

Ethnographic Journalism and the American Urban Crisis

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Abstract

The historical role of racial prejudice in the development of black ghettos by the 1990s has been a source of contention in urban studies. This paper contends that works of ethnographic journalism such as Alex Kotlowitz's *There are no Children Here*, David Simon and Ed Burns's *The Corner*, and Leon Dash's *Rosa Lee* are critical texts for gaining an informed understanding of the urban crisis because they allow one to make connections with both the empirically-observable facts and the shared social experience of the black underclass. By revealing the importance of viewing positivist and interpretivist understandings of the American city as complementary rather than oppositional, these works provide a multifaceted, rather than mutually exclusive, framework for understanding the American urban crisis. This approach allows us to avoid the ontological shortcomings present in traditional methodologies for examining urban poverty—shortcomings that take root in discursive tensions regarding the nature of prejudice in municipal development. Ethnographic journalism evokes the empathy necessary to view urban squalor as a practical concern rather than a spectacle.

Keywords: Urban Crisis, Critical Realism, Epistemic Reflexivity, Popular Culture, Journalism, Ethnography, Race, African American Culture

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In 1994, Steve James's documentary, *Hoop Dreams*, was almost universally lauded by film critics and audiences as an important and poignant examination of American sports culture and inner-city life. Many argued that it was the first documentary worthy of a best-picture nomination from the Academy Awards. The film follows two teenaged basketball prospects, William Gates and Arthur Agee, as they work towards college scholarships and a chance at achieving their dreams of NBA stardom. Regardless of the filmmaker's original goals, James's documentary becomes a revealing look at the systemic hurdles faced by young black men growing up in the American inner-city. In a powerful scene late in the film, Arthur plays a final game of one-on-one with his father before leaving for college. What begins as a friendly game devolves into a series of bitter exchanges, and the tensions resulting from Arthur's lifetime of marginalization and his drug-addicted father's broken promises boil over.

The film, however, is not without its detractors. bell hooks (1996), for example, has argued that the movie's appeal stems from a sense of voyeurism and that, in the United States especially, "white folks wanting to see and 'enjoy' images of black folks on the screen is often in no way related to a desire to know real black people" (1996: 78). According to hooks, the issue is not that *Hoop Dreams* is a product of white filmmakers focusing on black life, rather that black poverty can be oversimplified onscreen and serve as cheap entertainment, regardless of James's intentions (1996: 78). While *Hoop Dreams*' ability to affect audiences is not in question, hooks is unable to reconcile herself with the voyeuristic nature of white viewership. In her analysis, however, hooks does not put forward any suggestions for how this problem of viewership can be addressed, nor does she examine the significance of the film's ability to move audiences. While white voyeurism of black life is undoubtedly problematic, what hooks fails to consider is the importance of emotional responses to representations of squalor in creating the empathy

necessary for audiences to view urban black poverty as a problem to be solved rather than a spectacle to be observed. Considering the delicate nature of accounting for the social reality of the American urban crisis, one must question how the lived experience of the city can be effectively documented and whether or not white voyeurism inherently undermines the efficacy of these efforts.

There is a clear division in the literature pertaining to the urban crisis between those who treat the role of prejudice as causal (Massey & Denton, 1993) and those who largely dismiss the matter as symptomatic of other factors (Harvey, 1989). As this paper argues, the divisions in the urban studies literature pertaining to the relationship between racial prejudice and the processes of urban decay leading up to the height of the American urban crisis result from a traditional tendency to treat positivist and interpretivist methodologies as incompatible. Ethnographic journalism, on the other hand, is a form of reporting achieved through social immersion that treats empirical facts and personal accounts as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. This approach is in line with critical realist methods that attempt to identify the intersection between empirical knowledge and human agency, thus allowing one to keep track of what cannot be kept in existence in material form: experience. Through close contact with social groups, ethnographic journalism strives to achieve a multifaceted understanding of the meanings and functions of human actions not possible when viewing social phenomena through a strictly objective lens (Cramer & McDevitt, 2004: 128). By utilizing a critical realist methodology, works of ethnographic journalism such as Alex Kotlowitz's (1992) *There are no Children Here*, David Simon and Ed Burns's (1996) *The Corner*, and Leon Dash's (1997) *Rosa Lee* address the need to document first-hand knowledge while reconciling the divide between empirical fact and the lived experience of the American inner-city during the late-1980s to mid-1990s.

While these works can be read through the framework of the Frankfurt School's critiques

of mass culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), as reinforcements of problematic racial fantasies (hooks, 1996; Avila, 2004), or as products of a commercial news enterprise (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), the true value of these texts lie in their ability to account for affect in documenting and communicating the urban crisis. In order to confront the mnemonic gap between empirical knowledge and first-hand experience, Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash provide real-life context to issues of urban poverty such as sub-par education, unemployment, teenaged parenting, and violence, emphasizing the human element often lost in the statistics. By treating the empirical and the experiential as complementary, ethnographic accounts of urban life can achieve the epistemic reflexivity necessary in order to gain practical insights into the social world of the American city only possible through a certain degree of empathy. Works of ethnographic journalism such as *There are no Children Here*, *The Corner*, and *Rosa Lee*, therefore, perform an important function: by explicating how empirical facts and the lived experiences of the urban crisis coalesce, these texts allow one to gain a more nuanced understanding of urban life not possible otherwise.

To ground this study within the urban crisis discourse, this paper will begin by giving a brief overview of black urban migration and discuss the division in the urban studies literature regarding the role racial prejudice has played in the deterioration of the United States' urban centres. Because the works of Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash provide an account of American cities during the late-1980s to mid-1990s—the height of the American urban crisis—this paper will primarily focus on the literature pertaining to this specific time period. I examine urban studies theory historically and place my emphasis on what was happening at the height of the urban crisis rather than what has changed since then. In order to illuminate the necessity of ethnographic journalism in deciphering the complexities of the American inner-city, this analysis will then move to an examination of conventional methodologies for documenting the urban

crisis while making the case for a critical realist approach, discussing how the above mentioned works of ethnographic literature fit within such a framework. Additionally, this paper will examine the lasting effects urban decay has had on the American black population leading up to the period of interest, regardless of whether prejudice has been symptomatic or causal.

In order to qualify the selection of *There are no Children Here*, *The Corner*, and *Rosa Lee*, I examine how popular culture acts as both a site of contemplation and reproduction of problematic racial fantasies. This qualification includes discussing the particularities of this genre and an explanation of why other works concerned with the American urban crisis—novels, film, and music—have not been selected for analysis. Finally, this paper will move to a detailed examination of the selected works, discussing the process of how these literary projects came into being, how these works function to document lived experience, and the significance of these books' locations.

Black Migration and Urban Life

Following emancipation in 1865, newly freed blacks in the Southern United States faced continued difficulties. Chief among their concerns was a distinctly unfair treatment by white land-owners and employers, making it nearly impossible to make a decent living (Lears, 2010: 124). Furthermore, the institution of Jim Crow laws in the Southern states—discriminatory policies whose official purpose was to give blacks “separate but equal” status—provided legal measures for ensuring the continued dominance of whites, sanitizing and rationalizing the supremacist “dream of racial renewal through violence” (2010: 129). As a result, black people began migrating to the North in great numbers in order to seek out the opportunities denied to them in the South. However, through communal resistance to integration and government processes—restrictions on interracial sales, housing policies, and municipal zoning, for example—that ensured that black mobility was severely hindered, African American migrants in the early

twentieth century found themselves segregated into urban ghettos (Fainstein, 1995: 131). Additionally, because of white insecurity regarding the availability of work, black men looking for job opportunities in cities such as Detroit were subjected to racial discrimination, making even poor-paying, low-skill jobs hard to come by (Sugrue, 1996: 92).

After the Second World War, Rust Belt cities—the former centres of the American manufacturing industry—lost hundreds of thousands of jobs as advances in transportation and communication technology saw manufacturing work leave the city for new facilities in the suburbs, semi-rural areas, smaller and medium-sized cities, and even other countries (1996: 128-9). As jobs began to leave urban areas, whites began to move to newly developed suburban communities. In the mid-1950s to early-1960s, racial tensions in American cities boiled over; as the urban landscape changed and blacks attempted to move into new areas, white neighbourhood organizations in many cities defined and defended the invisible racial boundaries that divided their municipalities, often through violence (1996: 233-4). Furthermore, blacks faced continued discrimination by sellers, realtors, landlords, and lending institutions in the housing market, finding themselves excluded from “jurisdictions with higher levels of public services and better-quality schools” (Fainstein, 1995: 132). Municipal priorities can be gleaned from the geographic development of different neighbourhoods, as neoliberal urban renewal has been characterized by a malign indifference to the interests of the poor communities trapped in these urban spaces (Davis, 1990: 160-3).

As a result of the absence of work and educational opportunities, many disenfranchised inner-city youths turned to the thriving drug economy. However, while crime rates rose steeply in most western countries between the 1970s and the early 1990s, the United States adopted policies that saw its imprisonment rate rise significantly higher than any other developed country (Tonry, 2009: 380). Since the 1960s, blacks have made up a disproportionate percentage of the

American prison population, and nearly all of the laws and policies responsible for these disparities remain in effect (2009: 389).

Racial Prejudice as Causal or Symptomatic

Because of their unique history, social position, and sustained levels of imposed residential segregation, African Americans are not comparable to other ethnic groups in the United States (Massey & Denton, 1993: 136). However, regardless of the scholarly framing of white flight and the subsequent deterioration of American cities, it is clear that the urban black population was adversely and disproportionately impacted by the mechanisms that drove municipal development. While this plight is undeniable, there is a divide in the urban studies literature between those who treat racial prejudice as causal and those who treat it as symptomatic.

Douglas S. Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) argue that, while the term “racial segregation” had largely disappeared from Americans' vocabulary prior to the urban crisis, American cities remained deeply segregated through institutional arrangements and contemporary individual actions (1993: 136). Black ghettos resulted from “institutional practices, private behaviours, and public policies by which whites sought to contain growing urban black populations” (1993: 137). It is important to note that, unlike other ethnic minorities, the black segregation of the urban crisis cannot be attributed to income differences. While segregation decreased for other minorities as socioeconomic status rose, the same was not true for blacks: black segregation remained constant at all levels of income. Puerto Ricans are the only other minority group that shared this characteristic, although it is worth mentioning that many Puerto Ricans possess African ancestry (1993: 137). This race-based discrepancy is significant because this isolation perpetuated social disadvantages faced by blacks, impacting this population's access to quality schools and public services while increasing their exposure to crime (1993:

140).

The nature of poverty itself changed. In the past, poor people remained active participants in the labour market, but class and racial segregation in the 1970s left the poor increasingly isolated, often forcing young African Americans to seek a living on the periphery of the mainstream economy (Sugrue, 1996: 3-4). This isolation helps explain why so many urban black youths became involved in drug trafficking and, as discussed by Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash, became trapped in increasingly precarious lives. When whites fled downtown Detroit and created suburban municipalities that greatly resembled the city that they left, for example, it was far more difficult for African Americans to follow. Subtle practices such as real estate discrimination were coupled with overt hostility when blacks attempted to move into suburban communities like Redford, Wayne, and Warren (1996: 266).

One of the directions this “underclass” debate has moved towards is the search for structural explanations for inequality and urban poverty. Proponents of structural arguments are, however, divided on the issue of race. One viewpoint focuses on the effects of economic restructuring while the other gives greater credence to racial discrimination (1996: 4). While Massey and Denton's analysis of black ghettos suggests that racial tension has been a significant factor in shaping the American urban landscape, other scholars regard the racial aspect of urban decay as a symptom of economic factors.

David Harvey (1989), for example, focuses on the relation of capital to urban geography. Deeply influenced by Marxist theory, Harvey argues that the study of urban development should be primarily “concerned with processes of capital circulation; the shifting flows of labor power, commodities and capital; the spatial organization of production... and so on” (1989: 7). One of Harvey's primary focuses is the political economy of the real estate market, in which those “who have the power to command and produce space [possess] a vital instrumentality for the

reproduction and enhancement of their own power” (1989: 261). In taking this position, Harvey suggests that urban ghettos developed because the low income population lacked the means to “overcome and command space, [finding] themselves for the most part trapped” (1989: 265). Nonetheless, however significant the flow of capital has been to the development of urban space, this viewpoint should not supersede the very real influence of racial prejudice. Because Harvey’s work focuses heavily on the empirical analysis of capital, he oversimplifies—or simply ignores—the complicated relationship between race and class.

Even if we were to accept that the racialization of American cities was symptomatic of the flow of capital rather than causal, the geography of urban landscapes reveal telling municipal priorities regarding race and class. Relations of power are “inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (Soja, 1989: 6). Everything—from a city’s parks to its bus stops—is imbued with politics and ideology. Mike Davis (1990), for example, discusses the significance of Los Angeles’ constructed geography. Citing William Whyte’s assertion that the quality of any urban environment can be measured by the presence of comfortable seating, Davis states that L.A. has been notably divided in its treatment of public space. While brochures promoted the downtown area’s “livability” with images of office workers and well-to-do tourists leisurely enjoying cappuccino and free concerts in public areas, the reality just blocks away betrayed an opposing logic (1990: 160). At the time of writing, Davis observed that areas such as Bunker Hill and the Civic Centre featured extremely uncomfortable seating in public spaces such as bus stops, fortified garbage dumpsters designed to dissuade homeless trespassers, and a significant lack of public washrooms. The troubled urban areas of L.A. were designed to be as uninhabitable as possible (1990: 161-3). As a result, Los Angeles’ class divide could be read through its urban geography.

Despite the complications caused by the conflicting arguments concerning race in the

deterioration of the United States' urban centres, one can definitively ascertain that the spatial organization of American cities has intensified the problems faced by blacks trying to attain the fleeting promise of the American dream. While the situation of African Americans has undoubtedly improved, white dominance remains so deeply ingrained in American society that it may be unrealistic to expect that true parity will ever be achieved. Harvey's assertion that black ghettos have resulted from their inability to command space may not necessitate a constitutive racial component, but his arguments do not presuppose the fact that the development of cities has had a disproportionate historical impact on African American communities.

There are several possible explanations for the scholarly disavowal of individual prejudice, including the perceived legitimacy of the discourse. The argument is that, if capitalist development is framed as illegitimate, practical advice loses its credence; if, however, the discussion aims to create realistic expectations of urban inequality and injustice "and... muffle debate about social responsibilities, then it enhances the perceived legitimacy of the processes that generate decline and thereby makes the preferred actions and dominant advice of the discourse more attractive" (Beauregard, 1993: 311-2). Approaches to the urban crisis must, therefore, emphasize reconciliation with the realities of contemporary urbanity, specifically social inequality and injustice. While it may be unrealistic to expect people to view urban decline as inevitable, "at least they might come to believe that it is tolerable; if not natural, at least reversible; if not curable, at least isolated and contained" (1993: 306).

Writing and working in the late-1980s to mid-1990s, the works of ethnographic journalism presented by Kottlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash assist in buttressing the field of urban studies by "filling in" the mnemonic gaps present in the scholarly discourse. As I will discuss shortly, by accounting for lived experience at the height of the American urban crisis, these ethnographic works address the need for reflexivity in the sociological discourse. Even

setting aside the debate regarding the role of prejudice in the decline of American urban centres, these texts elucidate the importance of questioning exactly how it is that we document social life. The intellectual proclivity to theorize the social world, while important, risks burying reality into theoretical logic and undermines our ability to recognize practical concerns (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 39-40). Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash's books, therefore, are important because they allow us to acknowledge and address this detachment. By confronting us with the faces behind statistical accounts of the urban crisis, the ground-level contextualization provided by these works helps us see the importance of viewing empirical fact and first-hand perspective as complementary rather than oppositional.

Urban Studies' Ontological Crisis

While the causal or symptomatic nature of racial prejudice remains a point of contention, the effects urban decay has had on the black underclass remain very real. The fact that positivist interpretations of the urban crisis can, to a large extent, ignore the importance of race in the development of American cities points to an ontological crisis. Harvey, for example, assumes an ontological position that haphazardly infers that the racialization of urban poverty has been incidental in the economic structuring of American municipalities. Positivist approaches of documenting the urban crisis take the position that what one is able to observe and quantifiably archive is representative of what has actually occurred. However, by limiting its scope to an empirical level, positivist accounts of municipal development fail to account for the complex intricacies of the urban experience.

The primary shortcoming of positivism is that it is characterized by an ontological limit “that holds that the universe is ordered by and comprises a series of atomistic and observable events that exist independently of our knowledge of them” (Frauley & Pearce, 2007: 16). Critical realist ontology, on the other hand, argues that the causes of social phenomena are not located at

the empirical level: what is empirically observable is not the explanation in and of itself, but rather an indication of other underpinning facets that require further explanation. Our social reality, therefore, needs to be interpreted, not apprehended through sensory observation. In simplest terms, critical realism asks the question of what the object of investigation needs to be in order to explain social phenomena, not how knowledge is to be generated: we must first question what exists before asking how and why. By providing the means to account for phenomenological interpretation as well as the empirically observable, critical realism allows one to achieve understandings of the social world which would not be possible otherwise (2007: 16-7).

In order to fully understand the American urban crisis, one must strive for a similar reconciliation between the empirical and personal, because it is “only through the complex and interwoven histories of race, residence, and work in the postwar era that the state of today's cities and their impoverished residents can be fully understood and confronted” (Sugrue, 1996: 5). Empirically focused studies of the urban crisis such as Harvey's stem from a belief that positivism and personal interpretation are incompatible methods. However, critical realism aims to preserve empirical concerns while addressing interpretivist anxieties regarding the crucial role of human agency in the maintenance and transformation of social structures (Frauley & Pearce, 2007: 17). In this sense, the ontological crisis present in positivist accounts of urban development do not invalidate their findings, but their empirical observations need to be reconciled with the lived experience of inner-city poverty in order to glean a complete and multifaceted understanding of the American urban crisis.

The social life of urban centres is important to account for because it is inherently fleeting. Because the landscape of cities change so rapidly, the history of urban space becomes erased and contaminated. The significance of this erasure is that the qualitative experience of

cities become relegated to popular memory, a fundamentally unreliable form of documentation (Klein, 1997: 7-8). The speed of urban development makes the history and identity of cities difficult to archive, making the experiences of a city's inhabitants an indispensable social document. It is here where we can see the benefits of a critical realist approach: by focusing primarily on the empirical data it is possible to misinterpret the peculiarities of cities—the complexity of race relations, for example—which are often unquantifiable and thus more difficult to observe.

The Legacy of Black Exceptionalism

The difficulty of placing racial discrimination within the context of urban decay can also be attributed to the historically ambiguous nature of Americanism. In a historical context, “America” has always existed as a state of mind: “one isn’t just born American; one becomes American” (Bardaglio, 2001: 168). This notion of becoming is important because it means “that one can be deemed non-American, not because of anything that one *does* but because of who one *is*” (2001: 168). Black exceptionalism was instrumental to constructing the American identity from the nation's inception; only through the bondage and exploitation of blacks could the concept of what it meant to be American be understood.

Giorgio Agamben (2005) characterizes the exception as the exclusion or abandonment of a subject from the protection of the state: it is the withdrawal of the law from an excluded life (Neal, 2010: 79-80). The state of exception, as Agamben puts it, opens up a no-man’s-land between the juridical order and life (Agamben, 2005: 1). This exception actually exists from the beginning; one accepts the accepted norm out of a fear of the sovereign’s abandonment (2010: 86). The concept of the exception as abandonment assists in explaining the nature of black exceptionalism. African Americans were forced into an underclass standing from the beginning (Lipset, 1996: 113). The status of blacks as an exception did not arise from unforeseen

circumstances, but rather “because the dominant culture decided that they did not embody the established norms”; African American exceptionalism stemmed from the subjective decision-making of those in power (Bardaglio, 2001: 169). Similar to how the norm exists in opposition to the “bare life” of Agamben’s exception, the American concepts of liberty and equality were defined in direct contrast to the bondage of black slaves (2001: 169).

The case of black exceptionalism forces one to consider the notion of permanence within the state of exception. The black population in the United States has been unable to completely move beyond their status as a former exception to the American ideal. In this sense, permanence does not refer to the state of exception itself, but rather its lasting effects. According to Agamben, despite the suspension of the law’s application in a state of exception, the subject continues to possess a relationship with the law’s absence, legacy, and memory (Neal, 2010: 90). Similarly, African Americans, while no longer representing an explicit exception, continue to possess a relationship with the memory of their past exceptionalism. Although it is not a specific focus of this paper, the works of ethnographic journalism discussed in this paper can be read as sites of memorialization for the legacy of black exceptionalism in the tradition of the collective memory discourse building off of the theories of Maurice Halbwachs (1992).

Consider, for example, the case of the American South. Slavery was not a peripheral institution in plantation life, but an organic component of the Southern American patriarchy: in the antebellum statutory codes of the Southern states, the master-slave laws were included within the domestic relations chapters. The entrenchment of slavery in Southern day-to-day life explains why all male heads of households in the South regarded abolitionism as a direct attack on their independence, regardless of whether or not they owned slaves (Bardaglio, 2001: 173). The patriarchal ideology of the Southern household also provided the foundation for how public power was exercised in Southern society (2001: 174). It is no surprise then that abolition struck

such a powerful chord in these states. At its core, the move to end slavery was an overt challenge to the oppressive power of the Southern patriarch (2001: 176). Because Southern conceptions of freedom were inherently tied to the dominion of white masters, fathers, and husbands in the household, the fallout caused by the Civil War and abolitionism profoundly destabilized the traditional social relations of plantation society (2001: 180).

The subsequent racial tension—not limited to but certainly amplified in the South—is of little surprise when one considers what abolition actually represented: abolition affected not only one's ability to own slaves, but it also restructured the social order of half of the United States. The reconciliation of race and social order in the South necessitates direct confrontation, but this recovery has been complicated by a focus on the promise of the American future that “makes it nearly impossible to heal the wounds of race and gender” (Bardaglio, 2001: 182). The prioritization of the future has encouraged a neglect of the United States' historical diversity that would help explain the root causes of the country's strained racial relations.

This historical sentiment is reflected in Seymour M. Lipset's (1996) contention that the continuing exceptionalism of blacks in the 1990s stemmed from the group's community-based values running counter to the country's historically dominant ethos of individualism (1996: 113). The American Creed has typically emphasized “social egalitarianism, respect across class lines, and meritocracy, equality of opportunity”, with black Americans serving as the most historically significant exception to this value system (1996: 113). The widespread belief in the individual and the equality of opportunity has been more prominent in white America than anywhere else. Americans rejected the European class-based education system, pressing instead for common schools out of a belief that an elitist school system would foster a rigid class-society. The American code is predicated on the belief that it is work, rather than outside assistance or luck, that enables one to “move up” (1996: 114-5). It is also important to note that this philosophy is

not exclusive to white America; according to numerous polls, in 1991 almost 70 percent of blacks remained committed to the belief that hard work and educational achievement were the keys to improving their socioeconomic situations (1996: 115).

When one considers how deeply entrenched the ethos of individual achievement has been in the American ideology, the widespread resistance to policies that can be perceived as “levelling the playing field” for African Americans becomes easier to understand. It has been argued that, given the history of oppression and continued discrimination, equality of opportunity and formal integration are not sufficient. The problem with American meritocracy when accounting for blacks was articulated in Lyndon Johnson’s Howard University speech on June 4, 1965, in which he likened American life to a race that had many participants showing up at the starting line with shackles on their legs (1996: 118-9). Taking up the cause of “affirmative action”, Johnson attempted to introduce policies that would increase opportunities for the poor to—among other things—enter better schools, which would provide them with the necessary skills for upward mobility. These policies were, however, slow moving and led to the permutation of the term “affirmative action” under the Nixon administration. Affirmative action came to emphasize “equality of result for groups rather than equality of opportunity for individuals”, and attempted to improve the situation of African Americans through special preferences for jobs and educational opportunities (1996: 119). Although these policies persisted through both liberal and conservative administrations, opinion polls consistently showed that the vast majority of whites and more than 50 percent of blacks continued to believe that the equality of opportunity principle should only apply to individuals, not underrepresented groups in privileged jobs and schools (1996: 121).

Affirmative action’s ethos of equality of result for groups, although honourable in intention, directly contradicts numerous facets of the well-established American creed. White

resentment of practices such as compulsory integration and quotas stemmed not from an opposition to racial equality, but rather “because they feel these measures violate their individual freedom” (1996: 128). Additionally, in terms of race, preferential treatment for blacks also violates the notion of equality among races (1996: 129). Americans are not opposed to compensatory actions which involve measures aimed at helping disadvantaged groups catch up to the standards of competition—special training programs such as Head Start, financial aid, and community development funds, for example—but there is a distinct line drawn when policies attempt to predetermine one’s success based on anything besides merit. In Lipset’s words, Americans are willing to remove the chains, but they will draw the line at predetermining the results (1996: 130).

Setting aside—for now—arguments regarding the role of prejudice in the continued socioeconomic troubles faced by African Americans, Lipset puts forward a compelling explanation for why attempts to buoy the position of blacks in the United States have have been met with such difficulties. While Americans are not necessarily against providing special measures for the underprivileged, any attempts to reconcile disadvantages faced by groups such as African Americans must achieve a delicate balance. Returning once again to Lyndon Johnson’s metaphor of the race, Americans will approve of measures that will ensure that everyone arrives at the starting line on equal terms, but that is it: everyone must reach the finish line on their own.

The Failure of Public Policy

However, even if we accept the above assertions regarding the American ethos of meritocracy, compensatory measures in the United States have been limited. The United States’ failure to consolidate comprehensive welfare programs following the Second World War has continued to impede social welfare reforms (Hooks & McQueen, 2010: 186). Instead of expanding on New Deal policies following WWII, Congress opted to consolidate a hodgepodge

of public and private alternatives. As a result of preventing the consolidation of New Deal social policies during the critical postwar juncture, the conservative coalition impeded reforms for years to come (2010: 187-8). The decentralization of social policies—in large part influenced by the shift towards militaristic priorities during WWII—has complicated the implementation of effective compensatory measures as a response to the country's evolving position on race and equality. Furthermore, the convergence of wartime mobilization and social policy has led to an underdeveloped welfare state and the outright abandonment of universal social welfare programs in the United States (2010: 201).

The effects of the underdeveloped welfare state in the USA on black Americans has been further exacerbated by increasingly severe criminal policies that, despite steadily falling crime rates since 1991, has seen its imprisonment rates double since the early 1990s and has risen by more than five times since the 1970s (Tonry, 2009: 379). Several laws were introduced between 1975 and 1995 that drastically raised the severity of punishments (2009: 379). Michael Tonry (2009) argues that the simplest explanation for why American penal policies are so severe is that American voters elected candidates that delivered on promises that they would be as such, but this explanation does not elucidate why Americans believed that crime could be easily addressed by stricter policies. Likewise, analyses focused on the social and economic changes of the late 20th century fail to explain why the penal policies in other developed nations were far less severe than those in the United States despite facing similar growing pains after WWII (2009: 389). Tonry's work questions why such harsh measures have been instituted, identifying key aspects of American history and culture that help explain the country's approach to criminal policy: a discernible paranoia in American politics largely associated with Protestant fundamentalism; antiquated constitutional arrangements that give significant agency to short-term priorities; and America's historically troubled race relations (2009: 379).

The 1960s is the period in which racial disparities in prison populations began to truly rise; by the 1980s, blacks, although representing only 12 percent of the US population, made up half of the American prisoners and possessed an imprisonment rate seven times higher than whites (2009: 386). These statistics may not necessarily point to an overt targeting of African Americans in regards to criminal policies, but they do, at the very least, indicate neglect: the war on drugs, for example, has been the primary cause of the increase of imprisonment, though it was known—or should have been known—by policymakers that young, disadvantaged, inner-city minority groups would be the most affected. American crime policies continue to be characterized by a disregard for disadvantaged black Americans' interests. As a result, while the percentage of blacks arrested for crimes such as aggravated assault, robbery, rape, and homicide has declined since the 1980s, blacks continue to make up half of the American prison population (2009: 386).

It has been argued by scholars such as Loïc Wacquant that the severity of American criminal policy can be read as a continued effort to ensure white dominance in the wake of African American emancipation and the end of the Jim Crow laws: if the aim was to prevent black men's assimilation into the social norm, "it is hard to see how the justice system could do [it] more effectively" (Tonry, 2009: 387). Douglas Massey (2007) similarly states that, whether or not they are willing to admit it, white Americans have a vested interest in preserving the mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequality. He further argues that, when pushed to end discriminatory practices, those in power create innovative alternative methods to ensure the maintenance of the status quo (2007: 54). The emphasis on punishment, therefore, reflects a deliberate racialization of crime and violence by political entrepreneurs (2007: 94). Public opinion reflects these sentiments: the literature on racial attitudes and opinions of crime control policy show that whites possess a substantially harsher attitude concerning punishment and a

greater confidence in the justice system than African Americans; because those who go to prison are disproportionately black, white voters comfortably pay the price of the war on drugs and crime, particularly because it reinforces the “economic and social tradition of white dominance over a socially disorganized black underclass” (Tonry, 2009: 388).

Popular Culture and the Urban Myth

One of the primary places the relationship between race and the development of American municipal policies has been contemplated is popular culture. While this paper argues that Kotlowitz's *There are no Children Here*, Simon and Burns's *The Corner*, and Dash's *Rosa Lee* represent efforts to address the discussed crisis of ontology that characterizes much of the literature surrounding the American urban crisis, the significance of other popular culture representations of the inner-city must be discussed. Cultural representations of urban squalor have been historically relevant in the development of post-WWII American identity. The importance of these representations are not limited to the disadvantaged black communities they depict; in fact, “whiteness has historically defined itself relative to blackness, [and] the cultural manifestations of vanilla suburbs relied on the lurid imagery of chocolate cities” (Avila, 2004: 8). Cultural productions are, therefore, historically important because of the role they possessed in shaping the American urban landscape.

Just as the social world exists only as a contrast to the “bare life” of the exception, the construction of the white hegemony of the postwar United States was dependent on the existence of urban black squalor. Postwar Los Angeles noir films focused on themes betrayal, alienation, and a growing disbelief in the American dream, indicative of a growing pessimism in the country (2004: 71). The urban experiment, in particular, was framed as a failure, as urban landmarks such as Southern California's Bunker Hill were depicted as the cynical hearts of urban desolation, as “site[s] that harboured crime, fear, and psychosis” (2004: 77). Instead of portrayals of the

decrepit housing conditions in Bunker Hill inspiring public subsidies for working-class housing, L.A. Noir's sensationalized imagery put forward narratives of fatalistic despair, furthering the notion that the inner-city was beyond redemption (2004: 77).

Aside from depicting the squalor of the inner-city, postwar popular culture helped define the ideal of suburban life. By using the strained relations between black and white Americans in order to define the spatial parameters of postwar cities, L.A. Noir helped put forward the utopic myth of life outside the city. Film noir framed urban centres as the domain of the socially undesirable, including blacks, promiscuous women, homosexuals, Orientals, and Communists. By virtue of comparison, the suburbs were, therefore, viewed as safe havens where the white nuclear family—almost always coded as the cultural ideal—could continue to assert its hegemony (2004: 100, 104).

Considering the concerns embedded in popular culture's politics, this study will discuss the implications of documenting inner-city life through novels, film, and music. It has been suggested by Carla Cappetti (1993) that the novels of authors such as James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Richard Wright should not "be understood within a restrictively literary context... but must as well be framed within a larger tradition of urban writing" (1993: 2). She points out that it was not until Wright began to examine the sociological underpinnings of his experiences as a black American that he understood the environment that would become the focus of his narratives (1993: 185).

Cappetti's analysis of Wright's novels and autobiography contends that urban sociology had a life-long effect on Wright's work, adding that the Chicago school, in particular, was the "overarching source and inspiration of Wright's creativity" (1993: 13). Because of this influence, Wright's—as well as Farrell and Algren's—work performs an important ethnographic function: thoroughly entrenched in urbanized communities, writers such as Wright act as "sociological

informants and observers of their own neighborhoods” (1993: 15). In one of her chapters on Wright, Cappetti points to a passage in his autobiographical *American Hunger* in which Wright describes his reasons for writing about one of his acquaintances:

I felt that if I could get his story I would make known some of the difficulties inherent in the adjustment of a folk people to an urban environment; I would make his life more intelligible to others than it was to himself. I would reclaim his disordered days and cast them into a form that people could grasp, see, understand and accept. (Wright as cited in Cappetti, 1993: 183)

Wright's sentiments show that, by recounting the experiences of black migrants adjusting to life in the North, Wright felt that he could use their plights to help readers understand the confluence of sociological issues and urban black life.

While it would seem that the ethnographic novels of Farrell, Algren, and Wright examined by Cappetti would be ideal candidates for capturing the lived experience of urban America, the representations of Chicago put forward by these authors present their own set of problems. Wright, for example, has received criticism for his remarks regarding the absence of a “black tradition” and for his passive and inferior characterization of black women (1993: 187). Furthermore, the accuracy of his depictions of the experiences his family and comrades faced migrating from the South to the North have been questioned, not just in his fictional work, but also in his autobiographical texts (1993: 201). While Cappetti notes the questionable accuracy of Wright's work, she is largely ambivalent to these concerns (1993: 201). While the accuracy or inaccuracy of Wright's documentation of the 1930-40s urban experience may not be of paramount importance to Cappetti's arguments, the inconsistencies in Wright's work will always bring his intentions into question and undermine ethnographic readings of his novels. Cappetti is correct to question the efficacy of purely empirical documentation, but such arguments do not

presuppose the importance of what has actually occurred. The works of Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash discussed in this paper, therefore, allow for a stronger ethnographic account of the American city than the novels of authors such as Wright can provide. Even if one were to set aside the complications presented by Wright's Communist-leanings and categorically patriarchal views of domesticity, the fact that much of his influential work is fictional in form carries inherent issues of representation when attempting to view these texts as urban literary canon.

While the scholarly reception of cultural productions depicting urban black poverty are not uniformly negative, it is worth examining both sides. Hip Hop culture, for example, possesses discursive elements, but there are very real and pervasive obstacles presented by the capitalist marketplace. In the late 1980s the rap group Public Enemy used the medium to discuss the troubled conditions the black population was facing (Watkins, 2005: 116). The group used rap to discuss issues pertaining to racism, misinformation, incarceration, and media interpretations of African Americans. Public Enemy revealed that hip hop and, by extension, popular culture in general, "can be, and often is, political" (2005: 118-9). What is problematic is that Public Enemy's attempts to make socially relevant music also informed what S. Craig Watkins (2005) calls "reality", or "gangsta" rap: hip hop music that utilizes sensationalized images of the ghetto's criminal underground in order to stake a claim in the commercial marketplace (2005: 116).

Charis E. Kubrin (2005), on the other hand, is not as quick to condemn gangsta rap, arguing that this genre of music acts as a revealing social document. In her discussion of gangsta rap's "street code"—the inner-city canon of violence, crime, and misogyny—Kubrin argues that rappers tell important stories of how deteriorating inner-city conditions affect young black men (2005: 37). While she does not go as far as to state that rap music does not inform any behaviours itself, Kubrin argues that gangsta rap is primarily a response to the difficult and, often, morally

ambiguous environment of the inner-city. What rap does is assist in the organization and construction of violent social identity and account for these types of behaviours (2005: 361).

What Kubrin's analysis oversimplifies, however, is how this documentation of urban black life coalesces with the commercial market. The rise of hip hop from relative obscurity meant that the subculture would inevitably have to interact with the mainstream commercial sector. In fact, many of hip hop's socially conscious movements appeared as a direct response to the encroachment of corporate ideologies into hip hop music. Chuck D of Public Enemy expressed his dismay at the state of commercial rap music explicitly, stating that originally

rappers rapped for the people, and they rapped against the elite establishment. In the last [ten] years or so, rappers rap for their companies and their contracts, and they're part of the establishment now. It's two diametrically opposed ideas. (as cited in Watkins, 2005: 127)

Chuck D's sentiments also point to a larger issue in the culture industry: a preoccupation with the commodification of black authenticity. Chuck D's statement indicates that the involvement of an artist with corporations suggests a lack of sincerity. This view presents a predicament for media companies because their artists' reception by the audience—and their commercial success—is inextricably tied to the perception of the musician's authenticity.

The authenticity of black music is often identified with productions that purposely distance themselves from the commercial mainstream (Lury, 1996: 176). Defining black authenticity by its opposition to the commercial sector is dangerous because “this nostalgic, sentimental understanding of black authenticity is one way in which black people are blocked from laying claim to the economic capital... which their cultural practices create” (1996: 177). As a result, the commodification of blackness denies black people the capacity to produce culture worthy of themselves.

Black authenticity has nevertheless become an invaluable commodity in the culture industry. Watkins goes as far as to argue that, since the genre proved its financial potential in 1991, rap music has been produced primarily with the white consumer in mind (2005: 96). In 1991, gangsta rap pioneers Niggaz With Attitude (NWA) took the music industry by storm with their third studio album *Niggaz4life* (originally released as *Efil4zaggin*). To the surprise of everyone involved, *Niggaz4life* gained unprecedented commercial success, debuting at number two on the Billboard 200, the highest-charting entry since Michael Jackson's *Bad* in 1987 (2005: 93-4). The success of *Niggaz4life* made it clear that the market for rap music was more lucrative (and white) than previously understood. Understandably, this marked a distinct shift in the way rap music was thought about; for the first time, white audiences represented a primary demographic in the production and marketing of hip hop music and merchandise, enjoying what Watkins refers to as a form of cultural tourism (2005: 96-7). The commodification of blackness has long reached the point in which images of African Americans "are typically used to facilitate commercial communication between white people" (Lury, 1996: 169).

The encroachment of the "white world" into the hip hop community has been met with a deep-rooted mistrust. Watkins discusses the rise of the white rap artist Eminem, and the race related issues that developed because of his popularity. Eminem had very public problems with *The Source* magazine's founders, Raymond "Benzino" Scott and Dave Mays: Scott and Mays claimed that they had come into possession of old tapes in which Eminem had used racial slurs and planned to unveil them in an effort to disparage the rapper and reveal him as a racist interloper with no respect for the social value of hip hop (Watkins, 2005: 85-6). Although Eminem had always been scrutinized for his categorically homophobic and misogynistic lyrics, accusations of racism carried far greater consequences. Eminem's acceptance in hip hop had always been predicated on shows of "respect for black music, hip hop, and the history and people

that produced both” (2005: 87). When asked if he would ever use the word “nigger” in his recordings, a commonly used word in rap music, he remarked that he would not out of respect for the black people that had created the art form. Similarly, when asked about the racially sensitive recordings, he attributed them to a lapse of judgement caused by a tumultuous relationship with an African American woman (2005: 87).

The precarious nature of Eminem's status in the hip hop music scene is interesting because the strongest, and seemingly only, point of contention to his authenticity is tied to his whiteness. Viewing his life objectively, it is difficult to dispute his “street” credibility: he was a high school dropout, had a troubled relationship with his mother, conceived a child out of wedlock, lived most of his life in poverty, and toiled in the underground MC battle scene for many years to earn respect in the hip hop community (2005: 90, 99). In many ways, the young Eminem was more disadvantaged than the inner-city black men living under similar conditions: Eminem possessed all of the economic and social obstacles of the lower class, but gained none of the authenticity commonly understood to be the birthright of inner-city blacks. Eminem's appeal, irrespective of race, is the message that impoverished communities share important interests despite real and perceived racial differences. If the hip hop community could look past Eminem's skin colour, they would see that he is one of them: a dispossessed youth utilizing rap music as his voice, identity, and his “opportunity to make a mark on a work that renders [marginalized youths] useless and easily disposable” (2005: 92-3).

It is likely that the issue of race will always remain a sensitive topic in the context of cultural productions. As discussed earlier, hooks possesses similar anxieties regarding white appropriation of black urban life. hooks takes further issue with the images of athletic glory put forward to young black men in *Hoop Dreams*, which present impressionable youths with limited avenues for potential success. Underlying hooks's criticisms of *Hoop Dreams* is a concern that

the film posits the contradictory views that black people can be successful only through assimilation and that staying within one's own group is the only way one can safely survive (1996: 81). However, the options presented by popular culture to disadvantaged black youths are limited, compounding the difficulties already present in efforts to assimilate.

Since Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight boxing champion in 1908 despite racially charged resistance from boxing organizations, sports have become “the promised land” for young black Americans. Aside from the entertainment industry, the sports arena was one of the first sites where African Americans were “allowed” to succeed (Harrison, 1998: 64). What is problematic is that disadvantaged black youths have come to perceive success in sports as the best chance they have at fame and fortune, often putting “all their motivational 'eggs' into just a few sport 'baskets'” and failing to consider more pragmatic alternatives for self improvement (1998: 65). Furthermore, prominent sports clichés such as “white men can't jump” and “black men can't think” contribute

to the self fulfilling prophecy that black males are more likely to do well in sports than in academia... [and] also [ignore] the complex social mechanisms that are responsible for African-American male participation and success in sports in the first place. (1998: 70)

Also overlooked is the difficulty of attaining athletic success on a professional level, itself not a guarantee of financial stability: C. Keith Harrison's study found that about one in 7325 hopefuls make it into the NFL or NBA annually, and that nearly 80% of professional athletes find themselves broke by the end of their careers (1998: 66).

Along with the pipe dreams of athletic glory, black youths are also inundated with images that encourage superfluous consumerism. Roopali Mukherjee (2006) and Regina Austin (1994) discuss the damaging practices of conspicuous consumption that black youths often practice in

response to the disillusionment caused by their marginalization. Austin contends that conspicuous black consumption is a form of compensation, an attempt to purchase social recognition. The attempt to buy status, however, is futile because of its fleeting nature, making conspicuous black consumption wasteful and fundamentally detrimental (1994: 232). The Selig Center for Economic Growth has reported that black buying power rose drastically from \$585 billion in 2000 to \$723 billion in 2004 despite the fact that these findings did not correlate to a growth in black wealth (Mukherjee, 2006: 604). Mukherjee argues that this precarious rise in spending is informed by a mainstream hip hop aesthetic that champions commodity fetishism as a legitimate response to black disempowerment (2006: 603-4).

Disenfranchised black youths look to “hip hop moguls” such as Jay Z, Russell Simmons, and Oprah Winfrey and their excesses as visual symbols of the good life, viewing the flaunting of success as a signifier of youthful rebellion (2006: 600-1, 621). The stock placed on these images of material wealth is indicative of a black community desperate to fully participate in the “rituals of American citizenship, privileges denied to them by twin burdens of race and class” (2006: 619). Furthermore, black commodity fetishism is an attempt to access the commodity markers of the white “good life”, meaning that it will always exist as a “consolation prize” (2006: 612). Austin argues that blacks need to stop participating solely through consumption and become more heavily involved in the production of capital in order to move beyond reactive resistance of their commercial manipulation (1994: 245).

In films such as the *Barbershop* series that attempt to address conspicuous black consumption, there is basically no reference to the disadvantages faced by inner-city black communities commonly understood to be caused by structural racism: the onus of responsibility to rise above irresponsible consumption is placed squarely on the shoulders of the citizens of these marginalized communities. By consciously disregarding the systemic subordination of

black Americans, these movies suggest that capitalist enterprise can and will drive black politico-economic progress (Mukherjee, 2006: 623). This stance reflects Paul Gilroy's (2008) sentiments that racial discourse is itself fundamentally problematic and that, in order to challenge racial hierarchies, we need to renounce the concept of race entirely (2008: 528, 521). He states that:

[we] must step away from the pious ritual in which we always agree that "race" is invented but are then required to defer to its embeddedness in the world and to accept that the demand for justice requires us nevertheless innocently to enter the political arenas it helps to mark out. (2008: 541)

Although it seems like the *Barbershop* films reflect Gilroy's difficult-to-swallow stance of racial antipathy, Mukherjee argues that the films inadvertently suggest that there is no alternative to playing by the rules of the capitalist market (2006: 614, 624). Furthermore, Gilroy's stance glosses over the systemic hurdles—which have had very real consequences regardless of prejudice's role in creating them—faced by disadvantaged blacks in their attempts to participate in the commercial marketplace through legitimate means.

Ethnographic Journalism and Inner-City Life

The works selected for this study provide a more effective framework for documenting the lived experience of the urban crisis than those outlined above because they make concessions for both empirical fact as well as personal interpretation, not one or the other. These books, based in Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., chronicle the experiences of black families living in some of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in the United States in order to foster a greater collective understanding of the hardships faced by those living in decaying urban centres. While the broader focus of these texts is similar, they do possess their own individual properties which will be discussed in greater detail.

Kotlowitz's *There are no Children Here* follows the lives of two young brothers, Pharoah

and Lafayette Rivers, for a two year period between 1987 and 1989. The book depicts their struggles with school, the lure of neighbourhood gangs, and the profound impact the close proximity to gang violence had on them. Kotlowitz first encountered the boys and their mother, LaJoe, in 1985 when he was asked to write the text for a photo essay a friend was putting together about Chicago's troubled Henry Horner Homes housing complex for *Chicago* magazine (1992: ix). Two years later, Kotlowitz encountered the family again while writing an article for *The Wall Street Journal* discussing the toll inner-city violence has on children. After the article was published, Kotlowitz approached LaJoe about expanding his examination of her family into a book in order to remind readers that, while the Rivers brothers and their peers experience an inordinate exposure to the horrors of life before they even reach adolescence, they are still children (1992: x).

Simon, a former journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*, and Burns, a former Baltimore police detective and public school teacher, take a similar approach. They detail the exploits of fifteen-year-old DeAndre McCullough, a resident of one of Baltimore's many impoverished urban neighbourhoods. The authors attempt to glean an understanding of how families are affected by the drug trade by following DeAndre and his parents, Gary and Fran, for a year as they attempt to navigate their lives through the all-encompassing presence of the city's drug economy. The book depicts Gary and Fran's struggle with addiction and DeAndre's alternating and half-hearted attempts at honest work and drug trafficking. Simon and Burns expand their scope by including the stories of other residents of the titular drug corner, from drug addicts to those trying to make a difference while surrounded by a world of abject poverty and substance abuse.

Lastly, Dash's *Rosa Lee* attempts to elucidate the lasting impact of America's continued failure to provide effective measures for black assimilation by following the life Rosa Lee Cunningham, a drug addict and former prostitute. The book examines how her decisions and

social status have largely been shaped by her mother, and discusses how Rosa Lee's children continue to be affected by the limitations placed on their lives by past generations. Dash, a *Washington Post* journalist, places a particular emphasis on the past, eschewing a detailed analysis of Rosa Lee's day-to-day life in favour of examining how her and her children ended up in the precarious lives they are unable to escape. Interestingly, Dash does not distance himself from his book's narrative, the significance of which will be further discussed shortly.

An important component of each of these works is a discernible concern with method. Each author acknowledges their preconceptions going into these projects and, significantly, address how their presence altered the narratives that unfolded during their research. Kotlowitz, for example, states that some events were left out of his final draft out of a respect for the privacy and wishes of those who contributed to his work, although he does not believe that the inclusion of these stories would affect the structure of his book. He also confesses that he helped out the Rivers family financially when there were no other options—usually in the form of new clothes for the boys when LaJoe could not afford them—but he points out that his assistance was not a condition of the Rivers family's cooperation (Kotlowitz, 1992: 308-9). Kotlowitz also notes that the profits from his book were to be used to set up a trust fund for the two brothers and also send them to private school. Although Kotlowitz is uneasy about breaking his journalistic responsibility to remain detached and objective, he states that the bond he formed with Lafayette and Pharoah is very real and that their friendship will always come first (1992: 309).

Simon and Burns were presented with different challenges while conducting the research for their book. The residents of the titular Mount and Fayette corner initially viewed the two writers very suspiciously. It did not help that some even recognized Burns from his days as a Baltimore Police Department patrolman and detective. The two authors had to spend considerable time just “hanging around with no particular purpose”—playing basketball, buying

iced tea for the kids, etc.—to convince the neighbourhood that they really were just working on a book (1996: 537-8). Furthermore, Simon and Burns admit that they were unable to remain completely detached from the events covered in their work. They state that

As a rule, we did not intervene in the swirl of events. But there were a few instances when we ignored the rule. We came to this project as reporters, but over time we found ourselves caring more about our subjects than we ever expected....

Yet the limited support we provided had decidedly little help. (1996: 540)

What is interesting about the similarities between Kotlowitz and Simon and Burns's notes on methodology is that the effect their research had on them is very much in line with the effect these authors wanted their books to have on audiences: their subjects became real people to them.

Of the three works selected for this study, no author strays further from the journalistic ethos of nonintervention as Dash. Unlike Kotlowitz or Simon and Burns, Dash inserts himself into the book's narrative, describing his interactions with Rosa Lee as early as the prologue. However, it is worth noting that, before Dash intended to use Rosa Lee as a subject for a book, they already possessed a close relationship: Dash had originally written a series of stories for *The Washington Post* on Rosa Lee, and, after those articles were published, the professional barrier between the two had been dissolved and they became genuine friends. Dash regularly gave her personal advice and assistance, and the nature of this relationship is reflected in the book (1997: 262). The direct presence of Dash in the life of Rosa Lee, however, is somewhat mitigated in the book through the text's primary focus on Rosa Lee's past, before her and Dash had ever come into contact.

These authors' involvement in the social worlds they explore reflect Pierre Bourdieu's concept of epistemic reflexivity. Many argue that social science is reflexive in the sense that the knowledge it generates affects the reality it describes, ranging from self-awareness/reference to

the “constitutive circularity” of texts, but Bourdieu takes this concept a step further and argues that this reflexivity is a crucial component of the discourse (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 37-8). According to Bourdieu, it is through this interaction that a subject of inquiry can transcend academic confines and reach the levels of social and collective consciousness (1992: 36). Whether or not they are aware of it, Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash's inability to view the events in front of them passively indicates that their examinations of urban poverty have had reflexive consequences on the writers. This “bending back” of their analyses is important because, as Bourdieu argues, when social life is viewed as a spectacle, we tend to view the world “as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than concrete problems to be solved practically” (1992: 39).

Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash's presence in the lives of their subjects, therefore, should not be viewed as an affront to journalistic ideals of objectivity, but as a necessary step towards achieving the empathy necessary in order to understand the complex facets of the urban experience. The notion of journalistic objectivity is misleading: it is impossible to report the news without values and judgements on what constitutes reality (Gans, 1979: 39). The supposed objectivity of journalists is problematic because, when values are not deliberately inserted into the news, these values must be inferred. Inference, however, cannot be achieved without an inferrer, and different people observe the news with their own preconceptions and personal beliefs, adding to the ambiguity surrounding the values underlying works of supposedly objective journalism (1979: 40). It has been argued that ethnographic journalism, on the other hand, is a form in which subjects are the actual narrators of the stories and that the writers are merely a medium through which a group's story is told (Cramer & McDevitt, 2004: 137). Furthermore, it is important to note that the concerns raised by these admissions of interference are addressed directly by the authors themselves. Unlike Wright, whose inconsistencies force

many to question the ethnographic validity of his work, Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash recognize the concessions made in their texts and make a transparent effort to discuss the impact these compromises have or have not had on their work.

While the ethnographic texts discussed in this paper share similar methods and themes, the issue of race requires further discussion. As noted earlier, Dash is the only writer in this study to insert himself into his book's narrative. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that he is also the only black author in the group. Additionally, consider that, in the television adaptation of *The Corner*, Simon and Burns are not portrayed; instead, it is the show's director, Charles S. Dutton—who is black and himself a product of Baltimore's inner-city—who interviews DeAndre, Gary, and Fran throughout the miniseries. Unlike Dash, Simon and Burns display a distinct discomfort with their roles in the events that took place during their research. The uneasiness of Simon and Burns in making their presence known in their work is reminiscent of hooks's criticisms of the documentary *Hoop Dreams*: despite her claims that she has no inherent issue with white artists depicting black life, it would seem that hooks's concerns regarding the exploitation of urban poverty would apply to the works of Kotlowitz and Simon and Burns.

In the epilogue of *Rosa Lee*, Dash notes that most upper and middle class Americans are so far removed from those living in poverty that his accounts of Rosa Lee's life were greeted by a “visceral rage” and embarrassment by those believing that he was perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans, the argument being that white Americans would perceive the actions of those in poverty as representative of all black Americans. Dash qualifies his selection of Rosa Lee as a subject by stating that he chose to focus on such an abject example of urban squalor because he wanted to make readers as uncomfortable and alarmed with the subject as he was. He notes that many of the negative responses to his *Washington Post* stories on Rosa Lee came from African American readers who questioned why Dash did not choose to focus on stories of success (1997:

258-9). He points to the work of E. Franklin Frazier (1965) to explain the hostile reaction of middle-and-upper-class black Americans when confronted with images of extreme poverty. Frazier argues that one “of the chief frustrations of the middle-class Negro is that he can not escape identification with the Negro race and consequently is subject to the contempt of whites” (1965: 224). The critiques of hooks mentioned earlier can thus be interpreted in a similar matter: as a defensive response caused by a deeply-rooted concern with stereotyping.

Another key feature of these works of ethnographic journalism is a concern with the intersection between positivist and personal accounts. Kotlowitz's work, in particular, directly addresses the mnemonic gap between empirical knowledge and social life. For example, in his discussion of the state of inner-city Chicago's public schools, Kotlowitz examines the fiscal history that has crippled the city's urban black community since the early 1960s (1992: 63-4); however, Kotlowitz takes his investigation a step further, analyzing how the legacy of underfunding has impacted not only the schools, but the community's children and teachers as well. He discusses Pharoah's fourth-grade teacher, Diana F. Barone, an enthusiastic and well-meaning educator who nevertheless found herself becoming increasingly worn down by the overcrowding of classrooms and an underfunded system that often found her spending her own money on supplies. Adding to her difficulties in teaching was neighbourhood violence that routinely left her students and herself tired and distracted (1992: 65-6).

Kotlowitz's examination of the past is not unique to his work: in order to illustrate the generational effects of the antebellum South, Dash devotes a chapter of his book to the examination of Rosetta Wright, Rosa Lee's mother. Growing up in the forests and swamplands of the Bishop and Powell Plantation of North Carolina, Rosetta's family never put much emphasis on education. Her parents had no school to attend, and Rosetta and her siblings were only allowed to go to class when there was no work to be done on the farm and when the water level

of the swamp was sufficiently low (1997: 76, 78). Rosetta grew up “in a time and place where hard work was the only way rural black sharecroppers could survive.... And if you were a black woman, work meant domestic work” (1997: 76). Growing up in this environment, it is no surprise then that education was not a priority for Rosetta's children despite the increased educational opportunities afforded to them by their emigration from the South.

By giving the educational troubles of the United States' inner-cities a real-life context, Kotlowitz and Dash help elucidate the deeply ingrained problems presented by the American ethos of individual meritocracy alluded to by Lipset. Additionally, their work shows us that quick-fix solutions in line with the Nixon administration's take on affirmative action fail to address root causes of educational disparities such as teacher and student disillusionment and differing generational priorities. Simon and Burns offer a more cynical take on urban education, stating simply that “[the] schools cannot save us” (1996: 277). They argue that the children of urban poverty simply live in a separate world in which education has no meaning; for an overwhelming majority—through experience, peer influence, and a system unequipped to respond to the high failure rates—Simon and Burns argue that education is never perceived as a viable response to one's social situation (1996: 277-285).

Even more humble pursuits of legitimacy often prove fruitless and humiliating. Upon discovering that his girlfriend was pregnant, DeAndre McCullough made a concerted effort to leave the world of drug dealing and find a proper job (Simon and Burns, 1996: 346). DeAndre took a job at a Wendy's fast food restaurant and tried in earnest to make good on his promise to be a responsible father. He quickly found, however, that the money did not come as easily or quickly as it did on the drug corner. When he asked for more hours, his manager perceived the request as arrogance and her relationship with DeAndre quickly soured. Eventually finding himself with even less hours, DeAndre refused to try to work things out with his manager and

returned to the drug corner, explaining that, while he did not want to get arrested, he needed “real money” (1996: 409). On the Franklin Square drug corner, DeAndre's status as a dealer provided him with a measure of respect and authority. As a member of the working class, DeAndre's lack of professional experience and formal education put him in a disadvantageous and vulnerable position. Because DeAndre's story is not atypical in the environment he was raised in, the events covered by Simon and Burns help explain the seemingly counter-intuitive actions often exhibited in the American inner-city.

The ground-level contextualization provided by the works of Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash can help explain seemingly irrational behaviours. One of the conventional measures of underclass growth has been the rate of teenage childbearing in poor urban communities. Dash notes that, in 1993, almost eight percent of African American teenagers were mothers, comparable to two percent of the country's white population (1997: 256). Simon and Burns present an explanation of teen pregnancy beyond the usual references to welfare, promiscuity, failures of parenting, and the lack of family planning. They argue that the majority of children conceived by teenaged parents in the inner-city are very much wanted: a lifetime of disappointment and lowered expectations has left a generation starved for affection. Most of these babies, therefore, are not necessarily the product of irresponsibility or neglect: they are legacies for teenaged drug dealers who expect to be in prison by the age of twenty, and the personal justification for teenaged girls “thirsting for the love of another being” (1996: 233).

Through their interactions with members of the black underclass, Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash are able to gain insights into the human element often lost in the empirical documentation of events. The importance of these ethnographic projects is further illustrated in Kotlowitz's examination of the circumstances surrounding the death of Lafayette's friend, Craig Davis. The 19-year old Craig was a fixture in the neighbourhood Lafayette and his brother grew

up in, providing the boys with a rare positive male role model. Craig spoke to Lafayette of his plans to attend a broadcasting school, speaking often of the future, “something most young men in this neighborhood rejected—often for good reason—as a waste of time” (1992: 121). In the Spring of 1988, however, Craig was shot dead while fleeing from police officers. The shooting was covered in *The Chicago Sun-Times* as follows:

A reputed street gang member was fatally shot Thursday night when a federal agent's revolver discharged during a scuffle, investigators said.... A spokesman for the federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Bureau said the agent and a Chicago police gang crimes officer approached Davis to interview him about illegal firearms trafficking and Davis grabbed the agent, touching off the scuffle. (as cited in Kotlowitz, 1992: 198)

While fleeing from the police in Chicago's inner-city was common even among the law-abiding, nobody believed Craig would have instigated a physical altercation with the authorities in question. Although community members were adamant about Craig's innocence—his efforts to avoid gangland crime were well known—no official apology was made by the police department or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). The press continued to be told that Craig was a member of Chicago's Black Gangster Disciples street gang, and both the police department and the ATF refused to discuss the case with Kotlowitz (1992: 206, 308).

Even if one were to set aside the inaccuracies regarding Craig's gang involvement, his death still carried affective ramifications beyond positivist accounts. After Craig's death Lafayette fell into a deep depression, shutting out others as his distrust of people grew. Even during the year that Kotlowitz followed the experiences of the Rivers brothers, Craig's was not the first or last death to impact Pharoah and Lafayette. The boys' mother noticed Lafayette's increasing distance, as if he did not want to get close enough to anyone to be hurt by their

absence (1992: 209). The case of Craig's death and its effect on the young and impressionable Lafayette remind us—as Kotlowitz notes in his epilogue—that these are children; however distant objective and positivist accounts of inner-city squalor can make these events appear, the works of writers such as Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash serve as a stark reminder that those affected by the urban crisis are real people.

Of course, one cannot discount the empirically observable factors at work in the constitution of urban life. However, a multifaceted understanding of the black American experience at the height of the urban crisis during the late 1980s and early 1990s cannot be reached without making accommodations for the unquantifiable. Interpretivist and positivist accounts of the urban crisis should not be read as diametrically opposed ontological approaches to comprehending the nature of American urban life, but rather complementary methods which allow one to achieve an understanding not possible otherwise. Discussions of the role of racial prejudice in urban deterioration, therefore, should not place their focus on whether or not prejudice has been causal or symptomatic of socioeconomic development, but rather how these facets interact with and reconstitute each other in a dialectic relationship. In doing so, it is possible to create the reflexive empathy necessary to view social phenomena such as the American urban crisis as a practical concern rather than a spectacle.

A final feature of these works worth discussing is the focus on their particular municipalities. While these texts choose specific cities for their projects—Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington—the emphasis for each of the authors is what is generalizable rather than what is unique. Simon and Burns, for example, state that they chose the Franklin Square neighbourhood of Baltimore almost at random; because it was fairly typical of the roughly 120 open-air drug markets in the city, “Franklin Square therefore seemed comparable to any number of inner-city neighborhoods overwhelmed by the drug trade” (1996: 537). Dash takes a similar

stance regarding the representativeness of inner-city Washington drug markets, while Kotlowitz does not explore the implications of his choice of location (Dash, 1997: 260).

At first glance, it would seem that Simon and Burns take for granted that Baltimore is indeed a representative American city, that life in Baltimore can act as a stand-in for urban American life. In an interview with the novelist Nick Hornby (2007) regarding his use of Baltimore in his later work on the television series *The Wire*, Simon expands on his choice of setting:

by getting out of the traditionally dominant locales of New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, writers stand a better chance of speaking to conditions that are reflective of a lot of less-than-unique or less-than grandiose second-tier cities.... [Stories] from here have a chance of being about more than Baltimore per se. The storytelling here might be quite detailed in referencing local geography and culture, but it translates easily to elsewhere and therefore acquires additional relevance easily. (Simon as cited in Hornby, 2007: para. 19)

This supposition is reflective of a similar tension in the field of urban studies regarding the representativeness of certain cities. Similar to how Simon and Burns and Dash use their respective cities to understand the American experience, there is a distinct tendency in American urban studies to use particular and unique cities in order to draw conclusions about urbanism as a whole.

Much of the celebrated scholarly work has focused on cities such as New York (S. Zukin, 1995), Los Angeles (M. Davis, 1990; E. Soja, 1989), Chicago (E. Burgess, 1967), and, somewhat less prominently, Detroit (J. Herron, 1993). Jerry Herron (1993), in particular, is adamant in his claims that Detroit is the consummate American city, stating that

Detroit is the most representative city in America. Detroit used to stand for

success, and now it stands for failure. In that sense, the city is not just a physical location; it is also a project, a projection of imaginary fears and desires. (1993: 9)

There is a branch of urban studies building off of Harvey Molotch's (1976) influential work that does not place its focus on any specific municipality, leading one to question why exactly many authors choose to place their focus on such specific places. However, attempts to champion any single city as representative of the United States as a whole is misguided; the majority of the literature in urban studies focusing on particular cities is largely cognisant of the fact that cities are unique and, while there is an interest in what is universal, there is also a distinct regional focus. The distinctiveness of any given city does not presuppose the notion that the irreproducible features of distinct municipalities can allow one to better understand urbanism as a whole.

An analysis of the academic literature pertaining to the urban geography discipline reveals that the question of a city's representativeness is a moot issue for the majority of the field's prominent scholars. Ernest W. Burgess's (1967) work, for example, presents a model of concentric circles to illustrate the process of urban expansion. Using the development of downtown Chicago, Burgess explains that cities expand radially from a central business district with the encircling areas representing factory zones, zones in transition, zones of working men's homes, residential zones, and commuter zones (1967: 50-1). He notes, however, that cities' processes of expansion are impacted not only by physical growth and business development, but also changing social organization and differing personality types (1967: 53). Building on his preliminary model, Burgess's second chart takes into account social factors such as homelessness, racialized communities, and restricted residential areas (1967: 54-5). While Burgess's model—meant to help one understand urbanism in a general sense—is based on his observations of Chicago, he points out that no city, including Chicago, fits perfectly into his

framework. Chicago, for example, possesses unique characteristics such as the “lake front, the Chicago River, railroad lines, historical factors in the location of industry, the relative degree of the resistance of communities to invasion, etc.” (1967: 51-2).

Davis and Soja, discussed earlier in this paper, examine Los Angeles in a similar manner to Burgess's utilization of Chicago. Both Davis and Soja assess the implications of Los Angeles' constructed geography. Similar to Burgess, Davis and Soja do not make overt claims regarding Los Angeles' representativeness of American urban life. Instead, they attempt to use the specificity of the city in order to gain broader insights into postmodern geography because Los Angeles presents an incomparable composite assemblage of not only American, but world cities (Soja, 1989: 193).

Sharon Zukin (1995) examines the role of culture and symbolism in the growth of urban areas. The crux of Zukin's work involves understanding how cities use culture as an economic base, how capitalizing on culture spills over into the privatization and militarization of public space, and how the power of culture is related to the aesthetics of fear (1995: 11). Zukin contends that cities do not possess a singular culture or a collection of subcultures; municipalities exist in constant negotiation between macro-level sources of change—global and local cultures, public stewardship and privatization, social diversity and homogeneity—and micro-level negotiations of power (1995: 46). Although her focus is on New York City, Zukin is not concerned with the city itself, but rather what it reveals about culture's impact on contemporary urbanism. It is telling that Zukin repeatedly uses the general term “cities” rather than cite New York specifically.

The futility of ordaining any particular city representative is further evidenced by the disinterested responses to Michael Dear's (2002) assertions in which he advocates for the L.A. School's increasing prominence over the Chicago School. Scholars such as Andrew Abbott (2002), Harvey Molotch (2002), and Robert J. Sampson (2002) uniformly critique Dear's

contentions by elucidating the superfluous nature of championing one school over another. These scholars recognize the limitations inherent in treating any particular school as canon. Abbott, for example, argues that the Chicago School possessed a particularly weak analysis of political economy (Abbott, 2002: 34). On the other hand, Molotch contends that, while the Chicago School often treats the regional as too universal, the opposite is true of the L.A. School, which does not give enough credence to the universal aspects of its city of study (Molotch, 2002: 40). The literature pertaining to particular cities should be viewed as a collaborative effort; the theoretical particularities of one city may help explain what is confounding elsewhere.

The urban studies discipline should not be viewed as diametrically opposed schools of thought—the Chicago School vs. The L.A. School, for example—but as a collaborative effort which uses the unique qualities of distinct cities to buoy the entire urban studies field. Simon and Burns and Dash's attempts to proffer their cities as representative, therefore, are to a large extent beside the point. The value of these works is not what they tell us about black life and urban America in a general sense, but rather what they reveal about the affective consequences of the American urban crisis. Substituting empirical fact for first-hand experience is an inherently problematic practice. Works of ethnographic journalism such as *There are no Children Here*, *The Corner*, and *Rosa Lee*, therefore, become important tools in engaging with the past because they allow for the documentation of the experiences of those that actually lived through the events of interest.

Conclusion

Although the unique social position of black Americans is undeniable, whether or not racial prejudice has been a root cause or a result of urban decay remains a point of contention. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton argue that black ghettos are a result of policies, behaviours and policies aimed at containing black communities. Political economic analyses of urban

development, on the other hand, do not view prejudice as a constitutive factor. David Harvey, for example, contends that urban ghettos develop because underclass populations do not possess the means to command space: they simply lack the resources necessary to escape decaying urban centres.

However one chooses to view the role of racial prejudice in the constitution of urban development, it is far more difficult to deny the disproportionate effect urban decay has had on the black underclass. The tension in the literature pertaining to the urban crisis regarding the role of prejudice points to an issue of method: positivist and interpretivist accounts of the crisis are often viewed as incompatible, but a comprehensive understanding of the American urban experience cannot be reached without reconciling empirical knowledge with lived experience through the critical realist methodology exhibited in the works of Alex Kotlowitz, David Simon and Ed Burns, and Leon Dash.

The position taken by proponents of structural explanations does not give proper consideration to the lasting effects of black exceptionalism. Blacks were forced into an underclass status from the beginning; their exclusion from the American mainstream was intentional, as those in power decided that African Americans did not fit into commonly held but ambiguous American ideals. While they no longer represent a formal exception, blacks continue to struggle with the difficult process of post-abolition assimilation. The quick fix attitude to reconciling racial inequalities—exhibited in short-sighted policies such as Nixon's version of affirmative action—is problematic, as it encourages a neglect of the social and historical contexts that would allow the country to confront the root causes of its underlying racial tensions (Bardaglio, 2001; Lipset, 1996).

Following the Second World War, the United States began a process of decentralization that has severely undermined the effectiveness of social policies aimed at addressing the

country's evolving position on race and equality (Hooks and McQueen, 2010; Tonry, 2009). If anything, policies have exacerbated the difficulties of the urban black population, with reformed criminal policies in particular having a disproportionate impact on the black community. It has been argued that white Americans have a vested interest in preserving discriminatory practices and that those in power will always create new methods to maintain the status quo (Massey, 2007).

Representations of urban black communities in popular culture have possessed a significant role in the construction of postwar American identity. Cold War-era film noir, for example, reinforced the hegemony of white suburban life by framing urban centres as sites of abject squalor and moral indifference. The myth of the suburban utopia was sustained through its contrast to the despondence of life in the city. Because blacks came to be associated with the city and were depicted in a way that preyed on white insecurities, film noir helped reinforce the fears that would inform white flight (Avila, 2004).

Carla Cappetti argues that the novels of James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Richard Wright provide a framework for providing an ethnography of the urban experience through their observations of the writers' neighbourhoods and acquaintances. However, the inconsistencies in Wright's novels elucidate inherent problems in treating fictionalized texts as ethnographic. While Cappetti chooses not to concern herself with the issues presented by those challenging Wright's truthfulness, the merits of Wright's work do not supersede the importance of actual events.

While rap music—gangsta rap specifically—can act as a form of discourse through its examination of inner-city life, the encroachment of private interests in the commercialization of the musical form has altered how rap is produced and marketed (Kubrin, 2005; Watkins, 2005). These concerns also extend to representations of black life in films. bell hooks, for example, takes issue with the documentary *Hoop Dreams*, arguing that white audiences “enjoying” images

of African Americans on the silver screen does not imply a desire to understand the plight of the movies' subjects. She argues that these representations oversimplify the nature of black life, providing cheap entertainment to voyeuristic audiences while putting forward problematic images to impressionable young black men.

While black spending has risen considerably, this growth does not correlate to a comparable rise in black wealth. This precarious spending is a response to the humiliation of poverty, as disillusioned youths flaunt their material excess in a misguided attempt to participate in "the good life". Films such as the *Barbershop* series attempt to address the problematic spending habits mentioned above, but these films tend to put forward the notion that there are no alternatives to "playing by the rules" and routinely gloss over the systemic hurdles faced by impoverished blacks (Mukherjee, 2006).

The journalistic works of Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash allow for a stronger ethnographic account of urban life because they take into consideration both the empirically observable and the personal accounts of their subjects. Each author directly discusses the issue of method, justifying both their approaches to writing and their personal involvement with the events that took place during their research. Unlike Wright, however, the authors discussed in this study recognize and establish a discourse surrounding the compromises made in their projects in an attempt to make their intentions transparent. In order to bring the lives behind the statistics to the forefront, Kotlowitz, Simon and Burns, and Dash directly address the mnemonic gap between empirical knowledge and social life by providing a ground-level contextualization of the various facets of urban poverty.

As this paper has argued, the divergence of opinions regarding the role of prejudice in the processes of urban decay has been caused by the tendency for classical methodologies to view each other as diametrically opposed rather than complementary. However, by accounting for

affect as well as the empirically observable in their examinations of the urban crisis, the works of ethnographic journalism discussed in this paper allow one to achieve the epistemic reflexivity and empathy necessary in order to view urban decay as a practical concern rather than a series of inevitable events to be witnessed passively. *There are no Children Here*, *The Corner*, and *Rosa Lee*, therefore, are crucial to gaining a well-rounded understanding of the complexities of urban life because they allow audiences to see how empirical facts and the lived experiences of the urban crisis converge in a dialectic relationship.

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