barbershop texts.

It has become commonplace for cultural critics to structure their explorations of alterity and dissidence in spatially referent terms, by speaking of “sites,” “margins,” “borders,” and “grounds.” Yet simultaneously, as Edwards Soja remarks, theoretical privileging of social-historical intersections and interactions have “peripheralized [spatiality] into the background as reflection, container, stage, environment or external constraint upon human behaviour and social action” (71). Texts such as the “barbershop books” emerge from a persistent spatial reworking of discursive patterns—they do not simply elaborate a dissident male cultural space, or lend themselves to “appealing spatial metaphors” (Soja 96) that might linguistically contain and theoretically manage outlaw masculinities. In fact, these texts implicate what Deleuze and Guattari term a transverse “line of flight”—a horizontal impulse to uprootedness and movement across milieus (16)—that asserts itself in the mobile exertions of “steppers” and the self-constituting, spectacular urban modalities of presence.

Indeed, I would add that temporality, in the “barbershop” books, is rendered in such vague, weak terms that any sense of the subject’s historicization or self-possession as a consciousness of identity traversing time, dissolves in favour of the subject’s staking a claim to conspicuous, theatrical presence in an array of significant spaces. These spaces call to mind Michel Foucault’s proposed “heterotopias,” (48) which relate to time, not in the name of an imagined eternity or a project of permanence, but rather on the plane of what is most transient, heterogenous, fantastical. “Heterotopias” can be linked, he asserts, to what is most futile, passing, precarious, in the mode of the festival. An example of this would be fairgrounds which, at city boundaries, are populated a few times a year by shanties, shops, mismatched (and we might say anomalous) objects and people, “wrestlers, snake-women, fortune-tellers.”¹⁹

Similarly “heterotopic” is the “fast track” as it offers itself to the dazzled subject in the “barbershop” texts: it appears to be ruled by the topicality of the most ephemeral current slang, the immediacy of fashion styles and other indicia of material culture, while its transient, fantastical occupants flash across temporarily inhabited spaces. In Pimp: The Story of My Life, Robert Beck presents the urban, criminalized male subject as pushed along by temporal forces that merely distribute and re-shuffle always and again the spatial business of moving from one experience, one enclosure to another. In Pimp’s sole reference to the distant unfolding of History, the “players,” assembled in wartime, learn that “the torch” has been put to Pearl Harbour. They briefly reflect upon the war’s effect on the “pimp game,” particularly in terms of the “pool of squares for the pimps to turn out,” “squares” who could be immobilized in legitimate settings, earning pay checks at the defense plants. “The war was raging,” concludes Iceberg, “as far as I was concerned, the pool was still full of fine fish. I had three original girls and three new cops” (225). Significantly, the events that precipitate the subject’s entry into

structures of state-controlled detention are not motivated by historically significant imperatives (such as the draft, or the Depression), but occur as spatially determined violations to the Mann Act, which establishes the crossing of state borders as the most damning enactment of criminality. In Pimp, the speaker is unaffected by the war, unconcerned by its claim to significance, but constantly moving the members of his “stable,” “turning them out,” “setting them down,” “picking them up,” and repeating the pimp’s refrain of consuming, destructive mobility: “cop and blow.”

2.3 The Name of the Game is Cop and Blow

“Cop and blow” is a discourse that contradicts reliance on models of temporal “growth,” fruition, evolutionary or progressive schema. The philosophy of “cop and blow” is not to expect the passage of time to produce or increase the subject’s emotional or economic investment, but rather to take up, consume (or “cop”) whatever a woman will hand over, and to then evacuate her from the system of consumption and move on (“blow”), without accumulation of resources, without any visible remainder of the original predation. To “cop and blow” is to know that one will always move away from former entanglements, to go on to the next “turn out.” In order to “cop,” and because he must “blow,” the narrator inhabits his own increasingly expensive, increasingly showy, ever renewed suit of clothes (“vines”) or his moving car. His itinerance traverses streets, bars, hotel rooms and temporary furnished “pads” in constant awareness of the impending exhaustion of this economy of consumption. In the course of “cop and blow,” the “barbershop book” gives voice to anxieties so profound that they taint every boasting, swaggering formula of self-glorification. The pimp subject narrates a demonic version of the dominant order, which in the words of Guy Debord “discourses endlessly upon itself in an

uninterrupted monologue of self-praise" (19). The pimp's "world of commodity," spectacularized, depends upon a modern "logic (that) is one with men's estrangement from one another and from the sum total" of what they do, or do not produce (26). Always surrounded by those he must control, display and police, unmistakably dishonest about what this economy will produce ("I'm going to make a star outta you" [219]), the pimp multiplies rhetorical acts of self-representation: "Never forget this family is as one against the cold, cruel world. We are strong because we love each other. There is no problem I can't solve. There's no question I can't answer about this game" (Pimp 219). Yet as Beth Coleman remarks, in her "Pimp Notes on Autonomy," the "players" of this game "understand that rhetorically (they are) in a double bind," since agency demands some representation in order to be legitimized, and since the black man enjoys no public, societal recognition of his agency. As a result, she proposes, "If you are outside the economy, you are free to play any card in the deck. In the pimp discovery of America, the joker's wild. Pimp theory is to be that thing so thoroughly for your audience (whores, patrons, colleagues) that one is able to rob the man and have him thank you for it. That is the magic trick, the moment of transformation...." (80). To "be that thing," then, is at the center of the barbershop books, and I read the contradictions and obscene dimensions at play in these texts as examples of what Slavoj Zizek, drawing from Santner, identifies as "the crisis of investiture" (Plague 73). Repeating slogans of mobility ("you can't stop a stepper"), the pimp circulates within a structure that generates its own obscene, itinerant representational rituals, in travelling shows that further spectacularize and incriminate him.

2.4 The Obscene Supplement

If the “racial swagger” of this “black pop star” (Coleman 68) permeates the “barbershop books” with such disturbing inconsistency, we yet recall that the magic trick, the wizardry of the pimp figure is founded upon his being “the one who shines up some dark thing and takes her to the market” (Coleman 73). When the subject is unable to assume the symbolic mandate conferred upon him, he finds himself in a situation in which, as Slavoj Žižek posits, ideological interpellation enters a vicious cycle in which “it is no longer clear who is actually the master and who the servant” (Plague 71): “there never was a purely symbolic power without an obscene supplement,” writes Žižek, “The structure of a power edifice is always minimally inconsistent” (71). Racialized power dynamics have always played themselves out in the ritualized pairing of abjectness, in the enslaved and oppressed other, with a highly charged desirability. Drawing from this recognition, the “pimp book” of unwritten street rules requires an obscene paternal authority that can police, display and profit from the “hidden obscene supplement” of white racism. “Sweet,” Beck’s brutal “master pimp,” extols the material “arrival” of his pioneering models, but also offers a harshly critical “lowdown” on the white sickness that subtends and animates his own function as oppressor of black women:

They wore fine threads and had blooded horses. Those pimps was black geniuses.

They wrote that skull book on pimping. Even now if it wasn’t for that frantic army of white tricks, Nigger pimps would starve to death....

To show you how sick in the head (the white man) is, he thinks black broads are dirt beneath his feet....The sick silly bastard is like a whore that needs and loves punishment....He wallows and stains himself. The poor freak’s joy is in his suffering. The chump believes he’s done something dirty to himself. He slips

back into his white world. He goes on conning himself he's God and Niggers are wild filthy animals. (Pimp 195-6)

The "strange logic of subversion" in Beck's Pimp and Goines's Whoreson, then consists in mirroring, displaying, or in any case always engaging with the "obscene phantasmic support" (Zizek, Plague 73) of this economy of degradation. That phantasmic support, the obscene supplement is at the center of the narrator's "skull book": profoundly inconsistent, criss-crossed with illogic, paranoia and "self-praise," the pimp's edifice of domination in radical materialism is sustained by its most obscene, most blatant problem: a blurring of master/servant, in a trade that simply isn't one. The goal of pimping, and the structure of power that subtends it, are ambiguous to the point of absurdity in a system where every subject is motivated by the belief that he, or she, is making a "trick" of the other and holding the upper hand in a game of mastery. The white man is "like a whore," sneers "Sweet." Likewise, "Blood's" beaten, exploited woman expresses feelings of power from her encounters with white "tricks": "A lot of them are clean-cut high 'mucky-mucks' in the white world. Some of them show me pictures of beautiful wives and cute children. It makes me feel greater than those white bitches living in soft luxury" (Pimp 176). Likewise, the pimp describes himself as "a whore who's reversed the game on whores": a whore "ain't nothing but a trick to a pimp....always get your money in front just like a whore" (Pimp 215).

Dismissive and contemptuous of women who choose to work out of a "house" and give up a "cut" of their earnings, the narrator of Pimp indeed demands that every dollar made in the course of every night's work be surrendered unquestioningly to him. Reiterating the "pimp book's" injunction that he be only ever "as sweet as the scratch," the narrator tailors his tactics of domination in accordance with the amount of money that has been provided. He is being

rewarded, argues “Iceberg,” not for offering tenderness, emotional or sexual closeness—quite the opposite: “A good pimp doesn’t get paid for screwing, he gets paid off for always having the right thing to say to a whore right on lightning tap” (12). Yet that “right thing” invariably springs from the “skull book” and deepens his attempt to interpellate the woman he exploits: “a pimp is happy when his whores giggle. He knows they are still asleep” (12). In a self-generating loop ritualizing distortions of exchange, “Iceberg” convinces his companions to pay him for his skilfully deployed arsenal of domination. To “pimp by the book” is to draw upon “secret rules” that are always already known and proffered. It is to demand that a woman “leave” her night’s earnings on the bedroom dresser, as if they were not always already required, calculated and appropriated by the pimp.

2.5 Hate Club

One such rule requires the pimp to make acknowledgements of his companions’ desires and his own yearnings, while he positions himself within a system that guarantees the denial of fulfillment. As he narrates his attempts to recruit Chris, for example, “Iceberg” describes at length her beauty and appeal, and establishes his own claim in an offer made to her in the most superbly categorical yet indistinct language: “All we need is an understanding. All you need is a man” (181). When she responds with sexual advances, he refuses to touch her, demanding instead that she “come to (him) as his (whore)” (181). He has put into place an “exchange” in which she receives nothing, an understanding which requires her to “need a man” when that need will be, from that point on, formally denied. We can perceive, in such a scenario, that as Žižek suggests, “sexuality is not a kind of traumatic substantial Thing, which the subject cannot attain directly; it is nothing but the formal structure of failure” (Plague 71). That failure is replayed

and rehearsed with such conviction that the pimp and his “woman” are shown tirelessly repulsing, loathing and betraying one another, as they both enact their part in fulfilling an understanding that isn’t one. As “Sweet,” the evil, hateful “master pimp” warns, a pimp is a “sonovabitch” who’s “joined a hate club he can’t quit” (Pimp 216).

The pimp’s circulations on the “fast track,” as he asserts his membership to that “hate club,” are made manifest by conspicuous excesses. Not only must he “pimp or die,” but he must be seen to be transmuting the sexual economy of racism into spectacular personal adornments that foreground the tireless workings of that economy. When he is misrecognized, mistaken for a “square” cog in the legitimate machine of success, the pimp displays the obscene mark of economic wastefulness that brands his body. In one of Pimp’s most compelling stagings of the spectacularized inconsistencies that rule his destructive immersion in the symbolic order, “Iceberg” is reunited briefly with his father, who wrongly assumes that the “player” is in fact a successful businessman:

I said, “You haven’t heard about ‘Iceberg Slim’? He’s famous.”

He said, “You don’t associate with filth like that I hope.”

I said, “Look Jack, I am ‘Iceberg.’ Ain’t you proud of me? I’m the greatest Nigger that ever came outta our family. I got five whores humping sparks outta their asses.”

I thought he was going to have a heart attack....He was supporting himself against a lamp post. His face was grey in shock under the street light. I jerked my shirt and coat sleeves up past spike hollow. I stuck the needle-scarred arm under his nose. He drew back from it.

I said, “God damnit Jack, what’s the matter. Shit I shoot more scratch into that arm a day than you make in a week....I been in two prisons already. Shit, Jack, I’m on my way to the third any day now. You ain’t hip I’m important? Maybe one of these days I’ll really make you a proud father. I’ll croak a whore and make the ‘Chair’.” (230)

In that moment, the beautifully clothed dandy spews a nihilist discourse that in fact annihilates a father who grasps at bourgeois narratives of self-making. The player’s display of luxury speaks to a squandering that encompasses his own body and life, a contemptuous display that seems to fulfill Georges Bataille’s envisioned potency, in The Accursed Share, of “the individual who lies down and scoffs” (76). The “explosiveness” heralded by this figure rests in “the somber indifference of the individual who refuses work and makes his life on the one hand an infinitely ruined splendour, and on the other, a silent insult to the laborious lie of the rich” (77). Do we not encounter, in the fabulously attired, professionally idle pimp, just such an indifference, and does it not enter into the urban aesthetics of post-industrial “cool”?

2.6 “Perfection in Motion”

As a conspicuous, self-displaying “assemblage” of inconsistencies, the pimp renders his adherence to a “hate club” tangible by flashing across space as a stylish, dramatically aloof apparition. This concern with urban “cool” and its performance through variations of style in dress, appearance and gesture, is situated, in the “barbershop” texts, above all as strategic choice, performative “front”: “Sweet’s” face is “like a black steel mask,” “not a flicker of emotion” plays over it. He proves that pimping isn’t “a charm contest” (Pimp 120). Armoured by the sartorial imperatives of cool urban style, the “slick” pimp presents himself as a costumed, self-

controlled visual manifestation of acquisitive savvy and dazzling mobility—a manifestation that is as tightly fastened to his body in its transient, shifting occupation of space, as his “game” is wound up tight. Goines’s “New York,” who “pimps hard,” wears his hair processed, and always keeps it neatly done; “his eyes had a coldness that was hard to overlook, but when he smiled, he revealed beautiful, evenly spaced teeth. He dressed the way only a small man can; his personal grooming was perfection in motion” (Whoreson 79). The pimp’s detached, “hard” approach to his “stable” is concomitant with the conspicuous “processing” of his own corporeality: occupying his body as a sleek, mobile display along the nocturnal festival of the “fast track,” he is clothed in expensive finery, glossy and glowing with makeup, scented with heavy perfume: the pimp establishes his “front” by grooming his body “to perfection.”

Yet George Bataille reminds us that the night is indeed “the world of the subject”—“that changeable, infinitely suspect night which, in the sleep of reason, produces monsters” (Accursed 58). Dick Pountain and David Robins remark further that “cool is the ideal sensibility for anyone who must live by constant self-reinvention, never forming any permanent bonds” (132). The outlaw male subject, displaying his clandestine status, necessary to an economy of sexual exploitation yet estranged from physical desire, “anomalous” to an urban community he refuses to see himself as integrating is, as I have argued, a flashpoint of contradictions. In The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim, Beck’s “Iceberg” persona argues that the career pimp projects “an image of icy composure in the face of constant stresses, and threats of the turf. He keeps his cool despite the most voluptuous sexual temptations within his stable or in the streets” (57). Urban coolness is therefore encrypted with understandings of transience and survival, but also with denial of the organic. The particular, the self-celebrating, is blurred into a generic iciness, in a version of processed “perfection.”

2.7 “I’ve Seen You Duplicate my Hand Motions”

The importance of a “cool” performative display has often been examined and elaborated in terms of gendered demands upon a disempowered subject. In order to constitute himself as a man within a culture that has sought to absorb him only as a grinning, emotionally childish “boy,” proposes this argument, the descendant of enslaved Africans signifies a visible opposition to all forms of emotive encodings or sentimentality.²⁰ He eschews smiles as well as tears, in an effort to neutralize centuries of jolly, grinning, emasculating cultural baggage, and uses the postures and ritual indifferences of “cool” as defensively formulated strategies upon which to base a claim to spectacularized masculinity. The “barbershop books” of Beck and Goines certainly work, as we have seen, with an attention to “cool” that foregrounds the strategies of display animating the masculine urban gestures collected in these texts. Having said that, I do think it is important to temper and reorient any reading of urban masculinities that would produce fixed encodings of what “cool” “really means.”

In Whoreson, the coolest model of proud posturing is not to be gleaned from a masculine performance; it is provided by the hero’s mother, who from the outset establishes her claim to “cool” and her persistent legacy of self-display through a particularly tyrannical act of naming: “You can’t do that, Jessie. Give the child a good Christian name. “Christian name hell!” Jessie replied sharply. “I’m naming my son just what he is. I’m a whore and he’s my son. If he grows up ashamed of me, the hell with him. That’s what I’m wanting to name him, and that’s what it’s goin to be. Whoreson!” (11). From that moment, her son’s relationship with his own name will have to call up and rehearse a performed acceptance of her conspicuous, enduring self-manifestation. He is “whore’s son” and is therefore compelled to appropriate some version of her “cool” pride if he is to preserve his name, and go on thus “naming” himself. The modern,

urban refusal to sweeten, to temper, to facilitate black presence, in the case of Whoreson, is effectively transposed into a refusal to disguise or deny the white-on-black acts of sexual obsession and exploitation which result in the conspicuous existence of a light-skinned “trick baby.”

Yet in the “barbershop” texts—already destined to a readership within the urban community—the cultivation of cool also implies the delivery of a performance that will carry across the “fast track” and impress those who are within the community. There is no white man to placate, threaten or guard against, in the urban space of these texts. The white man is a shadowy, craven, pathetic “trick” or “chump” who slavishly seeks the most twisted, pathetic thrills—thrills that the pimp and other “players” provide coldly, efficiently. The performance of cool, as I have noted, rather takes place in terms of the “player” spectators, who are initiated and equipped to judge the display. Thus, the über-“cool” “New York,” urban right down to his chosen name, is enabled to give “Whoreson” a critique of his daily attempts at “cool”:

“To pimp, Whoreson,” he said arrogantly, “you got to have style. I don’t mean to copy it off somebody. Like for instance the way you imitate my walk. I’ve heard you try and mimic the way I talk. I fact, baby, I’ve seen you duplicate my hand motions.”

I blushed like a schoolgirl....I had tried to walk, talk, even act the way I thought he would on certain occasions. But for him to put it out in the open like this really showed me how foolish I’d been acting.

Ignoring my embarrassment, he continued. “Now I’m not the only one who has noticed this, Whoreson. My girls remind your ladies of this fact with expressions that have made serious problems flare up.” (85)

In the “barbershop” books, the culture of “cool,” as it displays and yet disavows itself, occurs where a young “player” such as “Blood” or “Whoreson” enacts mobility and self-constitution. Immediately, he undertakes the project to establish a surface hardness, a “glass top” reflective veneer of style that will brand the “player” as modern, urban, “in,” rather than “out” (what “Iceberg” calls an “ex-cotton picker” from the “big-foot country” [*Pimp* 143]). The gestures of cool present themselves as a slippery, tortuous option for the urban “stepper”: the most superficial rules of style are never quite “out there,” though they partake of the imitative. Yet “hand motions” are to be proffered so that a copy or simulacrum can be held out by the performer as a “true” original display that will escape ridicule. The obviousness of an imitative strategy is only marginally less uncool than the propensity to “blush like a schoolgirl.”

2.8 “Daddy Cool”

In order to avoid looking like “sucker” or a “green-ass,” the slick player has to “freeze up and stop that sucker grinning” (*Pimp* 170), and “Sweet,” of the “black steel mask,” demands that young “Blood” stop smiling, that he “freeze (his) ‘map’ and keep it that way” (*Pimp* 162). In the “map” that must be “frozen,” “icy, icy,” in order for the pimp to carry off a “tight game,” do we not find what Deleuze and Guattari, in *Mille Plateaux*, identify as the “bunker-face” (“visage-bunker” (209))? In their chapter titled “Visagéité” (Faciality) they examine the workings of an “abstract machine” of facialization, recognizing in the face a surface, a map that is produced when the head ceases to be encoded by the body, when it ceases to have “a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code”— what they call “Face” over-encodes (“surcode”) the body and the head (208). Detached, hard, “tight,” groomed to perfection, the pimp’s physiognomy plays at inscribing the cool as the icy.

“Glass Top,” whose street identity is performed as processed, shiny and polished, helps “Young Blood” to the “embalming” effects of cocaine, and hangs a new name on him after a bullet shoots off his hat: “I’ve seen some cool studs in my time, but I ain’t never seen nothing to equal that. Kid, you were cold in there, icy; icy, like an iceberg” (Pimp 220). The glassiness, iciness and hardness of faciality in a “tight game” testifies to an “over-encoding” that is congruent with the “street” imperatives of display and performed restraint. The smooth, metallic reflecting surfaces of a “perfect grooming” denies the corporeal by embalming the subject’s frozen “map.” If man has a destiny, propose Deleuze and Guattari, it will be to escape the face, to undo face and faciality, and to “become imperceptible, to become clandestine” ²¹ (Plateaux 209).

As we have seen, the barbershop texts of Goines and Beck underscore the theatrical and anxious performativity of a “black steel mask” that signifies its own participation in an economy of display. Yet a figure such as Goines’s “Daddy Cool” complicates any reading of “cool” posturing as an efficient “masking” strategy for wounded and struggling masculinities. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the “abstract machine” that, in “faciality,” forces down “flux” into “knots of arborescence” that mark an impotence (Plateaux 232), a closing off of potential, can also operate to pierce facialized surfaces. What they call a “seeking head” can be liberated from the face, in a creative flight that dismantles the planes upon which hang “dichotomies” and “bipolar values” (233). “Daddy Cool,” as he anxiously tries not to “lose his head,” plays against type in his drama of faciality, confronted as he is by the impotence that feeds into his “bunker-face,” assuming as he does different ways of becoming imperceptible, becoming clandestine.

2.9 “Couldn’t Make the Proper Moves”

If we consider the quiet, ruthlessly efficient hit man of Goines’s novel Daddy Cool, we immediately notice how anxiously thin and unreliable the “cool” façade turns out to be, but also how deceptively reductive the very notion of an efficient, protective “façade” can be. In keeping with the book’s title, the narrative presents a subject whose business-like work of “cold-blooded” contract killing demands that the loyalties and ramifications of “the Life” complicate any sense of a sustainable, rewarding patriarchal structure. Unable to “control” or discipline his children, tired and disgusted as much by his comfortable domesticity as he is weary of his work, “Daddy Cool” succeeds at being neither a father nor an icon of “cool,” even while he enacts the external constraints of both these positions, as they cross-pollinate one another. In an early chapter, for example, the description of his precise, professional knifing of a “vic” is followed by an episode of rage, when Daddy Cool comes home to find his teenaged daughter in the arms of a prospective pimp, and immediately loses his “cool”:

Daddy Cool sighed as he got out. His anger was going to be his downfall one day if he didn’t learn to control it better. Even as he approached the girl he cautioned himself about his anger. His temper was already almost out of control and he didn’t really know how much he could take. From the happenings of the past night’s work, he was still keyed up to a high pitch. (22)

In the course of a narrative that allows him to be filled with ennui and nausea, yet unable to squelch crises of rage, despair and guilt, “Daddy Cool” endures an irrepressible vision of the vast urban imperatives which have already dismantled the domestic edifice of his patriarchal performance, and have granted no significance to the chilly manifestations of his murderous efficiency:

He felt if he slept forever he still would not get enough rest. For the first time in his life, Daddy Cool despised his very existence. What was his life for? He didn't enjoy it. And now, with his daughter going her own way, what was the use? He couldn't figure it out.....His money, he had to laugh at that. People would kill: the thought stayed in his mind. He had killed to accumulate the money and now it didn't do him any good. Yes, maybe he had lived a good, or rather soft life most of the time, but was it worth it? He damned sure didn't enjoy it. (171-2)

"Daddy Cool," a modern, urban agent enforcing "the Life's" internal rules, is the mobile, clandestine representative of an outlaw order, but he is disguised as a "Monsieur Tout-le-monde," dressed in dark clothes, looking like "family man" or even a white "trick"(75). Yet there is for "Daddy Cool" no simple dichotomy between the appearance of being a "square," and some "deeper" or "truer" delinquent anarchic self—or conversely, between his status as a "cool" hit man and some deeper rejection of the "street" within his secret father's heart. As a participant in the "Life," the "cool" subject plays a double social game that never rings true: he wears the mask of patriarchal authority, and the "armour" of cool, but these do not cancel each other out in favour of some hidden "true" self. As Slavoj Zizek reminds us, the "'outside' is never simply a 'mask' we wear in public but rather the symbolic order itself" (Looking Awry 73-4).²² "Daddy Cool's" disguise as a "family man" is in fact congruent with his decidedly "uncool" emotional investment in his daughter: he is disguised as what he perceives himself to be "behind" the façade of "cool." Yet contamination also works to distort the edifice of his domestic, familial legitimacy, which again cannot function as the basis of "Daddy Cool's" "true" self. His "cool" killer status within the clandestine order of "payback" compels him to choose

the precise gestures required to murder his wife's own children, yet he feels a sense of pity for which he blames himself: "He couldn't really understand his own behavior. He blamed it on the job ahead. He knew he was about to kill her children and felt pity for the woman who had shared most of her adult life with him" (180) (emphasis added). His reaction typifies the instability of any claimed "true" self which might be thought to underly a "false" mask of fictitious self-discipline and aloofness.

The blurring of "daddy" and "cool," the impossibility of pinpointing what constitutes the "façade" or disguise, suggests that, in this barbershop text, the reading of "cool" simply as a masking array of empty or protective gestures is not satisfying. This text proffers the prototypical "cool" man who is scrupulously attentive to his clothes and grooming in the grand tradition of neat and perfectionist "fronting," and who smugly examines himself in the mirror to note that he can "find nothing wrong with his appearance" (31). Yet as soon as this clandestine killer encounters challenges to his paternal project of simulated bourgeois ease and harmony, he becomes extremely distraught: "Daddy Cool sat rigid, unable to think properly. He couldn't bring his thoughts together; he couldn't make the proper moves" (34). "Daddy Cool's" masculine coolness is in fact undermined by the text so consistently, and the concatenation of "masks" and roles is made so redundant and layered that by the time he willingly submits to his daughter's expertly-thrown knife, he has become a self-sacrificing, smiling, paralyzed observer who pretends to be a cold-blooded aggressor in order to provide her with a claim to self-defense. In turn, Daddy Cool's daughter, the spoiled and naïve "square" who has been "turned out" by a young pimp, now enacts the gestures of a cool, efficient killer who "stares straight ahead" and embraces parricide with a "smooth and easy" movement (199).

2.10 Addiction and Absolute Cold

And thus we see that in the barbershop texts, things are never as they seem, and “masks” never operate to mask. Outside and inside are never cleanly dichotomized, and the idea of urban “cool” seeps through these narratives, not as a hierarchizing and strictly gendered principle of control, but as a recurring refrain that is carried across urban spaces, not solely as an engagement with mastery, but more anxiously as one aspect in the performative drama of the “monstrous” subject’s self-containment. Certainly, displays of “cool” present themselves as conspicuously enacted contests for proving some elusive surface sign of ascendancy, yet these texts model constructs in which cool resilience in an urban environment reaches across systems of sexual and economic exploitation.

Perhaps the configuration of an icy performance of detachment, and the drama of producing an urban subject must also, in the “barbershop books,” traverse the complex, uncertain, modern terrain of drug addiction. These texts compellingly return to the “chilling,” “numbing,” embalming effects of cocaine and heroin as they “frost the skull” and turn an eager, impulsive “Young Blood” into an “icy, icy....iceberg” (220). How appropriate to note then, that Felix Guattari, in a discussion of drug addiction, speaks of the significance of connecting “aesthetic objectives” and models to “all the registers by which we judge” and develop treatment for addicts. “This move,” he proposes “will help us understand that life is a performance, that one constructs one’s life, that one works it” (207-8). In Mille Plateaux, he and Deleuze draw attention to the productive matrices of “Zero intensity.” The drugged body is just such an attribute, they offer, and as such it is a type of “Body without Organs” with its “production of specific intensities from absolute cold: 0” (190)²³. Deleuze and Guattari argue that certain modes of self destruction undo the organism without killing it. They open the body to

connections, to “circuits, conjunctions,” thresholds and passages, and they rip conscience away from the subject, in order to transform it into a means of exploration (198). Of course, the body thus always runs the risk of becoming a “vitrous, empty, cancerous, totalitarian” (204)²⁴ double that triumphs while the Body without Organs remains marginalized and isolated. When it avoids that fate, the Body without Organs is filled with possibilities. It constitutes a plateau state that does not culminate—an “intense germ,” an involution that is “always contemporaneous” as a milieu that is constantly creating itself (203).

I tend to see, in the “player’s” quest for an icy push to mobility and self-creation, in his insistence on being spectacularly removed from the constraints of the organic, such a plateau of thresholds, but also such a danger of emptiness, of suicide, of “fascist use.” For, indeed, the addict occupies a line of constant itinerance, and uses the crucible of his own frozen body to “cop and blow” not only women, but “hits.” Always moving on to the next “high,” he seems to be saying, as Deleuze and Guattari propose, “Let us go even further, we have not ...sufficiently destroyed our self. Replace anamnesis by oblivion, interpretation by experimentation” (187). As such, the addicted “player” is vulnerable to practices that will, according to Deleuze and Guattari, empty the “BwO” of its potential. Beck’s Pimp recounts precisely, in the tale of “Pretty” Preston’s downfall following his attempt to “cut into” “Sweet,” the creation of a “vitrous, empty” shell ruled by the totalizing powers of need and dependence:

“I tried hard to be like (“Sweet”), so I got hooked on “H.”My habit screwed my mind up. All I wanted to do was bang “H” and “coast.”....One morning I was puking sick. ‘Sweet’ was torturing me. He hadn’t brought me my stuff in twenty-four hours. I was cold as ice wrapped in a blanket, the red hot. I was naked, crawling on the floor, nailing my body bloody when he came in.I said,

‘Please ‘Sweet,’ cook it for me and load my outfit”....“Sweet’ if you don’t hurry, I’m sure to croak.’ He was getting his kicks making the yellow nigger suffer.... At noon two ‘rollers’ broke the door down. I was ‘coasting.’ I was draped in my P.J.s. They found the ‘H’ and booked me for ‘possession.’” (99-101)

Paralyzed, subjected to the “*désir-fasciste*” that leads to annihilation and evacuates the potential for intensities that once filled the space of “cold absolute,” the addict exists only as an emptiness to be filled by “H.” Once he has “kicked his habit” in jail, he disintegrates and is eviscerated: “I left my hair, teeth, and looks in the joint. A con ran a shiv into my plumbing” (101).

The disembowelment of “Pretty” Preston, and his persistent presence as a warning against the consequences of invading another’s “game,” typify a recurrence of permeability, of openness to leaking that textures these narratives of the “street.” In spite of, or perhaps because of the dangers of “cutting into” someone, or of being in turn “cut into,” the “fast track” of the barbershop books facilitates the wanderings of subjects whose containment and boundary formation is constantly challenged.

2.11 The Permeable Subject

In the “infinitely suspect night” of the outlaw urban male’s self-fashioning, the vision he proffers of an embattled, “cold” self is supplemented by a profoundly anxious discourse of permeability, invasiveness, penetrability. The “player” holds himself together or falls apart under the overlapping conditions I have been adumbrating. With performative material excesses, and conspicuous inconsistencies constantly re-shaping a symbolic apparatus that displays its own obscene support, “outward” and “inward” constitutions of the masculine subject contaminate one another. In traversing these modalities, Beck’s Pimp, for example, offers a flourishing discourse

of boundary transgression, permeability and leakage. Besides being obsessed with “cutting into” other players on the “track,” “Young Blood” constantly wants to “pick” someone’s brain “like a buzzard” (103), to keep his “mind like a sponge” and his ears “like suction cups” (104): his inhabitation and absorption of the “fast track” lead him to cross the physical boundaries of others, and to acknowledge the permeability of his own. His vocabulary for narration of “the Life” is indeed a compendium of openings, leakages, explosions and implosions: “I felt like the top of my skull had been crushed in. It was like I had been blown apart and all that was left were my eyes” (132). Before he decides to “go straight,” the imprisoned “Iceberg” describes eerie invasions into his solitary cell, by a voice that seems to penetrate the tiny enclosure into which he is confined: “The voice was louder and clearerI heard my name in the flow of chatter.” His “skull book” remains accessible for him to flip open and leaf through, just as he has consulted the psychic matter within the “skull” or “self” of other players, in order to lift pages from their unwritten mental “books.”

With his “rehabilitation” and his final project to turn away from “the Life,” “Iceberg” practises a “skull-guard plan” in which he trains himself to “stand guard” over his thoughts at all times and “shout down” the troubling, invading manifestations of anything that would seem “unreal” (303). Significantly, as the “shout down” strategy suggests, the darkest, most violent of the “barbershop books,” such as Pimp and Whoreson, can carry the possibility of the subject’s sudden repudiation of the “fast track.” Both “Iceberg” and “Whoreson” end their narratives with abrupt, disruptive conversions out of “the Life,” and “Whoreson’s” is particularly compelling in its rapid, unexplained shifts: “I bit my lip as I tried to remember the old toast an old con had once told me. It fitted me to a tee: ‘the jungle creed, said the strong must feed, on any prey at hand. I was branded a beast, and sat at the feast, before I was a man.’As I stared through the

bars, I began to see myself more clearly. In the past four hours I had finally grown up” (Whoreson 296). In the crisis of detention, both “Iceberg” and “Whoreson” install a similarly rigid system of containment to fix their course away from patterns of invasion or devouring absorption, and towards legitimate spaces of domestic finality. “I knew there would be a real home somewhere in my future, a house full of love,” asserts “Whoreson;” “I knew where I was going now” (296). In an almost identical move, “Iceberg” walks out of prison and travels directly to his mother’s bedside: “She clutched at life for an added six months,” he notes; “I never left the house for those six months” (310). Display, transience, and permeability to the “cutting in,” “feeding” or “skull-picking” of others are at last foreclosed in a space designated by the “rehabilitated” shut-in subject who “goes straight” by establishing the prison enclosure both inside his psychic space, and outside “where (he’s) going.”

If the “black steel mask” of the urban “player” poses the threat of over-encoding the subject into a “tight,” restrictive “faciality,” the alternative of “going straight” leaves him no choice but to install a censoring, limiting “skull guard” and institute a lockdown. Despite the narrators’ final conversions in Pimp and Whoreson, the layered contradictions and inconsistencies of “the Life” are told, in these “barbershop books,” as shaping variations on a dazzling, fantastical, chaotic, unpredictable and exhausting project of self-fashioning. The urban male subject “plays” all and risks all, filling his veins with “H” and his ever-changing rooms with flashy new clothes, running, hiding, getting shot, getting high: he is “cool, breathless, magnificent” (Pimp 142). Mastery and dependence, exploitation and need, self-invention and imitation, jumble into the immediacy of an incessant transverse flight across streets where the savviest, coldest “player” can always be “cut into,” devoured or absorbed. As Deleuze and Guattari urge, in the search for an empty, drugged, liberating Body without Organs that can

break into ecstasy, “let us go even further....That is where everything is played” (Plateaux 142)²⁵ (emphasis added). Thus does the urban subject of the “barbershop books” forge the mask of “icy” performativity in order to move in splendour, to have more, always, again, to scoff at the corporeal and to lose himself.

Chapter III: Love Your Unbearable Neighbour: Bodies Inhabiting Space

An urban setting for the permeable, devouring and re-constituting work of the black masculine narrative experiment does not simply testify to the historical facts of migration from a rural “blues” tradition to a streetwise “barbershop” sensibility. In the inhabitation of a densely peopled space, intensely webbed with indicia of cultural work and social activity, the city of modern narrative discourse fosters experiments of identity and presence that occupy physical space in complex ways. Let us consider, for example, the following grotesque repudiation of “cool” Harlem offered by Chester Himes, in the apocalyptic race-war vision of his Plan B:

Unfortunately, it was not only unbearably hot, but it stank (....) It stank from body odor—B.O. to you—underarm sweat, unwashed vaginas, unclean beds, rotting semen, unflushed feces It stank from the yearly accumulations of thousands of unlisted odors embedded in the crumbling walls, the rotting linoleum, the decayed wall paper, the sweaty garments, the incredible perfumes, the rancid face creams and cooking fats, the toe jam, the bad breath from rotting or dirty teeth, the pustules of pus. (51)

Here bodily presence, at its most repulsive, permeates a cityscape that is all heat, excremental excess and putrescence—and its scale is minutely human, grotesquely wedded to the most intimate details of fleshly existence. How do we approach the intensely permeated repository of bodily effluvia that Himes offers up as a Harlem in which “outside is the same as inside, night time is the same as day time”(Plan B 48) ? Why is the body’s occupation of urban space, and the legacy of embodiment, so fraught here with notes of grotesque, invasive physical traces?

In the crucible of black masculine self-fashioning, the occupation of space and the self-possession of bodily integrity, as we have seen in the previous chapter, offer themselves as extremely malleable categories of thought. Façade and depth, numbness and pain, protection and invasion haunt and exhaust the tormented hero of “barbershop” narratives with renewed mutations and permutations that complicate and threaten every move. I wish now to consider narratives of urban presence that veer away from the dictums of cool or cold spectacular mobility, and examine instead variations of the body’s intimate, proliferating yet fleeting impressions upon the street. These operations remind us that, in its course across cultural modalities of fear and fascination, abjection and envy, the black man’s sexualized body has long served to constitute, in the words of Robert Reid-Pharr, the “quintessential queer identity.”²⁶ As Reid-Pharr has noted, when we consider Bayard Rustin’s now famous complexity of engagement, his resilient reworkings of resistance, political action, public commitment and private circulations along the margins of policed sexual topographies, we can summon a peculiarly bittersweet reading of the coarse racist dictum according to which once you “go black, you can’t go back.” There is no going back, no retracing a path to an original sexualized subject who was “there all along” and may be recovered. After all, “origin,” argues Gilles Deleuze, “assigns a ground only in a world already precipitated into.... ungrounding” (*Difference* 202) (emphasis added). African American culture has played with scripts of original black manhood, in some instances by marking (as with an X) the ungroundedness that subtends constructs of origins, in other instances by fixing gestures of resistance within a specific contained, hard and armoured performance of Black manliness. As Kobena Mercer suggests, “it is not as if we could strip away” “‘negative images’ of black masculinity” and “discover some ‘natural’ black male identity which is essentiallypure” (137). In narratives of spatial

occupation that refute the internal coherence of stable, displayed identities, and that refuse the “cool” in favour of the stifling, the intimate and the fleshly, black masculinity dwells in arrangements of troubling proximity, and the haunting question of desire marks the body’s use of space with its imprint.

3.1 Making “My Man”

The male subject’s occupancy of a desiring, dangerously eroticized, unpredictably manifesting body can indeed turn out to be anything but cool. A compelling instance of how the rhetoric of embodiment haunts and pressures the gestures of “cool” occurs in the Autobiography of that arbiter of “cool,” the cerebral, stone-faced guru of be-bop, Miles Davis. He gives the following account of how white pianist Bill Evans is baited into an encounter with the literal, “embodying” potential of his initiation into the Davis-led (all-male) band:

When Bill Evans—we sometimes called him Moe—first got with the band, he was so quiet, man. One day, just to see what he could do, I told him, “Bill, you know what you have to do, don’t you, to be in this band?”

He looked at me all puzzled and shit and shook his head and said, “No, Miles, what do I have to do?”

I said, “Bill, now you know we all brothers and shit and everybody’s in this thing together and so what I came up with for you is that you got to make it with everybody, you know what I mean? You got to fuck the band.” Now, I was kidding, but Bill was real serious, like Trane.

He thought about it for about fifteen minutes and then came back and told me,
 “Miles, I thought about what you said and I just can’t do that. I’d like to please
 everyone and make everybody happy here, but I just can’t do that.”

I looked at him and smiled and said, “My man!” And then he knew I was teasing.

(226)

In this ritual invocation of homosexual contact as a shortcut to inclusion in a group where “all” are “brothers,” the white man’s “seriousness,” Evans’ own intellectualizing of acceptance means that he does not really “get it” when Davis literalizes submerged presuppositions. The pianist’s quiet consideration of the inclusive musical “ensemble” is pressured to imagine the creative give-and-take of the band as a physical act in which he “makes it with everybody.” His repudiation, of course, prompts Davis to offer the very signs of inclusion, the acknowledgement of “manhood” that welcomes Evans into a jealously guarded circle of black musicians. Yet Davis claims that his offer has been taken seriously by a puzzled, quiet and earnest white man who would “like to please everyone and make everybody happy,” in what can only be read, coming from Davis, as an ironic transposition of dominant images centering on subservient African American serviceability.²⁷

This subversive use of literalizing, embodying rhetoric plays upon an evacuation of the presumption that a white man will always correctly know and guess “what to do,” but it also stages a concretization of European artistic clichés which touch upon white cerebral talent and racist hypersexualized projections of black culture.²⁸ Evans thinks he can “make it” artistically with the band, and Davis taunts him into believing he must now sexually “make it” with every member of the band. The irony is even more biting when one remembers what a cool, cerebral and effete persona Davis cultivated for critics and popular audiences. By forcing the intellectual

white musician to construct phantasmal contact with his imagined body, Davis suggestively feeds him the already fully created spectre of dreaded intimacy that Evans must repudiate for the “joke” to function for all of them. “My man,” smiles Davis, as the homoerotic moment hangs, between them, summoned, renounced, and yet always enduring, submerged within the group of men who will circulate across the country, bound by the endless tour’s combination of transience and isolation. Imagined sexual bonding has been summoned and repudiated, and the shadow of this repudiation colours the closeness, the proximity—at times cheerful, at times exasperating—of Davis’s tightly controlled group.

3.2 “Feed the Flesh!”

Davis’s strategy of literalizing the other’s assumptions, ambitions and desires is a rhetorical move that plays embodiment as a destabilizing cultural force. The potencies of the flesh, as markers of the cultural work of inhabitation, grant embodiment an equally crucial role in Chester Himes’s Blind Man With a Pistol. The phantasmic proffering of black flesh occupies the novel as an aggressive gesture, typified most violently by the text’s “Prophet Ham” and his vision of the forced gorging of “whitey”: “We’re gonna feed him the flesh of the Black Jesus....that, brothers IS OUR SECRET WEAPON!We’re gonna feed him the flesh of the Black Jesus until he perish of constipation if he don’t choke to death first” (77-8).” “Here,” suggests Greg Forter, “the novel comes remarkably close to offering an internal representation of its strategies—the forced reincorporation of an indigestible black substance” (208)—or, I would propose, the forced contact with the troubling proximity, the choking closeness of that flesh. Just as Miles Davis turns a taunting desire for inclusion into “authentic blackness” to a fantasy of orgiastic contact (“you want to make it with the band? Then make it with the band!”), so too

does Himes proffer the body's excreting, exuding thereness to his reader of Harlem narratives, in such abundance of detail and grotesque richness that the detective novel is burdened less with the logics of problem solving than with the minutiae of embodiment.

In this respect, Himes's novels of domestic Harlem render spatiality as the mapping of flesh, from a street that is lined with "rusty bare legs and splayed black feet with enormous toes(...) a Harlem sidewalk (...), black feet and purple blood" (36), to "fried hair [melting] in the hot dark air" (73). Humans, leaking sweat, smells, "[breathing] rotten air" (73), permeate the grids of an overheating structure saturated with excesses of fleshly occupation. In his typically grotesque version of neighbourhood, Himes offers a catalogue of physical occupations that concretize what Henri Lefebvre identifies as the modalities of social practice: the "use of the body: the use of the hands, members and sensory organs, and the gestures of work as of activity unrelated to work" (262). Feet, hands, exhaled breath and inhaled smells, gestures and sounds that situate, cover or reveal the body in its excessive, excretory functions—these claim and constitute space in Himes's Harlem. No better example comes to mind than a visit staged by Himes's two black detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, and a white sergeant, in the stinking, crowded flats that harbor a group of inhabitants who refuse to engage with police investigation. Their resistance to reveal even a single clue is read, by the detectives, across the signs of fleshly occupations carried out inside this building:

About what had gone on outside their room that night, or any other night, they knew less than their neighbors at the front. They always kept their shades drawn and their window closed to keep out the noise and the smells and they couldn't hear anything inside, not even their neighbors. Sergeant Ryan was silent for a moment while they all listened to the sound of a drawer being opened and the

exchange of voices in the adjoining room, but he didn't pursue it. What about when one of them went to the toilet? He asked instead. Poon became so agitated she sat up in bed, exposing two big drooping breasts encircled by deep red marks where her brassiere had cut her and tipped by tough brown teats like the stalks of pumpkins cut from the vine. They weren't children, they didn't pee in bed.

Grave Digger glanced at the washbasin with such obvious suggestion her face swelled with indignation and the sheet flew from the rest of her, revealing her big hairy nest. Suddenly the room was flooded with the strong alkaloid scent of continuous sexual intercourse. Sergeant Ryan threw up his hands. (81)

In the nearby "Cozy Flats," the same detectives find "closed doors, bedroom and toilet odors, the nose-pinching smell of marijuana, the grunting and groanings of skin poppers and homosexuals, the muted whine of old blues played low" (85). The most intimate bodily processes listed here are woven through spatial entanglements which the forces of order attempt to classify and re-grid, and the "choking" effect of being fed this flesh disempowers an intrusive agent of interrogation who "throws up" his hands. The redundant questions of "detecting" release only, in the "coziness" of bodily closeness within these flats, an excessive, overpowering fleshliness that marks these spaces so richly that the spectral presence of a possible constructed "suspect" is foreclosed by smells and sounds of the uncontainable, exaggerated, living, smelling, copulating, grunting body.

Himes's meticulous lists of the bodily traces, sounds and effluvia that percolate through Harlem, grant substance to the proliferation of intimate trajectories which Michel de Certeau proposes, as he imagines the city's inhabitants "blindly" writing entangled paths across space. Their bodies function as constitutive elements in the invisible poetry that "practitioners" of the

city create, and they know its spaces with the familiar intimacy that graces the closeness of amorous contact (141).²⁹ In the “cozy” flats, the signs of an occupation that is verbally disavowed by uncooperative, nameless tenants, are the overpowering imprints of the sexual, the genital, the excretory: “grunting and groanings,” the “strong alkaloid scent of continuous sexual intercourse,” (81) and the imagined appropriation of a washbasin as a makeshift washroom. The body’s traces suggest the trajectories and itineraries that have preceded the sudden probing of the Law within closed but porous doors. Noisy, odorous bodily functions mark the fleeting, invisible migrations that have occurred prior to the white sergeant’s scrutiny—enigmatic proximities by men who may have occupied a tiny boudoir room, decorated with obscene murals and soaked with blood, in a gridded space where, as Grave Digger observes, “Anybody can come in here day or night....Good for the whores but bad for the children” (63). In Himes’s Harlem, the law’s intervention forces such migrations out of sight and into the darkness of clandestine markets and services, and prompts a disavowal of the motions and trajectories that Ed and Digger detect just below their sight.

3.3 Marching for Brotherhood or Leather

These hidden, secretive trajectories form what de Certeau identifies as the motion of delinquency: a narrativity of personal resistance that traces circuits of motion, and across which a course of gestures supersedes the establishment of a “state of being” (190). This supple, proliferating delinquency offers the possibility of living not in the margins, but “in the interstices of codes that the individual thwarts and displaces” (190).³⁰ Citizens can inhabit their streets and tenements in a diffuse, indistinct, but stubbornly resistant way (146). When a “silent crowd [collects] in the shadows” next to the murdered white man whose death forms the novel’s initial

enigma, the black policemen try to disperse onlookers: "Coffin Ed turned on them and shouted suddenly, "You people better get the hell away from here before the white cops come in, or they'll run your asses in." There was a sound of nervous movement, like frightened cattle in the dark, then a voice said belligerently, "Run whose asses in? I lives here!" (35). The body here gathers and moves in darkness, summoned nameless on the street as the living, "indigestible," unmanageable presence that resists by drawing repulsively close or by dispersing across itineraries that are "bad for the children," networks of a hidden economy, compositions of a multiple history, "formed by fragments of trajectories and alterations of space" (de Certeau 142).³¹

Those changeable circulations, interrupted routes and retracings occur in the novel's "man in a red fez," who is glimpsed repeatedly along the murder-investigation plot, running down the street, unstoppable as he carries a crucial, unexplained clue: the pants of the murdered man. That "supple" mobility subtends the black detectives' favourite motto: "This is Harlem," they repeat, Harlem, where the delivery of televisions is performed in the middle of the night by "Lunatic Lyndon" –clandestine purveyor of sets that he provides and installs "ANY TIME OF DAY OR NIGHT ANY PLACE" (107). Lunatic Lyndon's men, unfettered, tracing unknown circuits, alter urban grids and boxes and re-compose space in darkened tenements by appearing and summoning inhabitants at "any time." Shadowy occupants materialize, their voices "[bubbling] in the night": bodies emerge out of the "black squares of windows" in houses that are "vague geometrical patterns of black against the lighter blackness of the sky." (119) Nameless citizens banter and challenge one another as they coalesce to crowd into a tenant's room, "surging pell-mell" (123) and then just as quickly "[melting] away" (124): "One minute the room was filled with them.the next minute they were gone....the delivery men unlocked

and opened the door. They began to take away the wooden television box. No one came to help them. No one appeared to look. No one appeared at all” (124-5). Surging, then melting away, the inhabitants of Harlem occupy the streets of a hardboiled detective story that stages its own unmooring from the structures of solving and knowing, as bodily occupation either circuitously bends its course away from the Law’s surveillance or chokingly crowds and immobilizes the exercise of detecting. De Certeau reminds us that there is an agility to the occupation of an urban space, a power to subvert, to evade even as a city block, a street, an alleyway or a flat is occupied (149)—an agility and subtlety that are aptly rendered by Himes’s inclusion of Lunatic Lyndon. Inhabitants, proposes de Certeau, inscribe their embodiment in articulated practises which have the effect of shaping space. A body that gestures, moves, places and displaces itself, and experiences pleasure, continuously imprints the vanishing occupation of here as opposed to there (191). This power, according to de Certeau, revives ageless reserves of a multiple, insidious, mobile delinquency, that is at once “playful and menacing” like the unfolding of ancient carnivals (191).

Such a carnivalesque explosion of bodily occupation is staged by Himes in the Nat Turner Day collision of 3 marching crowds. The first group of marchers, proclaiming Brotherhood, is composed of bare-legged black and white youths who hug “suggestively”, kiss, dance and prompt a passerby to exclaim: “it’s an orgy!” (99). Racially diverse, these bodies are troubling: they look either “unbelievably black” or “unnecessarily white,” and their leader flaunts “the strained expression of a man moving his bowels” (98). A second group, demonstrating in the name of a Black Jesus who “drips black blood from ...outstretched hands,” is a “long disorganized procession of (...) thinly-clad black girls of all shapes and sizes, clinging to the ebony arms” of young men, as solemn preachers carry a banner reading “FEED THEM

JESUS! They'll vomit every time!"(100). Simultaneously, Black Power marchers converge on the crowded street, some wearing leather, others illuminated by a booming machine that lights up their faces and bodies into images from a blackface nightmare, highlighting "the white crescents of the black men's eyes, the ivory shields of their teeth, and the gleaming black muscles of their naked torsos" (100).

The excremental release of excessive, bi-racial and earthy love collides here with the Word made black flesh, a Black Jesus whose body is offered to be force-fed by suggestively paired, heteronormative couples. Both of these occupations of the street are complicated by the thrust of gleaming, shirtless, muscle-bound, leather-wearing Black men: power troopers who seek to collide with young flesh. When fighting breaks out between these occupants of a shared public space they each claim, the Brotherhood youths are taunted as "sissies," and the Black Jesus is "Slowly (...) dismembered by the crush of bodies" (105). In the carnivalesque occupation of the street by such diverse, mutually arousing and threatening, mobile crowds, a sense of the ageless potency suggested by de Certeau is indeed noted: "What's this carnival about?" asks Coffin Ed of a neighborhood informant, who cannot elucidate in logical terms, but finds a seriousness of purpose and potent energy in the crowds; "it ain't what I see," replies the informant, "It's what I feel. I can feel they're serious" (103). The surging crowds are taken by the forces of order to mask a "meaning," a linear, causal trajectory that could point to its own structure. Yet the rioting places bodies in a complex, fluctuating map of violent, beautiful and grotesque presence, which the detectives are unable to read: it looks "like a rehearsal for a modern ballet," young men's bodies "moving in grotesque rhythm, lithe, lightfooted, agile and fluid, charged with a hysterical excitement that [makes] them look unhealthily animated" (136). From the moment these occupations of the street collide and coalesce, the novel's detectives are

compelled to struggle with the impossible demand for an explanatory revelation, one that would structure and clarify a chaotic occupation of space, but that the novel entangles in a knot of intersecting, fruitless and unfulfilled searches.

3.4 Cannibalistic Circuits

As the leather-clad, gleaming, bare-chested Power marchers attack the “sissies” they identify as forming the Brotherhood, black flesh turns upon black flesh by pounding it with “such abandon it [looks] indecent” (105). The novel’s tracking of fleshly occupations has folded into an involution, a point of contact. At moments when the structure of detecting cannot function and the black policemen are impotently confronted with the enigma of “what needs answering” (93), the text strategically features circuits of flesh encountering the other’s “meat;” the black detectives justify their frustrated beating of Lucas Covey, for example, by stating that “you can’t make a ragout without cutting the meat” (110), and they find a freshly murdered John Babson (whom they have exposed to harm and then failed to protect), slashed by his attacker across the buttocks so that “his ass [has] popped wide open just like a sliced frankfurter” (146). Each time, the flesh that is cut, sliced and ground up is that of men labeled within the text as “sissies”—Covey is a “superior-acting black man” with “effeminacy in his carriage,” a “pederast” whose dressing-table is decorated with “black and white dolls,” while Babson is described as a “pansy,” a swishing lunch counter flirt who bats his eyelashes at the cops and takes them to a bath-house. The circuit by which flesh collides with flesh occurs in encounters between a hyper-masculine persona and a differently self-displaying man, and the collision only opens further shadowy, impossible, frustrating lines of questioning for the hardboiled narrative apparatus driven by Ed and Digger: who is responsible for the rioting among marchers? How

can the identities of Covey, Babson and the “man with the red fez” be fixed to the satisfaction of a Lieutenant who, enigmatically, doesn’t want his detectives to “rake any more muck than necessary” (111)?

One reading of these flesh-upon-flesh circuits would entail simply to approach each assault as playing out the ritual of attraction and disavowal, fantasy and repulsion that has been suggested in Miles Davis’s tempting and taunting of Bill Evans. An aggressive disavowal of the proximity and brotherhood demanded by marching “bare-limbed youths” (“Brotherly Love Is the Greatest!” they proclaim [98]), for instance, would yield signs of what E. Patrick Johnson terms an “unspoken queerness that manifests precisely at the moment its silence is supposedly guaranteed” (60), and would read desire and melancholy in what seems like the staging of extreme homophobic violence. I am tempted however to set aside such a reading in order to allow for a greater variety of unstable masculine formations to co-exist in the fabric of these violent scenes.

After all, one of Chester Himes’ most striking strategies is to propose a subject who is always many different things at once, and about whom a constellation of disjointed narrative pieces gather. His version of the detective novel presents hot, dark space that teems with flesh, movement, violence and unsolved, unresolved identifications, victimizations and communications. It is marked by what Greg Forter terms a “characterological indeterminacy” that infects the whole text with a “repetition of figures in contexts that invite yet question the identity of those repeated ‘entities’” (175). Every disorganized preacher, ineffectual “race man” or “know-nothing” tenant is also an enigmatic con-man who circulates along clandestine economies and exploitative networks, and who deflects investigative projects back towards a hot city maze filled with bodily traces of occupation. Not one “suspect” is who or what he seems,

and the secret keeper of the hidden, bloodied boudoir room no-one will claim is Covey, the gay West Indian man whose eyes have a “slight Mongolian slant, giving his face a bitsa look, a bit of African, a bit of Nordic, a bit of Oriental” (Blind Man 86). The white “square” who ventures into this night space where “everybody [is] ahead of the play” finds himself untethered, unmade in his response to young black men’s painted lips and brazen gestures, until his desire for them makes him “weak as water, [dissolves] his bones, [dizzies] his head” (Blind Man 18). Enigmatic to the end, the “man in a red fez” is construed by detectives as being neither a “real” black Muslim, nor a convincingly artificial one (Blind Man 111).

What Himes’ Harlem offers, by enfolding black flesh against black flesh in explosive contact, is an ungrounded occupation of city space whereby bodies enter into frictions, try out assemblages and dismantlings. Inhabitation, as we have seen, functions as a mobile, fleeting, ungrounded cluster of practises that are enacted by the body. The black man of Himes’s narrative occupies space as a transient, misleading assemblage of bodily presences, and his flesh enfolds upon the other’s flesh when proximity turns to collision.

3.5 “What Am I for Those Others?”

Whether marching in an unstable sea of bodies, or disoriented by thickening mysteries which multiply beyond the reach of elucidation, the armed, armoured male subject apparently strikes out against proximities that compel extreme instances of friction. Faced with the sign of “Brotherhood,” with the spectacle of cross-racial same-gender-loving, and with the chaos of different enigmatic “statements” (Blind Man 103), the Power “troopers” enact a hysterical reaction to what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the problematic injunction to love one’s neighbour. My neighbour, suggests Žižek, acts as an “impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericizes me.

The core of this presence, of course, is the neighbour's desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the neighbour" (How to Read Lacan 43). Interpellated by the call to "Brotherhood," radically "uncertain as to the other's intentions" (Zizek, Remainder 139), unsure what it means to be a "brother" to this fascinating, suggestive, moving column of young men who claim that "Brotherly Love Is The Greatest," the Black power trooper fantasizes in his neighbour's closeness the homoerotic desire of the "sissy." The anxiety that this proximity yields centers on the persistence of an enigma that textures the urban narrative of communal space. Jacques Lacan provides a key to reading that enigma, by suggesting that it resides in the subject's "nescience of whence he desires" (Ecrits 689): "this is why the Other's question—that comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects an oracular reply—which takes some such form as 'Chè vuoi?,' 'What do you want?,' is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire" (690). The Other,³² the neighbour who enacts nocturnal circulations and whose choking proximity at once masks and suggests endless clandestine movements, is the site of an "unfathomable desire":

Not only does the other address me with an enigmatic desire, it also confronts me with the fact that I myself do not know what I desire, with the enigma of my own desire.... For this reason, Lacan's 'Che vuoi?' does not simply ask: 'What do you want?' but rather: '....What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not control? (How to Read 42-3)

When Grave Digger and Coffin Ed corner and beat Covey in his bedroom, what they want is never voiced; what they achieve is a display of how privately unbearable the mystery of his troubling presence is to them. By striking him, they draw from him the "pet name," the "loving

name” of a “nice man,” but that name only points to spectral identities in a grid of sexual, cross-racial circulations, and these, like the black and white dolls propped up to decorate his space, prove to be enigmatic fantasies.

If Himes allows his mobile masculinities to fold into violent assemblages by which the neighbour’s flesh is fantasized as “meat,” he also creates erotic circuits of proximity and provocation that position every male to “address [another] with an enigmatic desire” (Žižek, How to Read 42). The leather-clad, aggressive Black Power marchers, looking “like Nazi SS troopers in blackface” (Himes, Blind Man 100), not only administer beatings that look “indecent,” they are taunted by street addicts who respond to their proximity with fantasies of suggestive bravado: “Thass right. I show them. I power their behinds”(101). The suggestive instability that rules the language and gestures of “meat” even marks a kind of “hardboiled” flirting between the cops and Babson, the “extroverted pansy” from whom they order a meal of “steak in one piece” (112). The neighbour of Himes’s Harlem compels responses of fascinated repulsion, and the supremely hideous, fascinating advocate of brotherly love, the Black Jesus, is a grotesque monstrosity, a thing that is dismantled by the crowd. When the neighbour transforms into “meat,” the full ambiguousness of his monstrosity is captured. It is “a monstrosity,” suggests Žižek, “on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbour the term Thing (das Ding), used by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability” (How to Read 43). The intolerable intensity of a white man’s predatory desire for a young black body is thus encoded by a neighbourhood gatekeeper into a mysterious thing, an order of “chops,” and as he is pressed with the interpellation of that desire, the white consumer of cross-racial “brotherly love” can only “lean away” in confusion and repulsion:

He was a thin black man with a long smooth face. He wore black pants, a black long-sleeve shirt with black buttons and a bright red fez.....He leaned toward the white man and whispered in his other ear, "I know what you want."

The waiter gave him a look. "Chops," he said.

As he leaned away from the black man, the white man thought they were all talking in a secret language. All he wanted was to get with the sissies. (Blind Man 18)

The "secret language" is what animates the questioning of what he seeks to consume; it is that by which inhabitants interrogate his desire and seek to compel him to name it, choking and frightening him with a repellent proximity that only exacerbates a vaguely phrased need to "get with the sissies." It is the "secret language" of an encounter during which each man gestures to the other the content of an enquiry—"what do you want from me?"—and which prefaces an entry into the shadowy circulations and clandestine occupations whose traces will be a dead white man and a mobile pair of pants. In a neighbourhood where a white man's initial foray into the streets can only lead to his vulnerability and loss of physical cohesion, the "private formula" of his desire is what reduces him "to a puppet-like level 'beyond dignity and freedom'" (Zizek, How to Read 48)—we could almost read his annihilation as a migration into that disembodied, ridiculous pair of pants, carried along shadowy spaces at unpredictable intervals by a man in a red fez emblazoned with the words "BLACK POWER."

The entry into the interpellation of desire is structured, in keeping with Zizek's reading of Lacan, as a confrontation with the impenetrability of one's own desire to one's self, so that "the original question of desire is not directly 'What do I want?', but 'What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for those others?'" (How to Read 49). As we have seen, that

process can be detected in the vision summoned by Miles Davis to preface Bill Evans's initiation into his group. And it is developed with even greater detail and gusto in the aggressive self-fashioning of Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice.

3.6 "How Much He Was a Man"

Soul on Ice is a text whose title comes to us so steeped in the race-conscious slang of its time of publication (one year before Himes's Blind Man), that the work of exhuming "Soul" as a popular encoding of a certain late-sixties perception of African American sensibility,³³ and "ice" as designating the prison, now inevitably seems to open a critical distance that allows for several versions of the Cleaver persona to flourish. There persists, of course, "Eldridge Cleaver, the 60's Panther.... famously homophobic" (Bond Stockton 152), a figure perceived to be contained by an experience of incarceration that puts him "on ice" and forces him to analyze and reveal, in this text, a single healing, maturing "self." (Reed 16). Ishmael Reed promotes such a reception of "Eldridge Cleaver" by contributing a typically abrasive preface added in 1992, in which he nevertheless notes, as evidence of Cleaver's aptitude for change, that "In Soul on Ice he refers to himself as though he were different people" (5). Yet to attribute the discontinuous, excessive and disjointed sensibilities found in this text to the "different changes" that shaped the history of a centralizing "Eldridge Cleaver" (as Reed does), is to evacuate much of the text's richness and enigmatic, anxious, and excessive flair. Robert Reid-Pharr has emphasized the ways in which Cleaver's discourse of "heterosexual normalcy" performs a "caricature of itself," (358) so that there are constant disjunctions between "the interracial homoerotic, homosexual environment, the prison, in which Cleaver actually lived and wrote and the fantasy of black heterosexuality that he constructs in his narrative" (357). Fantasy, then, points us to ways of approaching the

Cleaver persona and its colliding constructs of presence. As we discover, the multivalence of fantasy and desire cannot be immobilized, or put “on ice;” the prison is not an ellipsis, a suspension from the work of self-fashioning in an occupied space shared by an always present Other, and the persona which shapes this text does not simply yield “Eldridge Cleaver, the 60’s Panther, homophobe.”

In a suitably hazy, but also appropriately malleable statement, the back cover of Soul on Ice, the pocketbook edition, announces that “what Cleaver shows us, on the pages of this now classic autobiography, is how much he was a man” (emphasis added). If we read Soul on Ice as divulging how many anxious, recurring fantasies, indeed, guide the project of “being a man,” we can certainly concur that the text shows a persona who is deeply enmeshed in rhetorically diverse attempts at formulating theories and visions of manhood. The text’s complex eloquence and deceptive bravado, its theorizing sermons and echoing scenes of phantasmic formation, construct a Cleaver persona who indeed tells and re-tells “how much he [is] a man.”

Soul on Ice foregrounds its own stylistic components, and its tone, at times lecturing, at times ranting, its violent, overblown or humorous images, its pseudo-scientific and evangelical formulas, establish from the outset a devotion to the performance of rhetorical excess. The impact of boxer Muhammad Ali, for instance, is rendered in terms that recall the grotesque heavy-handedness of Himes’s “Church of Black Jesus,” and its cannibalistic slogans (“FEED THEM JESUS! They’ll vomit every time!” [100]). Ali, a black Muslim champion who erupts into mainstream white culture, is a bitter pill to swallow, proposes the text, and a command must be issued to white Americans: “swallow it—or throw the whole bit up, and hope that in the convulsions of your guts, America, you can vomit out the poisons of hate which have led you to a dead end in this valley of the shadow of death” (121).

Such violent fantasies of embodiment, and repeated strategies by which the cultural is transubstantiated, incarnated into fantasies of the physical, the fleshly, also direct the text's approach to the legacy of James Baldwin. As the narrator establishes his initial delight in the discovery of Baldwin, and his "lust" for the "newborn page" that he imagines would emerge if he sat "on a pillow beneath the womb of Baldwin's typewriter," (122) Cleaver chooses, according to Kathryn Bond Stockton, to "tease" with carefully chosen metaphors, since the crux of his subsequent rejection of Baldwin rests on a perceived "wish to create that swiftly becomes a wish to miscegenate, bodily and intellectually" (158-9). Drawing a parallel between intellectual sycophancy and a proposed "racial death-wish" for the racial mixing that has been "diluting" African American blood, the Cleaver persona implicates black homosexual men in bourgeois intellectual cowardice, which in turn is imagined as the sexual act of miscegenation. This discourse of blame tropes "insufficient racial identification...in terms of a failed manhood for which homosexuality," as Philip Brian Harper argues, acts as "the primary signifier" (50) (emphasis added). Homosexual contact, in *Soul on Ice*, is proposed as the founding ritual of racial self-hatred, and its participating black subject is imagined as seeking the impossible, sentimental outlet of procreative embodiment:

It seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm. (127-8)

The text fantasizes, in precise sexual terms, the embodiment of a perceived artistic and cultural submission to white domination, and the narrator imposes upon black homosexuals an obsessive, unfulfilled need to have the word become flesh, in the racially hybrid “little half-white offspring of their dreams” (emphasis added). Significantly, as the narrator installs a fantasy by which cultural deference is embodied into erotic penetrability, he also colonizes the homosexual subject’s experience of desire with the same need for embodiment. Penetrating the crux, the “cross” of that desiring, he compels his imagined subject to perform the very same “phantasmic formation” (Žižek, Plague 9) he obsessively iterates. Proposed as an endlessly re-attempted, always frustrated procreation, the cultural work of the black homosexual constitutes here a botched miscegenation of the desiring mind: the homosexual is presented as desiring something deadly to himself and his race, but as producing something grotesque and sickening to himself. Yet the narrator’s phantasmic scene does not stage its own toxic end, but rather a self-perpetuating structure that “re-doubles [its] efforts” to nourish an embodied contact that is fantasized as something that continues and intensifies. Eternally “unwinding,” already “bending over and touching their toes,” the black men imagined only increase their “intake of the white man’s sperm” in a vision of endlessly repeated, eternally “re-doubled” penetration. Repulsed by the “sickness,” the “death-wish” he reads into that subject, the narrator nevertheless constructs for the black homosexual a fantasy model of never-ending bodily mergings and ejaculation. The rhetorical strategy of embodiment which the narrator proffers likewise “re-doubles [its] efforts” when it conflates the imagined desiring of the Other with the working of his own phantasmic structure, to penetrate with what he fantasizes as the always-renewed center of his desire, the “cross” he has to bear.

That structure is further complicated by the fact that, as Kathryn Bond Stockton has observed, the invective of the essay condemning Baldwin strikingly mirrors the narrator's own introductory self-portrait: "Cleaver's charge against the homosexual's 'sickness' and 'miscegenation' echoes his indictment of himself at the start of Soul on Ice, insofar as Cleaver begins by confessing his attraction to white women" (160). In fact, the word "sickness" is one the narrator uses interchangeably to denote either an attraction to white women, or the desires of homosexual black men as these appear in the text's repeated phantasmic scenarios. Initially contemplating his own "sickness," the narrator, Himes-like, imagines the other as edible material: he includes lines from a poem, written "to a white girl," in which he figures her flesh as "meat": "I love you,/Because you're white," asserts the outlaw narrator, "I hate you/Because you're white./Your white meat/Is nightmare food" (32). Against a background of lynching (she is "Symbol of the rope and hanging tree,/Of the burning cross") and "crucifixion," he experiences his desire as regulated by a dangerous proximity to the "white meat" that uncannily feeds him, and he finds himself removed to containment in the space of the prison, where his "pride as a man [dissolves]" (34).

3.7 The Spectral Neighbour

As Robert Reid-Pharr has noted, imprisonment, a "primal scene of black subjectification" in modern narratives, can direct the subject to introspection and discovery at the very point where the "twentieth century black male [narrator is] in danger of being homosexualized" (360). As we have seen in other modern narratives of the street, in this "deep hole" of the prison (Cleaver 35), the self is dismantled. "I was very familiar with the Eldridge who came to prison," asserts the narrator, "but that Eldridge no longer exists" (35). To explain this loss of the "self's"

cohesion, the text points to markers of the Other's desire to which he has access: a man who remains mobile, uncontained, "gets constant feedback from the number of female heads he turns when he walks down the street," but the prisoner receives from his neighbours only "hate-stares...sour frowns" and "bitter looks" (35). "You can easily see how a man can lose his arrogance or certainty" with regard to his "attractiveness to women" declares the narrator. The situation evoked here recalls Žižek's warning about the "intersubjective" character of fantasy, its reliance upon the Other. The question of desire, as we have seen, is not "What do I want," but rather "What do [others] see in me? What am I to others?" (Plague 9) (emphasis added). Once he finds himself in the exclusively male space of the prison, the narrator is in constant proximity to another man, a neighbour whose gaze carries an enigma that he cannot face or process, and from which he is not capable of constituting "what he is to others." Immobilized, unable to circulate across the known urban space where the gestures of his presence would perform inhabitation and be sustained by his reading of imagined interchangeable signs of validation (as "female heads turn"), the narrator is instead "hystericized" by the proximity a neighbour whose gaze offers no certainty. As we have seen, this confrontation with the proximity of the desiring Other, as Žižek explains, not only addresses the narrator with "an enigmatic desire" (in "frowns" and "looks") it also defies him "with the enigma of [his] own desire" (How to Read 42-3) In a space of containment and physical closeness, a man "[loses] his arrogance or certainty" and he turns to fantasies of the body battered, invaded by the proximity of the Other (Cleaver 35).

Unmade by the impenetrable gaze of other men, the narrator expounds at length on his phantasmic constructs of homosexuality, and he proffers fantasies of physical penetrability and bodily dismantling. "The black homosexual," he declares, "when his twist has a racial nexus," submits to a white man who has "deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of

his burning skull" (128). Physical violations enacted upon the lynched black body—castration, burning skull—constitute a scene of victimization that the narrator then proceeds to relocate in the inner-city space of the black community. When the black subject's homosexual "twist" inscribes itself simply as occupation of the ghetto street, claims the narrator, the white man is not the one who will "castrate him," but he will instead be subjected to "punk-hunting" by his neighbour. In what he terms a "classic, if cruel," ubiquitous phenomenon of the black ghettos, the narrator describes a practise by young black men "of seeking out homosexuals on the prowl, rolling them, beating them up, seemingly just to satisfy some savage impulse to inflict pain on the specific target selected" (132). This scene, too, "seemsnot unrelated" to the "ritualistic lynchings and castrations inflicted on Southern Blacks by Southern Whites" (131-2). The ghetto neighbour, then, in the "classic" street scenario proposed, is a youth of "savage impulses" whose uncanny violence mirrors that of the white oppressor (like Himes's "Nazi troopers in blackface"). Of course, the street is also shared by the enigmatic Other who inhabits the neighbourhood with gestures of occupation that cause him to be sought out, identified as a homosexual, branded a prowling disturbance and emasculated. Insistence on the black homosexual man's enigmatic, uncanny presence is marked by the narrator's repeated designations of him as a living spectre:³⁴ Rufus Scott is declared to be the "weak, craven-hearted ghost of Another Country" (131), Richard Wright is notable for having described the violent "encounter between a ghost and several young negroes" (131), while Wright himself is considered "not ghost enough" to transform rebellion into "lamblike submission." The "ghost's" disturbing, "hystericising" presence leaves the Cleaver persona caught in an impasse created by competing fantasies of either the lynching cruelty of roaming savage youths, or the intolerable

mystery of their “selected target,” the spectral neighbour who cravenly awaits “news that the Day of the Ghost has arrived” (134).

3.8 “The Law of My Rod”

The narrator’s investment in forcing the transposition of cultural relationships into bodily ones, his insistence on literalizing political submission as homosexualized, erotic surrender, and on returning obsessively to a moment of castration, situate the black male body as the rhetorical, metaphorical center of this text’s cultural work. In one of its most compelling fleshly application, this rhetorical treatment serves to elaborate a fantasy in which the narrator surrounds himself with “Eunuchs,” “young, strong, superlative Black Eunuchs in the prime” (183), in order to stage an “allegory,” a foundational tale of black emasculation by a white “Omnipotent Administrator” who controls black male sexuality. The episode is striking in that the narrator assigns to another phatasmic figure,—a fellow inmate he designates as the “Infidel”—the work of presenting an elaborate schema immediately developed, by the narrator himself, in the text’s following chapter (“Primeval Mitosis”). A theorizer once removed from the narrator, the “Infidel” expounds upon the ways in which the white “Omnipotent Administrator” has asserted control over black masculinity, while the narrator situates himself within the community of passive listeners. The excessive rhetorical style granted this “Infidel” includes all the “campy ‘ambition’,” the “fanciful, entertaining, crude” and highly wrought stylistic mannerisms which Kathryn Bond Stockton detects in what she reads as the “dark camp” (211) of Soul on Ice. Borrowing the voice of the “Omnipotent Administrator,” the Infidel declares, “by subjecting your manhood to the control of my will, I shall control you. The stem of the Body, the penis,

must submit to the will of the Brain” (Cleaver 194). As he gazes upon this speaker, surrounded by those he describes as “Eunuchs,” the narrator experiences a reaction of fear and arousal:

I felt a hot throbbing in my crotch. Instinctively and with a taste of panic, I reached down, almost afraid that my rod would be missing, but it was there and it was erect and I squeezed it and it was strong and resilient and firm. When I gave it that squeeze, a wave of strength surged through my body. I felt powerful, and I knew that I would make it if I never betrayed the law of my rod. The Infidel smiled, and I was sure he had read my thoughts. (Cleaver 195)

Predictably, a “hot throbbing” works as the focal point of anxiety and attraction, and this moment indeed typifies the text’s genitalization of both fear and desire, its relentless compulsion toward embodiment and toward the fantasizing of flesh both as cut or damaged and as fully potent and graspable. *Soul on Ice* persistently presents a vision of Black manhood that is bound by the function of castration as loss of sexual and social symbolic power to the Other, the white man. Kathryn Bond Stockton reads in Cleaver an original source of Lacanian insights,³⁵ a kind of Black Panther psychoanalyst who “has his own way of showing that the penis is not the phallus” (166). Indeed, the Omnipotent Administrator does examine separate positions of masculinity and carry out the establishment of a distinct function situated in social and symbolic power.

Temptingly evocative of Lacan, the “law of the rod” that the narrator vows to follow in order to “make it” yet remains spectacularly blank, completely unformulated. It acts as a central empty position of masculinity that the text refuses to fill with anything more than the fleshly erection, “resilient and firm,” rather than “missing.” Such is drama of man’s “nonposition”, explains Judith Butler (56), since in Lacan’s analysis “men are said to ‘have’ the Phallus, yet never to ‘be’ it, in the sense that the penis is not equivalent to that [Symbolic, paternal] Law and can never

fully symbolize that Law” (59). “Man cannot aim at being whole,” writes Lacan, “once the play of displacement and condensation to which he is destined in the exercise of his functions marks his relation, as a subject, to the [phallus]” (581). In Soul on Ice, the penis is a reminder of disjointedness: it is the flesh that is always also not there, always envisioned threatened with castration, so that, by holding it in place, the narrator summons the blank (and, as we have seen, slippery) promise of “making it.” Likewise, by holding fast to the embodiment of all matters cultural into visions of bodily collision, by compulsively drawing his rhetoric towards the hypnotic, uncanny flesh of the Other, the narrator paradoxically conjures “ghosts” and phantasmic doubles.

The text’s culture of desire charges the enclosed space of the prison with fantasies of bodies, meat, penetration and castration and the uncomfortable closeness of male presence is yoked to a language of embodiment that crystallizes at points of anxiety. The aroused, throbbing penis is grasped at the point where the enigma of desire is coupled with “the taste of panic” (195). After all, as Zizek explains, “anxiety does not emerge when the object-cause of desire is lost....—on the contrary, anxiety emerges when (and signals that) the object of desire is too close, when and if we come too near it” (Ticklish 363). While the body directs attention to itself as the flashpoint of an anxious, unmoored self, the text’s narrator, a rhetorically excessive, mannered persona, is left silently holding onto his own penis in an infantile gesture of self-reassurance, gazing at a phantasmic persona that, mirror-like, confirms only his own rhetoric.

3.9 Mean Streets and Matching Penises

This vision of the Cleaver persona deriving a sense of power from touching his body and feeling his own arousal compels us to follow further the thread of this problematic identification.

In some ways, it offers a dangerous, familiar reworking of the most reductive racist clusters of imagery. Familiar indeed, because as Franz Fanon remarks in Black Skins White Masks, European culture fosters an image of the black man that substitutes the penis for the subject: “one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis”(170). Yet black masculine self-fashioning, so insistent, as we have seen, in its rhetoric of embodiment, is eager to improvise variations on the refrains of bodily presence and awareness in order to develop a discourse of spatial occupation. In Soul on Ice, a man who is shut away from the habitual gestures that have situated him on the street and structured his desire, feels aroused by an echo of his own words and centers his fantasy upon graspable flesh that can mysteriously evoke the project of “making it.”

In Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets, a racially indeterminate “morenito” (“little brown one”) is likewise haunted by the question of desire, which in his case is tightly woven with the issue of how racial distinction—administered by the Other—processes his enigmatic brown body. In echo of Cleaver’s sought comfort at the “rod,” the narrator of Mean Streets anxiously observes and tests his genitals as he pressures the palimpsests of racial history and the neighbourhood-wide enigma of what the culture of “becoming hombre” (15) requires. The penis constitutes indeed the “stem of the Body”: it operates as a central indicator of race. His own brother’s penis is white, notes the narrator, as he specifies, “only ones got black peters is Poppa and me, and Poppa acts like his is white too” (142). The father’s denial of a racial classification, of a community, and of a body that could inhabit the urban space of gridded neighbourhoods as “black” rather than “Puerto Rican,” is figured as a denial of his black penis. He “acts like his is white too,” which means that he refuses to engage in a reassuring, welcoming identification of his son’s anxiously considered body with his own. The fantasy of matching black penises is a

fantasy of racial and familial embrace, and “acting like his is white” signifies the father’s refusal to engage with that fantasy. Social, communal, racial identification are found wanting in this “white-acting” father and his perceived cowardice is embodied, genitalized so that refusing to be a black man is refusing the black penis. The narrator requires his racial history to be made flesh; he wishes to inscribe the difficult relationship with his self-hating father into a question of “literalized sexual anatomy” (Butler 91). When the cramped proximity of home fails to facilitate the literal, genital identification of black manhood which the narrator seeks to provoke, he directs his desire towards occupation of Southern destinations where Fanon’s dictum is likely to prevail. “I want to see,” muses the narrator, “what a moyeto’s worth and the paddy’s weight on him” (143). The text tracks a mobility that will take him southward to carry his body across policed systems of spatial occupation.

The text’s vector of nomadism not only presides over the journey into segregated America and back again, it also shapes the restless charting of public space by street gangs of the home neighbourhood. In the renewed collisions of local turf-war, the posturing youth is called upon to daily re-inscribe his gestures of inhabitation and self-display on the street, for the benefit of a gang culture: “I’m tough enough. I’ve got much corazón, I’m king wherever I go no punk out, no die out, walk bad; be down, cool breeze, smooth. My mind raced, and thoughts crashed against each other, trying to reassemble themselves into a pattern of rep” (48). Sure of the literal immediacy of his black penis, but unsure of any other sign he carries, the narrator is pursued by the question of desire. Never does he formulate an interrogation of his own desire, other than by placing his brown body across spaces that will provoke the intersubjective function of desire and receive his “pattern of rep”: “What do [others] see in me? What am I to others?” (Zizek, Plague 9) When the “little brown one” gazes at his penis and seems on the verge of “going black,” he

finds that there is no “going back” to a secure racialized masculinity that would be anchored to a consistent, stable reading of desire’s functions. The narrator who inhabits the mean streets with his own dispersed gestures of presence—violent gang combat, public verbal assertions of Puerto Rican cultural inclusion, swaggering territorial claims—experiences both racialization and masculinisation as forming an intersubjective “battlefield for the desires of those around him” (Zizek, Plague 9).

Recurring in the text is a teasingly potent suggestion according to which the neighbourhood’s traced heteronormative boundaries of “being hombre” are really so indeterminate, so ungrounded, that their vagueness is at once tested and masked by the hypermasculine, macho practises of spatial occupation. This possibility is approached by the narrator in the mode of a combined attraction and repudiation that we have already seen at work in urban narratives. When he and his self-celebratingly heterosexual comrades visit the apartment shared by several gay Puerto Rican roommates, it is difficult, as Robert Reid-Pharr notes, “even in the face of the ‘straight’ men’s protestations, to maintain a distinction between the two” (363): so surreal, so liminal does the space of the gay men’s apartment become that, claims Reid-Pharr, “we might even” call it a “no man’s land” (363). “Being hombre” as a category of thought, amounts to ungroundedness in the close, stifling room. The usual gestures of masculine gang loyalty suddenly include acquiescence to the body’s experience of arousal among men, within reach and within sight of one another. In this setting, in a haze of intoxication and passivity, the proximity of bodies that forms the homosocial inflection of urban inhabitation on the “mean streets” tips into homosexual contact that, for the narrator, is overwhelmingly genitalized. If the penis functions as synecdoche for the racially complex self, it also implicates the narrator in a dissociative moment where genital investment is paired with verbal repudiation.

Both “scared and pleased” by genital stimulation that he passively accepts from a stranger, the narrator chants to himself that he likes “broad.... Muchachas....girls,” only to find that it is already “too late,” it is “all over” (Thomas 61). The rhetorical strategy of cataloguing the designations of those he purportedly “likes”—and of making sure the list, pronounced mantra-like, renounces the flesh’s receptiveness to a man—does not conceal from the narrator his arousal or climax. The genitals yield to an irresistible act that simply takes place (it is “too late” to defy the penis), and then is “all over.” The flesh, the genitals here bring the narrator to an encounter in which the hidden phantasmic undercurrents of the neighbourhood’s homosocial groupings are concretized, if one only surrenders one’s body to them.

Those who assist in the realization of what it might mean to “make it” with a street gang, the young Puerto Rican gay men who service the narrator and are also treated with violence by some gang members (a “cruel, yet classic” scenario?), are presented as deploying their own distinctive gestures in the inhabitation of their enclave. Exuberant, talkative, they are rendered as speaking a language that is much more strongly accented by Latin-American inflections than the narrator’s own amalgam of black and white street slang: these young men are him and yet are not him, and they occupy a specified living space as a discrete, identifiable group of neighbours. The racial anxieties of a modern urban “tragic mulatto” persona are thus supplemented by a gangland experiment of manhood in close contact, a point where the homosocial blurs into the homosexual (Reid-Pharr 362). Yet that space, and the moment when it is “too late” and then “all over” for the young “morenito,” are described only to vanish from the narrative, to “be over” as well. They are not to be revisited or theorized by a narrator who yet works through the issues of racial hybridity and “mestizaje”³⁶ obsessively. The narrative places this episode within its own suggestive ghetto, and a mother’s blessing for her son’s circulation

and self-discovery remains the enigmatic injunction to “be un hombre, wherever you go.”

(Thomas 34)

The narrator persists in undertaking inhabitations of space that are shaped by the extreme proximity of men: from the cramped bathroom he and his light-skinned brother share, with no hint of privacy or modesty, to the mobile street gang that claims and occupies urban enclaves, to the masculine team atmosphere he will encounter on a ship, and inevitably, to the male realm of the prison. He ventures to the South, with his black friend Brew, in order to test the racialization of his hybrid body against the social and spatial practises of segregation. The narrator’s Southern journey confirms that he can expect cultural and social management of bodily closeness to attend the reading of his roaming brown body as black. That itinerary also surprisingly leads to the strangely disjointed point at which Brew—with whom he has shared close proximity across a variety of milieus—also falls abruptly, incomprehensibly out of the narrative. Setting out for the Southern states, companionably paired with a black man, may constitute a perilous adventure, but what the narrative cannot bear is for our “morenito” to then simply come home with a man—a “brother” whose proximity he never confronts. His subsequent return North without Brew only prolongs itinerance.

In the Northern city, the claim to spatial occupation is shaped by more subtle contingencies than the evident policing of Southern racial boundaries and grids. What leads the narrator to his downfall is his choice once again of the swaggering, aggressive posturings of gangland, but in a setting where he fails to address the complexities of his neighbour, or to ask, What am I to these others? What do they see in me? He finds himself disoriented, wounded and completely disempowered when he and his comrades attempt to rob a gay nightclub. In utter confusion, they find that their interruption of a drag performance is taken by the audience to

form part of the show (237-8). To their incomprehension, their spectacle of threatening machismo only plays itself out on an ironic register, and has already flowed into something ungrounded, something that leaves the narrator lost and childlike (238). To be the victimizing aggressor who penetrates the discrete space of gay cultural presence guarantees nothing, and generates no stable reassuring response to his version of the “classic” predatory “punk-hunting” youth of the street. Quite the contrary: it is this space’s capacity to process hoodlum machismo posturing as more drag that weakens the narrator who, paralyzed by how little he can apprehend of what he is to others, becomes the victim and submits to capture. What remains is to encounter prison, where his occupation of confined space is marked by the hypnotic, repulsive possibility he describes to his cousin: “you can punk out and become a girl” (267). Against the alternative of pairing off with another inmate, finally, his containment plays itself out as leading abruptly to Jesus, emblem of brotherly and neighbourly love. That shift substitutes formulas of divine acceptance and guidance for the shifting messiness of a narrative that has jettisoned troubling neighbours and brothers along the way. It neutralizes the enigma of homosocial brotherly love, as well as the desiring neighbour’s unsettling proximity.³⁷ The experimental workings of an embodied life, the intersubjective contingencies that have aroused, confounded and challenged the urban male who has cast his brown body into the varying trials of occupying space, are suddenly foreclosed by the invocation of religious rhetoric, and the narrative has nowhere further to go. The enigmatic desires of gangland brotherhood, so dangerously close to being concretized as conjugal pairings in an overtly homosexual context within the prison’s enclosure, are evacuated by a spiritualizing turn that leaves the body behind, back on the street, back in the text’s rendering of delinquency, itinerance and exploratory ungroundedness.

As we have seen, the spatial tracing of that body which is inescapably there, fleshly, exuding, crowding or dispersing in shifting arrangements of clandestine mobility, shapes diverse assertions of masculine urban culture —a culture whose subject is troubled, untethered, hystericized by the proximity of the Other. In the narratives of Himes, Cleaver and Thomas, the nearness of the Other provokes intense circuits of flesh-upon-flesh contact and collision, in erotic or aggressive enfoldings that concretize the instability of desire's fascination and repulsion. The subject's contact with his own flesh, and his management of the body's gestures and traces, are inseparable from the discursive work of self-fashioning. The texts notably stage anxieties of racial identification as variations on a man's investment in his body's integrity. They feature a literalizing rhetoric which requires that "blackness" be embraced and defended from invasion just as the black body is to be acknowledged and kept unpenetrated. A man's use and deployment of his body are imagined to enact and realize, in recurring phantasmic scenes, his approach to racial, cultural commitment.

As the narratives proffer both the body's circuitous self-awareness, and its eruption out towards those who must be fed the "chops," the meat, the "bitter pill," the reader's own implication appears tacit. Himes's Blind Man with a Pistol, a novel which acknowledges its white readers,³⁸ asks those readers to "ingest it," writes Greg Forter, as "inassimilable and impure materiality" (213). Likewise, Cleaver's Soul on Ice, which was received initially by white readers, and was reviewed extensively and enthusiastically in the mainstream press, proffers its aggressive rhetorical bravado for white consumption.³⁹ Cleaver himself, according to Ishmael Reed, "was first pushed as a celebrity by the New York Old Left and its branches in Northern California and Los Angeles. They had given up on the worker....and in his place substituted the black prisoner" (3-4) (emphasis added). For Piri Thomas, the entry into

American culture also followed the path of mainstream, accessible publication.⁴⁰ His allegiance as an outspoken Christian (his follow-up to *Mean Streets* is titled Savior, Savior Hold My Hand) also positioned his work within a larger sphere of cultural acceptance. Reaching the white reader then, “pushing” the black male body as the inescapable rhetorical core of black cultural presence, these texts aggressively “feed” its readers “the flesh.” They also relentlessly pose the enigma of desire which arises in the proximity of the impenetrable Other, by likewise “pushing” the unbearable intensity of the neighbour, the brother who confronts and hystericizes the subject. To a liberal white readership which could imagine itself as believing indeed that “Brotherly Love is the Greatest,” and for whom the day had come for black male writers of the “street” to inhabit shared cultural space⁴¹ aggressive indications of the impenetrability, troubling potency and intersubjective character of unfathomed desiring may have turned out to be an indigestible, disturbing pill indeed.

Chapter IV: Monstrous Domains and Lethal Tenements

Before we leave the intense physicality and grotesque bodily traces of Chester Himes's overheated, crowded Harlem, there is a moment we must turn to, an encounter so uncanny that we must examine its substance. It is staged as John Babson's lover materializes in the interrogation room, where Grave Digger and Coffin Ed "push[him] around":

He was a big spongy man in a sweat-stained white shirt rolled up at the sleeves and black pants hanging low from a paunch; not fat exactly but without muscles, like a slug....He wasn't an ugly man, just strange-looking as though he belonged to a race of jelly men. He didn't have a white lawyer to front for him and he had already been pushed around. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed pushed him around some more. They turned up the lights so high he seemed to turn into smoke.

(Blind Man 161)

This spongy man of jelly, detained of course by policemen of the "hardboiled" variety, in his soft, formless potency, erupts and spews forth a narrative that resuscitates the history of his lover's circulations and spatial occupations. He releases an unnatural, throbbing anguish of a nature which the detectives have never observed: "for the first time in memory," they are disturbed, "embarrassed" by what a witness releases in the "pigeon's nest" (Blind Man 164). The man's "spongy boneless body (heaves) convulsively," and the detectives react to him with disgust and anger: "Coffin backed away as though from a distasteful worm. Automatically Grave Digger dimmed the battery of lights. But his neck had begun to swell from impotent rage" (Blind Man 164). The slug-like apparition offers no resistance, yet it is in his yielding softness that he unframes the structure of investigation and complicates the official narrative of the

murder plot with further evidence of the dead Babson's, enduring, enigmatic multiplicity: "He couldn't have killed anyone that night—unless it was me. I can account for every minute of his time. His body was touching mine every minute of that night" (Blind Man 166-7). Since we so often make it our work to interrogate the subject, we can begin this phase of our inquiry in the interrogation room and allow this figure to heave and disperse something—something formless, plastic, uncanny and insistent that inhabits African American urban narratives. In the neighbourhood that throbs with life, and bears the signs of a physical occupation by which teeming, exuding, sweating, restless bodies trace fleeting configurations of presence, this jelly man provides a point of entry into a region where what palpitates, to quote Slavoj Žižek, might be an "'undead' life-substance" (Žižek, Plague 68), formless and disturbing. The city space, so concretely rendered in Himes's grotesquely detailed "domestic Harlem," can slip into suggestions of a completely distinct region, an abyss, an area "between the two deaths, symbolic and real" (89) that "endeavours to stretch the imagination to the very boundary of the unrepresentable" (Žižek, How to Read 64), so that turning up the bright lights of representation will cause what lurks in this abyss to turn into smoke.

Ironically, the production of the inner-city, the so-called "black ghetto" space, as a category of thought, has denoted an investment in the representational, the finite, by incorporating countless variations on the attempt to familiarize and domesticate the "mean streets." The black urban ghetto, persistently figured in American popular culture as a hellish and dangerous corner of America,⁴² was mediated in the 1960s and 1970s by the gaze of social scientists, and proffered for the comprehension of white readers for whom the Watts, Newark and Attica riots would function as frightening eruptions of the captive, or returns of the repressed. The discovery of a purportedly "emerging" ghetto and its inhabitants could therefore

be performed by such texts as the infamous, so-called Moynihan Report of 1965, which superimposes a now well-known pathological configuration to black daily existence and family rhythms.⁴³ Other accessible works, such as Harold Rose's The Black Ghetto: A Spatial Behavioral Perspective (1971), also enact a fantasy of "comprehension" by allowing the expert social scientist to approach the designated space as constituting a geographical project in need of properly technical elucidation. Rappin' and Stylin' Out (1972), a collection of texts and pictures, edited by Thomas Kochman, about "communication in urban black America," provides examples of expressive hand gestures and reconstructs various types of street-worthy "walks," while Roger Abrahams's Talking Black (1976), contains a genial guide to proper jive-talking, with illustrative examples. Yet urban narratives produced by African American writers of this period work against such fantasies of brotherly, liberal-minded or expert-driven understanding across the races, or of neighbourly love across the gridded spaces of urban occupation. Our formless slug-like jelly man, spewing an undead, open-ended supplement to the story of his cut-up, hamstrung, and subsequently "framed" lover, leads us, as we shall see, to a much more horrifying space than the one plumbed by social scientists: the space of the death drive.

4.1 Mingus: Life in Excess

The death drive, as argues Žižek, should not be understood as a thrust "toward self-obliteration;" it is on the contrary an "undead" urge that "persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption" (Parallax 62). What psychoanalysis teaches us, by confronting this notion, is that "human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things" (Parallax 62). That lesson is markedly

appropriate to the autobiography of a jazz “great”: the narrative of Charles Mingus. We discover, in Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus (1971), a persona of immense appetites and enormous self-regard,⁴⁴ in a text that nevertheless includes, in a grandiose, fragmented account of mobility and achievement, troubling episodes of a kind of “living death,” and descriptions of a living partial object. “When I was a child,” recalls the Mingus persona, “I was knocked unconscious by a fall”:

A boy lay bleeding on the floor. I was that child yet I was not that child It was entirely up to me whether I let that boy lie there and walked off into infinity or breathed my conscious life into him again. And now I can see you and everything around you as clear and as plain as I saw that day when I knew where people were going and could think myself there or ride in their car beside them without them seeing me. (297)

Mingus’ persona cites this incident near the end of an account that will shortly take him to Bellevue hospital for self-diagnosed “head problems” (328), as he reviews his “twisted” living arrangement with the two women he has been pimping. In an uncanny, distanced invocation of “a boy” who lies unconscious, and an errant, floating split-off entity that can either march off into “infinity” or restore itself to finite being, the child’s body is not situated in life, nor can it be positioned as dead. We encounter the workings of what Žižek describes as “the split of life itself into ‘normal’ life and horrifying ‘undead’ life,” (Parallax 121) which persists as an experience of ghostly self-projection “where people were going” and a haunting of the living, invisibly, “in their car beside them.” There is here no “simple opposition between life and death,” but rather a “monstrous dimension” (Žižek, Plague 89), a fantasy so compelling it can be invoked as a measure by which all objects, “you and everything around you,” can yet be gauged. What

persists is the recognition of an undead supplement that emerges and endures. That wandering, grotesque surplus peoples fantasies of disconnection and finds expression earlier in the text, when the narrator's two lovers recount an encounter with an eerie, mobile, partial, undead thing:

Suddenly a funny spark of light ran across the floor. It was like a bluish soap-bubble shining and we both saw a single tiny face in the bubble. It looked like you—with crosses or plus-signs in the place of your eyes!....it turned yellowish, greenish, purple, and bright in the center like a crystal ball, then it gradually got dull like a tiny colored balloon and sort of sputtered across the floor”....

“Donna, I told you it was his eye! The size and shape of a large, dark grape, only crystal-like, transparent. (Mingus 279-80)

Here, as Žižek notes, the partial object is a “weird organ that is magically autonomized, surviving without the body whose organ it should have been” (How to Read 62). It prompts reactions of revulsion, fear, and seems to presage a shift in how each component of this love triangle will subsequently appear to the others. A disembodied eye, reflective and mobile, holds within its depths an eyeless face, in a receding fragmentation of recognizable bodily components. Its unexplained apparition and uncanny, mobile presence are notable, particularly in the context of a narrative which holds at its center a persona about whom we know what is said, but who is very reluctant to use a stable “I,” choosing instead to weave observations and replies around a huge central character, “Charles,” “my boy,” or “my man,” and who only intermittently undertakes a first-person narration. The text constantly proposes fragmented speaking parts reacting to a Mingus figure who rarely assumes the “eye” of an observing gaze,⁴⁵ and whose narration, when it adopts the speaking “I,” incorporates a striking disconnect between Mingus-narrator and Mingus-persona. Recounting the “sudden plunge to pimpdom for my man” (210),

for example, the narrator notes: “I’m the only one besides my man who knew how he felt—cheap, low, still in love with a woman yet hating her for giving in to his cautious turning out” (212) (emphasis added). Rendered primarily through that discourse of divide, then, the text produces a surplus that confirms, yet also supplements an always incomplete, always lacking representability of the subject. The appearance of a face within an eye, a partial object within a partial object, “epitomizes life in its indestructibility (Zizek, Tarrying 182), and the haunting, “undead,” split-off “I” hints at excess beyond that of the Mingus persona’s already excessive life. Indicia of the urge which “persistsbeyond generation and corruption,” these elements “stick out” of a narrative that features the subject as a coalescence of restless circulations and gigantic appetites. The text welcomes, within the fabric of its imaginings, elements that originate from a “domain of monstrous spectral apparitions” (Zizek, Ticklish 154), and this is a domain that urban narratives insistently visit and sustain, notably by incorporating intrusions into the world of the “desubjectivized” (Zizek, Plague 88), the spectral, living corpses of heroin addicts assembled in nightmare pockets of urban space.

4.2 A “Lamella” in the Sun

Such a narrative is George Cain’s 1970 novel Blueschild Baby. This disjointed, poetic account imagines inhabitations of a world which, as Gilles Deleuze proposes in Difference and Repetition, is a “flashing world of metamorphoses, of communicating intensities, differences of differences, of breaths, insinuations and exhalations:....a world of simulacra or ‘mysteries’” (Difference 243). Set at the time of the Newark riots, the novel moves its narrator through the tensions that attend occupations of public space when a repressive order capriciously disrupts community presence on the street. A newly-released ex-convict and ex-addict, Georgie Cain,

deliberately undertakes to re-establish a full-fledged drug habit, and to traverse the gridded structures of urban control. Acutely self-conscious, obsessed with the bearing of his body as he takes it across town, the narrator fixates on his walking style, which he deems “too black, too aggressive” (74) for certain street spaces and adjusts according to location. As he dashes from street to shooting gallery, he is chased to rooftops and through mazes of alleys and fire-escapes. Georgie tests the trajectories that can, as Michel De Certeau suggests, substitute a narrative bricolage for a system of coherent and totalizing containment (153-4). Cain grants his narrator access to multiple clandestine routes, and the vector of his mobility unites the fear of capture, the immediate need for his next “hit” of heroin, and a more general, diffuse necessity for movement across the city’s public spaces: “I’m on the streets again,” he proclaims, “they hold me more than any drug” (58). If drug-addiction and the nomadism of “street-addiction” structure the narrator’s uses of space, they also lead Georgie to regions “between the two deaths, symbolic and real” (Zizek, Plague 89). That uncanny territory is open to occupation, as Zizek clarifies, when a human being is “‘dead while alive’”—in other words, when that person has been “colonized by the ‘dead’ symbolic order” (Plague 89), and is rendered mortified, mechanical, by a parasitical symbolic machine. Alternatively, a narrative (as we have seen in the case of Mingus’s text) might also establish the function of that which is “‘alive while dead’,” “[giving] body to the remainder of Life-Substance which has escaped symbolic colonization” (Plague 89). Before we examine the position occupied by those who are “dead while alive,” and therefore colonized by death, let us examine how an indestructible life-substance resides in this narrative of the urban space. That palpitating, irrepressible remainder is elaborated in Lacan’s “myth of the lamella.” The scope of its application opens vivid possibilities for reading the uncanny “underworld” inhabited by drug addicts in this text, since these citizens of the street are figured

as dead beings who yet animate themselves, like the “living dead” of horror movies, with “blind, indestructible insistence” (Zizek, How to Read 62). The formation of that “lamella” is proposed as a concretization, an incarnation of the libido:

Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the hommelette, or the lamella.

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something—I will tell you shortly why—that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal—because it survives any division, and scissiparous intervention. And it can turn around.

Well! That is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelops your face while you are quietly asleep...

(....) It is the libido, qua pure life-instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that needs no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. (Lacan, Four Concepts 197-8)

With this “myth” in mind, we can enter the domain of Blueschild Baby’s “Sun,” a drug dealer who is surrounded by “junkie souls,” “posed” on the stairs of his tenement, “all piled on one another”(2), a grotesque being whose rotting smell precedes his appearance, with emanations of “sulphur, cigarettes and decaying flesh, a stench so moist and clinging, no amount of air can dispel it” (3) (emphasis added). In this “kingdom,” Sun is misshapen, indistinct, with a

“monumental” head and a “gnome’s body,” while his mate Flower, tubercular and thin, coughs and spits blood. They oversee the distribution of heroin, which Sun stores “somewhere deep in his pants fly” (4), and for which purchase money is kept in the space of Flower’s “hollow breasts” (4). Georgie enters this realm in order to acquire the drugs which he will “cook” and push into his arm, and when Sun joins him, “there is a lull in the world” (5): the dusty, dank, stinking “kingdom” of Sun is where we encounter the indestructible, immortal function of what Lacan imagines as the “lamella.” Its immortality, notes Zizek, is that of the “undead,” the “obscene immortality of the ‘living dead’ which, after every annihilation, reconstitute themselves and shamle on” (Lacan 62). A specific episode in Sun’s domain, the overdose poisoning of young Tracy, executes that uncanny insistence of a living death.

4.3 Blue—Undead—Child

Tracy and Tommy, two young white addicts, impose themselves on Georgie’s awareness, first when the gagging girl demands that he kiss her: “I move to do so intending to cheek her, instead she grabs my head and presses her lips to mine, choking me with tongue and saliva” (Cain 5). The two white addicts are speaking, yet both are “dead,” observes the narrator—even as they argue for more heroin, their retorts are uttered in “toneless monologue.” When their birthday celebration entails heightened consumption of even more heroin, Tracy ceases all sound and movement, “dying of narcotic poison,” blueness “stealing up her fingers” (11). Soon afterwards, feeling no pulse, Georgie is uncannily thrilled to declare her indeed dead of an overdose (13). Violent, chaotic attempts to revive her flopping body yield nothing: “we administer to her naked corpse for hours,” he notes, “and still she’s just as when we started” (14). Flower, angry at death’s inconvenience, invites Tommy to “have [his] way with her, she’ll never

know" (14), and while Sun and Flower confer on how to dispose of Tracy's corpse, Tommy undertakes to "kiss her as if she weren't dead, strangling her with spit, rolling his body against hers and rousing himself to coming" (14). After he has fully completed a bizarrely vocal, violent act of intercourse with her pliable shell, she suddenly hiccups, moans and vomits, while Tommy, "drained of life and dead" collapses. Shivering, "still blue in the lips, [she sits] on the bed," and oblivious, with the distinctly flat lifelessness and thoughtlessness that marked her presence in the moments preceding her four-hour overdose "death," asks, "Anyone got a smoke?" (15).

This episode ends thus with Tracy in the realm of the "living dead," no longer "out," but bearing still the "'acephalous,' formless life-substance," an irrepressible, immortal, "uncanny excess of life" (Zizek, How To Read 62), on account of which her body and Tommy's have been relentlessly rolled against one another. This life that requires no organic support—a "life that needs no organ" (Lacan, Four Concepts 198)—as proposes Lacan, is the libido, an undead urge that insists and persists beyond biological imperatives. Already dead but also subject to a death from which she can awaken, already drugged but requiring more heroin, covering Georgie's face in an enveloping, suffocating kiss, she is pliable, unresponsive, and alive while lifeless.

As a reminder of the "lamella"'s function, in which what persists is precisely "what the sexed being loses in sexuality," the "formless Life-Substance" joins her body with Tommy's on the uncanny condition that, being "dead," she cannot know what he is doing. Handling her unresisting, stripped, "simplified" and suddenly childish flesh, Georgie is inexplicably ordered to massage Tracy's icy breasts, in useless and arduous gestures that are required of him only after he has already acknowledged her death. The staging of these protracted, incomprehensible practises performed upon a body that has no breath and no pulse, as well as the tenacious, unwavering reception of her flopping, yielding shape "as if she weren't dead," reveal this

phantasmic figure as something that persists outside the symbolic, that will not die in the symbolic order. The subject's relationship to this "amoeba like creature" is "impossible" (Zizek, Tarrying 181): there is no symbolic path by which a position can be secured for the contradictions inherent in a corpse which is simultaneously declared dead, acknowledged as such, yet also brutally subjected to the intense gestures of engulfing contact. If "dying is the name of the game," (Cain 14) as notes Georgie, there is no "name" for the game of reviving an "indestructible" life.

Sun's kingdom, in fact, can be said to operate as a region where a human being can function as a "phantasmic entity that gives body to what a living being loses when it enters the (symbolically regulated) regime of sexual difference" (Zizek, How to Read 65). Sun is the presiding "gnome," the ruling, misshapen "hommelette" of a realm in which scratching one's opiate-induced itch, until open wounds bleed upon the skin, constitutes "the most gratifying act in the world" (6). He stores heroin inside his pants and extracts the bags of powder from his crotch with the completely unself-conscious ease of a prelapsarian being. "Junky souls" gravitate around a Sun who demands a "taste" of each "fix" he sells, and his retinue establishes elaborate lies and tricks to avoid sharing with one another the precious "cooked" heroin:

She turns away for a moment, and while she isn't looking, stick my finger in the water jar and shake the drops into the cooker then pretend to squeeze a few from the spike in and look at her with disgust.

"Here. You're too much. You ain't got no habit."

She hits herself, waits for a rush then asks, "Do you feel it?"

"It's nice."

.... I'm high, but pretend to be higher and after watching me a while, she convinces herself. (17)

Even the experience of the opiate is rendered as a type of phantasmic formation, a wishful state that can be separated from an organic, tangible support, and expand on its own. The domain of the "lamella" is the dimension of "pure semblance," where "a multiplicity of appearancesseem to enfold a central void" (Zizek, How to Read 62), just as the pimps, prostitutes, and other "junky souls", gathered around a stairway in Sun's tenement, pressed against each other "like debutantes at the ball....stare vacantly into the well" (2) (emphasis added).

4.4 Something More

The domain "between two deaths," and its elaboration in a spatial arrangement of uncanny occupation in a circular, centrally perforated structure, can also be found in Georgie's recollection of murderer August Robles's sudden, disruptive, hypnotic and terrifying appearance in a tenement building "across the way":

He'd killed and they came for him in blue numbers. Watched him firing while bullets chipped the brownstone all around him. He was charmed, none touched him....Spotting me in the window across from him, he smiled and waved me down to safety. The noxious fumes, tear gas, burned my eyes and nose.... The smoke cleared and he flashed me a smile and a high sign....He had his arms above his head when they shot him and pushed him out the window. He fell gently, quiet, without violent movement, time froze, sickening sound of flesh smacking concrete. They let him lay there as an example to anyone who would try the way of the gun, running blood clotted in a puddle....Finally they came and

got him, leaving only the bloodstain. Was sick all over myself, chills and fever, delirious. They put me to bed.

Looking out the window the next day saw the bloodstained walk, people stepping on it, only a few bothered to go around . The stain grew, turning bright red, covering the cars, people, buildings. Everything and body moved in it unconcerned. It climbed the walls and I screamed when it came through the window, warm and sticky.

Newspapers were full of the story of the berserk gunman....Robles had overcome anonymity, for days people talked of nothing else. He's still alive, the warm smile and signs we'd exchanged. Something more had passed between us.

(160-1)

In this scene of insistent, persistent, formless life, the eruption of an outlaw, a magical, "charmed" man circled by the "blue numbers" of police, gives way to the fall and rupture of that "charmed" body, an explosion of flesh and blood so traumatic that it sends Georgie into delirium. Yet Robles, received and narrated by the community as an insane gunman, has appeared to Georgie as something completely other, something that writes itself out of the regulated realm of symbolic representation. First, by assuming the shape of a besieged outlaw, on the lam, out of control, seemingly invincible, he erupts from the narrative of community tenement space as an aberration. Incomprehensibly present across the way, this uncanny, frightening apparition responds to tear gas, bullets, armies of "blue" with stubborn persistence and defiance, yet he also reacts to Georgie with gestures that are completely out of place and out of script (as "berserk gunman") . His occupation of the temporarily besieged space does not

match a subsequent “official” narrative of his disruptive presence, which tells of him as insane, surrounded, entrenched in the nihilism of the desperado.

Robles’s occupation of space in his death is also disruptive as a shattering of tenement boundaries and as a staging of living death. Sacrificial and vulnerable in a final moment of surrender (as he has his arms up), he is no longer defiant, but “gently” compelled to fall into the empty center of the visible scene, and obscenely, publicly to rupture there. That eerie and gentle, helpless death of Robles partakes of the sacrificial, which as Georges Bataille argues, can “have the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual,” to the extent that the one who sacrifices is free to “throw himself suddenly outside of himself” (*Visions* 70). The heterogeneities of a smiling, gesturing, helpful killer, a defiant, invincible yet “gently” executed outlaw, the shocking inconsistencies of this disruptive subject culminate in his shattered corpse and congealing blood being left as “an example”—a staged, obscene display that is ignored in a generalized public indifference, even as the dead killer, paradoxically, achieves popular fame.

For Georgie, “something more” has passed between this figure and himself. “Sick all over [himself],” at the sight of the physical rupture and explosion on the pavement below, Georgie experiences his own disgorging, his own explosion, in a moment of identification: “repugnance,” notes Bataille, “is only one of the forms of stupor caused by a horrifying eruption, by the disgorging of a force that threatens to consume” (*Visions* 70). The persistence of a sickeningly split body and its puddle of clotting blood culminates in an uncanny, spreading, choking stain that he senses invading the community space and covering him with the warm, sticky insistence of a “formless Life-Substance.” Georgie’s mesmerized, horrified, phantasmic vision of this warm, living, spreading matter is paired with an understanding that the killer’s

unexplained and stubborn deviation from his symbolic role is what grants him the function of living, still. Robles lives while dead, he has filled the tenement space with “something more,” and the inconsistent spectacle of his disruptively unexplainable gestures suggests “a multiplicity of appearances” that seem to “enfold a central void” (Zizek, How to Read 62).

4.5 “There Was No Me”

The circling narrative structure of Blueschild Baby is singularly allied to these uncanny dimensions, as the text works anxiously over the question of Georgie’s escape from a symbolic role that has been formulated around his performance of success. Cast as the one who will emerge from the urban ghetto, the narrator is caught in gestures of acknowledgement, and must accept that “so many [know] him” (30): “I was going to make it for them and get out of this stinking pocket of existence. They knew Georgie Cain, All-American basketball player and student. They told their children, ‘Be like him, not like me.’ And I failed them, falling back into the pit they so wanted me to escape, for their sake, my sake, just to see it done” (30).

The symbolic mandate he has detected, complete with a title designating his phantasmic role (“Georgie Cain, All-American”), produces rituals constituting his presence on the street, as he is stopped by neighbours and “from the windows and doorways come shouted hellos” (30).

The subject here, however, experiences this fascination with “Georgie Cain, All-American basketball player and student,” as revealing the split between his person and his symbolic function (Zizek, For They Know Not 255), but the effect of his “transubstantiation” is even more radical. Such a symbolic function, as Zizek explains, “redoubles his very body, introducing a split between the visible, material, transient body and another, sublime body, a body made of a special, immaterial stuff” (255). Georgie narrates the content of this fissure as a

multiplicity dependant upon, and transcribed from, a cultural repository of shared symbols:

“There was no me,” he remarks, “only bits and pieces of everything and everybody bound and tied to a whole race of people” (7) (emphasis added). His “sublime body,” is a thing “‘of nothing,’ a pure semblance without substance” (Zizek For They Know Not 255), and Georgie’s addiction, in its rituals of the veins, the scratching, the nodding, liberates him from that “special, immaterial stuff.” It grants him, as he posits, a way to “be rejected,” to “live life unhindered” so that he can “begin anew” (7). Addiction and the re-inscription of a body into the most degraded aspects of street presence, facilitate a counter-narrative that can sabotage the constitution of a performing, athletic, “sublime” thing:

Whites amuse themselves by asking who was the greatest performer in a sport, they quote figures, statistics, give college and professional records and show you a picture. Ask me the same question and I say Bootsy was the best [basketball player]. Who is Bootsy? What school did he go to? I don’t know. I don’t even know his name and he didn’t go to school, but you can find him nodding on the corner of 116th Street and Lennox. (31)

From the realm of the “formless life-substance,” where ever-renewed opiate-fueled scratching and nodding are indicia of the insistence of simplified, indestructible life, the narrator proposes his own re-constitution: “Someday soon, I shall emerge as Georgie Cain” (7). The narrator is engaged in a project that undermines and dismantles the phantasmic “pure semblance” of the ritualistically recognized “thing of nothing” which constitutes the symbolic weight he refuses to bear. In opposition to that “sublime” thing, we can allow Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to propose a strategy: drugging the body can result, as we have seen in Chapter 2, in a project to “undo the organism” without killing the body (Deleuze and Guattari, Plateaux 198). As Deleuze

and Guattari argue, the body becomes “organism” when we impose upon it dominant and hierarchal structures, when it coagulates and sediments (197). If the organism is the enemy, “with what necessary prudence,” they ask, is its dismantling to be carried out? With the “art of dosage,” they propose, and the danger of overdose. “One does not proceed with hammer blows,” but by filing down very finely at the organism to invent modes of self-destruction (198). Echoing that mindfulness, Georgie asserts: “There are no accidental junkies, nobody can tie you up and string you out. You have to work hard to get hooked, takes too much time and effort to be an accident” (199).

Addiction shapes a web of gestures and practises in paradoxical, impossible balance between the deliberate release from symbolic imperatives of a certain type of presence upon the street (by destroying “Georgie Cain, All-American”), and the predictability, the knowability of spatial occupation as a junkie. “If the President was one I and every other junky (sic) would know immediately,” (20) claims the narrator. While heroin facilitates, as Deleuze and Guattari propose, the emancipation of a subject who unmoors himself from the points of subjectivation which fix him in place (198), it also situates the addict as an inhabitant of the street whose presence constitutes its own logic of spatial execution and communal perceptibility. Addicts are instantly known to other addicts, “no matter how clean or well disguised” they might be, and when the narrator encounters a fellow addict, without a word, “coming from a nod,” they gaze at one another, “emanating rays that inform” (20) each of the other. For the narrator of Blueschild Baby, the key to avoiding the solidification of his heroin-fashioned self is not only to counter the symbolic mandate of “Georgie Cain, All-American” with the narrative of addiction, but to tap into the vector of mobility which drives the body’s desire for opiate.

4.6 Rhizomes and “Roads to Hell”

Once the narrator’s “sublime body”—his presence as marked by achievement—has been disavowed and destroyed by the gestures of “failure,” his occupation of the neighbourhood is constituted by restless trajectories of an aimless itinerance, which, to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari, is horizontal, “rhizomatic” rather than arborescent. The rhizome, argue Deleuze and Guattari, operates as a ramified network of multiplicities that, when broken, only reconstitute themselves (Plateaux 13-6). An arrangement of underground burrows and passages, for example, takes shape as a rhizome, by virtue of their functions as systems of habitat, storage, movement, evasion and division (Plateaux 13). How can we not recognize, in such an array of proliferating and variable spatial dimensions, a kinship to the urban circuits traversed by Georgie as he refuses to rise and “get out” of the neighbourhood?

The text refuses to enact “uplift,” to tell of a spatial and symbolic move out of the “stinking pocket, “the “pit,” and up to a domain corresponding to the sublime fantasy of a “Georgie Cain, “All-American.” It eschews as well the “descent and redemption” model, which also functions on a vertical axis, narrating a subject’s mobility “down” to criminality, addiction and social exclusion, and then back “up,” to rehabilitation, edification, clean living. In a classic instance of that model, as in Claude Brown’s Manchild in the Promised Land, that vertical alignment overlays the mapping of urban habitation, so that the narrative “moves on up,” as it moves its hero on out of the neighbourhood (6).⁴⁶ Georgie Cain aptly summarizes what that unfulfilled script demands from him, as he opposes “making it,” “getting out” and escape, to “falling back” in the “pit.” Blueschild Baby offers a narrative that instead, “goes nowhere;” its narrator typifies the circulation of those who, throughout the text, occupy the neighbourhood

without shouldering any type of mandate, without endorsing an arborescent model of “uplift” for the race.

The addict circulates across urban spaces, but refuses to leave the streets, and inhabits the urban lines of flight prompted by his desire for heroin: they are necessary vectors of flow that mirror the operation of his permeable veins. “There [are] no landmarks or guideposts,” he claims, “only the addiction pushing [him] after the next fix” (Cain 200). The prospect of endorsing a symbolic function that would operate from authoritative readings of the neighbourhood as the space that must be left “below,” is one that sees desire annihilated for the subject. The danger, as Georgie senses its imminence, is of “life with no consciousness of life, meeting experience with a stock of pat reactions” (40). After all, when the rhizome is blocked, write Deleuze and Guattari, nothing of desire can circulate. Only along the rhizome can desire move and produce (Plateaux 22), and along the body’s veins, in an opiate rush, can Georgie experience “running red hemo, raging in me like a Niagara fed river, red, taxing flexible carriers, storm fed, wild running thing, threatening dikes and levees” (Cain 199). Heroin, which keeps Georgie moving along rhizomatic paths, is what he’d “been waiting for all (his) life,” something he had to “like and want....long before” he began to crave it (199). Yet as a process that he returns to even once the craving has been extinguished by a stay in prison, heroin addiction presents for Georgie the pain of enjoyment, an unpleasant array of disgusting symptoms: “rush and warmth for only one second, then begins the swift fall down, sick or always verging on illness” (128). It typifies the way in which transgression procures enjoyment, precisely because it promises, in Georgie’s words, a “road to hell” (199), or in Lacan’s formulation, it presents the offer of “defiance or contempt for the gallows” (Ecrits 660). Truly, in seeking to solidify his addiction through most of the narrative, Georgie stages enjoyment as the surplus which comes

from knowing that a certain amount of displeasure is inherent in our experience of pleasure (Zizek, For They Know Not 239).

Carried across the increasingly painful and disgusting enjoyment of heroin, the narrator finds it is the unknowable, the unfathomable, which persists, as the text ends with his reticent, elliptical summation: “have gone as far as I can” (199). The text has brought him to a point of detoxified clarity, but has opened the shadowy realm of a time “when (he) raged out of (his) mind and cannot be sure of what did and did not happen” (199-200) (emphasis added). Having journeyed across those domains, he now wishes himself “handcuffed” to his regal, supportive lover, “handcuffed so (he doesn’t) break away” (200). Precariously, provisionally stilled, Georgie to the very end operates as a conduit for what Deleuze and Guattari propose, quoting Antonin Artaud, as a plane where consciousness has not entered, a plane “obscure, unformed,” but which surrounds us as an unlit continuation or a threat and releases adventurous sensations, perceptions (Plateaux 198). When the conclusion of Cain’s novel has Georgie admitting that the streets are “part of [his] addiction, not the junk alone” (200), are we not invited to imagine, in the city’s surfaces and routes, the suggestion of those urban spaces as having allowed—just as the text has—“unlit continuation,” from which a surplus, like the “formless, ‘undead’ substance of Life” (Zizek, Ticklish 155) surges and heaves, suggestive of that which “sticks out” to derail and shape what does and does not happen?

4.7 “Dead Preachments” and Non-Persons

If Blueschild Baby structures much of its narrative to give room to the insistent presence of an undead Life-substance, Robert Beck’s intensely morbid, darkly deterministic Mama Black Widow invites us to consider the obverse: those who are “‘dead while alive’,” who have been

“colonized by the ‘dead’ symbolic order” (Plague 89), and are mortified, devitalized. Mama Black Widow is structured to establish the deadening functions of its over-determined discursive thrust, yet these highlight a resistant layer of narrative, which opposes that fate. Fate indeed appears as one of the constructs most suited to deliver the horrible machine-like workings of an already dead script that from the outset frames its embedded narrator as a “tragic homosexual queen” (11). In a Preface offered as the narrative contextualizing input of “Iceberg Slim” (Robert Beck’s “pimp” pseudonym and nom de plume, as we have seen), the reader is given a highly problematic story of the texts’ origins. Iceberg Slim, visiting Otis Tilson, the “tragic queen” he has known for twenty-five years, elicits from him a “gutsy,” “real” tale that he records and proposes to barely alter for publication. “Any book I have any connection with has to tell it like it is,” warns Slim and, impressed by Tilson’s “gut idiom of the queer—the black ghetto—the deep South—the underworld” (13), Slim states his intention to “lift it” all from his recording and “put it in the book, gutsy and like it is” (12). There will be no “dead preachments” on the “living pages of this book,” he asserts (13). Yet in the moment of insistently invoking that attention to the “real,” Slim assays the overworked, run-on, preaching formulas he has promised to exclude. Affirming the story’s “realness,” for instance, Slim reassures Tilson that the starkest account will “prove a thousand points about this black hell and the poisonous pus of double-standard justice, racial bigotry and criminal economic freeze-out, infecting and grotesquely bloating the hideous underbelly of white America’s shining façade of democracy and freedom and opportunity for all” (7).⁴⁷ From this double-pronged preface, the text gives way to Tilson’s first-person narrative, until the very end, where a brief Epilogue recasts that account within a frame, by virtue of the Slim persona’s most reductive, deterministic “dead preachment”: remarking on Tilson’s eventual suicide in a “skid row hotel,” he concludes, “I can’t help but wonder what he expected

to find there except the misery that is the heritage of his kind. Perhaps the final solution to the torture of spirit and body he endured could only be death” (239) (emphasis added). The frame-narrative, then, points to the urban space as a deadening, contrived stage for the stiff gestures of machine-like figures with names like “Soldier,” “Railhead” and “Lockjaw.” The wild card in this narrative game, however, turns out to be Tilson.

The novel grounds its deterministic structure by reversing the slave narrative’s current of circulation, which would conduct the subject from Southern deprivation and violence to Northern self-mastery and potential⁴⁸ in Beck’s text, the strong, able-bodied black subject brings his dignity to filthy Chicago tenements, where he is trapped and rendered weak, useless, and emasculated. The move North brings a gendered polarization that is figured, in the novel, as fundamental to pathologized structures of cultural presence. As the narrating Tilson recalls his family’s migration across the Mason-Dixon line, he wonders how his father could have known “that Mama would become like the man of the family and he would become like the woman” (60). In an economy of service, rather than a rural context of agricultural work, the father’s “brawny back and strong hands....become counterfeit as exchange” (60) and scripts for secure masculine agency and self-constitution⁴⁹ are rewritten, in the Depression-era ghetto, in a strictly deterministic, tragic mode. Lengthy diatribes attributed to the preachy construct of Soldier, noble friend and mentor—whose face, in a constellation of cultural referents, seems drawn from the image on the Buffalo nickel—provide a strict patriarchal reading of Tilson’s life-script even as the narrative sets out its structure. Typifying the black family in much the same fashion as the Moynihan report does (thirty years after the narrative’s chosen temporal context, but three years before Mama Black Widow’s publication), Soldier blames an inversion of gender roles for the black family’s struggles with social ills and psychological pathologies:

The lowly masses of black men must go on blubbering and hobbling about in the white man's complex world mentally maimed and crippled by white haters and unthinking black women. The positive black woman uses her glory and her strength and power to inspire her man towards self improvement and leadership so that her children might have a strong pattern image. (113)

Otis Tilson's account, as it carries Soldier's psycho-social commentary, contains that very version of the black family in crisis,⁵⁰ a structure comprising an idle, defeated father, a controlling, economically canny mother and her victimized Mama's boy (the tragic cross-dressing "queen" who will find only the "misery that is the heritage of his kind"). In the Chicago tenements and streets, inhuman, mechanical characters enact inexorable gestures that impel the narrative's trajectory towards inevitable ghetto ruin. Railway Cox has an artificial, "fancy prancy" walk upon the street, and a "horribly long head," and the monstrous Lockjaw, a policy racketeer, carries a face which on one side has been "crushed in from eyebrow to jawbone," his right eye a "maimedorbcrimson and unblinking" (78). These "blind," "desubjectivized" mannequins, seemingly too damaged and grotesque to be living humans, are horrible precisely because they are devoid of any personality—they are pure machine-like predatory drives. The horror of such a person, argues Zizek, "resides in the fact that he is not a proper person at all," but rather a piece of the "parasitical symbolic machine" which "behaves as if it possesses a life of its own" (Zizek, Plague 89). Each one of these blindly characterless entities stands for a part of the discourse which anchors the constructs of black existence in the urban ghetto and over-determines, mortifies spatial occupation of a hostile urban North. In defiance of this congealed, deadened discursive order, and with a resilience that belies the text's framing Prologue, Otis

Tilson occupies his morbid, tragic version of ghetto ruin with a narrative that counters the stifling economies of striving with the disruptive function of sacrifice.

4.8 Troubling Alteration

Tagged with the infantilizing, obscene-sounding name of “Sweet Pea,” Tilson gives flesh to a disruptive variation of the feminized father of ghetto discourse, by allowing the memorialized, martyred father to first enter the text as an enchanting, undead substance leaking through the described mirror image of Otis in full drag:

I was dazzling in the shimmery white silk micro dress and blue-black wig that hung to my shoulders in Grecian curls.... I stepped closer to the mirror....I gazed at my huge hazel eyes flashing emerald sparks beneath the curly canopies of dark auburn lashes. Despite my age, my smooth yellow skin still stretched tautly over my high-cheek-boned face. My full lips were curvy and glistening beneath pale pink lipstick....I was enchanted with my face. I really was. I guess I loved it so much because it was Papa’s face in every detail. (31)

Married to the owner of a mortuary, witness to death, violence and helplessness, Otis Tilson revisits grotesque scenarios of his own martyrdom, as his racial indeterminacy and his ability to “pass” for a woman facilitate his circulation through the dark spaces of urban transgressive economies. Despite a malleable body that allows him to inhabit the city as a desirable, uncanny but “passing” version of the feminized male, Otis observes the workings of inexorable ghetto Fate upon the inhabitants of a mortifying urban narrative of useless striving. On the street, he forms part of a passive, resigned mass of residents who watch their neighbours “stomp” one another’s faces “intomushy scarlet [masks]” (195). Against that order, he can only

circumvent deadening economic imperatives, crushing, always-defeated attempts at establishing an essential familial core, by succumbing to his own chaotic, queer narrative of what Lee Edelman terms “corrosive enjoyment” (30).

If Otis gives life to the undead substance of the martyred father, he is also possessed of a surplus in the form of “Sally,” the “freakish creature” who is “alive inside” (18) and who signifies the secret, often ironic thwarting of domestic ghetto scripts.⁵¹ When, at a nightclub, he is threatened by the jealous wife of a hustler who has perceived only a beautiful, light-skinned, female rival in Otis’s “Sally”-inspired drag, he is called a “lying, half-white bitch” and finds himself considering the potential of responding to the classic heteronormative domestic scene, and the icepick that is about to perforate his ribcage, by “[proving] that [he is] the possessor of a penis” (208). The force that can set aside urban scripts which require that the “possessor of a penis” be crushed, feminized, impoverished and driven from the bosom of a ruined family—scripts that have been explicated and realized by the text’s heterosexual “Soldier” males—is to be found, significantly, in Otis’s account of the violent sexual economies sought by “Sally” to set him adrift but also batter his body. Since Otis’s sentimental investment in another is consistently met with the staging of his brutal beating, marking and mutilation, I propose to read, in recurring scenes of detailed sexual violence, of being bitten, burned, bludgeoned and “battered withiron fists until he [passes] out” (228), the function by which Tilson performs sacrifice, a practice that, as we have seen, grants the possibility of “throwing oneself....out of oneself” (Bataille, *Visions* 67). When Otis imagines a version of social and familial stability with Ray, a recent pickup, for example, he daydreams that they “could even get married and no one would know [he] wasn’t a woman” (213)—only to find an enraged Ray burning him with a cigarette and willing to kick him into unconsciousness (216).

The mechanisms of sacrifice, which Bataille describes in terms of collective or individual beatings, mutilations, or “striking each other mercilessly” (Visions 67-8), ceaselessly sought and accepted, relate to “the radical alteration of the person” (70). Sacrifice can be considered as “the rejection of what [has] been appropriated by a person or a group,” and this function is significant in that what is “rejected from the human cycle is altered in an altogether troubling way” (70). In Otis’s detailed accounts of the beatings he endures, he seems to be “throwing himself out” of a self that is in danger of being colonized by a discourse of stability, of sentimentalism, which “Sally” opposes. When Soldier dies, for instance, and Otis, having been transient and intoxicated for days, appears late for the funeral, he stages his own dramatic self-beating in memory of the dour and “upstanding” mentor, ghetto repository of familial scripts: “I started ripping off my dress and the long red wig. An open-mouth crowd quickly gathered. I flung myself into the gutter and smashed my head against the curb” (Beck, Mama 220). If we read as sacrifice the compelling instances of beating and mutilation in which the “freak” “Sally” implicates Otis’s beautiful, restless, circulating body, we can detect an angry rejection of the sentimental, familial fantasies of ghetto survival—fantasies which the dead order of Lockjaw and Railhead always already incorporate as ruin.

After all, as Bataille reminds us, sacrifice disappears from human practises if it is “not able to be sufficiently charged with [an] element of hate and disgust, without which it appears in our eyes as servitude” (Visions 71). That element of hate and disgust with the mortifying, rigid tales of kinship in the cruel city finds its most intense formulation in the grotesque, bizarre scenarios of violence which Otis imagines at the points when he is confronted with his mother’s engulfing claims to love. As she reaches and calls to him, Otis considers the “spidery arms” that extend towards him, and recalls the “terrible thoughts” he used to entertain when doing the

dishes with his mother: thoughts of stabbing her with a kitchen knife or seeing her with her arms chopped cleanly off, and of “how funny Mama would look without those arms,” “no pain, no blood, just open-mouthed surprise to see herself without them” (24). Fantasies that grotesquely disrupt the discourse of ghetto home, with its tritely invoked pathologies and patterns (a discourse so efficiently carried by Soldier), subtend the gestures of sacrifice which allow Otis to alter his own inhabitation of the urban space in “an altogether troubling way” (Bataille, Visions 70). The Otis way is to disengage from the imperatives of economic striving, to evacuate familial scripts, and to inhabit a funeral parlour.

Since he can occupy the city while escaping the brutalizing economic demands that have emasculated the fathers, and in fact re-imagining the dead father as the substance that underpins a beautiful, enchanting drag-queen’s face, Otis Tilson’s self-fashioning partakes of what Lee Edleman qualifies as a queer denial of futurity. Futurity, embedded in the symbolic order, dependent on that “formal element,” the “lifeless machinery” that animates its “spirit” (27), fixes, congeals identity “through identification with the future of the social order” (25) itself. “Queerness,” proposes Edelman, accepts its “status as resistance to the viability of the social” (3), and the queer subject, in opposing reproductive futurity, is called upon to figure the death drive, which as we have seen denotes “a will to undo what is thereby instituted, to begin again ex nihilo” (9). To be queer, then, is to possess the power to oppose phantasmic formations that “bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier” (31), by substituting a “corrosive enjoyment” (30) to the lethal fantasy of a viable social order peopled by families invested in a “better” future that is always out of reach. In a text that structures the ghetto narrative as an exposé of futurity’s ruin, the city space is delineated as a gigantic, over-determined machine peopled by those who are “dead while alive,” and Otis Tilson’s embrace of the death drive is

what allows him to oppose its crushing imposition of “promised land” fantasies and sentimental vocabularies. These are revealed to have never been viable, and under their rule, self-fashioning sacrifice, in pain, mutilation and anger, does not tend towards self-annihilation, but towards an acknowledgement of the excessive, the darkly enduring, the corrosive.

Both Mama Black Widow and Blueschild Baby end by performing last-ditch (or last-page) attempts to neutralize resistant narrators, in ghetto spaces overburdened with the weight of symbolic and phantasmic formations developed on arborescent models. The addict of Blueschild Baby has chosen to enjoy heroin’s painful, disgusting rituals as an antidote to the symbolic mandate that splits him into separate, vertically envisioned layers: a higher, sublime, immaterial thing (all semblance), floating above a visible, material, ephemeral body. By engaging the transient, needing body in the most physically destructive, socially reprehensible rituals of bodily wretchedness, the narrator proposes to liberate himself from the rigidity of that split, and to invite the constitution of a subject that is perhaps coming “someday soon” (7), but never needs to arrive. Likewise, the primary narrator of Mama Black Widow refuses to attach to a vertical axis of striving, and to imagine rising above the mechanisms of aggression, brutality and death that decimate his family and neighbourhood. He opts instead for the mindful, willful occupation of an insecure social position that will subject him to repeated instances of brutality. In each case, the subject’s most potent gesture of resistance to imposed or deadening scripts is not even to try, not even to set out for phantasmic heights of being, in an unsullied promised land somehow imagined to hover above the visible, material, ruined neighbourhood. In both instances, narrative structures stage belated attempts to prevent the resistant subjects from flourishing in liberating, mindful pain: Georgie’s telegraphic “have gone as far as I can” (Cain 199) can be paired with Iceberg Slim’s final reminder of “the misery that is the heritage of [Otis’s] kind”

(230), as assayed points of closure. Yet these texts also confirm that something always exceeds, always flies off, sticks out and derails a stable order that works to promote its own brand of lethal dreams and deadening visions. The subversive potential of these long-neglected texts emanates from their inscription of the death-drive, and consequently of the most socially disruptive urges, not as demoralizing compulsions towards self-annihilation, but as insistent, productive thrusts to “begin again” and enjoy excessively, against all social imperatives. That enjoyment, without the promise of futurity, without the sanction of dominant uplift narratives, or the sentimental subtext of ghetto survival dramas, hints at unformulated, invisible domains that can be activated in the inner-city space—realms which evade the gaze of the social scientist, but which subtend the constitution of these almost-forgotten urban narratives as they re-appear, undead, uncanny, and excessive, to shamle on.

Chapter V: The End of the Road is a Fast Lane Hillside: Deleuze in the Ghetto

This journey has until now carried us along city streets, through alleys and across gutters, rooftops and vacant lots. The theatrical vision of Chester Himes, the dreamy poetic hipness of George Cain, the savvy rhetorical maneuvers of Robert Beck, all generate phantasmic mappings of an urban space that unfold to correspond with the occupying gestures of its inhabitants. The enclosed spaces of Sun's realm, or Otis's ghetto home, occur simply as undescribed elements of the strata which compose traversed domains of presence. At certain points, however, urban narratives confront the subject's anxiety in encountering disorienting, repetitious, communicating segments that require or resist his occupation. That confusion, distinctly urban, unmistakably modern is engagingly rendered in a reminiscence offered by Georgie, the narrator of Blueschild Baby. He recalls a childhood incident of panic when, unable to reach the appropriate elevator button, he would get lost on a tenement landing exactly like the one where he lived:

[The elevator] is the same, the ever-present puddle and stink of child's pee in the center which forces us to the corners of the car. Starting up with apprehension, a fear from childhood.

A child was unable to reach the desired buttons save one, a pretty white-lettered red button. The car stuttered up, alarm sounding urgently. Closing doors and movement frightened him and he'd scream for his mother. Then it would stop as if at his fear and open on a hall exactly like his, white brick façade and five steel blue doors in corresponding positions. He knocked on the one thought his and strange faces appeared, hostile voices. Insane questions. "Who are you? What do

you want? You don't live here, go away." And the door would slam. He'd stand crying, not knowing where to go, where was his house, father, mother, above, below, maybe they were gone and he's never find them. Maybe they never were and his life had been a dream. (40-1) (emphasis added)

This moment of hesitation and of disorientation in an encounter with repeated segments of space, in which difference is repeated and a sequence of doors is presented, strangely familiar yet completely other, seems to me a moment with a peculiarly Deleuzian resonance. Since we have not yet turned to the subject's experience of segmented space, the details of its imbrications, partitions and junctures, nor have we addressed the subject's position in a space where "the multiple, in and of itself" (Colombat 202) shapes the "identity of the I along with the resemblance of the self (Deleuze, Difference 219), I now propose to traverse that Deleuzian territory in charting two final instances of modern African American urban narrative.

5.1 "5-C Folks" and Segmentation

If segmentation, as Deleuze and Guattari, propose, establishes communicability between lived episodes of social and spatial processes and practises (Plateaux 254-5), Robert Deane Pharr's S.R.O. is the novel of segmentation par excellence, as narrative unfolds and arranges itself in the name of segmented space. In S.R.O., the urban array of the "street" assembles into the configuration of one building, the Logan, a vast apartment house converted into a "single room occupancy" hotel peopled by welfare recipients, junkies and "winos." Organized into tiers that delimit micro-neighbourhoods, and sub-groups of tenants accordingly, the Logan is established as a metonymic expression of segmented urban organization. In his initial entry into the Logan, Sid, the novel's narrator, is offered a spatial arrangement that is distinct, unique, and

will shape the narrative. On each floor, five spacious former apartments have been subdivided, so that the front doors of these reconfigured apartments hang “like badges of shame,” while behind each door is “a warren of six hotel rooms plus a community kitchen and bath” (12). On the fifth floor, one former apartment still boasts of a front door that can be locked, therefore creating a significant boundary closing off the inner rooms:

He unlocked the 5-C door and we stepped into a dim-lit hallway.

Directly facing us was the community kitchen, so named because all who lived in this 5-C sector had an equal right to its use. The first door to the right of the kitchen was the bath, and past that were the doors of rooms 5-C-5 and 5-C-6. The manager led the way to the first door on the other side of the kitchen, 5-C-4, and unlocking this door, proudly showed me the room. (13)

This boundary or threshold, as we shall see, functions as a crucial point where will be determined with what degree of flexibility segmentation will operate within this sub-space of inhabitation.

Throughout the narrative, this point of entry is activated by various occupants of 5-C, and the constant knocking, the pressing, noisy, intrusive demands of claimants to this space establish the narrative’s atmosphere of ambiguity and self-questioning. From the outset, the sub-spaces of the Logan establish varying cultures, so that tenants of the building’s sixth floor can structure their spatial and social practises in terms of such differences. Mr Johnson, an older “wino” from the sixth floor, berates Sid for his “5-C” attitude:

I was beginning to think kinda bad of you, boy. Thought maybe you had the idee that us sixth-floor folks was too low down for you 5-C high-society folks, but I sees you’re finally here although it had to take ole Blind Charlie to get you up

here. Now these sixth-floor people got their ways, just like everybody else, but they ain't no worse on the sixth floor than anywheres else. (161)

Mr Johnson, fearing the rigid segmentation he associates with a certain social setting (high-society folks) and transposes into the Logan's tiers of assorted practises, attempts to reaffirm what Deleuze and Guattari detect in "primitive," and flexible regimes of segmentation: there is no centralizing, concentric force imposing a consistent resonance, but just the opposite (Plateaux 256-7). Where arborescence would harden segmentation and include in every center of activity "the father's face, the school teacher's face, the face of the colonel, the boss" (257), in instances where arborescence is sabotaged, codes and territories become variable and entangled in a flexible fabric (255). There may still be centers where forces gather, and where a community figure, such as the shaman, might establish a constellation of discursive lines, and gather them in radiating structures. However, this operation can remain localized, situated in a designated segment so that each point of community power can continue to emit independent sequences of influence (256-7).

Such a flexible structure is precisely what the reader encounters in the communal urban setting of the Logan, where designated spatial centers (numbered rooms) contain distinct bases of localized effect. The room occupied by a shamanistic, drug-dealing, matchmaking social commentator and community historian, the white and wealthy "Sinman" and his apparent protector, Blind Charlie, is just such a center. Strangely hypnotic in his presence, speaking in the style of nineteenth-century bourgeois fiction, eager to detail the "sins" of each Logan occupant, the Sinman, whose real name is Jimmy Person,⁵² harbours the enigmatic Blind Charlie, whom Sid describes, in Deleuzian fashion, as "a giant brain encased in ignorance" (50).

The flexible segmentation signalled by Deleuze and Guattari does not merely constitute a “primitive” or residual aspect of modern social structures. Every individual, they propose, is traversed by both a “molar” and a “molecular” form of segmentation. If, on macropolitical, molar level, segmentation occurs on a rigid plane, this does not foreclose the simultaneous effect of a molecular domain of interactions, in which relationships, “conversations,” perceptions are distributed differently and operate independently (260). In the domain of the S.R.O., occupants are subjected to a “macropolitics” of injustices and degradations, which they bring back to their living space in the form of narratives setting forth nights spent turning tricks for a few dollars, beatings received or doled out, or systematic racism preventing entry into a dominant economic order. Rigid rules of exclusion from specific spaces come into operation as soon as one leaves the Logan and attempts to find work, get medical treatment, or retrieve belongings, as Sid recounts:

The young doc on duty in the screening office was no Angel of Mercy, or even the near relative of any angel unless it be the Angel of Death....

The two benches outside his office could accommodate maybe ten or fifteen patients, and they were full. And we all could hear every word this medical gladiator said on the phone. In a way, the fool was fishing for thank yous and compliments.

“I’ve got a lovely liver on the way up to you,” he said during one of his calls. “I know you’ll be wanting to see it. There are the damndest signs of...” Then he went into a mumbo-jumbo of medical terms I don’t think even he understood.

The woman sitting next to me moaned and fell off the bench in a faint. It seemed pretty evident that she had also brought in a lovely liver. (257)

Sites of concentrated social power are therefore predictably organized and delimited in that outside realm, and occupants of the S.R.O. return from that “rigid plane” with tales of disempowerment that other tenants ratify. Yet within the Logan, the segmentation of spatial practises is malleable. The collective and personal gestures of establishing what Deleuze and Guattari term a “geometry” of lines and formations can still burgeon and proliferate (Plateaux 258). If, as they propose, private property constructs an overly encoded, gridded space, the areas occupied by people who own nothing, and rent only segments of what was once a leasable, bounded group of rooms meant to form one living space, place the S.R.O. in a geometry in which lines are always “becoming” (Plateaux 258).

The status of the locking entrance door to the 5-C section of rooms provides an interesting application of these concepts. The conduct which converges upon this locking entrance door, and the presence of different “doorkeepers,” nurture a productive state of ambiguity for the inhabited segments of 5-C. As David Sibley explains, in Geographies of Exclusion, entrances are “breaches in the boundaries of the home,” and the hallways and passages of entry constitute “an ambiguous zone where the private/public boundary is unclear and in need of definition....in order to remove the anxiety of the occupier” (381). The uncertainty created by the door, and by the fact that, despite the lock, people are allowed in indiscriminately and seem to “[troop] in and out of 5-C like it [is] a five-and-ten-cent store,” place Sid in a position of ignorance when faced with the question of allowing entry into an inner “sector” where he and the other tenants develop a habit of leaving individual room doors open. Sid’s implication in being doorkeeper remains ambiguous throughout, as he is urged to manage the point of entry, but also discouraged from it:

“Every day was a thing unto itself,” Sid observes, one morning....Jinny would brush past my door, viciously muttering that ‘Mister Bastid’ was too lazy to take his turn at answering the door like everybody else. And very the next morning Joey would arrogantly inform me that since I was a square and a stranger, it was not seemly for me to answer the foyer door with all these unprotected females about....J&J’s come-and-go-attitude notwithstanding, I did take my turns at the foyer door while I was not at work. And I learned a whole lot from answering that door. (63-4)

At a crucial point in the narrative, Sid refuses entry to a group of visitors who will subsequently haunt his space with encroaching, disruptive behaviours. In the chain of destructive, bizarre events that follows, Sid worries over the moment of reticence which has prevented him from opening the crucial door to “Crazy Mary,” a destructive figure who brings maddening illogic and engulfing destruction to the 5-C.

This example of the narrative’s obsessive attention to spatial components indicates a predominant feature of Deane Pharr’s novel: its concentration on the most minute details of spatial practice, and its engrossed inventory of segmented spaces and practises. The novel offers Sid’s narrative as a running description of the Logan’s imbricated, connecting rooms and sectors; he and the other Logan residents move ceaselessly in and out of one-another’s designated spaces with such frequency and in such flexible arrangements, that the ambiguity of the threshold gradually contaminates every instance of occupation. This ambiguity, as we will discover, supports the maintenance of Sid as an open, emerging, “larval subject” (Deleuze, Difference 110).

5.2 The Rhizome's Short Memory

If one approaches this text with the sense that to enter the Logan is to immerse oneself in a Deleuzian world, it is partly because the Logan, the S.R.O. is figured as the point where arborescence dissolves. Its inhabitants, as Sid explains, cannot go anywhere else; for them, it is “the end of the rope” (12), the “Logan now for better or for worse” (13). The vertical axis of downfall or uplift cannot be overlaid upon the S.R.O.’s pockets of culture: as Mr Johnson points out, people on any given tier of its space “ain’t no worse....than anywheres else.” They cannot “sink” lower or “rise above” the narratives which are bestowed upon their fleeting presences in the S.R.O. When a polite, well-groomed young couple appears daily to purchase heroin from the resident pusher of 5-C, Sid unfailingly allows them entry: “every morning at ten a handsome young couple knocked on the front door....it was usually I who admitted them” (65). Yet he is puzzled by their seeming lack of a clear destructive “habit,” and enquires as to the story of their residence in the Logan. No tale of downward mobility, no account of “fall” or disgrace is provided by the neighbours in 5-C; the “pretty boy” is simply a “fence and a pill-boy.” Not satisfied, the narrator observes that he “never learned any more about” them (66), and the text refuses to attach narrative models of ruin to the numerous, varied presences that occupy its configurations of occupation. To inhabit the Logan is to partake of the “anti-genealogy,” the “short memory” of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, Plateaux 32). The very function of a S.R.O hotel is to provide changeable space for transient occupants, figured here as always traveling horizontally towards an equivalent space, another rented room. While inhabitants are at times granted flashes of personal history, moments of memory, these are not organized to account for the text’s “present” or to proffer an explanatory thread.

5.3 Representation and Contingency

That rejection of the explanatory, the cause-and-effect, riches-to-rags modalities of the ghetto narrative⁵³ extends to a more generalized vision of subjectivities. The novel from the outset displays subjects whose scattered, unpredictable displays of presence disrupt Sid's attempts at reading them, and are unrelated to his own position in the dynamics of shared space. Tenants embrace him with ungrounded familiarity, or shout with gratuitous belligerence, at times negating his presence altogether, and at other times cleaving to him in patterns that he terms incomprehensible. Often, intersections of presence in the closely peopled spaces of the Logan grant these excesses and instabilities an element of invasiveness, an overpowering force of collision that disconcerts the narrator and prompts a reference to his ignorance and "squareness." In his meeting with the manic Cuestick, (of whom next to nothing is learned in the course of the narrative—he, too, is a "pill-boy"), Sid finds himself incomprehensibly trembling: "Cuestick's greasy eyes bulged with wrath, and he suddenly advanced toward me with that pigeon-toed gait of the street fighter. 'Now who in hell can beat breaks like I got last night?' he yelled directly into my mouth. 'Not one lousy bitch on 125th will go for the okey-doke!'" (40).

In cataloguing these events and presences in the Logan, the narrator reinforces a Deleuzian stance in relation to representation, by addressing the S.R.O. as the site of illusion. According to Deleuze, representation is supported by distorting postulates which "culminate in the position of an identical thinking subject, which functions as a principle of identity for concepts in general" (*Difference* 265). That subject is always in danger of erasing the "difference that thinking makes in thought, that geniality of thinking, that profound fracture of the I" (266). Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, particularly in its concluding chapter, undertakes to demystify representation, and as André Pierre Colombat notes, "what is

demystified here is the belief in an organic or totalizing unity that would explain a writer's work and, ultimately, the world itself" (202). That is why Deleuze's practice invites the possibility of thinking "of the multiple in and of itself—its movement, its becoming multiple—without ever reducing it to an organic unity" (Colombat 202).

Deane Pharr's work in structuring S.R.O. repeatedly disavows unity or internal logic, and foregrounds instead its investment in "the multiple in and of itself." The novel notably includes a number of "Scenes," provided in visually distinctive italic, which are set apart from the "Sid Bailey" narrative by a number of conspicuous stylistic elements: they feature an omniscient narrator, they display an array of prose styles, and they incorporate self-consciously literary devices that draw attention to their artifice. The very first of these scenes, for instance, is set in the space "directly over Sid," and tells of a young man who is stabbed by his crime boss for having needlessly shot a store-owner as he and his young partner were carrying out a hold up. Though the other young thief admits that he did not see the shooting, their boss reacts swiftly:

"I never tole you to waste that Jew bastard," the man said to the boy.

"Jesus. Are you crazy? Why would I shoot the motherfucker?"

Blinded in a rage of terror, the man flashed a knife and drove it into the boy's stomach two times. The boy grunted and stepped back, but the man closed in and began to wrestle him for the gun in his waistband.

"I didn't shoot him, man," the boy gasped. "His wife did." (20) (emphasis added)

With this enigmatic "surprise" ending to the narrative vignette, evocative of a noir plot about to unfold, Deane Pharr opens a dimension of artifice that is then immediately set aside, as the "Sid Bailey" narrative resumes, and the noir plot is never picked up again.

Sid's first-person account also works constantly against the possibility of "an organic or totalizing unity." His position as narrator is recurrently identified as that of someone who is a "square,"⁵⁴ an "ignorant" witness to episodes that baffle and intrigue him at every turn, as he questions himself and underscores his own lack of savvy: "So this J&J had me uptight again: what were they really trying to do or say?....So was I being put to some kind of test? Did they think I was some kind of undercover man?Or were they simply telling me to pack up and git?" (30-1) Obsessive in his interrogations, often baffled by other's spatial practices, Sid nevertheless opposes the designated "squareness" of his subjectivity by engaging with contradictions, and testifying to the proliferation of fragmented tales. He is confronted, for instance, with countless efforts, by the occupants of the Logan, to defeat the narration of an organic "whole" by choosing to perform race and gender roles in accordance with unspoken contingencies and dimensions that are never explained. The figure of Joey is particularly compelling, in that this tenant of the 5-C is initially introduced by Sid as a "rotund little Irishman," a guy who looks like a "toy bulldog," but has soft and girlish hands, and the voice of a woman (23-4). He lives with his wife, Jinny, and initially "passes" for a gay man, until the Sinman explains that Joey is indeed a woman—as meaningless as that pronouncement turns out to be in the domain of malleable identities that is the Logan. Joey's approach to racial affiliation is equally baffling to Sid: "I was amazed by the many inconsistencies of Joey. This would-be male had not only a woman's voice but a Southern Negro accent as well. However, it was not until Joey began to preface his remarks with such phrases as: "We Negroes..." and "All us colored people..." that I began to feel cordially uptight" (25).

"Cordially uptight," undoubtedly, is the designation that applies to Sid throughout the narrative—"uptight" every time he is puzzled, confronted, as a "square" who constantly works

against the grain of his “squareness”— and it should perhaps call to mind Deleuze’s “geniality of thinking,” a mode of addressing “difference” in thought (Difference 266) and engaging with a domain where representation foregrounds its own function as illusory. Entering his thought, shaking up his “ignorance,” Joey’s performance as the S.R.O drag king epitomizes Judith Butler’s now classic dicta regarding the performative dimensions of gender: “In imitating gender,” asserts Butler, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (175). A presence such as Joey’s proffers “sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (175). In keeping with the effects of this performance upon his thinking—genial, uptight or otherwise—Sid tells of his own sudden constitution of an overdramatized, instant love affair with a young prostitute, an undertaking that is fraught with deep realizations of the doubts which possess him. Trying to gauge whether his newly experienced passion for the transient Gloria is based on something he thinks may be “false and theatrical” in her, Sid observes: “Woodenly, with eyes wide open, I tried to see what I could of Gloria’s face. To fathom her. I couldn’t” (51) (emphasis added). His assayed understanding of this connection is already one that evacuates the vocabulary he knows: “it was frightening,” he asserts, “to think that we faced so great a love without love” (52) (emphasis added).

The unfathomability of desire and passion, and the difficulty in formulating his position as a “man” to the Logan women whose varied performances of gendered passion seem “blandly inscrutable and detached” to him (55),⁵⁵ are complicated by the chaotic effects of an alcoholism that the narrator shows no reluctance to spell out. In the most minute details of his daily embrace of addiction, Sid acknowledges that “sin and sinning [are] dynamic,” and his careless, destructive binges, his operatic hangovers and bouts of the DTs, all point to a subject who seeks,

in the words of Deleuze, to “put aside the identity of the I along with the resemblance of the self (Difference 219). Only by dismantling the “square” that he has brought into the Logan can Sid attempt to traverse the realm that opens to him in the closely peopled halls and rooms of the S.R.O., and his project to divest himself of “ignorance” and stable vocabularies follows the movements of the Deleuzian “larval subject.”

5.4 The Larval Subject

In some ways, we could read Robert Deane Pharr’s novel as situating the spatial structure, the segmented Logan, at the center of its narrative project. The S.R.O itself, point of intersection for homeless hustlers, lobby junkies, canny or careless drug pushers, re-sellers and down-and-out users, attracts our attention as an organizing principle. Yet the spatial, here, gathers the “multiple,” the contingent, the fleeting, without wedding itself to a narrative of unity, or a centralizing practice of representation. A meeting-place of subjectivities, the Logan is invoked by its imagined tenants in much the same way as the formula from Chester Himes’s Blind Man With a Pistol, the derisive but open-ended “This is Harlem,” finds itself uttered. The Logan is named by its occupants in countless articulations, so varied and shifting,⁵⁶ that its function as a unifying structure is undermined in the very act of formulation: “Not only can everybody in the Logan die faster than everybody else,” claims Joey; “everybody in the Logan can kill you and you better hurry up and believe it” (189). No sooner is the Logan termed as a cause or effect or overarching principle, than the narrative offers a subject that dissolves the operation of causality, or the claims of logic, unity or sense. The Logan inmate worthy of that designation is the one who claims, in the same utterance, “Ah been ‘round,....Ah ain’t been nowheres,” (184) and who staggers as the assembled grouping of a drunk, a blind man, and a

limping girl, “an unearthly trio” that, when glimpsed with detachment prompts Sid to note: “I did not know how high we all were until I happened to look over my shoulder. We really were Logan inmates” (184).

A “Logan inmate,” of course, proves to be a mere shell into which any version of subjectivity, any number of perceptions, affects, or performances of presence can be poured. For Sid, the black male subject who has come off the street and signaled that “this Logan [has] to be it for now” (13), the S.R.O. immediately reveals itself to be other than its previous versions of itself, just as the working “square” proves to work against the squareness about him. Unlike the slick, fast-talking and savvy personae produced by the narratives of Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, or Eldridge Cleaver, the narrator of S.R.O. names himself from the outset as a fool, a naïf who has been weakened by his addiction, and now appears as “a middle-aged Black, obviously on the tail end of a monstrous drunk” (11). He constantly points to his own bafflement, his own lack of understanding, as he engages with the modalities of a space which, as we have seen, evacuates “molar” systems of organizing identities. In the Deleuzian realm of the S.R.O., we can read Sid as the larval subject, the “fractured I” that appears in Difference and Repetition and suggests a pivotal approach to the subject. One of the uses of the “larval subject” for Deleuze, as Ian Buchanan signals, is to remind us that “if we assume subjects to be always already there, to be somehow ready-made, and only attempt to map their movements,” we may reduce them to “a series of points on a graph” and thus neglect the event that is the subject’s emergence (115).

That emergence is made manifest, in S.R.O., at the point where Sid lies down in his newly rented room and is overcome by delirium tremens: “Inside my head,” he recounts, “right behind my eyeballs, was the whirr of a motion picture projector gone mad,” and “an unholy imagery would dance before my every gaze” (14). The final image that comes to him, before he

is overcome by a terror that seeps through him in voices and whispers, is of himself “looking down at [his] own stinking corpse” (17); “nobody would bury me, and the stench rose from my dead body in visible waves” (17). That imagined, reeking death under his own gaze, occurring as it does following the chaotic thronging of discharged images, “projected” within but visible outside the “I,” sets the path for an emergence that occurs in accordance with Deleuze’s version of the “death instinct” (Difference 259).

In an assertion that adds to our ongoing understanding of the “death drive,” Deleuze proposes the “death instinct” as “an internal power which frees the individuating elements from the form of the I or the matter of the self in which they are imprisoned” (259). Death then, would not be envisioned as a “return to inanimate matter,” but as a liberating instance that releases “swarming” differences in intensity—a swarming that recalls the immense potential which Deleuze finds in the cogito, not as designating a field of sameness and unity, but as referring to:

a fractured I, an I split from end to end by the form of time which runs through it....ideas swarm in the fracture, constantly emerging on its edges, ceaselessly coming out and going back, being composed in a thousand different manners. It is not therefore a question of filling that which cannot be filled. Nevertheless, just as difference immediately reunites and articulates that which it distinguishes, and the fracture retains what it fractures, so ideas contain their dismembered moments. (Difference 170)

The black male subject of Deane Pharr’s S.R.O. narrates himself as mobile, darkly ironic yet naive, ignorant but constantly seeking, terrified yet insistently confronting the kinetic dynamic energies that he can never explicate, situate or contain. The rooms in which he seeks solace and

understanding are also spaces he attempts to confront as silent segments “filled with a furious kind of savagery,” and his absurd encounter with the otherworldly logic of Crazy Mary (who throws his only manuscript out of the window) releases endless questionings and re-articulations: “Was Mary telling the truth? What I mean was, just how uptight was I for real? Was my script for real? Or was it a fetish? Hell. This crazy woman had me uptight for real” (435). Uptight, perhaps, but cordially uptight: that is the S.R.O.’s term for the subject’s seeking, anxious, ceaselessly re-formulating engagement with a realm of ideas that never stabilize, never stop re-constituting themselves into new arrangements, and never offer up what is “for real.”

Questioning, moving till the end, Sid does not conclude his narrative with anything more unified than the fractured “I” that rushes forward toward the “pulsing harbor of more life,” with Blind Charlie’s arm “pushing [him] implacably ahead...almost sprinting now, as if the world was hurtling [him] into a void” (544). Larval, fractured, uptight yet subjected to the swarmings of incessant ideas and re-definitions, the male presence of S.R.O. anxiously allows the spatial hulk of the microcosmic, metonymic urban domain of the Logan to scatter subjectivities as emergences. Subjects do emerge, unpredictable, baffled, and yelling into each other’s mouths to avoid settling into simple points upon a graph of the city’s blighted landscape.

5.5 Walking on Eggshells

Having thus noted the Deleuzian turn that manifests itself in Robert Deane Pharr’s novel of urban occupancy, we can keep in mind, as we turn to Herbert Simmons, that Deleuze’s rhetoric of the subject imagines that “dreams are our eggs, our larvae and our properly psychic individuals.” “The vital egg,” he proposes, “is nevertheless already a field of individuation, and the embryo is a pure individual” (Difference 250)—a formulation that brings us almost too

neatly, too organically to our last text, Man Walking on Eggshells (1962).⁵⁷ Yet Simmons's novel in many ways allows us to return, tortuously, to points of departure along the way, by announcing its interest in the lives of jazz musicians, and in the stylish presence of bebop master Miles Davis. In the novel's 1997 "Introduction," Simmons indicates his interest in a style of composition which he terms "assimilationism," and which he allies to the bebop stylings of Miles Davis (12). "Assimilationism," proposes Simmons, is what "allows a writer freedom to use whatever literary device, form, style, or movement works," and it has allowed him to structure a novel in which "corner boy Raymond Williams becomes a man" and opposes American hegemony "in order to style and prosper on a fast lane hillside" (13) (emphasis added). To style and prosper, to move along a fast lane is, as we shall see, to deny an opposition between depth and surface, between style and "meaning." Simmons's brief contextualization of his novel's title provides a further sense of the mindful occupation of an exterior that creates its own line of expressive presence: "...he blew like a man walking,/they said. Like a ...[man walking on eggshells]" (17). If we return for a moment to our Deleuzian "vital egg," to our dream-eggs, we can perhaps situate the "man walking" as a force of creative release, as the deceptively "superficial" touch of constant motion across the field of subject-constitution, across the shells of emerging larval subjects.

The jazz artist, blowing like a "man walking," traverses a narrative project that occurs as an assemblage of forms that can be blended, and across which he can move. Indeed the novel plays with intersections of musical styling and narrative development in such a way as to sabotage any sense of the static compartmentalization of forms (which Deleuze and Guattari associate with the "classic artist" [416-7]). Consider Chapter 26, for instance, which opens with the blues lyric: "...a woman's a two face, a worrisome thing..." (91) and then proceeds to detail

a musician's reunion with the lover he has not forgotten. As the text lists the steps he now takes to win her back and marry her, the narrative is punctuated with another lyric, one which opens a seam of irony in the face of heartbreak:

He had left in '35 because he couldn't get a gig; any kind of a gig. Marsha had wanted to get married anyway. Now he was the one, but when he told her she started to bawl and wouldn't come in on the conversation. Now, wasn't that the lick?

He went out and bought her a \$750 engagement and wedding ring set. That called for more tears. She took the rings, but wouldn't wear them. Man, now that was the lick! (91)

As the chapter ends, Marsha pulls a different wedding ring from her bag, and reveals that she is already married, and has "even got two kids." The text returns to its refrain: "Now that was the lick, the lick that laid poor Dick out deader than a doornail and that wasn't no lie" (92). The lyric here operates in one of the many ways signaled by Deleuze and Guattari as they explore "La Ritournelle," the refrain. The ironic song constitutes a location, a "milieu," which is encoded, and defines itself by repetition, while it also "transcodes" itself into an opening for another "milieu," and reconstitutes itself anew (Plateaux 384). Here the lyric worries a question ("wasn't that the lick?") just as the musician attempts to translate his recent success into a revisiting of the past relationship, while meeting doubt and distrust along the way. His desire to recapture a commitment that has been rendered unlikely is punctuated by gestures that also "transcode" themselves into a questioning, ironic, rhythmic and ultimately comical and tragic variation on heartbreak. Such transcoding of course, directs the reader back to the opening excerpt, "a woman's a two face, a worrisome thing."

Man Walking on Eggshells foregrounds such assemblages, and allows jazz stylings to shape the narrative in ways that collapse surface and depth, inside and outside, so that the gliding move “on eggshells” in fact constitutes the black male subject. Claire Colebrook asserts that the production of the subject, for Deleuze, is inseparable from the question of style: “Deleuze will insist that it’s not as though there is a subject who is then expressed through propositions. It is the style of the proposition that unfolds the subject” (112). As Deleuze states in Difference and Repetition, “by ‘expression’ we mean, as always, that relation which involves a torsion between an expressor and an expressed such that the expressed does not exist apart from the expressor....the terrified face does not resemble what terrifies it, it envelops a state of the terrifying world” (26) (emphasis added). In the musical domain of Simmons’s nomadic jazz man, the ironic, heartbroken expressor of that cultural factor comes to envelop a state of the Blues world, the state in which “that was the lick” that haunted, worried, and unfolded the subject. As Claire Colebrook further asserts, Deleuze’s appeal to style is not aesthetic: “If actuality is nothing other than its effects then style will itself be a mode of being” (121). That mode of being frees the subject, in Simmons’s novel, to constitute presence in the urban space as a fleeting, stylish, jazzed-up or bluesy release, one that glides along on a perpetual “fast lane hillside” and settles on nothing. Thus, the murder of a police officer, the novel’s climactic, traumatic staging of urban resistant occupation, is rendered as a bluesy, impressionistic moment of sound and colour:

An orange streak blossomed in the night air.

Holt clutched at his chest.

Lobo’s lips bared back over strong white teeth.

Amazement sagged in Holt’s fleshy cheeks.

Lobo's eyes burned red as fire.

...you piss blue ink...

The orange blossom bloomed again

.....

Hate leaped at Lobo from the sergeant's blue eyes.

...you piss blue ink...

Once more the night flower bloomed.

...ee-oo-weeth, you mother. Ee-oo-weeth...(108).

The domain of Man Walking on Eggshells thus functions as a modulated return to cool, a tortuous circle that brings us back to a blues sensibility, to the detachment and ironic distance of the mobile artist. Occupation of the urban space is elaborated as style, a form of "styling" in which the individual picks up and lays down expressive modes, but continues to oppose the rhetoric of motivated or redemptive meaning. Only the potential of a "fast lane hillside" remains.

By following the vectors of these pulsing lines of occupation across the bleakest landscapes of poverty, addiction and injustice, these narratives by Pharr and Simmons perform a crucial operation: they completely foreclose mortifying scripts (the "dead preachments" of Mama Black Widow) that are arborescent structures of failure and oppression. Yet they also summon a realm where all is fleeting, where "you can't kill nothing and nothing won't die," as Sid decries. Nonetheless that coolness, which we have seen transformed in the "barbershop books" into the icy coldness of the magnificent player, also operates as a refusal to endorse phantasmic, lethal visions of a better future that is always already in ruins. In the realm of the Logan and of "the lick that laid poor Dick out," the subject accepts the anxiety of constituting a

presence only for now, only here, without attachments, without wedding rings or unopened doors. The ambiguities of inhabiting spaces that are familiar, yet not closed off into rigid segments of structured inhabitation, constitute a subject that is mobile, mindful, flexible—flexible enough to walk on eggshells and stake a stylish, transient occupation. By choosing style instead of representation, the jazzman becomes our nomadic vector of male self-fashioning, and is further supplemented by the haunting, imperfect, questioning and hurried figure of the “straight-man.” At the end of his rope and with no place left to go, he nevertheless constitutes a powerful principle of released motion, creative doubt and active engagement with an entire world of differences.

Conclusion

The lyrics of a well-known traditional black spiritual, proclaiming the greatness of God's love, assert that his wonderful love is "So high you can't get over it/ So deep you can't get under it/ So wide you can't get around it." This multiple, unfathomable, immense vision strikes me as a wonderful concluding variation on spatiality, one that functions very well with the works I have gathered and endeavored to read in this project. Having paid close attention to these neglected texts, I have wanted to invite them to disperse the compelling, troubling, and at times deeply anxious or ironic, resistant or haunted modalities that have shaped their deployments of masculinity in the ghetto neighbourhood. Imagining the hip, cool, mobile and self-reflective urban male of ghetto narratives, as he travels along a line of flight that reorganizes itself along the way, I suppose he might indeed find that the one thing he cannot get over, get under or go around, is his configuration of presence in the urban space—his active, flexible occupation of interconnecting segments, assemblages and routes in the post-industrial city. Yet I have found, in these texts' approaches to spatiality, a liberating function at work for the subject who, as we have seen, is compelled in the most wretched circumstances to fashion a version of masculinity, a claim to presence on the blighted street. Thus, I have taken my cue from Amiri Baraka's assertion to the effect that, even upon beholding a horrifying domain of cement, filth and overcrowded flats, new inhabitants of the ghetto were apt to remember that "the sole idea was 'to move'" (105). To move, to circulate, to experience friction and troubling proximity upon the crowded street, to display oneself and seek the next thing—these operations, as we have seen, have been crucial in suggesting that realms of creative instability can be read into the rhythms of ghetto life. These texts attend to the most wretched visions of urban criminality and marginality, but they also give room for the addict, the pimp, or the down-and-out, unmoored drifter to

envision breaking the icy mask, dismantling a congealed, deadened persona, or as George Bataille proposes, to imagine throwing himself out of himself (Visions 67). There is no “end of the rope,” even for those who reach it, as the resilient tenants of a chaotically imagined S.R.O.—the last S.R.O. on the way down—suggest. One can always ignore the tyranny of a vertical axis that set one on that way down, or one can simply open that last locking door for the release of untold possibilities and emergences towards something else—the next, unknown, thing.

Yet what troubles me, as I survey the multiplicities which these works have released in my understanding of African American urban culture, is the sense that occupation of the urban space may yet turn out to be an immensely immobilizing cultural mechanism, one that might prevent anyone from getting over, under or around its crushing presence. As I notice the extent to which hip-hop culture, and other popular expressive manifestations, seem to draw from phantasmic legacies of the pimp, the player, and the detached, ice-cold, materialistic man of the ‘hood (Boyd 60-81 and Neal, Soul Babies 175-194), I wonder to what extent urban texts of another era can set us straight—or in Deleuzian terms, put us back on a productively tortuous course. If black manhood only traverses culture as the rigid mask, the ritualized set of machine-like gestures so often associated with hip-hop culture, we might indeed turn with some nostalgia to the texts of the ghetto Fathers.

Nevertheless, the work of dismantling these existing representational rigors, and exploring their implications, is already being carried out with great finesse by critics such as Mark Anthony Neal and Todd Boyd, among many others. Neal, in particular, has approached the question of black manhood with the passion of personal involvement, but also with a great receptivity to diverse cultural manifestations in friction (particularly in New Black Man). In his Songs in the Key of Black Life, for instance, Neal draws attention to the lyrics of Omar Bin

Hassan, a hip-hop poet who has known addiction and homelessness and who has recorded a tribute to Miles Davis. Bin Hassan links hip-hop to be-bop, as he proclaims his indebtedness to Davis:

Up jumps Miles, Up jumps Miles, bobbing and weaving sticking moving going
against traffic on a one-way-street...

Miles turning his back on guaranteed death and low life insinuations perpetuated
by the perverted fantasies of the founding fathers of these United States of fuck
you mothafuckas, fuck you mothafuckas....

He was our cool walks in the wind (quoted in Neal, Songs in the Key 183).

Such a striking, topical homage to the empowering vision of a mobile, resistant subject unmistakably echoes the variations on urban spatiality that we have been reading. Here, as in our ghetto narratives, mindful inhabitation of the urban space opens untold possibilities for the subject to assay: the artist cannot keep still, but is jumping up, “bobbing and weaving,” “moving,” and in true Miles style, “going against traffic.” Miles Davis, the arbiter of cool and enduring figure of sophisticated, creative detachment, persists here in a manner that suggests untold connections with the cultural terrain that I have sought to bring once again to the light of meticulous, respectful reading.

This project has been driven by my hope of seeing long-neglected texts re-enter the fray of discourse, debate, and of course, circulation. Any instance of resonant correspondence across decades is significant, as it directs our thoughts towards the possible multiplicity of suppressed, lost, submerged and enduring connections that we have yet to trace.

End Notes

¹ Murakami 262 and James, Pragmatism 87.

² Jan Carew. “S.R.O. One Bed to a Customer.” New York Times, Oct 31, 1971.

³ On Marc Gerard and Old School Books, see Horton-Stallings, 183.

⁴ Daniel Stern. “One Who Got Away.” New York Times, May 21 1967.

Thomas Lask. “What Color Is the Side You’re On?” New York Times, Dec. 28, 1970.

Jan Carew. “S.R.O. One Bed to a Customer.” New York Times, Oct 31, 1971.

⁵ For the case of Cleaver, see Reed’s reading in his “Preface” to Soul On Ice.

Mingus and Miles Davis are discussed as if their identities and texts were interchangeable, in

Guillory. For the treatment of Cain and Pharr, see Lask and Carew.

⁶ Representing, in African American culture, can mean, in addition to its usual sense, to assert, demonstrate or perform blackness (Boyd, 1-12).

⁷ See Fligstein, Grossman, Lemann.

⁸ See Massey and Denton.

⁹ I discuss this at length in Chapter one regarding Blues culture, and the issue is relevant as well in the subtext of reception of the “barbershop books” (Chapter 2). Cleaver and Mingus (Chapters 3 and 4) are also at the heart of this debate.

¹⁰ A PBS documentary on the blues, “Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues” (aired in the fall of 2003) is a striking example of a series of films in which the word “blues” is used incessantly, and yet almost nothing is said about blues culture, lyrics, performance or tradition.

¹¹ I am emulating Ross Posnock’s use of the term, and he of course borrows it from W.E.B. DuBois.

¹² Because of the level of complexity in Deleuze and Guattari's Mille Plateaux, the linguistic play and density of the text, I have opted to read that text in the original French. I provide brief translation where required.

¹³ Tommy Johnson, for example, (no relation to Robert) was said to have sold himself to the devil (Palmer 59-60). Peetie Wheatstraw (actually William Bunch, though the name was claimed by at least one other bluesman) billed himself "the Devil's son-in-law" and the "High Sheriff from Hell" (Palmer 115).

¹⁴ Palmer himself reports this (Chapter 3: "Mojo Hand," Deep Blues).

¹⁵ According to Carlo Rotella, depression, war and inflation "pushed urban problems to the back burner," but these suddenly became more tangible after WWII. "Factories, civic buildings, and especially overcrowded neighbourhoods were physically deteriorating; cities' economies, especially factory production and downtown retailing, were showing signs of long-term erosion....many cities' tax bases shrank as poor in-migrants, especially Southern blacks, settled in the inner city while middle-class whites and businesses dispersed into the suburbs....the industrial cities that had for generations been the leading models of American urbanism were undergoing a profound transformation. The gradual shift of primary economic function from manufacturing to services, the prodigious rise of the suburbs as places to live and work, the expansion of the black inner city, and the erosion of the industrial village—these were the big groundswells, just beginning to shake the foundations of industrial urbanism, that would make urban history in the second half of the century" (26).

¹⁶ On minstrelsy, see Lott.

¹⁷ See Davis, Murray, Baraka on the rituals of urban post-war “cool” jazz. Davis comments, about style-setter Dexter Gordon, that he had “hipped [Miles] to the importance of looking sharp....he was the cleanest cat around” (Davis caption to photograph #28).

¹⁸ In Davis, caption to photograph #5. In comparison, Charlie Parker’s bebop band, captured in photograph # 21, (and featuring Miles Davis) looks serious, absorbed, remote.

¹⁹ The translation is mine : “de lutteurs, de femmes-serpent, de diseuses de bonne aventure” (Foucault 48).

²⁰ This is the fundamental argument of Marlene K. Connor’s What is Cool? See also hooks’ We Real Cool, Harper’s Are We Not Men?, and of course Cleaver’s Soul on Ice.

²¹ “devenir imperceptible, devenir clandestin.”

²² Zizek argues that by “pretending to be something,” by “acting as if we were something,” we “assume a certain place in the inter-subjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our true position. If we remain convinced, deep within ourselves, that ‘we are not really that,’ if we preserve an intimate distance toward ‘the social role we play,’ we doubly deceive ourselves. The final deception is that social appearance is deceitful, for in the social-symbolic reality things are precisely what they pretend to be” (Looking Awry 74).

²³ “sa production d’intensités spécifique a partir de froid absolu = 0.”

²⁴ “corps vitreux vides, corps cancéreux, totalitaires et fascistes.”

²⁵ “Allez encore plus loin... c’est la que tout ce joue.”

²⁶ Robert Reid-Pharr’s statements were made in a keynote address at the Black Masculinities conference, City University of New York Graduate Center, February 4th 2005. His comments

are included in the forthcoming work titled: Once You Go Black: Desire, Choice and Black Masculinity in Post-War America to be published in July 2007 by New York University Press.

²⁷ Recall Davis's comments, in his Autobiography, concerning Louis Armstrong and his ingratiating "grinning" (caption to photograph #5).

²⁸ On these issues, Franz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks examines the classic formulations of racist and racialist thought systems.

²⁹ De Certeau's exact phrase is "le corps à corps amoureux" (141)—an image that is not irrelevant to the rest of this discussion.

³⁰ The translation is mine : "dans les interstices des codes qu'il déjoue et déplace" (de Certeau 190).

³¹ The translation is mine : "formée en fragments de trajectoires et en altérations d'espaces" (de Certeau 142).

³² In an effort to be consistent and to reflect my understanding of Lacan, I capitalize "Other" when the subject to which it refers can be understood in terms of its place in the Symbolic Order, rather than the subject's ego—in other words, when it designates "the radical alterity of the other person beyond our mirroring in it" (Žižek, They Know Not 199). Žižek's use is at times inconsistent, or he makes explicit reference to the "big Other" to clarify.

³³ For a discussion with Paul Gilroy concerning Soul culture, style, music, and the commodification and persistence of versions of Soul, see Green and Guillory, "Questions of a Soulful Style."

³⁴ Lee Edelman provides an extremely compelling analysis of queerness as a haunting, anti-futurity embrace of the death-drive. It is discussed in the following chapter.

³⁵ Kathryn Bond Stockton bases her observation on the fact that the publication of Soul on Ice predates the availability of an English translation of Lacan's "The Meaning of the Phallus" (in 1977) (166).

³⁶ Likewise criticism has tended to focus on Thomas as an author of "mestizaje" (for example, in Sanchez and Caminero-Santangelo), to the detriment of some of the more subtle elements of the text's anxieties of masculinity.

³⁷ Jesus could of course be read as the "big Other" par excellence .

³⁸ The novel specifically explains Harlem landmarks and history for the white reader (for example, "Interlude" 19-21). It also explains Harlem culture, spaces and some local traditions.

³⁹ Reed notes, among other mainstream endorsements, those of The New Republic and the New York Review of Books (7).

⁴⁰ Down These Mean Streets was originally published by Alfred-A Knopf and has been in print for 40 years.

⁴¹ Norman Mailer is a good example. Cleaver admires him as an example of what has been wrought by a "new generation of white Americans" who seek to "enter into the cosmopolitan egalitarian spirit of the twentieth century" (124).

⁴² Examples of this popular vision of the ghetto could be found in mainstream culture of that time, in films such as The Cool World (1964), and more pulp-driven offerings such as This Rebel Breed (1960), or Halls of Anger (1971). Popular fascination with the ghetto as nightmare space of criminality persists in more recent, problematic texts such as David Simon and Edwards Burns's The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood (1997) and Douglas

Century's Street Kingdom: Five Years Inside the Franklin Avenue Posse (1999). This is of course without considering the immense domain of ghetto-centric elements in hip-hop culture.

⁴³ Daniel P. Moynihan, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.

⁴⁴ Surprisingly, Monique Guillory reads the text as providing unmediated access to the psyche of the historically stable, talented but insecure jazz musician, Charles Mingus: "His wanton sexual abandon, though excessive and overwhelming, merely conceals a more powerful rage and helplessness. Although a master musician and composer, Mingus uses Beneath the Underdog to explore his personal and emotional life, ravished by childhood abuse and insecurity" (207). I could not disagree more with such an approach to the text.

⁴⁵ A striking example of the Mingus persona's reticence, and of the dialogue that encircles that presence, occurs in the following apparent re-telling of a traumatic moment:

"Hey dad! How ya doing? I thought I'd come and talk to you about a few things."

"Why, hello, son, I was hoping you'd be over to see me one of those days. Come in, sit down, make yourself at home. I been hoping to see you since the day you handed me my gun."

"Oh, Daddy, I didn't know what I was doing. I was so hurt you were leaving me—why doesn't he kill me, I thought. Then I saw the look in your eyes when I gave you the gun."

"I'd of killed myself, son, if I'd thought it would help change things. The woman kept me so mixed up! But you're my flesh and blood and I love you. Oh, Pearl! Would you close the door? My son has come to visit me." (124)

⁴⁶ “I was afraid of what Harlem could bring out in a person. When I decided to move, I was trying to get away from the fear” (Brown 427).

⁴⁷ Slim’s view is found, largely expressed in the language of the social sciences, in Kenneth B. Clark’s Dark Ghetto (1967).

⁴⁸ In an account such as Frederick Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom, for example.

⁴⁹ See for example Amiri Baraka’s vision of the impetus to migration: “the North suddenly represented a further idea of what this country and what a black man’s life might be....the significant idea is that the North now represented for Negroes a place where they could begin again, this time, perhaps, on a more human footing” (96).

⁵⁰ For a 1960s-era summation of the so-called “crisis of the black family,” see Herzog: “The man who cannot command a stable job at adequate wages cannot be an adequate family provider; the man who cannot provide for his family is likely to lose status and respect in his own eyes and in the eyes of others—including his family. His inability to provide drains him of the will to struggle with continuing and insuperable family responsibilities” (149).

⁵¹ When he reconfigures his identity in a “surrender” to the mobile, ageless, but also chaotic, irresponsible “Sally,” Otis recognizes the androgynous beauty of his father while also echoing the transgressive mobility of his childhood neighbour, Sally Greene, who could “roll her hot hazel eyes sexily” at Soldier.

⁵² We might read “Person” as its French homonym, “personne” which would be an uncanny designation of him as “Nemo” or no-one.

⁵³ Typified, as mentioned, in Brown.

⁵⁴ He is designated as a “square” because he is employed in a wage-earning job on the “outside.”

⁵⁵ See also S.R.O. 291, in which he describes himself as “alienated,” “useless” and incomprehending in reaction to his lover’s “cool” performance.

⁵⁶ See pp.189, 191, 193, 206, 207 for just one cluster of such formulas.

⁵⁷ David Jarraway has drawn my attention to the egg in Deleuze and its relation to the larval subject.

Appendix A

A.1 Robert Johnson, "Crossroads Blues," from The Complete Recordings:

Palmer, like many critics who write about Johnson, fails to provide Johnson's actual lyrics, an omission which convinces me of the necessity of doing so here:

I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above, have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please

Standin' at the crossroads, tried to flag a ride

Whee-hee, I tried to flag a ride

Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroads, risin' sun goin' down

Standin' at the crossroads baby, the risin' sun goin' down

I believe to my soul now, po' Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown

That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, baby I'm sinkin' down

I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west

I went to the crossroad, babe, I looked east and west

Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress

A.2 Robert Johnson, "Hellhound On My Trail," from The Complete Recordings:

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving,

Blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail

Mmm, blues falling down like hail, blues falling down like hail

And the day keeps on remindin' me, there's a hellhound on my trail

Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail

If today was Christmas eve, if today was Christmas eve

And tomorrow was Christmas day

If today was Christmas eve and tomorrow was Christmas day

(spoken "oh, wouldn't we have a time, baby")

All I would need is my little sweet rider

Just to pass the time away, to pass the time away

You sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm, around my door

All around my door

You sprinkled hot foot powder, all around your daddy's door

Mm, mm, mm

It keeps me with ramblin' mind rider

Every old place I go, every old place I go

I can tell the wind is risin', the leaves tremblin' on the tree

Tremblin' on the tree

I can tell the wind is risin', leaves tremblin' on the tree

Mm, mm, mm

All I need is my little sweet woman

And to keep my company,

Mm, mm, hey, hey, my company

A.3 Muddy Waters, "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man," from Muddy Waters on Chess, Vol.2:

1951-1959:

The gypsy woman told my mother

Before I was born

I got a boy child's comin'

He's gonna be a son of a gun

He gonna make pretty womens

Jump and shout

Then the world wanna know

What this all about

But you know I'm him

Everybody knows I'm him

Well you know I'm the hoochie coochie man

Everybody knows I'm him

I got a black cat bone

I got a mojo too

I got the Johnny conkerroo

I'm gonna mess with you
I'm gonna make you girls
Lead me by my hand
Then the world will know
The hoochie coochie man
But you know I'm him
Everybody knows I'm him
Oh you know I'm the hoochie coochie man
Everybody knows I'm him
On the seventh hours
On the seventh day
On the seventh month
The seven doctors say
He was born for good luck
And that you'll see
I got seven hundred dollars
Don't you mess with me
But you know I'm him
Everybody knows I'm him
Well you know I'm the hoochie coochie man
Everybody knows I'm him

A.4 Muddy Waters, "I Be's Troubled," from The Complete Plantation Recordings:

Well if I feel tomorrow
 Like I feel today
 I'm gonna pack my suitcase
 And make my getaway
 Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind
 And I'm never bein' satisfied,
 And I just can't keep from cryin'
 Yeah, I know my little ol' baby
 She gonna jump and shout
 That ol' train be late girl,
 And I come walkin' out
 Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind
 Yeah and I'm never bein' satisfied,
 And I just can't keep from cryin'
 Yeah, I know somebody
 Sho' been talkin' to you
 I don't need no telling, girl
 I can watch the way you do
 And I be troubled, I be all worried in mind
 Yeah and I'm never bein' satisfied,
 And I just can't keep from cryin'
 Yeah, now goodbye baby

Got no more to say
Just like I been tellin' you, girl
You're gonna have to leave my way
Lord I'm troubled, I'm all worried in mind
Yeah and I'm never bein' satisfied,
And I just can't keep from cryin'
Yeah my baby she quit me
Seem like mama was dead
I got real worried gal
And she drove it to my head
I be's troubled, I be all worried in mind
Yeah and I'm never bein' satisfied,
And I just can't keep from cryin'

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