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THE BRICK: NEWARK'S ARTISTIC INQUIRY INTO URBAN CRISIS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
The Brick: Newark's Artistic Inquiry into Urban Crisis
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The Brick: Newark's Artistic Inquiry into Urban Crisis reads Newark through its artists, through their biographies and oral histories, and through their work as texts, and reads its artists through Newark, the social and cultural streams that shaped the city, from the sixties until now. Because these artists actively sought to express urban experience, this dissertation considers how their work both represents and is representative of the cities that inspired it. My project focuses on five Newark-born artists to show how close attentive readings of their work can reveal fresh thinking about urban problems. Many social scientists and critics ignore art and culture in their discussions of postindustrial cities. The artists I discuss are a novelist, two poets, a photographer, and a jazz trombonist. The poems, images, and music they created have an aim to ethically describe urban space—writing that is justice-seeking rather than only aesthetic, and help us to discover what happened in Newark. I claim that artists have made significant contributions to the history of cities, not only in terms of what their art is about, but how they made their art.

Chapter 1 explores Amiri Baraka and Philip Roth, the ways they write about Newark, and the ways they have been primary in dominating how Newark has been imagined in American culture, even though there are fresh insights to be made about their work.

Chapter 2 is about Newark's long, overlooked jazz culture. I explore this jazz culture through the life and music of Grachan Moncur III, a jazz trombonist. By closely listening to Moncur's music, I give a more nuanced understanding of Newark's jazz culture, which was often synonymous with its African American community.

Chapter 3 gives close readings of Lynda Hull's poems about Newark and other cities. I examine how she juxtaposes private memory and public knowledge and presents an empathic reading of cities.

Chapter 4 focuses on Helen Stummer, a photographer who took photos of people in Newark's Central Ward between 1980 and 1993. I discuss the meanings of photographs by other social documentary photographers, placing Stummer in a broader cultural context.

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“The Brick: Newark’s Artistic Inquiry into Urban Crisis”

Introduction: Newarktopia

Next I ask myself the question, Where is it all now? Smoke, ashes, fable. Or perhaps it is no longer even a fable. —Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book Twelve¹

The city of Newark and memories of its past have been contested spaces since the riots or uprising there in July 1967. Whether it is Amiri Baraka describing the city as a catastrophe, or Mayor Cory Booker calling it a city that will amaze the world, Newark—perhaps more than any other American city—is a flashpoint of debate.

Newark’s status as a troubled and dangerous place is in constant contradiction with its attempts at reinvention and this dynamic has affected scholars’ ways of seeing the city in some profound ways. Yet Newark’s history as a site of arts and culture has not been studied.

My dissertation, “The Brick: Newark’s Artistic Inquiry into Urban Crisis”, expands earlier scholarship in American Studies not so much by correcting existing scholarship on the urban crisis, but by saying something different. I write about five Newark artists—Philip Roth, Amiri Baraka, Grachan Moncur III, Lynda Hull, and Helen Stummer—and how they engage the city by using their personal memories against the broader public memory of the city. Their collective model serves as a way to engage the city in the midst of the urban crisis. I, and these artists, seek to construct a new way to approach the city that is not another historical encounter, but a *creative act* with the city.

¹ Marcus Aurelius (Emperor of Rome), *His Meditations Concerning Himself*, (New York: Dutton, 1900), 180. Marcus Aurelius was Emperor of Rome from 161-180. His *Meditations* are a series of personal writings, and an important text of Stoicism.

My dissertation makes three important contributions to American Studies. First, I argue that cultural responses to the urban crisis coexisted with the crisis, and were not limited to after it had passed.² Scholars such as Jeff Chang and Joe Austin have focused on how hip-hop and graffiti became artistic responses to urban crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. They showed that these expressions occurred after the urban crisis created a “rupture” in postindustrial cities.³ I argue that the Newark artists were not working after a rupture. They used traditional forms—the novel, lyric poetry, photography, and jazz music—beginning in the early 1960s and their work is part of a long trajectory of valuable artistic inheritances from the New Deal.⁴

Second, although many scholars working on the urban crisis focus on political or structural forces or on community organizing, I focus on cultural and artistic responses to the urban crisis, particularly in the context of Newark. Until now, these have been overlooked.⁵ Newark during the years of urban crisis was a site of the ascendancy of Black Power, and there is significant scholarship by Komozi Woodard on black nationalist cultural projects during the Black Arts Movement that were essential to this

² “Urban Crisis” is a general term that refers to urban problems in the 1960s as they became increasingly identified with racial conflict.

³ See: Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2007) and Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁴ See: Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*. (New York: New Press, 2001).

⁵ See: Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. (New York: Random House, 2008) and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

realignment of civic power.⁶ My dissertation shows that the Newark artists worked across racial lines; white artists coexisting with the Black Arts Movement had goals of using empathic inquiry to give voice to Newark's poor communities. Newark also has a cultural legacy of multiracial cooperation.

Third, the irony of the Newark artists' inquiry into urban crisis is that they worked in Newark, a place that in the popular imagination is symbolic for urban blight, poverty, crime, and negativity. My dissertation reveals that Newark is a cultural place, and that the Newark artists I examine make significant contributions to American culture despite having limited resources. Michael Denning has shown how an insurgent social movement of overlapping layers of cultural and political solidarity throughout the thirties and forties was forged from the labor militancy of unions like the CIO, anti-fascist solidarity with Spain during the Spanish Civil War, refugees from Hitler's takeover of Europe, and left wing elements of Roosevelt's New Deal. The artists and writers I examine are the cultural children of this legacy, yet they made their contributions to culture with far fewer resources than those writers and artists who had federal and local support during the New Deal.⁷

This study begins with the most prominent, and arguably the most significant writers to be associated with Newark, Philip Roth and Amiri Baraka. Chapter 1 explores Baraka and Roth, the ways they write about Newark, and the ways, in the second half of

⁶ See: Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). See also: James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s And 1970s*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Verso, 1997).

the 20th century, Newark's cultural imagination is dominated by their work. Philip Roth and Amiri Baraka are often studied separately in hermetically sealed containers, but my analysis argues they are like artistic twins; their writing about pre-1967 Newark mirror each other. Roth's characters are Jews from the Weequahic section of Newark who try to make Newark their own, escape anti-Semitism, and have sometimes contradictory approaches toward self-preservation while Newark was becoming a black-majority city. Baraka's characters in multiple genres (poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction) are often surrogates or stunt-doubles for his own self; they seek to return home to Newark almost like a Zionist in reverse.⁸

Chapter 2 is about Newark's long overlooked jazz culture. Newark is a black-majority metropolis, and many important jazz figures were from Newark: Ike Quebec, Andy Bey, Woody Shaw, Larry Young, James Moody, Babs Gonzales, Sarah Vaughan, Freddie Green, Hank Mobley, Wayne Shorter, and Alan Shorter, for example. I explore

⁸ Although their work is not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that there is also some especially finely crafted popular detective fiction centered on Newark by Valerie Wilson Wesley and Brad Parks. Wesley's series of mystery novels star Tamara Hayle, the female, African American detective who lives and works in Newark. These books, like *Of Blood and Sorrow*, *Dying in the Dark*, and *Where Evil Sleeps*, give a nuanced and exciting twist on the noir style of Raymond Chandler. Wesley's books use the mystery genre to give a specific African American and female perspective on the mystery novel, and use that perspective to provide insight into Newark. Parks, a former reporter for the *Newark Star-Ledger*, writes comic mysteries—*Faces of the Gone* and *Eyes of the Innocent*, for instance—and his hero, Carter Ross, is also a reporter, but for a fictional version of the *Star-Ledger*. Playful and self-conscious, Parks understands the subtleties of Newark's history; he shows the passion, love, fortitude, and corruption, too, of Newark's surface and underbelly.

A Tamara Hayle Mystery, (New York: Random House, 2009); and Valerie Wilson Wesley, and *Where Evil Sleeps* (New York: Putnam, 1996), among others. See also: Brad Parks, *Eyes of the Innocent*, (New York: Macmillan, 2011); Brad Parks, *Faces of the Gone*, (New York: Macmillan, 2009).)

this jazz culture through the life and music of Grachan Moncur III, a jazz trombonist. His music begins during the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, when he recorded two classic albums for Blue Note Records— *Evolution* (1963) and *Some Other Stuff* (1964). By closely listening to Moncur’s music, and through interviews I did with him, I give a more nuanced understanding of Newark’s jazz culture by showing how his family was often synonymous with Newark’s African American community. Moncur’s father was a Swing Era bass player, and his parents’ home was frequently filled with their friends, the elite of Newark’s African American cultural figures.

Chapter 3 gives close readings of Lynda Hull’s poems about Newark and other urban places. Hull published three books (the last posthumously)—*Ghost Money*, *Star Ledger*, and *The Only World*—that, through a refreshing synthesis of lyric and narrative poetic modes, address the spaces between private and public memories and histories. The first poem, “Spell for the Manufacture & Use of a Magic Carpet,” in her first book, *Ghost Money*, conjures images of Newark, and a little “obscure girl,” who remembers the city:

*Ask then
to discover the secret thing you seek,
gazing out always over the diners & arcades
to the cities of New Jersey rising
white, small beyond the Palisades.⁹*

The speaker of the poem imagines herself on a commuter train passing Newark. Though the poem is in imperative mood, the speaker exhorts the reader of the poem to engage with Hull’s personal memories of Newark who will “discover the secret thing.”

Chapter 4 focuses on Helen Stummer, who calls herself a “visual sociologist”, is a photographer who took photos of impoverished families in Newark's Central Ward

⁹ Lynda Hull, *Ghost Money*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), xiv.

between 1980 and 1993. They appeared in her book, *No Easy Walk* with her own ethnographic fieldwork.¹⁰ In this chapter I discuss the meanings of photographs by other social documentary photographers, placing Stummer in a broader cultural context.

Newark is representative of postindustrial cities that were affected by the urban crisis, and Newark's history has been written by other scholars, albeit not from cultural perspectives. Brad Tuttle describes Newark's trauma as the culmination of a range of economic and political changes over many decades.¹¹ Kevin Mumford uses alternatives to texts for some of his evidence, artifacts such as Molotov cocktail instruction mimeographs and mannequins, as tools to read the city.¹² Sherry Ortner merges private and public memories of Newark's past from a sociological perspective when she gives a detailed picture of the social texture and class texture in Weequahic High School.¹³

I expand on such ideas in my study. In my dissertation, I seek to write the larger cultural history of Newark through its arts and artists. I show how artistic inquiry *into* artistic inquiry is a special kind of approach to cities that will show how private memories of artists intertwine and coexist with public memories of urban citizenry in ways that intensify both sets of memories. I emphasize the idea that artistic inquiry into urban problems gives unique and important data that will aid in understanding those problems.

¹⁰ Helen M. Stummer, *No Easy Walk: Newark, 1980-1993*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Brad Tuttle, *How Newark Became Newark: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of an American City*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

¹² Kevin J. Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America*. (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

¹³ Sherry Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Reading art closely will give fresh insights into Newark, and cities in general, that would elude us otherwise. Earlier scholars have, however, used culture to read other cities. Carlo Rotella has made useful connections between the urban crisis and the feelings that make Chicago; he sees urban crisis “as a term describing the problem of creating the city of feeling as much as it describes events in cities of fact.”¹⁴ Samuel Zipp uses architectural projects to show how the New York’s spaces were often sites where urban planners and federal and local political interests could often use culture to manifest power.¹⁵

To illustrate my argument, I show how Newark is enriched as we closely read art, and how art is enriched as we closely read Newark. My work on these five artists (Roth, Baraka, Moncur, Hull, and Stummer) is partly biographical, partly close reading of their art as texts, and partly placing their work in an historical context. The subject matter of my project is interdisciplinary— literary studies, visual culture, and jazz historiography— as are the methods used to understand that subject matter. The following chapters use these interdisciplinary methods, and each chapter focuses on a topic in a different artistic genre or discipline.

Philip Roth and Amiri Baraka are already connected to Newark, and there is already vast scholarship on their work. I show how their work on Newark forms a foundation for all the art that proceeds, but to tell a more comprehensive story of Newark’s culture, it is necessary to examine others who followed them. Hull, Stummer,

¹⁴ Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁵ Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

and Moncur express art, history, and politics in a subtle combination of form and content. By closely reading their work, these artists reveal the coexistence of several relationships: the relationship between art as an anodyne to violence, between history and “truth,” between observer and observed, between witness and underdog, and between the reader of art and the “reader” of Newark, the historian or layperson that might interpret its meanings.

By including the art that coexists with Roth and Baraka, my project fosters an appreciation of Newark’s vivid culture beyond the uprising or riots of July 1967. Hull, Stummer, and Moncur probably always look back at this as a major public and personal disturbance, but their work anticipates ways to be optimistic about the greatness within Newark. Since a poem, photograph, or jazz performance is a public space, the personal memory of a city becomes the public expression of a city.

Newark’s artists have made significant contributions not only locally, but to broaden and enrich American culture as well. In the way that Carl E. Schorske’s *Fin-De-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* explores Vienna’s culture in 1900, I draw upon interdisciplinary fields to find points of contact between private and public memories in Newark.¹⁶

The phenomenon of urban crisis has previously been examined in political, structural, economic, and from systemic perspectives. Robert Self argues that a Oakland’s space organizes political scale. The collage of neighborhoods and their overlapping mesh of racial and economic layers are not abstractions, but matter materially in peoples’

¹⁶ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. (New York: Vintage, 1981).

lives.¹⁷ Robert Beauregard addresses the historical and economic forces that contributed to the urban crisis in a broad, analytic way.¹⁸ Thomas Sugrue shows that Detroit that “is plagued by joblessness, concentrated poverty, physical decay, and racial isolation”¹⁹ and shows how Newark’s increasingly large black population felt the affects of de jure integrated and de-facto segregated and Jim Crow experiences.

Books by writers like Philip Lopate, Luc Sante, and Mark Binelli approach the topic using elements of travelogue, archeology of urban decay, or through sensational descriptions of cultural artifacts.²⁰ Meanwhile, other scholars have written on the economic, social, or political histories of cities; these are often stuck in a dichotomy of Jane Jacobs versus Robert Moses as the only two alternatives to address urban problems.²¹ My intention is not to reject this body of work, but to explore the city differently, drawing from urban studies, cultural studies, and close readings of poetry, novels, photographs, and paintings. I mean for the “inquiry” of my subtitle to be read broadly since a work of art—poem, photography, painting, or jazz improvisation—is not

¹⁷ Self, 18.

¹⁸ Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

²⁰ See: Philip Lopate, *Waterfront: A Walk Around Manhattan*. (New York: Random House, 2008), Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*. (New York: Macmillan, 2003), and Mark Binelli, *Detroit City Is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis*. (New York: Macmillan, 2012). See also: Zev Chafets, *Devil’s Night: And Other True Tales of Detroit*. (New York: Random House, 1990).

²¹ See: Alice Sparberg Alexiou, *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006) and Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: the Transformation of New York*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

a fixed text, but one that demands that meaning be a creative act between both maker and reader.

Precedents exist for what I am trying to do here. For instance, Benjamin Looker's *Point From Which Creation Begins: The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis* is a model for how to use jazz and local jazz cultures to explore a city.²² Looker essentially does with jazz in St. Louis what I aspire to do with Newark. Looker describes how African American experimentalists involved with theater, visual arts, dance, poetry, and jazz, were inspired by the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s, and how they made St. Louis their own cultural Mecca through do-it-yourself record companies.²³

These texts on urban crisis present it as a slow process of urban decay from broad economic, racial, or political perspectives; my take is a departure. I find urban artists to have a unique perspective on urban crisis because their art exists at the intersection of public and private memories of the urban crisis as everyday people experienced it.

What is their unique insight? It is that when a person engages with a poem, a photograph, a painting, or jazz music, the meaning of the art being engaged is a dual act between artist and reader / observer / listener. Art cannot be paraphrased. The experience of the art is the process of engagement, and is a fluid experience. In other words, there is no fixed result of artistic inquiry *into* artistic inquiry. It is this process of artistic inquiry itself that is absent from existing scholarship.

²² Benjamin Looker, *Point From Which Creation Begins: The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis*. (St. Louis: Missouri History Museum Press, 2004).

²³ See also: Stuart Baker and Gilles Peterson, eds., *Freedom, Rhythm and Sound: Revolutionary Jazz Original Cover Art 1965-83*. (London: SJR Publishing, 2009).

Because I am interested in the ways private memories of artists intertwine and coexist with public memories, I use my own background as an artist and poet to illuminate the advantages of using history to read art and using art to read history. Over many years of writing my own poetry, nonfiction, and hybrid non-poetry-nonfiction work on related topics to this dissertation, I can make connections between art and the city as both an artist and a scholar.

Ultimately, I am fascinated by how artists in cities have used their own memories to produce moments of connection with public memories or histories of those same places. Thomas Lacquer warns the scholar to tread carefully on this ground: “Memory is a means of making loss survivable but it is also therefore a means of allowing the past to have closure. Pain slowly fades; and with closure comes one sort of forgetting, that of critical history.”²⁴ By relying on oral or visual cues for memories, we paradoxically are at risk for losing the values of remembering or misremembering historical events. I have relied on both photography and oral history to discover the ways people remember their pasts in cities, and the official top-down record of those pasts can find points of agreement, thereby heightening both. A photograph or an oral interview is what Walter Benjamin called “merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it.”²⁵ Alessandro Portelli agrees when he says, “Orality is woven into the very texture of the

²⁴ Thomas W. Lacquer, “Introduction,” *Representations, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering* 69 (Winter 2000): 8.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1927-1930*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 238.

written official record.”²⁶ Benjamin and Portelli see the oral history almost like a residue on a sieve, on which the moisture is the history a scholar attempts to document. Portelli says that a narrator (the oral interviewee) must come to terms with the location of a memory, both in time and mode: “Two strategies offer themselves: a ‘vertical’ shift in modes (upward to pure politics or downward to personal life and affections); or a ‘horizontal’ shift in chronology.”²⁷

Creative expression is really about artists using the artistic *process* to find the meaning they want, to express their art as beautifully as they can, and to use urban life to increase individuality and increase their bravery as artists. This expression is the artist’s wisdom. They keep intact a general affection for the city no matter how dreadful the particulars of the city about which they are producing art. Surprise is the general guiding principle of art, and through the act of engaging with these urban artists, an academic can experience the thrum of the city—its heterogeneity, turbulence, and strangers—with fresh eyes or ears.

The artists I have chosen appear to be addressing not only the constituents of the cities—the men and women who engage with history to mourn and celebrate who we (Americans / Newarkers / urban people / artists) really are—but also the historians who bear, as Dolores Hayden says, the responsibility of sorting the memories from the rubble.²⁸ What are they saying? Culture is being produced within the city—it is Newark’s

²⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 1991), 5.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

inquiry—and if scholars do not look there, they miss a human element that is left out of political or structural arguments.

My dissertation is called “The Brick” because the brick is a metaphor for Newark, “the Brick City”; the basic building block of many housing projects, the brick has its roots in an artisan’s craft. Its solid versatility and imperfections in its surface imply the resilience and pliability of urban people. “The Brick” is a metaphor for what Lynda Hull saw in “each fugitive moment the heaven we choose to make.”²⁹ Yusef Komunyakaa, in his introduction to Hull’s *Collected Poems*, says: “thus, each poem challenges and coaxes the reader into an act of participation.”³⁰ The participatory act allows reading to be a creative act, and not merely an act of consumption. The meaning of the text (poem, jazz solo, photo, etc.) is determined in a joint act of reader and artist.

These artists make this contribution to our understanding of cities: they make the reader empathize and make the reader feel the affects of the city. What if art could illuminate the humanity wanting in the existing histories of Newark? Artists make Newark more than smoke and ashes. They make it fable, and the promise of a fable is that it restores a human, creative quality that, in the context of Newark’s constant revitalization, is missing from historical analysis. These poems, photos, and music were created by a group of people who love the city of Newark in their bones. Their work is a model for how we should approach the city.

²⁹ Lynda Hull, *Collected Poems*. (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2006), 192.

³⁰ *ibid.*, xii.

Chapter 1

Makers: Amiri Baraka and Philip Roth

Newark's literary culture, in some ways the soulfulness for which a place is known, is great because Amiri Baraka and Philip Roth made it so. After Stephen Crane emerged from Newark to become a major writer of the 19th Century, Baraka and Roth best represent Newark's literary past.¹ As iconic exemplars of urban literature, Baraka and Roth have made Newark the focus of much of their work, even though Newark is not thought of as a literary place. Their literary oeuvre, among other things, is focused, almost obsessively, on remembering Newark, living Newark, and re-imagining Newark of their youth. Their work, taken from a point of distance, is a love letter to Newark. What Baraka and Roth wrote is endlessly interesting, and this explains the sub-fields of Baraka studies and Roth studies, yet there seems to be an over-emphasis on their work that overshadows the other writers and artists in this study. In my view, the other Newark artists—Hull, Moncur, and Stummer—are *more* interesting once we look closely at what Baraka and Roth say about Newark, and, in addition, Baraka and Roth are also *more* interesting once we place them in the context of Hull, Moncur, and Stummer.

Baraka and Roth imagine Newark differently, but their Newarks were elements of the same place. Baraka's Newark is a middle-class African American Newark where struggling people seek to create and defend their culture against the status quo. Roth's

¹ Stephen Crane was born November 1, 1871 in Newark. He began writing as a journalist, but is best known for *The Red Badge of Courage*, set during the Civil War, a stylistically and psychologically innovative realist novel, and a major influence on Ernest Hemingway. He died at age 28 in 1900 from complications of several hemorrhages in the lungs.

Newark is a middle-class Jewish Newark where struggling people seek to create and defend their culture against the status quo. The difference is stylistic and also exists at a level of degrees of affection for the worlds they describe. Baraka's writing is changeable in its content and sometimes inconsistent in its quality; these changes can be pegged to his shifting political and social identities, whereas Roth's 31 novels are topically varied, and wildly imaginative, but stylistically similar. Both writers, however, have cemented their place as literary icons, even as they are figures from the literary past.² Their best work is undeniably powerful, re-imagining the city in ways wherein it is impossible to see Newark the same way not having had the experience of seeing it through their eyes. I argue, however, that wonderful as their work is, the memories of Newark they imagine has become static and overshadows—to a fault—the literary work, by Lynda Hull, for example, that came later.

Of all the artists from Newark, Amiri Baraka must be the most imposing and indomitable figure. His radical nature belies not only his middle-class upbringing, but the shocking contrast between his public persona and his soft, genial, and warm personal presence. He was born in Newark in 1934 as Everett LeRoi Jones to a future postal supervisor and a future social worker. Some readers and critics become apoplectic when discussing Baraka, but unlike most of them, and unlike Newark itself, for that matter, Baraka has the gift of reinvention. He has continuously, since 1957, re-examined, rethought, and reconfigured himself not only as a person, but also his relationship to language, and his relationship to the brick city.

² Roth has recently quit writing. Charles McGrath, "Goodbye, Frustration: Pen Put Aside, Roth Talks," *The New York Times*, 17 November 2012. Sec: Books.

Baraka's trajectory has been widely documented, but to summarize, his work is best understood chronologically in four periods: the Beat Period (1957-1962), the Transitional Period (1963-1965), the Black Nationalist Period (1965-1974), and the Third World Marxist Period (1974-present).³

He began his writing life the 1950s as a Beat poet, and was heavily influenced by the white avant-garde writers in the New York School and the Black Mountain School—Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, and Charles Olson—with whom he surrounded himself.⁴ From a certain perspective, Baraka's alignment with these poets was a sensible stylistic and cultural foundation for his later transformations. The New York and Black Mountain School branches of the Beat Generation (itself an umbrella term for a number of artistic groups) were experimental in their forms and subjects, but also in their sense that their work was transformative within American society. Stylistically, Baraka's early poems especially reflect the influence of the Black Mountain aesthetic pioneered by their philosopher king, Charles Olson. These aesthetic markers were defined and described in Olson's important 1950 essay called "Projective Verse." Olson favored "composition by field," the opposition of poems composed by received or predetermined form and measure. Instead, seeking a way to transfer energy from poem to reader, Olson developed ways to use the human ear and the human breath as the foundational unit of syllables and

³ For more detail about Baraka's four periods, see William J. Harris, "Introduction," in *The LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), xvii-xxx.

⁴ Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) was a poet and art critic. Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was a poet and a leading figure of the Beat Generation. Charles Olson (1910-1970) was a second generation modernist poet, but a leading figure of the New York School, Black Mountain School, Beat Generation, and the San Francisco Renaissance—these schools overlapped, but were also distinct.

line lengths, respectively. From Olson, Baraka's aesthetics use breath as a central concern, along with the *kinetics* of the poem; stylistically, Baraka's open parentheses without closed parentheses, and his insistence that form is an extension of content, are inheritances from Olson.

However, as Baraka's growing sense of black identity made him feel at odds with the primarily white avant-garde with which he was aligned, his poetics and persona began to shift. Increasingly affected by jazz music, Baraka began to psychically shift his allegiances to Harlem from the Village. His liner notes to jazz records from this time reflect this. In my opinion, these liner notes show his greatest strengths as an artist and as a person.

For example, his 1962 "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," offers many gems of Baraka's own emotional experience of Billie Holiday's voice lagging slightly behind the beat building incredible tension: "Nothing was more perfect than what she was. Nor more willing to fail. (If we call failure something light can realize. Once you have seen it, or felt whatever thing she conjured growing in your flesh."⁵ Baraka goes on to describe the combination of tragedy and joy in her voice: "A voice that grew from a singer's instrument to a woman's. And from that (those last records critics say are weak) to a black landscape of need, and perhaps, suffocated desire. Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this lady."⁶

Baraka's own "black landscape of need" meant that his shifting alliances and aesthetics were forced from the discoveries he gleaned from the white avant-garde to a

⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 25.

⁶ *ibid.*

different kind of avant-garde, that of “new” jazz. In his 1964 notes to *Coltrane Live at Birdland*, Baraka writes: “One of the most baffling things about America is that despite its essentially vile profile, so much beauty continues to exist here. Perhaps it’s as so many thinkers have said, that it is because of the vileness, or call it adversity, that such beauty does exist. (As balance?).”⁷ The idea of balance is a question, and it remains a question in both Baraka’s persona and in his work.

In the aftermath of Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, Baraka left his Jewish wife, Hettie Jones (née Hettie Cohen), and their children in Greenwich Village, moved to Harlem and aligned with black cultural nationalism.⁸ After a year in Harlem, he returned home, to Newark, and remarried Sylvia Robinson (Amina Baraka). He became deeply involved in black avant-garde jazz (John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp) and the Black Arts Movement, of which he was a founding figure.⁹

During the Newark uprising / riots in July 1967, he was almost killed when he was beaten by the police. Arrested and convicted for carrying weapons and resisting arrest, he was sentenced to a three-year jail term, which was overturned.¹⁰ He became involved in the civic and political life of Newark, assisting Ken Gibson’s 1970 mayoral

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ There was a similar move by the Jewish-African American poet Bob Kaufman (1925-1986), who took a Buddhist vow of silence following Kennedy’s assassination that apparently lasted until the end of the Vietnam War.

⁹ John Coltrane (1926-1967) was a tenor saxophone specialist and a major innovator in music history. Cecil Taylor (b. 1929) is a classically trained pianist, and a major stylist of free jazz. Albert Ayler (1936-1970) was an avant garde tenor saxophonist. Archie Shepp (b. 1937) is a tenor saxophonist, primarily in the avant garde subgenre, but plays other forms as well.

¹⁰ James Barron, “A Poet Looks Back on a Bloody Week in 1967,” *The New York Times*, 10 October 2012, Sec.: NY Region.

campaign, organizing black political conventions, and becoming an important writer and reader of Newark's political trajectory.¹¹ In 1967 he changed his name from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka. In 1974 he rejected black cultural nationalism wholesale, calling it a form of fascism.¹² He became a convert to third world Marxism. In the following two decades, he became a professor at SUNY Stony Brook and was an honored cultural figure whose legacy seemed secure. However, in September 2002, Baraka created a controversy over a poem with almost no literary merit when he said in "Somebody Blew Up America" that 4,000 Israelis knew of the World Trade Center attacks in advance and did not come to work on September 11, 2001.¹³ In December 2002, New Jersey's Senate voted unanimously to abolish their Poet Laureate position rather than risk the legal struggle to fire Baraka over his poem.¹⁴

When I had the opportunity to meet Baraka in 1995 at a celebration of the African American poet Etheridge Knight, he inscribed my yellowing copy of *Black Music* with the phrase "Unity + Struggle" and my copy of *Blues People* with the phrase "All the Strength + Wisdom we need!" His generosity to a young white, Jewish poet may seem contradictory when considered next to his 9/11 poem in 2002—is his behavior and rhetoric a performance, is it a reenactment of the fervor and fire of youth, a desire for attention, or does he actually believe this stuff? Close readings of his texts show the

¹¹ See Smethurst, Mumford, et. al.

¹² Joseph F. Sullivan, "Baraka Abandons 'Racism' as Ineffective And Shifts to 'Scientific Socialism' of Marx," *The New York Times*, 26 December 1974.

¹³ Matthew Purdy, "New Jersey Laureate Refuses to Resign Over Poem," *The New York Times*, 28 September 2002, Sec: NY Region.

¹⁴ Iver Peterson, "Senate Panel Moves to Abolish State Poet Laureate Position," *The New York Times*, 13 December 2002, Sec. NY Region.

psychological, social, and cultural shifts in his writing style and image that are in step with his first withdrawing from Newark's culture and then embracing Newark's culture.

Baraka's first book, published in 1961, was *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note*. The ironic title suggests that the speaker of the poems has so much to say to the world he intends to depart that he will never get around to the suicide. The poems are existential in their themes, and are stylistically similar to other, albeit white, Black Mountain School and New York School poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, and Frank O'Hara.¹⁵ The title poem in that book is dedicated to his biracial daughter with Hettie Jones, Kellie Jones. The poem is somber, sincere, and thoughtful, yet avoids sentimentality or obvious gesture. It suggests a longing for meaning amid an existential crisis. The first-person speaker suffers from a "crise de foie," a crisis of the liver not unlike the speaker in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*; it begins, surprisingly with an adverb and a close psychic distance—the distance between the speaker and the content of the poem—even as it rages against the universe:

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
 The ground opens up and envelopes me
 Each time I go out to walk the dog.
 Or the broad edged silly music the wind
 Makes when I run for a bus...

Things have come to that.

¹⁵ The Black Mountain School was a group of poets in the mid-1950s who were drawn to Black Mountain College in Black Mountain, NC, and through Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, were associated with the literary renaissance in San Francisco, and through Allen Ginsberg, to the Beat Generation in Greenwich Village. It also refers in a broad way to the stylistic traits and formal concerns shared by those writers associated with the Black Mountain School: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Jonathan Williams, and Robert Creeley.

The natural world is against him—the ground opens and the wind makes “broad edged silly music.” The adjectival phrase “broad edged silly” that modifies the wind is a surprise as is the way it comes in after the conjunction “or” in a sentence that trails off into an ellipsis. The form of the sentence, then, matches the feeling the speaker has. The nonspecific “things” suggest that the poem as well as the speaker’s place in the world “have come to that,” a growing accustomed to meaninglessness. The word “envelopes” instead of “envelops” offers a play on words to suggest the act of both writing a letter, or a preface, and the act of being enclosed. The second stanza begins again with a conjunction, and shows the speaker literally addressing the universe that has eluded him:

And now, each night I count the stars,
And each night I get the same number.
And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave.

Nobody sings anymore.

In contrast to the first stanza’s wind that makes music, here, “nobody sings anymore.” Someone used to sing, even if it was “silly music,” but now no one does. Though the poem is in free verse, the third stanza is the only quatrain, implying a missing, or “phantom” line. Like the first stanza’s adverb “lately,” this begins “and now.” The fifth stanza begins similarly and the speaker interacts not with the dog, a bus, or the stars, but with his young daughter:

And then last night, I tiptoed up
To my daughter’s room and heard her
Talking to someone, and there was no one there...
Only she on her knees, peeking into

Her own clasped hands.

The enjambment between “into” and “her own” across a stanza break mirrors the ellipsis at the poem’s beginning. It does not criticize a child’s prayer to a God the speaker knows is not there and will never answer; rather it despairs at the responsibility he has to answer her. This poem has a simplicity and freshness like much of his early work, and was a recurring theme.

In his 1964 poem “An Agony. As Now” Baraka said: “I am inside someone / who hates me.” A possible reading of the poem is that its speaker is in the throes of another existential crisis; he is being torn by anguish from within. Another possibility, from the point of view of urban life, the speaker is in love with and hated by that city which cradled LeRoi Jones, from which the toxicity of race relations had borne the volatile and transitional Amiri Baraka. Baraka’s analysis is as fresh and pointed today as it was when it was first spoken, at a press conference on July 22, 1967: “What is responsible for this violence, for this rebellion, is the inability of the city government to feel, as human beings, the plight of the majority of people in this city. And *that* is the cause of this violence.”¹⁶

Yet, his contemporaries in the Black Mountain School criticized the polemics of his Beat and Transitional poems despite their freshness. A letter from Robert Duncan to Denise Levertov from May 18, 1965 confirms their distaste for his work at this time.¹⁷ Duncan refers to a public appearance Jones/Baraka made in San Francisco in March and

¹⁶ Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka Reader*. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), 123.

¹⁷ Robert Duncan (1919-1988) was a poet and acolyte of H.D. [Hilda Doolittle], a major Imagist poet, and a leading figure in the San Francisco Renaissance and Black Mountain schools. Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was a poet in the Black Mountain school. She and Duncan maintained an intense correspondence for decades when their conflicting feelings about the role of poetry as a response to the Vietnam War ended their long friendship.

that Duncan had “grave questions” about Baraka’s work and about inviting him to the Berkeley Poetry Conference for which Duncan was an adviser:

He read entirely hate the whites and worse than that hate the white-loving negroes which came off at about the level of Governor Wallace on hate the nigger-loving whites—But poetry often has to include the dementia of the poet, the thing was that what he read was blatantly demagogic. Written for its effect on the audience and I suspect swept up in the sense of its opportunity. *Insincere* in the only meaning of that word that seems important to me. There have been poems of LeRoi’s in the past where the hate was most really communicated—but now the hate is being put across or put over—it does not take long in that direction for the writer himself to be taken in by his own opportunity. LeRoi will support the conference financially (along with Allen) but—but what? He has forfeited the goods of the intellect in becoming a voice of racism. And I mean in the sense that he has would have forfeited the goods of the intellect in whatever loss of the complexity of inner feeling. It’s sad, because he has written some fine poems; and he has turned against that humanity in himself.¹⁸

Duncan here criticizes Baraka for his lack of sincerity and for the righteous hatefulness in his work. Ironically, Duncan was an advocate for Baraka before this became his primary mode of expression. Duncan was a mentor to bell hooks (then called Gloria Watkins) and her partner, Mack (the writer Nathaniel Mackey), people who superficially have more in common not with Duncan, but with Baraka. hooks describes how “we have quickly become deeply involved in Robert Duncan’s life...Robert is ecstatic about our right to live a life centered on poetry and poetics.”¹⁹ In contrast to the insincerity that Duncan sees in Baraka’s work, hooks sees nothing but sincerity in Duncan’s:

Mack is a devoted reader of Duncan’s work and writes critical work about his poetry. I am just a mere lover of the poems. I cannot speak that love in any way that is meaningful. Robert Duncan comes into our life like a whirlwind, embodying the passion for poetry that we feel is the heartbreak

¹⁸ Robert Duncan, “Letter 348,” in *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 494-495.

¹⁹ bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion*, (New York: Owl Books, 1997), 232.

of our life together....How those lines *often I am permitted to return to a meadow* enchant me. Even though I am practically invisible to this man whose eyes make you think he will never see straight I am grateful to be in his presence and hear him speak. He makes a life lived in and through poetry a path to the ecstatic. We love to read him—and to hear him read....We are transported to another place when we hear him read. Poetry is the place of transcendence.²⁰

The comparison between Duncan's reception to Baraka, and hooks's reception to Duncan illustrates several ideas: first, Baraka's concerns in his work in the mid-1960s were primarily racial and political rather than literary; they did not center around poetry and poetics, as did Duncan's world. For hooks, a young, aspiring and African American writer, Duncan's devotion to poetry-centered ideas transcended those of race, sexuality, or gender. He was more important to her than Baraka. In nearly 800 pages of Duncan's correspondence with Denise Levertov, hooks is never mentioned, yet he is discussed frequently and in detail in *Wounds of Passion*, her memoir of her writing life.

Baraka's poetry from this period, the mid-1960s, exists in the shadow of Newark, since for him, Newark was a place the orbit of which moved around racial identity, and a growing black civic power of which he was a major component. More than that, however, Baraka's poems shaped Newark as much as Newark shaped the poems. In "Rhythm & Blues (I)", a poem dedicated to the Civil Rights leader Robert Williams, Baraka says: "The invisible mountains of New Jersey, linger / where I was born. And the wind of that stone." In "Political Poem," Baraka says: "the poem undone / undone by my station, by my station, / and the bad word of Newark."²¹ The word "station" is an

²⁰ *ibid.*, 114. Duncan's poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" is his most canonical and well-known poem; it reflects the mysticism and open form by which his work is recognizable.

²¹ Harris, ed., 73.

important hinge in this stanza: it refers to a manner of standing, a stationary condition, as opposed to *motion*, a position assigned to a man on duty, and a position in the social scale, as higher or lower. The first stanza, too, is a comparative to his statement at the press conference: “Luxury, then, is a way of / being ignorant, comfortably / An approach to the open market of least information.”²² The neglect and abuse Baraka, and by extension, the citizens of Newark, were experiencing at the hands of those in positions of power, thrived in the “ignorance is bliss” environment. Everyone has a right to an opinion, but those who are informed have more of a right. The most appropriate metaphors for someone like Baraka for the situation in Newark were the declining circles of hell, as envisioned by Dante Alighieri between 1308-1321. In *The System of Dante’s Hell*, the cold place at the bottom level is reserved for heretics, those people who betray their origins: “The Bottom was like Spruce & Belmont (the ward) in Nwk. A culture of violence and foodsmells. There, for me. Again. And it stood strange when I thot finally how much irony.”²³ There is more than a little self-loathing in the punitive response for betrayal.

The most striking irony of Baraka’s relationship to Newark is that the writer adept at reinvention, recreation, and resurrection is inextricably bound to a city that has been categorically incapable of reinvention. Newark has not literally or metaphorically been able to free itself from the yoke of danger, colonial occupation, and the fear outsiders have of being dealt in, and dealt under by Newark.²⁴ Newark, as Baraka says in *Tales*,

²² *ibid.*

²³ Harris, ed., 103.

²⁴ Here, I allude to Baraka’s statement about the heavyweight boxer Sonny Liston: “Sonny Liston was the big black Negro in every white man’s hallway, waiting to do him

“always had a bad reputation.”²⁵ Perhaps Baraka employs a lens of honesty that Newark has not been lower onto itself, to peer into its own pores and decide how to forgive?

Baraka, in “Am/Trak,” invokes the potency of John Coltrane in a poem that is part-elegy and part-call-to-arms: “(I lay in solitary confinement, July 67 / Tanks rolling thru Newark / & whistled all I knew of Trane / my knowledge heartbeat / & he was *dead* / they / said.”²⁶ Imagine you are Amiri Baraka. On July 14, he was arrested and badly beaten by two patrolmen.²⁷ On the last day of the uprising, July 17, he received word that his idol, John Coltrane, died of liver cancer. He had passed through the crucible, and had been altered again: “I felt transformed, literally shot into the eye of the black hurricane of coming revolution.”²⁸ His beloved city was fractured, and Coltrane buried in the ground. It is fair to say Baraka was traumatized by the events of July 12-17. All losses trigger all previous losses; Baraka was determined, for himself and his community, to take the admonishment seriously: “organize / yr shit / as rightly burning!”²⁹

Another poet associated with the Black Mountain School, Robert Kelly, wrote a poem, “Newark,” in the middle of the events, and tries to “make sense of the broken

in, deal him under...Liston was the heavy-faced replica of every whipped-up woogie in the world. He is the underdeveloped, have-not (politically naïve), backward country, the subject people, finally here to collect his pound of flesh” in *Home: Social Essays*. (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), 179.

²⁵ Harris, 115.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 272.

²⁷ For a full account, see Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America*. (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 146.

²⁸ Brad R. Tuttle, *How Newark Became Newark: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of an American City*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rivergate, 2009), 174.

²⁹ Harris, 272.

voices of our news, what we use for information.³⁰ What he [Kelly] knew of a friend's heart [Baraka] was louder than what papers said, loud as another man's music."³¹

Kelly's poem reflects the stylistic inheritances from Olson and Creeley, including line as breath, open—but not closed—parentheses, and loosely connected stanzas that use space as an element of information. The poem begins by making the connection between the Newark uprising and Coltrane's death, in particular as these affected Baraka:

John Coltrane died this morning, LeRoi's in jail.

Whatever you say of the daytime

it gives you a taste
for the obvious

the places where
night is
filled with a different wisdom³²

Later in the poem, the speaker introduces a trope similar to the one Baraka uses in

"Preface..." The mode turns to a rhetorical question, and it remains unanswered:

but Roi, where is the night, where is the dark
brooding hot snake-mother gives us birth
where no sun comes to distinguish our skins?

The poem's closing suggests that the death of Coltrane and the symbolic death of Newark overlap, and the memories of their music somehow find connection in the poet's private memory of those events:

Trane
rode out on a bad rime, bad shit
they shoot us to live on

³⁰ Robert Kelly (b. 1935) was influenced by the Black Mountain School. He has taught at Bard College since 1961.

³¹ Kelly, quoted in Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey, eds., *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose*. (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993), 362.

³² *Ibid.*, 187.

The words
break down,
 he made it
say itself inside our heads.

Kelly's "Newark" offers a surprising and unconventional insight: writing in the moment of July 1967, he shows the brutality brought upon the human element in Newark; by comparing Coltrane's death and Baraka's personal suffering in the context of Newark, Kelly is able to infuse his own reactions through an empathic reading of Coltrane and Baraka. His open form emphasizes this connection because the lines and open parentheses do not close; rather, they overlap each other in a kind of layer. The pronouns at the end of the poem show the speaker becoming plural ("our heads"), and this effectively links private and public memory.

Baraka, traumatized though he was by these events, seems to experience Newark differently from many of its artists: it is not a place from which to escape, but to which he should return. "You don't need to worry about hell," Baraka said. "We're already in it, the trick is to get out."³³ Though he is ensconced in Newark, most of Baraka's works ironically do not mention Newark per se. One poem that does *in extremis* is a poem from his Black Nationalist period, "Black People!" The poem is unusual because it is written as a prose poem, and therefore has the lyric power of poetry and the rhetorical power of prose. It shows the startling strengths and the severe limitations of his work in and around 1967. The poem takes the position that blacks should take whatever they wanted ("stoves and refrigerators, record players") from Newark's department stores ("Sears, Bambergers, Klein's, Hahnes', Chase, and the smaller joosh [sic] enterprises").³⁴ The poem shows the absolute rage the black nationalists felt and revealed their obvious anti-Semitism ("The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up!")³⁵

³³ Amiri Baraka, in conversation with the author, 3 April 2013, Newark, NJ.

³⁴ 224. Baraka spells "Jewish" as "joosh" as a kind of dialect affectation.

³⁵ *ibid.*

Baraka later repudiated his anti-Semitic statements and writings; in the harsh light of morning more than 40 years later, the poems from that era feel over-determined, solipsistic, and foolish. In the December 26, 1974 article in the *New York Times* in which he said hatred of all non-blacks was sickness, he poses with a deadly serious expression in Newark's Temple of Kawaida auditorium in front of several framed photos: Martin Luther King, Jr., Marx, Lenin, and Mao.³⁶

By contrast, his autobiography shows a more reflective, self-deprecating, and clear version of the same events. The autobiography, written in 1979 when Baraka was sentenced for assault and resisting arrest to 48 consecutive weekends in a Harlem halfway house. It begins in Newark and ends with his conversion to socialism.

Describing events of 1965, Baraka describes an encounter with a Black Muslim:

Tong had not been downtown married to a white woman. He had not just hung around with white dudes trying to screw every white woman who had been turned away from the Miss America pageant. I know that the light of Islam helped that rhetoric, scowling at the swine-eating, wine-drinking dudes the rest of us were. But I have never met a person as violently male-chauvinistic as Tong. He would make women (at least black women) walk several feet behind him, and he was consequently getting into struggles with most of the women around the Arts who didn't even know what the fuck he was talking about....³⁷

Later, he describes a rally where "people danced in the street to Sun Ra and cheered Ayler and Shepp and Cecil and Jackie McLean and the others. It was a great summer!" Here, Baraka has the giddiness of a child writing to her parents from summer camp. Later, as the rifts among conflicting visions of Black Arts became too severe,

³⁶ Baraka was instrumental in the construction of an apartment building for blacks, the Kawaida Towers, in Newark's North Ward, which was 3/4 Italian. See: Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Newark Kawaida", *The New Yorker*, 30 December 1972.

³⁷ Harris, 373-374.

Baraka makes the decision to relocate to Newark: “But now I had other things to think about. Like, what was I doing back in Newark? I had just completed a book of essays called *Home*, which meant coming back to one’s self, one’s consciousness, coming back to blackness. I ended the introduction to the book: ‘...by the time you read this, I will be even blacker.’ That was true, albeit the grand stance. But I could also have said: ‘...and confused like a motherfucker.’ But, at least, I was, literally, *Home*.”³⁸ This passage reflects Baraka’s ambivalence about his transitions and reinventions, not to mention his ambivalence about returning to Newark.

Yet, it was Newark that defined Baraka from then on, and vice-versa. The conventional narrative is that Baraka is merely an anti-Semitic apparatchik of Black Nationalist delusions, or that he is a narcissist with no real interest in Newark’s success, or that his earlier misogynist and homophobic statements overwhelm his wisdom and insights (for example, his writings in *Black Music* or *Blues People*). Yet, these narratives serve only to distort a more nuanced reality. Similarly, the narrative that Newark cannot move beyond the economic, racial, and social rifts hewn from the revolutions of the 1960s, that it hovers between farce and melodrama in the cultural imagination and is immune to historical facts.

The origins of the Black Power political movements in the 1960s were in Newark.³⁹ Most of the entrenched urban problems facing American cities—abuse of police power, unequal health care, inadequate schools, and corrupt or inequitable political

³⁸ *ibid.*, 399.

³⁹ Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 2, 37 and James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005), 101.

provisions between black cities and white suburbs—became the focus of the newly inherited civic power of the black community after the mayoral election of Ken Gibson in 1970. Komozi Woodard describes how the black community was organized at the neighborhood level since they convened assemblies to gain control over urban renewal, especially in terms of funding and use of urban space.⁴⁰

Yet for all the beneficial neighborhood-level change Baraka brought to bear on Newark, and on the civic and political power of blacks in Newark, the cultural imagination surrounding that city is still held hostage by the oppositional and essentialist views he held. Baraka's angry sentimentality for pre-1967 Newark is especially noticeable when viewed in contrast to Cory Booker's almost self-righteous and cool optimism. In October 2012, Baraka reflected on the events of July 1967 in Newark: "The idea that the city would blow up was obvious."⁴¹ Baraka implies that Newark had so been abused and maligned over decades that its black community expected violence to erupt on their streets. Philip Roth describes this phenomenon as a fictional event from the Jewish community's perspective in his 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*. In the novel, Charles Lindbergh has defeated Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election, and anti-Semitism becomes acceptable in American life:

After Detroit, the Jews of Newark—numbering some fifty thousand in a city of well over half a million—began to ready themselves for serious violence erupting on their own streets, either because of a Winchell visit to New Jersey when he swung back east or because of the riots inevitably spilling over into cities where, as in Newark, there was a heavily Jewish neighborhood abutting large communities of working-class Irish, Italians, Germans, and Slavs that were already home to a goodly number of bigots.

⁴⁰ Woodard, 198-199.

⁴¹ James Barron, "A Poet Looks Back on a Bloody Week in 1967," *The New York Times*, 10 October 2012, Sec.: NY Region.

The assumption was that these people wouldn't require much encouragement to be molded into a mindless, destructive mob by the pro-Nazi conspiracy that had successfully plotted the riot in Detroit.⁴²

Interestingly, Roth inverts what happened in Newark's black community and imposes it onto its Jewish community. Through his fiction, Roth expresses empathy for how the blacks must have felt by expanding on the ways Jews were second-class citizens in Newark during the same time. Roth's prolific career has made him one of the most serious and honored fiction writers in the United States, and much of his fiction is set in a fictionalized version of Newark.

Philip Roth was born in Newark in 1933 and graduated from Weequahic High School in 1950.⁴³ Roth, in a manner not unlike Baraka's, treats Newark in a sentimental way that is nonetheless filled with pathos and some empathy for the African American experience there. Roth's first novel, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) describes Neil Klugman's romantic involvement with Brenda Patimkin; but it also describes a working class kid from Newark falling for an upper class girl from Short Hills. While Baraka's work imagines "going home" to Newark, Roth's is often about getting away from it. Roth describes pre-1967 Newark and its environs wistfully:

Once I'd driven out of Newark, past Irvington and the packed-in tangle of railroad crossings, switchmen shacks, lumberyards, Dairy Queens, and used-car lots, the night grew cooler. It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven....Inside my glove compartment it was as though the map of *The City Streets of Newark* had metamorphosed into crickets, and the night noises sounded loud as the blood whacking at my temples.⁴⁴

⁴² Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 268. Winchell, a Jewish journalist, was one of the first to attack Hitler, and pro-Nazi American groups such as the German-American Bund. He was also an advocate to the Roosevelt administration that the United States enter World War II.

⁴³ See Sherry Ortner's *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Arnold Lubasch's "Philip Roth Shakes Weequahic High," *The New York Times*, 28 February 1969 for more information about Roth and Weequahic High School.

⁴⁴ Roth, 8. There is perhaps a comedic comment in Brenda's name and its similarity to the Battleship Potemkin, the focus of a 1925 silent film by Sergei Eisenstein.

Roth is concerned with consciousness of class within New Jersey's Jewish Diaspora; the term "at my temples" must refer to the tension of how the Klugman will place himself within this Diaspora within his own mind (the temples, or flat part of the side of his head) and in the Jewish community itself (the temple, or *shul*). Through the car's windshield, the reader sees Newark's industrial past, and its railroads delivering goods and passengers. Much of the detail here is devoted to mobility: trains, switchmen, cars, and maps—though it is whether to remain with or leave the community of Newark that provides the conflict for the main character.

Roth shows the irony associated with this conflict when an African American boy seeks art books at the Newark Public Library, where Klugman works. His supervisor wants to prevent the boy from even looking at the books:

"‘There is touching,’ John said sententiously, ‘and there is touching. Someone should check on him. I was afraid to leave the desk here. You know the way they treat the housing projects we give them.’
 ‘You give them?’
 ‘The city. Have you seen what they do at Seth Boyden? They threw *beer* bottles, those big ones, on the *lawn*. They’re taking over the city.’”⁴⁵

Later, the boy imagines the world of Paul Gauguin in the Marquesas.⁴⁶ Even as Roth describes the boy exotically, the boy imagines Tahiti as the exotic otherworld the way it was imagined by Gauguin:

“By the light of the window behind him I could see the hundreds of spaces between the hundreds of tiny black corkscrews that were his hair. He was very black and shiny, and the flesh of his lips did not so much appear to be a different color as it looked to be unfinished and awaiting another coat.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* 35.

⁴⁶ Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) was a leading French impressionist painter who is known for his paintings of the South Pacific and for his tumultuous relationship with Vincent Van Gogh.

The lips were parts, the eyes wide, and even the ears seems to have a heightened receptivity....”
 ‘Where is these pictures? These people, man, they sure does look cool. They ain’t no yelling or shouting here, you could just see it.’
 He lifted the book so I could see. It was an expensive large-sized edition of Gauguin reproductions. The page he had been looking at showed an 8^{1/2} X 11 print, in color, of three native women standing knee-high in a rose-colored stream. It *was* a silent picture, he was right.”⁴⁷

The kid admires the quiet of the picture—in contrast to the noise of his home in Newark—and Klugman admires the kid. The narrator observes the kid who observes a world beyond Newark, as observed by Gauguin. The boy is a canvas of texture and color, and is defined by the quality of not having the freedom to move from Newark; he is a symbol of Klugman’s own inability to leave for Short Hills, the way his girlfriend’s family had. Roth, via Klugman, observes and admires the kid, who observes and admires Gauguin, not unlike the way Gauguin observes and admires the Tahitian women in his paintings. Soon after, Klugman reveals: “Over the next week and a half there seemed to be only two people in my life: Brenda and the little colored kid who liked Gauguin.”⁴⁸

Roth ends *Goodbye, Columbus* with Klugman returning back to Newark in time for Pesach, the Jewish New Year. Perhaps it is an affirmation of his allegiance to the downtrodden, those citizens, like the boy dreaming of Tahiti, that, like Baraka, he chooses to stay in Newark. Roth evokes the changing demographics of Newark in the years prior to the uprising:

Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks was in the heart of the Negro section of Newark. Years ago, at the time of the great immigration, it had been the Jewish section, and still one could see the little fish stores, the kosher delicatessens, the Turkish baths, where my grandparents had shopped and bathed at the beginning of the century. Even the smells had lingered: whitefish, corned beef, sour tomatoes—but now, on top of these, was the grander greasier smell of auto wrecking shops, the sour stink of a brewery, the burning odor from a leather factory; and on the streets, instead of Yiddish, one heard the shouts of Negro children playing at Willie Mays with a broom handle and half a rubber ball. The neighborhood had changed: the old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they had reached the crest and started down the other side, pouring into Gentile territory as the Scotch-Irish had poured through the Cumberland Gap. Now, in fact, the Negroes were making the same migration, following the steps of the Jews, and those who remained in the Third Ward lived the most squalid lives and dreamed in their fetid mattresses of the piny smell of Georgia nights.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 36-37.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 47.

I wondered, for an instant only, if I would see the colored kid from the library on the streets here. I didn't, of course, though I was sure he lived in one of the scabby, peeling buildings out of which dogs, children, and aproned women moved continually. On the top floors, windows were open, and the very old, who could no longer creak down the long stairs to the street, sat where they had been put in, in the screenless windows, their elbows resting on the fluffless pillows, and their heads tipping forward on their necks, watching the push of the young and the pregnant and the unemployed. Who would come after the Negroes? Who was left? No one, I thought, and someday these streets, where my grandmother drank hot tea from an old *jahrzeit* glass, would be empty and we would all of us have moved to the crest of the Orange Mountains, and wouldn't the dead stop kicking at the slats of their coffins then?⁴⁹

Roth here passionately reenacts a number of Jewish holidays as he describes the demographic change from a largely Jewish Newark to an African American Newark. Brenda's family's business, kitchen and bathroom sinks, alludes to ritual hand washing; theirs is one of the last remaining Jewish businesses from the old days, the days of Klugman's immigrant grandparents. The passage then evokes the smells of the changing neighborhood; this implies that the changes are imperceptible, nearly invisible, and are bound to the types of businesses that can exist in Newark's political economy. Corned beef and sour tomatoes have been supplanted by leather and beer.

The wandering Jews, a Diaspora, move further and further west towards the edge of Newark. Like those Jews of the Old Testament, moving from east to west, through from the Middle East to the Netherlands, to Spain, and finally to New Jersey, these Jews move up one side of the Orange Mountains and down the other side. As the black middle class increases in number and the quality of life in Newark declines, they make the same migration; a parallel is made between their migration from the South—the piney Georgia nights—to Newark as from Newark to places beyond: Orange, Irvington, Montclair, etc. These parallel migrations are embodied in the kid from the library. His world is a world without men—they have been killed or locked away in New Jersey's prisons. The buildings the kid and kids like him occupy are filled with dogs, children, women, and the very old. These unsettling images suggest more sinister, Holocaust-era tribulations faced by Klugman's ancestors. The very old put their elbows on pillows, an allusion to Passover, when Jews "recline" on pillows to reenact Exodus from Egypt.

Klugman's grandmother drank tea from a *jahrzeit* glass, the empty vessel that formerly held a candle used in the Jewish mourning ritual. This glass alludes to Yom Kippur, a time when *jahrzeit* candles are lit. *Goodbye, Columbus* ends with the first day of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, as Klugman makes the decision to stay in Newark rather than pursue a future in Short Hills. Neil and Brenda's romance is thwarted in part by her parents' discovery that she is using birth control. Klugman's stomach also drops when he sees Mr. Patimkin's black employees throwing sink bowls back and forth as they unload a truck. They are literally breaking the sinks and figuratively breaking the hand-washing blessing. He cannot stomach the thought of joining the family business,

⁴⁹ *ibid.* 900-91.

even in the confines of his own imagination. Thus, the above passage metaphorically reenacts a series of rituals and shows the somewhat parallel passages of both the Jewish and black Diasporas through and away from Newark. The passage ends with a rhetorical question about the migrations and the movement of the dead beneath the feet of those who migrate: the sacrifices of those who struggled make the migrations to new opportunities possible.

In *American Pastoral*, Roth's novel that most directly refers to the social upheavals in Newark in the 1960s and 1970s, the hero, Seymour "Swede" Levov, laments that his business, Newark Maid, and his quiet, conventional life, have been disrupted and destroyed partly because of what has happened to Newark. The narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, describes how the Swede has dealt with this:

His family had kept their operation going in Newark for quite a long time; out of duty to long-standing employees, most of whom were black, the Swede had hung on for some six years after the '67 riots, held on in the face of industry-wide economic realities and his father's imprecations as long as he possibly could, but when he was unable to stop the erosion of the workmanship, which had deteriorated steadily since the riots, he'd given up, managing to get out more or less unharmed by the city's collapse....

'Taxes, corruption, and race. My old man's litany. Anybody at all, people from all over the country who couldn't care less about the fate of Newark, made no difference to him—whether it was down in Miami Beach at the condo, on a cruise ship in the Caribbean, they'd get an earful about his beloved old Newark, butchered to death by taxes, corruption, and race. My father was one of those Prince Street guys who loved that city all his life. What happened to Newark broke his heart.⁵⁰

Prince Street was a main artery in Newark's old Third Ward, the Jewish center of the city in the 1920s and 30s. It was the Jewish neighborhood's main shopping thoroughfare, and less than a mile from Broad Street, the main street in Newark's downtown. The passage is told in a series of layers of storytellers. The Swede relates his father's story whose own story is told via Zuckerman, whose narrator is a kind of mirror for Roth himself. Through this device, a kind of frame within a frame, Roth is able to increase the psychic distance between himself and the loss of old Jewish Newark, and to decrease sentimentality.

Like *The Plot Against America*, *American Pastoral* is innovative in its process and form insofar as it uses historical data and materials for fiction, though it is not historical fiction. The Swede is based on an actual local hero from Weequahic High School, Seymour Masin (1920-2005), whose athletic abilities were idolized by Roth in the way Nathan Zuckerman idolized the Swede in the novel. In both form and content, Roth makes his fiction about history political.

William Empson, the English literary critic, and a founder of close reading or New Criticism, showed that the pastoral is always political; Roth, like Zuckerman, was

⁵⁰ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 24.

“unbound” in his treatment of language, of space (both on the page and in terms of connecting real figures to fictional figures), and of a passionate syntax.⁵¹ *American Pastoral*, among other things, is a lesson in language as being vital, if not essential. Empson echoes this: “It is clear at any rate that this grand notion of the inadequacy of life, so various in its means of expression, so reliable a bass note in the arts, needs to be counted as a possible territory of pastoral.”⁵² This feeling, the inadequacy of life, a kind of animated hopelessness, is expressed in much of Roth’s fiction.

Later in *American Pastoral*, when the Swede’s daughter, Merry, is living in squalor and poverty in Newark, Roth offers a scene not of the human, but of the landscape. His innovative idea—to show urban scenery as pastoral—must reflect the Swede’s inner torment that his daughter, who has admitted bombing a local post office that has killed a bystander, has been lost to him, just as the city itself:

His daughter was living in Newark, working across from the Pennsylvania Railroad tracks, and not at the end of the Ironbound where the Portuguese were reclaiming the poor Down Neck streets but here at the Ironbound’s westernmost edge, in the shadow of the railroad viaduct that closed off Railroad Avenue all along the western side of the street. That grim fortification was the city’s Chinese wall, brownstown boulders piled twenty feet high, strung out for more than a mile and intersected only by half a dozen foul underpasses. Along this forsaken street, as ominous now as any street in any ruined city in America, was a reptilian length of unguarded wall barren even of graffiti. But the wilted weeds that managed to jut forth in wiry clumps where the mortar was cracked and washed away, the viaduct wall was barren of everything except the affirmation of a weary industrial city’s prolonged and triumphant struggle to monumentalize its ugliness.

On the east side of the street, the dark old factories—Civil War factories, foundries, brassworks, heavy-industrial plants blackened from the chimneys pumping smoke for a hundred years—were windowless now, the sunlight sealed out with brick and mortar, their exits and entrances plugged with cinderblock. These were the factories where people had lost fingers and arms and got their feet crushed and their faces scalded, where children once labored in the heat and cold, the nineteenth-century factories that churned up people and churned out goods and now were unpierceable, airtight tombs. It was Newark that was entombed there, a city that was not going to stir again. The

⁵¹ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, (New York: New Directions), 1960.

⁵² *ibid.*, 111.

pyramids of Newark: as huge and dark and hideously impermeable as a great dynasty's burial edifice has every historical right to be.⁵³

This passage, beautiful in its composition, syntax, and evocative details, nonetheless describes a despairing place: the viaduct at Railroad Avenue looks exactly as Roth describes it even today. The city itself and its industrial past literally swallow the people there. The passage is geographically accurate as it maps not only how the neighborhood west of the Ironbound changes into a blighted detritus, but also maps how the industrial city has changed over time as its factories and foundries disappeared.

Roth uses the physical landscape of the city to evoke and describe the Swede's emotions surrounding his daughter, Merry. In this way the personal memory and public coincide in surprising ways; through the power of his syntax, tone, and pacing ("churned up people and churned out goods"), Roth is able to compress history and memory in his description. Though infrequent, there are other illustrations of this in literature. In Larry Levis's poem "Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex," for example, begins with a speaker (Levis himself, or someone like Levis) looking at a painting of David and Goliath in the Borghese by Caravaggio.⁵⁴ Caravaggio killed a boy in a brawl in 1609 and became an exile from the authorities, from his enemies, and from the Pope. The speaker then remembers how Goliath's "decapitated, swollen, leaden-eyed head" is actually Caravaggio's face, which in turn reminds him of a high school friend who, in 1970, stepped three yards off a path onto a landmine in Vietnam. The poem masterfully uses punctuation, syntax, line lengths, and line breaks to evoke the "swirl & vortex" of time rather than presenting it in a linear narrative form. In one stanza of the long-form poem, Levis uses the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington as an illustration to show how private memory amends the public memory of the monument:

Time's sovereign. It rides the backs of names cut into marble. And to get
Back, one must descend, as if into a mass grave. All along the memorial, small
Offerings, letters, a bottle of bourbon, photographs, a joint of marijuana slipped

Into a wedding ring. You see, you must descend; it is one of the styles
Of Hell. And it takes a while to find the name you might be looking for; it is
Meant to take a while. You can touch the names, if you want to. You can kiss them,

You can try to tease out some final meaning with your lips.

⁵³ Roth, 218-219.

⁵⁴ Larry Levis (1946-1996) was an American poet.

The boy who was standing next to me said simply: “You can cry....It’s O.K., here.”⁵⁵

The boy Levis encounters at the memorial is represents not only his friend who died, but also David, in the painting. The poem uses the power of metaphor to equate the soldiers in Vietnam, exiles in Southeast Asia, and the counterculture youth movement of which Levis was a part, protesting the war; those students were themselves exiles; they felt estranged from their own country.

Roth’s passage in *American Pastoral* is also similar to the Detroit of “They Feed They Lion,” a 1973 poem by Philip Levine, that shows the same gritty disbelief at the loss of an urban working-class world.⁵⁶ The first stanza reads:

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
 Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
 Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
 Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
 They Lion grow.⁵⁷

Both Roth and Levine use descriptive language of landscape and the language of objects, to evoke the voices of missing people. In this way, Roth imposes private memory onto public memory; as Newark’s memory of its industrial past crumbles and is overgrown with weeds, the speaker feels as though what has happened to the city has happened to him personally. In Levine’s poem, the surprising refrain “they Lion grow” connects the changing ferocity of the slaughterhouse worker—those the speaker has come to praise—to the pigs being slaughtered. The poem alludes to not only the Detroit Lions, but also Detroit’s industrial past and to the political consciousness of those works described so eloquently in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.

Stylistically, when Roth seeks to increase lyricism, pacing, and eliminate sentimentality, he offers long, breathless passages in which images pile on top of each other, not unlike a prose poem; although the definitions are slippery, the prose poem was pioneered by the French Symbolist Charles Baudelaire and uses the lyric and metaphoric power of verse, but is not written in lines. When Roth describes the uprising / riots as the Swede sees it, the normally contrarian and critical Swede admires the looters in Newark’s Central Ward, and the affect of the language is photographic:

He was sitting alone in the last factory left in the worst city in the world. And it was worse even than sitting there during the riots, Springfield Avenue in flames, South

⁵⁵ Larry Levis, *The Selected Levis*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 147-148.

⁵⁶ Philip Levine (b. 1928) is a populist American poet known for his poems praising his blue collar background in Detroit.

⁵⁷ Philip Levine, *New and Selected Poems*, (New York: Knopf, 1995), 81.

Orange Avenue in flames, Bergen Street under attack, sirens going off, weapons firing, snipers from rooftops blasting the street lights, looting crowds crazed in the streets, kids carrying off radios and lamps and television sets, men toting armfuls of clothing, women pushing baby carriages heavily loaded with cartons of liquor and cases of beer, people pushing pieces of new furniture right down the center of the street, stealing sofas, cribs, kitchen tables, stealing washers and dryers and ovens—stealing not in the shadows but out in the open. Their strength is tremendous, their teamwork is flawless. The shattering of the glass windows is thrilling. The not paying for things is intoxicating. The American appetite for ownership is dazzling to behold. *This* is shoplifting. Everything free that everyone craves, a wonton free-for-all free of charge, everyone uncontrollable was thinking, Here it is! Let it come! In Newark's burning Mardi Gras streets, a force is released that feels redemptive, something purifying is happening, something spiritual and revolutionary perceptible to all. The surreal vision of household appliances out under the stars and agleam in the glow of the flames incinerating the Central Ward promises the liberation of all mankind. Yes, here it is, let it come, yes, the magnificent opportunity, one of human history's rare transmogrifying moments: the old ways of suffering are burning blessedly away in the flames, never again to be resurrected, instead to be superseded, within only hours, by suffering that will be so gruesome, so monstrous, so unrelenting and abundant, that its abatement will take the next five hundred years. The fire this time—and next? After the fire? Nothing. Nothing in Newark ever again.⁵⁸

The first half of the passage is one long sentence, a list of what the people are carrying is followed by a generalization—it is Americans who have a boundless appetite for things, including destruction and liberation. The second half is also one long sentence, praising the riots for its transformative ability, even as Roth laments that it will take 500 years for this new suffering to be abated. This is a major imaginative leap; that Roth articulates, in 1997, these contradictory emotions surrounding private and public memories of the riot. What if the literature people read about Newark, the photographs people saw about Newark, and the music people heard about Newark, did not limit the imagination surrounding this place, but expanded it?

The moving dead that Roth evokes in *Goodbye, Columbus*, the zombies of the cultural imagination surrounding the city of Newark, tend to be resurrected in moments that, in attempting to move forward, are pulled backward through the decades. For example, a new development designed by “starchitect” Richard Meier called Teachers Village, is expected to cost \$149 million. Its eight low-rise buildings clustered around the intersection of William and Halsey Streets, evokes passionate attacks and defense by all parties.⁵⁹ Definitions of “middle-income,” degrees of community involvement, the developers' interests, historically contextual design, and the tax credits given by the city government, are scrutinized.

⁵⁸ Roth, 268-269.

⁵⁹ See Alison Gregor's “Newark Project Aims to Link Living and Learning,” *The New York Times*, 6 March 2012, sec. Real Estate.

Baraka and Roth imagine and describe a mythical Newark that tries to connect private memory and public memory, but at a close psychic distance. Their fictions about Newark use historical events in an unsentimental, yet cynical way. It is important for readers of Baraka and Roth, people open to fluid imaginative positions on Newark, to know that their work, however great, is not the last word. I intend to show, in the following chapters, how several artists from Newark imagined their city freshly and differently from the way it had previously been done so in art.

By moving beyond Baraka and Roth, the conventional wisdom about Newark can be enhanced, made more complex, and increase awareness of Newark's past and present as a rich generator of American and African American culture. Newark's African American culture is synonymous with its jazz culture. Though mostly long disappeared, in the 1950s when Baraka and Roth were ascendant literary stars, Newark and its environs produced a significant portion of jazz talent in the United States.

On September 28, 1953, Redd Foxx, the original dirty comic, had a weekly gig at the Picadilly Club, located at Peshine and Waverly Avenues, and was tasked with bringing in jazz.⁶⁰ He hired a "house band" of Hank Mobley, tenor saxophonist, and Jimmy Schenck, a bassist, and that night they were playing in a quintet with Charli Persip, drummer, Walter Davis, Jr., pianist, and Bennie Green, trombonist. The music recorded that night showed several of the period's stars at a high-water mark, and is evidence that Newark's inner city exemplified a local jazz scene during jazz's golden age.

⁶⁰ Bob Blumenthal, liner notes to Hank Mobley, *Newark 1953 Uptown Records* UPCD 27.66/67, 2012, compact disc. Also see: Bob Blumenthal, liner notes to Hank Mobley, *The Complete Blue Note Hank Mobley Fifties Sessions* Mosaic Records MD6-181, 1998, compact disc. Redd Foxx (1922-1991) was a comedian known for his explicit comedy records.

Chapter 2

One Step Beyond: Grachan Moncur III and Newark's Jazz Culture

"I seem to have disappeared. But in a sense I wasn't totally extinct. I just went underground."—Grachan Moncur III¹

"Whenever I have a conversation about what's wrong with the jazz business, I always start out by saying, 'where is Grachan Moncur?'"—Jackie McLean²

"I'd say 'What's happenin'?' and she'd say 'Newark' and that was enough, 'cause you know what Newark does to people."—Wayne Shorter, re: running into Sarah Vaughan on tour³

Listening for Moncur

Francis Wolff's November 21, 1963 photograph of Grachan Moncur III recording "Evolution" shows a trombonist in a white shirt facing a microphone in Rudy Van Gelder's Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey studio. The studio is in Van Gelder's parents' home.⁴ Like a medieval tapestry, Moncur is lit from below and the velvet-black background—like all the Blue Note photos of that era—makes him hum and glow;

¹ Adam Shatz, "The Perils of Living Too Long," *The New York Times*, 26 October 2003, 28.

² Ibid.

³ Michelle Mercer, *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 22-23.

⁴ Francis Wolff (1907-1971) was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and, with Alfred Lion, the co-founder of Blue Note Records. He took thousands of artistic photographs of every musician who recorded with Blue Note. Rudy Van Gelder (b. 1924) is a record producer responsible for being recording engineer on all the Blue Note recordings, among recordings for other independent jazz labels. The Blue Note sessions—approximately 1500 albums—were recorded in his parents' living room-cum-studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

brooding and demonic sound ripples from the Bach Stradivarius.⁵ In 1963 Moncur was an ascending jazz icon for both the cognoscenti and in the popular press. Between then and now, he has become undervalued and even unknown as a jazz artist, yet by paying attention to the music he has created, we can understand how he was informed by Newark, and how Newark might be informed by him.

Moncur, an original composer and trombonist within the avant-garde subgenre of jazz, creates what is sometimes called “free” jazz, because it does not adhere to predetermined chord changes based on the blues or George Gershwin’s “I’ve Got Rhythm.” Moncur was 26 years old in 1963: ears wide open, an artist from Newark, writing serious and complicated music. Moncur is a window into Newark’s rich jazz culture, the product of its black urbanism, both of which are overlooked and understudied. For a small city, for example, Newark has a 24-hour jazz radio station, WBGO 88.3 FM, and has long been a source for black cultural figures who later found fame and broader cultural recognition in neighboring New York.

Many African American cultural figures—Sarah Vaughan, the jazz singer; Wayne Shorter and Hank Mobley, both tenor saxophone specialists; Redd Foxx, the original dirty comic; and Larry Doby, the first black player in baseball’s American League; and others; additionally, there were many whites who were important figures in African American culture from Newark, such as Ozzie Cadena, a producer at Savoy Records. Savoy’s founder, Herman Lubinsky, a notorious figure who had a reputation for cheating

⁵ Michael Cuscuna, Charlie Lourie, and Oscar Schneider, eds. *The Blue Note Years: The Jazz Photography of Francis Wolff*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), 170. The photo is cropped and appears in magenta on Reid Miles’s album cover of *Evolution*.

black musicians out of their fair share of royalties and writing self-interested contracts, was also a Newark native.

To understand why and how Moncur became obscure in jazz's master-narrative, his music must be appreciated and understood. Sherrie Tucker's 2006 article "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The 'Subjectless Subject' of New Jazz Studies" is a call-to-arms for jazz scholarship that I apply to Moncur, by posing these questions: Does the data on Moncur reify or reject old constructs? In writing about cultural views of history via Moncur, can I avoid what Tucker calls "historical overdub," the frustrating exercise of stuffing my devalued topic into the "master-narrative that constructs itself by excluding him"?⁶ What does Moncur's story and the way that story was written reveal about jazz binaries or boundaries? What do Moncur and his music mean, in conflict and in concert with jazz history, with Newark history, with cultural memory?

It is possible that Moncur was relegated to the dustbin of the master-narrative of jazz studies because of what Ed Berger called "various reasons, some of his own doing and some beyond his control." These reasons include: a lack of guidance from elders in the jazz community *despite* Moncur being raised in a community of jazz elders; Moncur's Newark location; and the ways the cultural memory of his music interfaced with the cultural memory of jazz's 1960s avant-garde.

II. Newark's Jazz Culture

Moncur was born June 3, 1937 at Sydenham Hospital on Manhattan Avenue, in Harlem, New York, and raised in Newark, New Jersey, within Newark's jazz culture. He

⁶ Sherrie Tucker, "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The 'Subjectless Subject' of New Jazz Studies," in *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism*. 2 (2006): 31.

started on piano and cello, but Moncur's father bought him a silver-plated trombone wrapped in newspaper, at age 9. His father, Grachan "Brother" Moncur II, a bass player and his uncle, Al Cooper, founded and played in the Savoy Sultans.⁷ "People like Dizzy Gillespie, Babs Gonzales and James Moody were always dropping by the house, and they took an interest in me. Sarah Vaughan and my mother were best friends. Sarah was a great cook and used to cook in our kitchen!"⁸

Moncur is a complex figure. He raised six children in Newark, amid arduous conditions. He consistently wrote compositions in his own company (he, and not Blue Note Records, own his own master recordings through his company, Gramon Publishing). Wayne Shorter, a Newark native, and Moncur's peer at Newark Arts High School, put the conditions in which they grew up in this context:

Newark was a hell of a place to learn something about how to survive...a lot of things, whether you were well off or very, very down in the dregs of poordom. Poordom. There is [sic] only a few people from Newark now who are somewhere in the world, imparting their knowledge of survival intelligently, or just daily survival.⁹

Moncur, at the peak of his musical success in the 1960s, appeared to be destined for status as a jazz legend. Between the time when he recorded several albums for Blue

⁷ The Savoy Sultans were a small Swing band (usually nine pieces) led by Cooper, Moncur III's uncle and included Moncur II, who played bass. They opened at the Savoy Ballroom at 596 Lenox Avenue in Harlem on Labor Day 1937. They became popular among the Savoy's dancers. They broke-up in 1946.

⁸ Ed Berger, "Overdue Ovation. Grachan Moncur III. Some Other Stuff," *Jazz Times*, September 2003. Al Cooper founded the Savoy Sultans and played with them from 1937-1946, the height of the Swing Era. Babs Gonzales (1919-1980) was a jazz vocalist during the Bebop Era. Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993) was a trumpet specialist, bandleader, and major innovator during the Bebop Era. James Moody (1925-2010) was a saxophonist and flautist.

⁹ Michelle Mercer, *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 22-23.

Note and today, his name has become nearly unknown even among jazz aficionados.

Moncur shows that his fade into oblivion is less easily explained, even though he remains hopeful his legacy will improve:

It's strange. Most of my best friends are people I very seldom see. In recent years I didn't even try to see them because I wasn't happy with things. I'm the kind of guy who wears his feelings on his sleeve, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to snuff it out. But everything's cool, man. I'm still composing, and I'm finally beginning to see a little daylight.¹⁰

By "things," Moncur refers to the lack of recognition for his accomplishments.

Elaborating in a Fall 2011 interview I did with Moncur, he said:

That's the story of my life. Everything I do is great! I just don't do a lot. You know, I've got a great family, I've got a great wife, I've got a house... I've got everything. I eat. You know what I mean? I'm not sick.

The thing about it... I would like to do much better just for my horn's sake, and I love my horn so much. And I'm hearing things that's so beautiful and I don't have the enthusiasm to go out like I used to and be at everybody's space and do everything. I don't feel like that. That's missing out of me. But, I'm not angry with anybody. I'm not jealous of anything. I just miss what's in my horn not being able to... not getting more enthusiasm to want to do more. I don't have a soul mate.¹¹

Moncur was born and raised in an upper-middle-class family within Newark's rich jazz culture, an African American urbanism that is under-recognized. There is a fire dancing behind his eyes; his enthusiasm and interest in everything around him shows an artistic temperament. I interviewed Moncur after having been a fan of his music for 17 years.

¹⁰ Adam Shatz, "The Perils of Living Too Long." *The New York Times*, 26 October 2003.

¹¹ Grachan Moncur III, interview by the author, 19 October 2011, Newark.

Moncur begins by explaining how he was born into a jazz family; his father, also called Grachan, was a Swing Era bassist who played with Billie Holiday and his own bands.

Moncur: My father was mostly known as “Brother.” People hardly knew his name was “Grachan” until I started recording because all the musicians of his era knew him as “Brother,” Brother Moncur. They didn’t know he was Grachan until the third came out. That’s pretty much where it began.¹² All of my people from my father’s side were from Florida and the Bahamas. The people from my mother’s side were from Newark, her mother and her mother’s mother. So my father came from Miami up here and met my mother.

Moncur’s lineage in a jazz family continued after his parents met at the Savoy Ballroom, an important place for African Americans to play Swing, and for African American audiences to dance to it.

Moncur: They met in Newark. They got married. At the time when I was born, my father was working at the Savoy Ballroom and my mother happened to go up and visit him. So she came to New York from Newark to visit him one weekend and I guess those happy feet at the Savoy kind of urged me to want to come out, you know? I decided to come a couple of months early, so I was born a preemie in New York only because it was up to my mother. I was born in New York at Sydenham Hospital, which I’ve very proud to say. I told my mother that was the best things she ever did for me, that I could I say I was born in New York. I was very grateful about that. Although I was raised in Newark.¹³

¹² Grachan “Brother” Moncur was born September 2, 1915; he was the half-brother of Al Cooper. He was a founding member of the Savoy Sultans, which formed in 1937, a swing band (called “jump” by the musicians). They were popular with dancers at the Savoy Ballroom from 1937 until 1946. Grachan is pronounced “GRAY-shun.”

¹³ Sydenham Hospital was in Harlem on Manhattan Avenue between 123rd and 124th Streets. It began in 1892 in a brownstone as an African American hospital and moved to Manhattan Avenue in 1924. It was shut down by Mayor Koch in 1980 despite bitter community sit-ins and protests. It now houses the Ryan/Adair Community Health Center and the Mannie L. Wilson Towers, which was converted in 1987 into 101 subsidized apartments for low-income senior citizens and the handicapped. The Savoy Ballroom was located at 596 Lenox Avenue, between 140th and 141st Streets in Harlem.

As evidence of a lifelong Newarker's "inferiority complex" with regard to New York, Moncur seems to take pride in the fact that he happened to be born in New York and not Newark.

Moncur's upbringing was not just among jazz's elite, but also among Newark's upper class African American culture.

Moncur: My mother inherited a beauty salon at a very early age. I think she started working when she was about 11 years old in this beauty salon. And I think at the time it was called "Theatrical Beauty Salon" and she inherited that beauty parlor with that name and until she died she kept that name.¹⁴

The Theatrical Beauty Salon was on 18th Avenue, near Spruce Street. So what happened was she started working for this older lady, I think her name was Mrs. Wardell. Kind of older lady. I guess she was very happy about how enthusiastic my mother was and my mother showed a little bit of talent. So, to make a long story short, by the time... she started doing hair. By the time she was 13, the owner started preparing her to take over the shop, because she was going to retire. Before my mother was 15 she inherited the shop, so she inherited the shop before she had a working permit; you had to have a working permit. She had the job, so as soon as she became 15 she got the working permit and a license so it was legitimate. She started the Theatrical Beauty Salon. Before my mother took over, I think a lot of theatrical people frequented that shop. So my mother inherited a lot of those kinds of customers. My mother, later, when she was 16 or 17 she met my father. All of her life she was really close to Sarah Vaughan. Her and Sarah went to high school or grammar school or both. Sarah was like my aunt. My mother was with Sarah from the day she got the gig at the Apollo until the day she died in California, she was at her bedside. So, they were like sisters.¹⁵

Sarah and my mother, being that they were very close, and my father being a musician, I guess they were all close in business and stuff. I grew up in a very musical atmosphere. When I was 2 or 3 years old, my father was recording with people like Billie Holiday, and working with big bands, even some of the white bands like Paul Whiteman. The Savoy Sultans had disbanded and he started freelancing with different groups. At a very early age I was exposed to a variety of entertainers. All my life. So, I would say...by the

¹⁴ See also: Evelyn Boyden, "Day in and Day Out In Newark," *The Afro-American*, 26 May 1956. "May 6 was a busy day at the Theatrical Beauty Salon, now located on West Kinney Street, just a few steps from the corner of High Street, Newark. It was the advent of a brand new partnership which was initiated by well known business woman Mrs. Ella Moncur who has started business anew with Miss Viola Cooke of Orange."

¹⁵ Sarah Vaughan was born in Newark on March 27, 1924.

time my mother had the beauty parlor on 18th Avenue, we had a two-story house. I'm not sure if my mother was the owner, but she owned part of the house. What I do remember was that after we moved down there, the next most significant place that I remember growing up was on High Street; she bought a house on High Street, and this was at a time that the whites were moving out. We were about the third black family to have a house on High Street. We were opposite the Krueger's Mansion.¹⁶ Some of the Krueger family was still there. So I remember 602 High Street was a very popular house; because the beauty parlor was in the basement. Dinah Washington... Dinah didn't come much to the beauty parlor, but my mother worked for her as a cosmetologist. She was more than a hairdresser; she developed styles for entertainers, like hair color way back before that was fashionable. She went to Paris and learned haircutting and hair color. So she was very advanced and a lot of people catered to her because she was very updated and very modern. So I was exposed to a world that was so rare... I didn't know... all I knew was I had a very beautiful childhood. I had my chores... we had a 15-room house; I was an only child for 17 years, so I had a lot of responsibility to keep the house clean, but I had an allowance, so I was pretty cool.

When I was nine years old, my father came in with a trombone.

Moncur receiving the trombone marked his childhood transition from being the coddled son of an elite family of artists to becoming an artist and participant in that elite culture himself. He was constantly surrounded by other artists from all sorts of genres—Sarah Vaughan, Redd Foxx, Dinah Washington, and Dizzy Gillespie—whom he could observe. Even though he was in some ways the heir to this cultural reservoir, he did not use his many connections to Newark's stars to further his own career.

Moncur: 602 [High Street] was a very nice experience for me. The people who came through there were really stars... I was a kid. They looked at me as Brother and Ella's son. Dizzy Gillespie would come through, Rudy [Williams] would come through, Redd Foxx.... Redd Foxx would sleep on our couch; that was before he was making any really big money. My mother let him crash at the pad so he wouldn't have to pay for a hotel. The only hotel he could stay in at that particular time was the Coleman Hotel.¹⁷ It was owned by the Coleman Brothers, a gospel group. They had their own hotel; a black family had their own hotel, their own record company, and their own radio station. They

¹⁶ The Krueger-Scott mansion is on the corner of Court and High Street (now Martin Luther King Boulevard).

¹⁷ The Coleman Hotel had 72 rooms and was just west of Newark's Lincoln Park. See Chapter 20, "The Coleman Hotel—For Negroes Only," in Barbara J. Kukla, *Swing City: Newark Nightlife 1925-50*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 147-152.

were very interesting. Any entertainers that came to town would stay at the Coleman Hotel. A lot of my friends in middle school knew I was into music; especially when I got the trombone they knew I was kind of serious. They said: “Oh, you’ll automatically make it.” They knew my mother and father knew everybody. But that was not the case. That had nothing to do with it. None of the stars that ever came to my house had anything to do with my development. I developed totally on my own through my own resources from beginning to end. You can’t ride somebody’s shoulders; you’ve got to have your own talent.

Moncur, not unlike Duke Ellington, had a special relationship with his mother, who raised him to be an artist. Moncur speaks eloquently about his admiration for her.

Moncur: I think her enthusiasm for me to pursue my dream helped me believe in myself. She was great. She was a no-nonsense kind of person; I don’t think she would lead me on if she didn’t think that I had talent. She was enthusiastic; she let me try to develop. And so was my father; he definitely tried to put me on the right track. He was about no tricks and no easy way in. He was a no shortcuts guy. You know what I’m talking about? The first gig I was 18 or something. I think he gave me \$35... most guys were getting like 7 dollars and 10 dollars. [laughs]

Around 1955 or 1956 the taxes on his parents’ house on High Street were getting to be unmanageable, so they sold it and moved to Florida. By this time, jazz was at the peak of its “Golden Age” and Moncur was a professional musician, but his major successes were still seven years away.

III. Inside-Outside

What is the meaning of Moncur’s music and what is its context? The music is avant-garde, left-of-center, of Newark origins; this makes it almost totally unknown, underground, and obscure. The ways Moncur has been presented from the mid-1960s until now provide clues as the way his memory exists in the cultural imagination. Moncur appeared in 1964 in James Baldwin’s play, “Blues for Mister Charlie” and was associated with Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. I suggest that Moncur’s music of the

sixties be read as representative of Newark's culture of the time. Though progressive and even avant-garde at times, Moncur's music of the sixties cannot be easily categorized. Neither solidly within the Black Arts aesthetic or the avant-garde or free jazz aesthetic, Moncur's music has lasted longer than both in many cases. Both aesthetics and the social questions of the time affected jazz music and recording in the 1960s. Moncur was both the beneficiary of these changes as well as harmed by them. The terms through which critics understood Moncur limited his potential; these critics saw his music as an expression of the sixties. For example, a 1965 article from *Down Beat* explains:

Underlying almost all Moncur's reflections one notices an almost compulsive need to come to grips with the everyday world. For this the tragic insight of Baldwin's play served as fertile ground. The challenge to create music about a deranged social action became more than a mere mechanical exercise; it had a therapeutic effect.¹⁸

The adjectives "compulsive," "tragic," and "therapeutic" reflect how readers of Moncur's music place him in the scope of the black experience of 1965. Moncur was both personally and artistically influenced by those social and racial changes, even he influenced them in return. The 2003 article in *The New York Times* paradoxically attributes his obscurity to his survival:

If Grachan Moncur III had perished 40 years ago in a car crash, or become one of jazz's junkie-poets, he might be legend today, rather than an all-but-forgotten trombonist. Unless you're a serious student of free jazz, chances are you've never heard of him. But in the 1960's and early 1970's, Mr. Moncur was the leading trombonist on the scene.¹⁹

Moncur was praised for his ability to write music of the moment (ca. 1965) that feels fresh in 2003. Moncur's cutting-edge status in the jazz community in 1965 has been

¹⁸ George Bright, "Getting Into It—Grachan Moncur III," *Down Beat*, 28 Jan. 1965, 15.

¹⁹ Adam Shatz, "The Perils of Living Too Long." *The New York Times*, 26 October 2003, 28.

usurped by a legend of a heroic tragedy in the 2003 article. The later article located Moncur as an experimental and ahead-of-his-time figure who was surpassed and forgotten about, but only hints at the reasons (e.g. dental problems which disrupted his embouchure, the way in which a player applies the mouth to the mouthpiece of a brass or wind instrument.).

Down Beat in 1965 and *The New York Times* in 2003 show the popular reception of Moncur in the context of the turbulence of sixties, but 38 years apart. Between the notes, 1965 and 2003, there is a long rest. It is a silence containing the myths and assumptions about black avant-garde jazz. These myths affected Moncur's reception at the time, and his place in jazz now. Why, for example, must interest in Moncur in a 2003 *New York Times* retrospective be placed only in the context of a death by either car crash or a drug overdose?

These facts suggest that Moncur's half-erasure was linked to remembering not only Moncur as a person, but the political movement with which he was associated, the Black Arts. Amiri Baraka, in *Black Music*, a book of liner notes and essays, singles out *Evolution* as one of "a few very fine LPs to pass through my fingers recently" and mentions Moncur as "the critic's choice new star trombone."²⁰ Baraka, the main proponent of the "new music," and one of the few blacks writing about jazz in the 1960s, described what he admires about *Evolution*, and about each musician on the record—Lee Morgan ("some of the best Lee I've ever heard"), Jackie McLean, Bob Cranshaw, Bobby Hutcherson, and Tony Williams—but tellingly, elides Moncur himself. Baraka does not

²⁰ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Black Music*, (New York: William Morrow), 1968: 115-116.

mention Moncur's solos, or the compositions themselves.²¹ Later, in a review of the *New Wave in Jazz* album, Baraka says: "Grachun [sic] Moncur represents, along with Charles Tolliver's group, the cool aspect of the new generation, the post-Milesian."²² In truth, Moncur was *ahead* of Miles's band because Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams, and Herbie Hancock were in his band before they joined Miles. This is because even though Miles is known in the jazz world for having the ability to seize young talent by including younger musicians as sidemen in his various bands, his three most famous and influential were actually members of Moncur's group prior to being member of Davis's.

Singer: Now, you said something about Miles's reaction to this band you had in Europe, but I know that Williams, Hancock, and Wayne were in this group *before* they were with Miles.

Moncur: That's right!

Moncur says so, but then moves on to an assertion that Davis employed a similar theme as Moncur's composition "Evolution" in Davis's "Dingo," a 1992 movie soundtrack; he also asserts that he heard fragments of "The Twins" in a 1965 recording, two years after Moncur's. I was unable to definitively determine which melodies to which Moncur refers. Since Davis is known for his ability to choose young musicians and hone their talent, it is notable that three of Davis's most famous sidemen were first with Moncur's group.

²¹ Lee Morgan (1938-1972) was a major trumpet innovator after Clifford Brown. Jackie McLean (1931-2006) was an alto saxophonist in both the bebop and avant garde subgenres. Bob Cranshaw (b. 1932) is a bassist best known for his work with Sonny Rollins. Bobby Hutcherson (b. 1941) is a vibraphonist and marimba player. Tony Williams (1945-1997) was a major drum innovator known for his work with Miles Davis and with his fusion group, Lifetime.

²² Ibid., 176.

Moncur talks about his days playing with the drums specialist Tony Williams, even as he laments not having the same caliber of talent with whom to work lately.

Moncur: Tony played “Hilda” with me to. Man! We used to play “Hilda” and “Blues for Donald Duck” and man, we got some shit out of that was like psychedelic shit! That shit was like [gestures wildly with his hands] That has *never* been recorded! I mean, it was recorded on one of those old time things, but never professionally recorded. Let me tell you something, if I ever get a chance, man. People have not heard, they have not heard my music. Because back there I had an opportunity... these were fantastic musicians [referring to the musicians on *Evolution* and *Some Other Stuff*] where they copped very quickly... we did everything Bip! Bam! Boom! Bip! Bap! But can you imagine since then where I’ve had time to think and analyze that shit and come up with different shit *since* then? Man, if I get *anywhere* near some musicians to do like updated versions of stuff! I believe it’s going to happen, like this trip I’ve got coming up. Hopefully the next couple of gigs I have might blossom into something. Yeah, you know.

Baraka and Moncur are both Newarkers, both of the same jazz culture and presumably working toward simpatico cultural ends, and roughly the same age (Baraka was born in 1934, Moncur in 1937). They have known each other since they were teenagers. In the 1960s, they both worked (Baraka via poetry, playwriting, and criticism; Moncur via music) to advance the goals of the Black Arts Movement, and saw each other frequently. John Szwed places this moment in an historical context:

After Malcolm X was shot on February 21, Jones changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka and moved up to Harlem to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theater / School, in part with money he had raised with a benefit he put on at the Village Gate on March 28, at which John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Grachan Moncur III, Archie Shepp, Charles Tolliver, Cecil McBee, and Sun Ra played; and in part through the arts and culture program of Operation Bootstrap, a division of HARYOU ACT, the first War of Poverty program set up by Lyndon Johnson in an effort to stop violence and rioting after the “long hot summer” of 1964.²³

²³ John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 210. In 1964 the Johnson administration provided \$110 million to support educational changes recommended by HARYOU, Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, a social activism organization founded in 1962.

The “commonplace about the Black Arts movement is that it was characterized, almost defined by an extremely misogynist and homophobic masculinism.” Although these phobias and this categorization of the Black Arts movement is challenged by James Smethurst and Kevin Mumford, these views were a key facet of Baraka’s ethos at the time.²⁴

Moncur was in Newark the first night of the riot, but left for a gig in Toronto. Moncur describes not only his experience of the riot, but of the ethos and feeling of avant garde jazz in the 1960s, of which he was an important participant.

Moncur: I was here. I was here; as a matter of fact, the night of the riot, I was on my way to Canada. And... Baraka and some of his people came by my pad. See a lot happened during that time. John Coltrane died. You know? I remember when I was in Canada, the first or second night that I opened there in Toronto, we got the word that Trane had died and I had just left Newark. But Baraka came over to my house during the riot... I don’t know if I should say all that went down, but anyway. He came by; a stop before they were doing their thing. I was on my way to Canada, but I stopped to entertain them for a while and I went downtown. On my way downtown to Penn Station or wherever I was going to get the bus and I was dodging and it was weird... very weird. I had my horn and was trying to get out of town. The first night of the riots.²⁵

But, another fast forward, and this is weird... I don’t know how... in ’67 I met my wife before she became my wife. I went to Europe with Archie Shepp. This was the first, either the JVC or the Newport jazz festival had gone to Europe. For the first time it was taking it from Newport to an international tour. And Miles Davis was the head of the show. Everybody was on the show. Sarah Vaughan. The Thelonious Monk Big Band. It was a hell of a show.²⁶

²⁴ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 84.

²⁵ Coltrane died July 17, 1967. The riots in Newark were July 12-17.

²⁶ George Wein developed this concert series, called the “Newport Jazz Festival in Europe”; it was sponsored by Pan Am airlines and the U.S. Travel Service, a government agency. Eight acts performed in cities like Antwerp, Belfast, London, Rotterdam, Stockholm, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris, and Barcelona. Not every group performed in all 17 cities. Other bands included: the Gary Burton Quartet (with Larry Coryell, Steve Swallow, and Bob Moses), and Wein’s own Newport All-Stars with Buddy Tate.

And we were the *cats*: we had Archie, Roswell Rudd, Jimmy Garrison, and Beaver Harris. That was the group. We went over there and tore up Europe. We had the whole spirit of what was going on in the world... Civil Rights, the Sixties... the revolution... that whole energy. The whole thing. We were uncontrollable. Nobody could do nothin' with us... Miles, no one. Miles was very angry at us; they changed our spot to last because we would get a standing ovation that would last close to a half an hour. And that would cut into the time for them to come on, you dig? So they changed our spot to last. After the tour was over we stayed four months after; one club called Le Chat Qui Pêche in Paris. Madame Ricard was the owner, a very old lady, and she owned a club called Le Chat Qui Pêche, which means the little pussy cat.²⁷ It was the most prominent jazz club in Paris. We stayed there six weeks.

Moncur describes his association with the revolutionary jazz of the period, but also notes that this association—though it brought him opportunities—ended up pigeonholing him and limiting perceptions of his music. In this way, the perception of his artistic accomplishments are, like Baraka's, overshadowed by the last few years of the Sixties.

Singer: You said that the band had the spirit of the Sixties, in a sense, the power and enthusiasm... do you think your music has something to say about the social disturbances of the Sixties?

Moncur: See I was a part of that. I want to make this clear: I am a jazz artist. I don't want to pretend to be something that I'm not. I have been involved with groups that were considered revolutionary groups. That's because...uh, I had a hard time. It seemed the younger generation embraced me; I was the first trombonist to be identified with the avant-garde. Even though I played with mainstream cats, hardboppers, but I had created a form of music to put the trombone in that music. You know. I'm not saying I was the first one to do it, but I was the first one to have major exposure. Therefore, in Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia* it was written that I was the first trombone player of the '60s to be identified with the avant-garde jazz. It didn't list anyone's name but mine. The reason is because my exposure, that it was on Blue Note, which was the main jazz company in the world at the time. That gave credibility to the avant-garde and opened the door for several of the avant-garde pioneers such as Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and Eric Dolphy to record on that label;²⁸ they knew my music and the groups that I recorded as

²⁷ Around 1955 Le Chat Qui Pêche (The Cat That Fishes) opened at 9 rue de la Huchette in the Latin Quarter.

²⁸ Ornette Coleman (b. 1930) is a saxophonist, trumpet player, and violinist and a major figure in avant garde jazz, though he began playing rhythm and blues. Eric Dolphy

guinea pigs to find out that that kind of music worked. They was ready to tear at me. After they saw what I did on *Some Other Stuff* they was ready to kill me! Because Alfred was out of town when I recorded that and Frank Wolff was the A&R person; Alfred wanted to kill me. [imitates Lion in a German accent] “Are you crazy... you recorded that?” [laughs]

Oh, man. They found out that all of my music was already published in my company, they *really* didn’t like that!²⁹ They dropped me like a hot potato.

Singer: They didn’t ask you to record again?

Moncur: That’s right. They dropped me like a hot potato....I recorded with other people a couple of times; but before that they wanted to sign me exclusively. I was rewarded when they did that. I didn’t do that to be funny. I put my music there about a year before I even started recording with them. That was done behind a young lady that was my friend at the time I knew and she was working for Marv Davidson’s lawyer, Harold Levett, and Bruce Wright who was a lawyer at the time before he became judge. Remember they called him “Turn ‘em loose Bruce”?³⁰ You don’t remember that. And my company was set-up at the time when John Coltrane’s company, Jocal, Cannonball’s, and everybody’s, so I just thought it was the natural thing to do. Now, all those cats were considered to be really well-established musician; “You’re just coming on the scene and you’re telling me....”

Singer: I know you were planning a record with Monk and Art Blakey and maybe Woody Shaw. That was a travesty that Blue Note didn’t go for that. It would have been a classic.

Moncur: Oh, *man*! Honest to God. We had a three-way conference call, because I told Monk and Blakey, I said: “I have this music and I want you guys on this date” and they had heard *Evolution* and Monk went for it because Monk *loved* “Monk in Wonderland” that I wrote for him. He told Nellie that, he told Nica. That was his favorite tune that anyone wrote for him, that he really liked. I think those cats would have brought something, they would have carried my music.

Singer: It would have been amazing.

Moncur: I mean, I was so surprised that they were so receptive to want to do it and to prove it they said: “We’re going to call Alfred now.” Alfred said: [imitating German

(1928-1964) was a saxophonist, flautist, and bass clarinetist and a major figure in avant garde jazz.

²⁹ All of Moncur’s music is published under Gramon Publishing Co.

³⁰ Wright was called as such because in the 1970s he set low bail for many poor and minority suspects.

accent] “No, man. No, Grachan. You’re doing something different. What they’re doing is not the same thing!”

Singer: Man, what a shame. Do you have that music? The music you would have done?

Moncur: I have not recorded it. I only recorded one piece of it. That’s a piece that I did recently that I recorded in California with a group called *Inner Cry Blues*.

Moncur was being pegged as a certain kind of musician, an avant-garde one, which meant he could not or should not associate with an older generation of musicians. Lion’s dismissal of what would have become a classic record was a kind of *fait accompli* based on Moncur’s inside-outside status. Another example of this occurs in Ekkhard Jost’s *Free Jazz*. Jost says: “Apart from Grachan Moncur III, who later often worked as second trombonist in Shepp’s group, Roswell Rudd was one of the few trombone players who was then able to escape the overwhelming influence on the standard set by J.J. Johnson.”³¹ Jost seems to think that Moncur was trying to “escape” Johnson’s influence, but the truth is that Moncur idolized Johnson, and would have given anything to have approached his greatness. If anything, Moncur used Johnson as a role model.

Angela Davis discusses the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s which rendered explicit the underlying politics shaping women’s lives: “...it is possible to detect ways in which the sharing of personal relationships in blues culture prefigured consciousness-raising and its insights about the social construction of individual experience.”³² Moncur’s music reflects his personal tribulations—” Moncur never enjoyed the sustained success of his peers”—and the broader story of Newark’s decline

³¹ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz*. (New York: DaCapo, 1994), 115.

³² Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 55.

and perpetual rise.³³ If Moncur's music has been ignored, although he has made periodic attempts to re-emerge into jazz culture, then a combination of various factors can be the reason: his own self defeating attitude and the bottoming-out of the jazz economy, especially in Newark are two explanations. There is a connection between Moncur's personal life in Newark and his music.

Amiri Baraka, in his liner notes to fellow Newarker Woody Shaw's album *Woody*

III, wrote about how Shaw escaped Newark and its bleak circumstances:

A lottery for most of us, I mean we don't even know if we gonna make it, in the totality of everything that means. Like the survivors of a catastrophe....Woody hails from Catastrophe City, Newark, NJ, where the wicked witch of the West has located her largish urban commode. In one sense, he's even "lucky" to have "got outta there alive....The pressure to be broken by incredible odds, by the poverty, ignorance, violence, indifference, that is one's day to day environment in the town is immense (Newark)e. It's like a grey haunting presence one feels pushing against the outside and inside at the same time. But even so, a few fortunate people like Woody Shaw who are not stronger or brighter than the struggling masses of the city, but simply more consistently focused in a direction that can provide a shield and exit from the ghetto horror, do manage to make it out. And many times the stories they carry, told through whatever medium or form, are staggering in their brutality and shattering in their beauty!³⁴

Baraka here eloquently states that for a talented person, like Shaw or Moncur, to escape "Catastrophe City," he needs focus that serves as "shield and exit." Baraka adds that it is the artist's narrative—the stories they carry—that become the vehicle for leaving brutality and also for pursuing beauty.

³³ Berger, 44.

³⁴ Amiri Baraka, liner notes to Woody Shaw, *Woody III*. Columbia JC-35977, 1979, LP. Shaw was born in Newark on December 24, 1944 and was a major trumpet specialist of the 1970s. He died in 1989 at age 44 a few months after a freak accident in which he was hit by a subway train.

Valerie Wilmer, in her 1977 study of the “new jazz,” another term for the avant-garde, contrasts the musician’s family life with a misogynistic jazz culture of the 1960s:

But political consideration aside, the musician who puts his wife and family before the music has always tended to be rejected by the subculture. The group itself frequently takes the place of the conventional family, especially when there is little work to be had and the musicians come together often to play and develop a corporate philosophy.”³⁵

Tucker says jazz as a genre is defined in the master-narrative as “great-man epics, sudden genre changes timed by a decade, and colorful anecdotes about eccentric individuals”³⁶, and Moncur easily slipped through the spaces that lie between. This is the case even though his music demands our attention: it is a beyond category amalgam of pyrotechnical bebop, funky blue vamps, and menacing waltzes colored by a self-determined confidence. “Ghost Town” (from the album *One Step Beyond*) is built on an A-flat major mode, and begins with a poignant and somber introduction by Moncur and Jackie McLean, on acrid alto saxophone.³⁷ McLean’s tone is that of Billie Holiday’s voice; the percussion, played by a 17 year-old Tony Williams on drums, Bobby Hutcherson’s vibes, and Eddie Khan’s bass, scrapes and knocks. These are the specters haunting the shutters of the town in question. It is desolation, echoing in the concrete valleys of buildings. “Evolution” and “Air Raid” (both on the album *Evolution*) embody this sentiment, especially imagining the poor Newark of Moncur’s workaday world.

Susan McClary has analyzed constructions of gender in music thought to be “abstract.” She writes that categorizing a kind of music, as aggressive, like most “avant-

³⁵ Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz*. (London: Pluto, 1977), 193.

³⁶ Sherrie Tucker, “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies.” In *Current Musicology*, 71-73 (Spring 2001-Spring 2002): 375.

³⁷ “When Grachan and I got together it was like a marriage,” McLean said. (Shatz, 28).

garde jazz,” or contemplative, like Moncur’s, is really an articulation of power. By looking more closely at two different pieces of avant-garde jazz, we can better appreciate the distinction between the masculinized and the Moncurized. I seek to find ways to closely listen to examples of free jazz music from Moncur’s contemporaries and compare them to his music.

The first example is that of Dewey Redman, a tenor saxophonist born in 1931 in Fort Worth, Texas, whose repertory includes elements of bop, blues, and avant-garde. His composition called “Boody” from 1973’s *The Ear of the Behearer*, and another, “Turn Over Baby” from 1981’s *The Struggle Continues*, are each wildly impressive, funkified, blues-drenched expressions of male desire.³⁸ These pieces reify the masculinized aesthetic of jazz: the all-male space, the gratuitous song titles, aggressive potency and miasma, the pure joy of sensation and action. The music is all verb and not introspective or reflective. Grachan Moncur is a second, comparative example. His music has none of the boiling-over of tenor saxophones, successive eighth notes, clarion calls, harsh vibrato, or chaotic uprising associated in the cultural imagination with the avant-garde. It is weighty, holistic, and nuanced. Nathaniel Mackey, a fiction writer, poet, and critic in *New Jazz Studies*, makes a distinction between the two:

“From noun to verb” means, on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-inflected music, and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility, a containment of the economic and social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation. The domain of action and the ability to act suggested by *verb* is closed off by the hypostasis, paralysis, and arrested suggested by *noun*....³⁹

³⁸ I use the example of Dewey Redman because of the superficial similarities between his music and Moncur’s: the hybrid of styles, the groove, use of irony, virtuoso solos, and because of their related statuses within the avant-garde.

³⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb.” In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 514.

Those in the avant-garde (post-1965 Coltrane Quartet, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp) and those from Newark in the avant-garde (Woody Shaw, Larry Young, Wayne Shorter, Alan Shorter) have the masculinities we expect from rock or punk: the aggressive stance, male body as the desired object, and cool misogyny, the attendant companion of racialized hyper-hetero-masculinity.

By comparison, others such as Moncur (I might also include Bill Dixon, Marion Brown, Lloyd McNeill, and Anthony Braxton) tend to express the reflective, ambiguous, liminal, emotional, antithetic, introspective or “feminized style”. Tucker finds these masculinities and femininities in many forms: “A feminized style, for instance, may be valued differently in jazz than a masculinized style, even if each contains both men and women.”⁴⁰

Duke Ellington is credited with saying that jazz is about choosing to be joyful *in spite* of conditions. Gender is one of the conditions. Though both of these styles (Redman contra Moncur) are masterful, creative, boundlessly imaginative, and joyful, they offer differences in how we read culture as an expression of gender. Krin Gabbard said: “Part of what has made jazz intriguing is the number of alternatives it has offered to conventional notions of masculinity and male sexuality.”⁴¹ In Moncur’s music, the traditional male spaces of the jazz culture are whittled-away, but gradually, through the magical feel of the slow and subtle compositions in question.

⁴⁰ Sherrie Tucker, “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies.” In *Current Musicology*, 71-73 (Spring 2001-Spring 2002): 388.

⁴¹ Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

In her memoir / autobiography, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, bell hooks describes the invisibility she experienced at the peak of this cultural moment:

And even though the last job was fun (cooking at the jazz club) where I get to listen to all the great musicians and meet them too. I get to meet Sun Ra, Archie Shepp. Although the “girls” in the kitchen don’t get talked to that much, especially if you are black, when I cook the musicians do come back for more and more food, especially deserts. My lemon tarts are a total favorite.⁴²

Her ironic quotes around the term “girls” expresses a triple-invisibility. First, she isn’t talked to much because of her labor—like Sarah Vaughan in Moncur’s memory, she cooks in a jazz club kitchen; second, she isn’t talked to much because she is a “girl,” though she was born in 1952 and was an adult by this time; third, she isn’t talked to much especially because she is black. Her lemon tarts are valued more than whatever she would have to say. In this example, we can see bell hooks excluded from the jazz culture she ostensibly is within. Anthony Braxton confirms: “I began to realize that there was something strange happening in the sense that I was not very much aware of the great women masters. In fact, I had not even been aware that I wasn’t aware of them!”⁴³

hooks’s anecdote, a deeply felt personal experience, demonstrates the uneasy lines between the performance of jazz and the lives surrounding it. The music was a male space, and this space expanded beyond the demarcation of the bandstand: if there is a painful economic and erotic profit-seeking element to jazz, bell hooks has felt its affects.

Lynda Sharrock, the wife of the avant-garde guitarist Sonny Sharrock elaborates:

The whole thing that goes with being a musician, like the kind of women for the kind of sexual experiences you might have, it’s something that only a king might

⁴² bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, (New York: Owl, 1997), 203.

⁴³ Graham Locke, *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton*, (New York: DaCapo, 1988), 274.

have. Musicians have a lot of things around them that are very unusual and this aura becomes part of them. So they get to this point with the white ladies of having somebody with some money to help them, and it's just too complicated. The way they treat their women is just another example of how they don't respect them because they don't respect themselves. If you can't accept yourself, then you definitely can't accept a woman—of any race. But particularly a white woman if you're Black.⁴⁴

bell hooks makes a related connection in her romantic and domestic problems with Mack, with whom she lived with for ten years. Here, she refers to herself in the third person, as if observing herself from above:

No matter how many times she shares that presents matter, he will not give gifts, or he will give something she could not possibly ever want. When she gives him special things like that out of print *My Name is Albert Ayler* record he has always wanted (that she has to search and search to find) he never shows he is pleased. He punishes her for the past, like he cannot see her as someone other than his mother.⁴⁵

hooks, and her partner, Mack, both appreciate the kind of music central to the Black Arts Movement, but she is punished *for the past* and for maltreatment visited upon him by his mother. Nathaniel Mackey is the Mack to who hooks refers. His epistolary novel, *Bass Cathedral*, opens with a letter from N. to Angel of Dust, and expresses belief in creative expression, truth, himself, through “Frankenstein,” the third song on Moncur’s and Jackie McLean’s 1964 album *One Step Beyond*:

Foreclosure is the risk I’ve run and evidently succumbed to, unable, as I’ve been, to get on with or get beyond the mere bit of melody which has held me up. Grachan Moncur III’s “Frankenstein,” however, encourages me to believe I can. That he wrote it as a waltz, more exactly, keeps me from giving up. It seems he speaks to retreat and receipt’s cautionary rhyme and revision by pushing waltz’s restrained embrace a bit further, furthering such restraint via titular monster-held-

⁴⁴ Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz*, (London: Pluto, 1977), 199.

⁴⁵ hooks, 218.

at-bay (extenuation confounding stark, Frankensteinian stitch with *Ur*-rhapsodic stitch.)⁴⁶

There is a private world expressed by Moncur's "Frankenstein" that N. sees in himself, though it excluded hooks. Originally called "Freedom Waltz," the 32-bar composition reveals a beauty in ugliness, the humanity inside the corpse-constructed monster. George E. Lewis articulates and resolves of both musical and what have frequently been thought of as "extra musical" issues, namely race and ethnicity, class, and social and political philosophy. Lewis is an avant-garde black trombonist and author of *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, a study of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a cultural institution of avant-garde jazz musicians, founded with working-class roots in 1965. Moncur was both inside the Black Arts Movement and outside it. He was both included by Baraka and those who sought to unify avant-garde arts with the political momentum and the social upheavals that beset Newark, and also excluded because of his music's lack of aggression, its feminized quality. The result is that he has unfortunately been hidden from view.

Yet, heard for the first time, or the thousandth, *Evolution*, is as fresh and interesting as when it was recorded. Moncur's solo on "Air Raid", the first track, dances and palpitates even as it expresses a mournfulness at its core; Bobby Hutcherson's percussive, menacing vibes glitter behind Jackie McLean's acrid, lemony alto. Soaring into a high register, the cymbal from Tony Williams and the chord-like vibes interact and form a background of clicks, hums, and staccato interruptions. McLean floats above them and wanders off into the theme; Lee Morgan's rubbery, blues-inflected solo begins over

⁴⁶ Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral*, (New York: New Directions, 2008), 1.

the same vibe theme then pops into a sparkling, buoyant glissando; it is a gloss on the blues. The listener can image the devastated neighborhoods of windowless, brick buildings seen in Helen Stummer's pictures—it has been an “air raid,” and it is as if the air itself makes the interplay of the instruments find recompense in the act of playing above whatever destructive force was in Moncur's imagination.

“Evolution,” the second track, begins with two long breaths; these repeat over and over. Several drum rolls seem to push McLean's alto into being. Like Charles Mingus's title “*Pithecanthropus Erectus*,” the first human to stand, “Evolution” suggests the way the music straddled the hard-bop and avant-garde styles for which these musicians were known. Like Lynda Hull, whose work knit-together narrative and lyrical styles in a way that evolved both, “Evolution” keeps the time as much in the horns as in the drums. The enchanting affect suggests “the beginning of a change in mankind.”⁴⁷ “The Coaster,” the third track, is a happy-go-lucky illustration of Coney Island. The coasting sax and trumpet behind the trombone roll it along, as if on a track. The summertime atmosphere of freedom and people watching on the beach is expressed in “The Coaster.” “Monk in Wonderland,” Moncur's tribute to Monk shifts from 3/4, a waltz, to 4/4, standard time in jazz; though the beat changes, the pulse stays the same. Interestingly, the two somber tracks come first; the joyous, up-tempo pieces come second. Moncur's dedication to Monk implies both musicians' inability to stay pegged to a single style within Blue Note's roster; neither mainstream, nor avant-garde, Moncur's deliberate attention to Monk's influence is an interesting way to reconnoiter the ways marginal people voice their personalities and insights via their artistic expression.

⁴⁷ Moncur, in A.B. Spellman, liner notes, *Evolution*, Blue Note CDP 7841532, compact disc, 1988.

IV. Margins

Moncur's compositions and playing both demonstrate great style and quality of style. As the political considerations of the jazz with which he was associated became passé, as power in Newark shifted away from those instrumental in the Black Arts Movement, and as peoples' tastes in jazz changed, Moncur's position on the mountaintop of jazz legends became uncertain. Moncur's only artistic goal was to be himself; he did not follow trends, get on bandwagons, or seek approval. Other musicians who were less politically vocal, like Thelonious Monk, began to overshadow Moncur, even as those in the avant-garde lionized Monk as the high priest of their music. Robin D.G. Kelley analyzes the ways the avant-garde interpreted, appropriated, and was shadowed by Thelonious Monk. Kelley shows how the term "avant-garde" becomes complicated with the position of jazz in American culture. Moncur was labeled as "avant-garde" and as "jazz" in ways that may have been intended to limit him. This happened with Moncur's idol, Thelonious Monk. Neither Moncur nor Monk easily fit into either the mainstream post-bop model or the avant-garde label that peaked in the middle 1960s, just at the time when a young Moncur began to be noticed at Blue Note Records:

The term *avant-garde* obscures as much as it reveals. There have been many self-proclaimed avant-garde movements in music and in the arts more generally, and depending on how one defines avant-garde or the specific historical context in which these movements emerged, one might argue that jazz's unique position as neither "folk" culture nor a product of mainstream Western arts institutions, combined with its ever-changing improvisational character, renders the entire genre avant-garde.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Robin D.G. Kelley, "New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz Avant-Garde." *Black Music Research Journal* 19 (Fall 1999): 137.

Some of the insights from Kelley's earlier work in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* are reflected in his newer research on Monk. In *Race Rebels*, Kelley finds a "hidden transcript," meaning an infrapolitical or covert agenda of resistance and self-expression in the lives of ordinary African Americans, something at odds with prescriptions of the African American middle class.⁴⁹ For example, in reading the racial protests on Birmingham, Alabama buses, he sees the buses as "moving theaters," first as a public stage on which African Americans struggled to achieve a measure of autonomy and dignity, and second as a site of black-white racial conflict between the races where the city's increasingly marginalized working class was in conflict with a middle class Civil Rights movement in 1963.⁵⁰

Kelley's concerns with Monk also seek "hidden transcripts," and in this way, share these concerns with Tucker's work in *Big Ears*. Kelley cites both Steve Lacy, a soprano saxophonist, and one of Monk's most frequent interpreters, and Ira Gitler, an older critic whose métier is at odds with the new developments in jazz historiography, in terms of their descriptions of Monk's gendered music. Lacy described Monk's music as distinctively "masculine," while Gitler agreed, referring to Monk's music in contrast to "numerous effeminate jazz offerings."⁵¹ In these examples, Kelley sees a larger point: the shifting critical responses to Monk's music change depending on the political landscape on which they reflect. When a conservative critic hears Monk, he hears a foil against the

⁴⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 8. Kelley takes the phrases "hidden transcript" and "infrapolitics" from the political anthropologist James C. Scott.

⁵⁰ Kelley, 57.

⁵¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, "New Monastery: Monk and the Jazz Avant-Garde," *Black Music Research Journal* 19 (Fall 1999): 140.

free jazz or avant-garde rebellion. When a critic is concerned with Black Nationalism or Third World solidarity, Monk becomes one of his or her own.⁵² Tucker says jazz as a genre is defined in the master-narrative as “great-man epics, sudden genre changes timed by a decade, and colorful anecdotes about eccentric individuals.”⁵³ In this sense, Kelley’s work on Monk seeks to overturn parts of the master-narrative.

In addition to Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, Andrew Hill, and Charles Mingus, Kelley cites Moncur’s “Monk in Wonderland,” also on *Evolution*, as being aligned with Monk’s insouciant approach to music. Partly this was a political choice on avant-garde musicians’ part: they were “some of the most vocal proponents identified with the Black Freedom movement and/or were organizing to fight racism, exploitation, and inequality in the music industry itself.”⁵⁴

Michael Cuscuna at Mosaic Records reissued Moncur’s Blue Note recordings elegantly and with appropriate appreciation after 35 years of obscurity. The same year of this reissue, 2003, *The New York Times* offered this assessment: “His Blue Note records, meanwhile, went out of print, as if the company had no interest in preserving his memory.”⁵⁵ Moncur’s obscurity stands out in contrast to others with whom Moncur recorded at the time, such as Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. They became some of the most-reissued and highest paid musicians in jazz, which raises a question of why Moncur’s story is framed in the subjunctive, a story of actions set in terms of wishes,

⁵² Kelley, 136.

⁵³ Sherrie Tucker, “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” in *Current Musicology*, 71-73 (Spring 2001-Spring 2002): 375.

⁵⁴ Kelley, 144.

⁵⁵ Ken Weiss, “The Perils of Living Too Long.” *The New York Times*, 26 October 2003.

doubts, and possibilities. Something encoded in Moncur's cultural productions made his a story of "what-might-have-been."⁵⁶ Hancock and Shorter, along with drummer Tony Williams, were first members of Moncur's group, and later became superstars in Miles Davis's band, known as the second great quintet (1965-1968).⁵⁷

Moncur, however, by all accounts of the available data, has been excluded from this master-narrative, which always includes Monk. This is not to denigrate Monk and his achievements; although the appellation "genius" can easily be sewn over the Moncur story, his outsider status, even within an outside subgenre of the music, can only serve to reify the mythology of the jazz genius. Most of these geniuses, such as Billie Holiday or Charlie Parker, for instance, died young of drug abuse and general dissipation. Moncur only died symbolically, moving beneath the radar, unaware of his fate as the cultural imagination became amnesiac. Of all the cities colored by the heroism and tragedy of the 1960s, Newark, New Jersey has a culture that perpetually moves in the shadow of that decade, particularly five days in July 1967; these social disturbances ("riots") throw Moncur's story in Newark into focus.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ For more information about Davis's second great quintet, see Todd Coolman, liner notes to Miles Davis, *Miles Davis Quintet 1965-1968*, Columbia 67398, 1998.

Chapter 3

Making History Bearable: Lynda Hull and Reading Newark

“Better this immersion than to live untouched.”—Lynda Hull, “Frugal Repasts”¹

“If poetry is not absolution, we can expect pity from nowhere else.”—Yannis Ritsos²

Lynda Hull’s love of beauty was so intense that she could risk her life to achieve it. In the fall of 1981 in Little Rock, Arkansas, driving her oil-burning “Outlaw Vega” through a thunderstorm, she decided not to turn on her windshield wipers, since the rain-streaked patterns of streetlight and starlight on the glass reminded her of Monet’s water lilies. She crashed into a parked car, cutting and bruising her head. This incident illuminates many of the themes her poems address: the intensity of longing, the attraction to near-disaster, the compulsion toward desolation, and the glamorization of difficulty. These forces were manifested in her greatest poems, and were what drew her to the sad and unfinished story of Newark’s decline and renewal. Hull’s approach to personal and collective memory merges her historical context with an intense, ethical, empathic language: she moves the chaos of the cities as herself or through a mask, and describes the streets with a jazz-inflected lens of horrified fascination.

She is an urban poet, with the concerns of urban people: she pursued an inventive way of describing the interlocking meanings of decay in her own life and in the city that she loved. We should care about Lynda Hull because she not only illustrates intensity. Her work illustrates that empathic inquiry can start with one idea: to look at cities, and

¹ Hull, 127.

² “The Poet’s Place” in Charles Simic and Mark Strand, eds. *Another Republic: 17 Europeans and South American Writers* (New York: Ecco, 1976), 203.

then ask one's own mind: what else have you got to say about reading cities with empathy? Her subjects employed to find these meanings show the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of lost causes, and of "utsuroi," a Japanese term for "a way of finding beauty at the point it is altered."³ Her voice as an urban poet reveals a range of subjects, the way a prism illuminates multiples of the same fractured image: Chet Baker⁴, a metaphorical bridge between the burning South Bronx and the Warsaw Ghetto, Charlie Parker's dissipation through improvisation, and cubist voices of racial animus, violence, and tumult of Newark in the summer of 1967. Hull did not, however, seek to praise decline, as much to embody its necessity of reinvention, and of relocation—she sought to be critical enough for her subject to become greater. David Jauss, Hull's undergraduate poetry teacher at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, reveals her desire for criticism in a way that relates to this obsessive treatment of her subjects—she handled criticism better than she handled praise, if only because she believed it more than she could allow herself to believe the praise:

"Such a craving is not only good but necessary if someone truly wants to be an artist, of course, but at times I thought there was something almost unhealthy about Lynda's response to criticism: it was as if she desired confirmation of her own negative judgment of herself, as if she wanted proof that she didn't deserve to be praised and loved."⁵

The dynamic of her attraction to criticism and her attraction to the shards of the cities annihilated by the urban crisis are connected. The urban crisis is a general term that refers

³ Hull, 113

⁴ Baker (1929-1988) was a trumpet player and singer in the cool genre; though plagued with heroin problems, he made an important contribution, with Gerry Mulligan, in their piano-less quartet in the middle 1950s. He was killed when he fell from a hotel balcony in Amsterdam.

⁵ Jauss, 1998, 14

to the state of postindustrial cities and their social and economic problems; besides the decline of industry cities such as Newark, Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, Baltimore, etc. faced a diminishing tax base correlated to “white flight”, the decision to invest in interstate highways rather than public transit, poorly performing schools, neglect of basic services—trash pickup, snow removal, park maintenance, libraries, no upkeep of buildings, and so forth; those cities later became “eerily apocalyptic,” with boarded up shops, hollow shells of factories, and huge portions of the population living below poverty line⁶.

Hull’s work explicates her unique reaction to urban crisis, which looks into the vortex before the plunge and embraces the burning buildings. Robert Beauregard says, for most observers, the “contradictions of urban development were simply overwhelming,” and therefore the common reaction was to retreat; Hull, however, moved closer to the ruin, like a boxer moving rhythmically forward into a blow. *Urban crisis*, the term used by commentators to express their fatalism, was a euphemism for *race*. By claiming an intractable crisis, commentators severed their moral ties to places in decline and thereby reneged on their social obligations. Many argued that people had either succumbed to despair or lacked the capacity to overcome their condition. The practical advice instead became extreme—abandon the city!⁷ Poetry helps us to read nuance and subtlety to the words “urban crisis”⁸ because it does not take politics as a way out, it

⁶ Sugrue, 3 For another poet’s view of Detroit, see Alan Dugan, “Accommodation to Detroit” in *Poems Seven*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 126. Dugan writes: “Greater Detroit is what has grown around the ones who have / Hamtramck or nothing as a preview of a concrete flower to come.”

⁷ Beauregard, 151

⁸ “unpacking my sequence of crises vanquished” (Hull, 81).

constantly refreshes and engages language, and it engages the reader not as mere consumer, but as a producer of the text. Therefore, the reader's ethical and imaginative sensibilities are employed with the mechanisms of a poem. It is more important that writer can be evaluated not only as an aesthete, but as a moralist. When Hull engages readers at a creative level, the personal memories Hull had of her cities, and the public's of those same urban imaginaries are unified. Cities should be honored, preserved, and praised not only for aesthetic reasons, but for moral ones.

In Hull's exegesis of urban crisis—specific to Newark, but useful for cities in general—she does not disagree that the crisis was intractable; she was partly attracted to the city at its most vulnerable, yet remained optimistic. In her poems, her general affection for the city remains intact. Un-intimidated by race, and drawn to the angularity and chaos in the urban environment, she did not romanticize the suburban comfort sought by many of her contemporaries in poetry; she did not pursue an academic job as a “poet.” She sought ways in both her form and content to escape that ambivalence, even if it meant seeking the caustic, often painful remains of the urban spaces that ignited her imagination in the first place.

Much of Hull's work operates along a trajectory of her memory of urban spaces. She was driven by “a deeply ambivalent sense of survivorhood—an awe and astonishment that she endured and emerged relatively unscathed her years on the street....Memory, in other words, but never in an abstracted or effete sense.”⁹ In this manner, the private sectors of her past become inextricably bound to the public knowledge of cities (e.g. “the asphalt jungle, the blackboard jungle—concrete as a

⁹ Wojahn, 2009

cancerous quicksand”¹⁰). Her poems are the guide through her own memory, even as the tour expands into a collective retrieval for the cities slowly succumbing. Dolores Hayden offers a helpful insight: “Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities.”¹¹“ Hayden shows the ways memory is place-oriented, and contends that because the urban landscape evokes visual memory, it is an underutilized resource for public history¹².

Many poets working around the same time as Hull also found inspiration in cities, but their work rarely approaches the unique interface of private and public memories of those cities. These poets often had special insights in their poems, but these excerpts offer conventional insights into cities:

“He walks eastward thru the Village, the sun going down streaking pinks and blues in his path. He walks down West 10th Street to 8th Street to St. Marks Place to the end, the park. Through the park to the end. Down 8th Street to the end. Darkness. He climbs the tenement stairs one by one.”¹³
(David Henderson, “the kid”)

“The village is not better than Pittsburgh. / Only Pittsburgh is more than Pittsburgh. / Rome is better than Rome in the same way the sound / of raccoon tongues licking the inside walls / of the garbage tub is more than the stir / of the them in the muck of the garbage.”¹⁴ (Jack Gilbert, “Tear it Down”)

¹⁰ Judah Stampfer, as quoted in Beauregard, 204

¹¹ Hayden, 9

¹² *ibid.*, 47

¹³ David Henderson, *The Low East* (Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1980), 15.

¹⁴ Jack Gilbert, *The Great Fires* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 9.

“The black women in Newark are fine. Even with all that grease / in their heads. I mean even the ones where the wigs / slide around, and they coming at you 75 degrees off course.”¹⁵ (Amiri Baraka, “W.W.”)

“515 Madison Avenue / door to heaven? portal / stopped realities and eternal licentiousness / or at least your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables”¹⁶ (Frank O’Hara, “Rhapsody”)

“Buildings embankment parkway grass and river / all those cars / all those windows / each building shooting (straight up) / out of its small allotment / all those buildings fibered together / their flowing sap / traffic threading / the shark tooth city / O coral reed / O slick and edible matter”¹⁷ (James Schuyler, “Buildings”)

“In the mills and refineries of its south side Chicago / passes its natural gas in flames / Bouncing like bunsens from stacks a hundred feet high. / The stench stabs at your eyeballs. / The whole sky green and yellow backdrop for the skeleton / steel of a bombed-out town.”¹⁸ (Lew Welch, “Chicago Poem”)

Like Newark, Hull also contains a troubled past. Early photos by William Cone of Newark show dilapidated, crumbling infrastructure, immigrant workers covered in goo and grime from head to toe, and give a sense of desperation; it is a cityscape just scraping by.¹⁹ Unlike Moncur, who grew up as the pampered only child of people who raised him to be an artist, Hull’s experience of Newark as a child perhaps planted the germ in her head of transience. She was not content to stay in one place, and her liquid imagination always showed a push towards transition and change.

¹⁵ Harris, 221.

¹⁶ Frank O’Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1964), 37.

¹⁷ James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Noonday, 1993), 86-87.

¹⁸ Lew Welch, *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 24.

¹⁹ See: New Jersey Historical Society, “City on Display: A Newark Photographer and His Clients, 1890s-1940s.” Database on-line.

http://www.jerseyhistory.org/exhibit_detail.php?recid=35. Accessed 23 April 2013.

A self-described “feral child,”²⁰ she was born in Newark on December 5, 1954, and grew up in Upper Montclair. [Lynda Hull, Figure 1] She attended Montclair High School and won a scholarship to Princeton in 1970, but dropped out of high school and ran away at fifteen. As a child, she was always writing or reading, drawing and painting. She was always interested in Newark. Her mother, Christine Hull, described Lynda’s attachment to the underprivileged, and ties this attraction to Lynda’s witnessing, as a young teenager, the Newark riots / uprising. Christine Hull said: “We would go to Newark and Jersey City once a year around Christmas to deliver food to families in need... she just loved that. Her interest came about with the Newark fires... going to her grandmother’s roof and being totally impressed.”²¹

Like Tolstoy said, the Hull’s story of Lynda’s unhappiness is unique to them. “We [Christine and Gene] didn’t see her from her 16th birthday until 1974 or ’75”²²; Her husband, David Wojahn, also an important poet, elaborated: “Lynda was the oldest of a family of four children, two brothers and a sister. Father was a businessman, working in various aspects of sales, mostly carpets. Her mother was the head dietician in one of the New Jersey State mental hospitals. Family very dysfunctional during her childhood, for a number of reasons. But later on they grew vastly more stable. After about ten years of being incommunicado with them (from her late teens, when she ran away from home,

²⁰ Wojahn (Hull, 227).

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Christine Hull, interview by the author, 2009

into her late '20s), she reconnected with them, and had an especially close relationship with them in the last decade of her life.”²³

Hull’s family moved to New Jersey from Pittsburgh in 1963 and lived variously in Montclair and the Caldwells. Her last years at home were “fragmented by drugs.”²⁴ She lived on the streets, crashed on friends’ sofas, and married a Chinese gambler, an illegal alien. Moving to and from Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and San Francisco, she pursued the marginal, liminal status that would fuel many of the subtexts of her writing: poverty, alcoholism, and heroin addiction²⁵. In adulthood, when she’d return to her hometown, she’d often drive to the hills of upper Montclair—a place where she could see both Manhattan on one side of the view and Jersey and its environs on the other²⁶.

Jauss elaborates on this: “Much of Lynda’s poetry conveys this essential hunger of hers, this desire to feel and understand everything human, no matter how devastating. Perhaps this is why...she seems to glamorize desolation—after all, it is an essential path toward understanding the riddle, toward immersion in the life she felt separate from.”

Mark Doty, Hull’s friend and an important contemporary poet, in the afterword to Hull’s posthumously published third book, *The Only World*, wrote: “If the difficulty of personal history is glamorized, in these poems, it is because glamour is a way of making history bearable.”

²³ Wojahn, 2009. David Wojahn (b. 1953), an American poet, has won many of poetry’s most important prizes.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ “From a child on, she always looked for someone who was hurt, different from the norm.” Christine Hull, interview by the author, 2009.

²⁶ Wojahn, 2009

Hull's poems show a genius of synthesis that interweaves disparate worlds, juxtaposing moments that Yusef Komunyakaa, Hull's graduate poetry teacher at Indiana University in Bloomington, says: "allude to public history alongside private knowledge."²⁷ "These connect to each other in her poetry in several ways: through her compassion for outcasts, mortality, and an understanding that the recognition of human transience is the necessary predecessor to wonderment and a credible appreciation of beauty"²⁸. With her alternating currents of attraction and repulsion, Hull attempted to connect Newark's fraught history—she paid attention to the city's multiple manifestations of race, class, and gender—to her own battered past. She never saw the publication of *The Only World*, as she died in a car crash on March 29, 1994²⁹. Strangely, her accidental and untimely death both reveals and partly precludes our apprehension of the meaning and reception of her work.

"Ask then / to discover the secret thing you seek, / gazing out always over
the diners & arcades / to the cities of New Jersey rising / white, small

²⁷ Hull, xii; These did not always connect via desolation, however. Coleridge, and other Romantics, for example, made a connection between their private understandings of the artist in an environment with utopian principles in the New World, like Pennsylvania, where Coleridge and Robert Southey had planned a "Pantisocracy." Frontier America and 18th-century England were affected by the Romantic vision of personal freedom. John Keats's brother, George, emigrated to Kentucky in 1818. (Manning, 125). Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947) is a major American poet. Hull studied with him in the 1980s. I studied with him between 1993-1997.

²⁸ Wojahn, 2009

²⁹ She was pronounced dead at the scene, Route 3 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, shortly after the 8:15 p.m. crash in the southbound lane. She was driving between 75 and 80 m.p.h. She had apparently tried to avoid an exit while traveling in the passing lane, may have swerved and lost control on the wet and icy road. "She attempted to make a sharp right turn avoiding Exit 4 and she lost control of the vehicle and struck a guardrail, vaulted over it and traveled down the embankment and struck a tree" (Dowdy). 40,716 Americans were killed in car crashes in 1994.

beyond the Palisades.³⁰ (“Spell for the Manufacture & Use of a Magic Carpet”)

“At the hour the streetlights come on, buildings / turn abstract. The Hudson, for a moment, formal.³¹ (“Tide of Voices”)

“I want a song that rolls / through the night like a big Cadillac / past factories to the refineries / squatting on the bay, round and shiny / as the coffee urn warming my palm.³² (“Night Waitress”)

“Whole years I knew only nights: automats / & damp streets, the Lower East Side steep // with narrow rooms where sleepers turn beneath / alien skies.³³ (“At Thirty”)

“...I’m on the edge of a new day / in this city of Newark which is not a city // of roses, just one big hockshop.³⁴ (“Midnight Reports”)

“Familiar numbered streets erase themselves—your ride uptown—14th, 23rd, 42nd, counting into the concourse / swarmed with zero-hour losers, newsprint, incense,³⁵ (“Gateway to Manhattan”)

“Red velvet the color / of that long car we’d cruise under the river through Alphabetown, / then the Bronx, Hunts Point / & its flooded streets awash with crates of rotting fruit, / streets that figure still // relentless in the endless anarchy of dreams—³⁶ (“Red Velvet Jacket”)

Hull, then, can be understood within a lineage of seeking uses for memory to re-imagine the past, to reinvent it³⁷. Memory is tied to physicality and materiality, via the

³⁰ Hull, 4

³¹ *ibid.*, 7

³² *ibid.*, 18

³³ *ibid.*, 33

³⁴ *ibid.*, 79

³⁵ *ibid.*, 108

³⁶ *ibid.*, 154

³⁷ “I’m impresario / of the moment, the sky’s peerless imperial // blue, combers foaming to glassy ripples / intricate as the mind, taking this all in” (*Ibid.*, 205).

workings of imagination. Simonides of Ceos³⁸ is credited for the invention of the “Method of Loci,” a mnemonic technique in classical antiquity, which used the loci of large architectural spaces and similarly seeks rooms or passages in the memory at specific locations to memorize information, such as speeches. Giulio Camillo’s³⁹ memory theater, for example, connects the materiality of architecture (wood, stone) to spatial representations of chronology⁴⁰. Marcel Proust⁴¹, in 1909, unleashed the power of involuntary memory, when a madeleine triggered memories of his mother. A final inhabitant of this lineage is Roberto Bolaño,⁴² whose monumental novel, *2666*, is a vast metaphor for the amount of time it will take for the human mind to process memories of historical events, especially sexual violence. Both those who fled cities for the suburbs and those marginal inhabitants still enduring the urban environment “might invent

³⁸ Simonides (c. 556 BC-468 BC) was a Greek lyric poet. See Yates and Hutton, 30

³⁹ Camillo (c. 1480-1544) was a Friulian-Italian philosopher known for his posthumous work, *L’Idea del Teatro*.

⁴⁰ The English expression “in the first place” has its etymology in this method.

⁴¹ Marcel Proust (1871-1922) explored memory at length from his bedroom in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a 3200-page, seven-volume novel. *Chercher* means both “to look for” and “to try”; its common usage as “to seek” is useful to understand the way history is sought out, as an attempt. “...a more vital tie—born of sunny days, and not to be reborn but with them, containing something of their essential nature, it not merely calls up their image in our memory, but gives up a guarantee that they do really exist, that they are close around us, immediately accessible” (Proust, 78).

⁴² Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) was Chilean novelist. “...but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else” (Bolaño, 2008a: 86).

consoling fictions,⁴³“ but Hull sought to reconfigure the mythology in search of some provisional rightness⁴⁴.

In her context, Hull has few predecessors and few successors. In my view, Paul Blackburn, the urban poet whose *métier* was New York City,⁴⁵ has related concerns to Hull’s, but his work precedes the urban crisis that was her focus.

In his history of Newark, Kevin Mumford demonstrates the failure of both Black Nationalism and interracial liberalism to protect the citizens of Newark. Robert O. Self, however, is more forgiving: for many black people, he argues, Black Nationalism symbolized their engagement with the institutions and traditions of American political culture⁴⁶. Hull observes these same events, but she uses different materials: through a passionate syntax and attention to language, she developed an inventive method by which the undercurrents simmering beneath Mumford’s analysis are revealed.

Hull’s lyricism offers an artistic inquiry into artistic inquiry. She exists in a rich cultural context of visual artists, jazz musicians⁴⁷, and photographers who were driven by

⁴³ Hull, 155

⁴⁴ “After surviving, what arrives?” (Hull, 134)

⁴⁵ Paul Blackburn (1926-1971) was a leading member of the Black Mountain movement. His poem “Bryant Park,” for example, was composed between 1958-1963, and ergo does not confront the traumatic re-imagining of the city of Hull’s era. Stylistically, Blackburn’s poems share the textures, lingo, and zeitgeist of the Beat Generation.

⁴⁶ Self, 255

⁴⁷ Many jazz musicians were from Newark: Andy Bey, Better Carter, Babs Gonzales, Al Haig, Scott LaFaro, Grachan Moncur III, James Moody, Ike Quebec, Woody Shaw, Wayne Shorter, Alan Shorter, Sarah Vaughan, and Larry Young. “Years later, Wayne Shorter said he would run into Sarah Vaughan on tour: “I’d say ‘What’s happenin’?’ and she’d say ‘Newark,’ and that was enough, ‘cause you know what Newark does to people” (Mercer, 22-23).

an impulse to embrace the cities during this period. Wayne Shorter, a tenor saxophonist and composer, perhaps the most famous living musician from Newark said:

“Newark was a hell of a place to learn something about how to survive...a lot of things, whether you were well-off or very, very down in the dregs of poordom. Poordom. There is only a few people from Newark now who are somewhere in the world, imparting their knowledge of survival intelligently, or just daily survival.”⁴⁸

Marshall Berman suggests a few artists, like Red Grooms, whose “Ruckus Manhattan” installation showed the same intellectual power as Hull: “its wide horizon, its vision of the city as a whole.”⁴⁹ “Walter Benjamin reflects on the idea of these two ways of thinking about the same material:

“The card index marks the conquest of three-dimensional writing, and so presents an astonishing counterpoint to the three-dimensionality of script in its original form as rune or knot notation. (And today the book is already, as the present mode of scholarly production demonstrates, an outdated mediation between two different filing systems. For everything that matters is to be found in the card box of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar studying it assimilates it into his own card index)”⁵⁰.

Just as Hayden White challenged historians to write historiography using the arts as a model, Hull’s work that deals with history, with the other threads of inquiry, uses figurativeness as a new language to treat her materials. The poems take this intuition and turn it into language. Christopher Alexander, in *A Pattern Language* makes the interesting connection that poetic language makes connections to not only illuminate

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Berman, 29. Red Grooms (b. 1937) is a multimedia artist known for his cartoon-like installations of urban scenes, such as the subway.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 78

words, but also lives. Poetry and architecture use compression to shed meaning on the relationship between a human and space⁵¹. Poetry uses language and architecture uses materiality (wood, steel, glass, or stone) to configure empty space (the white space on the page) so that when a person enters the space meaning is provided: is it a sacred space, a public space, a private space? White suggests how historical processes benefit from the poetic:

“Historical accounts purport to be verbal models, or icons, of specific segments of the historical process. But such models are needed because the documentary record does not figure forth an unambiguous image of the structure of events attested in them. In order to figure ‘what *really* happened’ in the past, therefore, the historian must *prefigure* as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents. This prefigurative act is *poetic* inasmuch as it is precognitive and precritical in the economy of the historian’s own consciousness. It is also poetic insofar as it is constitutive of the structure that will subsequently imaged in the verbal model offered by the historian as a representation and explanation of ‘what *really* happened’ in the past.”⁵²

Hull’s metaphoric power, then, can be understood as a mode of inquiry into the history with which she was concerned. For example, Helen Stummer’s photographs of Newark look into the mouth of the “urban crisis” with the same empathic, textured, active eye. She sees the poor and their blighted blocks as individuals, and shows the landscape overlapping with figures, and those figures stepping out of the landscape to evoke hopefulness in spite of their situation. Like the Hudson River School of painters whose images evoke the spirit of the landscape, Stummer’s bodies are not inert. The “bodies passing smell like bodies, unwashed, ginsoaked, dopesick, the must & salt.”⁵³

⁵¹ Alexander, xl-xliv

⁵² White, 30-31

⁵³ Hull, 223

The images of Mel Rosenthal's photography also reiterate those sixteen year-olds with "police-colored skin."⁵⁴ Hull, Stummer, and Rosenthal ask the same question of their subject: "Why court the brink & then step back?"⁵⁵ The subjects of these photos, hailed by no one, extend the photographers' visions of the self: those who had been invisible are now reaffirmed⁵⁶. Too long taken for granted, they cease to be objects, but are subjects. Rosenthal's photos, taken of the South Bronx in the early-middle 1970s show a rose-hued humanity amid the crumbling bricks, boarded windows, and the raw marrow of the inner city left without a government-provided infrastructure⁵⁷. Camilo José Vergara's photographs at the *Invincible Cities* web site show the ripe, apocalyptic images of "urbicidal ruins"⁵⁸. The images show, within their frame, the tragedy in mortar and glass, of the euphemism "urban crisis." The value of Hull's lyricism is a tonic to that ruin. Wojahn suggests Hull made the same choices in her poems: "Her poems seem always to inhabit those liminal places where urban pastoral turns into urban noir—never speciously or with any form of mannerism."⁵⁹ Alan Dugan (1923-2003), a poet known for his acerbic wit and use of Classical forms in his poems, viewed the South Bronx as a

⁵⁴ Hull, 156

⁵⁵ Ibid., 133

⁵⁶ DeCarava, 23

⁵⁷ "The South Bronx is certain to be one of the areas hardest hit by the President's [Nixon] decision to impose austerity on domestic programs presumably in order to pay the brutal costs of a senseless war [Vietnam]. Combined with state budgetary restraints the outlook is bleak, for the South Bronx is dependent on public resources, not just for the quality of life, but for life itself." Mayor John Lindsay, January 18, 1973, *The New York Times*

⁵⁸ Berman, 28

⁵⁹ Wojahn, 2009

somber anodyne to feeling bad in his poem “On Being Asked How Do You Feel After An Operation With Inadequate Anesthesia, This Is How I Feel.”:

I.

Richard Nixon
is standing
in his underwear
in the South Bronx
in the rain.
Bob Abplanalp
and Bebe Rebozo
are pointing at him
and laughing.
He’s crying
with gratitude.

II.

Richard Nixon
is standing in the South Bronx
in the rain.
He has lost
his underwear.
He covers his parts
with his hands and shyly.
Something has gone wrong.

III.

He is surrounded
by black children
with walkie-talkies
and knives.
They are waiting
for the market
to settle down.
Eyes opened low
in mixed trading.
Kidneys are slack.
There are no calls
for hard-ons.
Nixon has a hard-on.

IV.

There's a call
 from the Burn Unit.
 Fresh skin is wanted.
 Premium prices
 for whole skins.
 Hard-ons optional.
 The flayers scrub up.
 Nixon autographs himself.
 He is cloned
 the hard way
 but cloned.
 He or his clones
 will be the next Presidents of the U.S.
 That's how I feel
 since you asked:
 much better.⁶⁰

Dugan's set-up to his punch line is a rapid-fire fantasy of Nixon suffering an emasculating experience in the South Bronx, even as the President is unaware of why these indignities are happening to him. Structured in a linear re-imagining of Nixon living in the South Bronx, Dugan's recovery from inadequate anesthesia is small compared to the trauma Nixon inflicted on the neighborhood.

Unlike graffiti, the phenomenon of break dancing, or the DJ's turntable, poems and photographs are not ad hoc responses to depravation; rather, Dugan, Hull and Rosenthal were unblinking observers who found beauty staring back. Berman recalls a tagline used by WNYC during his childhood that eight million people in New York City "live in peace and harmony, and enjoy the benefits of democracy."⁶¹ It sounds quaint,

⁶⁰ Alan Dugan, *Poems Seven*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 292-293. Robert "Bob" Abplanalp (1922-2003) was the inventor of the aerosol valve, a supporter of Republican causes, and a close friend of President Nixon. Charles "Bebe" Rebozo (1912-1998) was a Florida banker and close friend of President Nixon.

⁶¹ Berman, 9

even facile, by the standards of a cynical 21st viewpoint because of the sense of detachment, irony, trendy de-personalization, and postmodern disassembly that Hull found appalling⁶².

Of all of Hull's many poems, "Love Song during Riot with Many Voices"⁶³ voices her feelings about cities best. The poem uses inventive methods of language to address the state of the city. There are two essential texts on the ways art can be a heuretic model⁶⁴ by which history can be written: Gregory L. Ulmer's *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* and Michael Jarrett's *Drifting on a Read: Jazz as a Model for Writing*, which itself is indebted to Ulmer's book. These books address two different ways theory is assimilated into humanities: through hermeneutics, or interpretation, and through heuretics, through artistic experiment. Ulmer's text confirms the obsessions that Hull had to submit to⁶⁵ were also essential in her emotional ownership of them. An orator trained in the art and needing to commit to memory a body of information (Roman law, the lives of the saints, the virtues and vices) called to mind a mnemonic sense, a mental diegesis, representing the places of invention. The orator memorized the information by placing

⁶² Wojahn, 2009

⁶³ Composed between c. 1986-1991 and published in 1991.

⁶⁴ The branch of logic which treats the art of discovery or invention.

⁶⁵ "Her obsessive concerns with betrayal, abandonment, her compassion for those living on the margins of society, the desire for communion with others, the desire for all experience, and her habitual self-loathing" (Jauss, 2009). "She'd dog poems as she dogged life, demanding that it surrender its essence and scarred beauty" (Komunyakaa, *BC*, 53).

basic units of data at regular intervals throughout the space and associating each unit with a striking image (something sexual, violent, or bizarre)⁶⁶.

This is a fair example of the way Hull tunes her memories of Newark or other sites in a new, heurctic logic. Ulmer's idea of grammatology, a theory of writing, is identified with the avant-garde's use of generative theory. For example, the story Sophocles told about Oedipus Rex, was interpreted by Freud, critiqued by Feminism, used for poetry by Breton and filmed by Pasolini⁶⁷; Ulmer's idea is to develop a way to apply art's strategy to the writing of theory. Jarrett's book expands Ulmer's grammatology and applies it to writers who have used jazz music to push interpretation into the realm of invention. He calls for a kind of plasticity in the inventive space ascribed by jazz for writers: "Invention (heurctics), on the other hand, begins when the concept of metaphor dissolves, that is, when tenor and vehicle collapse or when, as in allegory, structure is projected as a sequence. *One plays a tenor by causing a reed to vibrate* between literal and figurative levels of language."⁶⁸ So, Hull's poems, particularly those with an aim to ethically describe urban space, can help us formulate three essential questions: first, will such methods prove to be transferable or even useful in the classroom or even to the city council or citizens of Newark; second, does Hull's poetry help us to discover what happened in Newark, maybe cognitively; third, does it help us make discoveries that the scientific method simply could not yield?

Hull's poems are an ethical response to cities, because their specific, accurate, truthful, lyrical language demonstrates her responsible choice of that language, and her

⁶⁶ Ulmer, 191-192

⁶⁷ Edipo re (1967)

⁶⁸ Jarrett, 206

responsibility for her stand on the question of the status of the cities in her imagination. Duke Ellington said that jazz is about choosing to be joyful *in spite* of conditions: Hull's poetry makes this choice, by allowing the beauty she saw to intermingle with forces of decline pushing against beauty. This tension, combined with her camouflaged, subversive voices (herself or someone like herself) created a vision of the city unrivaled by other poetry then or now. Albert Murray has attributed all the scope, authority, and implications of art to this blues aesthetic⁶⁹. A blues statement, regardless of what it reflects, expresses a sense of life that is affirmative, thus the blues tradition is evidence that those who evolved it respond to the vicissitudes of the human condition not with desperation, but through the wisdom of poetry informed by pragmatic insight⁷⁰. In a fully orchestrated blues statement, tragic and comic dimensions are expressed simultaneously⁷¹.

Hull's relationship to Newark tells the reader to think through the urban crisis differently, projected through forms which are themselves tragicomic, the eloquent blues aesthetic; the poems conjure an abiding mystery that speak to tragic circumstances, yes, but also reconciliation:

“She knew how to lift a moment of beauty out of sheer ugliness, and she could touch the bedrock of contradictions embedded in the human psyche. Maybe this is what Newark taught her. When one looks at the body of work, the three wonderful collections held side-by-side, one realizes that hers was a seamless beckoning for an imagistic clarity that is out of this world.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Murray, 86a

⁷⁰ Murray, 208-209b

⁷¹ Ibid., 204

⁷² Komunyakaa, *BC*, 55

Because of her accidental, untimely death at 39 and because of the underrated status of her work prior to last year's publication of her *Collected Poems*, Hull has been routinely praised and the memory of her as a person and as an artist has been treated as hagiography.

"After I first read her work I came home and told my wife that I had a student who was already better than I would ever be,"⁷³ David Jauss recalled his association with Hull as her teacher in the early 1980s: "in many ways, I was actually her student, for she taught me far more than I ever taught her, and one of the things that she taught me was nothing less than what it means to be a poet."⁷⁴ Even taking into account Jauss's modesty and Hull's prodigious gifts and facility with language, it is difficult to temper contemporary memories of a dead colleague, especially one who joins the ranks of other poets who died young (Hull was not a suicide, but her favorite poet, Hart Crane jumped from the *S.S. Orizaba* in April 1932 at age 32). Her poetry, though not her life, is best understood through the lens of those who preceded her, particularly Crane, whose poem "The Bridge" she memorized in its entirety.⁷⁵ Crane, too, shared the blues aesthetic, a tragicomic world view which is manifested in songlike and musical phrases dripping with anguish for what is lost, irretrievable, or felt but not acquired. Crane and Hull both believed that "images, totally dissociated, when joined in the circuit of a particular emotion located with specific relation to both of them, conduce to great vividness and

⁷³ Jauss, 2009

⁷⁴ Jauss, *Blackbird*, 2008

⁷⁵ Harold "Hart" Crane (1899-1932) was a Modernist poet and is known for his difficult, stylized, and ambitious lyric poetry that exists is often in the context of New York City. See also: Sean Singer, "Hart Crane: Provocative Futurist," *Electronic Poetry Review*, (February 2003): 5.

accuracy of statement in defining that emotion.⁷⁶“ Many of the ways people remember Hull, these memory loops and redactions, are politesse: they are emblematic of a real admiration for her work, the value of which has been enhanced since 1995, when *The Only World* was published.

Hull was attentive to the memories that often are ignored or overlooked in literary experiences of the urban environment. She felt that there was a vast underclass of the disenfranchised, all of who were rarely acknowledged by our literature. She gave them voices, not for apotheosis, but to testify to their value, to memorialize them.⁷⁷ Robert Beauregard describes attitudes toward the decaying cities during the period in which Hull was writing her greatest poems: “Out of racial unrest and fiscal crisis emerged the urban revival...cities seemed once again to be places of prosperity and the good life. But only those commentators without any sense of irony, or any skepticism, viewed the renaissance as real and enduring. The twin crises of race and fiscal collapse suggested abandonment of the cities and a severing of all ties between them and the rest of the country.”⁷⁸

In this context, Hull’s analysis in “Love Song during Riot with Many Voices” shows the same unstable, swinging discourse of race and finance, which was alienating the city from the rest of the country. Hull’s attention to the urban scene with lyric colors and passionate syntax, was not unique. Two earlier works, William Carlos Williams’s

⁷⁶ Crane, 277-282

⁷⁷ Wojahn, 2009

⁷⁸ Beauregard, 181

*Paterson*⁷⁹ and Hart Crane's *The Bridge*⁸⁰, were Hull's predecessors. *Star Ledger* (like *Ghost Money* and *The Only World*) is in three sections, a structural decision that echoes that of Dante's in *The Inferno*⁸¹ in which Virgil guides Dante through the various levels of the underworld.

Hull's book, however, uses the metaphor of Newark's newspaper as a guide to the events through which she sifts. The newspaper is "not just a force in city government but a part of the neighborhood and a member of the family."⁸² As an engagement with the subtext of Newark's present and past, the title *Star Ledger* alludes to myth or the zodiac, sub-rosa indicators of how to make choices that the daily news doesn't offer⁸³. Peter Fritzsche, in his book about the act of reading the newspaper in fin-de-siècle Berlin, demonstrates that "the city as place and the city as text defined each other in mutually constitutive ways."⁸⁴ Hull suggests that, like the citizens who read the daily newspaper, the *Star Ledger*, they would, too, read her book of poems *Star Ledger*, in a creative act.

⁷⁹ "Paterson is a long poem in four parts—that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions."

⁸⁰ In a letter to Otto Kahn (1867-1934), an investment banker and wealthy financier who became Crane's patron, Crane said: "What I am after is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present" (Crane 1997: 345).

⁸¹ *The Divine Comedy*, in three books, each consists of 33 cantos with an initial canto, bringing the total to 100. There are 14,000 lines of hendecasyllabic tercets in a rhyme pattern, terza rima ("tertiary rhyme"). The poem begins on Good Friday in 1300 and the number 3 is featured as a kind of symbol.

⁸² Zurier, 74

⁸³ Williams famously said: "It is difficult to get the news from poetry, yet men die every day for lack of what is found there."

⁸⁴ Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.

Fritzsche argues that “the creative labor of reading...provided the foundation for the construction of multiple cities” and that “reading in a socially informed act.”⁸⁵

In her title poem, Hull says: “Clipped from the Newark evening paper, whole galaxies / of splendid starlets gaze, fixed to violet pages / spread drying on the kitchen table.”⁸⁶ The poem ends with a statement that reiterates this idea, and frames the subsequent poems in the book:

“The girls by the flag will mostly leave
for lives of poverty, crippled dreams, and Newark
will collapse to burn like another dying star.

But none of this has happened. Afternoon has stilled
with the eclipse that strips them of their shadow,

so each with one stands within their own brief human orbit
while the world reverses, then slowly, recovers.”⁸⁷

Here, Hull’s imagery suggests a way to understand her examination of Newark’s decline: the notion of an eclipse, the rare celestial blocking of the sun, here alters the shadows of human orbits and is a kind of omen for recovery. The word “disaster” itself means “dark star,” and Hull’s terraced form also suggests the dynamic of reversal and recovery that is its subject matter. The word “another” is an allusion to the pattern of riots in inner cities in the late 1960s (Detroit, Watts). Despite its attention to sadness, the tone is essentially a hopeful, and this would explain the statement “but none of this has happened.” That the girls are “by the flag” and “will mostly leave” suggests they are disaffected by country and patriotism. Their dreams are crippled, so Newark itself becomes a nebula—a black

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 47-48.

⁸⁶ Hull, 69

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71

hole, or a white dwarf. The girls, stripped of their shadow, are standing within an orbit that is only redeemed when the world reverses.

The idea of *Star Ledger*, takes on dynamic, multiple meanings for Newark's cosmic fate, yet the final image of recovery implies hopefulness and fulfilled anticipation. Helen Stummer's photographs offer a celluloid counterpoint to Hull's references to other parts of Newark: "four brothers / from Springfield Ave. spinning in sequined tuxedos, // palms outstretched to the crowd, the Latin girls / from Ironbound shimmering in the brief conflagration / of their beauty..."⁸⁸ *Star Ledger* moves to other locations, as well, including Barcelona and Amsterdam, but the subtext and the skeleton girding all its metaphorical movement, is Newark:

"Your breath barely touched the sheets, eyes closed,
perhaps already adrift beyond the body, twisting
in a tissue of smoke and dust over Jersey's
infernal glory of cocktail lounges and chemical plants,
the lonely islands of gas stations lining the turnpike
we used to hitch toward the shore, a moment

I want back tonight—⁸⁹

This stanza, from "Hospice" describes "Newark's empty asylum wings"⁹⁰, and uses a single sentence of seven lines, broken by enjambment and parenthetical interruptions, and shows the personalized, local breath of a drug addict, merging with the turnpike's tissues crossing New Jersey with urbanized detritus, both of which lead the speaker to a lovely memory. Fritzsche points to several Expressionist poets in Berlin before World War I whose poems "could be said to constitute a distinctive metropolitan grammar, or rather an

⁸⁸ Ibid., 80

⁸⁹ Ibid., 141

⁹⁰ Ibid.

anti-grammar, since the surprises, flux, and the juxtapositions of the city infiltrated the verses themselves.”⁹¹ Hull’s work is significant in Newark in a way the Expressionists were for fin-de-siècle Berlin. Her unique metropolitan perception experienced the city through a challenging and empathic logic and invited the reader to be creative in her reading of the city as well.

The most important poem on Newark in *Star Ledger*, though, is “Love Song during Riot with Many Voices,” with a subtitle, “Newark, 1967.” Hull thought of Newark often. “A particularly striking memory for her was going with her father to hear Martin Luther King speak at a predominantly black church circa 1966 or thereabouts—a year or two before the ’67 riots. Although her father couldn’t exactly be called progressive in his politics, he obviously sensed the significance of that moment, that event.”⁹² Although only 13 at the time of the riots, Hull must have drawn on her memory of them; she was a teenager during the tumultuous subsequent years when the causes and impact were being publicly debated. Her attendance of King’s speech shows a bridge between language of integrationist politics of nonviolence and the sociological scope of her later work, sensed as a seed in her nascent imagination of language.

Combined with whatever trauma Hull was experiencing at home, she ran away from Newark two years later, never to return. “Love Song...” includes many of the rhetorical devices—enjambment, multiple voices, metaphors connecting Newark with the personal body, and recovered voices, especially of women—used in the above poems,

⁹¹ Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 245. The poets associated with German Expressionism include: Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benn, and Else Lasker-Schüller.

⁹² Wojahn, 2009

though more spectacularly. The poem works to unify the social disturbance outside on Newark's streets with a personally felt disturbance, somewhat deeper, in the interior of the speaker (Hull herself?) observing it behind boarded windows. Its initial image, the iron mesh of a bridge, alludes to Newark's industrial past as the light through the mesh cuts and divides the local population into "shadow and pale" and "man and woman":

The bridge's iron mesh chases pockets of shadow
and pale through blinds shuttering the corner window

to mark this man, this woman, the young eclipse
their naked bodies make—black, white, white,
black, the dying fall of light rendering bare walls

incarnadine, color of flesh and blood occluded

Again, the eclipse marks the biracial naked bodies as a "dying fall of light" hides the races as they are ironically illuminated. The bodies alternate and reverse their statuses, "black, white, white, black" as if to suggest some equality in their despair. The word "incarnadine," or crimson, is a racially unifying term and the occlusion of flesh and blood has a stanza break, leading to the surprise of voices. But they're not the voices of the figures behind the shuttered blinds, but are somewhat extradiegetic voices from a radio broadcasting both the news of war and the news of riots:

in voices rippling from the radio: Saigon besieged,
Hanoi, snipers and the riot news helicoptered
from blocks away. All long muscle, soft

hollow, crook of elbow bent sequined above the crowd,
nightclub dancers farandole their grind and slam
into streets among looters. Let's forget the 58¢

lining his pockets, forget the sharks and junkyards

The colon between “radio” and “Saigon,” which A. Van Jordan says is “as much a direction of CUT TO as any scene shift in a film”, does much work as a metaphorical leap to Southeast Asia, happening concurrently with the riots. The noun “helicopter” becomes a verb that relocates the action of the Vietnam War to the local war “from blocks away.” Similarly, the nightclub dancers and the looters are connected through the verb “farandole,” a Provençal community dance (a noun). The imperative “let’s” which echoes a technique from Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,”⁹³ is a way to reduce the psychic distance between the reader and the subject matter, and the plural pronoun “us” creates intimacy between the reader and the speaker. The enjambment at the end of the stanza announces the abject poverty and the egalitarian society the looters were seeking, especially because the 58 cents is “*lining* his pockets” instead of being “in” his pockets.

within us. Traffic stalls to bricks shattering,
the windows, inside her, bitch I love you, city breaking
down and pawnshops disgorge their contraband of saxophones

That the “sharks and junkyards” are “within us,” assumes the “let’s” from above has taken hold, that the intimacy between the reader and the subject has been manifested. Here, some of the “many voices” of the title are introduced: the interjection of “bitch I love you” is not the speaker, but a piece of overheard conversation. It appears bookended by commas and interrupts the idea of “bricks shattering the windows” and a “city breaking down.” The verb “disgorge” is an interesting choice that displaces the over determined burden of theft from the looters, the black residents, and places the

⁹³ “Let us go then you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky /
Like a patient etherized upon a table;”

responsibility, oddly, on the pawnshops themselves⁹⁴. The saxophones are contraband, a prison term, and are linked to wedding rings, the most basic symbol of marital stability, by another enjambment. Both are vestiges of a former life of artistic and romantic expression, now hocked at a pawnshop. The scene, and its psychic distance, is focused and decreased more sharply. From saxophones to rings, another interruption of “many voices” enters:

and wedding rings. Give me a wig, give me
a pistol. Hush baby, come to papa, let me hold you

The new voices: one female (“give me a wig”) and one male (“give me a pistol”) are further interrupted by another, more romantic voice: “Hush baby, come to papa, let me hold you.” The second person pronoun again opens the general situation to the reader, who also responds to “you” (in the spirit of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”⁹⁵), and who is surprised by another enjambment as she is held “through” something, “night’s broken circuitry.”

through night’s broken circuitry, chromatic
and strafed blue with current. Let’s forget this bolt
of velvet fallen from a child’s arm brocading

pavement where rioters careen in fury and feathered hats
burdened with fans, the Polish butcher’s strings

The verb “strafed,” a military term, meaning to attack ground targets from low-flying aircraft is employed here to suggest acts of predation. Like the verbs “careen” and “burden” and the pimps’ feathered hats connect again with the imperative “let’s”; the

⁹⁴ There is a precedent for this. In Robert Frost’s 1916 poem “Out, Out—”, the title of which alludes to a soliloquy by Lady Macbeth, a buzz saw snarls and leaps at a farm boy’s hand, killing him. The poem places blame on neither the saw nor the boy, and this offers a statement on the nature of “accident.”

⁹⁵ 1855, *Leaves of Grass*

reader and speaker see multiethnic Newark (a Polish butcher) as a victim even as these voices fade into the setting.

of sausages, fat hams. This isn't a lullaby a parent
might croon to children before sleep, but all of it
belongs: in the station torn advertisements whisper
easy credit, old me wait for any train out of town

The authoritative speaker of the poem returns: "This isn't a lullaby...but all of it belongs" and announces that the details presented are part of a pastiche of degradation. Like Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Hull's poem opens the reader to the possibility of textured, overlapping classes of people in a single space. Thus, the imaginative leap between sleeping children (a quiet, domestic scene), and a train station affected by economics, is made sensible to the reader. Whitman believed in an intimate connection between the reader using her breath and voice to give physical form to a poet from the past, a connection not unlike time travel.

The colon between "belongs" and the prepositional phrase "in the station" leads to a political statement. Newark's subway is whispered to by "torn advertisements for easy credit." Mumford's *Newark* gives an historical context for this phenomenon. With the increase in credit cards and purchasing accounts for shoppers, African American women in cities across the nation protested discrimination in lending, inflated interest and terms, price gouging in the poor neighborhoods, and inferior merchandise.⁹⁶ Thomas Bender likewise addresses the angst related to racial fear and racial guilt that many experienced at the time, but frames it in a common context of commentators who transformed the shame of cities into a human frailty: "Rather than the deterioration of the environment as represented by slums and blight, urban decline became equated with obstacles to the

⁹⁶ Mumford, 160

common concerns of the people who choose to live in large central cities....—looking at the buildings and other artifacts of an urban culture.⁹⁷

Hull equates the urban crisis with these same bodies and their urban environment:

and these lovers mingling, commingling their bodies,
this slippage, a haul and wail of freight trains

The old men fleeing on outbound trains and lovers “mingling and commingling their bodies” are victimized by “this slippage.” Additionally, the slant rhyme of “haul” and “wail,” like those of “shadow” and “window” in stanza 1, indicate a minor chord for the situation Mumford describes. Ending this stanza with “bodies” and “freight trains” suggests more insidious, Holocaust-era implications for the economic and racial permanent underclass brought to bear in the summer of 1967 across America’s inner cities.

The freight trains carried into the Newark the goods that were purchased with “easy credit,” and left during the Second World War with bodies. This explains the unusual choice of the term “this slippage,” a multifaceted accounting or economic term that connect lovers and trains; it has connotations of not only “slide,” but “decline,” “loss of power,” and the “difference in real and estimated cost.” That it appears as a parenthetical line break in this stanza is an interruption of form, as well as an interruption of content. Here, the poem’s speaker becomes part of the subject, rather than serving as an omniscient and distant voice apart from the subject:

pulling away from the yards. With this girl
I’ll recall black boys by the soda shop, other times
with conked pompadours and scalloped afterburns
stenciled across fenders. Through the radio

⁹⁷ Bender, 175

The first person singular statement looks back to a more peaceful, though still inequitable moment in Newark's past, the late 1950s of Hull's girlhood. The foreign haircuts of the black boys and the broad fenders of the era's cars uses the words "scalped afterburns" as a way to link the bodies of Newark's population and the industry, the machines of the cars across which the lye-burned hair is "stenciled." Here, the radio returns, but in the present moment of 1967 Newark. In Saigon and in Newark, Hendrix plays. Hendrix joined the 101st Airborne Division as an alternative to a prison sentence for riding in stolen cars. Hull's choice to include Hendrix (instead of any other music of the era) is a way for the allusions, metaphors, and content to merge within the tapestry of the poem. The blues appeared in Mississippi at the inception the 20th Century, a crossroads with other revolutions of human invention: Einstein, Freud, and the Wright Brothers, for example. The word "discord," is musical, but has the extra-musical meaning of strife between people or situations.

Hendrix butanes his guitar to varnish, crackle
and discord of "Wild Thing." Sizzling strings,
that Caravaggio face bent to ask the crowd

did they want to see him sacrifice something
he loved. Thigh, mouth, breast, small of back, dear
hollow of the throat, don't you understand this pressure,

The noun-cum-verb "butanes" is an echo of the earlier "strafed" because of its association with industrial or military fire. Hendrix, who was known to destroy or ignite his instruments, and whose style of music was itself "sizzling" is connected to Caravaggio⁹⁸, who was infamous for his swaggering, deliberately fighting, brawling, and

⁹⁸ Caravaggio (1571-1610) on May 29, 1610, killed Ranuccio Tomassoni; he then fled to Naples and to Malta.

finally murder of a young man. The “sacrifice” refers not only to Caravaggio, but to Hendrix as well, and to the criminals of Newark, whose criminality must be tempered with other acts of creation and art.

Something melds with “someone,” and her body (“thigh, mouth, breast, small of back, and hollow of the throat”) is an allusion to the sacrifices of antiquity as well as those in contemporary Newark of the poem. Hull is passing judgment here not on the lovers inside the “hotbox apartments”, but the situations outside, and larger than themselves, which turn love and sex into criminality. Another voice enters and interrupts the couple as it asks “don’t you understand this pressure”? To whom is the question addressed?

It is addressed to the reader, and to the “reader” of Newark’s riot, the historian or layperson who might interpret its causes and meanings. Note the preposition: the pressure is “of” the apartments rather than “from” them. The authority of the speaker again enters: she tells the reader that besides interpreting the causes of the riot in Newark, “there’s no forgetting the riot within.”⁹⁹ The statement again connects its two constituencies, like the iron mesh of the bridge, of the personal and the public riots:

of hotbox apartments? There’s no forgetting the riot
within, fingernails sparking to districts
rivering with flame. What else could we do

⁹⁹ Hull’s interpretation stands in stark contrast to the conservative view, that “a righteously indignant mob usually consists mainly of working-class people” (Banfield, 216); he also spoke of the “profitability of rioting” (ibid., 229) and that rioting will occur for many years to come (writing in 1974) “no matter what is done to prevent it” (ibid., 232).

The unusual verb “rivering,” unique to this poem, is a metaphorical leap from a woman’s red fingernails to the “districts” (27, 28, 29) of Newark that are burning. The voice announces another interrogative:

but cling and whisper together as children after
the lullaby is done, but no, never as children, never

do they so implore, oh god, god, bend your dark visage

The question is one of desperation. There are no responses for the inhabitants in the moment besides clinging to the lullaby (the poem itself?). Another of the “many voices,” a prayer, seeks an outside authority—broader than the authorial device above—to bend its “dark visage” over the “acetylene skyline”:

over this acetylene skyline, over Club Zanzibar¹⁰⁰
and the Beast of Three, limed statues in the parks, over
the black schoolgirl whose face is smashed again

and again. No journalist for these aisles of light
the cathedral spots cast through teargas and the mingling,
commingling of sisters’ voices in chapels, storefront
churches asking for mercy.

The flammable gas, a symbol of manufacturing, provides an expressionist palette for the colors of the city, but is a violent image. Berman describes the years it took the city to learn how to defend against “the next great collective catastrophe: fires...for years, midnight fires ate up not only buildings, but whole blocks, often block after block.”¹⁰¹

The statues in the poem are limed, worn with wear. The stanza moves carefully from the

¹⁰⁰ In the late 1970s, Club Zanzibar was Newark’s answer to Studio 54 at the height of disco. It was at 430 Broad Street. (see Andrew Jacobs, “Newark Loses Unwanted Landmark as Lincoln Motel Goes.” *The New York Times*. 8 Oct. 2007, sec. N.Y. / Region:.)

¹⁰¹ Berman, 15

pastoral of the park guarded by a Cerberus, who prevents people from crossing the River Styx in Hades, to a black schoolgirl being assaulted by the police. The poem does not shy away from the political indictment it makes. Here, Mumford is again useful to provide an historical context for “the escalating protest against police brutality fostered what might be called the nationalization of the black public sphere, leading directly to rioting.”¹⁰² The battles between minority communities and the police over police brutality in the 1960s did, in fact, yield gradual reforms over the next thirty years¹⁰³.

Yet the authority of the voice interrupts itself. First the people “cling and whisper together as children” but then the voice says: “no, never as children.” The simultaneous innocence of children is precluded or occluded, as the images suggested, by the social conditions destabilizing their lives. The statement that “no journalist” suggests the discrepancies between press coverage of white and black criminality that Mumford describes¹⁰⁴.

The “mingling and commingling” of the lovers above reappear in the guise of “sisters’ voices in chapels”; it is an ambiguous phrase which suggests black women in revivalist urban storefront churches rather than Roman Catholic nuns.

Beyond the bridge’s
iron mesh, the girl touches a birthmark
behind her knee and wishes the doused smell
of charred buildings was only hydrants flushing hot concrete.

The bridge’s iron mesh also reappears and the psychic distance is refocused locally, behind a girl’s knee. She returns to her memory of the 1950s childhood, when public

¹⁰² Mumford, 114

¹⁰³ Johnson, 276

¹⁰⁴ Mumford, 144

hydrants are opened so children can play in the water. But the “doused smell of charred buildings” shows an inundated fire department left with the task of putting out the burned buildings after the riot. Mumford shows some attribution for the riots to arson: from the perspective of the government, the riots started with arson, because of injuries to white fire fighters.¹⁰⁵ Roger Starr, conversely, saw the economic problem of selling fire insurance in areas with “fires of mysterious origin”¹⁰⁶. Yet the poem leaves the charred buildings and pivots to the summer of 1967, itself connected the memory of the earlier summertime.

Summertime. Pockets of shadow and pale. Too hot
to sleep, Hush baby, come to papa, board
the window before morning’s fractured descant,

a staccato crack of fire escapes snapping pavement
and citizens descending, turning back with points of flame

Gershwin’s song from “Porgy and Bess”¹⁰⁷ reintroduces the images of “shadow and pale” from stanza 1 as the voice of the lover from earlier in the poem says: “too hot to sleep, Hush baby, come to papa” again as the figures board the windows. The term “citizens” restates the civic indictment the government made against Newark’s citizens, who were consistently blamed, as in the South Bronx in the subsequent decade, for burning their own communities.

within their eyes before they too must look away.
At dawn, when the first buses leave, their great wipers arc

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 131

¹⁰⁶ Starr, 95; “The issuance of a fire insurance policy on a grossly deficient and unprofitable building is an invitation to the torch” (Ibid., 96).

¹⁰⁷ “Summertime” was a return hit in August 1968, when Janis Joplin sang it on Big Brother and the Holding Company’s *Cheap Thrills*. See also: Joe Nocera, “‘Summertime,’ Rendered 25,000 Ways,” *New York Times*, 30 January 2012, sec: Opinion.

Like women bending through smoke
to burdens, singing terror, singing pity¹⁰⁸.

The enjambment between “points of flame” and “within their eyes” sends the reader’s gaze to the iris of the lovers who leave via the fire escape, but also “must look away,” since the burden of communal responsibility cannot be necessarily completely borne by victims or perpetrators. The final abstractions of the singing terror and pity arrive through women “bending through smoke,” as if they are transforming themselves, in the style of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, to escape what they must witness.

“Love Song...” connects the physical body to the city’s body, and her later poem, “Red Velvet Jacket,”¹⁰⁹ compares the South Bronx (see Rosenthal’s photographs) to the Warsaw Ghetto. Although at first glance this may seem hyperbolic, her attention to detail allows memory to fuse the places into a single breath. Berman, too, makes a comparison of the South Bronx to both paintings by Anselm Kiefer and to Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002), and their visions of the ruins of Warsaw: “It is as if the Bronx, in its depths of disintegration, came to symbolize the twentieth-century world.”¹¹⁰

The poem alternates long and short lines, based loosely on syllabic measure, which shares the imaginative leap between time and location; her impulse though, to seek the racial status of the ghetto, remains the core of the metaphor. Her authority, too, is unfailingly powerful, as it insists the connections are made, despite what we know to be “factual”:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 76-78

¹⁰⁹ Hull, 155

¹¹⁰ Berman, 19. Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) is a German sculptor and painter. Roman Polanski (b. 1933) is a Polish-French filmmaker.

It's almost Biblical driving this midnight burning highway
 past South Bronx exits
 with the names of streets once known, where torched cars
 spiral columns
 acetylene blue & white. We're in the universe of lost things
 where the light are out,
 the lamp pawned & soon the record player, that enameled table,
 clothes, the rooms & faces,

air hissing soft through the rolled-down window like
 silk velvet slipping hot
 into my handbag, velvet fine as a fingerprint whorl,
 maroon as the long dusty cars
 that sharked these avenues, mildewed upholstery like
 the insides ripped out of everything.

Again, the language (burning, torched, acetylene, sharked, ripped) shows the lost causes, the acts of predation, and the interlocking frames of the Bronx and Warsaw click into place. In a later stanza, the tattoos on the Bronx residents and those of the Jews, become linked in the speaker's recollection, as the fires in the two ghettos scar not only the skin, but the memory of the place: "I'd walk untouched, fire parting smoothly before me, liquid / & blue, that refused to singe, / to mar the bearer with a scar to signify the event."

Hull concludes with a reaffirmation of these disparate threads: "I don't know what happened to the jacket / & all those people are lost to a diaspora, / the borough incinerated around them, nowhere in this night / I drive through. Silk velvet and its rich hiss / the shade of flame offering its drapery, its charm / against this world burning ruthless, crucial & exacting."¹¹¹ The plural pronoun "them" suggests the people of the borough, not only those in Warsaw, were incinerated. The goal of this is not mere beauty, but a taut political statement in its reasoned, yet passionate approach to the fate of both sets of "diaspora."

¹¹¹ Hull, 155

Hull was writing against detractors who sought to merely dwell on the reasons the cities should be abandoned, such as Edward Banfield or Tom Wolfe.¹¹² Banfield, an adviser to Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, for example, sought a cost-benefit analysis for racism and poverty, and did not believe the government could feasibly address these problems, or even should¹¹³. Wolfe, in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, treats the urban landscape during this period similarly, but without maintaining his affection: “The trains of vehicles inched forward in a cloud of carbon and sulphur particles toward the toll gates;¹¹⁴ “His memory had drowned in the night, and he could feel only the icy despair¹¹⁵.” In jazz, there is never a wrong note because each note can be redeemed by the next.¹¹⁶ Hull instead presents an original way to view the urban crisis. It synthesizes divergent sets of knowledge, activates both classical and contemporary notions of memory, and an empathic mode of questioning her material¹¹⁷. Besides the overpowering beauty of her language, she gives a subversive attention to cities that were not thought of as sources for meaning other than defeat. Her last poem, “The Window¹¹⁸”, is a perfect metaphor for the despair many have read into the urban crisis. The metaphor of the window demonstrates the historical dilemma of seeing cities: light goes through, our sense of sight causes us to

¹¹² Tom Wolfe (b. 1931) is a fiction writer, journalist, and figure in the “New Journalism” literary movement. He has a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale University.

¹¹³ Banfield, 268-271

¹¹⁴ Wolfe, 81

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165

¹¹⁶ DeCarava, 26

¹¹⁷ Empathic questioning, as opposed to Socratic questioning, helps writers express their “*innigsten Empfindung*”—innermost feeling (Bly, 58).

¹¹⁸ Hull, 226

apprehend what lies beyond it, but at the same time restricts our apprehension of what *really* happened. In other words, witnessing history must be viewed with responsibility:

Oh the many lives that have fountained through
my own. Soon, soon, I shall stop upon that platform

& you will meet me there, the world rosegray beyond
the scalloped tops of buildings & we shall seek
that thing which shines & doth so much torment us.

Hull appears to be addressing not only her constituents of the cities—the men and women who engage with history to mourn and celebrate who we really are¹¹⁹—but the historians who bear the responsibility of sorting the memories from the rubble¹²⁰. The second person she speaks to beyond the buildings seeks “that thing,” and because it both shines and torments, it is seeping with metaphor, and thus is an imaginative agent for change. Hull has creatively changed the ways we know what happened to the cities, and what it was like at the moment we were witnesses to it happening.

Reading *Star Ledger*, it becomes apparent that Hull’s kinetic sense of rhythm, her searching, meditative narrative, and her unflinching interest in finding beauty in Newark, even at its ugliest moment, all move language to present a fresh way to see the urban crisis. Her voice synthesizes private memories of a fraught childhood in the Newark area, the public memory of what happened in the summer of 1967, and an empathic mode of questioning these memories. The empathic person speaking in Hull’s poems looks forward and plans ahead with a sense of artistic and political freedom. Imagination is the connection-making aspect of intelligence, and Hull’s allows for multiple, conflicting

¹¹⁹ Hayden, 238

¹²⁰ The buildings are “scalloped” like the afterburns in “Love Song...”, thus further connecting the person to the landscape, the body to the building.

emotions to coexist. She describes that of what we have been unconscious, while preventing erasure of those fresh sense impressions. Her poems last as beautiful objets d'art, but more than that, they decrease normalized indifference¹²¹ and state her values, her general affection for cities, and her intention to tell the reader: an empathic reading of cities cannot be corrupt. We should care about Lynda Hull because she wards off not only outside messages of defeat, but also those within our own at times shallow selves. The city need not be limited to feelings of defeat, but can be sought as “that thing which shines.”

¹²¹ Bly, 247

Chapter 4

Photographing, Correcting, and Appreciating Newark: Helen Stummer

“so that citizens might blindly pass, might invent consoling fictions.”—Lynda Hull¹

“Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.”—Diane Arbus²

“How is it everyday, going through this dungeon, seeing people bleeding? What does that do to you? I want people to think about this.”—Helen Stummer³

Frame 1: *No Easy Walk*

Helen Stummer (b. 1936), a white, 73 year-old, “visual Sociologist,” and photographer who took photos of impoverished people in Newark’s Central Ward between 1980 and 1993. They appeared in her book, *No Easy Walk*, with her own ethnographic fieldwork. The book asks: Why are people poor?” and “What happened to Newark?” and in many ways documents her own interactions with the people she photographed. How did Stummer seek that subject, how did she engage with the people in her photos, and more broadly, how is photography a tool to address memory and history? Stummer is partly a photojournalist or concerned photographer and partly an artist. Her work is the physical embodiment of abstractions: dignity, struggle, dissent, disappointment, ugliness in beauty, and clarity in chaos. Her pictures actively try to destroy the idea of the poor as undeserving or as criminal. Her work is an act of protest and sometimes she sees it as an act of self-portraiture.

¹ Hull, 155.

² Arbus, 3.

³ Stummer, 2009.

I found Helen Stummer's business card in my library copy of *No Easy Walk*. I called her up. I interviewed Stummer at her home in Metuchen on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 2009. I took the train from Penn Station; she picked me up in Metuchen. Previously, we spoke over the telephone a couple of times, during which I reviewed the scope of my project and my interest in her and her work. I arrived at 10:00 AM and stayed until around 1:00 PM.

Metuchen, New Jersey is a mostly white suburban small town of roughly 12,000 people. Stummer lives on a quiet block in a "constantly-being-renovated" ranch-style house that she inherited from her father-in-law. However, the interior resembles an artist's New York City loft. There is a long, open space with plants, paintings, photos, books, and other accoutrements that artists enjoy (expensive green tea, a black Charles Eames lounge chair and ottoman, etc.) I recorded the interview and took notes. We sat at her kitchen table. She offered tea and muffins. We had an instant simpatico rapport.

Stummer likes talking about her self and her projects in a self-effacing way, for a long while. I asked her a few questions only when there was an appropriate pause in the conversation or to clarify what she said. Stummer is about five-feet tall and has an enthusiastic, animated way of speaking; she has a New Jersey accent, white hair, and an intellectual, though down-to-earth manner. She is bold and unafraid. She has a distinct, accurate, heartfelt way of describing.

Stummer talked about her experience in discovering her interest in photographing families in Newark, her upbringing in Newark, and the mix of social documentary and artistic sensibilities in her work. In this chapter, I place Stummer's work in a context of great art by Vermeer, Romare Bearden, and others to show that the forms in her

photographs, though spontaneously recorded, reflect forms, structures, and subjects often seen in those artists' great paintings; Stummer's work, though social documentary in nature, can be placed among the world's greatest visual art.⁴ I also show how her sensibilities, motivations, and methods of photographing in Newark, such as gaining access to unfamiliar populations of people, are part of a trajectory of social documentary photographers of her generation and older, whose work comes out of the artistic projects of the New Deal.

Robert Duncan, in his essay "Iconographical Extensions," describes the interconnection between reading the visual world, an allusion to William Blake, and the language of painting:

Blake speaks in the tradition of poetry's mysteries of a four-fold vision in reading; and we may likewise speak of a four-fold "reading" of the visual world. The experience of "meaning" is the experience of inter-relationships. The "language" of painting in which we read the meaning of the process of art itself, analogous to the meaning of the oral/aural processes of literary poetry, presents itself in the way of painting...⁵

In Stummer's work, she offers, as I see it, the visual world of interrelationships in a language akin to Hull's. Stummer spoke about she came to this world of interrelationships and used her gifts as a photographer to experience them both within herself, and as a way to give voice to the images of voiceless people, especially children. Stummer's strategy to become "embedded" in the lives of the families she photographed began with her interest in photographing children.

⁴ Jan Vermeer (1632-1675) was a Dutch painter specializing in interiors of middle-class life. Romare Bearden (1911-1988) was a painter and collagist. Though physically white, he was racially mixed and is known for his art depicting African American life.

⁵ Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 192. William Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker and a major figure of Romanticism.

Frame 2: Emitting and Gaining Trust

Stummer: People are amazing to me. They would let me into their home. It's uncanny. I was always bowled-over, I was always so amazed how people allowed me into their life with hardly any hesitating... it's a gift... it must be a gift. I don't believe it happens to everyone.

I never thought my work was unique; it was because they felt I may be the only person in America who has spent so much time in an urban environment with some of the same families. They don't believe it's ever been done. I just don't think of it as anything... I never had a plan or a goal. I just did it because I did it; I with I had a goal... it just happened. I did it from my gut, me heart more than anything... it felt right. It became a passion. I really want other people; the advocacy part of me was really enraged by the conditions people were forced to live under. It enraged me; because I realized it's man-made. It doesn't have to be.

In *No Easy Walk*, that's why I wrote it like that; to show why people are poor; that's what I wrote the book about; why people are poor. It's spelled-out why are people poor. One thing white people always ask me is: "why don't people move if they don't like it there?" A lot of my work never got published, but it enrages me. I never cared about a person's skin color... I never did; I photographed in Maine, where they're all white people; I photographed on the Lower East Side, where there's a mixture; I photographed in Newark where they're all black. It's the way it is... we're segregated. What I'm doing is trying to show people in the inner city as individuals and they need to be respected as individuals, like we all are.⁶

Stummer did not see her project as being "about" race, even though the majority of her work depicts the lives of inner city blacks. She explains that she was more concerned with class in a sense than race, since among the racial groups she photographed, their poverty and stagnation was more important for her to document on film.

But then I knew early on that people really didn't want to look at pictures of poor people; it's not a big seller or a big draw; you can't draw people in much. So, I have to make them as beautiful composition-wise and to present as beautiful as possible and that

⁶ For a poet's view on the Lower East Side, see Alan Dugan's "Memories of the Bowery" in *Poems Seven*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 317. Dugan writes: "How the air smells best on leaving a bar / broke in the morning with nothing to do / but be at present at Liberty's harbor / under the protection of that goddess, / and sit in Battery Park and feed / my beer-nuts to her pigeons. Impossible."

meant... the foreground is just as important as the background, the expression of the person, the lighting, and there's that energy part that nobody knows about... it's either there or not there. And then to present it as a print, to make the most beautiful print possible with all the tones. And then I always present my work on masonite; no frame, no glass. I wanted the spectator to be as close to the environment as possible. They're not there, but there is nothing to hinder it, nothing to obscure it... you are there. As close as you can get by not being there. That is always how I present my work. It's about education, but also to try to awake someone's sensibilities, to go past the stereotype, to try to get a sense of what it is like to live in this environment. And not what's on tv or in the newspaper. I have found the poorer you are, the nicer you are. Maybe that's a stereotype too, but that's what I've found. People were always so kind to me, and I was always amazed, because I really didn't get that in my own family that much. It kind of surprised me all the time how well I was received, no matter where I was.

Stummer happened upon Newark by accident, but once there was both attracted and repelled by what she found there. Her first stop, 322 Irvine Turner Boulevard, and the surrounding block, became the focal point for her work for more than a decade.

Stummer: I kept responding and seeing that building, 322. Because it's on the way home to 78. I would go from Irvine Turner Blvd. to 78 and pass this one building, 322. I started photographing on the corner there, because it scared me. The person from the Coalition Six, the group I was photographing for. I told the director how I felt about this building...every time we went by I would be totally electrified, I would be totally different. I could feel the pull. I could feel the whole thing. It scared me... there were people all around. They place was burned-out. So she said, "let's go drive there." So we went to the corner...there was another building on the corner...it wasn't frightening at all actually. She went up to the people... she was black, and introduced us. "What can we do to help you?" That's what she said. And they said "we would like that traffic light fixed. There are so many accidents here." [the light was at the corner of Madison Avenue and Irvine Turner Blvd.] Here people are living in this devastated condition and they're concerned about a traffic light, that other people are getting hurt. The next day, the light was fixed. I came back a couple of days later, by myself... I was God... they didn't say that, but that was how I was treated. That was my start. But I wasn't really happy with the pictures there... I kept looking at 322. Little by little, I photographed going to 322. The traffic light residents said: "You really don't want to go there. It's probably the worst place in Newark... it's filled with drugs and prostitution."

One day I went up to them and saw the children playing... I asked them if I could photograph the children. I always start with that. They thought I was either from DYFS [Division of Youth and Family Services] or a social worker. Then I would bring back always a photograph... and photograph more. Then I became involved with the families in the building. I was always scared to death... it was a really dangerous place. It wasn't any fooling around. The connection I had with that house...322...I photographed that building for 15 years.

You know what I do...I really have a deep respect for everybody... how they think; how they are. I picked up my camera as a signal that I wanted to take a picture, and most people turned their back on me. That was a signal that they didn't want to be photographed, so I put my camera down; I didn't take the picture because it's very disrespectful. I kept walking and these three men said "come on, come on" and then the site was there and they posed... usually I don't like posing. I only have a couple of pictures in all these years. I always tell them to be natural. Act like I'm not here. But there they were and there's the picture. [Figure 1] It was there... it's huge. Then I walk back again and I was so moved by the respect they gave me. I was allowed into another world. And that's what most of my work has been about... I've been allowed into other worlds. It doesn't happen. You don't experience that and I'm very lucky. It's been absolutely incredible and I healed myself. Because I was extremely shy and you can hide behind the camera. It gave me... It was a tool I could hide behind. It brought me out of myself. I was able to relate to people and people related to me. The whole experience became healing in itself.

I don't know if I'm more sociological or more art. I try to satisfy both by asking questions. For years I would photograph falling-down ceilings and give it to the families and they would give it to the Board of Health or... And it was fixed and it embarrassed me, actually. Here you've got a white person from the outside and I would always say, when I called someone..."I'm professor Stummer." and it works... "There's no heat here. You've got to do something here." The people would be complaining forever and they never got anything done. And here I'd come along and it's fixed.

Stummer is amazed that she was given special privileges as a white person in the black neighborhood. She sublimated her own fears and apprehensions about that, and instead used her position of power not only to take better pictures, but to assist when the community needed a person with white privileges to get things done from the city or state.

Stummer: They can tell I'm not from the ghetto and they associate white with being professional and that you're involved with something. Actually, I was telling someone the other day... a white person is safer in a black ghetto than a black person is. Because black people see me, or a white person, as connected. Social services, DYFS, police, a nun, whatever. They make that connection. So, they'll leave you alone more than they will a black person. I always thought about that. [Figure 2]

Stummer used her persona of wildness along with empathy for the people in the Central Ward to gain access to their community, the way she did on East Sixth Street. By

contrast, Jacob Riis admits in his autobiography that he used police protection. Stummer was unafraid to enter the worst part of the Newark on her own, to gain access.⁷

Stummer: I call to see if it's [the debris illegally dumped in Newark lots] contaminated or not. That's why they get away with it, because no one's going to complain. They have so much...they're sick, they're dealing with everything. They landlords are horrendous. They get away with it. But if the landlords even see me photographing... even see me... it's fixed, like that. Because someone is watching and when someone is watching, things get done.

Stummer describes the horror she witnessed when she photographed people in the Stella Wright Housing Project, a symbol of the failures of urban renewal. It was imploded and is indicative of the urban crisis.

Stummer: No. No. Nothing. They've got a few houses they built there that the people who live in this environment can't afford, so they're always swept away. I spent time in Stella Wright Housing Project which the residents called "Hoodlum City." I was just doing my archive and was just scanning those prints in yesterday.

When you look at these children... it was so painful for me to even look at. You look at these expressions... you don't see expressions like that in the suburbs on children.
[Figure 3]

I was devastated. The photographs of the children... I wrote the stories of what they told me. It was such a dungeon [Stella Wright Houses]... It was such a horrendous dungeon. The photographs are very clear, and I said: "What is our environment... how does it affect us?" How is it everyday, going through this dungeon, seeing people bleeding. Seeing people coming after you with a knife, and beating you up and trying to sell you pills... no safety whatsoever... what does that do to you? You know, I want people to think about this. Because we're so safe... you cannot go outside. There is no such thing as a backyard... there isn't any. You're always ready to die. People are ready to die or lose their children. Every time their children leave the door, they pray that they'll see them again. What kind of a horror is this to live under... and this is America? Come on; and it doesn't have to be, you know. We could put up security at the stadium there, and give people a chance with education. I know children told me every story. It's all wrong, it's all backward.

⁷ Jacob August Riis, *The Making of an American*, (New York: Macmillan, 1904), 268. On the relationship between taste and political consciousness, Hannah Arendt said: "taste is the political capacity that truly humanizes the beautiful and creates culture." (Arendt, cited in Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6.

This one young man who I photographed forever... it kind of breaks your heart because they're so trusting and they're so nice... until they see the reality and then they realize there's no goal, nothing's going to happen, their dreams are not going to come true and then they change and I photograph that change. In their eyes especially.

He couldn't read and when the teacher would pick on him, and all the kids would laugh at him, and he got in fights and the teacher would expel him... why did he have the fight is really the question and it kept on till he dropped out of school as soon as he could. The streets got him. At 16 he allowed me to photograph him, this last photograph... he was holding his baby son. He thought I was totally out of my mind. I always told him, you look just like an African king to me: you are elegant, you are gorgeous... he did and he thought I was totally insane, but you can see from the pictures... that's exactly what he looked like. And he's in jail... he's been in jail for a long time. I think he shot a cop or tried to or.... His anger... and I saw the police humiliate him... they do that with the little kids.

They humiliate them... they go in and they make them drop their pants. They're 8, 9 years old, to check them for drugs and then they put cuffs on them and then after they have their fun let them go. This creates rage. It goes from anger to rage... and it's in them. You can't do things like that. You can't have these bully cops... I'm not saying there aren't good ones. I've met them; I had them in my class. But there are bullies too; Bullies do a lot of damage, a great deal. You need to get rid of those. That's what I saw... I tried to portray it and photograph it and show it as clear as I could. I'm done [laughs].

Getting access is one of the major things about being a concerned photographer. That's the hardest hurdle of all. I want to show other people what it's like, how you're living here, because I don't think it's right. It was the right thing. On East 6th Street and a lot of them would leave... they said "we can smell attitude." I said to myself: Thank God I've got the right attitude! [laughs]

She describes this "right attitude" in the context of one of her most iconic images of three teenage boys. Her idea of getting access was like a change in attitude that she had a responsibility to use her gifts for photography to document Newarkers' lives.

Stummer: I was pulling around a corner and there were three teenagers sitting in front of an abandoned church. [Figure 4]

I couldn't believe it... they were exactly like that photograph... I almost fainted. I go running up the street... "I'm Helen Stummer... I'm a photographer..." I said: "Don't move! You're perfect." Except, Cornelius in the middle had a sandwich. I said, "Can you put the sandwich down," and he put the sandwich down. Maybe it's because something takes over in me, I'm really sure of myself, though I'm really scared. And the more scared I get, the louder I get. I'm photographing them and it turned out I won a prize... the best photo in show internationally in all media.

I went to find them because I wanted to share the money with them. I said: "Why did you let me photograph you?" They said, well, here you are, my hair is flying, a little old lady... you don't seem like a threat... we thought you might be a nun... you were

kind of funny. The whole thing was kind of funny. The only thing they asked me is don't say we're doing drugs. They said we're just chilling out from high school. We just got out of school.

It's just one indication... I seem to emit or gain trust. I think that has been my way of being accessible. I see something and know it's a photograph. I don't set-up anything... I don't know how. I know when I see it I know it. But until I see it, I don't know, just be natural. Then when I see it I can do the photograph. So, it's very uncomfortable for people and for me a lot of times. It's a persistence I guess. I have great love for doing what I did.

I stopped. I just don't do it anymore... I don't have the energy... I have osteoporosis and arthritis. My husband has dementia... it drains you. It really does. I used to worry about when I was going to stop, and fear it. But it happens naturally. Now I'm doing something just as important is organizing it and archiving it; The New Jersey Historical Society is taking all my Newark work and the New York Historical Society is taking all my New York work. So to prepare that is an incredible project.

Singer: I'm interested in this idea that everybody can take a photo, but only some photos are art. Why is that?

Stummer: There's an energy in the ones that last and are art. You can look at it for years and it still works, it's still good. I do believe that life is chaos; everything we're doing is chaos, but all of a sudden it comes together. In a second. I only have a manual camera, a Leica without a motor drive with a hand light meter. I have to go through the process of engaging, getting a light reading... I've got a Luna Pro, and dialing it in to my Leica camera... these are all steps that have to be taken, and then to engage you and then try to get that photograph. I don't get 17 chances before or 17 after. The picture of the children dancing... I took at least 10 rolls of film to get that. To get children playing is incredible without a motor drive... it all falls apart right after that. That's the time when your head, your heart, and your finger are all attached. That's the second you press the shutter and that's all you get. You can't get the same photographs if you're not involved... you have to come back, or you'll get a surface shot... just surface.

Singer: Given this definition of the concerned photographer, do you think photos are political statements?

Stummer: Always... you can't separate the two. I'm between an artist and an advocate and that's a concerned photographer.

Singer: So, in what ways can we understand what happened to Newark from looking at art that you can't get from history books or social commentary?

Stummer: I wanted to separate the person from the environment... the environment is bleak, the environment is poison, but the person is fine; they're beautiful, they're elegant, they're powerful... I believe my work shows that. It's the separation.... If you live in a bad neighborhood does not mean you're a bad person... come on, it's stupid, but we do put them together. I really love the light coming out of the dark... I like that a lot.

Stummer is deeply aware of the social content of the imagined final image, but she is also concerned with the aesthetic beauty of the images. She has a generous mind. She approaches photography neither as a specific repertoire nor academic exercise, but as a way of seeing. Stummer's work shows that the lives of black Newarkers can be illuminated through her specific, personal, adaptive, improvisatory inquiry into their problems. Through close, accurate observation and spontaneous recording of particular moments, Stummer shows both the difficulty and hardship, but also the humane sensitivity of their situation.

Before interviewing Stummer and looking closely at *No Easy Walk*, I had thought there was a connection between a documentary approach toward history and the concerns of art to create beauty and order from chaos. Roy DeCarava's images, for example, suggest the same thing. But Stummer has fierceness in her attitude toward this idea, and with a fire dancing behind her eyes, uses her unique sensibilities as an artist to reframe and refocus the entrenched social ills of a place like Newark's Central Ward. Her work has a practicality to its workmanship that suggest, for example, the photos of John Gutmann; it also sometimes has a distinctly political edge that is an explicit comment to hierarchies of power in Newark as in the photos of Alan Sekula (for example, her photo of the tires dumped in the lot where children played). [Figure 3]

I asked Stummer what she would apply from her years of experience in retrospect to her experience taking pictures in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Singer: Do you think you would do anything differently about these photographs now, knowing what you know 30 years later?

Helen Stummer: I thought about that once... I'd probably take better photographs now [laughs].

Frame 3: Stummer in Context

Helen Stummer can capture an image, as it exists in the moment because of her visual acuity and openness to peoples' humanity. My purpose in comparing her photos to paintings (Vermeer or Bearden, for example) is to illustrate the connection in art and real life, as Stummer saw it. Stummer is a terrific subject because of her unique knowledge as an outside witness into her subjects, the people she photographed. Because she is a kind of sociologist and an artist, she serves as a perfect counterpoint to Lynda Hull. I offer several close readings of her photos to show how Stummer appears to be addressing not only her constituents of the cities, but the historians who bear the responsibility of sorting the memories of Newark in the 1980s.

The viewer of her photos is a person to whom Stummer is speaking; beyond the buildings Stummer—in Hull's words—seeks a thing that shines and torments; it is seeping with metaphor, and thus is an imaginative agent for change. Stummer has creatively changed the ways we know what happened to the cities, and what it was like at the moment we were witnesses to it happening. Stummer's images served as a way for her to be a witness; the viewer of the photographs later reenacts the role of witness, but the responsibility of the witness to the collective memories that are evoked by the photographs remains uncharted in memory studies. Barbie Zelizer that unanswered questions still worry those interested in memories: "We still do not know where and among whom social memory is most actively operative. We still lack precise knowledge as to how remembering is accomplished for different social groups. How do the

memories of different groups intersect? How do we handle the ultimate subjectivity of collective memories? And are there points at which the mastery of memory obstructs a fruitful appropriation of its content?”⁸

Reading *No Easy Walk*, it becomes apparent that Stummer’s kinetic sense of rhythm, her searching, meditative narrative, and her unflinching interest in finding beauty in Newark, even at its ugly moments, all move photography to present a fresh way to see the urban crisis. On her way to Bloomfield in 1980, she took the wrong exit on the highway and ended up in Newark. Electrified by what she saw there, and armed with her spirit as a concerned photographer, she stayed for fifteen years.

Stummer’s work can be placed in a context of art in general. In terms of both form and content, there are similarities between her photos and some canonical images from Western art. None of these similarities are deliberate, but show the inherent beauty of the moments she sought to capture. For example, “Ring-a-round”, an image of children playing in the defunct shower rooms at Ripple Field, where Shabazz High School is today, in September 1987, is analogous to Henri Matisse’s “Dance” (1909). [Figures 6, 7] The arms overlap and the position of the children’s heads are nearly identical to the nude figures in the Matisse. The background of Stummer’s, though, is not the pastoral blue and green landscape, but a horror chamber of filth and graffiti. The expressions on the children’s faces are bucolic. Domesticity is always tied to the conditions and lack of choice—lack of freedom—in which the people exist.

Carol’s engagement to Rasheek, March 1993, [Figure 8] shows Carol’s glowing face towards the camera, with Rasheek looking down at Carol’s hand; another figure’s

⁸ Barbie Zelizer, “Reading Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (June 1995): 234.

head is looking away from the viewer. The open doorway shows a bedroom, a quiet, domestic scene, behind Carol and Rasheek, while the third person is in the kitchen.

[Figure 8]

In Vermeer's "Couple with a Glass of Wine", an analogous situation is constructed. The picture, like Stummer's, shows the female point-of-view; the male participants lack force and their faces are turned away. In both, the woman sits while the man stands behind the chair looking down. [Figure 9]

In the image of Carol studying, we see her wedding band. Her kerchief is just like the one on the woman in Vermeer's picture. In Stummer's, however, the light enters from the right, and in Vermeer's—as in all the Vermeers—the light enters from the left.

[Figure 10]

Stummer's photo of Clinton in Carol's backyard, in May 1988, shows a boy who holds a piece of metal rebar, the tensioning device inside a the reinforced concrete wall that is crumbling beneath him in a destroyed landscape. Like Japan after the bombing, the windowless, roofless building is a concrete shell. A twisted, inside-out fence is behind him on one side, a telephone poll on the other. The ground is a hive of litter, dead leaves, and pieces of rubble. He has a serene, yet serious expression. [Figure 12] August Sander's image of peasants in 1914 is strikingly similar: the same world-weariness, however, appears on a child in Stummer's image. [Figure 13]

Many of Stummer's photos depict children. They were a way of entering the lives of the people in the community. She learned this technique before she worked in Newark, when she was photographing East Sixth Street in New York: "I kept repeating to myself something that I had read: 'If you don't take risks, you will never do anything

meaningful.’ Finally I saw a group of children playing around their mothers, who were sitting on a stoop. No one spoke English very well, so I pointed to my camera and then to the children.”⁹

Stummer’s image of Arthur (“Diamond”) in November 1985 shows him making a dance-like hand gesture with his shadow repeating the gesture beneath him on the sidewalk; additionally, in a rare instance, Stummer’s shadow overlaps with his; her shadow takes the picture we are observing. Arthur froze to death in October 1987; there is an eerie resemblance to Roy DeCarava’s “Dancers” (1956) [Figures 14, 15]:

DeCarava took the image at a social club at the corner of W. 110th Street and Fifth Avenue; it shows two male dancers dancing to jazz during an intermission. DeCarava said the dancers:

represent a terrible torment for me in that I feel a great ambiguity about the image because of them. It’s because they are in some ways distorted characters. What they actually are is two black male dancers who dance in the manner if an older generation of vaudeville performers. The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man; to demean themselves in order to survive, to get along. In a way, these figures seem to epitomize that reality. And yet there is something in the figures not about that; something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word. So there is this duality, this ambiguity in the photograph that I find very hard to live with.¹⁰

Stummer’s image of Arthur shows the same situation; the emotional honesty of the people she depicts can best be described as grace. Stummer is an artist in the sense

⁹ Helen Stummer, *No Easy Walk: Newark, 1980-1993*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), xvii.

¹⁰ Roy DeCarava, *A Retrospective*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art 1996), 25. DeCarava (1919-2009) was an African American photographer.

that Vermeer or Matisse were artists, and she documents the society she observed with the passionate subjectivity of a photojournalist.

Frame 4: Builder Levy and Milton Rogovin: Photographs that Confront and Celebrate

Social documentary photography is in dialogue with the past. Social documentary photographers and oral historians, those whose roots are in the popular front of the 1930s, deliberately gave images to those with no presence and gave voice to the voiceless. What is the relationship between social documentary photography and oral history? How do social documentary photographers show their appreciation and critique through their art? Behind the photograph's tones of black and grey, the tenement building speaks, also the water tower. A cloud of pigeons seems to float above the detritus of a wasted city, Bushwick, Brooklyn, in the winter of 1987. In its platinum print, there textures emerge from the tones—charcoal, matte silver, concrete, mist—a lone figure, the photographer's student, climbs a stained boulder into a vacant lot. Then, after staring at it for a while, there are abstract forms—a sphere, rectangles, space and line. [Figure 16]

I will discuss the meanings of photographs by Builder Levy (b. 1942) and Milton Rogovin (1909-2011) in the context of social documentary expression, and in the context of Helen Stummer; specifically how their vision of showing the humanity and dignity of everyday people was rooted in their cultural background of cultural upheavals and innovations set in the 1930s. Levy believes the purpose of his photography is to document “quotidian lives and social struggles” and seeks “an honest, hardscrabble

realism, one that might project the possibility of a better world.”¹¹ The photograph itself is silent, yet demands what John Berger calls “an expectation of meaning.”¹² Levy and Rogovin document collective memory through photography, but in different ways. Their ways are analogous, however, to the oral interviews Studs Terkel recorded of people who lived through the Great Depression.

Levy and Rogovin’s photographs show the raw, wretched, beautiful, coherent, expressive moments of cities (Buffalo or New York City) in moments of decay; yet after reading the photographs, we can see the falling and rising of memory as it correlates to art. Memory is as selective and selected as the image. Because the photo has a special coherence, there is not only an act of communication between photographer and viewer, but between the document and “what really happened.” The photo is capable of producing something approaching a language.¹³ This language has its foundations in the 1930s, when the Communist Party and Popular Front’s ideas and ideals of art saturated a range of cultural productions (music, film, photography, writing) in all sorts of ways.

Photographers particularly saw themselves as using their cameras in the aid of social consciousness. Michael Denning, in his cultural history of the 1930s, *The Cultural Front*, says: “Nothing is more firmly establish than the perception that the ‘thirties’ was a time of social realism....Social realism...has come to mean three things: the documentary aesthetic, a rearguard opposition to modernism, and a relatively straightforward

¹¹ Builder Levy, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 15 February and 22 March 2010.

¹² John Berger, *Another Way of Telling*, (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 117.

¹³ Berger, 128.

representationalism in the arts.”¹⁴ Since Helen Stummer, Grachan Moncur III, Philip Roth, and Amiri Baraka (not to mention Lynda Hull’s parents) were born in the 1930s, that decade is an important flashpoint for the artistic and political implications of their work.

George Lipsitz said that “culture exists as a form of politics, as a means of reshaping individual and collective practice for specified interests, and as long as individuals perceive their interests as unfilled, culture retains an oppositional potential.”¹⁵ Photography is among the most lucid of cultural productions because of its seeming availability to anyone. Anyone can take a photo, but only certain photos are considered art. Making matters even more complicated is the fact that the social documentary photographer, like Levy and Rogovin, seeks to affect social change through his photographs. Their work is in a middle space between art and sociology, between an object that has mere aesthetic considerations and something that attempts to show the conditions under which some people in cities must endure. “I grew up in a household where art was encouraged, and it was assumed that we needed to change the world,” Levy said.¹⁶ Rogovin has made a similar statement:

While reviewing his photographs, Rogovin will often say, ‘Look at that. Everything works—the person, the way they stood, the way they looked at me....’ While he insists his purpose is social rather than aesthetic, when pressed further he acknowledges that the power and clarity of his photographs’ social message depends upon how visual components are represented.¹⁷

¹⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Verso, 1998), 118.

¹⁵ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 17.

¹⁶ Builder Levy, *Builder Levy: Photographer*, (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁷ Melanie Herzog, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*, (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 2006), 63.

Levy and Rogovin mostly photograph portraits of people rather than landscapes. We get a sense of the identities of the subjects, the photographer's personality, and where the viewer fits in the space between. Dolores Hayden said: "Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities."¹⁸ The social documentary photo tries to show the generosity, joy, activity, sense of style, sense of self, and the relationship between the subject's personality and the camera eye; the photo is evidence of the person's solid dignity, though it is revealed sometimes through the discrepancies between that dignity and the squalid, difficult, or harsh conditions in the picture's background. Sometimes this act of showing the person existing in spite of conditions is self-reflexive, and reveals something about the photographer himself. Michael Frisch, in his oral history of Milton Rogovin, elaborates:

To speak of self-presentation is not to deny the complexity of the relationship between the portrait subject and the painter, sculptor, photographer, or oral history whom that subject is addressing. Nor is it to deny artifice, interpretation, and even manipulation are necessarily involved in arranging the portrait session, rendering the images presented, and conveying them to others in some form or other....But portraits do represent and express a collaboration of their own between subject and artist/historian, a collaboration in which the subject is anything but mute or powerless, a mere object of study. This presentation is compellingly true of Rogovin's work: he is the sort of photographer who does not "take" photographs; rather, his subjects "give" them to him.¹⁹

¹⁸ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 9.

¹⁹ Michael H. Frisch, "Introduction," in *Portraits in Steel*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2-3.

Since Rogovin's photos, especially his "West Side Triptychs" series are three glimpses across the subjects' lives, they reflect the ontogeny of the people and of Buffalo itself; we can read the forgotten stories excised—either deliberately or not—from the master narrative. The master narrative is constructed by excluding the sorts of people captured by Rogovin's lens. Rogovin's goal was "to make sympathetic portraits of the poorest of the poor that showed them as decent human beings struggling to get by. Most are considered *los olvidados*, the forgotten ones, who are without a voice or power. Most people don't even know these people exist."²⁰

Beyond social documentary photography as the most mimetic, and most facile of the arts, there is a metaphysical characteristic to the best of these images (including light, form, and content) that is not as easily explained; yet both the quality of impression and the quality of the expression are the product of the photographers' vision, talent, practice, chance, and technical facility. Levy's "Pigeon Cloud" photo (Bushwick, Brooklyn, 1987) of the industrial warehouse, tenement, and water tower, with the light on the pigeons, was taken after Levy's 13 years of looking at that landscape. "I'm taking an old, broken-down neighborhood and making it into something amazing," Levy said.²¹

Helen Stummer reiterates this aspect of her image making:

When I see it I know it. But until I see it, I don't know, just be natural. Then when I see it I can do the photograph. So, it's very uncomfortable for people and for me a lot of times. It's a persistence I guess. I have great love for doing what I did. I wanted to separate the person from the environment... the environment is bleak, the environment is poison, but

²⁰ Melanie Herzog, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*, (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 2006), 152.

²¹ Builder Levy, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 15 February and 22 March 2010.

the person is fine; they're beautiful, they're elegant, they're powerful... I believe my work shows that.²²

Stummer describes the quality of presence that differentiates her photographs from being photojournalism and more in the realm of artistic expression. Hers is a bottom-up rather than top-down view of history; like Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*, she offers the intimate view of peoples' lives in context. Stummer appears to be addressing not only her constituents of the cities—the men and women who engage with history to mourn and celebrate who we really are—but the historians who bear the responsibility of sorting the memories from the rubble.²³ The affect on the viewer is changed into a progressive reaction. Walter Benjamin explained “the progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.”²⁴

Rogovin deliberately sought out working people and minority populations in working-class Buffalo—miners, Yemenis, storefront churches—to record workaday quotidian lives. This is one of the tenets of oral history: “European oral history projects from the start were the domain of social historians to record the everyday lives and experiences of working-class people.”²⁵ Because peoples' memories and their dissatisfaction with the present can “convince them that the hard times were not so bad

²² Helen Stummer, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 26 November 2009.

²³ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 238.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken, 1968), 234.

²⁵ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23.

after all”²⁶, a photograph can sometimes be more instructive than an oral interview to present layers of present and past in a single image. In my interviews with Levy and Stummer, the power and beauty of their photographs is self-evident; their explanations of how the photos came to be shows the years of talent, dedication, chance, and practice culminating in the final image. Many of their photos were the result of years, if not more a decade’s, attention and focus on whatever subject was being explored. Rogovin, however, though he “experimented with exposures and camera angles,” was an optometrist by day and his final photographs were the result of a single snapshot.²⁷

For an oral historian like Terkel whose vision of presenting history from mouth of the “man on the street,” history is not a cold dialectical system fixed among the stars to be interpreted by experts. It is a fluid document. Its liquids can be understood through a one-on-one interview with men, women, and child who lived through an historical moment (e.g. The Depression). For these popular historians, history is a preserved moment of the past, but is closely examined and “read” in the present; it is an intimate connection between the two, caught in silver gelatin. Alan Trachtenberg cites George Herbert Mead²⁸ on the roles of social documentary photography:

For Mead, a social act occurs when a person engages in internal dialogue, takes on the role or point of view of the other, imagines it provisionally as one’s own in order to respond to it. To foster exactly this exchange between the subject and the viewer of his pictures, and between himself and them, [Lewis] Hine attempted to enter his pictures into the internal experience of his audience, to awaken in them an imaginative response which would issue in a revised identity, one which now acknowledges the

²⁶ Ritchie, 25.

²⁷ Melanie Herzog, *Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer*, (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 2006), 51.

²⁸ Mead said: “History is always the interpretation of the present.”

imagined voices of his pictured workers as part of one's essential social world."²⁹

In the example of Rogovin's images of Buffalo, peoples' faces show emotional depth and affection for the universe without sentimentality. Many of his photographs (of miners for example) show them over a period of several years, both at work and covered in soot, and later in plain clothes, during recreation or with their children. Thus, the series' name, "Family of Miners" includes not only the workers themselves, but those for whom the workers are responsible. In terms of photography's role in oral history, Ritchie makes the concession that to reconstruct the social context of photographs is an exercise that "can be misleading, and misinterpreted, without help from those who were there."³⁰

One photograph of a female worker at Republic Steel, taken in 1978, when Rogovin was 69 years old, shows her outside the plant, body tilted, but facing the camera. She wears heavy, soot-marred gloves, a plaid wool coat, work boots with a flap nailed over the tops, and coal-black-stained jeans. She carries a three-foot length of chain looped through some metal equipment. Her blonde hair, wispy like a torch before the dark sky, remains untouched by the filth of the heavy lifting below the ground.³¹ [Figure 17] A facing photo, perhaps taken later the same day, shows the same woman with three little girls, her daughters. They are in a typically middle class dining room: tablecloth with filigree border, closed drapes, and a bizarre framed image of a lion on the opposite wall. The lion is a metaphor: it portends fierceness and determination for the three girls. They appear to range in age from perhaps five to nine. Here, the steelworker wears a

²⁹ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 204.

³⁰ Ritchie, 100.

³¹ Herzog, 114.

sparkling white blouse with puffy sleeves. The children may have no idea what drudgery and toil have produced this calm, clean, safe setting for their future meals. On these sorts of images, Rogovin revealed, “My real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful.”³²

Another example from the same series, *Working People*, shows an African American man, Joe Kemp, working at Hanna Furnace Corporation, also in 1978. He fills the frame, his shirtless torso glistens from unbearable heat. He is a cinder snapper, what Rogovin described to Michael Frisch as “flushing the monkey.” He swept slag from the runners after the casting was done. A vertical scar bisects Kemp’s stomach. He wears miner’s goggles above his head, like a flying ace, and holds an enormous tool (a spade?) like a sword. [Figure 18] The opposite photos show him after work with his family, four others, in their living room. A dyed white plastic Christmas fir is in the background, decorated with ornaments. The lampshade, wrapped in plastic, may have been purchased on layaway. A second portrait, taken in 1985, shows the same man—once hulking with intensity—in a wheelchair with a woman (his daughter?). His leg has been amputated due to circulatory problems six months before Hanna Furnace closed in January 1983.³³

Lost histories, hidden narratives, small voices, reclaimed dignity are forced out of the lens. These are some of the goals of oral history: to get the stories of the non-elite, or to not exclusively interview generals, but soldiers in the field as well. The act of the

³² Herzog, 119.

³³ Herzog, 117, 119.

social documentary photographer makes the personal history a public act, gives purposefulness to those persons, makes the viewer a witness and participant in public history, and shows the photographers' care in her ability to make and augment these connections. Discussing Rogovin's skill at this, Levy said: "If they [the people photographed] believe in you, they're willing to do it."³⁴ The relationship between oral history and documentary work can be a subtle act of psychological sturdiness on the part of both interviewer and narrator. Robert Coles, a psychiatrist, in *Doing Documentary Work*, shows the dynamic, porous, surrendering nature of documenting others' stories:

Our willingness to put ourselves on the line in this way, our willingness to indicate that the documentarian, the listener and the one who sees, the witness, can both be a vehicle and an obstacle on a journey. More silence, and then I recite a clinical truism: that the analyst must constantly look within, hence the parallel need in "fieldwork" to take into account the person (ourselves) who is offering an account of others—it being so easy, in contrast, to read those oral histories, those personal essays, those theories, or even those statistically laden reports, or to look at those photographs, with their titles and the terse or extended descriptions under them, or the film footage with its voices and visions, and forget (a negation of the whole point of documentary work) the person's life that preceded and now informs this time when he or she has become that listener, that witness.³⁵

The exploratory, sometimes corrosive recovery of memories for both the person recording the memory (whether it is a photo or an oral interview) and the person recalling the memory can be heroic, but it is fraught with danger. It confirms Adrienne Rich's idea that "lying is done with words, and also with silence."³⁶ The light reflected off the body of the person being photographed is in a deliberately selected frame; what lies outside the frame, beyond it, is for better or worse not included in that recovered memory.

³⁴ Builder Levy, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 15 February and 22 March 2010.

³⁵ Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43-44.

³⁶ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, (New York: Norton, 1995), 186.

Illustrating Robert Coles's point of the photographer giving an empathic "reading" of his subject to create this fluid journey, Levy gave me a "walking tour" of his photograph of a woman at the March on Washington, Washington, DC on August 28, 1963. [Figure 19]

At these citywide demonstrations she shows not only black opposition to Vietnam War, but also the commitment of several sectors of the population (both whites and black faces can be discerned in the photo's background) as well as Levy's own commitment to both Civil Rights and to the war's opposition. There are abstractions as well: the triangles of her kerchief and arms reiterate the conflicts at stake in those debates, yet a triangle in the proportions 3:4:5 always includes right angles, those corners necessary for architectural foundations. Issues of gender also emerge; since the woman faces the viewer and man's back faces viewer, the viewer can read an opposition of ideas: her earnestness and concern is contrasted with the absences of women's histories.³⁷ The crowd listens to Mahalia Jackson. The expression and gesture of the woman is a contrast of periodicity, taste, and light: she is from a different era; she wears a kerchief over her head, and has the religiosity of a Southerner bussed to Washington for the demonstration. She clasps her hands and her black hands and face appear to glow against her white blouse and seersucker jacket. Jackson's booming "How I Got Over" and "I've Been 'Buked, and I've Been Scorned" has decayed in the air by the time it reaches the woman, whose face and expression is a sustained concern. She glows and almost hums.

³⁷ "The marginalization of the women's liberation movement in sixties books has several sources, but it has been facilitated by the scarcity of memoirs or autobiographies by women's liberation activists" Alice Echols, "'We Gotta Get Out Of This Place': Notes Toward a Remapping of the Sixties," *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 9-34, reprinted in Echols, *Shaky Ground: The 60s and its Aftershocks*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 63.

There is continuity between the care and attention, a kind of generosity, Levy shows to the landscape of a West Virginia mountaintop and that of the woman at the March on Washington. Ritchie explains that oral historians have been “influenced by trends in anthropology, literary criticism, and social history; they examined not only what was said, but what was left unsaid, and they speculated about the lapses in historical memory.”³⁸ These lapses begin with the personal, but extend to the public. Since the social documentary photo is a record of the person within society, the photo can both conceal and reveal.

The photograph was a way to provide a narrative of the 1930s, particularly for those who were not literate. Terkel solved the problem of documenting those without an inclination to write or those who could not write with the tape recorder.³⁹ William Stott explains that Americans’ cultural imagination is often approached through the stories Terkel sought, or through the kinds of photographs Rogovin took: “Most Americans born since the Depression first approach it, if they do, through documents of the kind treated here. Their image of it starts with documentary photographs, one of the few things vivid in high school history books.”⁴⁰

On this point, Susan Sontag is increasingly important. Her book *On Photography*, a collection of essays originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, asks several profound questions: what do we know about the presumption of veracity that gives photographs authority? Are photos passive or aggressive in their “message”? Do photos

³⁸ Ritchie, 28-29.

³⁹ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 199.

⁴⁰ Stott, 67.

create an imaginary possession of the past or do they create historical “truth”? Is photographing an act of non-intervention? There are no easy answers to these questions, but a starting point reflects Robert Frank’s credo: “There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment.”⁴¹ Partly transfixed perversity, the picture-taker reaffirms her fight against being robbed of the past; she is trying to take “imaginary possession of past that is unreal.”⁴² Stummer, like Levy, was constantly seeking orderliness for her vision to be contained within a moment. It took Levy 13 years to make the image of the “Pigeon Cloud” photo, and Stummer spent as many years photographing the Stella Wright Houses.

When I see it I know it. But until I see it, I don’t know, just be natural. Then when I see it I can do the photograph. So, it’s very uncomfortable for people and for me a lot of times. It’s persistence, I guess. I have great love for doing what I did. I wanted to separate the person from the environment... the environment is bleak, the environment is poison, but the person is fine; they’re beautiful, they’re elegant, they’re powerful... I believe my work shows that.⁴³

She disdains digital photography and her camera has no motor drive. She simultaneously gauges the aesthetic and social value of what she intends to photograph as she gets a light reading and dials it into her manual Leica. This laborious process is tied, in her explanation, to her involvement in the community, among the people in the photo:

I don’t get 17 chances before or 17 after. The picture of the children dancing... I took at least 10 rolls of film to get that. To get children playing is incredible without a motor drive... it all falls apart right after that. That’s the time when your head, your heart, and your finger are all attached. That’s the second you press the shutter and that’s all you get.

⁴¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1977), 122.

⁴² Sontag, 9.

⁴³ Helen Stummer, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 26 November 2009.

You can't get the same photographs if you're not involved... you have to come back, or you'll get a surface shot... just surface.⁴⁴

The subjects' dignity is partially opaque, and partly a physical embodiment of social ills everyone is aware of but is not attending to. Like the oral historian who relies on the narrator's way of telling stories to create the joint project of meaning between interviewer and interviewee, Stummer is self-effacing and praises the perseverance of the families she photographed rather than her own undiluted powers of observation and technical facility:

People are amazing to me. They would let me into their home. It's uncanny. I was always bowled-over, I was always so amazed how people allowed me into their life with hardly any hesitating... it's a gift... it must be a gift. I don't believe it happens to everyone.

I never thought my work was unique; it was because they felt I may be the only person in America who has spent so much time in an urban environment with some of the same families. They don't believe it's ever been done. I just don't think of it as anything... I never had a plan or a goal. I just did it because I did it; I wish I had a goal... it just happened. I did it from my gut, my heart more than anything... it felt right. It became a passion. I really want other people; the advocacy part of me was really enraged by the conditions people were forced to live under. It enraged me; because I realized it's man-made. It doesn't have to be.⁴⁵

There is advocacy and there is a palpable tension between the veracity of a photo and whether or not we accept what is represented. Sontag says photography "is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks."⁴⁶ The photograph either universalizes or atomizes the history and politics the viewer

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sontag, 23.

understands. Oral memory likewise seeks to erase the abstract boundary between the fleshy person before the tape recorder and the great tumblers of history in which the person moves. Terkel interviewed Fran, a 21 year-old from Atlanta that illustrates this point in terms of the over-protectiveness of Depression Era-parents: “A lot of young people feel angry about this kind of protectiveness. This particular kind is even more vicious somehow, because it’s wanting you not to have to go through what is a very real experience, even though it is a very hard thing. Wanting to protect you from your own history, in a way.”⁴⁷

One way that younger generations “learn” their history is through the act of the documentation, whether an oral interview, or a photograph. Levy taught at Junior High School 271 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville when he began selling *Freedomways* magazine and taking many of its photographs. *Freedomways* was published for 25 years. It was founded by W.E.B. DuBois and its pages were filled with people on the phalanx of the Civil Rights Movements, including cultural figures like Ossie Davis, Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, and James Baldwin, African liberation leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, American Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Julian Bond, and writers, poets, and jazz musicians like Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Abbey Lincoln, Harry Belafonte, and Max Roach.⁴⁸ Levy had an opportunity as a young teacher to get involved and get his photographs noticed:

These are my students, and this is a color slide photograph from 1968 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Junior High School 271. That was the

⁴⁷ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 57.

⁴⁸ Esther Cooper Jackson, *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

heart of the struggle then for community control. I was there, staying with it. They were reading probably some Langston Hughes poetry in the *Freedomways* magazine. I don't know... they were reading one of the *Freedomways*. So, that's cool. That's it.

So, this is very inspiring to me. How did I get into this in the '60s? I told you I knew Esther Jackson because I was selling them. I made some good photographs already and I don't know if it was before or after the school boycott, I brought a pile of photographs over to Esther Jackson and I asked if I could show her some photographs; she said yes, and I lived in Clinton Hill, and she lived in Clinton Hill. It was after Brooklyn College. I came over and showed her a bunch of stuff and she liked it and her husband liked it and that's how it started. I don't know if I was photographing the school boycott for *Freedomways*, or if I showed *Freedomways* the photographs after the thing. But that was very inspiring.⁴⁹

Levy's background as a teacher of at-risk youth in Bushwick, his family's attention to progressive causes, his job as a teenager selling the Civil Rights periodical, *Freedomways* magazine, and his lifelong project of documenting "the visual poetry of human dignity within a hardscrabble realism" is entirely reflected in his work.⁵⁰ Stummer says almost the same thing:

I wanted to separate the person from the environment... the environment is bleak, the environment is poison, but the person is fine; they're beautiful, they're elegant, they're powerful... I believe my work shows that. It's the separation.... If you live in a bad neighborhood does not

⁴⁹ Builder Levy, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 15 February and 22 March 2010. The New York City teachers' strike of 1968 was a months-long confrontation between the community-controlled school board in the mostly black Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn and New York City's United Federation of Teachers. It was marked by tensions between blacks and Jews. Levy, although Jewish, was on the side of the black community. See also: Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2000) and Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York:*

Blacks, Whites, And the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ *ibid.* Esther Jackson (b. 1917) is an African American civil rights activist, and, along with Shirley Graham Du Bois, W. E. B. Du Bois, Edward Strong, and Louis E. Burnham, was one of the founding editors of the magazine *Freedomways*.

mean you're a bad person... come on, it's stupid, but we do put them together. I really love the light coming out of the dark... I like that a lot.⁵¹

Stummer is deeply aware of the social content of the imagined final image, but she is also concerned with the aesthetic beauty of the images. Stummer has a generous mind and she approaches photography neither as a specific repertoire nor academic exercise, but as a way of seeing. The heurctic method fits perfectly with her own thinking: that the lives of black Newarkers can be illuminated through her specific, personal, adaptive, improvisatory inquiry into their problems. Through close, accurate observation and spontaneous recording of particular moments, Stummer shows both the difficulty and hardship, but also the humane sensitivity of their situation.

Stummer's interview and her book, *No Easy Walk*, show a connection between a documentary approach toward history and the concerns of art to create beauty and order from chaos. This is not unique, per se; Roy DeCarava's images, for example, suggest the same thing. But Stummer has fierceness in her attitude toward this idea, and with a fire dancing behind her eyes, uses her unique sensibilities as an artist to reframe and refocus the entrenched social ills of a place like Newark's Central Ward. The viewer of her photos is a person to whom Stummer is speaking; beyond the buildings Stummer seeks a thing that shines and torments; it is seeping with metaphor, and thus is an imaginative agent for change. Stummer has creatively changed the ways we know what happened to the cities, and what it was like at the moment we were witnesses to it happening. The empathic person "speaking" in Stummer's photos poems looks forward and plans ahead with a sense of artistic and political freedom.

⁵¹ Helen Stummer, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 26 November 2009.

Similarly, Levy, who set-up community-based social documentary photography workshops for youth in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, where he taught, is involved in art in all that he does and constantly seeks to invest his interest in both the form and content of his photographs. Like Rogovin's method, Levy, too, has a direct involvement among the people he photographs. Even a superficially oppositional photo, like his "Medallion Lords, Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, 1965"⁵² shows a simpatico correlation between Levy and the Medallion Lords, a gang, and between the Medallion Lords and the viewer. [Figure 20]

Six of the Lords are in the frame. They are young—perhaps they are in their 20s—and wear snappy fedoras, leather jackets or raincoats, and Ray Ban sunglasses. Their clothes and stance are beyond the pragmatic—they have the cool affect of slight aggression; the movement of the insider we can only glimpse. Their demeanor is reserved and, like a suit of armor, to protect the costumes' wearers from the harsh light of urban travel. Stiff fabric, slightly cocked hats, and polished shoes with low heels tell us they take time to look this way. Levy explains how the photograph came to be made:

I was going home after an afternoon of photographing when I saw these fellows, who recognized me as a former Parks Department recreation leader. It was a Friday evening and they were going out. I wondered how I could approach them to make a photograph when, to my happy surprise, they insisted I take their picture.⁵³

Is our opinion of an urban gang reified or rejected? What does this photo mean in conflict and in concert with New York history or with cultural memory? When the viewer is en face with the Medallion Lords, we recognize them as human—perhaps we see

⁵² Herzog, 149.

⁵³ Builder Levy, *Builder Levy: Photographer*, (New York: A.R.T. Press), 2005.

ourselves—they are not the enigma who can be easily categorized. They show their own frailty and nobility implied by their name.

One of Rogovin's pictures from Buffalo's Lower West Side⁵⁴ in the mid-1970s shows two African American men dancing in a bar. It's 11:30 according to the wall's "Cold Aged Genesee Beer" clock. They are dressed in 1973 styles: unsubtle patterns, velour, and floppy, existential caps. The shadows of the men's bodies are cast on the jukebox behind, and the improvisatory joy of their elegance is the real subject of the photo. They move their limbs to a number one hit of 1973: Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" or the O'Jays' "Love Train." [Figure 25]

Rogovin, working as an optometrist, and his wife Anne roamed this neighborhood beginning in 1972, to photograph the streets, homes, churches, and bars.⁵⁵ He said:

As a social documentary photographer I was interested in this small neighborhood because of the many problems that existed there—high unemployment, prostitution, drugs, alcoholism, and others. A patient of mine introduced me to several of her relatives and then I was on my own. The first six months were very difficult for me.

People thought I was from the FBI or the Welfare Department. From the beginning I made it my policy to give a free copy of their photo to everyone I photographed. I don't know if was this or the quality of my work that encouraged people to approach and say, "Throw me a picture I can send to my mother in Puerto Rico." After about six months the people in this neighborhood, including the prostitutes, drug pushers, and other members of the community, began to invite Anne and me to their homes, cultural centers, and other gathering places.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ This neighborhood centers on Niagara Street from City Hall to Porter Avenue.

⁵⁵ Perhaps Rogovin's occupation as an optometrist suggests a structure for his acuity as a photographer: he measures the refractive power of the eyes. [Figure 26]

⁵⁶ Herzog, 88-89.

For Rogovin, the quality of his work was keyed to getting access. This imperative concept in social documentary photography is the means by which the photographer, who is often more educated and from a privileged, outsider position in the communities in which she photographs (either because of race or class, or some combination) gets a right of entry into other worlds. For Stummer, this admittance is paramount to all the work that follows:

Getting access is one of the major things about being a concerned photographer. That's the hardest hurdle of all. I want to show other people what it's like, how you're living here, because I don't think it's right. It was the right thing. On East 6th Street and a lot of them would leave... they said "we can smell attitude." I said to myself: Thank God I've got the right attitude!⁵⁷

Her "right attitude" is a combination of the subjects' ease with her and the fact that the images are never posed. Ritchie's metaphor for this comfort is photographic: "Single oral histories are like 'audio snapshots'....Repeated visits help establish an intimacy that encourages candidness."⁵⁸ Stummer got access partly because she is a woman and partly because of her empathetic appreciation for what she was doing. A recent image of Osmond "Oz" Dixon's "RIP Site" on Park Avenue in East Orange, New Jersey is analogous to Levy's image of the Medallion Lords. [Figure 2; Figure 20]

Ironically, Stummer views her ability to record the inner lives of these kinds of subjects as self-portraiture:

I really have a deep respect for everybody...how they think; how they are. I picked up my camera as a signal that I wanted to take a picture, and most people turned

⁵⁷ Helen Stummer, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 26 November 2009.

⁵⁸ Ritchie, 87.

their back on me. That was a signal that they didn't want to be photographed, so I put my camera down; I didn't take the picture because it's very disrespectful. I kept walking and these three men said "come on, come on" and then the site was there and they posed... usually I don't like posing. I only have a couple of pictures in all these years. I always tell them to be natural. Act like I'm not here. But there they were and there's the picture.

It was there...it's huge. Then I walk back again and I was so moved by the respect they gave me. I was allowed into another world. And that's what most of my work has been about... I've been allowed into other worlds. It doesn't happen. You don't experience that and I'm very lucky. It's been absolutely incredible and I healed myself. Because I was extremely shy and you can hide behind the camera. It gave me... It was a tool I could hide behind. It brought me out of myself. I was able to relate to people and people related to me. The whole experience became healing in itself.⁵⁹

In this instance, the social documentary photographer's effort to capture public history is more dangerous and fraught with tension than even the difficult oral interviews. My oral interviews with Stummer and Levy tend to echo what may be self-evident in their work. Stummer and Levy have both found the camera as a way to guard them, and allow them entrée into worlds distant and apart from their own, whether it is Newark's Central Ward or the Mongolian steppes.

The social documentary photographer has shown the fabric of the city in the faces of those she photographs. Stummer shows the person, who is fine, in the foreground, and the catastrophic melancholy of their crumbling surroundings. A photograph she took in 1987, "Joe holding child, May," shows a group of three African American men and one little girl. They sit on milk crates in Newark's dilapidated Central Ward. The girl is eating an apple. They remain elegant and graceful, though in the upper right hand corner is the

⁵⁹ Helen Stummer, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 26 November 2009.

burned shell of a building and the boarded-up window of someone's former home.⁶⁰ Like a foreign war zone, the image illuminates a poor African nation within Newark's borders, totally invisible if not for Stummer's lens peering through the gauze.

Stummer also captures classical postures and gestures reiterated in other great paintings. Compare the gesture of crossed-arms in "Carol's Turf" to Craigie Aitchison's "Portrait of Naaotwa Swayne" (oil on canvas, 1988) [Figures 21, 22]. Both Carol and Naaotwa Swayne cross their arms defiantly, but also protectively; their striped blouses and the dark backgrounds also suggest a world of human warmth in an uncaring world. A photo Stummer took of Carol and her niece Margo shows a surprising resemblance to a picture Romare Bearden made in the style of the Mexican muralists [Figures 23, 24]. In Bearden's painting, the women's massive faces are the same shapes as those in Stummer's picture. In the painting, the woman on the left is set against bare, rocky hills; the woman on the right is next to giant leaves, suggesting fertility. The shape of the woman's head on the left and her expression is identical to Margo's in Stummer's picture.

Levy's and Rogovin's photographs express art, history, and politics in a subtle combination of form and content. By closely reading these photographs, we can learn more about the relationship between art as an anodyne to violence, between history and "truth", between observer and observed, between witness and underdog, and between the reader of art and the "reader" of cities, the historian or layperson that might interpret the photos' meanings. Because Levy and Rogovin were infused with a passion for applying

⁶⁰ Helen M. Stummer, *No Easy Walk: Newark, 1980-1993*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 32.

the Popular Front's legacy to their photography—they believe that art can affect social change—the resulting images offer an intimate connection between the person viewing the photograph and the person in the photograph. This connection is apparently made possible by the sensitivity and social democratic feeling of the photographer. The photo embodies confrontation and celebration: it celebrates the person, even as it confronts the viewer to pay closer attention to the social conditions that wrought the person's circumstances. This attention is a supreme form of generosity.

Frame 5: Portraits Vs. Landscapes

Urban photography often focuses on the cities' people; Stummer used this strategy effectively. Other photographers working in the same time and places, such as Jamel Shabazz (b. 1960) and Q. Sakamaki (b. 1958), also used portraiture to make their artistic and political points. Still other photographers working in the same time and places, such as George Tice (b. 1938) and Camilo José Vergara (b. 1944), used urban landscapes to express the same impulses, as did Stummer.

At the same time Stummer was driving through the Central Ward, the legacies of the Popular Front in photography reached a young photographer called Jamel Shabazz. It's summer in Brooklyn in 1981. Some guys in Lee denim suits and suede Pumas with fat laces are listening to The Clash sing "The Magnificent Seven." Its proto-punk-rap rises through the humidity. A young photographer, Jamel Shabazz, has a pocket Kodak Instamatic 110 and is documenting the b-boys, breakers, fly girls, and taggers on the city streets. These photos are documented in *A Time Before Crack* and *Back in the Days*. The photos show the black community of the 1980s in a similar light as James Van Der Zee

did in the 1920s.⁶¹ Relaxed portraiture of this kind shows a record of daily existence.

They show a city before the ravages of crack rock and before the ravages of AIDS.

The kids pose confidently, with the plush, celebratory defiant ethos of early hip-hop culture. Posing before the spaghetti-like graffiti in a D train, they smile and embrace, and with their arms splayed or akimbo, they are one with the community. The images of graffiti in Shabazz's photos echo the descriptions of Newark from Roth's *American Pastoral*. Anton Chekhov offered a surprising insight into graffiti in his 1888 short story, "Lights." The hero, Ananyev is at a stone summer home that rises above the sea:

"When a man in a melancholy mood is left tête-à-tête with the sea, or any landscape which seems to him grandiose, there is always, for some reason, mixed with melancholy, a conviction that he will live and die in obscurity and he reflectively snatches up a pencil and hastens to write his name on the first thing that comes handy. And that, I suppose is why all convenient solitary nooks like my summer-house are always scrawled over in pencil or carved with pen-knives."⁶²

In other words, it is the graffiti artist's melancholy mood when confronted with grandiose landscapes, such as a subway train, that urges him to etch his name. Again, Chekhov has drawn attention to the idea that private experience of the city interfaces with public experience of the city.

Though Shabazz's images were made in a grittier and more dangerous New York—a time of dice, money signs, and wide, gold rings that read "Paid In Full"—Shabazz's images ironically evoke the opposite dynamic: innocence, friendliness,

⁶¹ James Van Der Zee (1886-1993) was a major African American photographer and a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He began his photographic career as a dark room technician at Gertz Department Store in Newark.

⁶² Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*. (New York: Random House, 2007), 19. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian physician, playwright, and short story writer.

pride, and most importantly, grace. Urban cherubim, in square plastic glasses, velour tracksuits, and a gleam of playfulness in most of the pictures show the photographer's rapport with his subjects, and they with him.

Shabazz's pictures work because of their inimitable coherence of form and color; they give the sensation that the personalities of the subjects have been captured. Like the images of the homeless in Tompkins Square Park taken by Q. Sakamaki during the same period, these people are anonymous; but unlike Sakamaki's subjects, these are working-class or perhaps middle-class young people merely express their own individuation within a vibrant community. Sakamaki's people are frightened, beaten by ridicule, and living on the thin margins of society. Shabazz's people are relaxing, enjoying each other's company (e.g. "chillin'"), and, though perhaps less politically engaged than those in Tompkins Square Park, show the impulses of their own interests; break dancing, for example.⁶³ [Figure 28]

Shabazz's domain was mostly Brooklyn, but the time period overlaps (1980-1989) with those Helen Stummer took in Newark for *No Easy Walk*. The differences in the subjects' demeanor can perhaps be accounted for by the fact that Stummer was "embedded" with the same families, and on the same blocks in the Central Ward for 13 years, whereas Shabazz took photos of strangers on the street. His main influences were James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks, but mostly his own father, also a professional photographer.⁶⁴

⁶³ See also: Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2006).

⁶⁴ Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was an African American filmmaker and photographer known for his 1971 film *Shaft*, the pinnacle of blaxploitation cinema.

Sakamaki's photos are not portraiture: they play with exposure, light, and grain. Some images are blurry, and the framing and focus are sometimes unclear so that the viewer isn't entirely sure what part of the image to pay attention to; details from the periphery of the photos emerge. [Figures 29, 30]

Sakamaki and Shabazz were attempting in part to document a community; Sakamaki, a Japanese immigrant, was reacting to the homogeny in his home culture and sought to authenticate the struggle of the homeless population of Tompkins Square Park against Giuliani-style gentrification, agitation by police, and an eventual class-related riot on August 6, 1988. Shabazz was in and of the people he was photographing, mostly the African American youth of Brooklyn and Manhattan. Stummer was embedded in her adopted community in Newark for 13 years, and though she was raised in Newark, remained an outsider.

George Tice shows urban New Jersey, but by witnessing the physical spaces in which people live. Best known for his photographs of Paterson, although Tice was born in Newark and photographed about 20 photos there, he never concentrated on it.⁶⁵ Like Stummer, Tice's habit of finding locations to photograph began with driving:

Photography and driving went hand in hand. I would decide to go off someplace, and once there I would continue driving until I chanced upon something that engaged my interest—something I could take a picture of that would add to my purpose at hand, or to the unity of my larger body of work. Whenever that happened, I'd stop the car, get out, and walk around. I would ask myself, "Do I really want to take this picture? If so, I'll have to get the equipment out of the trunk and set it up. And, from where do I want to take it?"⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Tice can trace his family tree in New Jersey back 300 years (See *Ticetown*, Madison: Lodima Press, 2007). His grandfather, George Robertson, for whom he is named, was murdered in Newark on July 3, 1922.

⁶⁶ George Tice, *Urban Landscapes*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 8.

Thus, Tice's images of Newark reflect its (mostly disappeared) industrial past: the Castrol Motor Oil Company, Bert's Shoe Repair Shop, Jimmy's Bar and Conmar Zipper Company, Gar's Bakery and Leisure Laundry, Naporano Wrecking Company [Figure 31] Tice plans what he intends to photograph carefully and uses an 8 X 10 View camera, a large format camera. When he sees the right image, he takes one picture. His editing, then, is done by not taking a picture of something that he knows won't work.⁶⁷

Tice's pictures show an almost nostalgic embrace for an urban New Jersey that no longer exists, or only exists in memory: a phone booth at 3 am, mom and pop drug stores, a drive-in movie theatre, a houseboat, hand painted signs, a diner. The preservation of the memory of urban New Jersey shows Tice's deep and abiding affection for those places (Paterson, Newark, Perth Amboy, Rahway, etc.) They illuminate the slowly moving away past that appears in the moment as unremarkable, yet is amplified in the collective memory as a place alive and crackling with meaning and pathos, a sense of home.

Camilo José Vergara has shown in equally powerful ways, the textures of decay in urban spaces like Camden, New Jersey, Harlem, New York, and Richmond, California. His *Invincible Cities* site shows buildings in those places over time; an interactive map shows colored pins that the user can use crosshairs on a map to select sites and to view changes to the landscape over decades. Various layers of decay—and sometimes improvement—appear etched in both the architecture and the infrastructure of the places Vergara photographs. [Figures 32, 33]

In some ways, Tice and Vergara show urban New Jersey as two sides of a coin: Tice has some things in common with a social documentary photographer, but is more of

⁶⁷ George Tice, *Interview with Sean Singer*, 29 November 2010.

an artist photographer; he prefers to show the beauty of his form and content. His images show an eerie melancholy and homesickness; the images are infused with a kind of *duende*, an expressive authenticity fringed with homesickness and longing. Vergara's photos are more overtly political. They show the terrible consequences of urban New Jersey's loss of its industrial past, its racial and class stratification, and its dependence on people paying attention.

The processes of portraiture and landscape also manifest themselves in a comparison again between Vermeer and Stummer. In Vermeer's famous painting of the little street in Delft [Figure 34], we see a striking similarity to Stummer's picture of Irvine Turner Boulevard [Figure 35].

For scholars, the insights gained by the oral historians and documentary photographers who emerged either directly or indirectly from this Establishment are valuable; they give the journeymen or expert observers of cities an opportunity to be more compassionate and hopeful about the potential of a city. The sentimentality and corny idealism attached to these interviews and images is less significant than those values.

In my opinion, the cultural legacies of the cultural projects such as Stummer's can be viewed as sentimental, as a fashion, or an historical curiosity, but these views are shortsighted. The valuable insights we gain seriously outweigh those views: the first is pure pleasure, the aesthetic beauty of the charcoals, lights, and shadows. The second is the humanistic benefit; we see even the worst part of Newark with fresh eyes. Newark becomes almost mythological in the photos' silver gelatin.

Conclusion: Ghost Town?

“sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.” — Virgil, *Aeneid* I, line 462¹

The harsh life of the jazz musician, particularly in the avant-garde (the least commercial kind of jazz music), can be daunting given the daily pressures of family life. Grachan Moncur’s wife, Tamam Moncur, elucidates. When they were living in the Scudder Housing Projects on Court Street in Newark, crime and drugs made for a fraught existence: “When I look back on it, I say, oh boy, it was really rough. I’d be sitting outside with the kids as babies. There might be shooting at any given time and you’d have to run for cover.”² Grachan Moncur tried not to be a musical influence on his children: “Influence them what? To starve like we were starving?”³ Moncur’s artistic decisions, then, are bound with his personal life. He chose to pursue his artistic vision and to teach as composer-in-residence at the Newark Community School of the Arts, creating difficult, demanding, nuanced, and sublime music.

The lives of other black Newarkers can be illuminated through a focus on his specific, personal, adaptive, and improvisatory problems. Through close, accurate observation and spontaneous recording of particular moments, Moncur shows both the difficulty and hardship, but also the humane sensitivity of their situation. The unique

¹ “These are tears for events and mortal things.”

² Chanta Jackson, “Newark Teacher Tells of Inner City Life.” *Newark Star-Ledger*, 28 February 2009. Moncur’s wife, Tamam Moncur (b.1940) was born Tracy Sims. She was a jazz pianist, but played a major role in the student protests and Civil Rights movement in San Francisco in 1963-64.

³ Alexander Lane, “Keeping the Music Alive: Through Good Times and Bad, Jazz Blooms in the Garden State.” *Newark Star-Ledger*, 28 September 2003.

sensibilities of an artist reframe and refocus the entrenched social ills of a place like Newark. A common idea in recent research my colleagues have done on Newark is that segregation, exacerbated by the events of July 1967, are somehow at the root of Newark's entrenched problems. Although segregation is undoubtedly a big part of Newark's difficulties to reframe itself, it is not only segregation.

New York City is one of the most segregated places in America, yet it has been spared the difficulties Newark has faced; indeed, by contrast New York has always been attractive, if not welcoming, to new immigrants.⁴ New York City's public schools are among the most segregated in the country. Eighty percent of students in New York City public schools would have to move to achieve integration among blacks and whites, and half the city's 1600-plus schools are over 90 percent black and Hispanic. Black isolation in schools has persevered even though segregation in neighborhoods has declined between 1970 and 2010.⁵ These statistics belie the diversity and multiculturalism New York imagines itself to be. And it is in the area of imagination where I see the core of the problem. Fear of Newark on a cultural and imaginary level has superceded the "facts on the ground."

Art is not always didactic, yet I believe there are lessons in how a complex and undervalued urban place like Newark can be re-imagined through the art that was created by people there. I have been ever impressed by the resilience of Newark's people, and Roth's novels, Baraka's writing, the poems Hull wrote, the photos Stummer took, and the

⁴ See: N.R. Kleinfeld, "'Why Don't We Have Any White Kids?'" , 11 May 2012, *The New York Times*. [sec: Education].

⁵ See: "A Portrait of Segregation in New York City's Public Schools", 11 May 2012, *The New York Times*. [sec: Education].

music Moncur made are this spirit. Though unquantifiable, by paying attention to these artistic productions in the context of the urban fabric of New Jersey, we look on Newark's ugliness and beauty with fresh eyes and ears. Roth, Baraka, Hull, Stummer, and Moncur show multiple perspectives and types of empathic questioning of the city through Ezra Pound's three lenses of poetic discourse: Logopoeia, Phanopoeia, and Melopoeia.⁶

Hull's Logopoeia, what Pound said induces both the effects of phanopoeia and melopoeia by "stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words"⁷ appreciates and also critiques the city through metaphor. She forms viable connections between personal and public memory and uses lyric mode to offer fresh and wonderful visions of history as she experienced it. Stummer's Phanopoeia, "throwing the object on to the visual imagination"⁸, presents the camera eye as she was embedded in a Central Ward community for more than 13 years. Through carefully calibrated, yet spontaneous portraiture of children and families, Stummer gives an unflinching glimpse for us lucky outsiders who bear witness to tragedy; yet this tragedy is often infused with joy. Moncur's Melopoeia, "inducing emotional correlations by sound and rhythm"⁹ shows a highly creative and unclassifiable jazz artist who is a vibrant window into the city's rich jazz culture that is synonymous with its black community.

⁶ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*. (New York: New Directions, 1960), 63.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

Jazz has a slightly higher listenership in the black community than in the white community, though the names of the jazz musicians they listen to are often locally rather than nationally known. Moncur is a good example of this phenomenon. Other musicians from Newark have eclipsed that city's 20 square-mile radius into the stratosphere.

A recent pop culture phenomenon, the televised live funeral of the late Whitney Houston (1963-2012), brought Newark and especially its culture, to a national audience. Houston sold over 170 million albums. She possessed a pure vocal tone and astounding range, called East Orange home, was also a troubled and depressed figure. Her fame and almost unreal talent made toxic by her apparent addiction to a variety of painkillers and alcohol.¹⁰

Houston's first recording was a version of the Hugh Hopper song "Memories." It was recorded with Bill Laswell's No-Wave rock band, Material, in 1982 when Houston was 19. The song also featured the avant garde tenor saxophonist, and Grachan Moncur's and Amiri Baraka's musical collaborator, Archie Shepp. Houston sings with extreme pathos and feeling: "Memories can hang you up and haunt you / All your life, you know / Get so you cannot stay / And yet cannot go." Incredibly powerful and emotive, especially given that she was just a teenager at the time, Houston gives one of the best ballads ever recorded.

Her girlish voice and demeanor are matched in the 1987 video "I Wanna Dance with Somebody"; it shows day-glow fluorescent pinks, exuberance, and enthusiasm. She

¹⁰ See John Leland's "In East Orange, Recalling Whitney Houston Before She Was a Star," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2012, sec. NY Region.

shows a coy sexuality and innocence. Her image in the video was even reproduced as a Barbie doll. [Figure 36]

Her music has an optimism and happiness that might belie the darkness consuming Newark during that decade. Her remake of Dolly Parton's hit, "I Will Always Love You," from a film starring Houston and Kevin Costner, is operatic in its scope, bravura, and emotional frailty. Perhaps Houston's greatest power was this inimitable combination of strength and innocence. In the video, she sits in a chair, and her only movement is her dramatic mouth, shown in tight focus during her spine-tingling high vibrato at the word "I" three minutes into the performance.

On January 27, 1991, 10 days into the Persian Gulf War, Houston sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Super Bowl, after being announced by Frank Gifford.¹¹ Houston's pop icon status as one of the most endearing singers in the world allowed her to temper the violence of the song's lyrics and allowed us to hear the beauty of her pure instrument.

Her funeral, held at New Hope Baptist Church, in Newark, was shown on national television, and its bizarre mix of private and public memory offered the broad public a window into a part of Newark few people get to see. The lurid nature of the televised funeral, coupled with Governor Christie's decision to fly New Jersey flags at half-mast, was tempered by anecdotes from family about Houston's uncertainty, doubt, and self-effacing fussing about her prettiness, her voice, and her fame. Still, none of the media's over-the-top coverage of her death has addressed the discrepancy that Newark's school

¹¹ Frank Gifford (b. 1930) played for the New York Giants 1952-1964 and is a television sportscaster.

system is unequal to those children receive in New Jersey's suburbs. Houston's gift was encouraged in spite of—rather than because of—Newark's music programs for children. Her gift was fostered, like many in the black community, in her church. Her fame was nurtured at New Hope Baptist Church, and at school; these show the potential in a place like Newark for schools to be integrated into the larger social order. This could include comprehensive, affordable healthcare, and housing.

Houston seems to be, among other things, a metaphor for the unsettling combination of beauty and toxicity for which Newark is known. Houston was bound up with controversy—addiction and romantic problems—yet it is impossible to remain unaffected by the pure quality and astounding range of her perfect voice.

This combination of qualities has manifested itself in popular literature, such as Richard Price's 2008 novel *Lush Life*, in art galleries on the Lower East Side, and on television, on the Sundance Channel's reality series *Brick City*, and on HBO's series *The Wire*.¹²

Price's *Lush Life* is, on the surface, a police procedural, but the subtext of the novel is a meditation on gentrification of the Lower East Side. Widely praised by critics and readers alike, *Lush Life* takes its title from the jazz standard written in the 1930s by Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington's musical partner.¹³ Like the song, the novel shows the trajectory of the witness to a murder, Eric Cash, as he tries to deal with internal and

¹² *Brick City* Season 1 premiered September 21, 2009, and ended in September 2010, with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's announcement that he was giving \$100 million to Newark's schools. *The Wire* premiered on June 2, 2002, and ended on March 9, 2008, comprising 60 episodes over five seasons.

¹³ President Obama read *Lush Life* over his 2009 summer vacation. See: Alison Flood, "Obama Unpacks his Holiday Reading," *The Guardian*, 25 August 2009.

external pressures of his neighborhood's rapid gentrification. Its prologue, "Night Fishing on the Delancey" refers to undercover police who wait in a fake taxi cab at the western entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge looking to frisk young black and Puerto Rican men who may have drugs, guns, and/or money:

Restless, they finally pull out to honeycomb the narrow streets for an hour of endless tight right turns: falafel joint, jazz joint, gyro joint, corner. Schoolyard, crêperie, realtor, corner. Tenement, tenement, tenement museum, corner. Pink Pony, Blind Tiger, muffin boutique, corner. Sex shop, tea shop, synagogue, corner. Boulangerie, bar, hat boutique, corner. Iglesia, geleteria, matzo shop, corner. Bollywood, Buddha, botanica, corner. Leather outlet, leather outlet, leather outlet, corner. Bar, school, bar, school, People's Park, corner. Tyson mural, Celia Cruz mural, Lady Di mural, corner. Bling shop, barbershop, car service, corner. And then finally, on a sooty stretch of Eldridge, something with potential: a weary-faced Fujianese in a thin Members Only windbreaker, cigarette hanging, plastic bags dangling from crooked fingers like full waterbuckets, trudging up the dark, narrow street followed by a limping black kid half a block behind.¹⁴

The syntax of Price's sentences in this passage mimics the right turns the car makes around the neighborhood. As the police observe the cultural layers and sites of gentrification, so does the reader of the passage.

At the end of the novel, Harry Steele, Eric's boss and a morally ambiguous entrepreneur, is building a fake Lower East Side inside a casino in Atlantic City. As in its opening salvo, over and over in *Lush Life*, people and places re-imagine the Lower East Side as gentrifiers, mockers of gentrification, or as gentrified places. Steele lives in a "desanctified synagogue on Suffolk Street, which had itself been converted from a standard tenement ninety-five years earlier. And now it was a private palazzo..."¹⁵ He is building his and Eric's memory of the Lower East Side as they imagine it, even though

¹⁴ Richard Price, *Lush Life*, (New York: Picador, 2008), 3-4.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 247.

that version of the neighborhood was itself a gentrified version of the Jewish ghetto there from which Cash's and Steele's grandparents desperately tried to escape. When Eric first sees the fake Lower East Side, he is faced with how his beloved neighborhood has been turned into a crass commodity and destroyed:

The ground floor of the Steiner Rialto hotel in Atlantic City had no end to it. It took five minutes for him to get from the front doors to the cordoned-off construction site, the indoor New York theme park going up on the perimeter of the casino floor. Separated only by a spattered sheet of plastic from a red and gold acre of slots, it seemed to him, big surprise, that the constant shriek of band saws and groan of cement mixers did nothing to shake the concentration of the players sitting there moon-eyed, clutching milk-shake cups filled with silver.

The Berkmann's sign was up already, but the restaurant, half the size of the original, was still a work of progress, all hammer bang and power whine.

Twenty feet away, trompe l'oeil tenement scrims were being hoisted into place and nail-gunned into their wooden braces; some windows adorned with cats or aspidistras, other with fat-armed Molly Goldbergs, their elbows propped on pillows.

Around the bend from Yidville was the hotel's Times Square Land, all neon girly-show signs, kung-fu-movie marquees, and a functioning Automat.

Around the bend from that was Punktown, one long poster-plastered, graffitied mock-up of St. Marks Place circa 1977, tattoo parlors, vinyl-record shops, and a rock club/restaurant, BCBG's.

As far as Eric was concerned, Harry Steele was attempting to ship him off to hell.¹⁶

Price alludes to many places from New York's past: Molly Goldberg at a Passover Seder, leaning on a pillow in a tenement window that exists in Yidville, a Disney World-like simulacrum of the former Jewish neighborhood, and a Punktown, a faux version of the places once inhabited by the Talking Heads, Blondie, and the Ramones. Steele has tried to recreate his private memories in a public space, and failed. These scenes resemble

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 451-452.

Roth's in *American Pastoral*, but here the joining of personal and shared memories is a parody.

In a surprising instance of life imitating art, or art imitating art, nine gallery shows were inspired in 2010 to have exhibitions inspired by *Lush Life*. For example, in "Chapter 1: Whistle," a short film by the Danish artist Debois Buhl, showed images of impoverished people on the Lower East Side taken by Jacob Riis at the turn of the century while the voiceover of a contemporary tour guide offers a quasi-narrative. The third chapter, "First Bird (A Few Butterflies)" is treated more figuratively: ballpoint pen drawings of birds, a video of doves flying in an art gallery, and Karen Heagle's "The End of Abundance," a Gauguin-like scene in bright colors of two black vultures picking over a trash heap of watermelons, a can, an empty bottle. [Figure 37] Price's fifth chapter, "Want Cards," was represented by Rudy Shepherd's expressive portraits of black men from the chest up, an allusion to the mug shots or "want cards" in the novel. In Hagel's "The End of Abundance," [Figure 36] the black vultures are not unlike the black hat of the man in Vermeer's "Soldier and Young Girl Smiling" [Figure 37]:

Flat against the background, the hat is like a hole in the center of the painting. It, and the map in the background, frames the woman's space, which looks in his, and the viewer's direction.¹⁷ In Hagel's picture, as with Vermeer's smiling girl, the colorful objects (the not-hat objects) are focus of the viewer's eye. [Figure 38] They stand in contrast, visually and perceptually, to the black holes of the hat or vultures. Her trash heap is treated, like the Newark in Hull's poems, affectionately. It is treated with warmth in a way that the vultures, the actor on the scene, cannot do. Often in literary expressions

¹⁷ For a more detailed reading of this painting, see Edward Snow, *A Study of Vermeer*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 82.

of urban problems, a person or place in the art expresses the contradictory feelings of the viewer, or reader, that is not otherwise easily expressed. In the early part of the last decade, two television shows using different settings (one in Baltimore, the other in Newark) and genres (one was a fictional serial drama, the other was a nonfiction reality show), demonstrate the power of artistic expression and its ability to be more true than ostensibly factual nonfiction.

Set in Baltimore, *The Wire* dramatically depicts the tragic ripples of the so-called War on Drugs and its affects on diverse populations of drug dealers, police, middle school students, dockworkers, journalists, and politicians. The serial format of the show and its emphasis on social realism has no equal in the history of television. *The Wire* was also unique because it employed non-professional actors from the districts of the city it portrayed.

The Wire examined Baltimore through the lenses of race, class, gender, immigration, and sexuality. Throughout its span of 60 episodes, the show has far-reaching implications for urban policy—it does not easily frame people in banal or static groups of “good” or “evil”; instead, it complicates notions of what police call “The Work” and what drug dealers call “The Game.” By watching *The Wire* and reading related texts we can better understand urban systems, and why, with all we now know about life in struggling urban centers, do we fail to improve these lives. Though *The Wire* is part of a trajectory of such fictions as *Bleak House*, *Naked City*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Godfather*, and *Red Riding*, though it is richer and thornier than any of those.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Bleak House* is a novel by Charles Dickens published in 20 monthly installments between March 1852 and September 1853; *Naked City* is a 1948 film noir based on a book of photographs of the same name by Weegee; *The Maltese Falcon* is a 1941 film

The Wire focused mostly on Baltimore's Western District homicide investigators who seek to take down a narcotics empire run by two friends from Western Baltimore's public housing projects, Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell; a new force in the drug trade, Marlo Stanfield, eventually replaces these drug dealers. Meanwhile, a range of police—each with complex and intertwining personal problems—deal with not only the criminals who often elude their investigations, but political corruption, budget cuts to their infrastructure, internal feuds, and their own personal demons.

I agree with the common consensus that *The Wire* is the superior expression of a certain aspect of urban life than *Brick City*; *Brick City* was introduced by the actor and Executive Producer Forest Whitaker as “100% real”, and the Associated Press described it as a “nonfiction blend of *The Wire* and *The West Wing*,” but it fell far from those marks.¹⁹ *Brick City* mostly told two somewhat interrelated stories: the first was about the politics of Cory Booker's administration and his interactions of his white police chief, Gerry McCarthy; the second was about a “Romeo and Juliet” couple, Jayda and Creep; the show focused on the contradictions between their seeking a quiet, domestic life raising children with the consequences of their crimes as former members of Blood and Crip sets.²⁰ These two conflicting storylines were intended to create dramatic tension of the struggles working class black people have in Newark while showing a model of black citizenry in the form of Cory Booker. The affect, however, ranged between a long

noir based on the novel of the same name by Dashiell Hammett; *The Godfather* is a 1972 crime film directed by Francis Ford Coppola; *Red Riding* is a three-part television series from 2009 based on David Peace's novels, the Red Riding Quartet.

¹⁹ Carlos Ulises Decena, “Gentrification Lite: Watching *Brick City*”, *Transforming Anthropology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 105.

²⁰ Since the show, McCarthy left the Newark police and is now the police chief in Chicago.

political ad for Booker's program and an exploitative and dull voyeurism into Jayda and Creep's narrow world.

Brick City's peculiar balance between a serious investigation into what Newark is all about edged into farce when Cory Booker and Conan O'Brien engaged in a facetious feud. O'Brien first upset Mayor Booker when he said: "The mayor of Newark, New Jersey wants to set up a citywide program to improve residents' health. The health care program would consist of a bus ticket out of Newark." Booker responded by first banning O'Brien from Newark, then the airport, then all of New Jersey. O'Brien, over several weeks responded in kind; for example, that he could still enter Newark if he could "navigate the sewer system because all pipes lead to Newark." It remains unclear how much this was staged, sincere, or some kind of extended performance piece.

The Wire, by comparison, treated Baltimore with affection, and showed its characters not to be solidly good or evil, but as complex, contradictory, emotional, erratic, sophisticated people. In Season Three, episode 6, Detective William "Bunk" Moreland [Wendell Pierce] confronts Omar Little [Michael K. Williams], a robber and killer of drug dealers, over Omar's violence and its affect on their community:

I was a few years ahead of you at Edmondson, but I know you remember the neighborhood, how it was. We had some bad boys, for real. Wasn't about guns so much as knowing what to do with your hands. Those boys could really rack. My father had me on the straight, but like any young man, I wanted to be hard too, so I'd turn up at all the house parties where the tough boys hung. Shit, they knew I wasn't one of them. Them hard cases would come up to me and say, "Go home, schoolboy, you don't belong here." Didn't realize at the time what they were doing for me. As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody, no victim, who didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies, and predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like

Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes me sick,
motherfucker, how far we done fell.²¹

Bunk expresses the common lament of a neighborhood's changing landscape: it is the same lamentation expressed by Baraka, by Roth, by Hull, by Stummer, and by Price. To varying degrees, and using different forms, these artists have articulated what we should we for Newark: that it can be imagined with its artists included, and that the art they have made should be included in the conversations we will have about not only Newark, but cities in general.

Reading these artistic expressions more closely reperiodizes cultural responses to the urban crisis. The conventional narrative in the literature of the urban crisis suggests that there was a “rupture” in cities as a result of the urban crisis, wiping out all the cultural legacies that can before. These artists show that this was not the case: their work, in fact, is part of a long trajectory reaching back before the years of the urban crisis; they used not postmodern forms that occurred after the urban crisis—hip hop or graffiti—but traditional forms like fiction, poetry, photography, and jazz. These artists working in these genres have made significant contributions to the history of cities, not only in terms of what their art is about, but how they made their art.

Once in Newark were factories and foundries across from railroad trestles. You could see them beyond the pink gauze of the cherry blossoms and their white edges that formed the Newark skyline. They smelled of incarnadine muscle of the citizens who worked there and toiled there. On the streets were patterns of maps of the peoples'

²¹ Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire* “Homecoming” Season 3, episode 6, prod. David Simon and dir. Leslie Libman. HBO video DVD 4000016801, 2008.

memories that overlapped and became each other like a maze. Private and public warrens. Newark was constantly being rethought, re-imagined, and recreated by the artists who loved it from their marrow. They sought a provisional rightness as they criticized and praised again. In the intersections of these streets, like the memories older than the trees these artists sang and called to be understood.

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Appendix: Images



Figure 1: Lynda Hull



Figure 2: Helen Stummer, Park Ave., East Orange RIP Site for Osmond "Oz" Dixon



Tires: Robin, Robert and Lateefah

Figure 3: Helen Stummer, Tires: Robin, Robert, and Lateefah

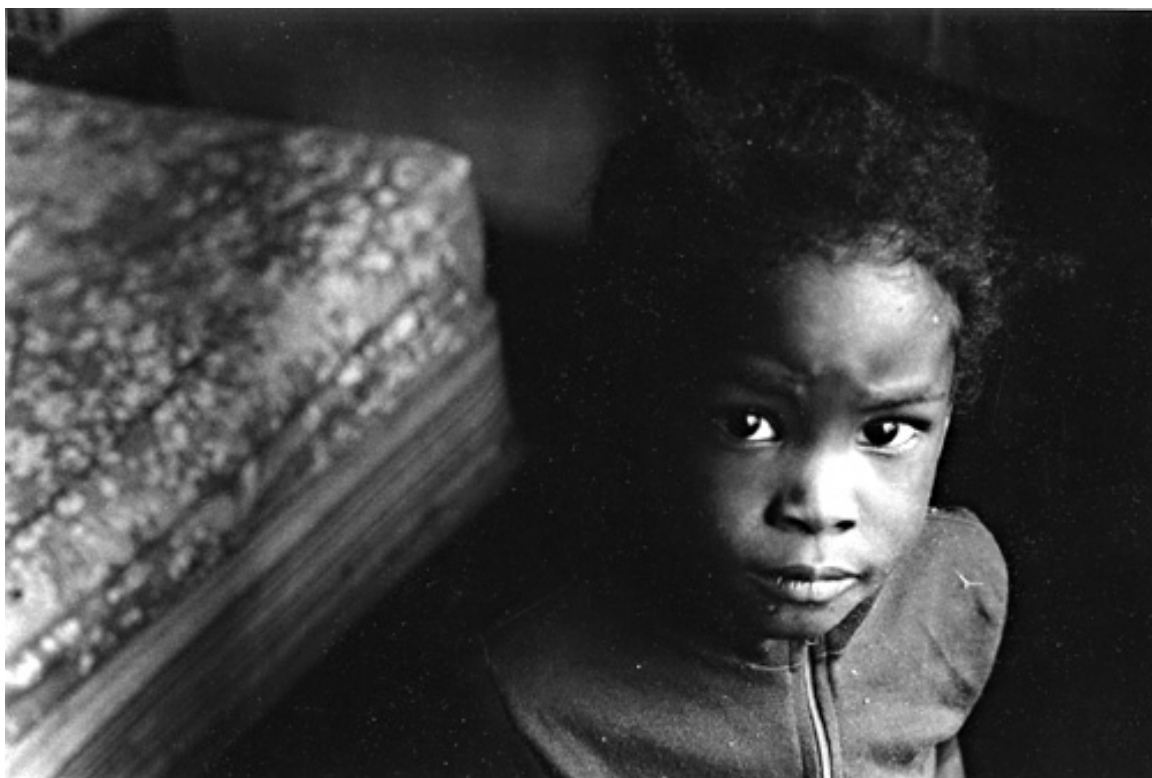


Figure 4: Helen Stummer, Annie



Quinzel, Cornelius, and Hasan

Figure 5: Helen Stummer, Quinzel, Cornelius, and Hasan

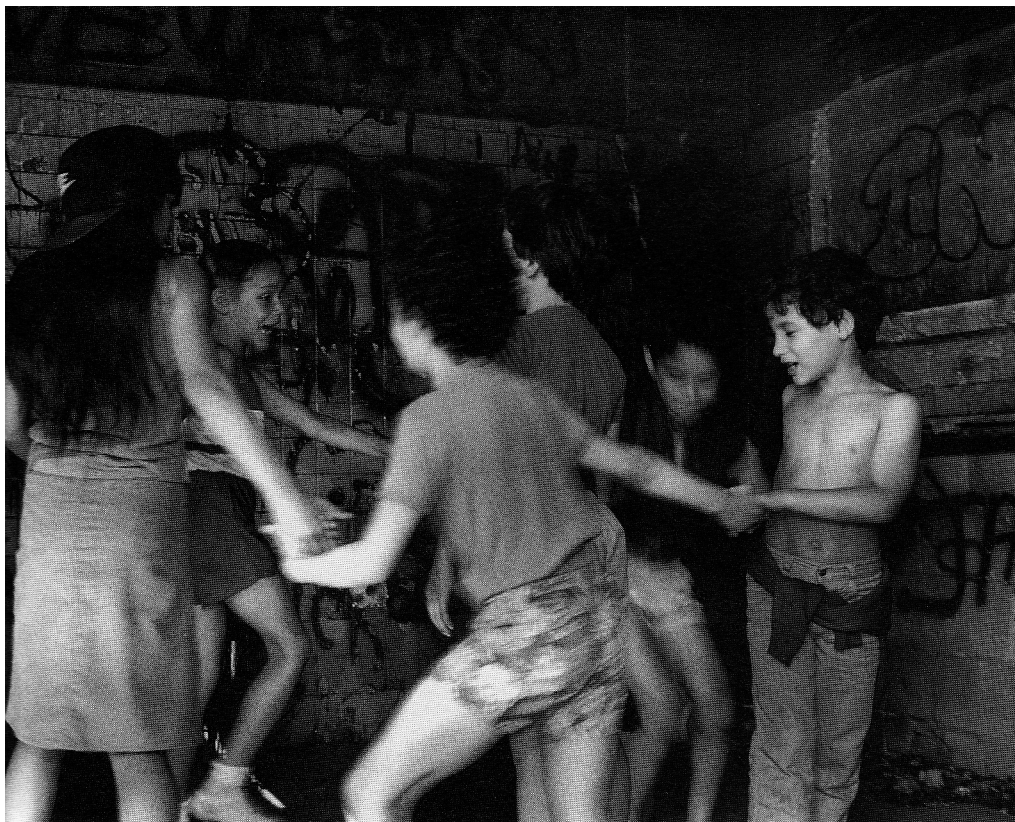


Figure 6: Helen Stummer, "Ring-a-round" in a defunct shower room, Ripple Field, September 1987



Figure 7: Henri Matisse, "Dancers" (1909)



Figure 8, Helen Stummer, Carol's engagement to Rasheek, March 1993



Figure 9, Vermeer, "Couple with a Glass of Wine"

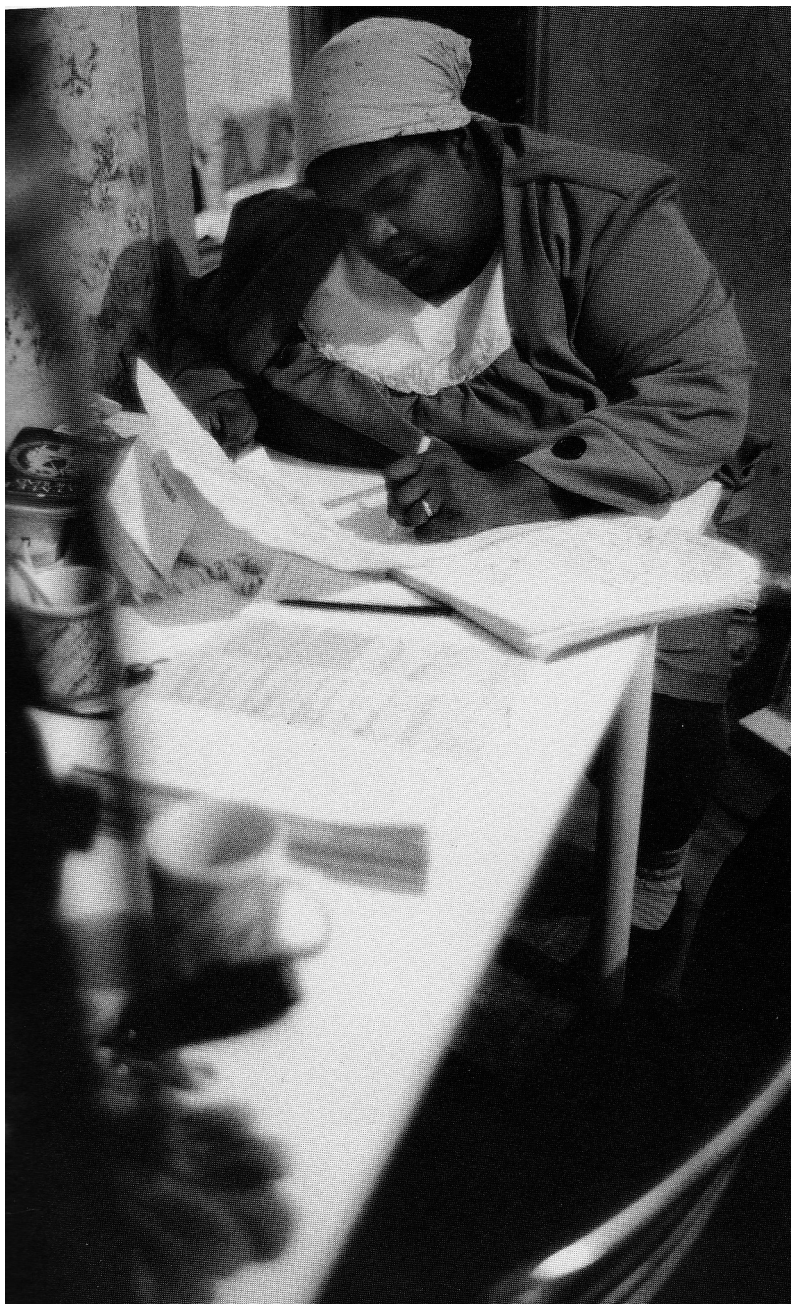


Figure 10: Helen Stummer, Carol studying for her high school diploma, March 1993



Figure 11: Vermeer, "Woman Writing a Letter with Her Maid"



Figure 12: Helen Stummer, Clinton in Carol's backyard, May 1988



Figure 13: August Sander, Peasants, 1914

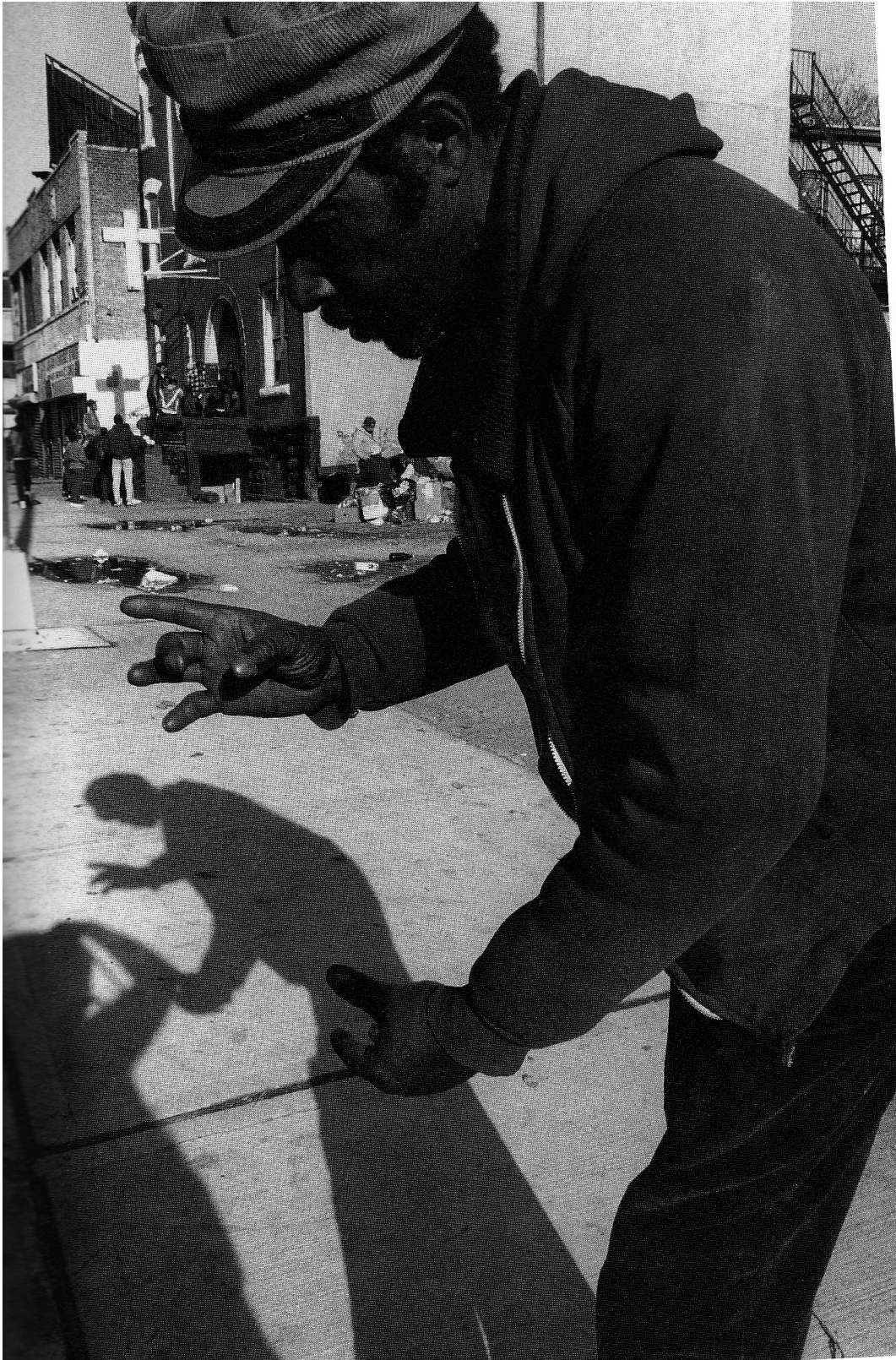


Figure 14: Helen Stummer, Arthur ("Diamond"), November 1985



Figure 15: Roy DeCarava, "Dancers", 1956



Figure 16: Builder Levy, Bushwick, Brooklyn 1978



Figure 17: Milton Rogovin, Working People, Republic Steel, 1978



Figure 18: Milton Rogovin, Working People, Hanna Furnace, 1978



Figure 19: Builder Levy, March on Washington, DC, August 28, 1963



Figure 20, Builder Levy, "Medallion Lords, Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, 1965"

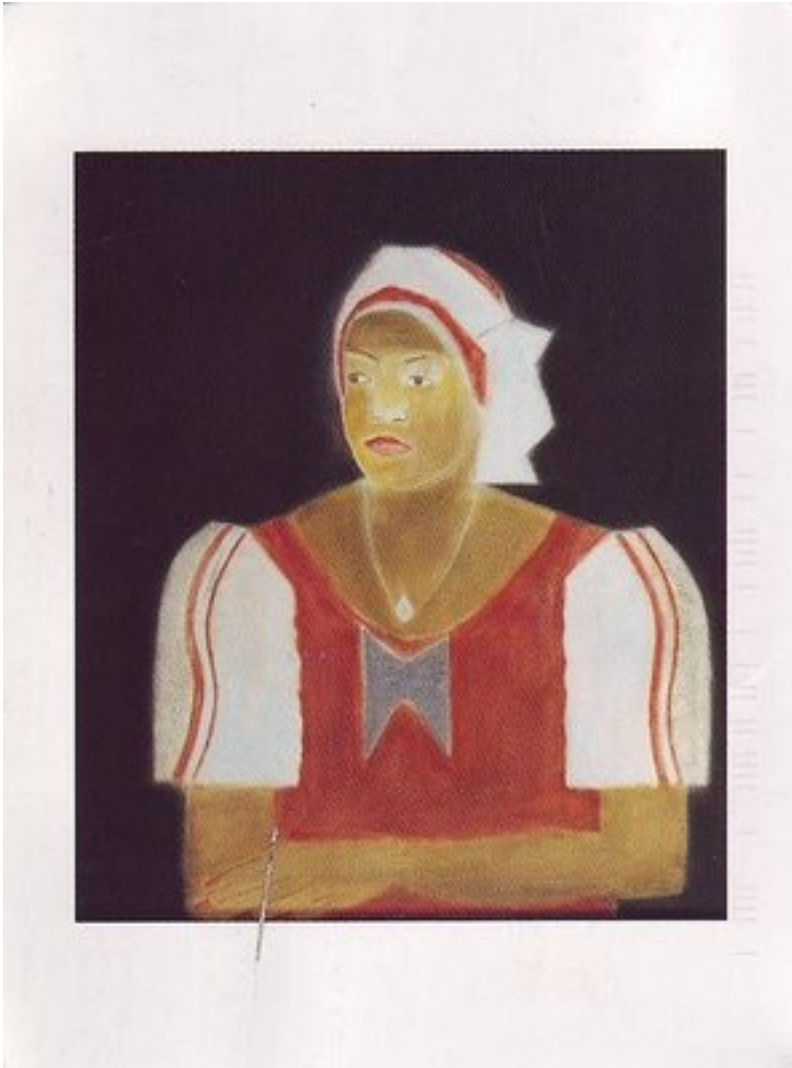


Figure 21, Craigie Aitchison, "Portrait of Naaotwa Swayne", 1988



Figure 22, Helen Stummer, "Carol's Turf", February 1989



Figure 23, Romare Bearden, "The Visitation", 1941, gouache on brown paper



Figure 24, Helen Stummer, "Carol and Margo," January 1993



Figure 25: Milton Rogovin, Lower West Side



Figure 26: Milton Rogovin's optometric practice sign



Figure 27: Jamel Shabazz, Lower East Side



Figure 28: Jamel Shabazz



Figure 29: Q. Sakamaki, A scene of Alphabet City before gentrification, December 1987



Figure 30: Q. Sakamaki, Keith Thompson, a homeless activist, and his supporters demonstrate for affordable housing on Avenue B, August 1989



Figure 31: George Tice, Junked Cars, Naporano Wrecking Company, Newark, April, 1973



Figure 32: Camilo José Vergara, Point St. and Wood St., Camden, New Jersey, 1981



Figure 33: Camilo José Vergara, 242-247 Chestnut St., Camden, New Jersey, 2004



Figure 34: Vermeer, "The Little Street", oil on canvas, c. 1657-1661



Figure 35: Helen Stummer, Irvine Turner Boulevard, March 1993



Figure 36: Whitney Houston Barbie doll



Figure 37: Karen Hage, "The End of Abundance"



Figure 38: Vermeer; “Soldier and Young Girl Smiling”

Curriculum vitae

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- Ph.D. American Studies Rutgers University, Newark, NJ, *May 2013*
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Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ • Visiting Writer • graduate courses in poetry and creative nonfiction • *January 2008-May 2008*

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PUBLICATIONS

Book

Discography. (Yale University Press, 2002). Foreword by W. S. Merwin