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Trafficking in the Space of Poverty: Reading the Post-War Wars of American Literature and Culture

by

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ABSTRACT

Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty: Reading the Post-War Wars of American Culture

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*Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty* reorients the “post-war” period of American literature and culture through a reading of various cultural and ideological wars at home: the Cold War, the War on Welfare, the War on Poverty and the War on Terror. By bringing together policy documents, sociology, psychology, literature and film, this project analyzes the discursive limits of depicting lives lived in and along the lines of poverty. To tease out the underlying assumptions about the people whose bodies are marked by poverty, I set up the historical contours of the period and then discuss the ways in which literature resists, supports, and traffics in the spaces of poverty as it was being variously defined in the period. The narratives that I have chosen are tutor texts designed to disclose the conditions and circumstances of poverty as well as their ideological displacement. Reading against the grain of the dominant discourses, I argue that writers who are typically read as working against various forms of oppression actually enforce a neoliberal commonsense, performing the emotional work of absolving middle and upper class guilt when faced with the persistence of inequality.

Managing the poor through these discourses has stabilized white middle-class privilege and produced uneven geographies. These spaces are socially managed and constructed through ideology to maintain uneven geographies but they are also deployed to explain *why* the poor remain poor. Movement in and out of spaces of poverty and
spatial freedom as a way to express social and class mobility characterizes much of the literature that I read in *Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty*. Migration, or the traffic of bodies across space, is another organizing principle of this dissertation. Social relations are expressed and enacted in and across spaces where identities are divided, defined, and limited. I argue that in the processes of trafficking in poverty, actual impoverished conditions and peoples’ unmet needs become fetishized and as fetishes enable a readjusted national imaginary and new ideological configurations of freedom and home, race, masculinity, motherhood, and the child.
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Introduction

American literature from the period after 1945 is frequently categorized as “post-war.” The “post-war” adjective suggests that this has been a time of peace and prosperity; however, American culture and literature of the period is thoroughly pervaded by war.¹ United States military involvement continued in colonial struggles and other international invasions after the end of World War II. Both overt and covert U.S. military operations and campaigns around the world were in fact incessant.² Accompanying the military practice of war after 1945 were internal or domestic ideological “wars.” These wars, at times entangled with references to foreign military conflicts, were fought through policy initiatives bearing the signature of “war” whose aim was to manage the domestic crisis of unmet need through the discourses of freedom and home.

Georgio Agamben argues that there is a “modern tendency to conflate politico-military and economic crises” (State of Exception 15). In the U.S. this conflation already was evident in public discourse during the Great Depression when President Franklin Roosevelt argued that the national economic crisis called for “broad Executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given…if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe” (14-15). Connections between politico-military and economic crises persisted during the Cold War. As the U.S. military involvement in

¹ Mary Dudziak argues that confusion about wartime and its end helps enable a politics of war—namely, that there are two types of law, one for wartime and one for peacetime. Suspension of the rule of law during wartime has political efficacy due to notions of wars as finite and the belief that civil liberties will be restored in peacetime. Geoffrey Stone argues that the government “prohibits political dissent only in wartime” (5). Giorgio Agamben asserts that in modern times “the distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible” (State 22).

² When considering criteria for membership to American veterans’ organizations or receiving combat-service metals, post-1945 America is anything but post-war. Metals were awarded for military honor for conflicts taking place in Laos, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala and Cuba to name only a few. For a complete list of U.S. Armed Service campaign medals see Dudziak, 29.
Korea made Soviet expansion and the threat of outright war quite immediate, Cold War militaristic intervention was frequently justified as an emergency abroad that threatened economic security at home. This link between militaristic intervention abroad and economic emergencies at home is one of the assumptions of this dissertation, and a recurring thread in my argument, that dispels the notion that domestic and international are separate spheres.

The main goal of *Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty*, however, is to reorient the “post-war” period of American literature and culture through my reading of its various cultural and ideological wars at home: the Cold War, the War on Welfare, the War on Poverty and the War on Terror. These cultural wars manage the crisis of unmet need and persistent want by trafficking in spaces of poverty to shape new policies and provoke new ideologies regarding constructions of freedom and domestic housing policy. Ultimately, I connect these domestic wars to the ongoing attention to poverty in the United States, attention that more often than not continues to redirect public attention from bodies with needs that matter and the material consequences of their unmet needs.

Despite the inordinate degree to which poverty has been in the public spotlight, literary studies that focus on poverty in the post-war period remain scarce. Recent notable work by Thomas Heise in *Urban Underworlds* (2011) and Stephen Schryer in *Fantasies of the New Class* (2011) begin this important work, but there is more work to be done. By bringing together policy documents, sociology, psychology, literature and film, this project analyzes the discursive limits of portraying lives lived in and along the lines of poverty. To tease out the underlying assumptions about the people whose bodies are marked by poverty, I set up the historical contours of the period and then discuss the
ways in which literature resists, supports, and traffics in the spaces of poverty as it was being variously defined in the period. The narratives that I have chosen are tutor texts designed to disclose the conditions and circumstances of poverty as well as their ideological displacement. Reading against the grain of the dominant discourses, I argue that writers who are typically read as working against various forms of oppression actually enforce a neoliberal commonsense, performing the emotional work of absolving middle and upper class guilt when faced with the persistence of inequality. Managing the poor through these discourses has stabilized white middle-class privilege and produced uneven geographies.

The spaces of poverty that the dissertation traverses are diverse. I discuss rural and urban locations from New York to North Carolina, from Appalachia to Watts. Although the spaces I read are varied, they all house the poor. Because housing, homes, and homelands are recurring preoccupations in representations of poverty I focus much of my attention on these spaces, among them the coal shack and the slave cabin, the family home and the boarding house. I argue that poverty policy shifts and redefines home-spaces as safe-spaces, as spaces where socially necessary labor is done and as spaces for state intervention and surveillance. These spaces are socially managed and constructed through ideology to maintain uneven geographies but they are also deployed to explain why the poor remain poor.

The great exodus to the suburbs was a signal feature of American progress in the post-war period. Richard Nixon’s “kitchen debates” with Nakita Khrushchev is only one symbolic example of how movement from the city to the suburbs became a sign of individual and social progress, affluence and modernization. It is no surprise, then, that
as historians, politicians and sociologists began talking about poverty, they used the phrase “left behind” to define the spaces of poverty and labeled them as the “other America.” “Left behind” was not simply a metaphor for modernization’s others; it was a spatial metaphor as well. The problem, these scholars suggested, was that poor people were spatially fixed. The proposed solution to poverty, therefore, was imagined in terms of spatial adjustment and social mobility. Movement in and out of spaces of poverty and spatial freedom as a way to express social and class mobility characterizes much of the literature that I read in Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty.

Migration, or the traffic of bodies across space, is another organizing principle of this dissertation. Social relations are expressed and enacted in and across spaces where identities are divided, defined, and limited. As one form of spatial social relations, migration promises a number of social and personal transformations. Among the examples of this promise that I discuss are black migration from the U.S. south to the north and from the rural farm to the industrial city; the tourist migrations of white men from suburbia to rural Appalachia; the migrations of women from the home into wage labor; and the exodus that leads entrepreneurial survivors back into the city in ruins. Several of these migrations were ideologically constructed and supported in policies to fulfill the need for low-wage jobs or to produce profits through urban gentrification. The incitement to migrate in search of “freedom” of one sort or another, however, was often propelled by failed promises that covered over the relation between the movement of bodies in space and the capital accumulation served by bodies burdened by travel and the erosion of social networks and support structures.

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3 For both
4 See Betsy Klimasmit, Carlo Rotella and Catherine Jurca.
I use the metaphor of trafficking to denote the conveyance of people through a system of transport that often defines the historical conditions and discursive context for poverty but also to connote an exchange that takes place as cultural texts turn to representing particular spaces of poverty. I trace these exchanges through the cultural work of these various late 20th century wars in my readings of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* that turns a critique of freedom and urban renewal into a celebration of trickster survival; in the texts of countercultural writers of the 60’s that find in the spaces of poverty cultural collateral; in feminist disclosures of incest in the 80’s that become fuel for the eradication of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); and in post 9/11 apocalypse literatures that embrace spectacles of ruin that support disaster capitalism’s rugged survivorship. All of these instances of trafficking are invested in telling stories of the poor and have variously been praised for doing so—sometimes even movingly. However, I argue that in their processes of trafficking in poverty, actual impoverished conditions and peoples’ unmet needs become fetishized and as fetishes enable a readjusted national imaginary and new ideological configurations of freedom and home, race, masculinity, motherhood, and the child.

The complex ideological construction of freedom throughout these wars was constantly being managed to cover over and justify the persistence of inequality. At the height of post-war affluence and the beginning of the Cold War (1945-1964) Red Scare, freedom was understood as the antithesis of communism. The Freedom Train project reinforced a set of policies and cultural norms whereby American citizens were compelled to demonstrate their allegiance to the nation state and its founding principles as a guarantor of the U.S. fight against the communist west. In effect, the meaning of
“freedom” during the Cold War was evolving, becoming less a positive set of values and more a mandatory public rejection of communism that was hinged onto a growing reformulation of the history of slavery. This instantiation of freedom as a stance against communism reframed the persistence of Jim Crow and obscured economic need in favor of universal prosperity. Poverty was being linked to Communist Russia while affluence was touted as all American. Together, the post-war economic boom and the ideological connections being forged between democracy and prosperity, communism and poverty marginalized those Americans whose basic needs were not being met.

When early Cold War ideologies linking freedom, democracy and economic prosperity were not able to contain the pressures of persistent unmet need, President Lyndon B. Johnson would return to pre-Cold War freedoms—particularly freedom from want—in order to wage a War on Poverty (1964-1980). For Johnson, the War on Poverty was part of achieving The Great Society that he thought “would enable Americans to move beyond Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms to even more expansive meanings—‘freedom to learn,’ ‘freedom to grow,’ ‘freedom to hope,’ freedom to ‘live as [people] want to live’” (Foner 286). Johnson declared that he wanted to “eradicate the three enemies of mankind—poverty, disease and ignorance” (Brauer 115). Alongside the federal initiatives for the poor he promoted were concerted efforts by civil rights leaders to bring freedom and equality to all. The slogan of the 1963 March on Washington was “Jobs and Freedom” (Foner 282). In 1964 Martin Luther King called for a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” to abolish economic deprivation (282). In 1966 A. Philip Randolph called for a “freedom budget” that would entail “spending $100 billion over a ten-year period for a federal program of job creation and urban redevelopment” (283). The
Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966 advocated for equal treatment in granting mortgages and the construction of low-income housing. In response, Congress passed a series of civil rights laws including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The federal government was making substantial strides in legislating equality and freedom, though not necessarily implementing it. Essentially, freedom was coming to mean opportunity not outcomes. Strikingly, in the civil rights discourse, even income would not be framed in federal initiatives as a right, but instead as an opportunity.

Ultimately, poverty was ameliorated through structural “opportunities” that individuals might choose, and when those underfunded initiatives failed, poverty was increasingly understood as a cultural issue. This “culture of poverty” approach was mustered to explain both the causes of poverty and its remedies. It preserved the logic of freedom as individual choice because poor individuals were represented as having made the choice to live simply and yet campaigns that targeted the cultures of poverty were seen as necessary in order to guarantee freedom. Though “freedom from want” provided the rhetorical framework for waging the War on Poverty, culture gained explanatory power over the persistence of economic inequality, want, and prejudice.

By the end of the War on Poverty freedom was being reframed in terms of the culture of consumer markets. The War on Welfare (1980-1996) continued this trend of understanding poverty through culture, but with the rise of neoliberal economic policies pathology re-emerged to explain why people choose poverty over economic freedom. Conservatives began to use the discourse of freedom to their advantage, and linked freedom to the free market, an approach that contended only those who work and
consume are truly “free.”” Welfare was being re-framed as no longer about meeting the basic needs of the poor, but about dependence on the state for care. And a national discourse emerged that claimed one could not be free until entering the wage labor system. The free market was idealized as “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills [through] strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2). During the War on Welfare individual freedom came to be directly linked to market freedom, the freedom to work, and the freedom to own and control private property.

Freedom as access to consumer markets is made clear through the resurrection of the Freedom Train in 1974, also known as the Preamble Express. The train in 1976 was funded by GM and contained artifacts like Jack Benny’s violin, basketball player Bob Lanier’s sneakers, and Judy Garland’s dress from The Wizard of Oz. The products of consumer culture and labor were linked to freedom (316). Neoliberal theory was on the rise and the discourses of freedom, as it was being represented in the Bicentennial Freedom Train, epitomized the transition.

Discourses on poverty as “cultural” also made it a code word for race—meaning black—in policy studies. Moreover, in the culture more broadly poverty racialized as black was already becoming feminized as the Cold War came to a close. This trend also drew upon the rising neoliberal discourse of freedom as conservatives began to use the discourse of freedom to their advantage by celebrating the free market: only those who work and consume are truly “free.” Increasingly welfare was being seen no longer as meeting the basic needs of the poor, but, rather, as pathologic dependence (un-freedom) on the state for care. Drawing heavily upon this discourse, coupled with the racialized pathologizing of poverty, the War on Welfare narrowed ideological constructions of
freedom to connote market freedom, the freedom to work, to choose a way of life, and the freedom to own and control private property—all of which presumed that freedom also equals white.

After the attacks of September 11th 2001, this market version of “freedom” was overwritten by a national discourse of homeland security as the nation state was seen to be under attack. President George W. Bush continually referred to terrorists as “enemies of freedom” (20 September 2001). To protect freedom, citizens were told to remain vigilant. These appeals to freedom re-framed “home” as the nation itself with a shifted emphasis on femininity and a discourse of “homeland security” that tied the fate of the nation to a re-privatized version of family. After a major restructuring of governmental agencies the Department of Homeland Security was formed in 2003. Though the department was created to protect the nation against acts of terrorism, its reach broadened to include Internet surveillance and urban area security initiative grants. Public Service Announcements such as “see something, say something” and “family emergency planning” made clear that threats could be anywhere and that families must remain vigilant and prepared to defend their country in order to remain free from terror (Homeland). 5

As the dissertation makes clear, the frequency and intensity with which public attention to poverty traffics in the spaces of poverty waxes and wanes. Although the plight of the poor was largely eclipsed during the Cold War by narratives celebrating post-war affluence, the poor quickly re-emerged in the popular imaginary during the War on Poverty. More recently, Americans have been inundated with reports about the

5 The “see something, say something” campaign has partnered with the NBA and NFL in an effort to inform every citizen of their role in identifying and reporting “suspicious activities and threats” including terrorism as well as “crime and other threats” (“Secretary Napolitano”).
persistence of inequality since the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. From the coverage of Occupy Wall Street to ABC’s Series on the “Hidden America” to This American Life’s two part series on Harper High to the coverage on the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty, the plight of the poor is re-emerging in the popular imaginary as a social concern in need of redress. Though increased attention is being paid to the poor, welfare and social programs that support them continue to be stigmatized. Further, the presentations of poverty still center on specific stigmatized communities, among them female-headed families and drug abuse, while the proposed solutions still hover around full-employment and education. Each of the four chapters of Trafficking in the Spaces of Poverty draw connections between the commonsense notions of poverty circulating in news coverage, policy, psychology, sociology and literature that span the decades since 1945 in the hopes that a more critical politics of care might be formulated that does not traffic in the spaces of poverty for cultural collateral and economic profit.

Chapter one brings this perspective to bear on Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952). In the history of Harlem as both a Mecca and a slum that Invisible Man traces, Ellison portrays the persistence of unmet need in line with developing ideological constructions of freedom and democracy during the Cold War. Four “homes” in the novel carry this tale: the slave cabin, the boarding house, the street-eviction and the coal-cellar. When the novel’s four instances of “housing” are read by way of Cold War policy it becomes evident that the narrative is much more invested in eliding the historical and material conditions of underground living than has previously been acknowledged. My reading of the novel’s infamous ending suggests that this canonical text of twentieth-

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6 Cite the reduction in food stamp benefits. What was once a popular program for the poor—that at the very least a modern industrialized country could feed all its people is now even being questioned.
7 See for example, the recent cover story in the New York Times, part of a series…
century literature makes the continuing American legacy of slavery and inequality not a provocation for social revolution but for American ingenuity by linking democracy and economic possibility, a central feature of Cold War ideology. I first consider the infamous Trueblood episode outside the slave cabin to analyze how Ellison critiques canonical sociology’s link between pathology and poverty through the housing structures of slavery. I then turn to the boarding house as a commercialized home and symbol of greed and racial stereotypes on Invisible’s final day with the boarding house landlord, Mary. Next, I read the eviction and riot it provokes as instances of two different forms of trafficking as Invisible navigates the language of urban renewal upon seeing an elderly couple’s free papers as the literal trash on the street and is subsequently seized upon by the brotherhood as a symbol of racial solidarity. Finally, I turn to Invisible’s descent into a coal shaft where American ingenuity and individual freedom are causally linked as Invisible creates a home that fulfills his basic needs through his kinship with Ford, Edison and Franklin and his appropriation of the excess of capital. As Invisible links his freedom to the possibilities afforded by American democracy, its founding principles and entrepreneurial heroes, the novel ultimately re-frames the history of deplorable housing conditions it has ascribed throughout to the unmet housing needs produced by poverty and economic inequality to individual failures.

This racialized pathologizing of unmet needs was a crucial feature of the discursive logic of freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity during the Cold War and it makes its way into Invisible Man. During the closing riot scene, Invisible explains that “freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility” (499). Here, perhaps begrudgingly, and certainly contradictorily, Invisible
Man marks this Cold War historical shift away from national attention to economic necessity. Through two distinct phases, the novel offers an ambivalent endorsement of Cold War freedom: first, as it moves from representing freedom as premised upon the recognition of necessity and later, as a condition of possibility. As Invisible Man is a bildungsroman, the first phase can be read as a facet of the narrator’s naïveté while the second phase can be read as an indication of the narrator’s education and maturation. This transition marks the narrative’s final ambivalence toward the persistence of unmet need.

Chapter two addresses the War on Poverty as a response to a crisis of white masculinity due to rising unemployment and the presumed domesticating effects of the consumer home. These contestations around masculinity play out in popular culture texts that traffic in the spaces of poverty where white masculinity is redefined against the signature figure of the War on Poverty: the hillbilly. James Dickey’s Deliverance (1970) exemplifies this trafficking in the saga of four suburban men who test their manhood in a rugged wilderness adventure. Similarly the countercultural arguments in Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1952) and Dennis Hopper’s (dir) Easy Rider (1969) idealize poverty as freedom from materialism, consumer culture and wage-labor. Deliverance, On the Road, and Easy Rider signal a shift toward representations of poverty tourism that depict poverty as a retreat from the struggles of middle-class malaise. Charles Burnett’s (dir) Killer of Sheep (1977), set in the urban ruins of the Watts neighborhood after the 1965 riots, presents the viewer with a poverty tour similar to On the Road and Easy Rider, where survival is possible by rejoicing in life’s simple pleasures. By romanticizing the

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8 For an analysis of consumer spending, and the shift from spending on durable goods for the home to spending on leisure and tourism, see Elaine May (221).
conditions of poverty as life affirming, these cultural texts all make way for criminalizing the social-welfare state and feminizing demands on the state for care during the War on Welfare.

In chapter three I argue that the War on Welfare is defined by the full-blown emergence of neoliberalism and its roots in the reduction of freedom to consumerism that trafficked welfare mothers into low-wage work for profit via discourses on dependency and pathology. This model of freedom, in which personal freedom is aligned with the free market, continues to leave its imprint on contemporary U.S. culture and racial stereotypes about the home, motherhood, and welfare. As a popular imaginary it was shaped by media and public policy initiatives and crystallized and contested in fictive representations of motherhood and welfare. The film Claudine (1974) is an early example of the role of fictional texts in popularizing the new regulatory practices of the welfare state and it is noteworthy because it marks the discursive emergence of the War on Welfare in popular culture. Dorothy Allison’s Bastard out of Carolina (1993) critiques the emerging paternity law for welfare mothers but also deploys the discourses of the criminal, poor, dependent mother that replaced welfare benefits with Child Protective Services. Sapphire’s novel Push (1996), reinforces some of the stereotypes of the bad welfare mother, while Precious’ hard work and resiliency represent the possibility of a community safety-net, like the one that would replace welfare, for those willing to work hard, a safety net that would consequently support the end of AFDC for needy mothers. Lee Daniel’s subsequent film Precious (2009), an adaptation of Push, is an example of the enduring cultural reminder of a story launched decades earlier: that welfare is not a right, but rather, an individual, racialized, and gendered malaise.
In chapter four I argue that images of 9/11 came to signify a modern apocalypse that augured the complete collapse of civilized consumer trading (Hirsch 85). The World Trade Center was an American symbol of trade and consumer markets, and when the buildings fell many Americans felt like it was the end of the world as they knew it. Subsequently a post-apocalyptic framework emerged in descriptions of life after the attacks of 9/11. The events of 9/11 provided a space for the implementation of increased austerity measures that would create a climate in which social services could not be depended on—or demanded. For some the twin towers themselves had represented a “form of protection, an insulation from danger” provided by free market capitalism, but now they were in ruins (Wigley 71). After they fell, insecurity came to be both installed and reconfigured as Homeland Security initiatives multiplied and surveillance seeped into the routines of everyday life in and outside the confines of the home. Many apocalypse and disaster narratives after 9/11 circulated the new cultural politics of the security regime in which the fetish of the rugged individual entrepreneur epitomizes new consumer citizens, markets and possibilities for economic and individual freedom emerging from the ruins. In their focus on rugged survivorship, the spaces and images of ruin after 9/11 traffic in ideologies of home and family that divert attention away from the economic casualties of war and other man-made disasters to offer a new national imaginary in which poverty became linked to apocalypse.

I first trace how these images of 9/11 are linked to the widespread ruin porn of Detroit and Katrina and go on to argue that the pleasures inherent in looking at images of these ruins affirm a neoliberal commonsense that transpose spaces of death into spaces of survival. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Frank Darabont (dir) *The Walking
Dead (2010-2014) epitomize this apocalyptic fascination and illustrate the ways in which the fears conjured by the War on Terror are also resolved through a revision of the patriarchal family romance that turns on the figure of the child. Through the logic of masculinist protection and Americans’ “hard work and creativity and enterprise,”9 these apocalypse narratives link the national and the domestic in struggles for survival and for adequate housing for the sake of a child. I then turn to two novels, Daniel Woodrell’s Winter’s Bone (2006) and Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones (2011), that resist the logic of masculinist protection but rely on the domesticating impulse of a female child to maintain the nuclear family amidst the erasure of any federal safety nets when economic and environmental collapse threaten basic survival at home. These children, with disabled and dead parents, serve as national models for independence and ingenuity and offer strategies for surviving in an age of austerity and privatization. Indeed, these narratives implicitly argue that the female child who cannot depend on her parents is already an adult who will not be dependent on her government. These girls promise to be steadfastly independent women who are also caregivers and ground-soldiers in securing the domestic home front. As neoliberalism intensified during this war, narratives of resiliency and grit share features with representations of alternative economies as strategies for survival in an environment where care is at best increasingly privatized or more often in a state of ruin.

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9 Bush would continually refer back to these three key features of American resiliency in his addresses to the nation after 9/11 (Address to the Nation).
Chapter 1

Housing Cold War Freedom in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man

Suburban housing and post-war affluence were key features that set Americans apart from the Soviets during the Cold War. Suburban sprawl marked America as the land of plenty not only for housing opportunities but also for the consumer goods that were central to the middle-class household. In short, capitalist democracy was seen to afford the benefits of comfortable suburban living while Soviet-style communism supposedly created economic hardships, urban overcrowding and poverty. However, there were many people whose basic needs for food and shelter were not being met in the United States. Because freedom was linked to the possibilities afforded by American democracy, the persistence of unmet needs in the United States was associated with individual failures and anti-American values. The poor and needy had long been racialized as “other” and the Cold War anti-communist logic continued this trend as persistent need became the unrecognized enemy-within. I trace these Cold War ideological links between freedom and necessity, slavery and prosperity, in the national patriotic campaign known as The Freedom Train, and popular advertising campaigns that had real effects on domestic housing policy. These same constructions of freedom and slavery are laid out in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) through four instances of housing that have yet to be analyzed in relation to Cold War housing policy. I argue that Invisible’s descent underground makes a case for an individualistic defense against the persistence of unmet need and the continuing legacy of slavery that is very much in line with Cold War discourses on freedom and democracy as the cure for the crisis of economic necessity that was being born disproportionately by African Americans.
In the history of Harlem as both a Mecca and a slum that the novel traces, Ellison portrays the persistence of unmet need in line with developing ideological constructions of freedom and democracy during the Cold War. Four “homes” in the novel carry this tale: the slave cabin, the boarding house, the street-eviction and the coal-cellar. I first turn to the infamous Trueblood episode outside the slave cabin to analyze how Ellison critiques canonical sociology’s link between pathology and poverty through the housing structures of slavery. I then turn to the boarding house as a commercialized home and a symbol of greed and of racial stereotypes as it features in a scene on Invisible’s final day with Mary. Next, I turn to the eviction and subsequent riot as Invisible traffics in the language of urban renewal upon seeing an elderly couple’s free papers as the literal trash on the street, where he is subsequently trafficked by the brotherhood as a symbol of racial solidarity. Finally, I turn to Invisible’s descent into a coal shaft where American ingenuity and individual freedom are causally linked as Invisible creates a home that fulfills his basic needs through his kinship with Ford, Edison and Franklin and the excess of capital (7). Though Invisible links freedom to the possibilities afforded by American democracy, its founding principles and capital production, the novel ultimately re-frames the history of deplorable housing conditions to link the unmet housing needs produced by poverty and economic inequality to individual failures. When the novel’s four instances of “housing” are read by way of Cold War policy it becomes evident that it is much more invested in eliding the historical and material conditions of underground living than has previously been acknowledged. My reading of the novel’s infamous ending suggests that this canonical text of twentieth-century literature makes the continuing American legacy of slavery and inequality not a provocation for social revolution but for American
ingenuity by linking democracy and economic possibility, a central feature of Cold War ideology.

**Reading *Invisible Man* Historically:**

The critical response to *Invisible Man* over the past 60 years has illuminated the cultural moment in which it took place as much as the novel itself. Much of the initial critical reception of the novel, which was published in 1952, celebrated the text’s post-war liberalism and mirrored the novel’s closing epiphany—“freedom [is] the recognition of possibility” (*Ellison Invisible Man* 499) Critics then and largely still ignore the unfreedoms the novel documents in favor of the novel’s message of possibility and universality. R.W.B. Lewis and Stephen Spender praised *Invisible Man* for going beyond social realism. Lewis explained that *Invisible Man* was a text of “its own being” instead of trying “to atone for some truculence in nature or to affect the course of tomorrow’s politics” (Schaub 92). And Richard Case praised Ellison for capturing the “the ultimate contradictions of life” (678-84). By the end of the 50’s critics such as Leslie Fiedler were still lauding *Invisible Man* as “superior to any of the passionate, incoherent books of Richard Wright” because Ellison “bypassed all formulas of protest” (Fiedler 493).

There were some piercing critiques of Ellison’s portrayal of “possibility” and its effect—upward mobility—from the Left, in whose circles Ellison had served as writer and editor in the previous decades. Abner Berry in *The Daily Worker* argued that *Invisible Man* “is written in the vein [sic] of middle class snobbishness—even
contempt—towards the Negro people” and that it “manipulates his nameless hero for 439 pages through a maze of corruption, brutality, anti-communism slanders, sex perversion and the sundry inhumanities upon which a dying social system feeds.” John O. Killens in *Freedom* argued that *Invisible Man* was “a vicious distortion of Negro life” and that the novel’s sex, violence and red baiting were the sole contributors to the novel’s best-seller status. Though Irving Howe was full of praise, he did take issue with the novel’s concept of individualized freedom as “a vapid one” (454). Berry, Killens and Howe not only level critiques at *Invisible Man*’s themes of upward mobility, freedom and anti-communism, they were also leveling critiques against Cold War conformity. However, these readings have not dominated recent scholarship on *Invisible Man*. This chapter situates these critiques within a close reading of the spaces of housing in the novel.

Recent criticism has focused on Ellison’s revision process and what was left out of the final version of the novel that made it more palatable to the Cold War reader. Roderick Ferguson and Barbara Foley have begun the task of expanding Ellison criticism to attend to the drafts and excised chapters of *Invisible Man*. Both Ferguson and Foley argue that the drafts of *Invisible Man* show clear critiques of liberal democracy. Ferguson argues that *Invisible Man* is an aesthetic and epistemological project that fails to achieve its “aims because the material differences of race, gender, class, and sexuality never cease to contradict pronouncements of unity” (55). In Barbara Foley’s book *Wrestling with the Left* she argues that through a series of extensive revisions *Invisible Man* lost much of its original communist sympathies. This transition, Foley argues, was in part due to Ellison’s desire to be published, his own frustrations with the party and mounting pressures by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Foley reads Ellison’s early works and the
drafts of *Invisible Man* as “the vital back-story to the [final version of] the novel” (4). She argues that in the contradictions there remain working class sympathies, particularly in the coal basement where “[t]he invisible man’s escape through the interconnected urban basements highlights the working-class context of his emergence” (215). Foley argues that Ellison draws upon Wright’s description of Fred Daniels descending through a manhole and discovering the substratum of capitalist society in “‘The Man Who Lived Underground’ (as well as, perhaps, the basement in *Native Son*). She contends that Ellison introduces narrative details—the furnace, the coal pile—that reiterate the key role of Negro labor in powering the dynamo of northern industrial production and the “class struggle [that is] is part of the underground of Harlem life” (215-6). Though Foley’s reading of the drafts provides useful insight into Ellison’s transition away from communism, her reading of the basement as a site of working class struggle deserves careful attention for its oversights. Certainly, the material details of the basement suggest impoverished housing conditions that were the site of class struggle in Harlem. But, that history is eclipsed through Invisible’s transformation of the coal cellar into a habitable space, in the process establishing his kinship with Ford, Edison and Franklin, elite white American industrial inventors. It is Invisible’s alliance with their thinker-tinker spirit that Ellison underscores as he makes the coal cellar Invisible’s final home.

A recent study by Thomas Heise is an important corrective along the lines of my argument in that he attends to the novel’s representations of housing and historicizes the events of *Invisible Man* with a critical eye towards the ways in which the “novel rewrites the cultural narrative.” Heise’s study is uniquely focused on how the novel portrays “underworld black squalor and delinquent pathology” in order to assert the “political
nature of space, and … redescribe black asociality not as psychopathology but as a conscious choice” in an effort to “recoup a vision of African American agency that did not succumb to the enervating effects of the slum” (152). Heise argues that even though “Ellison’s novel has generated shelves of scholarly criticism…it has yet to be placed within…its most immediate historical and spatial context: Harlem’s housing emergency and riots, which inform nearly every episode” (152). Heise’s study begins the work of unraveling the ways in which Ellison was writing against the pathologizing of the slum, but there is more work to be done in disclosing the novel’s narrative investments in housing spaces and their relation to cold war freedom and ingenuity as masks for unmet need.

This chapter pursues a line of inquiry opened by Foley and Heise by tracing the novel’s housing policy through four key moments where housing and other unmet needs merge—the slave cabin, the boarding house, the street-eviction and the coal-cellar. Ultimately, Invisible’s solution traffics in the discourses of urban renewal only to be trafficked himself as a black member of the brotherhood—a commodity to be exchanged for cultural capital. I argue that the final scene of the novel where Invisible finds housing underground offers a distinctly Cold War solution to the national domestic crisis of housing policy, namely to eliminate it, a solution that elides Harlem’s underground housing history in favor of Cold War iterations of freedom and possibility.

Advertising Cold War “Freedom”

When *Invisible Man* was published, the Cold War was heating up. This cultural context affected how Ellison would narrate Harlem’s housing history. Shortly after the
publication of *Invisible Man* Ellison argued that the finest writers of the nineteenth century had produced works that were an “imaginative projection of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate, and love” (Rampersad 271). These sacred documents, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, were critical in framing Cold War freedom and economic prosperity as endemic to American democracy.

At the height of post-war affluence and the beginning of the Cold War, freedom was ideologically constructed as the antithesis of slavery and communism. “Slavery,” defined broadly as dependence, was being re-defined as dependence on the state for wages and care, a shift that worked neatly to create the binary opposition between slavery and freedom with respect to “free markets.” During the Cold War, freedom and slavery also were frequently used to define communism against democracy and implicitly to argue for the moral superiority of American capitalism. Vice President Henry Wallace argued that the Cold War was a “fight to the death between the free world and the slave world” (qtd in Wall 245). *Life* magazine declared that the aim of the Soviet Union was “slavery…for all the world” (253). Winston Churchill divided the world into the “free west” and the “Communist East” (Foner 252). The Truman Doctrine cast the Cold War as the “struggle over the future of freedom” and prosperity (252). The ideological divide between freedom and slavery took center stage in defining the benefits of capitalism over communism.

The Freedom Train of 1947 brought this ideological construction of freedom to the masses. The original concept for the train emerged from the Attorney General’s
office. William Coblenz, the Justice Department’s assistant director of public
information, on a visit to the National Archives, saw a gradual erosion of civil liberties
after viewing a series of German surrender documents and Hitler’s last will and
testament. Knowing that only a select few Americans could make it to the National
Archives, he imagined the power of a traveling exhibit that could display, on one side,
documents and pictures from Hitler’s Third Reich and, on the other side, documents such
as the Bill of Rights. However, by the late spring of 1946, Americans were bracing for an
ideological struggle over “freedom” with Stalin, not Hitler (Wall 202). “Freedom”
already served as shorthand for American style democracy, while the alternative, slavery,
now attached to fascism and communism, needed no illustration. Comparisons to Stalin’s
Soviet or fascist regimes were only there by implication, however, because the Freedom
Train gathered only American documents.

Through much debate between the liberal staff at the National Archives and the
more conservative staff at the American Heritage Foundation, documents such as the
U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights were included,
while The Wagner Act and Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech were excluded.
Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech was excluded because it expressed a right to “freedom
from want.” The Wagner Act was excluded for what was considered its narrow partisan
support a year before the great strike wave hit the country. The exhibit was also going to
include an entire section devoted to “Economic Rights” which included a “yellow-dog”
agreement and a draft of the Committee on Economic Security’s report of 1934 that
proposed old-age and survivor’s insurance (Wall 212). In its final version, however, no
hint of economic inequality or labor unrest remained.
The train traveled to all of the states and attracted more than 3.5 million visitors who were urged to take the Freedom Pledge and sign the Freedom Scroll. The FBI gathered intelligence on those who opposed the train in an effort to prevent “‘foreign ideologies’ from infiltrating the U.S. and of ‘aiding the country in its internal war against subversive elements’” (Foner 252).

Indeed, 50 million Americans either visited the train museum or attended the affiliated program activities (Little 35). It was so popular that The Saturday Evening Post’s Richard Attridge argued that a sound track and documentary film should be made for the older folks and small children who were unable to stand in the long lines or drive the many miles to the train stop. In the end there were movies, radio programs, cartoons and two books—*Our American Heritage: Documents of Freedom* and *Good Citizen*—that documented the 1947 Freedom Train (Little 43).

If the train was meant to signal the United State’s distinction from communist and fascist regimes, the name “Freedom Train,” also conjured divisions between slavery and freedom. The “Freedom Train” was also a name for the Underground Railroad and alluded to emancipation from slavery, but the 1947 train made scant mention of the history of slavery itself. Indeed, the documents on the train that related to the history of slavery pertained only to emancipation: the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment and a 1776 letter by South Carolina patriot Henry Laurens criticizing slavery. This collection of documents portrayed America as a nation critical of slavery since 1776 and elided the long and vexed social and political history of slavery. Furthermore, the train made no attempt to document the contemporary Jim Crow laws. Indeed the train canceled visits to Memphis and Birmingham when local media attention
was drawn to authorities who insisted on segregating the train even though in Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia the train was segregated (Little). Langston Hughes would not get his wish that there would not be any, “Jim Crow on the Freedom Train” (Little 54).¹⁰

The Freedom Train project reinforced a set of policies and cultural norms whereby American citizens were compelled to demonstrate their allegiance to the nation state and its founding principles as a guarantor of its fight against the slavery of the communist west. In effect, the meaning of “freedom” during the Cold War was evolving, becoming less a positive set of values and more a mandatory public rejection of communism that was hinged onto a reframing of the history of slavery. This instantiation of freedom as a stance against communism, reframed not only the history of slavery and the persistence Jim Crow but also obscured economic need as a twentieth-century U.S. phenomenon. Poverty was being linked to Communist Russia, while affluence was all American. Together, the post war economic boom and the ideological connections being forged between democracy and prosperity, communism and poverty marginalized those whose basic needs were not being met.

A wide array of federal initiatives and advertising campaigns linked freedom to the expansive post-war economic growth in productivity. The American Economic System Campaign argued that extraordinary production had produced wealth and freedom. The campaign argued, “‘the most distinctive economic fact about America [is] our ability to mass produce’” (qtd in Wall 195). One ad sent to retailers in 1949, typical of an emerging mainstream discourse of prosperity linked to freedom, read

¹⁰ Langston Hughes poem “Freedom Train” mocks the contradictions between the Jim Crow and the constructions of freedom and equality the train deployed.
“Productivity…stimulated by …economic freedom…that’s the American way!” (qtd in Wall 195). As a consequence, the persistence of unmet need was becoming un-American.

While freedom was discursively constructed as an outcome of the possibilities afforded by American democracy, the persistence of unmet needs in America was being associated with a chain of related social illnesses: slavery, individual failures and anti-American values. At the same time, the discourse on poverty in America reoriented towards “[p]ersonality formation [and] psychological conditions” (O’Connor 113). Because of continued asymmetrical opportunities, poverty and blackness were being equated and understood simultaneously as signs of individual and anti-democratic pathology in both canonical sociology and literature. Pathology, once seen as an effect of poverty, was being reframed as its root cause and this pathologized poverty was becoming distinctly un-American.

This racialized pathologizing of unmet needs was a crucial feature of the discursive logic on freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity during the Cold War and it makes its way into Invisible Man. During the closing riot scene, Invisible explains that “freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility” (499). Here, perhaps begrudgingly, and certainly contradictorily Invisible Man marks this Cold War historical shift away from national attention to economic necessity. Through two distinct phases, the novel offers an ambivalent endorsement of Cold War freedom: first, as it moves from representing freedom as premised upon the recognition of necessity and later, as a condition of possibility. As Invisible Man is a bildungsroman, the first phase can be read as a facet of the narrator’s naïveté while the second phase can be read as an indication of the narrator’s education and maturation.
This transition marks the narrator’s ambivalence toward the persistence of unmet need.

**Harlem is Nowhere**

In his short essay “Harlem is Nowhere” in 1948 Ellison explained that in Harlem, the greeting “How are you?” was often returned with the phrase, “Oh, man, I’m nowhere” (Harlem 297). This common reply calls attention to the ways in which wellbeing (How are you?) is a function of location (I’m nowhere). In this essay written for, but unpublished in *Magazine of the Year* in 1948, Ellison describes Harlem as “a ruin” in the “very bowels of the city” where life becomes “a masquerade” because black Americans are “not quite citizens and yet Americans” even in the “Mecca of equality” and freedom (295-9).

By 1948, Harlem had been through many socio-economic changes. In the late 19th century it was being transformed from an isolated, poor farming village into Manhattan’s first suburb (Osofsky 71). Both established residents of Manhattan and new immigrants saw Harlem as the most desirable “community of the future” with luxurious brownstones and elevator apartments that only the wealthy could afford (75-8). Moving to Harlem at the turn of the 20th century was a mark of economic mobility and the prospect of a new subway line only increased land speculation and Harlem’s desirability. When the Lenox Avenue line opened in 1904 nearly all the vacant land in Harlem had been developed (87). However, due to the number of new properties and high rent prices many new apartments remained vacant even after the new subway line opened (90). Desperate to fill their properties, some landlords opened up their brownstones and apartments to black
Americans in order to take advantage of the traditionally higher rents they paid (92). Seizing the opportunity, Philip A. Payton began soliciting his property-management services to landlords willing to rent to black Americans (94). In a short period of time Payton was managing several properties and started The Afro-American Realty Company and by 1920 “two-thirds of Manhattan’s Negro population” lived in Harlem.

In popular discourse “Harlem became the symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere” and during the twenties people from “areas of the South that had previously sent few people to New York City” were heading to Harlem (Powell 70-1). “If my race can make Harlem,” one man said, “good lord, what can’t it do?” Harlem had become ‘the Mecca of the colored people of New York City” (Osofsky 123). For white New Yorkers, Harlem was also a cultural Mecca that promised forms of entertainment unavailable elsewhere in the city. These “white slummers” concluded that “Cabaret life was the true essence of Harlem.” Their nightly romps in Harlem nightclubs allowed for a vision of a place where freedom of expression was possible and myriad desires could be realized (151).

Contrary to the narrative of Harlem as a Mecca, the mass migration to Harlem was, in part, a result of diminished housing options elsewhere in Manhattan. The Tenderloin, a black residential section of the city, and the site of a 1900 riot, had been razed to make way for Pennsylvania Station (93). Blacks also populated the Five Points district, part of Greenwich Village, as well as what is now Central Park, but as white immigrants’ demands for housing increased, blacks were moved further and further

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11 For additional information about landlord’s decisions to rent to black Americans as well as their refusals and prohibitive contracts, see Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide, 58.
12 For references to Harlem as a Mecca see: Frazier, 72-88; Walters, 196-7.
13 See also on white slumming: Smith; Van Vechten 196. For a study of the references to slumming and hipness in Invisible Man see Konstantinou.
northward (Maurrasse 14). Between increasing geographical restrictions on black housing in Manhattan and the great migration to Harlem from the South, the demand for real estate in Harlem had never been higher and real-estate prices soared. Between 1919 and 1927 rent prices doubled and Harlemites were paying upwards of forty-five percent of their wages on housing that frequently did not meet their needs (Osofsky 137).

Much of the housing in Harlem had been constructed for upper-middle class, large families. However, most of Harlem’s population was either single individuals or small families searching for small, affordable apartments. To fill the increasing demand and increase profits, landlords divided brownstones into single room tenements and even rented out the coal bins and cellars. One in four renters began commercializing their homes by renting out the extra rooms of their apartments that had not already been divided. Others threw rent parties out of economic necessity (138-9). A community once designed for lavish, comfortable living was transformed within the decade to have two of the most congested blocks in the world. Even though rents were higher than in any other part of Manhattan, the living conditions were possibly the worst. The Seventh District Court, serving Harlem, had more disputes between tenants and landlords than any of the other four districts in Manhattan. Judges who took the time to view the tenements in question found housing conditions “deplorable” and unfit for “human habitation” (141). These conditions produced a profoundly asymmetrical health risk to Harlemites. Infant and childbirth mortality rates were two times that of other districts, while tuberculosis deaths were up to three times the city rate (141). It is against this backdrop of unmet housing needs that *Invisible Man* is set.
Building White Suburban America

At the beginning of the Cold War (1947-64), post-war affluence and suburban housing were represented in the U.S. popular press as key features that set Americans apart from the Soviets. Suburban sprawl marked America as the land of plenty not only for housing opportunities but also for the consumer goods that were central to the middle-class household. In short, the new commonsense represented capitalist democracy as affording the benefits of comfortable suburban living while Soviet-style Communism created only economic hardships, urban overcrowding, and poverty. This was the prevalent Cold War duality in the popular imaginary.

For many white Americans the suburban home was the buffer against urban and rural poverty. Suburbia was construed as the land of plenty where consumption came to be equated with individual freedom (Foner). New housing subdivisions were being equipped with central heating, indoor plumbing, telephones, refrigerators, washing machines and a car in every driveway, which defined a new national norm and civic identity. The setting of the 1959 debate about the merits of capitalism over communism between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in a suburban American kitchen was a significant example of the conflation between democratic freedom and America’s domestic ideal. Nixon’s opening message of the debate, “What Freedom Means to Us,” was devoted to representing America as a “classless society” due to an “extraordinarily high standard of living” that afforded “prosperity for all.” The positive features of American democracy were represented, visually, through the modern amenities that offered freedom from drudgery for American housewives. Nixon argued that the two nations must struggle for “victory not in war but
for the victory of plenty over poverty” and the way out of poverty was through a middle class, two-parent suburban home that was pointedly marked as white (Nixon 677-8).

The Cold War debate of the 1950’s also had an idealized, racialized, and consumer-focused version of motherhood and domesticity at its center. James O’Connell, President John F. Kennedy’s undersecretary of labor, argued that a woman’s ability to remain at home is what “separates us from the Communist world.” Therefore, American domestic practices of consumption, specifically, the icon of consumption, the white suburban housewife, were crucial in setting America apart from its foe during the first phase of the Cold War. Joseph Barry, a reporter for House Beautiful, claimed that foreign visitors appreciated American goods for “‘the freedom offered by washing machines and dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, automobiles, and refrigerators’” (Foner 271). Strikingly, “[b]y 1960, suburban residents of single-family homes outnumbered both urban and rural dwellers and the detached house had become the physical embodiment of hopes for a better life” (Foner 264). Suburban homeownership and the freedom it signaled was the new American creed.

Persistent segregation and economic inequality made certain that suburban America, and by extension its central political identity, would remain white. Vast new communities built by the developer William Levitt, that epitomized the suburban revolution, refused to allow blacks to rent or purchase homes. In 1957, not a single black family resided among the sixty thousand inhabitants of Levittown, Pennsylvania. . . . Meanwhile, under the slogan of ‘urban renewal,’ cities used their power of eminent
domain to remove the poor from urban areas slated for redevelopment

(Foner 267).

The Federal Housing Administration would only ensure “economically sound” home loans, which in practice meant, “most black families were ineligible for federally insured loans.” (Quadagno 23). In short, affordable housing for urban minorities was on the decline while suburban sprawl and white flight were on the rise. Housing was a central problem and a stark representation of racial inequality. Demand for housing was so high it was often difficult to make meaningful efforts to deal with slum conditions (Nadasen 24). Ultimately, slum conditions were the backdrop against which politicians called for “urban renewal,” but new, low-cost housing did not re-emerge where the old was being demolished, and fewer and fewer apartments were available in more limited areas of major city centers. “Urban renewal” was appropriately “known among some black activists as ‘Negro Removal’” (25). At a time in the 1950s and early 60’s when the U.S. ideal of familial stability and consumption-driven success were touted as markers of western prowess, housing conditions for the poor were suspicious examples of uneven development.

Marketing the Black Pathological Home

The fact that deplorable housing conditions persisted in the land of plenty was contrary to the ideological constructions of the allure of democratic freedom and prosperity, and the threat of communist slavery. The critical link between capitalist democracy and economic prosperity made the persistence of economic need in America almost unintelligible. Pathology was no longer being represented as an effect of the
unmet needs and economic inequalities instilled in by slavery and perpetuated in segregation as it had been in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton. Instead, during the Cold War, a reversal took place as pathology became the cause of unmet economic needs.

Drake and Cayton’s 1945 study *Black Metropolis* argued that poverty was the effect of a “racialized political economy, social disorganization and a distinctive, culturally deviant lower-class way of life” (O’Connor 88). In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Richard Wright argued that the study laid “bare the social environment that had created ‘Bigger Thomas’… murderous rage” (90). For Drake and Clayton, as for Ellison’s mentor Wright, poverty was an effect of the inequalities of race and class that in turn produced social pathology.

As the Cold War developed, however, the persistence of inequality was marked through the discourse of democracy as panacea. Gunnar Myrdal’s influential study, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* focused on the contradictions between American ideals and the living conditions for black Americans. Like Drake and Clayton, he also understood poverty to result in racist, social pathology. However, he argued that American democracy would cure the effects of racism, namely economic inequality.

In his review of *The American Dilemma*, posthumously published in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison asks “[a]re American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they find around them? . . . Why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man’s dilemma?” (339) In *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s character Trueblood takes advantage of “the white man’s dilemma”
through a blues inspired call and response technique that critiques canonical sociological studies that understand pathology as an effect of poverty embodied in his dilapidated housing conditions.

The infamous Trueblood Incident has been the source of critical attention with considerable attention to Trueblood’s tricksterism, his evocation of the blues, and his class position as the head of a southern sharecropper family and home. Against these readings, I argue that Trueblood strategically frames his act of incest through the material space of the slave cabin, a tactic that aligns with canonical sociology’s pathologizing discourse in making his material condition intelligible.

The architectural specificity of Trueblood’s house as a “log cabin,” built during slavery times, is what draws Norton, a trustee of the college, to ask Invisible to stop the car. Invisible describes the cabin as “old” with “chinks filled with chalk-white clay” a patched roof, rickety fence and a yard that is “hard” and “bare” (46-7). Given that the cabin provides a material trace of slavery, Norton wants to know more about the “history of the place” from its inhabitants (48). Housing conditions in the neighborhood had not improved since the 19th century. Indeed, electricity and running water have not made it to this neighborhood. Unable to access the modern amenities available to the townspeople, Trueblood was in need of food and heat but he “couldn’t git no help from nobody” (52). Thus, Trueblood’s tale to Norton is framed as an enduring history of the material space left over from the practices of slavery.

In addition to the dilapidated housing condition, Trueblood describes his family’s persistent material want as being psychologically overwhelming. He is troubled by concerns about where to “to git some grub” and heat his home. Trueblood explains that
his material want for heating produced conditions where he was forced to sleep with both his wife and his daughter in order to stay warm (53). Trueblood explains that he was “worryin’ ‘bout my family, how they was goin’ to eat and all” while laying in bed listening to his family sleep. He began to think of better times when he was younger and lived on the river and in a two-story house. While he was listening to his family breathe, he is reminded of the “boss quails is like a good man, what he got to do he do” (55). He imagines his family living in this house with him and how they would “lay there feelin’ like [they] was rich folks” (56). He then begins to detail the dream-state in which he commits the act of incest in search of “fat meat.”

Thus, his material want for heat is framed as a direct cause of his act of incest and social pathology.

Trueblood’s dream details his simultaneous sexual desire and fear of white women and murderous rage. Trueblood’s entrapment leads to sexual confrontations with women from whom black men are socially restricted. He dreams of a white woman who touched him but he explains that he was “scared to touch her ‘cause she’s white. Then I gits so scared that I throws her on the bed and tries to break her holt (58).” To readers of Richard Wright’s novel Native Son, this assault is strikingly familiar to Bigger’s confrontation and subsequent murder of Mary Dalton, a white woman who ignores interracial sexual taboos.

Trueblood’s story becomes part of white sociology. As Thomas Heise remarks, “we may interpret the Trueblood incident as an allegory of actual sociological encounters with rural blacks” (74). Indeed, Trueblood notes this appropriation quite specifically.

Some “big white folks” come from “the big school way cross the State” to write “it all

14 For a striking analysis of the way in which Trueblood’s story is a “merchandising . . . product . . . of the slave trade” see Houston A. Baker’s canonical study “To Move without Moving” where Baker argues that Trueblood has “a carefully constructed narrative, framed to fit market demands” (841).
down in a book” (53). Clearly, Trueblood’s tale commands an academic audience and it is possible that Ellison had in mind the sociological tracts studying poverty such as Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* and St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton *Black Metropolis* that Wright argued made a clear connection between social conditions and deviant acts.

However, the scholarly validity of canonical sociology is called into question by Trueblood’s tricksterism. As I stated earlier, there has been much critical attention to whether Trueblood’s story is genuine. His name alone suggests a sense of critical irony with “True-blood” signaling that incest is a central feature of his family tree.

Additionally, as Gillian Johns points out, Trueblood smiles at Invisible as he begins his story, which is a central feature of trickster tales (239). We also know that over time he has mastered his tale through repeated re-framings to white audiences. Further, Invisible is guided down the road leading to Trueblood’s cabin as Norton explains that Invisible, and black boys in general, are his “destiny” (41). Trueblood’s tale, because of its tricksterism serves as a critical mirror to Norton’s relationship with his own daughter and thus, Norton’s sexual pathology. Before hearing Trueblood’s story Norton explains that his daughter died while they were on a trip across the Alps and that he feels personally responsible for her death. He says “I have never forgiven myself” (43). His daughter is described as “too pure…too good and too beautiful” (43). And it is no surprise that she dies in Munich, a centre for true-blood and race purity. Norton is so enamored by the possibility that Trueblood had sex with his daughter and survived that he “stammered, ‘I must talk with you!’…perhaps I could help” (51-2). When Norton looks at Trueblood with “something like envy” because they both survived, Norton has been given the story of his destiny for which he has been waiting (51).
Trueblood’s tale is part of the magical storytelling that he is known for and the evidence that he fabricated the tale in order to fulfill his basic material needs is overwhelming. If the story is indeed fabricated, we can begin to understand how basic need is overcome—through an artistic blues inspired improvisation. The call and response central to the blues, here becomes a call and response between Norton and Trueblood. Trueblood tells Norton the story that he wants to hear, with the understanding that he will be compensated for pleasing Norton. Trueblood is rewarded heavily for his tale time and time again—one hundred dollars from Norton, glasses for his wife, clothes for his children and “best of all” work (53). Indeed, the white folk give Trueblood “more help than they [have] ever given any other colored man” (67). From these rewards Trueblood is able to improve somewhat his state of economic necessity on the horns of the white man’s dilemma.

However, Trueblood’s tale of social pathology, and by extension canonical sociological tracks such as Black Metropolis and The American Dilemma, have other wide ranging effects. Trueblood’s trickster tale precipitates the narrator’s expulsion from the university. Because he has not learned to lie to white folks, and has shown an important benefactor of the university the “slums” around the campus, he is expelled. Unlike Invisible, Trueblood and Dr. Bledsoe understand “the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” (139). Invisible is expelled from college primarily because he allows Norton the experience he desires—to see the enduring structures and stories of slavery and inequality that the college seeks to deny.

This confrontation with the enduring structures, both economic and spatial, of slavery forces Invisible northward with the expectation of a job that will allow him to go
back down south and finish his education. Indeed, his journey North is a journey on the freedom train away from slavery and toward freedom and the promised land of Harlem.

**Commercializing the Home**

The reality of Harlem proved to be far cry from the narratives of “freedom…up North” (152). Because much of the housing in Harlem was constructed for white, upper-class large families, housing frequently did not meet the needs of the majority of Harlem tenants—single individuals or small families. In order to make the inordinately high rents paid in Harlem, one in four Harlemites rented out rooms in their apartments (Osofsky 138). Urban reformers frequently “blamed many of Harlem’s social problems on this ‘lodger evil’" (138).

It is in this context that Invisible becomes a lodger in Mary Rambo’s home after his metaphorical rebirth in the union hospital leaves him weak and vulnerable. In earlier versions of the novel Invisible met Mary while still in the company hospital and he meets other men who provide the ideological foundation for joining the Brotherhood while living with her. In the final revision, however, she has been frequently read as a stereotypical mammy figure. James Smothers and Barbara Foley argue that Mary lost much of her depth in the drastic revisions of the novel. Mary Rambo’s proclivity to help those in need, made extreme and ultimately negative revisions of her character necessary in order to fulfill the text’s alignment with Cold War freedom as individual entrepreneurial ambition, but she remains an important figure for Invisible and he struggles to break the ties of her care.

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15 On lodger evil see National Urban League, 338.
Mary offers Invisible a comfortable place to heal after he endures wounds and trauma from an explosion at Liberty Paints and subsequent electroshock procedures. The procedure leaves him in a child-like state, unable to use his body or remember who he was.

I discovered now that my head was encircled by a piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair. I tried unsuccessfully to struggle, to cry out. But the people were so remote, the pain so immediate . . . It was all geared toward the easing of pain. I felt thankful . . . My mind was blank, as though I had just begun to live” (233).

The comparison of the electroshock therapy to the electric chair alludes to his treatment as a form of ultimate state punishment—death. However, the signaling of a rebirth frames the electroshock positively because here Invisible conceives of himself as a man without a history, a tabula rasa, where he will get to choose “freedom, not destruction” by this machine; if only he can discover who he is, then he will be free (243). He has the chance to become the quintessential American Made Man.

Feeling that he was perhaps “no longer afraid” (249) he emerges from the subway into Harlem where Mary, “the big dark woman,” asks him, “Boy, is you all right, what’s wrong?” (251). Invisible explains that he’s “all right, just weak” (251). When he says that he lives at Men’s House, she tells him that “Men’s House, … ain’t no place for nobody in your condition [t]hat’s weak and needs a woman to keep an eye on you awhile” (252). Invisible is torn, “inwardly rejecting and yet accepting her bossing, hearing, You take it easy, I’ll take care of you like I done a heap of others” (252). Ralston, a man on the street who happens to know Mary, helps take Invisible to a bed at Mary’s where he is able to
sleep soundly until late the next day. Mary has warm soup ready for him and only lets him leave after he eats. As he leaves, Mary reminds him that if he ever needs a place to stay, her rent is reasonable.

After the rebirth in the factory hospital, Invisible finds Men’s House alienating and hostile. His factory overalls mark him as working class against the middle-class college boys, black businessmen, preachers, community leaders, old men who maintain “dreams of freedom within segregation,” gentlemen, the younger crowd and the business students. He begins to see that Men’s House inhabitants create a disingenuous image of themselves by spending “most of their wages on clothing such as was fashionable among Wall Street brokers” (256). He feels ostracized and thinks back to “losing [his] place in Bledsoe’s world. He confuses Bledsoe with a prominent Baptist preacher and dumps a full spittoon over the preacher’s head. As a result, Invisible is barred from Men’s House for “ninety-nine years and a day” (257). Invisible’s action of dumping the spittoon over a man who he mistakes for Bledsoe marks his epiphany that all the inhabitants at Men’s House were “still caught up in the illusions that had just been boomeranged out of [his] head” (256). Once Invisible recognizes that his chances of returning to college have been eliminated and along with them his only vehicle for upward mobility, he no longer has a place at Men’s house. Invisible moves from one kind of boarding house, The Men’s House, to another, Mary’s House. Whereas The Men’s House expected inhabitants to be upwardly mobile, Mary would expect her residents to be socially responsible.

Because the other men who inhabit her house are conspicuously absent Mary’s house was a time of quiet for Invisible. It seems that so long as Invisible is able to pay Mary for her care with the compensation he gets from the factory accident, he is able to
tolerate her incessant talk about “leadership and responsibility” but once he can not pay he begins to find her talk “exceedingly irritating” (258). She is not a friend but instead “something out of [the] past which kept [Invisible] from whirling off into some unknown” (258). The “past” is Invisible’s college years when Bledsoe and the “founding fathers” of the college determined the appropriate path for young black men. Mary, like Bledsoe, is represented as preventing Invisible from discovering his own path and his own route to freedom. Through her generosity and mothering spirit, Mary delays Invisible’s progress toward individuality and ingenuity because of his need for care, food and shelter.

Once Invisible recognizes Mary’s need, he also recognizes his own.

“I couldn’t imagine Mary being as helpless as the old woman at the eviction…The odor of Mary’s cabbage changed my mind…it struck me that I couldn’t realistically reject the job. Cabbage was always a depressing reminder of the leaner years of my childhood and I suffered silently whenever she served it, but this was the third time within the week and it dawned on me that Mary must be short of money” (295).

The decision to become part of the Brotherhood, then, was not because of an independent desire to “do his part” but out of his recognition of need—for a job that would allow him to pay Mary back for his room and board.

The day Invisible leaves presents him with a series of reminders of his needs. While eating his last meal with Mary, cockroaches scurry across the kitchen floor. Upon Mary’s insistence Invisible chases the roaches and proceeds to splatter them hearing their bodies “pop and snap” (326). For the first time during his stay, his room has lost heat and
he becomes “sick at heart” and wonders, “Why do I feel so let down” (318, 9). Loss of heat was one of the major housing complaints in Harlem. Upon beating the pipes to get the heat to rise, Invisible sees the room from another perspective:

I saw something which I’d never noticed there before: The cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the bank, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around, as by the knocking” (319)

When he picks it up, he sees the bank’s expression as “more of a strangulation than a grin. It was choking, filled to the throat with coins” (319). The bank is a not-so-veiled metaphor for how Mary has commercialized her home; but also how Invisible has decided to take a job with the Brotherhood because of the sums of money he will be paid for opening his mouth. Though Mary expresses a desire to help, her helping is dependent on receiving rents from her boarders so that she can survive and they can fill their socially responsible roles. In the end, Invisible explains that “She was a landlady, I was a tenant” (322). His final payment of rent is a single one hundred dollar bill—the same amount of money given to Trueblood from Norton. Like Norton, Invisible pays Mary a large sum of money as compensation for the housing care she gives him.
When he is finally able to leave Mary’s house, Invisible is still haunted by the Sambo bank. When he tries to get rid of the bank and coins because “I needed nothing like this to remind me of my last morning at Mary’s” a woman yells “don’t ever put your trash in my can again! . . . We keep our place clean and respectable and we don’t want you field niggers coming up from the South and ruining things” (328). Unable to walk away from the screaming woman, Invisible “reached into the half-filled can, feeling for the package, as the fumes of rotting swill entered my nostrils. It felt unhealthy to my hand, and the heavy package had sunk far down. Cursing, I pushed back my sleeve with my clean hand and probed until I found it. Then I wiped off my arm with a handkerchief and started away, aware of the people who paused to grin at me” (328). Thus, the bank that symbolizes Mary’s commercialized home, now belongs to Invisible as he has commercialized his proclivity to make speeches to incite action by joining the Brotherhood.

**Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1945**

The contradictions between the ideological construction of Harlem as a Mecca and the lived reality of Harlem as an urban ghetto was a major source of the frustration and anger that led to the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. The 1935 riot began after rumors spread that police had beaten and possibly killed a 16-year-old boy for shoplifting at S.H. Kress dime store across the street from the 125 Street Apollo, later The Apollo Theatre. Alan Locke argues that the riot marks “the first scene of the next act—the prosy ordeal of the reformation with its stubborn tasks of economic reconstruction” and shows “another Harlem of the night clubs, cabaret tours and arty magazines, a Harlem that the social
worker knew all along but had not been able to dramatize—a Harlem, too, that the radical press and street-corner orator had been pointing out but in all too incredible exaggerations and none too convincing shouts” (Locke 307). Though the event that incited the riot was most directly linked to police brutality in the press, economic necessity, represented in the boy’s shoplifting, sparked the riots.

That persistent economic inequality was a contributing factor to the riots can be seen in the Commission’s recommendations for housing legislation and low cost housing projects. At least partially, the Commission argued that overcrowding and high rents were to blame. “Crowded in a black ghetto” the Commission’s report claims “the Negro tenant is forced to pay exorbitant rentals because he cannot escape. He is the veritable slave of the landlord” (122). Arguing that the “most fundamental problem of the Negro citizen of Harlem is the economic problem,” the Commission recommended that to prevent future riots, economic inequality would have to be addressed, particularly with regard to housing (120).

Shortly after the Harlem Riot of 1935, legislation aimed at improving housing conditions was introduced. The New Deal Housing Act of 1937, also known as the Wagner–Steagall Act, established the United States Housing Authority to help improve and subsidize housing for low-income families. However, when Harry Truman attempted to eradicate the urban ghettos and improve living conditions by razing aging structures, he did not replace them with an equal number of new homes. Thus, the housing crisis was intensified and many were left homeless.

The 1943 riot was arguably a re-iteration of the 1935 riot. Both riots were precipitated by rumors of cop-killings and resulted in looting of white property. While
working for the Federal Writers Project, Ellison reported on the 1943 New York riot. He explained the rumor spread that “A cop shot [and killed] a Negro soldier [Private Robert Brandy] out at Braddock’s bar” the tone of the crowd shifted (Eyewitness 49). Though a soldier had been shot, he was not killed. He was shot while trying to intervene in a disturbance between a white cop and a black woman, Marjorie Polite. Brady stuck the officer with his own nightstick, but the officer shot Brady in the shoulder. Brady fled the scene and rumors of his death escalated into mass looting (Holloway 72). Ellison reported hearing gunfire, but much of his report focused on the material possessions being removed from store-fronts: “Boys and men approached us running, carrying rolls of linoleum, mattresses, clothing…they took roll after roll of gaudy linoleum, second-hand chairs, cheap coffee tables with blue mirror tops, articles of clothing and food” (Eyewitness 50). Women joined in as the night went on “bringing mattresses away and clothing for their children” (51). In an effort to keep the looting to white-owned shops, “[i]nstructions were shouted among the mob as to what stores to attack. As in the riot of 1935, no Negro store was knowingly molested” (50). Ellison summed up the event as a group of people who “were giving way to resentment over the price of food and other necessities, police brutality and the general indignities borne by Negro soldiers” (51). The riots were ignited by the persistence of unmet basic needs and social inequality—marks of un-freedom during the Cold War.

**Dis-Possessing Freedom**

In Harlem, Invisible finds that you can purchase anything, anywhere, anytime. From a street corner vendor, he purchases what he believes is a symbol of his freedom.
He feels the freedom surge over him when he begins munching on a yam while walking down the street. The pleasure of openly eating something that he enjoys leads to his realization that “I am what I am!” and in turn “I yam what I am!” (266). He discards the shame he had previously felt for having southern tastes and embraces what he “had always loved” (266). Freedom here, however, is not the same freedom that Invisible had imagined while in college, or at the Men’s House. Now, freedom is “far less” but he still relishes his ability to eat and walk down the street. However, snow has come to Harlem and Invisible experiences his first northern winter. Harlem and its promise of freedom “seemed to fall apart in the swirl of snow” (261) and what Invisible had thought was freedom, is now just a frostbitten, inedible yam. Winter turns freedom bitter.

With a sense of foreboding, Invisible hears a woman yelling “Leave us alone…leave us alone!” (267). The old woman explains, “[t]hey can come in your home and do what they want to you…and jerk your life up by the roots” (269-70). As he approaches, he sees a crowd gathering around “worn household furnishings” but does not know why (263). Invisible hears a man on the street say, “[t]hey got no business putting these old folks out on the sidewalk” and asks “you mean they’re putting them out of their apartment?” (269). He is embarrassed and is marked as a non-native Harlemite. As the crowd gathers, Invisible listens and takes in the unfamiliar eviction scene. One man asserts, “all they need is someone to set it off. All they need is a leader” and Invisible is confronted with both Mary’s imperative to be a leader of the people and his own childhood desire to make speeches (268). He begins to feel connected to the dispossessed couple through shame.
Something had been working fiercely inside me, and for a moment I had forgotten the rest of the crowd. Now I recognized a self-consciousness about them, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or stare too hard at the effects that lined the curb; for we were witnesses of what we did not wish to see, though curious, fascinated, despite our shame, and through it all the old female, mind-plunging crying (270).

What “we did not wish to see” were the many useless items, the bric-a-brac, and perhaps more importantly, the “FREE PAPERS” of the dispossessed couple that read “Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859” (272). Shocked by the material artifact signaling that this old couple lived in and through slavery, Invisible insists that “It has been longer than that, further removed in time, I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn’t been” (272). The dispossessed couple’s freedom is eroded by their unmet material need for housing made more pressing by the onset of winter.

In harsh New York winter, housing is a precondition for freedom. Before approaching the eviction scene, Invisible had relished the freedom of eating a yam while walking down the street. Once he bites into the frost-bitten yam he is confronted with the harsh reality of winter and the necessity of heated housing. Like the elderly couple, Invisible had a taste of freedom but it turns bitter as the marks of freedom, a yam and freedom papers, are ruined in the snow covered streets. Invisible feels as though he himself has been “dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which [he] could not bear to lose…like a rotted tooth” (273). Invisible continues to articulate that precious pain
of the transition from need to freedom from want through a memory of his mother engaged in the labor of caring for others’ needs: “hanging wash on a cold windy day, so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned and hung stiff on the line, and her hands white and raw in the skirt-swirling wind and her gray head bare to the darkened sky” (273). His mother’s raw hands and bare head call attention to her physical precariousness, her need and her un-freedom. This remembering also traces a narrative from slavery to freedom and back to slavery. Ellison marks a genealogy of how slavery persists up through principles of American freedom and democracy even if enshrouded in shame and inserts slavery into Cold War ideology, not only the continuation of the slavery of America’s past in Jim Crow practices but also as the persistence of unmet needs through racialized post-war social policy.

Ultimately the “freedom papers” become part of the “junk” in the “filthy” apartment because their promise of freedom remains unfulfilled (277). Though Invisible does not portray the “junk” as anything of value, sentimental or otherwise, he utilizes the language of urban renewal to compel the crowd to “hide that junk! Put it back where it came from” (279). He only seeks to hide the junk in an effort to conceal the elderly couple’s shame as well as the audience’s shame. In confronting the stark evidence that the freedom papers as an artifact of emancipation prove to be worthless in securing freedom from want. They make all too evident that freedom is disposable.

What many historians and critics have argued was the root cause of the Harlem riots in 1935 and 1943—economic inequality and declining housing conditions—remains a crucial feature of the fictional riots in Invisible Man. The first riot, which is precipitated by Invisible’s impromptu urban renewal speech at the elderly couple’s eviction, is
directly a result of un-fair housing practices. Indeed, it appears that the elderly couple is evicted because of an unscrupulous agent. The old man, in trying to comfort his weeping wife, explains, “It’s the agent, not these gentlemen. He’s the one. He says it’s in the bank, but you know he’s the one. We’ve done business with him for over twenty years” (270). Invisible incites the community to protest these unfair housing practices by forcibly restoring the couple’s possessions to their apartment.

Invisible’s use of urban renewal rhetoric precipitates a riot call by the police. Invisible worries that “someone might be killed. Heads would be pistol-whipped” but instead of death he finds a woman in labor: “she’s already in labor!...it didn’t start when we expected it. . . . What a hell of a time to be born” (286-7). The end (death) and the beginning (birth) mark the potential for community action. To be sure, it marks a change for Invisible when the Brotherhood employs him to deliver speeches.

The second riot in the novel features full scale looting and the burning of a large tenement building after the police gun down Todd Clifton. When Invisible is grazed by a cop’s bullet, Scofield tends to his wound and brings Invisible along through the riot. Dupre, Scofield’s friend, explains, “We fixing to do something what needs to be done. . . . First we gets a flashlight for everybody. . . . And let’s have some organization, y’all”” (542). They find a hardware store and gather flashlights, batteries, buckets and coal oil. As they approach a tenement building, Scofield tells Invisible “This the place where most of us live” and Invisible then understands the meaning of the kerosene. Schofield tells him, “It’s the only way to get rid of it, man” (545). A pregnant woman pleads with Dupre not to burn the place down: “please. You know my time’s almost here . . . you know it is. If you do it now, where am I going to go?” (546). But, when Invisible asks, “Where will
you live” Scofield responds, “You call this living?” (545) As in the history of Harlem’s housing, Dupre explains, that the landlord “wouldn’t fix it up” and “[m]y kid died from the t-bees in that deathtrap, but I bet aint no more go’n be born in there” (547). In preparation for burning the tenement Schofield explains

I wants all the women and chilllun and the old and the sick folks brought out. And when you takes your buckets up the stairs I wants you to go clean to the top. I mean the top! And when you git there I want you to start using your flashlights in every room to make sure nobody gits left behind, then when you git ‘em out start splashing coal oil. Then when you git it splashed I’m going to holler, and when I holler three times I want you to light them matches and git. After that it’s every tub on its own black bottom! (546).

The riot is divided into two parts: men against things and men against men.

At the start of the riot scene, Invisible is helped by Scofield. Invisible feels “a surge of friendship. He didn’t know me, his help was disinterested” (538). There was still some order and looting was restricted. When the men come upon a black-owned store, they hear the crowd yelling frantically “‘Colored store! Colored store!’ (542). Invisible even stops to help another man. Out of compulsion Invisible “reached down and twisted the tourniquet, feeling the blood warm upon [his] hand, seeing the pulsing cease” (551).

Invisible separates out the early and the late phase of the riot and explains “If only it could stop right here, here; here before the others came with their guns” (555). The riot is, thus, read positively until the participants turn away from the destruction and consumption of consumer goods toward the destruction of other people. . Like the
eviction scene, the impetus that spurs social action is positive, but invariably the focal point that spurred the community action gets lost in the shuffle. Community action is fleeting. *Invisible* would have to find another way out of necessity.

**Industrializing Freedom: Possibility as the Cure for Necessity**

In both their literal and figurative forms, riots erupt out of a recognition of and frustration with the failed promises of Harlem. In “Harlem is Nowhere” Ellison wrote that in migrating North, the Southern Negro “made some fatal error of judgment and fell into a great chasm of mazelike passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end ever against a wall” (298). When Invisible descends into the coal cellar after the Harlem riot, he blunders about, “feeling rough walls and coal giving way beneath each step like treacherous sand” (567). The space is “unbroken and impenetrable” and offers no escape. In an effort to see, Invisible burns all of his previously valuable possessions. Harlem is a treacherous maze where the exit might be freedom, the promise land of equality, but the “end is in the beginning” (6).

As Invisible tries to feel his way out of the cellar, he starts a fire with his high-school diploma—the literal beginning of the story. He realizes that to light his way out, he “would have to burn every paper in the brief case,” including Clifton’s doll and the anonymous letter warning him about the Brotherhood that he now recognizes as Brother Jack’s handwriting (568). Though Jack would introduce *Invisible* to the brotherhood, he would also seek to expel him. The briefcase houses all of the important documents of Invisible’s social life and his fumbling attempts at upward mobility and respectability. In
order for Invisible to survive his descent into the cellar he must withdraw from the maze, from Harlem and society along with all of their false promises of freedom.

Once Invisible takes to the cellar for a form of hibernation his world opens up to a set of “infinite possibilities” because the descent into the cellar is precipitated by a shift in his ideological construction of freedom (576). He explains, that with “boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility” (499).

With this conclusion to his novel that has been preoccupied with housing and homes, Ellison reframes the history of the most dangerous housing into one that offers the regenerative possibilities for healing that will enable an invisible man to become “socially responsible.” As Invisible notes, his coal cellar had been cut off since the 19th century most likely because of diseased conditions produced by lack of ventilation and sewage waste from the apartments above. An urban housing report “compared the number of stricken residents who lived in cellars with the number who lived above cellars. One comparison found that ‘out of 48 blacks, living in ten cellars, 33 were sick, of whom 14 died; while out of 120 whites living immediately over their heads in the apartments of the same house, not one had [yellow] fever” (Plunz 3). Cellars were the breeding ground for cholera, malaria, and tuberculosis (50). Ironically the cellars were made worse by sanitation advancements. When the Corton Aqueduct was built, replacing individual wells, water tables rose and many cellars flooded (50). As a result, after 1850, cellar dwellings were on the decline in favor of tenements (50-1).

For Invisible, this lack of ventilation, and the bad air from above are transformed down in the cellar. In old blues fashion, Invisible explains that “Louis was kidding, he
wouldn’t have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music…Old Bad Air is still around” (581). The symptoms of sub-standard housing conditions are transformed through a blues inspired American thinker-tinker spirit. His ingenuity begins as he turns a hole into a warm home that requires no payment to a landlord. A fundamental problem that must be resolved in making his hole into a home is lighting his home-space.

I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For instance, I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don’t know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don’t know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. . . . Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates” (5) I … also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I’ve wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I’ve already begun to wire the wall (5-7)
His theft is an act of revenge, sabotage and redistribution. However, this effort relies on a friend who has the knowledge of an electrician. Invisible calls him a junk man, because he salvages the wire and sockets necessary for Invisible to light his hole with 1,369 lights—a code for shit in Harlem dream books (Heise 163). Certainly the lights refer to the sewage waste so common in cellar dwelling but Invisible turns shit into light, love into hate (580). Along with help from other under-class men, Invisible can solve any problem, transform any material condition. If a need arises, he explains “I’ll invent a gadget . . . I am in the great American tradition of tinkers . . . call me . . . a ‘thinker-tinker.’" Yes, I’ll warm my shoes, they need it, they’re unusually full of holes” (7). Here, need for light and heat are resolved through an ability to improvise and make use of wasted materials.

The hint of an underground community of thinker-tinkers alludes to the cellar as a space of socialized care. Similarly, the focus of “Harlem is Nowhere” is how Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic provided free mental health services in a basement that “represents an underground extension of democracy” where “the confused of mind [may] seek reality” (295, 302). As Ellison argues here, there is a relationship between the patient’s problems and their environment; in changing the environment, the clinic resolves the patient’s problems.

In his descent underground into a coal cellar, Invisible writes the space where unmet need turns into the possibility for freedom and self-creation afforded by the principles of American democracy. This construction of freedom as endemic to American democracy is in line with ideological constructions of freedom during the Cold War. And most significantly it also erases the material history of housing as an unmet need in
Harlem. Invisible’s descent into the coal cellar should not be read in isolation from the history of housing in Harlem and Cold War constructions of freedom. Seen in light of this history Ellison’s ambivalent stance is evident. On the one hand, the coal cellar-as-home offers an argument for a fundamental change in housing policy. It is only through squatting that Invisible is able to put form to the chaos around him. As invisible tinkers with the materials around him, he is able to partially transform his material conditions. With the help of other tinkers, he is able to light his hole and carry on a silent fight with Monopolated Power and Light—perhaps a wink to the Cold War as a state of war without overt war. In this regard Invisible engages the discourses about America’s ability to mass-produce and to make goods during the Cold War. By harvesting this excess of consumer goods he is able to live well enough. Thus, in this final gesture of the novel production is disconnected from its Cold War context of upward mobility and national prosperity and redirected towards an underground subculture where tinkering with the surplus from below offers the potential to transform both industrial profits and housing conditions.

Invisible’s descent into a cellar that was closed off during the 19th century is also a figurative attempt to re-create the transition from slavery to freedom. A way to narrate the infinite possibilities that seemed blocked to African Americans during the Cold War when Harlemites were trapped in a maze of upward mobility that led “ever against the wall.” On the other hand, however, the cellar, a common symbol of protection against the other face of the Cold War, that is, Nuclear War, also provided protection for Invisible against the riot. In this way Invisible passively waits out the transformations to happen
above, and once the attack is over, he will play his socially responsible role where the maze that leads toward freedom will be simplified by nuclear disaster.

**The Invisible Dilemma**

The housing dilemma is a central trope in the novel *Invisible Man*. Through the slave cabin, the boarding house, the street-corner eviction and the housing riots, the reader glimpses the ways in which housing is an unmet need that poverty produces. Though I have read the descent into the coal cellar as Ellison’s solution to the alienating effects of housing necessity, Ellison achieves this end only through ambivalence that weighs the material history of underground living against an idealized portrayal of necessity as remedied by creative bricolage of the excesses of capital. Cellars were some of the most dangerous housing conditions of the late 19th and early 20th century, and yet Ellison turns the cellar into a place of freedom and possibility—a Cold War home of Invisible’s own that requires no income to inhabit, only American ingenuity to light and heat, a place to broadcast his accommodating message where, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you” (581). In its concluding veer toward a celebration of ingenuity, *Invisible Man* draws upon the dominant trend of tying freedom to prosperity and both as endemic to American democracy.

The previous homes in the novel, the slave cabin, the boarding house, the street eviction, and tenement stand in opposition to Invisible’s cellar, in that their inhabitants’ needs persist. The slave cabin, the boarding house, and the street eviction all point to contradictions in American democracy and equality—the persistence of Jim Crow, segregation and a black underclass. However, Invisible’s cellar proposes that the cure for
necessity lies in an American inventive spirit akin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. As in Myrdal’s *American Dilemma*, democracy and the American Creed promise to eradicate racial injustice and inequality. Democratic capital’s excess has provided the necessary conditions for Invisible to light his way out of darkness, out of necessity, and into a Cold War shelter of freedom and possibility.

While Invisible was carving out an other America for himself, the persistence of unmet need was being *rediscovered* by sociologists
Chapter 2

Troubled Masculinity and White Poverty in The War on Poverty

From the beat generation to the countercultural movements of the 1960s, suburban middle-class conformism was increasingly under attack. Early Cold War ideologies linking freedom, democracy and economic prosperity were not able to contain emerging middle-class malaise and calls for structural adjustments. The Cold War was entering a new phase. By 1964 there was decreased attention to and prosecution of communist party members. The Smith Act was commonly used to prosecute communists but in 1957 McCarthy died and the Supreme Court began overturning Smith Act convictions. In 1964 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of protecting rights of party members in *Aptheker v. Secretary of State*. As the Red Scare ended, a new invisible enemy emerged: a hidden America where time seemed to stand still and technological advancements stalled.

In this chapter I argue that the War on Poverty responds to a crisis of white masculinity due to rising unemployment and the presumed domesticating effects of the consumer home. These contestations around masculinity play out in popular culture texts that traffic in the spaces of poverty where white masculinity is redefined against the signature figure of the War on Poverty: the hillbilly. James Dickey’s *Deliverance* (1970) exemplifies this trafficking as four suburban men test their manhood in a rugged wilderness adventure. Similarly the countercultural arguments in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and Dennis Hopper’s (dir) *Easy Rider* (1969) idealize poverty as freedom from materialism, consumer culture and wage-labor. *Deliverance, On the Road and Easy*
*Rider* signal a shift toward poverty tourism\(^{16}\) that represents poverty as a retreat from the struggles of middle-class malaise. Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977), set in the urban ruins of the Watts neighborhood after the 1965 riots and shifts the focus from the rural to the urban. However *Killer* presents the viewer with poverty tour similar to *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* that turns the devastation of the city into a landscape where survival is possible by rejoicing in life’s simple pleasures. By romanticizing the conditions of poverty as life affirming, these cultural texts all make way for criminalizing the social-welfare state and feminizing demands on the state for care during the War on Welfare.

The crisis of white masculinity during these decades was interwoven with the crisis of American global dominance. Emerging concerns about America’s ability to keep up with rapidly changing technologies and maintain global military power sparked the space race. Advances in Soviet Russia “galvanized American fears of Soviet technical, educational, and military prowess and precipitated a wide-ranging questioning of America’s ability and resolve to meet the communist challenge” (Brauer 101). Indeed, John F. Kennedy’s campaign for the presidency in 1960 emphasized the need to “restore America’s relative strength as a free nation . . . to regain our security and leadership in a fast changing world menaced by communism” (cited in Boyle 101). To restore America’s strength internationally, something would have to be done to increase enrollment of young men in the military. But over a third of young men could not pass either the mental or physical examinations to qualify for military service (Williams *Appalachia*; Caudill 111). How would America maintain its military prowess abroad when the men at home were unfit to serve? Kennedy would conclude that in order to restore American male

\(^{16}\) For an analysis of consumer spending, and the shift from spending on durable goods for the home to spending on leisure and tourism, see Elaine May (221).
vigor at home federal initiatives must address the educational and physical development of young men in poor regions of Appalachia.

After being shocked by scenes of poverty in West Virginia, Kennedy vowed to make meaningful changes that would impact the everyday lives of the poor there. He read Harry Caudill’s biography of a the region, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1962), Michael Harrington’s influential study on poverty, *The Other America* (1962), and Dwight Macdonald’s 1963 review of it in the *New Yorker* and instructed his advisors to study the problem of poverty and propose solutions (Patterson 97). After his assassination in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson inherited Kennedy’s work on the problem of poverty and branded it as his own War on Poverty. In 1964, Johnson returned to the pre-Cold War freedoms Roosevelt had promoted—particularly freedom from want—and waged a War on Poverty (1964-1980) in order “to prove the success of our system” to the rest of the world (“State of the Union Address”). Though Johnson would create the government agencies to help eliminate poverty—namely the Office of Economic Opportunity—the war would span the presidencies of Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter. Its impact is still evident today in the anti-poverty VISTA program, a section of the AmeriCorps network, established in 1964 as the domestic version of the Peace Corps.

Linked to, but also distinct from the War on Poverty, was the international attention American race relations were receiving. Increasingly, national and international media outlets pointed out the contradiction between the rhetoric of American “freedom and equality rights” at home and U.S. imperial ambitions in international relations abroad (Dudziak 84). Johnson insisted that America could “afford to make progress at home while meeting obligations abroad,” and eliminating economic and racial inequality was
fundamental to maintaining American dominance on the international stage (qtd in Foner 287). If these two arenas of American policy were in tension with each other and at times conflated in Cold War rhetoric, during the War on Poverty their conflation was fully realized.

The enemies in policy documents during the War on Poverty were unemployment and lack of education; the proposed solutions were initiatives designed to create jobs, improve education and foster community action. The war was designed to help men who had lost their jobs to deindustrialization re-enter the workforce and to create national education programs to prepare young men for military entrance exams. In short, it was a war to help men who had been left behind by technological advancements and the consumer promise of American capitalism. Although these left behind populations were increasingly visible in the midst of celebrations of affluence, they were represented by politicians and members of the 60s counterculture who explained the persistence of unmet needs through a culture of poverty rhetoric which marginalized calls for economic structural adjustments.17

**Defining the Other America**

Kennedy’s encounters with the poor in West Virginia had a lasting impact on his goals for his presidency. He vowed to “press at every point and at every level to put our idle or part-time workers and machines and industries to full-time work” but more importantly he also promised to “put a new floor under wages . . . that can assure workers

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17 Of course, some early 60s radicals like the Johnson Forest Tendency and other Marxists called for precisely these structural adjustments--socialists, black nationalists, Panthers, weathermen, communists of various new stripes. However, they were of course targeted and repressed and some systematically eliminated by programs like the FBIs COINTELPRO.
the wages necessary for food and home and clothing and self-respect for themselves and their families” (Kennedy “Kennedy on West Virginia”). Early on, Kennedy saw widespread unmet need, and argued that full-time work and raising the minimum wage were key components to solving the crisis in West Virginia. Men needed full employment more than anything else. In one of his campaign ads in West Virginia, Kennedy is standing with miners at the Slab Fort Coal Mines. A miner asks him what he will do if elected president and he proposes five initiatives to help the unemployed miners: First, the Area Redevelopment Bill would permit the federal government to give funds to communities in need by providing fresh water, vocational training and unemployment compensation; second, new research for coal; third, persuading governments to accept American coal; fourth, federal aid for education; and, finally, and he argued most importantly, setting aside a percentage of defense contracts to redevelop areas with high unemployment. Richard M. Nixon, Kennedy’s Republican rival in the presidential race, asserted that Kennedy’s portrayal of West Virginians as stricken by poverty and his contention that seventeen million people went to bed hungry every night were “grist for the Communist propaganda mill” (Morgan). But Nixon’s Cold War rhetoric was unsuccessful in undermining Kennedy’s campaign or his proposals for employment and area redevelopment. Kennedy’s approach in West Virginia helped to clinch his victory in 1960. After his election, on the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act, Kennedy declared that the ‘war against poverty and degradation is not yet over” (Kennedy “Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy”). He pressed for extending existing Social Security benefits to include comprehensive healthcare for seniors, increased cash benefits, allowing retired people to work and still collect social security,
and providing increased possibilities for connecting people with skills to meaningful jobs. In his presidential speeches, he offered a multi-faceted approach to the persistence of inequality by raising cash benefits, increasing job opportunities, and providing job training.

Whether Appalachia remained on his mind when considering the problems of poverty has been the subject of debate. Some historians have claimed that while he thought “the civil rights message covers a lot of the ground,” he also saw “room for a broader program not limited to race” including launching a war on poverty (qtd in Brauer 105). Richard Piven and Frances Fox Cloward argue that the community action programs Kennedy promoted and that Carl M. Bauer refers to as evidence of his interest in a war on poverty were actually geared to shoring up black support for the 1964 election. Brauer, however, argues that there is no evidence in the archive to support their claims. Indeed, Kennedy’s interest was in Appalachia, specifically, West Virginia and Kentucky. Ultimately, the war on poverty was not framed through rights discourse nor did it target poor blacks during either the Kennedy or Johnson administration. It focused almost exclusively on white poverty.

Appalachia, promoted in the national imaginary of poor communities during the War on Poverty, would eventually serve as the signal image of the other America (Eller). The two texts credited with launching that phrase and the national imagination of the war on poverty were Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and Harry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Both focused on the cultures of rural, white poverty. Harrington’s *Other America* solidified a culture of poverty theory first introduced by Oscar Lewis in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies*
in the Culture of Poverty. Both link cultural and psychological traits with the persistence of poverty among cultures in modern societies. Harrington like Lewis stressed culture and argued that “There is, in short, a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor” (17). The poor, he argued, are not like “everyone else. They are a different kind of people. They think and feel differently; they look upon a different America than the middle class looks upon” (146). Though he includes a discussion of the effects of racial prejudice in creating urban, black ghettoes, his focus is on rural and agricultural poverty. Harrington identifies three cultures of poverty: first the subcultures of poverty that include intellectuals, bohemians, and beats; next the alcoholic poor, and the rural poor who migrate to the urban ghettoes due to changes in American agriculture. But it is in America’s rural fields that he finds the “harshest and most bitter poverty” (40). These spaces are not only unfamiliar to many suburban dwellers, but their inhabitants, Harrington claimed, are also living in a different culture than mainstream America. For the other American to be enfolded into the body politic of America, Harrington proposes offering real opportunities, comprehensive federal programs to establish new communities, and putting an end to racial prejudice.

While Harrington focuses on the cultures of poverty, Caudill focuses on the cultural aftermath of welfare dependence. He argues that the devastation caused by corporate mining, ineffective labor unions, and destructive technological advancements leads to a problematic dependence on welfare that breaks the men in the Cumberland Mountain Region both physically and emotionally. Welfare, idleness and migration, he claims, “emasculated” the physical and human resources of the region (305). Polluted water and over mining devastated entire communities with mudslides and chemical run
off. Unemployment was rampant, and the only chance for survival for many in the region was social security, welfare or disability payments. The solution Caudill proposes was a Southern Mountain Authority (SMA) based on the “successes” of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Crucial to his case for a SMA was his claim that if we rescue foreign people from Bolivia, Laos, Tunisia, the Congo and Greece we must give these “islands of poverty in our own land” the same consideration (365). He asked the federal government to face the chronically depressed areas and develop a Marshall Plan to deal with the shortcomings in these areas. For Caudill, the increased mechanization of mining was like a war, and it would take an act of war to deal with the cultural aftermath of the changes in social structure and labor relations, particularly the loss of male dominated, working-class positions.

Like Kennedy, Caudill saw a connection between Appalachian poverty and the military draft. Education in the Cumberland Mountain region was severely lacking. The majority of college graduates were “scarcely literate” (335) and many did not attend college or graduate. When they did, their opportunities were still limited. A particularly heartbreaking narrative in the text is of a father who works hard to give his children a better life by making sure that none of his children ever miss school. Once his son migrated to find work, the father explains that the employers

“said a high-school diploma from Kentucky, Arkansas and Mississippi just showed a man had done about the same as ten years in school in any other state. But they agreed to give the boy a test to see how much he knowed and he failed it flatter than a flitter . . . We’ve spent everything we’ve got
to try to learn our young-‘uns something so they would have a better chance in the world, and now they don’t know nothin’ either!” (338)

High school graduates were not fit for employment outside the state or military service abroad.

The 1960 Selective Service examined one hundred and four young draft registrants from the county. All of them were under twenty-three years of age. Only two failed for physical reasons, but twenty-six failed because they could not pass the mental tests. They were ‘functional illiterates’ who were unable to read or comprehend satisfactorily ordinary printed matter such as newspapers and magazines. Even more shocking, four high-school graduates volunteered and two of them were rejected for the same reason. Selective Service rejections for mental and educational reasons are running from 25 per cent in the ‘better’ counties to as much as 50 percent in the worst (337).

The region desperately needed an “energetic cadre of leaders” so that these men could leave the area and find meaningful work elsewhere, and meaningful work was frequently limited to military service (334). Caudill argued that the CVA should focus on education, employment, resettlement, redevelopment and preservation of the Southern Highlands to end the debilitating dependency among the people of the Cumberlands.

Caudill’s Night Comes to Cumberlands and Harrington’s Other America situated poverty within a discourse about culture that set the poor against the narrative of American progress and prosperity. Policy officials latched onto these two narratives because they considered the problem was not widespread, it was limited to specific regions, and the eradication of poverty would be possible only if these regions would
adapt to the culture of the rest of the country. Specific locations and cultures were targeted to explain why people remained poor, while the solutions to eradicating poverty in the midst of plenty doubled-down on economic policies that took advantage of the labor and environmental resources of these regions time and time again.

**Putting Anti-Poverty Policy into Action**

The Keynesian Council of Economic Advisors greatly influenced the war against poverty by citing culture and stymied growth as the root causes of poverty’s persistence (Russell). Keynesian and human capital ‘revolutions’ explained poverty as the effect of “inadequate economic growth, high unemployment, and individual human capital deficiencies rather than relating it to the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity” (O’Connor 20). This theory of poverty shares the psychology and culture approaches to poverty of modernist social science which are evident in Harrington and Caudill rather than the political economy of progressive reform advocated by the New Deal Democrats and Socialists that focused on meeting everyone’s basic needs. The Keynesian model acknowledges that poverty exists in the land of plenty but only because of market constraints or individual failures. This economic theory maintains the link between economic prosperity and capitalism that was crucial for constructing the logic for American dominance on the world-stage.

Government intervention would bring full access to capital through domestic military practices that would not attack structural economic policies but instead the “private home, city slums, small towns, sharecropper shacks, migrant worker camps, and Indian Reservations” that suffered from inadequate economic growth and disproved the
success of American capitalist democracy (Johnson). Communities of poverty were coined the “other America” by sociologists and politicians because capitalism, and its benefits of consumerism, they argued, had not had a chance to reach these locations—contradictorily constructed as part of America but also distinct from it. Federal initiatives would bring American-style-consumer progress to them via education and job training programs.

Though Johnson’s War on Poverty is frequently characterized as an extension of the New Deal, New Deal policies focused on imbalances of economic power and flawed economic institutions, while the War on Poverty focused on the absence of skills, opportunities, education and culture. In short, during the War on Poverty, poverty was represented as a problem derived from a mismatch between skills and available jobs, and reproduced through a culture of poverty. Economic equality was a civil right according to Johnson, but he commonly linked achieving “freedom from want” to “freedom from hate” (Brauer 115). He argued that “many Americans live on the outskirts of hope -- some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both” (State). The persistence of economic inequality, Johnson argued, may lie “in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities.” The War on Poverty he promoted entailed policy initiatives accompanied by a story that aimed to educate the public about the persistence of poverty, but in this story opportunity, not inequality or rights, was the term that was used.

Although government initiatives did not often frame income as a right, welfare rights activists began to shift the discourse on welfare away from charity and towards a rights-based-discourse and made some significant strides in alleviating structural racism
within the welfare system (Nadasen). The national welfare state grew dramatically during the War on Poverty and because more people were enrolled in federal poverty programs, real poverty rates were on the decline (Soss, Fording and Schram 29).

Though the War on Poverty did not frame “freedom from want” as a right, much of the civil rights movement of the 1960’s targeted economic rights. Ultimately the movement had a significant impact on civil-rights policymaking by shifting the discourse on poverty to include the rhetoric of racial inequality. The 1963 March on Washington slogan was “Jobs and Freedom” (Foner 282). In 1964 Martin Luther King called for a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” to abolish economic deprivation (282). In 1966 A. Philip Randolph called for a “freedom budget” that would entail “spending $100 billion over a ten-year period for a federal program of job creation and urban redevelopment” (283). The Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966 advocated for equal treatment in granting mortgages, and the construction of low-income housing. In response, congress passed a series of civil rights laws including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The federal government was making substantial strides in legislating equality, though not necessarily implementing it. Johnson wanted to “eradicate the three enemies of mankind—poverty, disease and ignorance” (Brauer 115). For Johnson, the War on Poverty was part of achieving The Great Society, that he thought “would enable Americans to move beyond Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms to even more expansive meanings—‘freedom to learn,’ ‘freedom to grow,’ ‘freedom to hope,’ freedom to ‘live as [people] want to live’” (Foner 286). Essentially, freedom was coming to mean opportunity not outcomes. Strikingly, in the civil rights discourse, even
income would not be framed in federal initiatives as a right, but instead as an opportunity.\(^1\)

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was the centerpiece legislative act of the War on Poverty that created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The OEO operated the Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and the community action programs, which numbered more than a thousand at its peak, including educational programs Head Start and Follow Through. The focus on community was tied to locating poverty along with a romantic faith in the potential of neighborhood action to resolve the symptoms? Causes? of poverty. The community action programs attempted to address directly the problems of the ‘other America’ by targeting communities in need. However, they were controversial, mismanaged and underfunded. They were designed with the idea that local communities knew best how to handle the particular problems of the community and that each community would have different needs. However, intention and implementation were not the same. In Chicago, for example, the mayor decided that local control meant mayoral control, and blocked federal antipoverty agencies at every turn (Borgia). In the end community action programs did very little to address the root causes of poverty and devolved into giving the poor services and personal rehabilitation rather than federal jobs and funding for communities themselves to decide how to use.

**Masculinity in Crisis**

The discourses of the War on Poverty were not limited to presidential speeches and policy statements but circulated widely through high and low culture. In the process

\(^1\) Though the National Association of Social Workers argued that income should be a “right, in amounts sufficient to maintain all persons through the nation at a uniformly adequate level of living” (Patterson 139) opportunity won the day.
they drew upon, even as they also helped recast, cultural norms regarding gender and race. Indeed, it is fair to say that the War on Poverty was also inextricably bound up with a cultural crisis of masculinity, a crisis that its rhetoric also aimed to redress. Kennedy’s speechwriter for his 1960 campaign, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr analyzes the emerging crisis of masculinity in a 1958 article for Esquire. He asks, “What has happened to the American male?” According to Schlesinger, men who were once confident were now unsure of their role in society. He returns to the topic of men’s insecurity in The Vital Center in his chapter on “The Crisis of Masculinity.” According to Schlesinger, feminism and the civil rights movement were disrupting white male hegemony, or were at least proposing to do so, and white men were uncertain of their future. Unemployment, modernization, commercialization, and social reform were undermining the social relations that had provided the anchors for masculinity.

The War on Poverty was for Kennedy and Johnson about reestablishing white male authority as a counter to federal Civil Rights programs and increasing unemployment in working-class professions. For many men, employment was masculinizing and unemployment was feminizing. In an effort to shore up white masculinity, the War on Poverty focused on full-employment for all white men. But the program has other effects as well. For one thing, the logic of the ‘other America’ provided a foundation against which employed, middle-class men could identify themselves. The redneck or hillbilly, the implied subject of the War on Poverty, was represented as a primitive, white male other, who “perform[s] the cultural work of recentering white masculinity by decentering it” (Robinson 12). Ultimately, the hillbilly,
stereotyped as an unemployed, uneducated, backward, rural white man, was feminized by his unemployment and racialized as not quite white by his lack of modern ways.  

During the 1960s, white male hegemony was also being undermined by some prominent black nationalist writers (Barnett 145). Amiri Baraka argued that “[m]ost American white men are trained to be fags,” with “weak and blank” faces with a “red flush” and “silk blue faggot eyes” (*Home* 216). Cleaver argued that to create a revolution, and regain black power, black men needed to rape white women (Kimmel 196). Traditional avenues for defining white masculinity were eroding as feminism and black power movements made strides in critiquing white hegemony.

White male suburban privilege and technological improvements were also feared to be emasculating by politicians and right-leaning cultural-critics alike. As white men were being drawn into new middle management and service professions in advertising, insurance, and the growing research sector and new suburban lifestyles, norms of masculinity began to change, but masculine ideals associated formerly with manual labor or a rugged command over nature were slow to fade away. There lingered the fear that “luxury and idleness” socialized men to be weak, through “overcivilization” as men in the new professions were not the rugged individuals of the American frontier (Cuordileone 525). There was increasing anxiety about the “dangers of leisure, affluence, corporatization, feminine influence, [and] the decline of rugged rural life” (525). The suburban family home, the emblem of American consumer culture, was the site of much of the panic over potential emasculation. In *The Feminized Male* (1969), Patricia Cayo Sexton argues in that “normal male impulses are suppressed or misshapen by overexposure to feminine norms” in the home and turning American boys into effeminate
sissies, “afflicted by excessive caution and a virtual incapacity to do anything in the real world” (4, 12). The home featured prominently in efforts to understand the crisis of masculinity. Patricia Cayo Sexton argued that ‘overexposure to feminine norms” at home and at school was turning young men into a bunch of sissies, “afflicted by excessive caution and a virtual incapacity to do anything in the real world” (39). This anxiety about real men potentially becoming soft in their suburban lives and new professions was one of the initial contributing social factors in launching the War on Poverty and a feature in its demise. If rugged, (read “difficult” and debilitating) rural life was crucial to forming masculine men, then the War on Poverty was potentially another source of emasculation in that it was seen as providing government funded leisure.

The 60’s counter-culture also played a part in consolidating new versions of masculinity that frequently reified a rugged version of masculinity, at times in an effort to combat the potential threat of feminizing queerness. Anti-bourgeois hippies, many in the student movement, who were embracing “back to the land” cultures were asking questions about the middle-class model of home and family and calling for a new definition of manhood. The Port Huron Statement (1962), the founding document of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), is one instance that Michael Kimmel has read as “an anxious plea for a new definition of manhood” (193). For many that anxious plea was for an identity that existed outside of employment and breadwinner, head of household status. Kimmel cites increasing reports of men driving themselves into early graves by endlessly climbing the corporate ladder. Men were complaining of “feeling like cogs in the corporate machine” (192) and turning to conspicuous consumption for relief. In Alienation and Freedom (1964), Robert Blauner linked the alienation of middle-class
and blue-collar workers in the realm of consumption. Subcultures of poverty, like the beat and hippie movements, were promoting alternative definitions of masculinity that questioned the work ethic, established experimental communities that disparaged it and in some cases even rejected wage-labor.

These counter-culture redefinitions of masculinity, often spurred by the student movement against the Vietnam War, were challenged by versions of masculinity that displayed traits of the conventional soldier in support for the war. This theme continued through the Nixon presidency when Vice President Spiro Agnew called Charles Goodell “Christine Jorgensen,” in reference to the most famous transsexual of the era during Goodell’s campaign for the senate in 1970. Goodell had advocated military withdrawal from Vietnam; Agnew went on to label antiwar protestors “effete intellectual snobs” and the press “nattering nabobs of negativism.” Agnew’s notorious retorts were only representative examples of a discourse in common currency that equated manhood with support for the American war effort (qtd in Kimmel 195).

In short, there were competing discourses on what it meant to be a man. Men were reasserting their masculinity and feared losing power; they were also calling for a renegotiation of masculinity themselves. Men were faced with the choice of maintaining dominant, violent masculine roles by participating in military initiatives at home and abroad, or rejecting these masculine ideals in favor of an emerging anti-war, anti-violent, anti-establishment, and anti-homophobic masculinity. As we will see in the discussions below, these choices were uneven and rife with contradictions.

**Violent Confrontations and the Promise of Deliverance**
In the following sections I analyze cultural texts that represent men and masculinity trafficking in the spaces of poverty and doing the cultural work of the War on Poverty. James Dickey’s 1970’s novel *Deliverance* lays bare this face of the politics of the War on Poverty: its logic of warfare, of an “other” America, and its reliance on a recalibration of masculinity. The novel is set along the fictional Cahulawassee River; Dickey’s inspiration for the setting was the Appalachian Mountains in northern Georgia along the Chattooga River. Four men decide to canoe down the river before the dam transforms the landscape, and here they encounter the other side of suburban comfort—the perils of nature and Appalachia’s signature inhabitant, the hillbillies. My reading of the novel and the film extends recent critical attention to the industrializing, modernizing, aspects of the novel to look specifically at the ways in which *Deliverance*, both the film and the novel, articulates masculinity’s crisis and echoes the discourses of the War on Poverty via representations of suburban men who confirm their manhood through a rugged wilderness adventure played out against their encounters with Appalachian hillbillies.19 Dickey was marketed to the public for an entire generation as the “white hope” “faggot-fighter” and was proud of it (DeMott). He built this reputation from the narrative of *Deliverance* and its attempts to reconstruct white-male dominance over nature, poverty and its byproduct, the hillbilly.

The hillbilly emerged as a term for poor people in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. They were the poster population of the War on Poverty and representative of a population distinctly other. Carol Mason argues that “the hillbilly serves as a foil for middle-class social mores” (Mason 42). In *Deliverance* this foil is most evident in relation to the trip’s

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19 Dickey’s deliverance is a novel situated in the historical present of Vietnam. The “other” at home is the hillbilly while the “other” abroad is the Viet Kong. The killing of the marked “other” plays out American masculine anxieties about Vietnam.
significance for all of the men traveling along the river each of whom who see it as an attempt to escape a middle-class existence most marked by their wage labor.

Each man who sets out on the river has a different relation to wage-labor and to capital: Ed is an ad-man, Bobby is a sales-man, Drew is a soft-drink executive, and Lewis is a landlord. Although Lewis would like to travel, he doesn’t because he has to stay close to the property he inherited. Ed is successful, in spite of his mediocrity, and lack of sophistication because his agency is located outside the city and there is little competition (11). Drew and Bobby both thrive under the leisure time and perks of suburban consumer culture. For many men like them, “testing one’s survival capacity without civilization’s safety nets” in rural spaces was a way to recover from the day-to-day alienation they suffered. (Knepper 20). Deliverance rescues the manhood of these men in the professional sector through the struggles they enact with the hillbillies who live and subsist along the river (Williams “Blood”).

Almost immediately the narrator, Ed, sets up a divide between rural and suburban Georgia. While driving to Oree, where they will drop their canoes in the river, he notes that “[t]he change was not gradual; you could have stopped the car and got out at the exact point where suburbia ended and the red-neck South began” (32). The striking divide between rural and suburban locales is developed as the plot unfolds and suburban culture is represented as a place where men are not able to be “open and let natural process flow” but instead “needed one purgative after another in order to make it to church” (33). In the suburban South, Ed argues, natural desires and processes could not be fully satisfied in the face of religious conservatism. Canoeing on the river is an attempt to get out of this push and pull between individual desires and social pressure as the river
current promises to restore to men the “natural flow” of their desires. The hillbilly who lives along the river is positioned as a natural, rather than a civilized, person, in a land where survival is the law.

Ed’s fascination with Lewis is more than merely admiration of his efforts to overcome social pressures and establish his authority. Looking at Lewis, he voices one of the many homoerotic moments in the novel. Ed gushes:

“I had never seen such a male body in my life, even in the pictures in the weight-lifting magazines, for most of those fellows are short, and Lewis was about an even six feet. I’d say he weighed about 190. The muscles were bound up in him smoothly, and when he moved, the veins in the moving part would surface. If you looked at him that way, he seemed made out of well-matched redbrown chunks wrapped in blue wire” (87)

Here, Ed sees Lewis as the epitome of raw physical male power. He is muscular, but not like the short, stout men in the magazines. He is better. He is taller. Not only is he physically superior, the description of the veins in Lewis’ arms, blurs the line between man and machine. Everything Lewis had done over the years, flycasting, archery, weight lifting, spelunking and canoeing, paid off. All of these sports, nature travels and attention to his body give Lewis the skills to survive:

“I think the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over . . . I decided that survival was not on the rivets and the metal, and not in the double-sealed doors . . . It came down to the man, and what he could do.
The body is the only thing you can’t fake . . . You’d die early, and you’d suffer, and your children would suffer, but you’d be in touch” (36)

Despite this reverence for rugged masculine activities and the man’s aptitude for survival in nature, survival in Appalachia means suffering in many forms and Ed and Lewis’ bodies stand in stark contrast to it as it appears in the other bodies along the river. Ed explains that “There is always something wrong with people in the country” (48). Some maladies are from “crippling or twisting illness, and some blind or one-eyed” (48). He supposes that it might be due to inadequate healthcare, but also thinks “there was something else” that was harder to pin down; harder to trace. Although Lewis’ survivalism assumes that farming, fresh air, fresh food and exercise would create a body meant to endure, in rural America, apparently it does not. Ed explains that he has never seen “a farmer who didn’t have something wrong with him, and most of the time obviously wrong; I never saw one who was physically powerful, either” (48). Ed wants none of it, and only wants to escape “from the country of nine-fingered people” (48). The bodies of Appalachian men are marked and disabled by the day-to-day labors that these suburban men have come to enjoy.

The desire to test their survival skills and make it down-river as a group cannot be separated from the crisis of masculinity the journey is meant to heal. The preoccupation with survival at the world’s end which comprises the plot premise of the novel, is a thinly veiled question about whether white men would retain their bodily superiority over the disabled, hillbilly other—and Deliverance answers with an emphatic yes.
The wilderness would give Lewis, Ed, Drew and Bobby a chance to test their endurance, physical strength and their manhood. As soon as Ed gets into the river, he is reconnected with his body and his sexuality:

Loading the canoe, I had not really been aware of the water, but now I was. It felt profound, its motion built into it by the composition of the earth for hundreds of miles upstream and down, and by thousands of years. The standing there was so good, so fresh and various and continuous, so vital and uncaring around my genitals, that I hated to leave it. (65)

Additionally, when Ed is attempting to climb up the gorge to kill the man who purportedly shot Drew and defend Lewis and Bobby, he explains his movements as a certain kind of sexual prowess.

There was nothing there . . . There was nothing . . . The urine in my bladder turned solid and painful, and then ran with a delicious sexual voiding like a wet dream, something you can’t help or be blamed for . . . I was held in the air by pure will, fighting an immense rock. Then it seemed to spring a crack under one finger of my right hand; I thought surely I had split the stone myself. I thrust in other fingers and hung and, as I did, I got the other hand over, feeling for a continuation of the crack; it was there . . . Then I would begin to try to inch upward again, moving with the most intimate motions of my body, motions I had never dared use with Martha, or with any other human woman. Fear and a kind of enormous moon-
blazing sexuality lifted me, millimeter by millimeter . . . I looked for a slice of gold . . . something lovable. (143, 151)

Ed’s sexual prowess with the virginal rock saves his life. As a result he is not only able to save himself from falling into the waters and dying, but he also potentially saves Bobby and Lewis when he kills the unnamed man with a gun who is looking down into the river.

For some of the men confrontations with poverty, or the other America, would be fatal. Drew, however, is the exception because he believes that collaborations between country and city folk are possible (Narine 466). Drew is also different from Ed, Lewis and Bobby in other key ways: he has meaningful encounters with several rural folks and he opposes disposing of the body of the man Lewis kills, the man who rapes Bobby. While the men are making their way to Oree, they stop for gas. Drew asks the attendant about the canoeing down the river. The man responds, “I wouldn’t want to try it . . . If it rains, you’re liable to be in bad trouble. The water climbs them rock walls like a monkey” (50). Lewis discounts his warning, and as the men walk back to their cars, the attendant sees Drew’s guitar and starts jumping up and down with excitement. Unsurprisingly Ed compares him to a “dog” (50), but as Drew hears Lonnie’s story, and how he’s never been to school but knows how to play the banjo, he asks “What’re we going to play?” (51) Drew sees this child, though mute, marked like the men that Ed wants to distance himself from, as someone he can communicate with through music. Their call and response moves even Ed:

I had never heard him play so well, and I really began to listen deeply, moved as an unmusical person is moved when he sees that the music is
meant. After a little while it sounded as though Drew were adding another kind of sound to every note he played, a higher, tinny echo of the melody, and then it broke in on me that this was the banjo, played so softly and rightly that it sounded like Drew’s own fingering. I could not see Drew’s face, but the back of his neck was sheer joy. He eased out of the melody and played rhythm, and Lonnie took it . . . They put the instruments together and leaned close to each other in the pose you see vocal groups and phony folk singers take on TV programs, and something rare and unrepeatable took hold of the way I saw them . . . I was glad for Drew’s sake we had come. Just this incident would be plenty to satisfy him (52).

Both Drew and Lonnie are made better musicians by this improvisation, communication, and collaboration. The scene becomes a musical education—the first education Lonnie has. In seeing Lonnie’s humanity and talent, Drew becomes a better musician, and perhaps Lonnie does too. Lonnie’s father “touched Drew’s shoulder” in a moment of gratitude and human kindness (52). Drew takes the time to get his name and number to play with him again; he has made a true friendship, and “authentic connection with family” (Knepper 24).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Drew opposes disposing of the body that Lonnie kills. It also comes as no surprise, either, that he is killed after disposing of the body. He may have been grazed by a bullet, he may have committed suicide, he may have had a heart attack from the stress of it all. To be sure, a man who believed in collaboration and mutual cooperation among the people in Appalachia could not survive when the terms for survival are that might equals right.
The failure to engage in meaningful collaborations was a critical mistake of the War on Poverty. As the policies were put into action there was little room for collaboration, even for community involvement. The war was designed to transform communities “immune to progress” in order to make them more like the rest of America—technologically advanced and consumer driven. The War on Poverty’s major community action programs would be controlled by mayors and local officials, not the poor. The poor would only be employed as wage-laborers in construction projects that brought in middle-class travelers and destroyed natural landscapes. The project, the land, and the culture would be eradicated in favor of progress and the needs and comforts of the suburban middle class. The dam, which violently reconfigures the river valley in Deliverance, is much like the projects actually developed by the Tennessee Valley Authority that Caudill supports in Night Comes to the Cumberlands. In Deliverance, however, the dam project is the original sin against the rural poor and it is committed by middle-class men. The men embark on their canoe trip because the dam is being built and several key features of the plot turn on the dam. For example, the decision to hide the murdered body is based on the men’s sense that there is a lot of community resistance to the dam project. Lewis explains that they could not get a fair trial because “there’s a lot of resentment in these hill counties about the dam. There are going to have to be some cemeteries moved, like in the old TVA days” (106). In the film viewers come to know that as a result of the dam, families are forced out of their homes and cemeteries are being dug up and there are more losses along the way about which the viewer can only speculate (Knepper 26).
In spite of the human costs, both the film and the novel take an ambivalent stance on the dam, one echoed in Caudill’s conclusion that “much of the Cumberland Plateau can best serve the nation by being submerged” (385). Similarly, the taxi driver in the film adaptation of *Deliverance* locates the town hall and fire station for Ed, and explains that “All this land’s gonna be covered with water [but that it will be the] best thing [that] ever happened to this town.” The virtue of submerging entire sections of the land for both the taxi driver and Caudill is to eliminate the delinquency that exists while transforming the land for future tourism and investment. Indeed, Lewis refers repeatedly to the houses that will now occupy the land for suburban weekenders on retreat. The natives must be removed, one way or another, to make way for the suburban travelers.

The physical costs of the dam can be found quite literally in the bodies that are being moved to new burial sites in the film. Lewis notes “I looked closer, and there were some green coffins stacked together, and a couple of the men were disappearing below the ground and coming back up together, heaving at something. ‘Like TVA, I guess,’” (232). Moving dead bodies—the work of TVA. In many ways the men who survive along the river are also entombed but still alive. As Rebecca Scott has argued, they are the living dead. The dam project might even be characterized as a mass lynching, a comparison that Lewis offers in the opening of the text:

“You can see a mass hanging. A self-hanging of millions of ‘em . . . they let themselves down on threads. You can look anywhere you like and see ‘em wringing and twisting on the ends of the threads like men that can’t die. Some of them are black and some are brown. And everything is quiet .
. . And they’re there, twisting. But they’re bad news. They eat the hardwood leaves. The government’s trying to figure some way to get rid of ‘em” (46-7)

Lewis’s image of mass lynching aptly captures the war on a people, a way of life and specific communities that the TVA and the subsequent War on Poverty enacted. Even though both sought to alleviate rural poverty and the unemployment that followed deindustrialization, this eradication was seen as a necessary casualty—even an enabling condition for to the assertion of suburban masculinity.

Fictionalizing The (Sub)Culture of Poverty

Another form of poverty outlined by Harrington is deprivation taking place in what he calls the “subcultures of poverty,” where white men also traffic in the spaces of poverty but in a manner radically dissimilar from the encounters with hillbillies in Deliverance and Night Comes to Cumberlands. For Harrington, those who inhabit the subcultures of poverty are the willing poor, and they too are mostly men. Though Dickey’s novel and film wage a battle between the suburban working-class and the rural poor, Jack Kerouac and the counter-culture hippie movement romanticize and even mimic the poor. On the Road, along with other Beat classics such as Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” William S. Burroughs Naked Lunch, and Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest influenced generations of youth disaffected with American consumer culture and conformity. Kerouac’s On the Road, considered the voice of the beat movement, was taken up by many in the counterculture of the 60s as they hit the road to dodge the draft and escape the monotony of their middle-class suburban existence. In this section, I argue that Kerouac’s On the Road can be read as a travel guide to the “other
America,” one in which white men traffic in the spaces of poverty, an exercise similar to Kennedy and Johnson’s tours of Appalachia, in that it engages racist romantic ideals about delinquency and structural inequality.

Two main literary critiques of *On the Road* discuss the depictions of criminality (Schryer) and whether to read Kerouac as a traveler or a tourist (Bill). I seek to synthesize these two readings as I argue that Kerouc’s novel is a precursor to the cultural dismantling of the War on Poverty, which took place as discourses on the ‘other America’ came to situate poverty as a set of delinquent behaviors distinct from the consumer capital of suburban excess. Situating *On the Road* in this historical context provides insight into how the novel, and the subcultures surrounding it, read poverty positively and as a feature of American-style rugged individualism. Reading *On the Road* as I do—as poverty tourism written for white-middle class men—inveses reconsideration of its reputation as a beat classic of young men’s quest for belonging by casting it as one of many discursive practices that were eclipsing the need even for limited structural adjustments, namely civil and welfare rights legislation, that threatened to disrupt racial and patriarchal hierarchies.

Through the 1960s, travel and mobility as indicators of freedom were activities reserved for white men and women. Though critics such as Philip Fisher and Barbara Klinger have idealized the road as a democratic social space, black travel guides speak to the difficulty of finding hotels, restaurants and gas stations that were willing to serve black travelers—not to mention the danger of traveling through sundown towns at any time of the day (Seiler 1092-3). Midcentury guidebooks *Travelguide: Vacation and Recreation without Humiliation* and *The Negro Motorist Green Book* were an effort to
inform black travelers about these perils and provide tips on where to find hotels, restaurants and gas stations willing to serve them along the road. Travel was neither open to all people nor a feature of democratic social space. In taking for granted carefree travel Kerouac unwittingly discloses his traveler’s privileged race, class, and gendered position.

The road has a long legacy as a symbol of freedom in the American cultural imaginary as part of frontier mythology. When in On the Road Dean asks Sal: “What’s your road, man?—holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow” he presents the road as a synecdoche for choice, possibility, and freedom (251). On the Road was completed by 1951 and published in 1957. When Kerouac himself was on the road, Jim Crow was still in effect yet he could imagine that this was anybody’s road. This vision of the road is made possible by romanticizing the disabled, disenfranchised and dead bodies of blacks, migrants and the poor. Two years before On the Road was published the young Emmett Till who had travelled from his home in Chicago to spend vacation with relatives in Money Mississippi was lynched for whistling at a white woman. In 1963 Bob Dylan would sing about the murder of Till that sutured over a long and gruesome history of lynching in America. These attempts to understand and co-op the conditions of the black and poor by middle-class white men eclipsed their continued participation in the social conditions that produced and profited from racialized mass-violence.

These unsaid paved the road for Kerouac to try on different race and class positions—and to profit from them economically and culturally. This version of cultural

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20 For an analysis of the links between democratic liberalism and African American travel see: Seiler. For an overview of the perils of black travel see: McGee.
mobility was enabled in part by the logic of 1950’s merchandising that replaced freedom with product choice, a substitution echoed in Kerouac’s notion of liberty as “trying on different ethnic garb” (Martinez 91). Indeed, the politics of white slumming is one of capitalizing and fetishizing the bodies of minority working and under classes and naturalizing a laissez-faire individualism.21

The beats and other subcultures of poverty would commodify the cultures of the oppressed that simply replace consumer capital with cultural capital. Never before in history had a group of industrialized people “voluntarily reverted to the soil. The trend of history has been away from the land, rarely back to it” (Caudill 279). Barbara Ehrenreich is perhaps correct in her assertion that the Beats presented “the first all-out critique of American consumer culture” (52) that would include an attempt to revert back to the soil. To be sure, a critique of consumerism occurs throughout Kerouac’s novel, but Bull provides the most striking example:

These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last forever. And tires. Americans are killing themselves by millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They could make tires that never blow up. Same with tooth powder. There’s a certain gum they’ve invented and they won’t show it to anybody that if you chew it as a kid you’ll never get a cavity for the rest of your born days. Same with clothes. They can make clothes that last forever. They prefer making cheap goods so’s everybody’ll have to go on working and punching time clocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions (149)

21 See Munoz for a link between key beat figures and laissez-faire individualism.
For Bull, the American people are being duped and swindled out of their hard earned money by corporations that refuse to make products that last. Bull, and other hipsters, critique consumer products and wage labor in an accumulation of alternative strategies for survival and knowledge. But these counter-culture stances are also situated within racist and misogynist discursive practice of poverty tourism that profited, at least in cultural capital, from trafficking in the cultures of the working-class and unemployed poor.

Locations identified as impoverished frontiers of America offer glimpses of unmet need that are exciting to Sal and his fellow travelers because of their otherness. For Kerouac the South is “fellaheen” lands and people, a way of life decidedly other than his suburban existence in the Northeast (Martinez). Sal describes his “beloved Mississippi” with a “big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself” (13). Just outside of Macon, Georgia Sal exclaims, “suddenly both of us were stoned with joy to realize that the darkness all around us was fragrant green grass and the smell of fresh manure and warm waters” (Kerouac 115) The idealization of returning to the soil at a farm in Georgia is “a kind of nostalgia for the vanishing American real” (Holton 275) that includes an invisible and unacknowledged past of slavery and a present of underpaid migrant farm work. Indeed, Sal explains that he wants to pick cotton for the rest of his life but he is too slow and tired at the end of the day and co-opts a different identity instead. As Michael Kimmel notes, of this donning of alternative identities, “If middle-class white men couldn’t beat ‘em, perhaps they could join blacks, gays, and women in the ranks of the oppressed” (191). Kerouac’s attempt, along with others in the subculture and counterculture, creates a false solidarity with working class people in an effort to define
white masculinity as wounded, but without participating in or knowing the conditions of persistent and demanding physical labor.

Racial minorities that occupy these nostalgic places are also romanticized. Sal explains,

I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned. All my life I’d had white ambitions; that was why I’d abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley. I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes; soft voices were there, occasionally the dusky knee of some mysterious sensual gal; and dark faces of the men behind rose arbors. Little children sat like sages in ancient rocking chairs. A gang of colored women came by, and one of the young ones detached herself from mother like elders and came to me fast—‘Hello Joe!’—and I suddenly saw it wasn’t Joe, and ran back, blushing. I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. The raggedy neighborhoods reminded me of Dean and Marylou, who knew these streets so well from childhood. (Kerouac 180)

Sal conflates American racial minorities into a common culture of joy and juxtaposes them to the sorrows of the white middle-class. Kerouac’s interest in fellaheen groups left behind after the collapse of world civilizations are at work here. The frontier for

22 See Robert Holton for a study of Kerouac’s later works and his interest in fellaheen.
Kerouac is not simply a measure of Manifest Destiny, it is the other America, where the frontier symbolizes raw nature and exoticized others not living on the land. As Sal looks out the window, he is excited to see “the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America” (83) because it is here that he is allowed to be a traveler and more aptly a tourist, of another America, another culture, and another economy.

The hipster as poverty tourist is always able to renounce his lumpenproletariat status and racialized otherness to re-join the middle-class. The one time that Sal experiences hunger, he is saved not by his aunt who continually sends him money, but by a painfully thin salesman. He recalls that night in Harrisburg when “I had to sleep in the railroad station . . . I was starving to death . . . When I told him I was starving to death . . . he said, ‘Fine, fine, there’s nothing better for you’” (106) and after a few hours the driver pulled out some bread-and-butter sandwiches from the back of the car. Though Sal describes the man as a “bag of bones, a floppy doll, a broken stick, a maniac,” he has no sense that the sandwiches might have been meant to last for a longer period of time or that he simply did not have enough food to share—because he cannot imagine that the road and all of its surprises would not provide or that the road could break bodies. Indeed, the driver’s story that there was nothing better for you than not eating may have been a coded narrative that sutured over his own unmet needs—not having routine access to food or the currency to purchase food.

The perils of unmet need for hipsters on the road, however, are eclipsed by a desire for freedom and individualism. Freedom for Sal is trying on different race and class positions, a mobility that turns into class transcendence. Following his logic, if transcendence and enlightenment can only be achieved through asceticism, then poverty
is to be admired, sought out and endured as a symbol of rugged individualism and the American frontier spirit. Poverty becomes a commodity with which Sal can express his superiority and knowledge of surviving. It also enables him to level a direct attack on the welfare state and any attempts to redress structural inequality.

Sal romanticizes Dean’s delinquency as a mark of his poverty and his otherness. Delinquency, thought to be a symptom of poverty and of a mismatch between opportunity and training, was a central concern for sociologists during the War on Poverty. Mobilization for Youth was a 600 page plan that prefigured the war on poverty’s community action agencies and focused on youth unemployment to decrease juvenile crime. But in On the Road Dean’s criminality was not something to be stymied; it “was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western” (Kerouac 7). On the Road underscores that criminality is ultimately part of being American and to be American is to be a “natural-born thief” (72). While Stephen Schryer sees Kerouac’s celebration of delinquency as a “case of a working-class boy whose aspirations are out of tune with his abilities” (132), Dean’s delinquency can more appropriately be read as providing a third way to return to white middle-class supremacy by reinvigorating America’s rigid race and class structure. In its tourist trafficking in the narratives of delinquency and rural unemployment that would later be deployed during the War on Poverty, Kerouac’s classic actually argues for maintaining inequality—racial and economic—to prevent universalized middle-class conformism.

Like On the Road, Easy Rider (1969) traffics discourses on poverty and community that constituted the cultural front of the War on Poverty. Though Kerouac
was troubled by the way “his work was being seen as progenitive of the 1960s counterculture . . . [and] had been appropriated by the forces of lawlessness, communism, and ‘delinquency’” (Martinez 111), *Easy Rider* can be read as the realization of *On the Road*’s desires to consume racialized otherness and to make delinquency an entry point for poverty tourism.

*Easy Rider* opens with a classic scene of criminality: the international drug deal. This scene is the impetus for the entire action of the film—taking to the road to discover the contours of American frontier life. Here, too, the frontier appears as spaces of impoverishment. Sweeping scenes of urban and rural decay are scattered throughout *Easy Rider*. The ranch where Wyatt and Billy arrive has a barn without a roof, and is littered with old tires and miscellaneous trash. The commune is a conglomeration of partially constructed buildings and barren earth untouched by progress, bathed in beautiful sunsets but also littered with the cast off trash of suburban excess. Still, the viewer is meant to feel that these are the places where folks are really making it, where they are free, where they are striving, albeit unevenly, for self-sufficiency.

At the ranch the dinner table represents a kind of egalitarian politics. The camera surveys the table where the rancher’s mixed-race family eats alongside the workers and their families. However, as in *On the Road*, gender divisions are still rigid here. The wife is silent and leaves her dinner to fetch the men more coffee. In admiration, Wyatt tells him “You’ve got a nice place. Not every man who can live off the land you know. Do your own thing on your own time you should be proud.” This scene of poor and proud independence is juxtaposed to the commune where a group of hippies struggle to make
their way on barren land. On entering the commune the camera surveys a graveyard, river, small adobe houses, then pans to a teepee, and a number of children.

The New Buffalo Commune inspired the commune scenes in *Easy Rider* where everyone was welcome and work was not a requirement. The founder, Rick Klein, who purchased the land from inheritance money, named the commune “Buffalo” because of what “the buffalo had been to the Indians, provider of everything to its people” (Miller The 60’s 64). The guiding principle was that anyone was welcome and that everyone would be provided for. But turnover was high, especially in the winter, and there were disagreements regarding the primary goals for the commune. The commune scenes in *Easy Rider* illustrate how difficult achieving self-sufficiency was when people have no knowledge about building, farming and irrigation and the skills for social reproduction are abstracted by wage labor and city living.

Wyatt and Billy see the problems of this version of communal living and get back on the road. Though the men are welcomed on the ranch and in the commune, as they enter small-town America, they are seen as threatening, un-American and effeminate. They are aligned with minorities in the Jim Crow era who needed special travel guides in order to find places to eat, rest, and fill their gas tanks. They can’t find a restaurants or hotels that will serve them and the men end up camping out. The locals at the restaurant discuss what “color” and what species these hippies are: “Now I think they’re a cult. Look like a bunch of refugee gorilla love in. They’re green. No they’re white. You’re color blind.” The hillbillies fight back with language rife with sexual and racial attacks. When George, the square wino they meet after being arrested for parading without a permit, is bludgeoned to death and Wyatt and Billy are beaten up, the lethal dangers of
being on the road as outcasts are evident. The lesson that the novel and the film’s cult followers often did not highlight is that trafficking in spaces of poverty populated by capital’s others can be lethal for men trying to redefine masculinity and sexuality in the civil-rights era.

**Community Romance**

Road narratives such as *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* depend on romantic notions of community that were embedded in the policies promoted during the War on Poverty. The logic here was that community action could cure juvenile delinquency [and by extension poverty] through education and job creation. Under this model, the individual could become independent through community action, but when community action programs failed, “community” nonetheless flourished as a discursive practice that celebrated individual survival in destroyed communities, as the new version of rugged individualism as the War on Poverty was being defunded. The replacement of community action for structural change with individual ingenuity as the cure for structural problems is at the heart of the 1950s subculture and 60s counterculture. We can see this emergent logic in the above texts in the implication each drives home that the American ideal of self-sufficiency could overcome any crisis—including a community in ruins.

The threat to the U.S. dominance during the War on Poverty was communities “immune to progress” where progress means capitalism. Culture of poverty theory saw poverty as a disease that crippled the body and the mind. Containment and actual eradication of the spaces of poverty were the goals of the federal initiatives of the OEA. Cities were divided by highways, streets, and train tracks, which served as literal
divisions separating poor neighborhoods and in some cases cutting them off from the resources of developed areas.

*On the Road* and *Easy Rider* are attempts to cross these spatial and social lines, to “experience a community without joining it” (Martinez 91). Both Sal and Wyatt can go in and out of minority, working-class communities, but residents of those communities do not have the same freedoms. What gets foreclosed in both the novel and the film of *Easy Rider* is a discussion about access to capital and upward mobility. Indeed, Easy Rider’s sympathy and romantic portrayal of the working poor eclipses the discursive apparatus of middle-class privilege, guilt and responsibility that creates a false sense of understanding of how the poor survive, or die, “outside of capital.” It is in this sense that these texts traffic in poverty by way of the commodifying culture of hip that relies on the perpetuation of an underclass and eclipses the need for more egalitarian social practices. The concept of community cannot be separated from capital’s need for difference.

Subcultures of poverty traded and extended the commodity fetishism of the 50s with community fetishism. The cultural and economic logic of "community" and rugged individualism gets government off the hook for political action and reparations, and elicits "sympathy over recognition of the limits" of understanding others (Young). J.K. Gibson-Graham argues that community action can produce a “solidarity economy” where “the use of resources [is] based on needs” (Gibson-Graham 97). For them, community can offer a space to live outside capital and provide an implicit critique from the outside. Various subcultures of poverty, however, have proven otherwise. Iris Marian Young argues that community “presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. For Young community privileges unity over difference,
immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view (302, 300). However, the subcultures of poverty [both chosen and imposed] are always attached to various forms of privilege that capital has already bestowed. The practice of slumming in communities in need offers no outside to that privilege. The 1960s “subcultures” of poverty that Easy Rider and On the Road represent trade working class solidarity for a fetishized and masculine cultural capital that ultimately enables a middle-class sector of the working-class to distinguish itself from the working-poor.

**Failed Promises and Communities in Ruins**

Critiques of the War on Poverty have focused not on employment in Appalachia, or white working class men, but instead on the black ghettos. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan charged Lyndon Johnson with wasting federal funds by “gilding the ghetto.” Moynihan’s gilding metaphor implies excess and waste, but is also covering over of a more systemic problem, which was for him the pathology of the black family. As the focus of a war on poverty shifted from the white rural mining towns to the black urban wastelands, housing became its focus, race relations overtook the debate, and white Americans pushed back hard against federal aid to urban spaces marked by civil unrest, unemployment and delinquency.

Harrington’s focus on housing where the “nation builds the environment of the culture of poverty” (148) was addressed, if only partially, in the Fair Housing Act of 1964 and 1968. But Americans were more interested in helping the poor than living near them—and many wanted to do neither. After the second legislative action to end housing
discrimination in 1968, HUD Secretary, George Romney, under the Nixon administration, argued that the government must remove the high income “white noose” from around inner cities like Detroit and other predominantly black cities (Riddle 21). Romney linked discrimination in housing policy to the practice of lynching and survival to an escape to the suburbs. Additionally, he argued that the root cause of rioting was segregated housing and blighted black ghettos (Glass). Ultimately, President Richard Nixon shut down Romney’s attempts to force desegregation in housing by defunding HUD grants to communities who refused to integrate. Over the next forty years, both democrat and republican administrations failed to implement the promise of the 1964 Fair Housing Act. As Elizabeth Julian, an assistant secretary for fair housing during the Clinton Administration put it, integration had not failed “because it’s never been tried” (Glass). 23

Throughout the 1960s the backlash against federal level desegregation policies was increasing and being played out in individual states. Although California had passed its own non-discrimination policy in 1963, the Fair Housing Act, also known as the Rumford Fair Housing Act, called for an end to racial discrimination in public and private housing (Henderson and Rumford). A year later, the California Real Estate Association sponsored an initiative to repeal the Act. In 1964, Proposition 14 passed by a two-thirds margin, and would allow property owners absolute discretion in their decisions.

23 Although the 1964 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts changed federal policy by outlawing major forms of discrimination in voting and segregation in schools, housing and employment, they did little to disrupt the everyday practices of structural racism and its links to poverty. Additionally, federal level enforcement of the Civil Rights Act was weak and only improved marginally over the next few years. The fissure between law and practice is often attributed with spurring the uprisings across the major cities across country in 1964. There were riots in New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, Chicago, and Philadelphia—some argued, like Romney, over housing conditions, loan practices and segregation.
regarding who to rent or sell their properties to ("Proposition 14"). Less than a year later, the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles would erupt with violence.

The riot lasted from August 11th through August 17th and there would be 34 deaths and 1,032 injuries, 773 were civilians, and there was 40 million dollars in property damage. Governor Pat Brown “decided to appoint a seven-member commission of distinguished Californians to make an objective and dispassionate study of the riots . . . to probe all causes of the uprising and present recommendations to prevent a recurrence” ("Brown Names").

On December 6th, the commission released their report for the Watts Riot and explained that the cause of the riots in 1964 in New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, Chicago, Philadelphia were largely the same: “not enough jobs. . . not enough schooling . . . [and] a resentment, even hatred, of the police.” But, Los Angeles was supposed to be different. Indeed, “the Urban League which rated American cities in terms of ten basic aspects of Negro life—such as housing, employment, income—ranked Los Angeles first among the sixty-eight cities that were examined” (Commission). Unmet expectations of progress and the lived reality of the poverty that registered in housing, schools, jobs were a key feature in creating the tensions that would give rise to protest and riots. A local explained “During the years away I had read much about the quickening pace of the civil rights movement, and upon my return I was eager to see what changes had been made. I was soon let down. The dismal sameness of the neighborhood disturbed me most. Watts had not a new building. The community issues, which were old two years ago, were now traditional…it did not in the slightest share the dazzling growth of the Los Angeles area” (Sanders). With a nod to the failures of the
War on Poverty and Civil Rights legislation, the committee argued that the work that has been done “is not enough. Improving the conditions of Negro life will demand adjustments on a scale unknown to any great society” (Committee). Ultimately, it was education, jobs and segregation that the committee found to be contributing factors, but little was actually done to redress the structural problems or to rebuild the city after the riots.

Set in the urban ruins of Watts after the riots, *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett, frames the ruins of poverty positively in a non-authoritarian male-headed household. *Killer of Sheep*, demonstrates Burnett’s concern for the future of his community that had lost its center due to the riots but the film also refers to Burnett’s past in rural, southern America (Massood 38). If the spaces of poverty in *Killer of Sheep* pit the city against the country, here the country is decidedly Other, even as it is also lodged within the city. The film argues that the simple pleasures desired by the countercultural movement in their affinity for the country—and their desire to live low—are represented in a community that was one of the most hard hit by race riots—Watts. I argue that the celebrated neorealism of the film is just one more reiteration of masculinity in crisis that trafficks in the spaces of poverty.

Much of the criticism around *Killer* celebrates the film for its simple documentary-style, and panoramic surveys of the city in ruins. The film makes the material conditions of economic inequality painstakingly clear, but it also presents the ruins in terms that coincide with a genre that has recently been named “ruin porn” (Leary). In the midst of frames of abject poverty and the violence of the slaughterhouse, are extended scenes of the protagonist, Stan, slow dancing with his wife, enjoying the
warmth of a cup of coffee, and watching his daughter play in a closet. At least one critic suggests that Burnett “had shed light on the tendency of blacks, as an oppressed people, to snatch joy from desperate situations—to improvise” (Thompson).

Because Stan is able to remain sensitive and fundamentally grateful for the pleasures of the everyday, he is represented as free from want. Stan’s masculinity is contrasted with other characters in the film through his sensitivity and commitment to his family. As yet one more example of representations of subcultures of poverty Killer of Sheep asserts that basic as well as emotional needs are met in spite of poverty through nuclear family and friend groups and it is Stan’s non-normative masculinity that allows him to form these important social networks.

Conclusion

In the early years of the War on Poverty, the problem of poverty was located in rural spaces set apart from the suburbs while the programs targeted the emasculation and feminization of men. However, poverty was simultaneously being framed by a countercultural movement that fetishized it as a lifestyle that shared features of rugged American individualism. These subcultures of poverty eclipsed the structural inequality that constitutes the material condition of poverty. In effect they paralleled more conservative approaches that understand persistent need as the result of individual failures to be resourceful and grateful even in the urban and rural wastelands of the “other America.” In many examples of cultural texts like those I read here that celebrated the subcultures of poverty as an ideal of community suggests that through family and friend
groups, homes could be secured and emotional and basic needs could be readily met through the prowess of rugged masculinity.

These subcultures of poverty that fetishized unmet need circulated at the same time as early “second wave” feminist critiques of the home represented it as a “comfortable concentration camp,” a “prison,” a site of “bondage” for women (Friedan), and as the site of emasculation for men dominated by “frustrated women” (Sebald). Together they lay the groundwork for the figure of the monstrously needy housebound welfare mother who irrupts into the national imaginary during the War on Welfare.

The 50th Anniversary of the launching of the War on Poverty precipitated a flurry of media attention to federal poverty initiatives. One conservative outlet argued that we actually won the war, and that republicans are responsible (Winship) while other outlets focused on continued inequality and made arguments for how to win the war in a new millennium by focusing on children (Goddard), on continued pockets of poverty (Bello), affordable housing (Fessler), or education (Bermudez). An examination of the cultural texts that accompanied and in many ways helped implement the War on Poverty suggests that any effort to map its lessons for the new millennium should keep a close eye on the shifting ideology of masculinity encrypted in its history. Coded as white male dominance, linked to the aspiration of full employment for white men, and circulated in tales of white men trafficking in the spaces of poverty, this apparatus managed to effectively excise unmet needs from the national imaginary and suture over fears of feminism and black power. In many ways it served as the cultural backdrop for the neoliberal reformulation of poverty that would define the War on Welfare.
Chapter 3

Criminalizing Motherhood, Winning the War on Welfare

Poverty was the “enemy within” during the War on Poverty, imagined in the signature region of Appalachia and the crisis of masculinity it conjured, but the new enemy during the War on Welfare (1980-1996) would be people who obstinately remained poor despite various, though short lived and underfunded, government initiatives to end poverty. Poor black women were the new targets.

Arrests and criminal indictments have historically served to increase stigmatization, particularly during the Cold War when criminal prosecutions of communists shifted public opinion. Three decades later criminal indictments for welfare fraud served similar purposes to criminalize the poor in the popular imaginary. With the rise of neoliberal theory that accompanied the War on Welfare, pathology re-emerged as a diagnosis not only to frame poverty as an individual, even a group choice, but also to explain why people choose poverty over economic freedom.

In addition, discourses on poverty as “cultural” made it a code word for race—meaning black—in policy studies, and in the culture more broadly poverty racialized as black was already becoming feminized as the Cold War came to a close.\(^{24}\) This trend also drew upon the rising neoliberal discourse of freedom as conservatives began to use the discourse of freedom to their advantage by celebrating the free market: only those who work and consume are truly “free.” Increasingly welfare was being seen no longer as meeting the basic needs of the poor, but, rather, as pathologic dependence (un-freedom) on the state for care. The implication was that one could not be “free,” economically or

\(^{24}\) For the long history of the feminization of dependency see Fraser and Gordon.
psychologically, without entering the wage labor system. As David Harvey notes, the free market was idealized as “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills through strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Drawing heavily upon this discourse, coupled with the racialized pathologizing of poverty, the War on Welfare narrowed ideological constructions of freedom to connote market freedom, the freedom to work, to choose a way of life, and the freedom to own and control private property—all of which presumed that freedom also equals white.

Moreover, the end of welfare as we know it, the slogan of the War on Welfare, had a gendered profile. The initiative was about ending Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), specifically un-married black mothers, while Social Security, unemployment insurance, workman’s compensation or veteran’s benefits were reframed as male entitlements. The female-headed family was understood through what it lacked—a male figurehead that would provide economic stability and security. This need, a mark of un-freedom, would be constructed for popular consumption through the criminalized welfare mother.

In this chapter I argue that the War on Welfare is defined by the emergence of neoliberalism and its roots in the reduction of freedom to consumerism that trafficked welfare mothers into low-wage work for profit via discourses on dependency and pathology. This model of freedom, in which personal freedom is aligned with the free market, continues to leave its imprint on contemporary U.S. culture and racial stereotypes about the home, motherhood, and welfare. As a popular imaginary it was shaped by media and public policy initiatives and crystallized and contested in fictive representations of motherhood and welfare. The film 
Claudine (1974) is an early example
of the role of fictional texts in popularizing the new regulatory practices of the welfare state and it is noteworthy because it marks the discursive emergence of the War on Welfare in popular culture. Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1993) critiques the emerging paternity law for welfare mothers but also deploys the discourses of the criminal, poor, dependent mother that replaced welfare benefits with Child Protective Services. Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996), reinforces some of the stereotypes of the bad welfare mother, while Precious’ hard work and resiliency represent the possibility of a community safety-net, like the one that would replace welfare, for those willing to work hard, a safety net that would consequently support the end of AFDC for needy mothers. Lee Daniel’s subsequent film *Precious* (2009), an adaptation of *Push*, is an example of the enduring cultural reminder of a story launched decades earlier: that welfare is not a right, but rather, an individual, racialized, and gendered malaise.

**The Freedom Train of 1975-6**

Gradually, through the late 1970’s and 80’s a cultural commonsense developed that presumed one could not be “free” economically or psychologically without entering the wage labor system. As Harvey notes, the free market was idealized as “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills [through] strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). The emergence of neoliberalism in the late twentieth-century differed from late nineteenth-century liberalism in that it substituted “market liberties” for “political freedoms” (Soss et al.). The linking of freedom to access to consumer markets is made clear through the resurrection of the Freedom Train in 1974, also known as the Preamble Express. Rather than being an ideological tool to garner
consent and support for the Cold War and the fight against communism abroad, as it had been with the 1947 train, the train in 1976 was funded by GM and contained artifacts like Jack Benny’s violin, basketball player Bob Lanier’s sneakers, and Judy Garland’s dress from The Wizard of Oz. The products of consumer culture and labor were linked to freedom (316). Though Carter warned in 1979 that a “crisis of confidence” was a result of “Americans’ ‘mistaken idea of freedom,’ which privileged ‘self-indulgence and consumption’ at the expense of devotion to a common national purpose,” neoliberal theory was on the rise and freedom as it was being represented in the Bicentennial Freedom Train epitomized the transition. (Foner 307).

Nonetheless, as neoliberalism expanded critiques of conspicuous consumption also circulated. However, many of them were not reserved for the wealthy, but instead targeted the poor. Because freedom was linked not only to the freedom to purchase consumer goods but also to the freedom to enter the wage labor market, the consumption habits and practices of the poor, particularly those receiving welfare benefits, were under surveillance and increasing scorn. If Lizabeth Cohen is correct in her assertion that under neoliberalism citizenship is tied to consumerism, critiques of welfare recipient’s conspicuous consumption also were coded as critiques of their access to citizenship. In short, surveillance of the purchasing habits and behaviors of the poor were strategies aimed to limit not only their freedom, but also their rights to citizenship.

**Theorizing the Home through Containment Culture**

The large unrestrained family became a focus for the fears about excess and overconsumption and it was a central concern for social scientists and politicians. With
the help of New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, President Richard Nixon set out to end Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, and Medicaid and replace them with a minimum income level of $1,600 for a family of four per year. Moynihan was interested in ending welfare for unwed and single mothers because he believed that giving benefits to single mothers gave them the incentive to evict and even divorce their husbands simply in order to procure welfare benefits. In his 1962 groundbreaking study of Appalachian poverty, the Kentucky native and historian Henry Caudill had already set the stage for criminalizing welfare in his argument that in “the deepening destitution of the coal counties astonishing numbers of women resorted to illicit associations, illegitimate children and the certainty of welfare checks in preference to the uncertainty of the holy but penniless state of matrimony” (286). For some mothers, however, divorce was the only way they could receive state benefits for their children and make ends meet. Divorce had become a strategy for survival not a formal separation of married couples, for in many cases the men remained part of the household and shared the income. Nixon’s solution, the FAP, would end the single-woman household requirement for welfare—as well as the nighttime social services surveillance of welfare women’s sleeping habits. In order to qualify for FAP, men were expected to work, but women would also be required to work or be enrolled in job training once their children were in school. This proposal entailed an important shift from the gender roles that characterized the national norm during the Cold War. During the Kennedy administration, James O’Connell, undersecretary of labor, argued that keeping women in the home was one of the many things “that separates us from the Communist world” (Foner 266). But now, women entering the workforce were no longer seen as a potential communist threat.
Some women would even be required to enter into the workforce in order to maintain their freedoms at home.

However, the FAP was controversial for both liberals and conservatives for reasons that teased out the racial politics of requiring women receiving welfare to work. Liberals argued that the living wage was lower than some were currently receiving in welfare benefits. Conservatives argued that the work requirements and work incentives were inappropriate for (white) female labor, as was state sponsored day care (Passel and Ross). While the debates teased out the racial politics of requiring women receiving welfare to work, an important component of FAP was that it did not separate the deserving from the undeserving poor. It would have equalized pay at the bottom “between men and women, African Americans and whites, and minimum and better-paid workers” (Quadagno 130). The FAP would have been a minimum income under which no one would be allowed to fall. It also did not have requirements like the “suitable home” and “man in the house” regulations that caseworks routinely used to deny benefits to black and unmarried women. Nixon would eventually drop his FAP proposal, but it would be resurrected as “workfare” without minimum income levels in the 1980’s during the War on Welfare.

The failed FAP notwithstanding, poverty remained a problem without easy solutions. Senator Moynihan had been a central figure in the War on Poverty and he remained a key promoter of the War on Welfare. He was the Assistant Secretary of Labor during the Kennedy administration, part of the Johnson administration, and Counselor to the President for Urban Affairs during the Nixon administration. The infamous Moynihan Report whose actual title is *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*
(1965), written when he was assistant Secretary of Labor, notoriously accounted for those who did not succeed, given the benefits of American capital expansion, through a discourse of family pathology, represented most particularly in the figure of the overly powerful black matriarch who either evicted her husband in order to receive a welfare check or was unable to enter into new partnerships due to her dependence on welfare (Nadasen 145). Indeed, dependency in this parasitic sense was a key term for describing welfare (Fraser and Gordon).

The pathologizing of black women in the Moynihan report was accompanied by concerns about black masculinity—even the emasculating of black men. As I detail in chapter two, the War on Poverty tapped into deep seated concerns about masculinity, not only because of increasing white male unemployment but also because of the ideological construction of the home as feminized, domesticated, and luxurious. Critics were increasingly linking the dangers to American masculinity to the feminized home. In *The Feminized Male* (1969), Patricia Cayo Sexton argued that “‘overexposure to feminine norms’” at home was turning American boys into fear-filled sissies “afflicted by excessive caution and a virtual incapacity to do anything in the real world” (12, 39). Robert Ardrey “argued that the American mother is ‘the unhappiest female that the primate world has ever seen, and the most treasured objective in her heart of hearts is the psychological castration of husbands and sons’” (Kimmel 200). Mothers were paradoxically represented as not doing anything and at the same time doing too much. As the home in the popular imaginary became a place of leisure equipped with technological advancements such as dishwashers, washing machines, and prepared meals, women’s
time was seen as freed to harass their children out of utter boredom and desperation for something to do.

Elaine May in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* explains how the sphere of influence for women during the Cold War was confined to the home. “Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, so they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which post-war women and men aspired. Domestic containment was bolstered by a powerful political culture that rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detractors” (16). During the backlash against feminism that began in the late 1970s and 1980s, “the rhetoric of the cold war revived, along with a renewed call for the ‘traditional’ family” (17).

The danger of the home for both parent and child was most clear in *Momism: The Silent Disease of America* (1976) by Hans Sebald. He argues that because women’s career ambitions had been thwarted, they pushed all of their hopes and dreams onto their male children. Because their children were unable to pursue their own hopes and dreams, they became psychologically damaged and effeminate. Mom’s power over the home, husband and children was an important component of hysteria about the changing social and economic role of women.

Betty Friedan’s famous *The Feminine Mystique*, which ushered in second wave feminism, also buttressed federal initiatives that pathologized women who refused to leave the home during War on Welfare. Friedan argued that the house was a comfortable concentration camp in her chapter titled “Progressive Dehumanization.” According to her formulation, the stay-at-home mom has “become dependent, passive, childlike” because she has
given up [her] adult frame of reference to live at the lower human level of food and things. The work [she does] does not require adult capabilities; it is endless, monotonous, unrewarding. American women are not, of course, being readied for mass extermination, but they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit (18).

Although her analysis of the home was an important critique of unpaid labor and the containment culture of the Cold War, she also infantilizes the stay at home mom and other women who performed labor in the homes of middle-class white women. Indeed, her argument about the predicament of housewives participates in the “psychologized dependency” of welfare rhetoric characteristic of some early second-wave feminism (Fraser and Gordon 325). Her analysis of the home as a place of decaying “minds and spirits” would be taken up by conservatives to argue that to be fully human, to be an adult, and to be sane, women must enter the wage-labor system and become independent, free consumers. Those who do not, and remain on welfare, are sub-human, childish, and pathological.

**Jobs Not Welfare**

The film *Claudine* (1974) directed by John Berry and starring Diahann Carroll as Claudine and James Earl Jones as Rupert (Roop), presents welfare as a barrier to marriage. But unlike Moynihan’s report it counters the myth of the lazy welfare queen and details a series of critiques against the regulatory practices of the welfare state. Claudine, a hard-working maid, meets Rupert, a hard-working garbage-man, as he collects the garbage at the suburban house she cleans. Roop and Claudine develop a
relationship in spite of her long hours at work, six children, bus commute, and financial
dependence on welfare.

Much of the plot turns on the fact that Claudine’s part-time employment in
someone else’s home is a barrier to her ability to receive welfare—and she must therefore
hide this wage-labor. In her weekly visits, the white social worker, Miss Kabak, asks
Claudine if she has a job or a boyfriend. If Claudine lies and says that she doesn’t have a
job or a boyfriend, then she’s committing fraud. If she tells the truth about her job as a
maid, her wages will be deducted from her meager benefits. If she tells the truth about her
relationship with Roop, everything including gifts, meals, and beverages will be deducted
item by item from her welfare benefits. If she loses her welfare check, she will not be
able to feed her children. If she’s not able to feed her children, social services will
remove them. Claudine and Rupert explain, “You can’t win” with the welfare state.
Indeed, welfare did not pay enough in benefits for women to remain home, but any
monies from employment or gifts were deducted from benefits if reported.

As if echoing the Moynihan report’s argument that welfare is a barrier to
marriage, Roop explains that welfare forces him “out of the house because it ain’t worth
the crap” he’s got to go through, namely the financial risk, to marry Claudine. As Roop
engages with the officials at the welfare office, the soundtrack plays Gladys Knight
singing “Mr. Welfare Man”: “keep away from me Mr. Welfare…I must divorce him, cut
my ties with him…keep away from me Mr. Welfare.” Claudine’s relationship with the
welfare state is figured as abusive and forcing her to “live against [her own] will.” The
viewer understands that for Roop to stay, Claudine will have to end her abusive marriage
to Mr. Welfare.
Claudine details the bureaucracy and surveillance that put women in a subordinate position to the state. Though the film staunchly critiques the surveillance practices of the welfare state, such as the man-in-the-house rules, the solution is not the Family Assistance Plan, or guaranteed income, but, instead, wage labor, “jobs.” The film makes clear that jobs do not offer justice. Claudine explains to her pregnant 15 year-old-daughter that even if she and her boyfriend both work, their wages will not equal the entire salary of a single white wage-worker. The film resolves the conflicts its plot foregrounds, however, with a stance that endorses the War on Welfare position as the concluding scenes combine Claudine and Rupert’s marriage with Claudine’s eldest son protesting for “Jobs Not Welfare.” This formula—“marriage plus jobs equals freedom”—would become one of the pillars of neoliberal policy.

The transition from welfare to jobs (or work in policy discourse) would be a crucial shift in poverty discourse. Though there was recognition by the federal government that poverty continued to exist in America during the War on Poverty, and important strides were made in reducing poverty, the cost of welfare was receiving more attention in public discourse where charges of welfare fraud helped consolidate the notion of the undeserving poor. The federal government ultimately shirked the notion that it was the responsibility of the state to alleviate poverty where it continued to exist in the land of plenty. Instead, poverty was reframed as the effect of generational pathology that was reproduced and exacerbated by dependence on welfare, resulting in matriarchal family structures and the loss of individual work ethic. The welfare poor were characterized as parasitic and greedy, and a burden on the state because they received

\[25\] See Frazier and Gordon who trace the genealogy of welfare dependency to subordination (312).

\[26\] For an extended study of the political debates surrounding FAP and Guaranteed Annual Incomes see, Steensland.
wages without wage-labor (Fraser and Gordon). Invisible in this logic was the socially necessary reproductive labor of mothering and child care that also haunted the arguments for marriage as a panacea. The pathologization of the unmet needs of mothers would ultimately justify state intervention in the name of the child to regulate the family models of the poor. As with the figure of the welfare queen, the child victim stereotype was a powerful cultural weapon that demonized the poor and justified a series of austerity measures that together led to the end of welfare as we knew it.

**Surveilling Motherhood**

The War on Welfare’s contribution to the consolidation of the neoliberal demonizing of dependency during the 80’s and 90’s pivots on these twin figures: the reproductive black mother and her children. From the “crack baby” epidemic, to the Susan Smith trial, pregnancy and motherhood were under constant media and governmental surveillance. The Reagan era slogan reminded the public that “Parents who can’t say ‘NO’ are creating a generation of misery,” but it was really mothers, not fathers, who were being held accountable for a range of dire social ills. The Washington Post article “Crack Babies: The Worst Threat is Mom Herself” explained that mothers who do crack are creating a national epidemic of young delinquents and damaged youth (Douglas and Michaels 158). The moral registers of dependency are extended through the discourses on drug abuse—but, drug abuse and child abuse were also linked here and teen pregnancy also gained increasing and sensational attention. One example was the media frenzy around the story of Melissa Drexler, or “The Prom Mom,” who delivered

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27 Frazer and Gordon argue that redefinitions of dependency as a character flaw was influenced by Puritans, Quakers and Congregationalists (315). In the 80’s these same pathological connotations would link drug dependency and welfare dependency (325)
her baby in the restroom at her high school prom, left the baby in the toilet, and returned to the dance floor.

Perhaps more importantly, however, were the ways in which mothers were routinely blamed for the sins of the father. In the Lisa Steinberg case (1987-1988), Lisa’s adoptive father, Joel Steinberg, beat her to death, but Hedda Nussbaum, the victim of severe and prolonged abuse herself, abuse that was easily read on her disfigured face, was routinely blamed for the child’s death even after many credible supporters, among them Gloria Steinem, intervened publically on her behalf. In 1996, Jessica Dubroff, a seven-year old pilot, was billed as a “miniature Sally Ride” (167). But when Jessica died in a plane crash with her father and flying instructor, it was her mother who was held responsible. As Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels note in The Mommy Myth, “it was the mother…who was portrayed as the true monster…[and] nearly every story about the tragedy featured at least one outraged mother who damned the mother’s permissiveness” (168).

These and other “bad” mothers represented in many of the public discourses of the 1980’s and 1990’s served to substantiate the claims made by Reagan about “welfare queens” and to justify surveillance and prosecution of aberrant mothers. Much of the horror in popular depictions of welfare during the 1970s and 80s was about the social dangers of aberrant motherhood. A prime example is the film Carrie (1976), in which Carrie’s mother, a fundamentalist Christian, abuses her emotionally and physically. After the opening blood-scene, Carrie’s teacher, Miss Collins, tells the principal at her school that something should be done to get Carrie away from her mother. Four years later, such an intervention would have been possible. The 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and
Treatment Act, provided states with funds to prevent, assess, investigate and prosecute child abuse and neglect. Vice President Walter Mondale argued in support of the bill that would

reexamine our past efforts to prevent, identify and treat child abuse. It is time to figure out where we have gone wrong for once and for all to put an end to the tragic accounts that temporarily jolt us from our newspaper or television sets, before we file them away somewhere in the corner of our minds so we don't have to think about them.

Presumably such legislation would have provided an avenue for the high school principal to report Carrie’s mother to police and intervene on Carrie’s behalf, preventing mass murder precipitated by child abuse. The films *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986) and *Aliens 3: The Bitch is Back* (1992) also portray aberrant motherhood excessively reproductive, threatening, dangerous, and black. To be sure, for the *Alien* franchise aberrant motherhood is even the cause of imminent apocalypse. Both *Carrie* and the *Alien* series tap into contemporary fears about motherhood and care of the child associated with dependency and welfare.

**Race and Reagan’s War on Welfare**

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28 Heron notes that “child abuse, too, forms a connecting link of concern in King’s stores” (“Horror Springs” 76) See also Terr.

29 There is considerable scholarly attention to the *Alien* series. John Russell argues that *Alien* (1979) is “the most literal incarnation of the predatory Black Other” (194). Much of the criticism of *Aliens* (1986) focuses on the films construction of motherhood. Rosemary Hennessy outlines how *Aliens* (1986) mirrors culturally sanctioned readings of good and bad mothers that are race and class specific (146). Rhona Berenstein argues that “these monsters are intimately linked to reproduction, or what can be termed ‘pregnancy anxiety’” (57) Daniel Bernardi argues that the alien queen in can be read as a “stereotype of overpopulating black women represented in the 1980s as ‘welfare queens’” (82).
Popular representations of welfare manipulation and mismanagement had been circulating from the early years of the War on Poverty and they would become a crucial component in the circulation of anti-welfare ideology during the War on Welfare. One significant example is Guy Drake’s 1970 song “Welfare Cadillac” which captured the equation of welfare with excessive consumption at public expense and did so with the car that would continue to signify welfare abuse. Pitching the song to predominantly white audiences as a riotous joke, Drake takes on the persona of a toothless white man, with 10 kids and a wife, living in a shack, but driving a brand new Cadillac. As snow blows through the siding on the house, they can just go out to sleep in the Cadillac. Drake appeared on the Porter Wagoner show and performed his “big hit” song to a live audience. As the camera pans out, the audience becomes visible as they laugh at the absurdity of welfare excess and the bad consumer choices of welfare participants.

After the performance, Porter thanks Drake and says, “I want a ride home in that new Cadillac when you get done.” Laughing, Drake responds, “Well I don’t know. I got my big fat wife with me. That’s that big fat ‘un up there. I can’t tell if she’s layin’ down or standin’ up. Ain’t but two inches different in her either way. But if there’s room, I’d be glad to take ya.” Though outside the context of the popular song, Drake marks his wife’s overconsumption on multiple levels. Her physicality is a metaphor not only for the excesses of the welfare state, but also for her laziness and excessive childbearing.

The Cadillac, a symbol of post-war prosperity and industrialization, had previously served as a metaphor for excessive government farm subsidies. In his 1962 study of Appalachia, Harry Caudill argued that if a farmer could afford a “new Cadillac each year” from government subsidies that “induce him to raise no corn or wheat, it can
provide a few hundred dollars to enable a penniless ex-coal miner to transport his family
to a useful life in a more fortunate part of the nation” (375). However, public critiques of
aid during the War on Welfare revolved around the excessively large family that refused
to use their welfare checks to improve their living conditions and squandered their
benefits (Nadasen 196-99). Welfare recipients were seen as taking advantage of the
system by having more children and buying unnecessary goods, like a new Cadillac every
year as in Drake’s formulation. They also made the workingman a fool for “paying
taxes/Just to send [his] youngins through school.”

The shift from the white, unemployed country hick [even hillbilly] man on
welfare to the black matriarch was part of the process of garnering support for ending
welfare and criminalizing the poor (Hancock). As the previous discussion of marriage
and welfare indicates, there is a long history of articulating inequality in government
entitlement according to gender (Gordon; Harris; Mink). Welfare policy also was driven
by discourses on the ghetto poor and the underclass that made distinctions between the
deserving and undeserving poor (Katz, Gans, and Briggs). These divisions between male
and female, deserving and undeserving poor, illustrate the ways that race and gender are
entangled in welfare policies (Kohler-Hausmann 330). During the War on Welfare the
distinction between deserving and undeserving poor was increasingly organized along
racial lines. After welfare grants increased in most states as a result of the Supreme Court
ruling in Goldberg v. Kelley (1970) that established welfare as an entitlement that could
not be summarily suspended without due process (Kohler-Hausmann) the old divisions
between deserving and undeserving poor based on race were outlawed and the public had
to come to grips with funding families that had previously been denied state aid without
cause. Welfare-rights activists and lawyers helped black women and single mothers gain access to entitlements that had previously been denied them under restrictions that distinguished the deserving from the undeserving poor (Kohler-Hausmann 332). At the same time fraud emerged as a way to resurrect the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor and criminalize the undeserving poor. In 1978 welfare fraud was re-classified from a misdemeanor to a felony (Kohler-Hausmann 336).

Cases of welfare fraud also were gaining increasing public attention in the 1970s. A series in The Chicago Tribune on prosecuting welfare fraud ran all the names, addresses and places of employment of those charged with fraud. Most fraud cases involved either failing to report additional income or an extra wage earner living in the house (Kohler-Hausmann 335). Frequently, the fraud charges pertained to wage-labor, but it was often part-time or marginal labor that could not provide the financial means to support a family. What was left unexamined were the exploitative working conditions that kept welfare recipients poor while both working and on welfare.

When AFDC was originally enacted as part of the Social Security Act of 1935, the payments were kept below low-wage male salaries to ensure payments would not make remarriage less viable financially. Welfare payments were so low that it was widely understood within the system that no family, no matter how frugal, could survive on these funds alone. A key alternative for survival was for recipients to lie about additional income or funds to their caseworkers, as occurs in Claudine. That strategy not only had

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30 In 1974 Reagan, as the governor of California, launched an anti-fraud initiative that tightened eligibility requirements and child support regulations. Illinois followed Reagan’s lead in their attempts to cut welfare costs after the Goldberg ruling (Kohler-Hausmann 333).

the effect of further marginalizing welfare families in the labor force, it also set the stage for public campaigns that blamed the victim. These public and criminal indictments were crucial in stigmatizing welfare recipients and forming the basis for the welfare queen mythology. In the late 1970s economy, where increasing numbers of women across the spectrum worked outside of the home, the early Cold War ideal (which had always been a white ideal) faded. Poor Black women welfare recipients (those erroneously cast by dominant discourse as the ‘typical’ welfare recipient) were now deemed lazy and un-American for not working outside of the home, whereas in the 1950s they were demonized for not being married stay at home moms. Initially the War on Welfare was marked by major federal policy changes and specific austerity policies, accompanied and facilitated by these shifting racialized and class-specific ideologies regarding home and motherhood.

The image of the welfare queen embodied the stigma of opting out of [not entering] the wage-labor system.³² While the focus of the War on Poverty was the blocked opportunity structures for men and a mismatch between their individual skills and employment opportunities, the War on Welfare targeted poor women who remained in the home and it branded them as distinctly un-American. The welfare queen was represented as a criminal mother who chooses welfare over work, is unburdened by morality, and bears the physical marks of excess and greed. She was, moreover, unmistakably Black, obese, part of the under-class and a serious threat to domestic security.

³² Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin of the New York School of Social Work at Columbia university were arguing in Delinquency and Opportunity (1960) against psychiatric models for the view that delinquent subcultures arose because youths were blocked from fulfilling the American dream. Delinquents had strong aspirations to succeed—hence their extreme reaction when conventional routes to success were blocked.
The Welfare Queen who Ronald Reagan mythologized in his 1976 presidential campaign was an amalgam of two news portraits of women on welfare: Linda Taylor and Carmen Santana. In her *New Yorker* article (1976), Susan Sheehan describes Mrs. Santana, a woman of Puerto Rican descent:

Mrs. Santana loves to dance; otherwise she avoids all physical exercise. She sits even while she is cooking, and she would rather leave the TV on when she isn’t watching it than bother to get up and turn it off. Her obesity appears to cause her no distress . . . . She makes no effort to conceal her thick neck, her big breasts, her big belly, and her enormous thighs; on the contrary, she favors tight-fitting, scoop necked body shirts with Bermuda shorts or slacks. Because of her weight, she is unable to take off her fashionable platform shoes unaided. Dancing, she quickly loses breath, but she goes on dancing. She is generous and lazy. Nothing lasts long in her apartment; it passes from being brand-new to being either broken or lost or stolen or given away (3).

Sheehan draws upon the culture of poverty logic to explain Carmen Santana’s poverty. She is obese and lazy, while her clothes illustrate her class position and her promiscuity. She is on welfare, according to Sheehan’s profile, because she is living in a cultural, generational cycle of poverty. Two years earlier *The Chicago Tribune* series on welfare fraud by George Bliss appears to be the first to use the phrase welfare queen in a headline reading “Welfare queen’ jailed in Tucson” (Bliss). Bliss had been reporting on welfare fraud, but no one seemed to care until the welfare queen came along and “dressed the scandal up in a fur coat” (Levin). Linda Taylor was a perfect case in point. After being
charged with welfare fraud, she would come to court in a big hat, fancy gloves and fantastic outfits. She also happened to own a Cadillac. The pre-existing stereotype had found its match. What had gone uninvestigated was how the social impetus to find a welfare fraud case undermined more serious criminal charges against Linda Taylor. Indeed, detective Joseph Fronczak was pulled from the case after looking into her other crimes such as child abduction. Levin uncovers a series of possible cases of child kidnapping and murders by Linda Bennett/Linda Taylor/Linda Jones/Connie Jarvis aged 35, 39, 40, 47, who was white on official records but black when it suited her needs, and he posits that the 8,000 dollars in welfare fraud charges she accumulated took precedence over more serious crimes of kidnapping and murder that were already suspected by investigators in 1974.

In his first presidential campaign of 1976, Ronald Reagan disseminated the myth of the criminal welfare queen based predominantly on a fabrication that blended the story of Linda Taylor with Carmen Santana. Reagan referred to his ‘welfare queen’ at almost every stop. She supposedly drove a luxurious pink Cadillac and had

- eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands…she’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000. (‘‘Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue’).

In short, she was a parasite on the state, and Reagan promised to launch austerity measures aimed at freeing the state [read taxpaying voters] from her ever-increasing body

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33 On the transformation of women from “partners to parasites” in marriage see Fraser and Gordon (318); Land (57); and Boydston.
and power. While white images dominated sympathetic media coverage of the War on Poverty, Black images dominated the mostly antagonistic media coverage during the War on Welfare and much of it took advantage of existing racial biases to garner support for ending social safety nets for the poor (Gilens). Linda Taylor could be any race she wanted to be in life and in myth, but as a welfare queen she was black. The Black, unemployed, and poor Welfare Queen stood in stark contrast to the white, suburban mother, her foil and mythic complement, who was a hard-working individual, dedicated to her family, and subordinate to her husband. In contrast to the housewife of the 1960s and 1970s, this mother was not bound by housework but “free” to labor outside the home.

After his successful presidential bid in 1980, Reagan’s first major blow to the welfare state was the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1981. OBRA blunted congressional power by overruling committees with aggressive executive orders that forced Congress to implement austerity measures (White and Wildaysky 137-8) and impose limits on who could receive welfare payments. The income from step-parents would now be taken into account, parents on strike would be excluded from receiving benefits, and the age of eligible children was reduced from 21 to under 18. Benefit levels were reduced as states were allowed to figure in food stamps, housing subsidies, and Earned Income Tax Credits before awarding welfare benefits. Ceilings were placed on work and child-care expenses and benefits would be based on net not gross income. Initial estimates were that welfare caseloads would decrease by 442,000 dollars, with a projected annual cost savings of one billion dollars (Englander and Kane 7). However, after the first eight to ten months caseloads and expenditures were trending back to pre-
OBRA levels (Englander 7). In 1986 Regan appointed a White House study group on welfare to recommend a complete overhaul. Their findings were coalesced into the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988, the second major blow to the welfare state. The purpose of the Family Support Act was to revise the AFDC program to emphasize work, child support, and family benefits, to amend title IV of the Social Security Act, and to encourage education, training, and employment (Public Law). In effect, FSA replaced welfare with child support payments, workfare, and childcare support. Women were no longer expected to stay at home with their children beyond pre-school age, and welfare benefits were decreased across the board by turning state-sponsored welfare into forced workfare. Workfare was one of the most important features of a plan to get women off welfare rolls. Women who chose to remain at home and on welfare were deemed parasites on the state but they were also thereby confined by their desire to remain at home.\footnote{Fraser and Gordon argue that the icons of dependency during industrialization were the pauper, the native, the slave and the housewife. I am arguing that the slave component of dependency is durative and overdetermined through its link to the history of slavery, but also to the pathologies of dependence, the infantilizing of housewives and the construction of the home as a concentration camp.}

Paternity was another crucial feature of the War on Welfare. Civil unrest during the 1960’s had been linked to economic inequality and ghetto life, and the solution for this unrest proposed by the Commission on Civil Disorders was to “encourage young men to marry and form stable, male-headed households” (Quadagno 124). Verification of paternity was a tactic to force male financial and by extension emotional involvement with their children. A Child Support Enforcement Program was enacted to determine paternity. States would lose welfare funding if a certain percentage of paternity cases were not solved. The nuclear-family model set the terms of financial responsibility, and
was crucial in reducing the number of welfare recipients. In congressional hearings, paternity continued to be a central concern through 2000. Preston Garrison, the head of a fatherhood program testified in Congress in 2000 that “Serious attention must be paid to building the capacity of low income fathers to attain the economic sustainability necessary to maximize the potential for children to grow up free from poverty and dependence on the government” (qtd in Haney and March 469). In part, FSA sought to police the sexual behavior and family practices of poor Black men and women. The non-nuclear family, increasingly associated with anxiety, frustration, and dysfunction, was offered as an explanation for the persistence of inequality. Women who remained on welfare during the rise of neoliberal economic policies were portrayed as culturally deviant for maintaining female-headed households and suspected of creating civil unrest among men.35

President Bill Clinton framed cuts in welfare benefits as policies designed to help the poor by teaching them discipline and the value and rewards of work. David Ellwood, Clinton’s chief welfare intellectual, coined the phrase “ending welfare as we know it,” but his plan differed considerably from the final bill Clinton signed. Ellwood’s plan was dubbed “soft” because it did not envision cutting people off from all forms of public assistance (including guaranteed government child support). The final blow to welfare was when Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and replaced Aid to Dependent Children with grants to states hoping or assuming that the “needy would make do with ‘the natural safety net—family, friends, churches, and charities’” (Foner 325). Throughout the War on Welfare that ended

35 There is a rich archive of feminist analysis of the role of the family in relation to capital. See Fortunati; See also the wages for housework debates led by Costa and James.
in this massive reform under Clinton the focus was more on ending female dependence, or as neoliberal economic theory would have it, “slavery to the state,” than actually reducing poverty (O’Connor Poverty 287). The effect was to flood the labor market with feminized/female labor, decrease wages, and increase the gulf between the rich and poor in an effort to restore class power by increasing the low-wage labor force (Harvey 5).

Constructing the Welfare Queen for Popular Consumption

Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) is a representative example of a popular cultural text that circulated in the wake of ending welfare as we knew it, while Lee Daniel’s *Precious* (2009) illustrates that these developments have been lasting. Evident in each are the neoliberal discourses on freedom and home that served to justify austerity measures implemented during the War on Welfare. In these texts, the welfare queen, though stripped of her pink Cadillac, is made criminal by her abusive relationships and her attempts to defraud the welfare state. The Welfare Queen becomes the villain of a shocking tale of “the spectacle of the unfit mother, the one who had failed to be upwardly mobile” (Douglas and Michaels 151; Hancock 27). She embodies the dangers of a welfare state and her youth heralds the need to implement austerity measures, now represented in the figure of the child as victim (Hancock 26). While Sapphire’s book reinforces some of the stereotypes of the bad welfare mother, Precious’ hard work and resiliency represent the possibility of a community safety-net, like the one that would replace welfare, for those willing to work hard. Furthermore, Precious conforms to the ideals of individualism and hard work that are the centerpieces of neoliberal culture that reinforce the increasingly common sense notion that social welfare programs for the
poor, not structural inequality, are actually to blame for poverty, stagflation, and downward mobility.

Mary Jones is the quintessential image of the excesses of the welfare queen. When in *Push* Precious first describes her mother, Mary, she explains, “I look at Mama. Scare me to look at her. She take up half the couch, her arms seem like giant arms, her legs which she always got cocked open seem like ugly tree logs…Mama can’t fit into bathtub no more.” (Sapphire 20-1) Though Precious is 16, Mary has not left the house since she was 12 and delivered her father’s first baby (55). Her physical excess and refusal of waged work mark her as a prisoner in her own home. She had Precious out of wedlock. She is represented as lazy\(^\text{36}\) and makes Precious cook, clean, and run errands. She commits welfare fraud by lying about where Mongo, Precious’ first child, lives. And, finally, she is representative of the family-demolishing matriarch that wields too much power over her family. She is a “picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished” (Roberts 1492).

Mary’s dysfunctionally dependent relationship to the state is linked to her abuse of Precious.\(^\text{37}\) Precious contextualizes her abuse through her mother’s failure to provide a secure home: “am I safe from Carl Kenwood Jones? . . . [Mother] bring him to me. I ain’ crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him” (23-4). Precious re-lives her sexual abuse through flashbacks, but the more pressing and immediate danger she faces is the physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her mother. Three months after she delivered her first child from her father, Precious explains,

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\(^{36}\) Gilens documents how public support of welfare most closely turns on the issue of work ethic and reports of idleness and deservedness among welfare recipients (76).

\(^{37}\) For an anthropological study of the link between surveillance, welfare and domestic abuse see Davis.
“Mama slap me. HARD. Then she pick up cast-iron skillet, thank got it was no hot grease in it, and she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor. Then she kick me in ribs. Then she say, ‘Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!’ I feel like I’m gonna die, can’t breathe, from where I have baby start to hurt . . . ‘I should KILL you (19).

Mary tries to kill Precious again just days after she delivers her second child by her father, this time by throwing the TV down a flight of stairs—a symbol both of her out of control violence and of her over-consumption. Ultimately, she narrowly misses Precious’ head and her newborn baby, Abdul, but the reader/viewer understands that Mary is the criminally abusive parent, as Carl is only present in the household because Mary allows him to be.

Indeed, Precious’ mother is represented as a continuing negative force in her personal and educational development. As Precious attempts to leave her family home and learn to read and write at Each One Teach One, her mother attempts to stifle her physical and educational mobility that are being promoted as her ticket to neoliberal freedom. It is her mother’s violence that Precious initially learns to resist: “she bedda not hit me . . . I am through being hit” and as a consequence she eventually decides she does not have to endure her father’s nightly visits anymore (13-4).

The familiar tale of women being responsible for their own rapes and for the rapes of others is at the center of the novel. These narratives emerge both as effects of, and in response to, the ways in which poverty policy and welfare reform were narrated and the figure of the Black mother that featured in their popular circulation. The “culture of
poverty” looked to the way in which welfare mothers had become abusers not only of state gifts but also of their children. Increasingly the case for state intervention into lower-class homes was being passionately made in order to protect helpless, uneducated, abused children while the needs (financial, emotional and sexual) of welfare mothers were neglected or criminalized.

The figure of the welfare queen was only a symptom of a cultural obsession with Black and poor motherhood, and their subsequent criminality during the 1980’s and 1990’s, an obsession that also coupled dependency as drug addiction with dependency as government freeloading. Media sensationalized individual cases as part of a national epidemic in which poor children were victimized by their mothers. More specifically, poor Black mothers were under constant media and governmental surveillance in the name of a duty to protect children. Media coverage of the “crack baby” epidemic is one example that found one of its most dramatic narratives in reports on the abuse of Ernesto Lara by his mother. The case of Ernesto Lara quite neatly sums up the links between abusive mothers and child victims that propelled the War on Welfare. In 1994, as the war was coming to an end, Ernesto’s mother plunged his hands into boiling water. He was found weeks later, locked in a room without medical attention, lying on a mattress covered in blood and urine. His mother Claribel Rivera Ventura lived with him and his six siblings in Ventura, CA. She was addicted to crack, the third generation in her family on welfare, conceived seven children out of wedlock, and was receiving AFDC, Food Stamps, and WIC benefits. Two days after the story broke in The Boston Globe on February 13, 1994 the Massachusetts Senate approved term limits on AFDC after two
years, citing the Ventura case.\footnote{For a discussion of the case of Claribel Ventura as a “bad mother” in the Welfare Reform debates see Marie Ashe.} What is notable about this case is how the public attention it garnered linked welfare benefits to child abuse as a justification for limiting AFDC benefits across the board. The catalog of reasons to punish unfit mothers grew; they must be punished to prevent misery, dependency, delinquency, and pathology. As the War on Welfare was coming to a close, cases of welfare fraud and child abuse were in the headlines almost daily (Williams “Race” 12).

While the character of Mary Jones reenacts the cultural stereotype of the pathological and violent Black mother, the character of Precious in Sapphire’s \textit{Push} re-scripts the purported cycle of poverty and offers an instance of a daughter who survives abuse to become the antithesis of the abusive welfare queen. She is a loving mother almost immediately. At 12 years old, she pleads to hold her baby, “Where’s my baby” she asks. “I know I had one. I know that.” (13) She wants to lose weight, get a good education, find good job of her own choosing, then get off welfare and finally find a home for herself and her children. She breastfeeds her son, Abdul, and regrets being denied the chance to breastfeed her daughter, Mongo. She hates crack addicts and women who abort their children. She reads to Abdul as she is learning to read herself. Her desires exemplify the promise of upward mobility that can be achieved through education despite rising odds. She is not only a good mother but she is also a member of the deserving poor because of it.

In \textit{Push} education is represented as an entitlement of the deserving poor and the central vehicle through which Precious is able to become a good mother, escape her abusive circumstances, and enter the wage-labor system. However, the junior high school
that Precious attends is much like her home where she is denied agency. The first scene in a school depicts the principal, Mrs. Lichenstein, pulling Precious’ out of the hallway and into her office before math class. The reason for the visit: Precious’ pregnancy. Mrs. Lichenstein tells Precious, “I see we’re expecting a little visitor…Sixteen is ahh rather ahh . . . old to be in junior high school.” (6-7). When Precious explains that her grades are good, she’s done nothing wrong, and refuses a home-visit, Mrs. Lichenstein accuses her of being uncooperative. Ultimately the principal calls security and expels Precious for being pregnant and too old for junior high. The school serves only to further punish Precious, and yet is also representative of Reagan’s report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform” (1983) that argued “American prosperity, security and civility” were at risk due to flagging educational advancements, many of them due to those “who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era [and who] will be effectively disenfranchised . . . from the chance to participate fully in our national life.” (National Commission on Excellence in Education). Reagan’s educational policy was deeply embedded in neoliberal economic policy that links citizenship to self-reliance (Soss et al 22). Mrs. Lichenstein marks Precious as morally reprehensible for conceiving her second child at the age of 16 and for being incapable of developing the skills to advance academically. Her perceived immorality and ignorance are linked. As a result, she is viewed as a threat to the prosperity of the entire school and is expelled.

The alternative school she is sent to, Each One Teach One, is fundamentally different. Here, Precious is given a voice through literacy-based education that allows her to form an identity for herself that can resist and name not only the violence she
experiences in her home but also her desire to get off welfare (Stapleton 213-223). As Ms. Rain teaches the alphabet, Precious creates simple sentences for A, B and C.

A is fr Afrc
(for Africa)

B is for u bae
(you baby)

C is cl w bk
(colored we black) (65).

Tellingly, Precious refers to her cultural heritage, motherhood, and race in these few basic sentences, which mark the beginning of her education and the formation of her identity. These basic sentences will allow Precious to pay her education forward and teach her son to read—Each One Teach One. What gets eclipsed in the educational narrative is that the alternative school is part of the same under-funded system that denied Precious an education for 11 years. The name Each One Teach One arose in part from Frank Laubach’s national literacy program that he developed from his experience teaching literacy abroad during the depression. When federal money for the programs he developed ran out, anyone who knew how to read had to teach someone else how to read. The program represents one of many examples of the move toward privatization as under neoliberalism responsibility for education shifted from the state to individuals who pass on their knowledge to others. The austerity cuts to state-funded education during the War on Welfare were made to seem inconsequential by the turn to individualism exemplified in the principle of Each One Teach One.
In another popular novel of poor girls and bad mothers, the lead character, Bone, in *Bastard out of Carolina*, wants to remain in a good school district, a desire that put her at further risk of abuse. Education would not be her way out of her bad situation because in her case a better school would be a way back to the abuse precipitated by a family romance. *Bastard out of Carolina* links the debates about welfare motherhood to non-welfare-recipients whose financial dependence on a male wage-worker is similarly dangerous for the child.

**The Marriage Cure**

*Bastard out of Carolina* ideologically straddles the war on poverty and the war on welfare. Set sometime between the late 1950s and early 1960s but written between 1988 and 1992, the novel dramatizes the dangerous effects of privileging white masculinity during the War on Poverty and the peril to the child from bad motherhood during the War on Welfare. Significantly, the novel constructs a world where poverty is not dangerous; rather danger lies in trying, desperately, to climb into middle-class respectability by forming the nuclear family and the suburban home.

A crucial component to ending welfare as we knew it was monitoring paternity and promoting marriage for non-nuclear families. Poverty has frequently been linked to single motherhood, and politicians, and some poverty analysts, have long argued that marriage is a cure for persistent poverty (Boo; Roberts and Martin). Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* not only critiques the “marriage cure” argument for poverty but also reinforces the narratives of criminal motherhood during the War on Welfare by dislocating the responsibility of sexual abuse from the father onto the mother.
Much of the critical attention to *Bastard* has focused on how the trauma of the novel relates to the family romance, southern realism, religion, and queer and white trash identities. The central trauma of the novel is Bone’s desertion by her mother, Anney. While many critics have noted how this hurt “far more deeply than Glen’s abuse ever could” (Fulton 72), few have analyzed the importance of this narrative choice. In the original version of the text mother and daughter kill Glen after the pivotal rape scene. Through an analysis of the historical and juridical conditions under which the text was produced during the War on Welfare, I argue that Anney’s ultimate complicity in Glen’s abuse is not only a critique of emerging paternity law for welfare mothers but also deploys the discourses of the criminal, poor, dependent mother that replaced welfare benefits with Child Protective Services.

Paternity law and welfare paternity define the father’s status and role according to radically divergent criteria: recognized legitimacy by the mother as the biological father of a child, economic support, and marital state. In Doe v. Shapiro (1969) The Supreme Court ruled that welfare could not be denied to parents who refused to name the fathers of their children. Yet, those children, like Bone, would still be identified as illegitimate. In 1968 the Supreme Court ruling King v. Smith ordered that women could receive welfare even if men visited their houses (Mink Welfare 60). During the 1970 Congressional Finance Committee meeting, however, members drafted a “bill [that] would clarify congressional intent by specifying that the requirement that welfare be furnished ‘promptly’ may not preclude a state from seeking the aid of a mother in identifying the father of a child born out of wedlock.’ . . . In an attempt to reestablish the pre-King moral regime ” (Mink Welfare 59). The following year Senator Huey Long would align
paternity with substitute father and man-in-the-house rules to “restore the marital family economy” and “shift the burden of family support from government to fathers”. Mothers who were not on welfare did not have to verify their children’s biological fathers; the role and responsibility of fathers was based on their presence in the child’s life as a source of support and role model.

Welfare reform made fathers the solution to maternal and child poverty regardless of the mothers’ actual welfare status. Of course this situation had been the default for poor women for generations. Any father was better than no father, it seemed. With no safety net from the state for single mothers, it was advantageous for a poor woman to find a man, and finding a man having some guarantee of financial support would prove to be the most important factor in selecting a husband and father. Though Anney Boatwright is not on welfare, at least in the context of the novel, she is part of the working poor, those considered to be “white trash.” Her financial need is great and her body and her daughter’s body bear the scars of unmet economic need. Furthermore, she does not have a high school diploma, she is a member of a socially ostracized and “dangerous” family, and her job prospects are further limited by the few available lucrative local employment opportunities.

The Boatwrights have a unique relationship to the state, one that in many ways is similar to that of welfare recipients. The opening car-accident scene strikingly shows that Anne Ruth (Bone’s) mother has no rights in naming her daughter (1). After the car accident that leads to Bone’s premature delivery, Anney is not able to shirk the questions about her daughter’s father and that red stamp not only meant that she was ILLEGITIMATE but that she was “No-good, lazy, shiftless” (3) just like popular
representations of welfare recipients, she is stigmatized as good for nothing, lazy, fraudulent. The fear of the overly fertile mother as a financial burden on the state that accompanies the stereotype of the welfare queen also adheres indirectly to Bone’s family as Bone’s father can’t support her because he has so many other children. Her Aunt explains, “with the six he’s got legal, and you, and the others people say he’s got scattered from Spartanburg to Greer, he’s been a kind of one-man population movement” (26). Bone is just another in a long line of illegitimate, needy, and racially ambiguous children.

The mark of illegitimacy on the birth certificate, “burned her like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her” all her life (4). Even though the clerk assures Anney that “sooner or later they’ll get rid of that damn ordinance” (9), she continues to try to get Bone an unstamped certificate year after year. “Bone’s status as a ‘bastard,’ as someone outside legitimate kinship systems” (Cobb 263), leaves her unable to access the means through which she could have been protected from this stigma or the means to appeal to the state for redress. The state marks her, like they mark the other Boatwrights, as outside of state care.

Bone notices that legal representations of the Boatwright clan, via newspaper clippings and mug shots, are always distorted. Bone sees the “dehumanizing effects of dominant representations on economically deprived people” (Irving “Writing” 105), specifically her uncles. It is the men who continually stand against and fight the law, both literally and figuratively, while her mother tries to hide from it. Her aunt complains that the men in the family “love that story, though, never seem to pay no mind to the fact that the army didn’t want no trash that has spent so much time in jail and hasn’t even finished
high school . . . It’s like going to jail. They think that a working man just naturally turns up in jail now and then” (Bastard 127).

The Boatwrights are racially othered, making their confrontations with the state impossibly uneven in the 1950s and 60s. Bone has dark hair and is thought to show her Cherokee heritage (26), but there was something to be concerned about in that Cherokee blood. Aunt Alma explains, “Oh, Bone! Maybe you should plan on marrying yourself a blond just to be safe. Huh?” (Bastard 26). There was fear that if she married someone with dark hair and dark (white) skin like hers, she might really be “nigger trash” like Glen’s family thought she was (102).

Anney’s marriages are her attempts to unmark herself as trash and her bastard child as “nigger trash.” When she was married to Lyle, she quit working as a waitress to work solely as mother and wife, thus claiming the definitive mark of the middle-class suburban family. However, Lyle’s job at the Texaco station pumping gas and changing tires “barely paid the rent” (6). When she was pregnant with her second child, her first with Lyle, she thought it would be easier to sit at a garment factory than to stand and wait tables. Lyle sweetly complained “How’s that baby gonna grow my long legs if you always sitting bent over” (6). He was willing to do anything to keep his pretty wife from working including working two jobs and overtime. But he takes on a second job with the “widest grin” and dies on the road, on his way home (7).

Anney had known that marriage alone would not provide financial security. After years of working in a diner, her decision to marry Glen was strategic. As she looks at the “boy” at the register, she tells herself, “I need a husband . . . and a car and a home and a hundred thousand dollars” (13). As she thinks about all the things she “needs” the
narrative shifts back to Ruth Anne’s (Bone’s) birth certificate. The people at the diner tease her about it, while the preacher tells her “no need to let it mark the child” (14). A year later, Anney is reminded of her dead husband while looking at Glen in the diner; Glen “had none of Lyle’s sweet demeanor,” a demeanor that all the other working-class men in the novel share. Indeed, Anney called Lyle “dumpling,” “sugar tit,” and “manchild,” in line with how other women describe their struggling, working class husbands in the text (Doane and Hodges 121). But maybe, just maybe, Glen would “make a good daddy” (15). Ultimately, her decision to marry Glen is driven by the desire for upward class-mobility and her pursuit of the middle-class family romance after years of working in a diner trying desperately to make ends meet.

Glen courts Anney because he is drawn to her lower class status and family reputation. Born into a middle-class family, Glen has fallen into the working class by the time he meets her. He sees Anney as a white trash commodity that can signify his rebellion against his family. “He would have her, he told himself. He would marry Black Earle’s baby sister, marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers.” (13). Here, race and class are explicitly linked for Glen. “Anney is marked as a socially undesirable and tainted woman—as someone suffering from a spoiled identity” (Bouson 105) and she tries to overcome her white trash identity by working her hands to the bone.

The marriage cure does not work for Anney. Glen loses job after job, and Anney feeds Reese and Bone ketchup and soda crackers and mayonnaise, with big glasses of iced tea after the flour for making biscuits runs out. When Glen gets home from going fishing with her brothers, she tells him “I was never gonna have my kids know what it
was like. Never was gonna have them hungry or cold or scared. Never, you hear me?
Never!” (73). Anney immediately changes clothes, puts on red lipstick and tells the girls to go to their Aunt Alma’s house since she’ll be late getting home. For the first time it seems, Anney engages in prostitution for food: a can of flour, a jar of jelly, butter, tomatoes, fatback and eggs. Though Glen is too proud to ask his family for money, and he would “rather starve” (63), Anney has known hunger and no work is too great a shame if it enables her to feed her children.

Glen’s contradictory desire for the ruggedness of working-class masculinity and the economic security and respect of his middle-class family are his attempt to traffic in and profit from a new position in lower-class culture. As J. Brooks Bouson has argued, by “using a series of class-coded descriptions, the novel presents Glen as an amalgam of middle-class refinement and lower-class brute physicality,” and the root cause of white trash suffering (108). Indeed, this amalgam is his routine justification for beating Bone. He tells Anney, “They laid me off today,” after stripping the skin off the back of Bone’s legs with a belt (107). Though Glen is known for using his hands like tools, he is not quite a member of the working-class. When Earle tells Beau that Glen “uses those hands of his like pickaxes,” Beau responds, “use his dick if he can’t reach you with his arms, and that’ll cripple you fast enough” (61). Although Glen uses his body as a weapon, he doesn’t have the stomach, or the heart, of Bone’s uncles. His body can’t take it. He “would invariably fall asleep while they were still sipping away. He’d wake up with an aching head and a sour stomach when Beau and Nevil were starting to sip coffee and get ready for a day of work” (202). Glen’s trafficking in these working-class spaces is an attempt to re-orient his body in a social situation that is always marked by violence.
In fact, while not quite the hillbilly, Glen resembles the man for whom the War on Poverty was waged. He is chronically unemployed and is emasculated by his wife and the rougher, tougher, working class men around him. Glen’s masculinity is undermined by his father, an awareness that surfaces for him only in narrow glimpses during fits of anger as he yells at Bone, “his neck bright red with rage” and she is reminded of when he is “at his daddy’s house with his head hanging down” (100). His shame of not being a part of his family, and not living up to their expectations is linked to his abuse of Bone. Still, Glen has a profound sense of entitlement. He demands money for Lyle’s death benefit from Reese’s grandmother. Even though Anney doesn’t want to demand the money, she explains to Bone, “Honey, you got to do things you wish you didn’t have to, and I don’t want to hurt that old woman. I really don’t. But Glen needs to take care of this, you understand? He needs to do it, and I’ve got to let him” (57). His sense of privilege remains when dealing with the Boatwrights and other working-class people. Because he was born into the middle-class, even though he shames his family for marrying Annie, he is able to retain some authority and privilege.

The Boatwrights lived in places where capital had not spread while Glen’s family lived in comfortable suburban homes. The Boatwrights are the Southern white poor that the War on Poverty tried to raise into the middle-classes. The houses that Glen chooses for his family, represent middle-class suburban mores—but they never have enough money to afford them. Thus, they are constantly living on the outskirts of suburban America or in houses that are past the glory days of suburban comforts. A crucial requirement in Glen’s search for homes is that they must be far away from the “nigger shacks” the Boatwright clan lives in. He tells Anney “We don’t need nobody else . . .
We’ll do just fine on our own”” (Bastard 50). But they are never far away from Anney’s support system of brothers and sisters. After Anney resorts to prostitution to buy food, they have to move again because the rent could not be paid.

We moved and then moved again. We lived in no one house more than eight months. Rented houses; houses leased with an option to buy; shared houses on city limits; brick and stucco and a promise to buy; friends of friends who knew somebody had a place standing empty; houses where the owner lived downstairs, next door, next block over, or was a friend of a man who had an eye on Mama, or knew somebody who knew Daddy Glen’s daddy, or had hired one of the uncles for a short piece of work; or twice—Jesus, twice—brand-new houses clean and bought on time we didn’t have.

Moving had no season, was all seasons, crossed time like a train with no schedule. . . . Moving gave me a sense of time passing and everything sliding, as if nothing could be held on to anyway. It made me feel ghostly, unreal and unimportant (Bastard 64-5)

The new place “was just like all the houses Daddy Glen had found for us—tract houses with white slatted walls and tin-roofed carports . . . and garbage disposals that never worked” (79). Though the houses have the marks of suburban homes, the carports, and some of their conveniences, like garbage disposals and newer furnaces, these suburban “amenities” invariably never work. The Boatrights “lived in big old rickety houses with wide porches and dogs lying out flat in the sun. Aunt Ruth liked the ones that had black walnut trees to spread shade over . . . [with] chicken coops in the backyard” (79). The
trees would provide shade from the hot summer sun while the chicken coops would provide the eggs. Both of these are important to the Aunts, because the houses offer both protection and nourishment when there isn’t enough money to turn on an air conditioner that doesn’t exist or to buy eggs when there is no money coming in. Bone criticizes the houses in suburbia that Glen chooses as being lifeless and soul crushing. The houses her aunts live in are alive, “always humming with voices and laughter and children running” while the houses on the outskirts of suburbia are hidden away from other people and “cold, no matter that we had a better furnace and didn’t’ leave our doors open for the wind to blow through” (Bastard 80). The positive connotations once associated with the locked-up-tight suburban home as a Cold War shelter from danger and sealed off from urban and rural poverty are dispelled in *Bastard*.

The housing crisis is the pivotal center of the novel. Once Bone refuses to live in the family home with Glen, the violence escalates and she loses contact with her mother, perhaps permanently. Though it is in her aunt’s home that she is brutally raped, it is also there that her mother can temporarily see the abuse and where Bone’s humanity can be seen. Indeed, this is the second time the abuse is made public in the houses of her aunts. It is here that Anney’s responses to Glen’s abuse of Bone is contrasted with the rest of her family. Though we are constantly told that Anney loves Glen, the reader has no real sense of that. There isn’t the typical narrative of violence/reparations. There is just the constant threat of violence for Bone. Anney’s questioning of Bone as to what she did to make Glen angry aligns the mother with the other state authorities that cannot see Bone as human, or as an individual who could be represented as a victim, instead of someone to be criminally monitored. In earlier versions of the novel, Anney and her mother team
up and kill Glen (Strong 11; see also Sandell 222). Though this revenge is still outside of state-mandated justice, here the mother could see the violence and the rape as warranting punishment. In the final version of the novel, however, Anney is a “complicit and betraying mother who ultimately chooses her victimizing husband over her victimized child” (Bouson 116).

Bone’s response to her mother’s betrayal is to say “I could never hate her, but I hated her now, for the way she held him, the way she stood there crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that? I let my head fall back. I did not want to see this. I wanted Travis’s shotgun, or my sharp killing hook. I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried” (Bastard 291)

Glen’s guilt is abstracted—what makes this a difficult to define incest narrative and the trouble critics have with the middle fantasy/religion chapters is that the text isn’t so much about incest as it is about a mother’s inability to protect her child from the label and stigma of “Illegitimate” and the years of abuse. The middle chapters offer the reader a prolonged sense of doom, and we look at the spectacle: a child is being beaten. Something must be done. Something. Then, the reader must confront the fact that nothing was done for a child so violently beaten. So it goes for the Boatwright’s confrontations with the state.

While Glen goes free for what he does to Bone, Early goes to jail for breaking a man’s jaw. There is no juridical sense of the Boatwrights as ever being possibly innocent or protected by the state. They are always in an antagonistic relationship with the state. Bone notes of the sheriff that questions her after she is raped by Glen that though “his
voice was calm, careful, friendly, he was Daddy Glen in a uniform. The world was full of Daddy Glens” (Bastard 296). Similarly, the doctor who treats her broken tailbone “looked angry, and impatient, and disgusted”(113). The only justice that the Boatwrights can get from the state is injustice secured by fighting back and going to jail because “they hadn’t a chance, and still held on to their pride” (Bastard 217). The only hope for some form of justice would be Nevil’s implicit “promise” to kill Glen (308) that makes Bone smile.

The removal of the state label ILLEGITIMATE, gives hope to Bone, now Ruth Anne again, that the threat of violence against her will be legible and she will be able to name herself in the “blank, unmarked, unstamped” in a place where salvage is a way of life. Aunt Raylene provides Ruth Anne a model for surviving though salvage, not wage-labor, not marriage. Raylene markets her “canned vegetables and fruit” and transforms the devalued space of home’s domestic sphere into a place of labor resistance by building an income from traditionally unpaid labor. For additional income, she picks trash out of the river. She explains to Bone,

This is good stuff . . . You got an eye for things, girl. I can clean and patch those clothes up. We’ll just soak the dishes in bleach and give the rest of it a scrubbing. Saturday morning we’ll put out blankets and sell it off the side of the road. You get your mama to send you over on the weekend and I’ll give you a tenth of everything we earn (Bastard 182).

She tells Ruth Anne, “Trash rises . . . and out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time’ (Bastard 180). This is not only a strategy for survival on the discarded items of suburban consumer culture, but a narrative about the entire Boatwright clan as white trash—they rise to the top as well. After all the trouble, after all the fighting, after
all the hurt, they will survive, be dusted off and become valuable and worth protecting by outsiders.

**Repackaging Poor Motherhood for the Obama Era**

When the *Push* reached mainstream audiences as *Precious* in the post-9/11, “post-racial,” Obama era, it served as an ideological reminder of the infinite possibilities for social uplift and individual freedom that late neoliberal solutions to poverty could promote. As the War on Welfare is absorbed into a post-racial common sense, motherhood remains under intense scrutiny and surveillance, most notably in the name of the child. Stories of horrific child abuse and infanticide have become so mainstream that they justify state interventions into the homes of low-income, inner city households often in pursuit of negligent mothers.

The case of Maryann Godboldo, a single, Black mother living on the west side of Detroit serves as a case-in-point. When she refused to give her 13-year old daughter, Arianna, Risperdal, an anti-psychotic, Child Protective Services ordered the child be removed from her home and placed in a psychiatric institution. Decisions to forcibly remove a child from parental custody are based on “whether the home can control and supervise a child” (Bishop and Frazier 410). Often the homes of low income families are viewed as unfit not because of parental care, but because of housing conditions. But housing conditions and poverty are ideologically linked to bad motherhood and care for the child. During court proceedings Assistant Attorney General, Deborah Carley asked Godboldo questions about her employment, child support from Arianna’s father, and the conditions under which Arianna’s leg was amputated shortly her after birth. Carley’s
questions were aimed at painting Godboldo as a lazy welfare mother who bore a child out of wedlock and with a congenital defect even though Godboldo says that she “NEVER received cash assistance from the state” and her daughter’s “defect” resulted from medical malpractice during delivery (Bukowski). Even though Godboldo disassociates herself from welfare and its criminal stereotypes, the terms under which the Attorney General attempted to criminalize her have a long history in the welfare state. Motherhood and the home remain central features whereby the state manages and controls parent-child relations, and those families whose housing conditions are marked by poverty are at a disproportionate risk of being classified as unfit.

Though the War on Welfare succeeded in implementing new austerity measures and ending welfare as we knew it, in part through Reagan’s convincing tale about welfare queens, motherhood remains under strict surveillance. Following on the heels of the War on Welfare’s absorption into American culture, the War on Terror carried on one feature of its legacy. Waged in favor of providing freedom to women in Iraq and Afghanistan, the War on Terror offered American state protection of non-white women in hopes of legitimizing a version of freedom afforded by American capital. As the following chapter will address in some detail, the contours of American motherhood remain central ideological tools in cultural representations for ratifying U.S. economic and politico-military initiatives. Women continue to be responsible for maintaining the health and economic security of the nation via the consumer-driven household, and the state is invested in identifying those who uphold the ideal and those who do not. The racialized legacy of the War on Welfare as class warfare continues to direct public attention to the
wrong villain even at a time when the villainy of the one percent has been so blatantly on display.
Chapter 4

Privatizing the War on Terror: Teaching Children Rugged Survivorship, Resilience and Grit

During the War on Welfare, the home was construed as a site of pathology for women who refused to enter wage-labor; during the War on Terror, discourses on domestic labor shifted back to the home as a space for women and children to express patriotism by securing the domestic space. The emerging threats to American nuclear families, according to the political rhetoric and ideology of the Bush administration, were terrorists who sought to attack and undermine American economic principles of freedom represented as trade, travel, and consumer citizenship—signature features of neoliberalism. The War on Terror came to be articulated through several formulations of domestic security pivoting on the supposed protection of national and familial “homefronts.” While national security measures focused on surveillance of an array of permeable borders, expectations for women’s work inside the home intensified through the logic of “securing the homefront” and were a continuation of policies, specifically austerity measures, sped up by a series of disasters, that eliminated safety-nets for the poor.39

In his speeches to the nation directly following the attacks, President George W. Bush told Americans to remain calm and to go about their daily business of running errands and shopping for their families. Leisure spending was equally important. Bush urged Americans to get out and “enjoy America’s great destination spots” like Disneyland in Florida (“Bush Urges”; Address to the Nation). He argued that the attacks

39 Though many scholars and media outlets argued that 9/11 ushered in a new era, recent attention has focused on the links between pre-9/11 and post-9/11 as being continuous. See: Holloway (4); Keeble.
targeted “American prosperity” but that our “hard work and creativity and enterprise”
could not be stymied (Address to the Nation). After all, Americans were a steadfast group
of entrepreneurs and consumer spenders. However, despite Bush’s rhetoric, the consumer
and tourist industries, symbols of the American leisure-class, nearly collapsed within
days after the attacks. By September 19th 2001, after all commercial flights were
grounded for three days, and affected more broadly by the widespread fear of flying, the
airline industry projected layoffs off 100,000 employees (Zuckerman; Alvarez). In the
following years, several major airlines and American automakers would file for
bankruptcy. Banks were failing and millions of Americans were under water on their
mortgages. America was in the midst of an economic emergency by 2008 and
uncertainties about the possibilities for security, economic or otherwise, were
intensifying.

Images of 9/11 came to signify a modern apocalypse and the complete collapse of
civilized consumer trading (Hirsch 85). The World Trade Center was an American
symbol of trade and consumer markets, and when the buildings fell many Americans felt
like it was the end of the world as they knew it; subsequently, a post-apocalyptic
framework emerged in describing life after the attacks of 9/11. The events of 9/11
provided a cultural space for the implementation of increased austerity measures that
would create a climate in which social services could not be depended on—or demanded.
For some the twin towers themselves had represented a “form of protection, an insulation
from danger” provided by free market capitalism, but now they were in ruins (Wigley
71). After they fell, insecurity came to be both installed and reconfigured as Homeland
Security initiatives multiplied and surveillance seeped into the routines of everyday life in
and outside the confines of the home. Many apocalypse and disaster narratives after 9/11 circulated the new cultural politics of the security regime in which the fetish of the rugged individual entrepreneur epitomizes new consumer citizens, markets and possibilities for economic and individual freedom emerging from the ruins. In their focus on rugged survivorship, the spaces and images of ruin after 9/11 traffic in ideologies of home and family that divert attention away from the economic casualties of war and other man-made disasters to offer a new national imaginary in which poverty became linked to apocalypse.

My aim in reading some of the features of this cultural work here is not to dwell on the rich archive of 9/11 texts such as Don Delillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Claire Messud’s *The Emperors Children* (2006) or Jess Walter’s *The Zero* (2007) that deal specifically with the plight of New Yorkers who had first-hand experiences with the attacks. Instead, I am interested in the wider cultural aftermath of the attacks that registered in an array of cultural texts as the ripple effects of the War on Terror seeped into the national imaginary of poverty, often articulated in discourses and discursive practices regarding housing, security, family, and freedom, and apocalyptic landscapes both within and beyond New York City in the wake of hurricane Katrina. Survival within these apocalypse landscapes becomes a space to test and celebrate individual resilience and survivorship that equates freedom and possibility with the complete eradication of social safety-nets. The Homeland Security regime was a key actor in circulating the images of ruin to create a climate of fear where surveillance was necessary and care became privatized in the family home. I first trace how images of 9/11 are linked to the widespread ruin porn of
Detroit and Katrina and go on to argue that the pleasures inherent in looking at these photos are about the politics of survival that transpose spaces of death into spaces of survival. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Frank Darabont (dev) *The Walking Dead* (2010-2014) epitomize this apocalyptic fascination and illustrate the ways in which the fears conjured by the War on Terror is resolved through a revision of the patriarchal family romance that turns on the figure of the child. Through the logic of masculinist protection and Americans’ “hard work and creativity and enterprise,” these apocalypse narratives link the national and the domestic in struggles for survival and for adequate housing for the sake of a child. I then turn to two novels, Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone* (2006) and Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), that offer critical maps to the logic of masculinist protection but rely on the domesticating impulse of a female child to maintain the nuclear family amidst the erasure of any federal safety nets when economic and environmental collapse threaten basic survival at home. These children, with disabled and dead parents, serve as national models for independence and ingenuity as strategies for surviving in an age of austerity and privatization. Indeed, these narratives implicitly argue that the female child who cannot depend on her parents is already an adult who will not be dependent on her government. These girls promise to be steadfastly independent women who are also caregivers and ground-soldiers in securing the domestic home front. As neoliberalism intensified during this war, their narratives of resiliency and grit share features with representations of entrepreneurship as strategies for survival in an environment where care is at best increasingly privatized or more often in a state of ruin.

**Documenting Survival after the Collapse—9/11, Detroit, Katrina**
Public fascination with and participation in trafficking the images of urban and industrial collapse post 9/11 is an effort to relive, survive, and thrive after national traumas. When the World Trade Center buildings fell, people wanted pictures. Even though police told native New Yorkers and tourists alike to put their “cameras away, [and to] show some respect” (Hirsch 69), the impulse to take photographs persisted, part of the effort to document individual survival and to share in the national trauma. Throughout the emotional responses to the initial collision, the buildings on fire, the falling bodies, and the final wreckage once the towers fell people were taking pictures. Indeed, the event would be the most photographed disaster in history. Marianne Hirsch reports that she even “took pictures of pictures, of people looking at pictures, of people taking pictures” (69).

The photographs do not simply document the actual event and subsequent ruins, however. They traffic the spaces of death and of graveyards into ruin port that obscures the bodies of the dead and dying. Popular images of 9/11 ranged from the planes hitting the towers, to people escaping covered in ash, often carrying or supporting others, and rescue workers at ground zero. Images of people falling from the towers were a shocking feature of the initial news coverage; the most notorious among them was a striking image of a falling man that was published the day after in newspapers across the country, including The New York Times (Klienfield). This particular image was chosen out of the many of the jumpers, as they were then called, in part because of his body’s perfect vertical placement in accord with the vertical lines of the tower.\(^{40}\) The symmetry of the image isn’t just visually striking — it suggests a decisiveness on the part of the jumper.

\(^{40}\) This was Richard Drew’s, explanation of what made the photograph special and unique. Drew was the photographer who captured the falling man image as well as images of Robert Kennedy as he was dying,
that set this particular image apart from the others. The image remains one of only a few that was fiercely critiqued by the viewing public. CNN pulled the video coverage of the jumpers once editors realized that they were capturing bodies mid-air. Newspapers who ran the falling man images apologized after receiving complaints that they had “turned tragedy into leering pornography” and the image was subsequently censored and relegated to the depths of the internet (Junod “Falling Man”).

The images that people would see as part of the homeland security machine dramatized the ruins and glorified the heroes who ran into the burning buildings to search the rubble, not the men and women who jumped to their deaths. The image of the Falling Man, and the initial video coverage of the numerous jumpers represented a brutal truth: there would be no heroic intervention.\(^4\) The Falling Man was withdrawn from circulation for a host of reasons but among them it would seem was his too visceral reminder of American male decline and of dashed hopes for imaginary male heroes that would save employees and maintain the myths of masculine protection that prop up the ideology of family structure. Certainly in the photographing frenzy of the events and aftermath of 9/11 the lives that were lost were not disregarded, but I am arguing that what people were capturing in many of the photographs, was not merely bodies or symbols of the dead but a certain aura that became a cultural vehicle for representing survivorship. Hirsch speculates that “through these photographs, others who are not here might be able to share in the dimensions of these deaths, their grandeur” (77). Overriding death was this aura of grandeur: the shared dimensions of heroism, ingenuity, and survivorship.

\(^4\) Junod: “We’re all falling men now” and showed us that 9/11 was “a loss, final and decisive, with which we’d always have to reckon” (Falling (Mad) Man)
The Portraits of Grief that appeared in the *New York Times* are a case in point for here the euphemistic treatment of the dead was emphatic. The Portraits of Grief were not obituaries. Rather, they maintained a decorous ambiguity between the missing and presumed dead (Simpson 22). The portraits uniformly portrayed the victims as “happy people, fulfilled in their jobs, fountains of love and charity, pillars of their family and community” (95). The memorializing impulse of the portraits sought to celebrate their lives without dwelling on the conditions of their death and dying. The men and women who died in the World Trade Center, and also in the Pentagon and on Flight 93 were described in other media representations as well as heroes and patriots lauded by politicians and reporters alike. They had, according to New York mayor Rudolph Guiliani, sacrificed their lives for their country (47). This conflation between civilians and servicemen was important because citizens were being charged with fighting the War on Terror at home in tandem with military personnel who were fighting on the front abroad. Visual reminders of the deaths of both iterations of heroes were suppressed. When Ted Koppel tried to document the transportation of flag-draped caskets of military personnel killed in the line of duty, several major TV stations censored the program (90). A stricter code of ethics was tacitly enforced in mainstream media in compliance with the emerging norms of the War on Terror’s cultural front: the dead bodies of civilian and military heroes are decidedly not for public viewing, precisely so that we may memorialize their lives as well lived, happy, and full of friends and family.

The photographs of 9/11 were marketable as scenes of ruin and disaster, but represented as scenes of heroism and patriotism. In other words, they documented *survival* in the end of the world as we knew it. One popular image is of the remaining
portion of the World Trade Center tower that remained obstinately erect despite the trauma to the surrounding structure—a kind of heroic survival, though reduced to a remnant, represented in architectural form.

Figure 1 illustrates not only the collapse of the towers, but also the remains of the exterior wall that refused to fall. In other words, the collapse was not total. Symbolically, all was not lost. These photographs became an early example of what would later be dubbed “ruin porn,” in referring to photographs of Detroit and third-world tourism photographs, because they aestheticized the attacks and subsequent ruins, dramatized the scene for the sake of spectacle, and romanticized everyday folks for their acts of heroism. The images of ruin photography also make the event into a tangible relic, a souvenir, a commodity that invites participation in the national trauma turned into a celebration and jubilation of survival, heroism and rugged survivorship.

Figure 1: Keres, New York, N.Y. Sept. 14, 2001.
When Detroit collapsed, people wanted pictures too. Much of the ruin photography in Detroit is of train stations, public schools, libraries and hospitals—public services, and the services they provide, in ruins.\(^{42}\) These ruins were marketable as symptoms of urban decay but also as reminders of what remains when a major industrial city is gutted of its public spaces and services. As in New York after 9/11, the people taking pictures in Detroit include everyone from locals to international poverty tourists and they are often taking pictures of others taking pictures in deserted buildings, documenting of all sorts “survivor” activities in the ruins—from multicourse gourmet meals to ice hockey in decrepit factories to a nude artist taking seriously the “porn” component of ruin porn—everyone is taking pictures.

Figure 2: Scott Haefner. “Sprouting.” Book Depository.

\(^{42}\) The most famous photographers of ruin photography are French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. They situate their photographs within a larger historical context, and argue that Detroit signals “the passing of a great Empire.” Their photographs are of Michigan Central Station, schools, hospitals and banks. Their work has influenced other international poverty tourists and photographers.
These poverty tourists traffic in the ruins of Detroit to substitute resiliency and grit for structural adjustment. Recent scholarship on grit and resilience during financial hardship romanticize the poor and justify the elimination of safety nets. Grit and resilience have become the new mantras of education and youth in America (Smith “Does Teaching”). Both undermine claims of uneven access to opportunity due to structural racism and economic inequality. Students are told that there are “no excuses”
for failure and that the key component to personal success is a capacity for resilience and grit. These theories of grit have become part of surviving the end of social-safety nets and services and end of the world as we know it after 9/11. In Detroit, young entrepreneurs, artists, and urban farmers demonstrate good citizenship through precisely this sort of resilience and the creation of alternative economies that include scavenging. By making do amidst the ruins of the city, they show that the lack of city services and infrastructure does not prevent individual ingenuity and can actually spur it. America is now full of these stories, often focused on young people surviving against the odds by developing new strategies for coping in an ever-changing landscape outside the rigid structures of (adult) leadership and control. These artists demonstrate what grit can do.

When the community has grit, Detroit is not a place of decay but instead of possibility, of exploration—even of utopia. The recent documentary *Detropia* (2012), directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, juxtaposes the union workers’ failed attempts to keep jobs in Detroit with the young white artists who have emigrated to Detroit for the promise of cheap rent and the thrill of poverty tourism. The two groups are set up as the past (industrialization) and the future (entrepreneurship), where the ingenuity of young artists coming to Detroit to “experiment” and revitalize a dying city. It is artists who turn a former AUTO PARTS logo into UTO PiA. But, in many ways, these artists have a mobility unavailable to many native Detroiters. They are able to leave if they want; consequently they are able to see Detroit as a safe-space because “if we fail, we haven’t

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43 KIPP charter schools focus on providing quality education to minority, low income communities by teaching 7 character traits that lead to success: zest, grit, self-control, optimism, gratitude and curiosity (KIPP). The focus on character is similar to culture of poverty theories in that the solution to poverty is through improving the moral character of poor people. KIPP has partnered with Dr. Angela Duckworth at University of Pennsylvania who has argued that grit is a better indicator of success than IQ (NPR/TED Staff).
fallen anywhere.” This utopian no-place,⁴⁴ is a utopia in part because of the lack of city services. There is no regulation and artists who have resources can re-build the city in their own image.

Grit and resilience are linked to the structural privileges of both race and class. This utopian vision erases the bodies burdened and killed by the removal of social services such as safe housing and access to healthcare. These bodies are not in the frame of ruin porn and are subsequently not grievable. For example, when a group of urban explorers found a dead body encased in ice from the knees up in the Roosevelt Warehouse, they did not report the dead body. Instead, they continued playing hockey around the corpse (LeDuff). A reporter for *The Detroit News*, Charlie LeDuff, got a call about the body and went to investigate before reporting it to the police. He confirmed that the anonymous caller was not a hoax; six calls and almost 24 hours later, the fire department arrived to begin removing the body from the ice. The explorers in this case literally disregarded the body of a dead man in their fascination with a spectacle. This example is only one instance of the pleasures gained from trafficking in the images of ruin porn that celebrate the bodies that suffer from the city in ruins.

This Detroit utopia is for white urban artists, farmers, and entrepreneurs while it is a city in ruins for the educators who are losing their neighborhood schools, the poor who are being forced out of their homes by city planners, and the everyday people on their way to work without city bus service. It is a city with real unemployment around 50%.

⁴⁴ Harvey traces how the place that is no place is common language for describing utopias (*Spaces* 173).
Still, it is a place where people come to see and take stock and provisionally inhabit the majestic ruins of industrialization.45

The public fascination with the ruins of Detroit is grounded in an ideology that celebrates poverty and the end of the world as we knew it as a way to display grit and resilience. The ruins remind us of what the end will look and feel like (Binelli “How Detroit”). Steve and Dorota Coy, Detroit performance artists who started Hygenic Dress League, for example, explain that Detroit is “like a post-apocalyptic world. The ruins of Detroit are just as much about the past as they are about a future. We are surrounded by all these abandoned factories and buildings falling down. Of course it’s a great venue for making all kinds of artwork” (“Our Mission”). Much of the art that Hygenic Dress League makes does critique disaster capital, but it also participates in capitalizing on the disaster by aestheticizing the ruins.

The pleasures of ruin porn, a key trope of the apocalypse, arise out of trauma and loss but also contain and manage the danger both conjure. The term “ground zero” is being used to describe not only 9/11 but also Detroit and Katrina.46 The term implies a containment logic (Hirsch), but it is also most commonly associated with nuclear explosions from The Trinity site in New Mexico to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, placing America among other nations that have lost “significant civilian casualties on their own soil” (Simpson 44). In this context the term “ground zero” functions “reflexively as an indicator of the dialectical and cyclic relation between us and them, the homeland and the faraway place” (44) and between the home front and the war-front. To be sure, there was

45 Binelli; Austin.
46 Arne Duncan, the Education Secretary told reporters that “Detroit is ground zero . . . Detroit is New Orleans two years ago without Hurricane Katrina, and I feel a tremendous sense of both urgency and outrage” (“Detroit Schools”). Ground zero for Katrina is frequently used as a sign of future hurricanes due to global warming (Troeh)
a sense of Americans coming to terms with a woundedness that other nations and people have long-known. But, the logic of ground zero also suggests the possibility of imminent danger and additional threats if containment is not steadfastly preserved.

Ruin porn trafficks in post-apocalyptic spaces in that incitements to show grit and resilience are almost literally overlain on the brutal and devastating loss of a way of life and the care and social services that helped support it. The lessons of these images and the following narratives is that state care is undependable and a new ethics of rugged survivorship will be necessary to survive a wide range of terrors at home.

**Surviving the Apocalypse, Rebuilding the Family**

Images of collapse became part of the popular imaginary after 9/11 and were relived through a series of apocalypse narratives. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *I am Legend* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008) are only a few of them and all are set in New York. Apocalypse narratives are marked by an erasure of the family unit yet often the construction of a more promising future depends on a re-instantiation of the family as an effort to push back the clock on gender equality and the home. The post-apocalyptic family restores an old world, in which securing the home front for the child is crucial for a regime focused on masculinist protection.

After the 9/11 attacks, Americans were looking for masculine heroes. In *The Terror Dream* Susan Faludi documents how the media portrayed a range of individuals from politicians to firefighters as heroes in the wake of September 11th. Heroes were found on Flight 93, in firehouses and police stations across the country. But, perhaps, most powerfully heroes were found in the White House. *Time Magazine* dubbed Bush
“The Lone Ranger.” In a *Vanity Fair* article Bush was pictured as a cowboy whose underlings were given superhero names to fit them into superhero molds. Dick Cheney was “The Rock,” John Ashcroft into “The Heat” and Tom Ridge into “The Protector.” According to Faludi such comic hyperbole was a response to the perceived impotence, despondency, and humiliation felt by the American population, a response not to the attacks themselves, but, rather, to the fact that there was almost no one to rescue once the buildings fell. Since so few survivors were to be found, the public began searching for heroes to protect the nation against an unidentified but imminent threat.

The form of protection that the Bush Administration proposed was what Iris Young has called militaristic, “masculinist” protection. In “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State” she outlines the ways in which organized violence is perpetrated by the state in the name of protection. Masculinist protection is not a gendered reality, but, rather, a gendered rhetorical structure that the state uses to subordinate both its male and female citizenry. Young contrasts her formulation of masculinist protection to the feminist theory of masculinity as “self-consciously domi

consciously dominative” because a formulation of masculinity as inherently violent itself creates the justification for masculine protection. As such, the masculine protector is more closely aligned with ideas of chivalry (“The Lone Ranger”) because men are “neither selfish nor do they seek to enslave or overpower others for the sake of enhancing themselves” (4). Indeed, many Americans believe that President Bush and his cohort of heroes (or knights in shining armor) were working to protect them from imminent threats both at home and abroad.
As such, this “protective” structure inspires gratitude rather than lamentation for the promise of security in exchange for liberty. Even though masculine protection is not malevolent, Young yokes it with Foucault’s pastoral power “that many experts in the care of individuals exercise over those cared for…[whose actions] often appear gentle and benevolent…but [are] no less powerful” (6). The dissemination of fear was an enabling condition for the successful implantation of this masculinist rhetorical structure. Stunned by media reports of national vulnerability and images of trauma and ruin, Americans desired protection and were willing to turn over their freedom in order to be protected by their national hero--or any of his avatars. Narratives of apocalypse after 9/11 recuperated male authority from subjugation to the new security state by operationalizing a masculinist rhetorical structure that reproduced and reorganized masculine protective structures in the patriarchal family.

Cormac McCarthy’s widely popular, Pulitzer Prize winning, apocalyptic novel *The Road* reproduces the logic of substitution that necessitated the creation of heroes and structures of protection after 9/11. In *The Road*, an unnamed man and son travel south on pre-apocalyptic roadways in a desperate attempt to get away from cannibals who enslave humans for food, sex, and labor. In order to have a reason for living in a world where people are reduced to bodies of consumable and commodifiable flesh, the father imagines that he and his son are “carrying the fire” and that they are “the good guys.” The father is the protector of the future, embodied through the child. Apocalypse narratives such as *The Road* embody the fantasy and fear of surviving outside social safety nets that provide help to the hungry and justice to the disadvantaged and abused.
In *The Road* the family home is a place of fear and danger. One of the stops the father and son duo make on their way south is father’s family home. The father has a sense of nostalgia for the things in the house and the memories represented therein. When the boy asks where they are, the father explains “It’s the house where I grew up” (25). While the father felt for the places on the mantle that once hung stockings forty years ago the boy asks if they can go because he is scared. For him, there is no nostalgia here. Indeed, on the road the mummified dead are “everywhere” (24), but it is in the houses where the boy is most at risk. It is in houses where bodies are held for food, and women and children are held as slaves. In other words, in *The Road* home is a literal deathcamp where bodies are held on reserve for future dismemberment and consumption. As the father and son search for food in a country house, they enter a basement to find another version of food in the post-apocalyptic world. There were men and women “huddled against the back wall…naked, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.” (110). Somehow the inhabitants know that the father and son are not there to dismember and consume them, but they also do not help. Fear is ever present and they are almost caught as they escape the house. In the post-apocalypse home is a place where bodies are used up and consumed not a place for care.

Women and children, so frequently associated with the home, are the casualties of the deteriorating safe-spaces of housing in a post-apocalyptic world. In the apocalypse of *The Road*, motherhood is vulnerable. The boy’s mother explains that the family are not survivors; they are the “walking dead in a horror film . . . You can’t protect us. . . They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you
won’t face it” (56). The only other woman in the novel is pregnant and “wretched looking beyond description” She left the child that she delivered in the night cooking on a spit (195). In the apocalypse, women shirk their roles as mothers through suicide or infanticide.

Given the lack of “good” mothers the boy, in his sheer existence, is figured as a messiah. A traveler on the road, Ely, thought that the son might be an angel. “When I saw that boy I thought that I had died,” the old man said. “You thought he was an angel?” The father asked. “I didn’t know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn’t know that would happen” (172). Because so few women survive, let alone one capable of literally and figuratively carrying and caring for a baby, Ely did not believe that a child could survive. In this sense the child’s survival is a miracle. Here a child’s survival signals hope as in the film The Children of Men (2006) where, after two decades of human infertility, the pregnant woman and the subsequent child are a sign that the community can be reborn and that survival of the human race is possible.

When the son is taken in by another family, complete with a house, mother, father, and two children, a boy and a girl, the family unit is healed and reproduction is possible and the possibility for a new era emerges. The mother holds the boy and explains, “I am so glad to see you” (286). Here, as in many post 9/11 narratives, the child is figured as the savior because he is the unifier of the fractured and disabled family. The family structure, represented in the safe house as the traditional nuclear family model, is represented as the signal of a new beginning, the other side of the fear and insecurity of the post-apocalyptic world and the need for masculinist protection.
While motherhood features only in the margins of *The Road*, it is a central feature of the most-watched post-apocalyptic television series *The Walking Dead*. Here the organizing principle of the series is the logic of masculinist protection, figured as the cowboy-hero. The only men still living in their family homes are Morgan and Herschel. These two men and their children survive in the homes they had before the apocalypse. Although they may not have running water and other city services, their houses are relatively safe-spaces. Herschel has a working well, crops, and chickens. The farm is the place to be post-apocalypse. But, we soon learn that there is something else tying them to their homes: their walker-wives. Every night, when the walkers converge on Morgan’s suburban neighborhood, Duane’s mother comes to door and turns the doorknob. Morgan explains, “That’s not your mom. That’s not your mom” as Duane cries. Herschel has been corralling walkers into his barn and feeding them live chickens. But, these walker mothers are dangerous. Indeed, Duane is killed by his mother, while Beth, Herschel’s youngest daughter, is attacked by her mother and ultimately saved by Rick—the stock cowboy-hero. Mothers outside the home are dangerous to the family unit and to the family home. Once the wife’s walker body is killed, the family is drawn away from their homes. The destruction of safe housing coincides with the destruction of the nuclear family—and it is aberrant motherhood that is to blame.

In these narratives positive, nurturing motherhood and mother-child relationship after the apocalypse is untenable and consequently the search for a safe home for the child is a central plot device. If saving the child from danger and trauma is a constant struggle it also propels the rhetoric of masculinist protection. Underwriting that rhetoric is the notion that existing versions of femininity and motherhood must be altered if
women are to survive in the current climate of protection. Without mothers, however, home is a dangerous place.

That home is indeed a dangerous place was the premise behind the national project of securing the home(land) after the 9/11 attacks and it was articulated in many narratives that hinged on keeping children safe and protected. In the post-apocalyptic imaginary the child is the figure of national repair. On the morning of September 11, 2001 President George Bush was reading *The Pet Goat* to the second grade class at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida. In what would become a canonical image, then chief of staff Andy Card whispered in his ear, “A second plane has hit the second tower. America is under attack.” In an effort to “project a sense of calm” and not “rattle the kids,” he showed no outward signs of distress and stayed until the story was finished (Boyle). Though he would be criticized for not acting immediately, his decision to stay-put supposedly displayed a heroic gesture of protecting the children’s innocence.

Narratives explicitly directed to children tended to frame the events of 9/11 through recovery, heroism, individual accomplishment, or community resolve (Connolly)—key features of neoliberalism. While the administration urged adults to volunteer and donate to the recovery effort, child psychologists recommended that parents give children the opportunity to help others as a way to “maintain a sense of control and realize that one person can make a difference” (Connolly 290). For both parent and child, then, the impulse to help was an impulse to maintain a sense of control and contain the terror of national insecurity. The primary book reviewed on Reading Rainbow’s 9/11 episode, and a widely read children’s book on 9/11, *On That Day: A
*Book of Hope for Children* (2001), “positions the young reader as a symbol of redemptive innocence . . . who can repair the world and ultimately end terrorism” (291). Though these were narratives designed for children, they represent adult hopes and a protectionist logic where children embody not only the future, but also the end of terror.

**Disaster at the End of the Social Safety-net**

After the attacks of 9/11, domestic security received a major federal overhaul. The first test of the Department of Homeland Security’s restructuring of domestic initiatives was Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The federal government’s ability to respond to widespread disaster was an unmitigated failure documented in a 24-hour news cycle. For Katrina, there would be no *Time Magazine* spread depicting the president or politicians as heroes. Instead, the hip hop recording artist Kanye West, off-script and rambling, would tell Americans to make individual donations to the Red Cross because “Bush doesn’t care about black people.” In many respects, Katrina was the nadir of the Bush presidency and Bush himself would say that being called a racist by Kanye West was the worst moment of his presidency—worse than the Iraq weapons debacle, worse than 9/11 (Burnett “Kanye”; Stein). Indeed, the relief efforts of FEMA and The Road Home Program were widely critiqued as being incredibly difficult for individuals to successfully navigate and get real relief (Adams). The heroes of Katrina that provided real and swift relief would be locals, non-profits and faith-based networks (11). Though the recovery left large gaps,

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47 In an interview with Matt Lauer, Bush explains “You go on: ‘I faced a lot of criticism as president. I didn't like hearing people claim that I lied about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction or cut taxes to benefit the rich. But the suggestion that I was racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low’” (Burnett “Kanye”).
non-governmental organizations were hailed as providing real relief to the people affected by Katrina (21).

In an effort to show that he was committed to the areas affected by Katrina, Bush appointed Frances Fragos Townsend, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism to “learn the lessons to improve our future disaster response.” In a 217-page report to the president, Townsend outlines many “lessons learned” and ways to improve federal response. However, Townsend repeatedly compared Katrina to 9/11 and returned again and again to the notion that the first responders were, and would continue to be, state and local officials, charities and average citizens. The Constitution, Townsend summarizes, operates “on the general premise that governments exist to do those things that individuals, alone or in free and voluntary association (e.g., families and charities), are not best positioned to do for themselves” (11). Much of the federal aid for disaster relief falls under the Stafford Act that establishes that state governors must request assistance from the federal government only when state and local resources are overwhelmed. The report implicitly placed responsibility back on the states for not asking for relief aid and on local families and charities for not doing their part.

Each section of the report opens with a quote from Bush responding to the catastrophe to signal that he performed his Constitutionally given role. To better “meet victims’ needs” in the future Townsend argues that the lesson learned is that the Department of Homeland Security needs to help foster collaboration between “government, private sector, faith-based, non-profit, and other volunteer personnel” to “innovate ways to provide medical, financial and housing assistance” (48). As a sign of this innovation, he explains how Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton “are
distributing over $90 million they raised following Hurricane Katrina to Gulf Coast higher education institutions, local and regional faith-based organizations, and the States of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama” (48). The new role of the federal government would be to solicit donations from individuals and then spread that wealth to higher education and religious organizations. Direct aid would be out of the question in an age of austerity.

In the ensuing years communities and individuals across the country have reproduced this logic. In both big and small ways Americans are asked to donate individually to every relief effort from Katrina to Sandy, from the earthquake in Haiti to the tsunami in Sri Lanka, individuals are told that they can make a difference by donating a dollar a day or their time to charities both global and local. The safety net is individualized, ad-hoc and unreliable. Individuals would have to be their own heroes.

The brutal, unforgiving truth of Katrina is that 71% of those who died were elderly—if the government statistics are correct. Some were even abandoned in nursing homes. The current “Get a Game Plan” for the Governor’s Office of Homeland Security &Emergency Preparedness (HSEP) in Louisiana puts the responsibility for being prepared on the family. The Family Plan preparations include: prepare a personal evacuation plan, know what to do when a hurricane watch is issued, know what to do when a hurricane warning is issued, protect your home, protect your valuables, prepare for high winds and prepare for those with special needs. The individual is doing the work of protecting the home(land) by making a smart plan. Those with special medical needs are not exempt from making similar, but also more extensive, plans. Shelters cannot guarantee power for medicines that require refrigeration or power for special medical
equipment. The requirements for Medical Special Needs Shelter are that the individual cannot be ill and must be able to “provide for their own basic care” but they must also “have a chronic, debilitating medical condition that requires intermittent or occasional assistance.” It’s a catch-22—you must be able to provide for your own care, but you must also need assistance to have access to medical special needs shelters. You must also bring the following items with you: medications, instructions for your care, walker or other special equipment, bedding, identification, mattress, food, personal hygiene items, clothes, air mattress, drinking water (1 gallon per day), extra glasses, flashlight, garbage bags, food for service dogs (if applicable), plastic hospital-type urinal (if needed). The state would not be responsible for meeting the basic or medical needs of even its most vulnerable population.

Some people would not even be recognized by the state. Eight years after Katrina, the death toll still remains a mystery and a source of anger and frustration (Olsen). John Mutter, a Columbia University professor estimates that the “true death toll will top 3,500 if those killed by the storm and by its many after-effects are accurately tallied.” The federal response to Katrina, marked the number at 1,300 and labeled it as “the most destructive natural disaster in American history” (1). The stark truth is that many bodies have yet to be counted.

Many of the stories and images of Katrina that are disseminated, as with the 9/11 attacks and Detroit, are tales of hope for a new, better beginning. In an interview with NPR, Wayne Dakkay, Owner of Little Dizzy’s Café, exemplifies this story: “we got a chance to start all over. If we screw this up this time, it’s only our fault. I think this is a tremendously unique opportunity to change the way we do business in this city” (Burnett
“Imagining”). Scott Cowen, President of Tulane echoes Dakkay’s sentiment: “To me it’s an exciting time to be in New Orleans, because no other major city that I know of in the United States in well over 100 years has the opportunities to redo themselves, to reinvent themselves, the way New Orleans has” (Burnett “Imagining”). Tony Recasner, an experienced school reformer goes so far as to call Hurricane Katrina a “blessing in disguise” because of “lighting, textbooks, kitchen equipment and landscaping” that people donated to make the school a “beacon of light in the community” (Burnett “Imagining”). New Orleans will be the first school district in the country to have a charter-only system. Charter schools, though they receive government funding, are independently operated and are a move toward privatizing public education. Like education, disaster preparedness would be privatized and New Orleans would become a city for young entrepreneurs making a new path, building a safer, stronger, smarter Louisiana from the ruins left behind by the elderly, the disabled, and the needy.48

*Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward won the National Book Award in 2011 and has been labeled the first great novel about Katrina. The novel reproduces the logic of the Homeland security regime and traces not the aftermath of the hurricane, not the bodies of the dead floating in the murky and dangerous waters, but the series of preparations leading up to the disaster. The novel details the diverse ways in which a poor family, making a way out of no way, prepares out of a ramshackle existence for environmental disaster while they are repeatedly reminded that no one will come to save

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48 The Road Home program, a subsidiary of HUD, was designed to help residents affected by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita get back into their homes. The program deploys similar narratives as the Department of Homeland Security even though they have worked toward increasing flood protection, improving municipal draining and pumping along with updated building codes—precisely the kinds of things *individuals, churches and families* cannot do—but the impetus for developing and improving these systems and facilities is framed through security and individual ingenuity.
them. They are on their own—homeland security will not be provided by the nation; the only protection will be provided by the family unit. Here, too, as in other post-apocalypse narratives, a new kind of femininity must emerge—rugged, brutal, gritty, and most importantly, motherly.

The novel is preoccupied with a series of preparations taken on by the entire family readying for a storm—even before one is named. Though the first ten chapters focus on preparations, the final push to prepare includes: covering the windows, bringing the jugs of water in, filling the gas tank, cooking whatever’s in the refrigerator, parking the truck in the clearing by the pit, getting food. Adequate preparations are not only difficult but impossible without additional financial support. The family is poor so finding and preparing adequate food on any day is a struggle. Three days of food for a family of five without a refrigerator or stove is an unachievable goal, but they still gather rations as best they can. They don’t have adequate plywood to cover all the windows, but they salvage from other areas of their land, including the chicken coop..

Although the father receives disability payments, underground economies are important strategies for survival for the family. Skeetah has set a long-range plan in motion to make some cash. The underground dog-fighting economy in Bouis Sauvage is so lucrative that Rico “only has a part-time job as a mechanic at an oil change shop, and he spends the rest of his time driving his dog in his pickup truck to illegal dogfights set back in the woods” (13). Skeetah has been developing his dog China’s reputation as an exceptional fighter. She has fought every dog owned by the boys in Bois Sauvage and she won all but her two initial fights. Because of her reputation, her puppies will bring the family 800 dollars. In excitement, Skeetah exclaims, “Do you know what we can do with
eight hundred dollars?” (74) For Skeetah, and the rest of the family, 800 dollars would not only provide adequate food for a period of time, it would also provide a modicum of leisure spending.

As a father and head of household Skeetah also makes preparations to enter the disaster economy. The post-hurricane market is an opportunity to make additional income by fixing his dump truck and collecting debris after the storm hits. It would be off the books income to supplement the meager disability checks he receives. He imagines that hurricane season could potentially be a blessing in disguise for the family’s economic needs. From the children’s perspective he is “obsessed with hurricanes this summer” and as they see it the preparations are panicked, full of fear, drinking and desperation (46).

Ultimately, their father will lose three fingers preparing the house for the big storm when he tries to use his dump truck to tear down the chicken coop and he will not have enough access to capital to profit from the disaster.

Even though the family has been reduced to bone after making their way through the roof during the flood, they are survivors. The father’s wound from his missing three fingers seems to be infected from the rising, dirty waters and the infection makes him weak. The children, Randall, Junior and Esch, are all bleeding, all gashed in some form or another from the debris and the fight to get out of the house (239). However, their shared trauma restores the family unit. They will survive by watching over each other and their surroundings:

We will sit with him here, in the strange, insect-silent dark. We will sit until we are sleepy, and then we will remain until our legs hurt, until Junior falls asleep in Randall’s arms, his weak neck lolling off Randall’s
elbow. Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah, and Skeetah will watch none of us. He will watch the dark, the ruined houses, the muddy appliances, the tops of the trees that surround us whose leaves are dying for lack of roots. He will feed the fire so it will blaze bright as a lighthouse. He will listen for the beat of her tail, the padding of her feet in mud. He will look into the future and see her emerge into the circle of his fire, beaten dirty by the hurricane so she doesn’t’ gleam anymore, so she is the color of his teeth, of the white of his eyes, of the bone bounded by his blood, dull but alive, alive, alive, and when she sees her, his face will break and run water, and it will wear away, like water does, the heart of stone left by her leaving” (258)

They are left with nothing but each other and their community. This community does take them in, but the trauma is restorative to the family unit. The family is improved by the disaster, not forever broken by it.

Esch demonstrates the grit and resilience necessary to keep fighting in the absence of social safety nets. She had been pushed by her father into the storm, fought the storm, been cut to the bone, and been to war, and she survived (257). And we learn that she would not die in childbirth like her mother. She and her siblings survive because they are hard-scrabble. “Without any of the comforts of civilization—no electricity, no running water, no government safety net—and all you have are your hands, your feet, your head and your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: survive” (264). The focus on survival through the family unit eclipses the dead bodies in the water. Although the title
of the novel suggests that there will be bones to salvage, it will be the bones of the survivors, not of the dead.

In this regard *Salvage the Bones* provides a counter-narrative to the news coverage on Katrina in which people were asking for help, chanting it even. The families here are fiercely independent and survive through an ethics of salvage, savageness and community, the very narrative that Homeland Security would endorse. The safety net is the local community and the family.

Daniel Woodrell’s novel *Winter’s Bone* (2006) extends the preparations of disaster narratives to the everyday preparations of crisis management of the poor. *Winter’s Bone* captures the terrors of a post 9/11 world, the subsequent idealization of the homeland, family life, and the hope that the child could end the insecurity and terror of poverty through (re)establishing the community. Ree successfully shapes her own destiny in spite of overwhelming family obligations and limited educational and economic opportunities. While brutal inequalities permeate the text, Ree’s grit in navigating the underground crank economy in the Ozarks will allow her to secure the family home.

As winter approaches, survival depends on preparations for the long lean months ahead. The houses in Ree’s remote neighborhood, set apart from town, have two or more deer carcasses hanging from their front porches. As she faces the wind, “her cheeks reddening as if smacked and smacked again,” she compares her preparedness to her neighbors’ (3). Her situation is dire. Her kitchen does not get sunlight and she would have to string a clothesline there above the potbelly stove for clothes to dry—and their
socks already show signs of the problems of hanging clothes to dry inside a cold home.\textsuperscript{49} They have no venison hanging on their porch. They have scant firewood for the potbelly stove. Their pantry is bare. In short, the approaching winter has the potential to reduce Ree and her family to bone.

Ree’s father, Jessup, normally completed the preparations for winter, and had promised to come back with “cash and a trunkload of delights,” but he has gone missing (4). Jessup is “broken-faced” (8) like so many of the Dolly kin who live lives outside “square law” (8). These fractured lives and broken bones that mended wrong, made for tough and abbreviated living. After limping through life the Dollys were known to fall “dead in a single evening from something that sounded wet in the lungs” (28). Her mother might as well be missing or dead but she is there and she is certainly broken. She is nearly comatose for days at a time and only speaks sporadically and in incomplete sentences.

Although Ree is only 16, her body is already marked by “loping after needs” of others and she is on a course toward disability (3). Once she finds out that the house that has been in her family for generations has been used as collateral for her father’s bail, from participating in one of the only lucrative economies—cooking crank—she knows that “She’d never get away from her family as planned, off to the U.S. Army, where you got to travel with a gun and they made everybody keep things clean. She’d never have only her own concerns to tote. She’d never have her own concerns” (15). Without a home, she worries she would never be able to teach her brothers to become self-sufficient.

\textsuperscript{49} Clothing left to dry in the home can cause problems with allergies, and the boys already have a hacking cough. The slow sickness that the men in the family have, alludes to lung diseases from coal mining, but now meth-cooking.
The novel recognizes that home is a space where education and skills are learned and developed for surviving. Because Ree knows that the family may lose their house and her brothers may be separated, she teaches Harold, 8, and Sonny, 10, as much as she can while they still have the house. She teaches them to cook, to wash their mother’s hair, shoot, skin a squirrel, and fight. While home in this hardscrabble country is a space for education, the school is a place of luxury for pregnant girls bumping bellies, boys smoking, lovers kissing and teachers watching “with sad eyes” as Ree hitches a ride (48). Spending the day in school would be impossible for Ree. She does not have the time to attend and never will again. The home and the family, not the state sponsored school-system, are expected to do the work of sustaining the family through the rough winter.

As in apocalypse narratives, the survivors minimize their needs and desires as key strategies for survival. Ree wants to live simply, meet her own needs, on her own terms. When she shops for food with the money that Uncle Teardrop gave her, she picks up noodles, rice and dried beans, soup, tomato sauce, tuna, bologna, three loaves of bread, oatmeal, grits, and three family packs of ground beef—calculating along the way to make the most meals out of her money. Gail who has taken her to the store says, “With all them noodles you’ll want sprinkle cheese, won’t you?” Ree responds, “It costs too much for what you get. So we always skip it” (122). Gail pushes, “This generic here don’t cost too much. . . It tastes just about the same.” But Ree is persistent. “Nope. Once the boys start likin’ it they’ll want it all the time. It’s too expensive. It costs even more’n meat does” (123). With surprise, it hits Gail, “I must’ve been raised up rich—we always had sprinkle cheese” (123). Being rich, or having the “luxury” of sprinkle cheese sets up dangerous expectations. Ree constantly worries for the boys and tries to minimize her brothers’
expectations so that they aren’t “wailing little cyclones of want and need” when all there is left to eat is grits and oatmeal, no meat (8). When Harold suggests that they ask Blond Milton, a cousin who lives nearby, to bring them some deer meat, Ree pinches his ear until “he bore up under the pain and stopped swatting” and said “Never. Never ask for what ought to be offered” (5). Federal aid, such as food stamps would provide a modicum of food security, but Ree would have to ask for that—and fill out paperwork—and there is shame in asking or demanding for needs to be met.

Kin-networks are expected to meet basic-needs, but those safety nets have deteriorated due to skirmishes and broken rules in the underground crank-economy. Sonya, Blond Milton’s wife, brings over meat, canned food and butter. “Ree saw four days inside that box. Four days free from hunger or worrying about hunger returning at daybreak” (18). But, as Ree tries to talk to Thump Milton to find her dad and secure her home, she gets nowhere until she tells Merab, Thump’s wife, “I am a Dolly! Some of our blood at least is the same. That’s s’posed to mean somethin’—ain’t that what is always said?” (59). Although the mention of shared blood softens Merab, she ultimately just asks “Ain’t you got no men could do this?” (60). Even though she is kin, her family has been shunned because her father snitched. Kin-networks alone will not help her save her house.

To survive the winter and save her home, Ree will have to prove that she can take a beating “like a man” and fight for her family. Ree endures a near-death beating that opens up an opportunity for her to explain the importance of securing her family home. During a second trip to Thump Milton’s house to get news of her father, Merab’s two sisters start kicking Ree in the legs, ribs and face. She was “kicked into silence” and
awoke to the sound of shovels around her (130). As they scrape the shovels on the ground she feels the “vacancy where two teeth had been” and “the sting of piss drying on her legs and a thicker expulsion mushed in her panties” (131-3). Ree is now marked like the rest of her kin—missing teeth and disabled by a brutal beating. Thump approaches her and says, “You got somethin’ you need to say, child, you best say it now” (133). She responds slowly and limping from her mouth

I got two little brothers who can’t feed theirselves…yet. My mom is sick, and she is always …goin’ to be sick. Pretty soon the laws’re takin’ our house away n’throwin’ us out…to live in the fields…like dogs. Like fuckin’ dogs. The only hope I got to keep our house is…is. I gotta prove…Dad’s dead. Whoever killed him, I don’t need…to know…that. I don’t never need to know that. If Dad did wrong, Dad has paid. But I can’t forever carry both…them boys’n Mom…not…without that house to help (ellipses in text, 134).

These words, literally, save her life. Everyone in the barn is silent, an electric moment of utter silence. The fact that she had endured the beating with tenacity, framed her attempt to save her family home as a fight with the law and personified her family home as “help” in carrying her family will be what it takes to get her the “proof” she needs to keep the law from taking her home.

The proof will be her father’s hands that will provide her an opportunity to work outside the two main economies in the text: cooking crank and prostitution. Ree refuses marriage, prostitution, and any other subordinate position. She will not end up like her best friend, and possibly her lover, who is told when she can drive and leave the house.
Though the community in which Ree lives is fiercely patriarchal, her home is decidedly not. Though many of the houses in Ozark valley still had “two front doors in accordance with certain readings of Scripture, one door for men, the other for women,” Ree is able to subvert this structure (49). She “ain’t lookin’ to marry” (168) and the securing of her Father’s hands symbolizes her ability to enter male-labor markets. This is a new kind of femininity. Tough. Brutal. Survivalist. Her mother and father are beaten down by the old ways, disabled and broken. Ree is the survivor, a new woman in the home that provides reassurance that the end of the federal safety net for the poor made children stronger in the face of a wide range of terrors. As in *Salvage the Bones* this is the kind of femininity that is required at the end of the social safety nets. Ree and Esch are made better by their fights for survival.

Though recent critical attention has been paid to the poor and the effects of austerity measures abroad, the politics of home and the home front continue to be articulated through discourses on children and a politics of resilience and grit. As neoliberalism intensified after the War on Welfare, the home becomes a space to prepare for a wide range of disasters. The ruin porn of 9/11, Detroit and Katrina, apocalypse narratives and southern realism, turn to the spaces of ruins and graveyards and yet at the same time they eclipse the bodies of the dead in exchange for a jubilation of rugged survivorship, resilience and grit. This exchange, one more instance of cultural traffic in the spaces of poverty, justifies the erasure of federal and state safety nets and reinforce the neoliberal commonsense that the can survive any disaster not because the material conditions of poverty have been eradicated but through their own ingenuity, determination, attitude and grit.
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