

DISSERTATION

Titel der Dissertation

**„African American Ghettos
Portrayed in Autobiography:
The Long Steady March from Lincoln to Obama
1865-2009”**

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To my dear husband Hermann,

without whose loving support this study would have never been completed.

Thematic Overview

BLACK URBAN GHETTOS PORTRAYED IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE LONG STEADY MARCH FROM LINCOLN TO OBAMA

1865-2009

I. SETTING THE STAGE:

PRE-1965

	IDEOLOGICAL VANTAGE POINT:	ARGUMENT:	AUTHOR:	WORK:
1	Conservative Behaviorist Cultural Argument:	Family Structure	Harriet Jacobs	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i>
2	Liberal Structuralist Racial Argument:	Historic Racism	Malcolm X / Haley	<i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i>
3	Liberal Structuralist Economic Argument:	Great Migration	Claude Brown	<i>Manchild in the Promised Land</i>

II. LOCKED INTO A SPIRAL OF DECLINE:

POST-1965

	IDEOLOGICAL VANTAGE POINT:	ARGUMENT:	AUTHOR:	WORK:
4	Conservative Behaviorist Cultural Argument:	Cultural Revolution	Cupcake Brown	<i>A Piece of Cake</i>
5	Liberal Structuralist Racial Argument:	Residential Segregation	Nathan McCall	<i>Makes Me Wanna Holler</i>
6	Liberal Structuralist Economic Argument:	Urban Restructuring	John E. Wideman	<i>Brothers and Keepers</i>

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I. Introduction

1. General Introduction

We black folk, our history and our present being are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. (Richard Wright)

The African American population faces a puzzling paradox today: the economic division within its community has never been greater. While the black middle class has reached unprecedented numbers, the swelling ranks of the black poor encompass about one fourth of all black families today. Of the 37 million Americans whose economic situation places them below the official poverty line, a disproportionate number is black (see Edwards 3).

“According to statistics, while it is the best of times for the black middle class, it is the worst of times for an equally large segment of the African American community” (Gates, *Future* 24).

This study is concerned with the disadvantaged group of African Americans, often referred to in the academic discourse as “the black underclass.” Its members reside primarily in urban ghettos where conditions have been deteriorating steadily over the past 50 years. Their living environment is characterized by racial segregation, economic hardship, and social isolation from the larger American society.

The aim of this study is to consider explanations for the desolate situation in the urban ghettos: for the disproportionate rates of social dislocation (such as high crime, drug use, unemployment, illegitimacy, family dissolution, and welfare dependency) and for the emergence of intergenerational poverty in urban African American neighborhoods. Various

autobiographical texts and social theories will serve as the basis for a cultural and literary analysis. The analysis will attempt to deduce—out of a complex web of factors—the main causes which have led to the unprecedented degree of isolation and impoverishment in black urban communities. The basic underlying question pertaining to the socio-economic situation of the subjects could be summarized in the following terms: What explains the emergence of persistent, concentrated, racialized poverty in American metropolitan cities? The mostly implicit answers given by the autobiographical writers will be compared to various academic theories seeking to answer the same question.

The predominant social theories explaining the dire conditions in the inner-city ghettos have traditionally been influenced by either liberal or conservative ideology. While liberal ideology tends to emphasize the role of structural forces such as insufficient economic opportunities and racism, conservative ideology stresses the importance of values and behavior as reflected in the culture of a particular group. Both lines of thought will serve as the basis for the analyses of the selected life narratives and will briefly be introduced in the following paragraphs.

Various *conservative behaviorist theories* attempting to explain the situation in impoverished urban neighborhoods center on the factor of *culture*. “It is culture, not racism or lack of jobs or the welfare system that have caused the underclass,” according to Myron Magnet and other scholars constituting the so-called “neo-conservative” group emerging in the 1980s (Magnet 1). These scholars suggest that the change of values which has negatively affected mainstream America since the 1960s along with misguided social policies have had “catastrophic effects” on the urban poor manifesting itself in behavior which downplays personal responsibility, self-control, and deferred gratification (Magnet 2). The “real-world consequences” produced by these attitudes are “cities ... made unlivable by crime, incivility, and squalor generated by the underclass and the homeless” (Magnet 2).

Proponents of *liberal structuralist theories* agree that the social dislocations of the black underclass play a vital role in shaping the living conditions of inner-city ghettos. Yet, they contend that structural forces such as the *lack of economic opportunities* and *racism* are responsible for creating the setting in which social pathologies thrive. According to these liberal scholars, racist practices compounded by structural changes in the economy have produced extraordinary rates of black joblessness and social isolation, factors which have fundamentally shaped the daily experiences of inner-city residents.

Presenting the Arguments

The aspects (here also referred to as arguments), representing either the conservative or the liberal ideological point of view, which are involved in the emergence of the black urban underclass include:

- the loss of traditional family structures
- the cultural changes which took place in American society during the 1960s
- historic racism
- residential segregation
- the Great Migration and
- changes in the urban economy

While the first two arguments are representative of the conservative behaviorist perspective, the latter four are typically invoked to support the liberal structuralist line of reasoning.

The body of the work is accordingly divided into six chapters, each representing one argument, which is again viewed from three different angles:

- 1) from a socio-historical perspective which introduces the reader to the background of each argument. Embedded in the analysis are excerpts from various autobiographies—“snapshots” of life stories—which visualize and exemplify the socio-historical background. The analysis will conclude with
- 2) a synthesis by presenting the academic discourse between proponents of the liberal structuralist and the conservative behaviorist perspective with regards to the respective argument. Finally, the concluding section of each chapter consists of
- 3) a “literary case in point,” which analyses an autobiographical narrative representative of the argument. The life stories in this section will be critiqued from a literary point of view while placing them in the context of the underclass debate.

Despite the extensive literature on the debate, there is little consensus in academic circles about what causes the disparities of class within the black community, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarks: “We can’t even agree on the causes of black poverty, let alone how best to remedy it” (Gates, *Future* 26). Nonetheless, most scholars recognize that the “social problem that is regarded as insuperable” in American society today is the “condition of the black slums

in big cities,” (Leman 343). Nicholas Leman notes that “[t]he ghettos, and race relations in general, are the one area in American domestic life where the whole country agrees that there is something terribly wrong, where the vocabulary of crisis and national responsibility is not in the least trumped up” (Leman 353).

Sociologists, writers, and journalists have therefore repeatedly argued that finding ways of improving the plight of the inner-city poor is critical to all Americans’ future. This study seeks to join this concerted literary effort by studying the voices of writers whose lives are immediately affected.

Primary Literary Sources

The life stories which will be analyzed from a cultural and literary perspective were selected as representative autobiographical narratives with regards to the authors’ gender, their ideological vantage point, and the time period they report and reflect on. While Harriet Jacobs’ life story, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Cupcake Brown’s autobiography, *A Piece of Cake*, represent the feminist autobiographical tradition during slavery and in contemporary America respectively, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Claude Brown’s narrative, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, convey the turbulent lives of young male adolescents in the 50s and 60s. Nathan McCall’s life story, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, and John Edgar Wideman’s autobiographical narrative, *Brothers and Keepers*, offer insight into the difficulties young blacks in segregated urban areas experienced during the 70s and 80s.

The common denominator which unites this diverse group of writers lies in their background. All authors grew up in mostly segregated, impoverished inner-city areas with a socio-economic environment representative of the urban underclass. Yet, despite their common background, each author paints a unique picture of their surroundings which does not allow for simple categorization into any theory.

Historical Timeframe

As the study seeks to include all the factors in African American history that have been crucial in the evolvement of black urban ghettos, it must inevitably include the effects of slavery. The chronological structure, therefore, will go back to 1863, the year all African Americans were emancipated at the end of the Civil War under *Abraham Lincoln*. The time frame will then extend into the present, covering all the important landmark events in the twentieth century which have led to the emergence of the black urban underclass and will end with the inauguration of *Barack Obama* as the nation's first African American president in 2009. The presidencies of these two great leaders are significant in the history of black Americans not only because of the magnitude of the change they symbolize, emancipation under Lincoln, and the first African American presidency represented by Obama, but also because of their ideological approach to national leadership. Obama repeatedly applauds Lincoln's leadership style, which he seeks to emulate in various respects, by extending the ladder of opportunity downward to reach those in the economic trenches of society through government investment in America's people and in its physical infrastructure as will be elaborated on further in the final chapter of this work.

The time period framing the cultural and literary analyses, therefore, encompasses the years between 1863 and 2009 and will be divided into two periods: before and after 1965. While the years *prior to 1965* represent the factors which constitute the background for contemporary black urban ghettos to emerge, thereby *setting the stage* with the legacy of slavery, pervasive racist structures, and the Great Migration, the years *after 1965* witnessed a *continual socioeconomic decline* of these impoverished urban communities, compounded by the loss of inner-city jobs, intense racial segregation, and the cultural changes in American society at large.

The year 1965 marks a decisive turning point in African American history for various reasons. For one, Congress passed sweeping civil rights measures, such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 1965 respectively, which granted African Americans their full rights as American citizens and officially outlawed any form of de jure segregation. 1965 further witnessed a turning point in interracial relations, which was expressed in the violent protest in the nation's ghettos. Beginning with the outbreak of riots in Watts and the assassination of Malcolm X, turbulent and bloody social unrest spread to all major U.S. cities

between 1965 and 1968, culminating in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, with further riots exploding in the aftermath of his death. Finally, the year 1965, with all its major civil rights accomplishments, foreshadows the growing socio-economic intra-racial divergence, which was to intensify in the following years.

Toward a Comprehensive Perspective

In an attempt to transcend the narrow conservative-liberal framework on the underclass debate, the study will conclude the analysis with a comprehensive perspective as proposed by David K. Shipler and Cornel West. Shipler points to the importance of “assembling all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle” in the debate—liberal **and** conservative—in order to arrive at an adequate definition of the problem which will allow policy makers “to approach a comprehensive solution” (*Dots* 15). Cornel West places this comprehensive approach in the broader context of the original vision of American democracy. He reminds his readers that the plight of the inner-city urban poor is of utmost importance to the country in order to “keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America” (*Race* 156).

Over the past 250 years, African Americans have contributed to this democratic experience by composing and publishing their personal life stories. W.L. Andrews points out that the rich African American autobiographical tradition, rooted in the early slave narratives, “testifies to the ceaseless commitment of people of color to realize the promise of their American birthright” (*Autobiography* 1). Following section will consider African American autobiographies as a genre in itself which defies narrow literary categorization and which, by its very nature, is deeply rooted in the social and political context of African American history.

2. African American Autobiography in the Context of Cultural Studies

2.1. The Historical Significance of African American Biography

I write my self, therefore I am. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.)

Among the various genres that comprise the African American literary tradition, autobiography holds a position of preeminence. Denied the right to possess a collective history as a people, black Americans published their individual histories in astonishing numbers. Commencing with Briton Hammon's autobiographical slave narrative in 1760, African Americans set out to narrate the collective history of their race in autobiographical form defying the system, which deprived them access to literacy and selfhood by law. "I write my self, therefore I am," could very well be taken as the motto of African Americans, as literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. adapts the Cartesian statement (Gates, *Witness* 4). The classic slave narratives therefore, such as Harriet Jacobs' work, which will be analyzed in the first chapter of this study, allowed the authors to give birth with pen and paper to their own existence as they transformed their identity from object to subject through the writing of their personal histories.

In the twentieth century, the black autobiographical tradition continued to play a significant political role. According to literary critic George Kent, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* began a questioning that shook the American dream (see 164). Other critical post-slavery journeys of the twentieth century were soon to follow, illustrating the "persisting ambiguous relationship of blacks to American institutional dispensations" (Kent 164). The autobiographies of Malcolm X, Anne Moody, Claude Brown, Angela Davis, and many others who advocated fundamental social reform in America's racial politics were widely read and often outsold white autobiographies in the U.S. and abroad.

The explosion of autobiographical literature and the concomitant intense interest in autobiography criticism in the 1980s had its roots in the cultural and political transformations of the sixties, which brought about a change of social life and academic concerns according to literary critic Alfred Hornung. The emergence of minority and protest groups led to “the institution of new interdisciplinary programs and methodologies” (Hornung, “Criticism” 371). African American and other minority studies became recognized as producing “valuable scholarly reflections [which] questioned the consensus and prepared the way both for an interest in the sociology and the history of personal experience” (371).

One of the aspects generally considered in the critical study of life stories deals with the challenge autobiographical writers face to truthfully record their experiences. Richard Wright expresses this internal struggle as he reflects on his own autobiographical endeavors:

I found that to tell the truth is the hardest thing on earth, harder than fighting in a war, harder than taking part in a revolution.... You will find that even if you succeed in discounting the attitudes of others to you and your life, you will wrestle with yourself most of all, fight with yourself, for there will surge up in you a strong desire to alter the facts, to dress up your feelings. (qtd. in Franklin 11)

Thus, the tension between authenticity and historicity is omnipresent in autobiographical literature and will therefore briefly be dealt with in the context of the respective life stories used in this study.

2.2. African American Autobiography as an Interdisciplinary Subject

**Everyone knows what autobiography is—but no two people agree about what it is.
(James Olney)**

Since black autobiography is a powerful force in and a characteristic form of contemporary culture, a growing number of critics and commentators have been attracted to this rich tradition of literary expression. “The broad variety of perspectives from which the subject is approached—historical and ideological, literary and philosophical, sociological and psychological—testifies to the genre’s complexity. Its varieties and the mines of information and insight contained resist simple categorization,” James Olney, a prominent critical scholar of autobiography, observes in his pioneering work *Metaphors of Self* (213).

Therefore, a cultural perspective which takes into account various cultural aspects, such as the socio-economic forces shaping the author’s environment, offers a tool for understanding the narration which might be concealed to the literary critic or historian. James Olney observes further that autobiography, by its very nature, is an open and flexible form, unconstrained by rigid literary conventions. He concludes that this “may distress the literary critic in search of a corner of literature that he can define in generic terms” (*Metaphors* 214). Likewise, the historian is faced with the dilemma that the autobiography may or may not refer to a historical past, but that it must inevitably reflect and reveal the present time of writing. Thus, while scholars who take a traditional approach to understanding autobiography may be limited to a one-dimensional perspective, a cultural approach to the narration offers “dual access to the cultural matrix” in which the autobiographer locates himself: Access by way of what the autobiographer reveals, for the most part consciously, of the past [and] access by way of what he reveals, for the most part unconsciously, of the present. (Olney, *Metaphors* 214)

This type of thorough understanding of the multifaceted autobiographical text requires a flexible, interdisciplinary perspective—a truly cultural critique. Only if literary critics, historians, and social scientists work together, synergizing their disciplines’ assumptions and methodologies, will they be able to clarify issues raised by autobiographical texts. Often

psychological and metaphysical questions must also be considered. Autobiography, by its protean nature, therefore, escapes formal assumptions and prescriptions, thereby mirroring the “unrepeated and unrepeatable” life experience of the author (Olney qtd. in Stone 173).

Taking a multi-faceted critical approach, the reader trying to gain a thorough understanding of a particular life story must also take theories of personal identity into account. Albert Stone observes that postmodernist trends concerning identity, challenging the very possibility of an autobiographical self, have barely affected contemporary black autobiographers, male and female. Instead, African American writers have continued to repossess their social and historical identities by recreating their lives in narrative without subscribing to fleeting “ideas of the separation of literature from society, disappearance of the self, [and the] death of autobiography” (Stone 188).

Since each autobiographical writer is engaged in the process of negotiating their own unique identity, and since there is no single African American experience, the reader of autobiography must, in addition to the formal analysis, contribute his or her own intuitions and interpretations to a comprehensive understanding of the text. Placing autobiography in a cultural perspective, Stone likens it to a participant-observer science and art (see Stone 186). Its objective methodologies must be combined with an individual’s skepticism and sympathy. Only then will the casual reader and the literary critic alike be able to fully appreciate the unique shape and flavor of each individual life story.

The life stories analyzed in this study are all marked by a deep-seated social concern for the communities the authors originate from. In 1974 Stephen Butterfield notes that “in black autobiography, the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition” (3). He thereby captures the common characteristic of integrating communal social responsibility into individual life stories. The impact of this shared social concern on autobiographical narratives shall be elaborated on in the following section.

2.3. Autobiography in a Social and Political Context

Any black who strives to achieve in this country should think in terms of not only himself, but also how he can reach down and grab another black child and pull him to the top of the mountain where he is. (Jesse Owens)

While autobiographical writers are always engaged in the process of shaping their “self” in language, African American authors usually have an additional purpose in mind when crafting their life stories for a public readership. In bearing witness to their life experiences, which are often marked by hardship and adverse circumstances, these authors challenge American society’s perceptions about itself and undermine its prejudices about black people.

As the social and political circumstances of African Americans changed from generation to generation, so did the autobiographical ideological messages conveyed in black life stories. While the early slave narratives, represented in the first chapter by Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, sought to strengthen the abolitionist movement, intellectuals after emancipation, such as DuBois, used their autobiographical work to explore the meaning of the African American experience in the United States. In his autobiographical essays James Baldwin advocated the integration of African Americans into the mainstream of American society while Malcolm X described his personal experiences in order to justify his rejection of integrationist doctrines. Civil Rights activists such as Angela Davis and Anne Moody dedicated their life work to racial equality before the law, and residents from the urban ghettos in the 80s and 90s such as LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman embarked on the mission of opening their isolated and segregated world to mainstream America. In all these narratives politics provides an explicit—not implicit, as with many white autobiographical writers—backdrop to the construction of the black autobiographical subject, women as well as men. While the social and political messages in these life stories cover a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives, the consistent

appeal of black autobiographies is in their political awareness, their empathy for suffering, their ability to break down the division of “I” and “you,” their knowledge of oppression and discovery of ways to cope with that experience, and their sense of

shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self. (Butterfield 3)

As Stephen Butterfield notes, it is precisely this preoccupation with the well-being of the black community as a whole and with the search for ideological solutions to its predicaments which accounts for the universal interest in individual black life stories. This appeal of black autobiographies continues as each successive generation shares their political and social concerns in a country where “being black was from the start a restrictive covenant that one could run from or live with, but that one could not escape” (Gates, *Future* 18).

The social issues which lie at the heart of the African American community have, since 1945, increasingly become subject of an academic debate accompanying the development of African American progress. The discourse has focused primarily on the economically disadvantaged groups who display high rates of social dislocations and has become known as the political underclass debate. The predominant conservative and liberal theories, which have been voiced by prominent scholars and which have influenced the course of the debate shall be outlined in the following as they are essential for an adequate understanding of the cultural analysis.

II. The Political Underclass Debate

1. Recurring Episodes of Reform and Reaction: 1945 - 2009

In most Western societies concern with poverty manifests itself in recurring episodes constituted by periods of reform and reaction. In the political climate following World War II, political decision making was marked by the “Red Scare,” a deep-seated and often exaggerated concern over the spread of communism within the national borders. In the postwar era, therefore, conservative forces were strengthened and economic and social strides made by minorities during the war years were often reversed. In the early 1960s, after a period of sustained economic growth, a reawakening concern with social issues, embodied in the War on Poverty and the Great Society, characterized the public consensus and was soon to be followed by the conservative reaction with the War on Welfare during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The second episode of alternating political currents since WWII is represented by the liberal Clinton administration from 1992 to 2000 followed by the conservative reaction under President George W. Bush from 2000 to 2008. The election of Democratic President Barack Obama, finally, signals again openness for social reform.

The interpretation of the forces affecting the social and economic changes within such an episode is quite diverse and usually follows ideological lines. Thus, scholars committed to liberal ideology have traditionally considered the years that span the presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon to represent progress in America’s War on Poverty, while their conservative colleagues conceive of Ronald Reagan’s presidency as the beginning of a

“mending period” seeking to “clean up” the damage previously done by liberal politics (Magnet 5).

The following section will portray the landmarks and major social and political developments of the time span between the postwar years and 2009 as seen through the conservative and liberal lens respectively. The three major issues that have dominated both the conservative and liberal poverty discourse for centuries, according to sociologist Michael B. Katz, are following: the categorization of the poor; the impact of poor relief (welfare) on work motivation, labor supply, and family life; and the limits of social obligation (*Undeserving* 4). In the following, the importance placed on each of these issues by various representative scholars shall be considered and the ideological conclusions subsequently drawn shall be contrasted.

2. Black Socio-Economic Progress since 1945: The Conservative Behaviorist versus the Liberal Structuralist Perspective

2.1. The Historical Conservative Perspective

Concerning their understanding of poverty within the socio-political and economic developments since 1945 most conservative thinkers are apt to agree with Charles Murray. In his book *Losing Ground*, Murray summarizes the changing political atmosphere from 1950 to

1980 and contrasts the public mood with the economic situation during those years. Thus, he points out that the term “poverty” was barely mentioned in magazines and newspapers during the postwar years, when 30 percent of the population qualified as poor by today’s standard. In the 1960s, however, a period when unemployment was at an all time low and the economy was booming, the issue dominated the political discourse (6). Murray quotes an article from the *New York Times Magazine* issued in December 1950 which encourages philanthropists to start being more creative in finding useful things to do with their money since “the crushing burden of relieving destitution has been removed from the shoulders of the individual giver” (4). This was at a time when 45 million Americans lived below the poverty line. By contrast, in 1968, a period when unemployment was at only 3.6 %, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders recommended emergency legislation to create two million new jobs, “lest the deep frustrations of the poor push them to more desperate measures to pry action from an unresponsive system” (6). Not only was the economy favorable at that time, the legal situation had also taken a turn for the better concerning the rights of African Americans. A few years earlier, Congress had passed into law landmark legislation in civil rights, medical care, housing, education, and job training. The Office of Economic Opportunity was a new and active force for urban renewal, community development, drug rehabilitation, alternatives for juvenile delinquents, and “experimentation with solutions for just about every other known social problem” (6). Yet, Murray points out, even though “there was reason for satisfaction, [there was] very little of it” (6). He concludes that in the thirty year time period, from 1950 to 1980, the country had stumbled “from complacency in the face of want to hysteria in a time of plenty” (7).

Conservative scholar Myron Magnet continues Murray’s interpretation of socio-political and economic events for the 1990s. Referring to the next episode of alternating liberal-conservative rule during the presidencies of Clinton and G. W. Bush, Magnet claims that “the work of repair” done in impoverished urban centers during the Clinton administration was carried out primarily by public officials (3). He cites two cases which he considers exemplary in their effort and efficiency of “cleaning up” impoverished urban areas. The first is New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s campaign beginning in 1994 to reduce crime. The second is the federal Welfare Reform Act of 1996. Both these reforms, according to Magnet, had the effect of “utterly disproving some of the most cherished tenets of the Cultural Revolution” (3). Magnet places his example in an ideological framework by offering the following explanations for the effects of the programs. As to Giuliani’s reform in New York City, Magnet concludes that “New Yorkers, [who] saw their own quality of life improve and their

city revive and flourish because of the restoration of public order, found it hard to keep alive the orthodox belief that ‘the system’ rather than the criminal was responsible for crime” (4).

Magnet’s interpretation of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 takes a similar ideological perspective.

Increasingly during the nineties, as welfare clearly had become a way of life for the underclass—and a way of life shot through with dismaying social pathology—Americans came to dislike it, especially since the work ethic was the one traditional value that emerged from the cultural revolution largely intact in mainstream America.... The new message coming from the larger culture to the underclass—that you are expected to work, that work is dignified while idleness is not, that there can be no benefits without reciprocal obligations—[constitutes] a liberating change in the worldview of the inner city communities. (5)

The conservative behaviorist perspective therefore views black poverty and its related issues in primarily individualistic terms. Both Murray and Magnet draw clear lines between “the poor” and the “non-poor,” the “criminal” and the “upright citizen,” the “underclass” and “the rest of society.” Which category an individual falls into depends solely on his or her own choices. Whether one chooses to adhere to the basic principles of the protestant ethic or not, according to conservative thinkers, determines one’s socio-economic situation. The collective failure of poor African Americans to adhere to the Protestant ethic—hard work, deferred gratification, frugality, and responsibility—therefore, is seen as the “main problem” of the black underclass.

Social policies usually promoted by conservatives, therefore, include self-help programs, black business expansion, and non-preferential job practices. They further support vigorous free market strategies that depend on fundamental changes in how black people act and live. Subsequently, the heart of the matter determining the success of such policies “rests largely upon a cultural revival of the Protestant ethic in black America” (West, *Race* 18).

2.2. The Historical Liberal Perspective

Liberal interpretations of the causes of black urban poverty contrast sharply with the conservative perspective. While conservatives view the 60s primarily as a time of moral and cultural decay, the liberal understanding of this time period is a predominantly positive one. Cornel West calls the era of the sixties

a watershed period in American history because for the first time we decided as a people to overcome the racial divide and declare war on poverty.... Contrary to the popular myths about the sixties, this was a brief moment in which we bravely confronted our most explosive issues as a people: racial hierarchy and the maldistribution of wealth and power. (*Race* 157)

The achievements gained during this period on a political and economic level are, in fact, remarkable and multifarious. Within two years, legal barriers against black access to civil and voting rights were erased. Within eight years, half of America's poor people were lifted out of poverty. And within a decade, the number of poor old people was more than cut in half (see West, *Race* 158). However, the strand of success did not last long. As liberals see it, the socio-economic situation of the country went downhill after 1973. What had seemed like "the full and resplendent maturity of liberalism" embodied in the Great Society, came to look a lot more like "liberalism's supernova: a final, white-hot burst before its dark collapse" (Gates, *Future* 23). As the economy slumped and the real wages of most Americans declined, urban centers rapidly deteriorated and a new racial divide manifested itself "in the minds and streets of fellow citizens" (West, *Race* 157). West, who places the worsening conditions in urban ghettos within the larger social context of American society, points to a "massive transfer of wealth from working people to the well-to-do, and an increase in drugs and guns...in American life" (*Race* 157). According to liberal scholars, poor black residents in the inner-city centers have borne the brunt of these changes since they increased the structural constraints on their life chances, thereby restricting their choices even further.

The liberal perspective, therefore, highlights the structural constraints on the lives of poor blacks, including a historical and sociological analysis of slavery, de jure segregation, job and residential discrimination, skewed unemployment rates, inadequate health care, and poor education. Social policies promoted by liberals call for full employment, health, education and childcare programs, and broad affirmative action practices. Liberals contend that the structural impediments restricting the lives of poor African Americans must be eliminated and adequate social policies implemented in order for the plight of the urban poor to improve.

3. Conservative Behaviorist Explanations for the Development of the Black Urban Underclass

While the range of theories on the urban poverty debate among conservative scholars covers a broad spectrum, certain basic ideas are fundamental to conservative politics in America. One such aspect, common in conservative thinking, is the primary importance it places on *human agency*. To most conservatives, poverty is a state of mind which might be overcome with hard work and discipline. Poor relief payments, therefore, be it by the state or private charities, are never effective in relieving poverty since they offer no incentive to work. Instead, conservatives argue, they lead to “degrading and pauperizing [rather than] self-respect and self-dependence” (Riis qtd. in Olasky 199).

In order to avoid these debilitating effects of free benefit payments, Myron Magnet emphasizes the importance of demanding reciprocal obligations from the poor for relief payments. This perspective is echoed by conservatives across the board, who applauded the reforms passed under Reagan, which required welfare recipients to work or prepare for work in return for support. As Lawrence Mead phrased it in the early nineties: “The idea of throwing money at social problems is decidedly passé” (Mead 1). Instead, social policy should foster financial and mental independence among its recipients. Mead views U.S.

politics since 1945 as divided into two eras. The first, which he calls the “progressive era,” lasted up through the mid-1960s. During this time the leading question in politics was “how to help ordinary Americans obtain advancement” (2). The second era, according to Mead is characterized by “dependency politics,” since welfare benefits have rendered recipients dependent on government payments. This era, Mead argues, focuses primarily on how to respond to the disorders of the inner cities and lasts until today since “liberal” programs are carried out under Republican and Democrat administrations alike indicating, according to Mead, that the country as a whole has taken a political shift to the left. Conservatives therefore demand drastic cuts in welfare payments in order to return to the “old era” style of politics as practiced before the liberal administrations of the sixties.

In summary, conservative thinking highlights the *behavior and the moral responsibility of the individual*. With regards to the black underclass, this line of thought focuses on socially aberrant practices common in inner-city centers. Explanations as to the root causes of the social pathologies of the underclass vary. While E. Franklin Frazier, an early African American anthropologist, considers the “*disorganization of Negro family life*” to be mainly responsible for “retarding the socialization of the Negro,” (637) the neo-conservative school, spear-headed by Charles Murray, takes *liberal social policy* to be the main factor in creating impoverished inner-city communities (*Ground* 637). Myron Magnet, another conservative scholar, views the *cultural revolution of the 1960s* in mainstream America to be the source of the problem. These three scholars, representing the basic ideas of American conservative thought with regards to the plight of poor inner-city residents shall be elaborated on in the ensuing section.

3.1. Family Disorganization (E. Franklin Frazier)

When the sociological work of Howard scholar Frazier was released, it constituted a groundbreaking study which was received favorably by conservatives and liberals alike. Yet, due to its emphasis on behavioral issues in the black community, conservative scholars have traditionally claimed Frazier's work to support their line of thought. In his monumental anthropological analysis, *The Negro in the United States*, published in 1957, Frazier's aim was to "study the Negro as a part of an organized (or disorganized) social life which forms a more or less segregated segment of American society" (*Negro* XIII). One of the chapters in this comprehensive 700 page analysis focuses on the history and development of the Negro family as a social institution in black American life. Frazier considers family disorganization to be one of the most serious problems of the African American community, hampering the process of integration into mainstream American society. Illegitimacy, desertion of the family by the father, and casual sexual relations, Frazier argues, must be linked directly to the "impact of social and economic forces on the simple family organization which evolved in the rural South" (*Negro* 637). These destabilizing factors were further enhanced by the massive migrations of African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities. In the process of moving to urban areas "many migrants cut themselves loose from family and friends to seek work and adventure" thereby deserting their natural families (*Negro* 630).

Frazier explains that the phenomenon of desertion refers not only to the breaking of marital bonds that had a legal basis. Rather, it includes those cases of quasi-families in which the husband and wife had been bound only by the "customary practices of the Negro folk" (*Negro* 631). These customary practices, which had community and family stabilizing effects in the rural South, were largely lost as blacks moved into urban centers.

Apart from being uprooted due to the loss of "simple folk culture," Frazier notes that the urban environment by its very nature hampers healthy relations since family disorganization is "indicative of the widespread practice characteristic of urban life generally of sexual association on the basis of casual attraction between individuals" (*Negro* 631). Yet, it is not only uncommitted sexual practices that have a destabilizing effect on poor urban families. Cramped living quarters do not allow for recreation or the "type of social intercourse which

knits the members of a family together,” Frazier explains (*Negro* 635). For children unsuitable living facilities often become “a veritable prison” and many conflicts in poor families are set off by the irritations caused by overcrowding (*Negro* 636).

Another difference between the rural South and the urban North concerning family organization pertains to the effects of illegitimacy. While out-of-wedlock births did not appear as a social problem in the rural communities of the South, where children simply became members of the more or less amorphous family groups, illegitimate children in urban areas represent an additional economic burden, and “may be the cause of shame and guilt for the unmarried mother” (*Negro* 632).

In summary, Frazier concludes that the “widespread disorganization of family life among blacks has affected practically every phase of their community life and adjustments to the larger white world” (*Negro* 637). The absence of stability in family life causes a lack of traditions and continuity which again affects African American children. The “deficiency in family training” (*Negro* 636) and the acquisition of socially disapproved behavior from their living environment do not foster any aims or ambitions. Moreover, Frazier argues, this aimlessness and lack of ambition is further amplified by the lack of employment opportunities. Thus, family disorganization and social and economic forces in the black community unite to create a sense of irresponsibility among African American youth. Frazier concludes that the large number of criminals and juvenile delinquents in the cities of the country are linked directly to the living environment created by these forces.

While Frazier points to social and economic forces in shaping the behavioral patterns of young African Americans, the majority of neo-conservative scholars today focuses primarily on social policy in explaining the origins of the urban underclass. One of the most prominent scholars representing this school of thought is Charles Murray.

3.2. Social Policy (Charles Murray)

Murray is among the best known proponents of conservative “revivalist” thinking in the early eighties. His work includes *Losing Ground* (1984), the *New York Times* bestseller *The Bell Curve* (1994), which he co-authored with Charles Herrnstein, and *In Our Hands* (2006). A senior research fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, he argues that the social programs of the Great Society to help the poor and disadvantaged not only did not accomplish what they had set out to do but often made things worse. These programs, according to Murray, changed the parameters of the poor who “continued to respond, as they always had, to the world as they found it, but that we—meaning the non-poor and undisadvantaged—had changed the rules of their world” (*Ground* 9). The effect of these new rules was to make it profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways that were destructive in the long term.

Murray focuses much of his criticism on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), a program which supports single parents with children. Murray argues that the program got “out of hand” soon after it had been implemented by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. While the program had been intended to support widows and deserted women with children, the main recipients turned out to be young unmarried women with changing sexual partners. These women “were accumulating children, neglecting them, and producing generations that would come back to haunt us in the decades to come” (*Ground* 19). Adding a racial dimension to his criticism, Murray notes that “the most flagrantly unrepentant seemed to be mostly blacks, too” (*Ground* 18). The situation would not be contentious, he argues, if “the notion of subsidizing a lifestyle [did not] grate on the values of whites” (*Ground* 19). He adds that “what is especially troubling [concerning illegitimacy] is...the complete breakdown of moral values” (*Ground* 19).

Kennedy and Johnson had built their policies on the premise that most of the able-bodied on welfare would work if given the opportunity. Time proved them wrong, Murray concludes. “We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poverty instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap” (*Ground* 9). This social policy trap, Murray argues, could easily be removed by stopping welfare payments. Other conservative thinkers such as Myron Magnet, who consider the “underclass problem” to

be rooted in the transformation of mainstream America in the sixties, are in basic agreement with Murray's analysis, yet they add a cultural dimension to their perspective.

3.3. The Cultural Revolution (Myron Magnet)

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Magnet's fundamental work *The Dream and the Nightmare* was called by (then) Governor George W. Bush the most important book he had ever read with the exception of the Bible since it promotes "compassionate conservatism." In his book Magnet argues that the radical transformation of American culture that took place in the 1960s brought today's urban underclass into existence. New beliefs and lifestyle experimentation among the white middle class produced "often catastrophic changes" in attitudes toward marriage and childbearing, the work ethic and dependency among the most disadvantaged (1). "As American culture went awry in the sixties—as its beliefs fell out of alignment with human reality and stopped giving a clear and persuasive account of right and wrong, and of how we should live our lives—those at the margins of society suffered first" (6).

Magnet explains the effects of the Cultural Revolution with its concomitant loss of traditional values in theological and philosophical terms. "There is a right life for man, a life in accord with our nature, a life that most fully realizes our potential for freedom, dignity, happiness—indeed, for humanity" (5). Magnet holds that this "right life for man" has been obscured during the cultural transformation of the sixties. Essential values, such as social order, personal responsibility, sexual restraint, moderation and sobriety, truthfulness and honesty have been lost in large segments of American society during that period. They have been replaced, Magnet argues, by an "if it feels good, do it" mentality, propagating self-indulgence. This mindset has harmed the poor, "whose lives have less margin for error" (1). Magnet points out that his intention is not to blame some "culture of poverty" or "ghetto culture" since they are merely byproducts of the mainstream cultural revolution. Rather, "majority

culture, led by its elite institutions...should be held responsible for supporting the transformation of society in the sixties” (8).

Therefore, since majority culture has brought about these fateful changes, it also needs to rectify the damage by adopting a fundamentally new attitude. Only with a “new kind of critical consciousness,” Magnet concludes, can “the work of repair...begin in earnest” (8).

4. Liberal Structuralist Explanations for the Development of the Black Urban Underclass

In liberal thinking—as in the conservative line of thought—a broad spectrum of ideas is represented, ranging from the far left to the center. Liberal scholars on the far left, such as Herbert J. Gans, consider the structural forces and general disposition of the non-poor (whites) to be responsible for waging the current “war against the poor.” Liberal thinkers who position themselves in the center of the debate such as William Julius Wilson and Cornel West emphasize the need to recognize both structural and behavioral aspects in explaining the causes of poverty in the black community. Nevertheless, despite the various points of view within the liberal framework, liberals agree that *structural forces, such as racial, economic, and political dimensions* are central to a comprehensive understanding of black urban poverty.

Referring to *the racial dimension* in assessing the situation of poor black Americans, Cornel West notes in a public dialogue with bell hooks that it is impossible to talk about the “Black American past and present independently of victimization” (hooks, *Bread* 96). To view the daily black sufferings of “unemployment, poverty, addiction, AIDS, homelessness, and police brutality [independently of a racial context] is to invite a kind of mass myopia on the part of the dominant culture,” hooks confirms (hooks, *Bread* 96). Yet, both agree, that it is important to talk about black victimization without solely viewing oneself as a victim. “The need to

historically situate the agency and responsibility within the context Black people find themselves [in], often circumstances not of their own choosing and in many ways beyond their control is central to a proper understanding and to prospects of a socio-economic amelioration for poor blacks” (97).

Yet, while race undeniably plays a major role in shaping the lives of African Americans, many structuralist thinkers are apt to see its significance as declining. Since blacks were granted full civil and voting rights in 1964 and 1965, many scholars tend to agree with Wilson that race is not the primary aspect dominating the lives of urban blacks. Instead, *economic and political changes* in the American economy, embedded in a culture of capitalism, are thought to be the main structural components that have shaped inner-city ghettos. During the postindustrial era the exodus of industrial jobs from urban centers to cheap labor markets has engendered an upward distribution of wealth. “Poverty no longer is natural,” Michael B. Katz writes, rather,

it is a social product [and] it is about distribution; it results because some people receive a great deal less than others. Descriptions of the demography, behavior, or beliefs of subpopulations cannot explain the patterned inequalities evident in every era of American history. These result from styles of dominance, the way power is exercised, and the politics of distribution. (*Undeserving* 7)

In his book *The Undeserving Poor*, Katz quotes Harrington, who voices a similar perspective in *The New American Poverty*. “The structures of misery today are the results of massive economic and social transformations and they cannot be understood apart from an analysis of them” (qtd. in Katz 237). The result of global economic trends, especially the international division of labor, has created a new poverty much more systematic and structured than in the past, Harrington contends. Therefore, Katz concludes, poverty in black urban ghettos today is the product of political and economic structures and must be fought with adequate redistributive measures (cf. Katz, *Undeserving* 238).

The prominent liberal structuralist theories representing the basic ideas of American liberal thought on the underclass debate shall be outlined in the following sections.

4.1. The War against the Poor (Herbert J. Gans)

In his book *The War against the Poor* published in 1995, Gans emphasizes the role mainstream America has played in creating the so-called underserving underclass. “America has been waging a war against [the] poor...with a variety of weapons, such as withholding the opportunities for decent jobs, schools, housing, and the necessities required for a modest version of the American way of life” (1). This war, Gans argues, has escalated since the 1980s and “bids to escalate further, since social policies increase the punitive conditions under which help is given” (1).

In his study, Gans focuses his attention on the “war of words,” a war of pejorative labels that “stereotype, stigmatize, and harass the poor by questioning their morality and their values” (1). Concerning the “behavioral underclass terminology,” Gans holds that there is no such class, and that it is merely today’s popular label to stereotype poor people (3). He explains that the term was originally introduced in 1964 by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal to describe workers forced out of the new postindustrial economy. Today it is used by journalists and social scientists to describe people who are accused “rightly or wrongly, of failing to behave in the ‘mainstream’ ways of the numerically and culturally dominant American middle-class” (2).

Rather than imposing moral judgment on the disadvantaged, the social scientist argues, it is necessary to understand that certain criticized behaviors are in fact poverty-related effects. “Few muggers really want to be muggers and most unmarried mothers would rather be married,” Gans contends (4). However, the conditions under which the urban poor live “set different criteria for responsibility, which are imposed by the need to survive under conditions better-off Americans cannot even imagine. Who then,” Gans asks, “is morally expert enough to judge?” (5).

Given the condescending disposition mainstream America exhibits toward the urban poor, Gans probes the socio-economic, psychological, and political reasons why better-off Americans seek to indict millions of poor citizens by labeling them as the “underserving poor.” He mounts the interesting argument that the underclass actually functions as a

scapegoat for ills in American society that have nothing to do with the behavior of the poor. Thus, it is politically convenient to blame them for high levels of taxation and even for the shortcomings of the economy. In addition, poor unmarried mothers can be charged with helping to further the changes in sexual behavior that have taken place in mainstream America since the 1960s.

By making scapegoats of the poor, Gans concludes, “Americans can postpone politically difficult and divisive solutions to the country’s economic ills” (7). In reference to the political climate of the day he observes that many Americans embrace “an individualistic and anti-governmental populism that pays homage to traditional mainstream values” while others use these values “to redistribute more income, wealth, and power to the classes that are already most affluent in these respects” (7). Gans contrasts these popular trends with his own economic policy ideas at the end of the book. Summarized in a nutshell, he considers downward redistributive measures in the form of antipoverty programs to be “the only sure remedy of behavior thought to make people undeserving” (3).

While Gans considers the life styles of poor African Americans to be an inevitable reaction to the structural racist forces they find themselves in, the sociologist William Julius Wilson points to macro-economic changes as the central factor in understanding the social dislocations of the urban poor.

4.2. The Postindustrial Economy (William Julius Wilson)

Harvard Professor for social policy, Wilson has published several studies on the underclass debate. His book *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) was selected by the editors of the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the sixteen best books of the year. In all of his analyses Wilson emphasizes the fundamental role changes in the economy have played in creating impoverished urban centers. He thereby challenges liberal orthodoxy in analyzing inner-city issues by discussing in candid terms the social pathologies of the inner city. In fact, it is due

to Wilson that the term “underclass” has been accepted into the terminology of most liberal thinkers, a great contribution, analyst Christopher Jencks notes, to finding ways of improving the situation of poor urban communities (see Jencks 142).

In the introductory notes to his study, Wilson explains that his central theoretical arguments were inspired by his travels to inner-city neighborhoods and his perception of social changes, including changes in the class structure of those neighborhoods (see *Disadvantaged* VIII). These changes, Wilson argues, cannot be explained by the (traditionally liberal) easy explanation of racism. According to the author, racial discrimination is the most frequently invoked explanation and it is undeniable. But, he asks, is racial discrimination really greater today than it was in 1948 when black unemployment was less than half of what it is now (see *Disadvantaged* 140)?

Instead of habitually playing the racial card, therefore, Wilson contends that inner-city problems must be related to a complex web of factors, such as the changes in the urban economy, which have produced extraordinary rates of black joblessness, exacerbating other social problems in the ghetto. These factors combined have created the ghetto underclass, which Wilson defines as a “heterogeneous group of families and individuals who inhabit the cores of the nation’s central cities. Unlike in previous years, [they] represent almost exclusively the most disadvantaged segments of the urban black community” (*Disadvantaged* 143). He explains that the term suggests that a fundamental social transformation has taken place in ghetto neighborhoods since the groups represented by this term are collectively different from and much more socially isolated than those that lived in these communities in earlier years. The exodus of black middle-class professionals from inner-city areas, increasingly accompanied by a movement of stable working-class blacks to higher income neighborhoods in other parts of the city and to the suburbs, has severely weakened those “left behind.” Norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior, a sense of community, and positive neighborhood identification as essential features of social organization have almost completely been lost in these deserted inner-city pockets.

In the context of high unemployment and social disorganization, the family structure of impoverished blacks has also been affected. Wilson points to research that has demonstrated a connection between an encouraging economic situation and the early marriage of young people. In the dreary economic context of black urban ghettos, however, the delay in marriage and the lower rate of remarriage, each associated with high percentages of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households, can be directly tied to the employment status

of black males. “Indeed, black women, especially young black women, are confronting a shrinking pool of ‘marriageable’ (that is economically stable) men” (*Disadvantaged* 145).

The three basic strands of Wilson’s argument might therefore be summarized as follows:

1. Due to the disappearance of low-skilled jobs from city centers, where blacks had settled during the Great Migration, unemployment has increased among young black men.
2. Male joblessness has decreased the likelihood of black marriage, resulting in high percentages of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households. Along with these two factors
3. the exodus of the black middle-class has caused a fundamental change in the social structure of poor urban communities. The decay of inner-city infrastructure, the deterioration of black inner-city schools, and the lack of role models are all linked to the disappearance of the stabilizing presence of middle-class blacks and have played a significant role in the socio-economic decline of ghetto communities.

Wilson’s theories have greatly influenced the U.S. poverty debate and many scholars such as Cornel West are apt to agree with his arguments. However, West and other centrist intellectuals add that the cultural changes in American society at large caused by capitalist market forces must also be considered in the debate.

4.3. The Shattering of Black Civil Society (Cornel West)

Cornel West's national bestseller *Race Matters* has confirmed his "stature as the preeminent African American intellectual of our generation," according to Harvard colleague Henry Louis Gates, Jr. West's arguments, clearly positioning him in the liberal field of reasoning, are exceptional in that they integrate a spiritual dimension into their understanding of the deterioration of black urban centers. West identifies "the loss of hope and absence of meaning [as the] major enemy of black survival in America" (*Race* 23). He argues that black civil society has experienced a spiritual impoverishment, which represents a greater threat to its survival than oppression or exploitation. Due to the spiritual impoverishment in African American communities, the "powerful buffers" [with which] our black foremothers and forefathers [were able to] fight back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness" have been lost (*Race* 23). West explains that "these buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence" (*Race* 23). The traditions West refers to consist primarily of black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support.

How then, according to this line of thought, did the shattering of black civil society occur? West points to the powerful influence of capitalist culture in weakening black cultural institutions. "Corporate market institutions have contributed greatly to their collapse," he argues (*Race* 23). Since the primary motivation of these institutions is to make profits and their basic strategy is to convince the public to consume, these institutions have helped create a seductive culture of life, a culture of consumption. Like all Americans, African Americans are influenced by the "images of comfort, convenience, machismo, femininity, violence, and sexual stimulation that bombard consumers" (*Race* 27). Yet, for those living in poverty-ridden conditions with a limited capacity to ward off self-contempt and self-hatred, the market inspired way of life proves disastrous. It creates a "sense of worthlessness and self-loathing in black America...resembl[ing] a kind of collective clinical depression in significant pockets of black America" (*Race* 27). Sadly, West observes, the combination of the market way of life, poverty-ridden conditions, and black existential angst, have directed most of the rage and despair of poor Americans, apparent in inner-city ghettos, toward their fellow black citizens.

Only occasionally does the “ugly inhumane outlook” with its violent actions surface in the larger American society, as was the case in the L.A. riots of 1992, revealing “one of the many instances of cultural decay in a declining empire” (*Race* 28).

“What is to be done,” West asks, “given our shattered civil society, market-driven corporate enterprises, and white supremacy?” (*Race* 28). In accordance with his spiritually based analysis, West suggests a spiritually based solution. He calls for a “politics of conversion” promoted by new models of collective leadership. This type of politics proceeds principally on the local grass-roots level in those institutions in civil society still vital enough to promote self-worth and self-affirmation. It does not seek the limelight but “stays on the ground among the toiling every-day people” seeking to affirm black humanity, while working toward a transracial coalition in progressive movements (*Race* 29).

In his line of argument, Cornel West repeatedly invokes the bigger picture of American democracy in debating the situation of poor black Americans. This perspective, transcending ideological differences, represents the common ground for liberal and conservative scholars in the debate. As Michael B. Katz suggests, meeting the challenge of eliminating poverty requires creative and material resources, which America has. What America does not have, according to Katz, is the political will for change. Therefore, the country is in dire need of a public dialogue which openly deals with the fundamental questions about the basis of community, the conditions of citizenship, and the achievement of human dignity (see Katz, *Undeserving* 230). These questions, Katz writes, are “about our definition of America and just how much we are willing to do to realize it” (*Undeserving* 239).

Conservative theorists counter that the basis of community cannot be discussed without taking into account the smallest unit in American society: the nuclear family. This aspect has proven to be troubled in African American communities, conservatives point out, since a significant percentage of black inner-city families does not adhere to traditional family values. The lack of orthodox family values, therefore, constitutes a fundamental element in the conservative explanation for the evolvment of black urban ghettos as will be portrayed in the ensuing analysis.

III. Analyses Pre-1965:

Setting the Stage

1. Broken Families

The Conservative Behaviorist Perspective:

The Loss of Traditional Family Structure as a Cultural Force in the Development of Black Urban Ghettos

1.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

1.1.1. The Historical Cultural Link

**I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out
with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?**

(Sojourner Truth)

African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier observes in his ground-breaking study *The Negro in the United States*, that “the disorganization of Negro family life has retarded the

socialization of the Negro and lowered his economic efficiency” (637). Frazier further links crime and juvenile delinquency among black youth to the “high level of disorganization” in black family life (637). The chapter at hand will consider the social and economic forces which have led to increasing frequency in social dislocations in black family life: a disproportionately high number of female headed households, absent fathers, teenage pregnancies, and out-of-wedlock births. In more concrete terms, based on autobiographies and various conservative and liberal academic theories, this chapter will ask whether the effects of slavery, sharecropping, and the migrations may be justifiably linked to the high percentage of social dislocations in urban communities among African Americans today. With the historical backdrop of the development of black family life prior to 1965, the ensuing synthesis will consider the underclass debate as it relates to the effects of black family structure on urban ghettos today and will conclude with a literary case in point analysis of Harriet Jacob’s autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

1.1.2. African American Family Structure During Slavery

In her girlhood all the delicate tenderness of her sex was rudely outraged. In the field, in the rude cabin, in the press-room, in the factory, she was thrown into the companionship of coarse and ignorant men. No chance was given her for delicate reserve or tender modesty. From her girlhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passions. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tigress for the ownership and possession of her own person; and, oftentimes, had to suffer pains and lacerations for her virtuous self-assertion. When she reached maturity all the tender instincts of her womanhood were ruthlessly violated. At the age of marriage—always prematurely anticipated under slavery—she was mated, as the stock of the plantation were mated, *not* to be the companion of a loved and chosen husband, but to be the breeder of human cattle, for the field or the auction-block. (Alexander Crummell)

Despite conflicting theories concerning African American family life during slavery, it is undeniable that slavery imposed great strains on black family structure. The *forced separation of family members, the dependence on the good will of the master, and sexual abuse* constituted common aspects in the daily lives of slaves and interfered with the

development of stable two-parent family groups. These adverse influences on slave family life shall be taken into account in the following sections.

- **The forced separation of family members** due to financial considerations was one of the cruelest aspects of the institution of slavery. Frazier states that “very often the exigencies of the slave system such as the settlement of an estate might destroy the toughest bonds of conjugal affection and parental love” (*Negro* 309). It has been estimated that “about one first marriage in three was broken by forced separation and close to half of all children were separated from at least one parent” (Kolchin 126). Historians agree that the “forced separation of men, women, and children from their relatives and friends constituted the most devastating experience of bondage for the slaves” (Kolchin 126). It is likewise unquestioned that this practice constituted an impediment to the evolvment of healthy black family life within African American culture.

Slave accounts relaying the heart wrenching stories of the separation from their loved ones are numerous and are always accompanied by condemnation for the practice. Frances Harper expresses the agony of the slave mother who is bereft of her son in the following poem:

The Slave Mother

Heard you that shriek? It rose
 So wildly on the air,
 It seemed as if a burden'd heart
 Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
 The bowed and feeble head—
 The shuddering of that fragile form—
 That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
 Its every glance was pain,
 As if a storm of agony
 Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother, pale with fear,
 Her boy clings to her side,
 And in her kirtle vainly tries
 His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
 For him a mother's pain;
 He is not hers, although her blood
 Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
 May rudely tear apart
 The only wreath of household love
 That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
 That o'er her pathway smiled,
 A fountain gushing ever new,
 Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
 Of music round her heart,
 Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
 Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
 Her last and fond embrace,
 Oh! never more may her sad eyes
 Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
 Disturb the listening air:
 She is a mother, and her heart
 Is breaking in despair. (414-5)

In a similar vein Mary Church Terrell, an activist for women's rights, expresses the sadness and contempt she feels when she learns that her enslaved grandmother was sold to a slave owner at a very young age, thus separating her from her mother.

Many a time I have lived over that parting scene when Emmeline, my grandmother, who was then only a small child, was sold from her mother never to see her again. Often have I suffered the anguish which I know that poor slave mother felt, when her little girl was torn from her arms forever.

When slavery is discussed and somebody rhapsodizes upon the goodness and kindness of masters and mistresses toward their slaves in extenuation of the cruel system, it is hard for me to conceal my disgust. There is no doubt that some slaveholders were kind to their slaves. Captain Church was one of them, and this daughter of a slave father is glad thus publicly to express her gratitude to him. But the anguish of one slave mother from whom her baby was snatched away outweighs all

the kindness and goodness which were occasionally shown a fortunate, favored slave. (Terrell 57)

Another witness account to the forced separation of close family kin among slaves is provided by William J. Anderson, a former slave, in his narrative published in 1857. Anderson's initial place of bondage was in Virginia, from where he observed slaves passing by on their way to the market before being sold.

I lived at a place where I could see some of the horrors of slavery exhibited to a great extent; it was a large tavern, situated at the crossing of roads, where hundreds of slaves pass by for the Southern market, chained and handcuffed together by fifties – wives taken from husbands and husbands from wives, never to see each other again – small and large children separated from their parents. They were driven away to Georgia, and Louisiana, and other Southern States, to be disposed of. O, I have seen them and heard them howl like dogs or wolves, when being under the painful obligation of parting to meet no more. Many of them had to leave their children in the cradle, or ashes, to suffer or die for the want of attentive care or food, or both. (Anderson 4)

Thus, as Anderson relays, separation of parents from their children was just as common as the separation of husbands from their wives. Frazier recounts that the missionaries from the North who went South to “minister to the needs of the freedmen often experienced difficulty in deciding who were the rightful partners” since the separation of spouses during slavery had affected considerable confusion (*Negro* 627). The agony over one such separation is expressed in a letter by Samuel Washington after he escaped from bondage in Richmond, leaving his “dear wife” behind.

I hope you will remember me now just as same as you did when I was there with you because my mind are with you night and day the Love that I bear for you in my breast is greater than I thought it was if I had thought I had so much Love for you I dont think I ever left being I have escaped and has fled into a land of freedom I can but stop and look over my past Life and say what a fool I was for staying in bondage as Long My dear wife I dont want you to get married before you send me some letters because I never shall get married until I see you again My mind dont deceive and it appears to me as if I shall see you again. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture 43)

This account of a family union being torn apart, heart-wrenching as it may be, testifies to a privilege Samuel Washington and his wife had enjoyed, namely the privilege of leading a fairly stable married life. As will be seen in the next section, the favorable conditions for the slave family to achieve a character of permanence and stability were often lacking since

- **the creation of a stable family group depended upon the good will of the master.**

Frazier reports that “[s]ome masters with no regard for the preference of their slaves mated them as they did their stock” (*Negro* 308). Nevertheless, be it for pragmatic or humanitarian reasons, many slave owners “showed some regard for the wishes of the slaves in their mating” (308). William J Anderson describes the cruelty of his former master as he forced his slaves under the threat of death to divorce and remarry against their own will (Anderson 9).

I have known him to make four men leave their wives for nothing, and would not let them come and see them any more on the peril of being shot down like dogs; he then made the women marry other men against their will. Oh, see what it is to be a slave? A man, like the brute, is driven, whipped, sold, comes and goes at his master’s bidding. (Anderson 9)

Thus, sexual relationships ranged from forced marriages and purely physical contacts, sometimes enforced by the master, to permanent associations in which the spouses extended their affection to their children. Even though slave marriage was not recognized by law, some families were able to achieve a considerable degree of permanence. In such cases, the master would exercise a “close supervision of their sex behavior and marital relations” (Frazier, *Negro* 308). Courtship and mating conditions for slaves were therefore anything but favorable for establishing a stable family life. Married slaves were often not permitted to share the same living quarters, and if they did, the housing situation reflected the adverse circumstances to intimate family living. Thus, it was customary for two or more slave families to share a small wooden cabin which did not allow for privacy as a married couple or as a family. As Jacob Stroyer, a former slave from South Carolina recalls, all children of a family had to share the same sleeping area, even when grown, until they got married and started a family “of their own.”

Some [two-family cabins] had partitions, while others had none. Where there were no partitions each family would fit up his own part as he could, sometimes they got old boards and nailed them up, stuffing the cracks with old rags; when they could not get boards they hung up old clothes. When the family increased, the children all slept together, both boys and girls, until either got married, then a part of another cabin was assigned to the one that was married, but the rest would have to remain with their mother and father as they did when children unless they could get with some of their relatives or friends who had small families ... The young men slept in the apartment known as the kitchen and the young women slept in the room with their mother and father. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture 33)

Apart from the adverse living circumstances interfering with the natural evolvement of family ties, slaves were often in no position to establish and maintain familial bonds due to the sheer workload imposed on them. Field slaves working on cotton, tobacco, sugar, or rice plantations were usually worked to the limits of their physical capacity, as Solomon Northrup, a former field hand from a cotton plantation recalls:

The hands are required to be in the cotton fields as soon as it is light in the morning and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture 34)

Such cruel and rigidly enforced labor conditions, which were common after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, imposed an enormous strain on family and parenting life. The situation was aggravated even further in the case of female slaves, who were subjected to sexual exploitation by their white masters and overseers. William J. Anderson relays the hardship female slaves had to endure if they did not satisfy their masters' urges. After describing a "calaboose whipping room," a type of torture chamber established for the sole purpose of whipping slaves, he recalls the whipping of females who were unwilling to comply with their master's sexual wishes.

Many white gentlemen—or white fiend in human shape—would send their women and girls here to be whipped because they would not gratify their hellish passions. Many of them to my knowledge, have been brought here from Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee, and whipped until they yielded; then by debauchery and incest they have become more loathsome and degraded than the brute creation. (Anderson 9)

In the process of abusing female slaves, male slaves were often humiliated. One common practice was to order the slave husband out of bed and take his place, as Anderson depicts:

I have known men in different parts of the South to make colored men get out of bed and go home, while they take their place and cohabit with their wives. It is certainly a great sin, and men who will do these things are capable of committing the most atrocious crimes. (Anderson 9)

While the separation of family members and the arbitrary and often ill-tempered rule of slave masters and overseers interfered with the development of stable black family life directly, the indirect effects of sexual abuse, namely matriarchal family patterns and fragmented family groups, represent yet another aspect which adversely affected the development of the African American family tradition.

- **Sexual abuse of female slaves** was a “routine feature of life on many, perhaps most, slaveholdings” (Kolchin 125). Even though sexual liaisons between white men and black slave women were sometimes based on consent, “far more often, slaves who had sex with whites did so against their will” (Kolchin 124). William Anderson describes one such instance which stands out in cruelty as he remembers the brutal rape of a female slave by her drunken master on a plantation in Mississippi. Anderson then proceeds to describe the sexual abuse female slaves were commonly subjected to.

[The master] divested the poor female slave of all wearing apparel, tied her down to stakes, and whipped her with a handsaw until he broke it over her naked body. In process of time he ravished her person, and became the father of a child by her. Besides, he always kept a colored Miss in the house with him. This is another curse of Slavery—concubinage and illegitimate connection—which is carried on to an alarming extent in the far South. A poor slave man who lives close by his wife is permitted to visit her but very seldom, and other men, both white and colored, cohabit with her. It is undoubtedly the worst place of incest and bigamy in the world. (Anderson 8)

Frazier explains that the matriarchal family organization common among slaves was fostered partly by the sexual relations between white men and female slaves. While the slave woman who was raped and often became separated from her “mulatto” child was usually “at the bottom of the scale” within the slave system, she was at the same time the most dependable, and therefore the most important member of the slave family (*Family* 85). As the father was often absent from slave family life, strong emotional ties between the mother and her children developed. Their masters were compelled, in their own interest, to recognize the biological and emotional dependence of the child on the mother. The circumstances of these female headed slave families eventually led to a matricentric family structure (cf. Burgess and Locke qtd. in Frazier, *Negro* 320). The grandmother presided as the authority figure over her children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and adopted children. Due to her age and experience, she was recognized as family head by all members of the household and accepted her daughters’ children and grandchildren into the family. These family groups, divergent from the nuclear family, persisted after emancipation and continued to dominate the rural South.

1.1.3. African American Family Structure after Emancipation

It is clear that whatever the cause of its differentness, black sharecropper society on the eve of the introduction of the mechanical cotton picker was the equivalent of big-city ghetto society today in many ways. It was the national center of illegitimate childbearing and of the female-headed family.... Sexually transmitted disease and substance abuse were nationally known as special problems of the black rural South; home-brew whiskey was much more physically perilous than crack cocaine is today, if less addictive.... (Nicholas Leman)

The Civil War and Emancipation created a crisis in black family life as families were uprooted from their customary mode of living. Frazier reports that “[w]hen the invading armies disrupted the plantation organization, thousands of Negroes were set adrift and began

to wander footloose about the country. [In many cases] sentimental and habitual ties between spouses [were] severed” (*Negro* 313).

Since the upheavals caused the separation of many slave families, sociologists at the turn of the century criticized “widespread family disorganization and immorality,” among rural blacks in the following decades (Bruce and Laws qtd. in Frazier, *Negro* 628). In response, Frazier points out that the “folkways and mores” which had evolved in rural African American communities accounted for the widespread family practices among blacks. He explains that “among the rural Negro generally the bearing of children represented the fulfillment of a woman’s destiny. The children of an unmarried daughter became a part of her family” (*Negro* 629). Thus, the matricentric family pattern, which had been established during slavery, continued quite naturally under the sharecropping system.

One primary factor hampering the evolvement of stable two parent family groups after emancipation lay in the economic exigencies the sharecropping system imposed on African Americans. Since it was “nearly impossible to make any money sharecropping,” both parents had to seek additional employment outside of the sharecropping system, which often required one parent to leave the home for extended periods of time (Leman 17). This factor further destabilized black family relations. Frazier explains that the

disorganization of Negro family life generally appeared as the result of the impact of outside economic and social forces, as, for example, when the father or husband was drawn into the turpentine or lumber camps or the wife or mother went to town to supplement the family income. (*Negro* 629)

Relaying the economic hardship of rural life in the 1940s, Anne Moody recalls her family life on a plantation in rural Mississippi. Since both parents were forced to work in the fields all day in order to provide for their two children, her mother’s brother, an eight year old boy, was charged with watching the two girls, two and five years old, from sunrise to sunset.

[The sharecroppers] all lived in rotten wood two-room shacks... but Mama and Daddy did what they could to make [ours] livable... The big room had a plain, dull-colored wallpaper tacked loosely to the walls with large thumbtacks. Under each tack was a piece of cardboard which had been taken from shoeboxes and cut into little squares to hold the paper and keep the tacks... from tearing through. Because there were not enough tacks, the paper bulged in places... We rarely saw Mama and Daddy because they were in the field every day except Sunday. They would get up early in the morning and leave the house just before daylight. It was six o’clock in the evening when they returned, just before dark. (Moody 3-4)

Eventually the marriage of Moody's parents gave in under the pressure of the sharecropping system and her father left. Her mother moved to a nearby town with three small children and started working in a "Negro café." There she made twelve dollars a week, "more than she had ever earned" (13). Nevertheless, she had to often "sneak out at night" to steal some corn off a nearby field, since "she didn't have enough money for food" (13).

Moody's family situation was representative of many African American families under the sharecropping system. First marriages of lifelong duration were the exception and in isolated rural areas marriage as such had not become "part of the mores" (Frazier, *Negro* 318). The permanence of the "habitual marriages" often depended on "the extent to which [the couples could] work together on the farm" (Frazier, *Negro* 318). The mother, who took care of the children after the father had left, was supported by the "folkways and mores" of the rural community, which usually meant that her own family as well as her in-laws offered moral and financial support (Frazier, *Negro* 320).

All of these factors supported the perpetuation of a matriarchal family organization which was further enhanced by the old "tradition" of white men keeping a "colored mistress" in the house. This custom, pervasive throughout the South, was the reason why Anne Moody's father did not permit her to seek employment as a domestic servant in a private household since "these no-good ass white men around here ... don't do nothing but mess over those Negro girls working in their houses" (Moody 217).

One such instance in which a black woman is asked to be a white man's mistress is relayed by Ruby Lee Daniels in a conversation with the author Nicholas Leman. At the time, Ruby was a young girl working with her family on a sharecropping plantation in the Mississippi Delta:

One day the planter, a white man named Tom Ware, sent for Ruby and her grandfather to come see him at his house. Ware called them into the living room—an unusual invitation, since a sharecropper almost never saw the inside of a white man's house—and asked [the grandfather] whether he'd like to sit down and have some coffee. Then he said, "Uncle George—white people called black people by their first names until late middle age, at which point the honorific "Uncle" or "Aunt" was applied – "Uncle George, I'd like your girl there." As Ruby sat silently, terrified, Ware complimented her grandfather on her beauty and maturity, and explained that if he agreed to this arrangement, he would clear money every year and never have to want for anything. George was noncommittal; that night the family slipped off. (Leman 22-23).

Even though the proposals for such sexual arrangements and the practice thereof were usually more concealed than in the above example, the sexual exploitation of black domestic servants in white households was commonly known. Activists for women's rights, therefore, sought to offer alternative employment opportunities to these African American women. Fannie Barrier Williams was one such activist who was dedicated to finding employment for young black women from the South. She writes that

[i]t is a significant and shameful fact that I am constantly in receipt of letters from the still unprotected colored women of the South, begging me to find employment for their daughters according to their ability, as domestics or otherwise, to save them from going into the homes of the South as servants, as there is nothing to save them from dishonor and degradation. Many prominent white women and ministers will verify this statement. The heartbroken cry of some of these helpless mothers bears no suggestion of the "flaunting pride of dishonor" so easily obtained, by simply allowing their daughters to enter the homes of the white women of the South. Their own mothers cannot protect them and white women will not, or do not. The moral feature of this problem has complications that it would seem better not to dwell on. (Williams 21).

As Williams suggests, most black women were in no position to question or avoid the sexual abuse they endured as domestic servants. Rather, having to fend for themselves, they endured adverse circumstances in order to maintain family stability without male support. Thus, the matriarchal family structure, which had characterized black families during slavery, was perpetuated in the economic opportunities open to blacks after emancipation.

Black life in the initial decades after emancipation centered around sharecropping and other agricultural employment possibilities in the South. However, this focus shifted as rural blacks began to migrate to urban areas in the North in search of new economic opportunities. The Great Migration had a significant impact on black family life and may be viewed as the next step in the development of African American family organization.

1.1.4. African American Family Structure Affected by the Great Migration

The urbanization of the Negro population since 1900 has brought the most momentous change in the family life of the Negro since emancipation. This movement, which has carried over a million Negroes to southern cities alone, has torn the Negro loose from his cultural moorings. But many more illiterate or semi-illiterate and impoverished Negro families, broken or held together only by the fragile bonds of sympathy and habit, have sought a dwelling-place in the slums of southern cities. Because of the dissolution of the rural folkways and mores, the children in these families have helped to swell the ranks of juvenile delinquents. Likewise, the bonds of sympathy and community of interests that held their parents together in the rural environment have been unable to withstand the disintegrating forces in the city. Illegitimacy, which was a more or less harmless affair in the country, has become a serious economic and social problem. At times students of social problems have seen in these various aspects of family disorganization a portent of the Negro's destruction. (E. Franklin Frazier, 1939)

Family patterns involving instability and a matricentric focus, which had been favored during and after slavery, were further enhanced by the Great Black Migration. In order to offer a more detailed understanding of the changes in African American family structure affected by the migrations, the context of the institution of black marriage before and after the Great Migration shall be considered.

- The Institution of Marriage in Black Rural Communities before the Great Migration

By the time the rural black population started moving to southern towns and cities, marriage had not yet acquired an institutional character. Marriage among blacks in the rural South was primarily a matter of pragmatic considerations based on sympathy and shared economic interests. Wedding ceremonies and formal divorces were not customary since the financial resources for such “luxuries” were not available to the average sharecropper. As Ruby Lee Daniels puts it: “Nobody had any money to put on a real wedding ceremony, and nobody bothered to get divorced because they didn’t have any possessions to divide” (Leman 32). Ruby further talks about her own marriage on a plantation as being typical for the

unsentimental, pragmatic type of liaison common in her southern community at that time.

Leman relays the account in following words:

W.D. used to come by and cut wood for George, [Ruby's grandfather,] and he and Ruby began to court. W.D. told Ruby he'd like to marry her. She told him he'd better do it soon, because as soon as the high water went down she was going back to Ruth and Ceatrice's place, and there was a young man there named Harold Brown who wanted to marry her too. On February 2, 1935, a Saturday, Ruby and W.D. were married by a preacher on the Self place. Looking back on it, Ruby didn't think she was really ever in love with W.D.; it was just that she was eighteen, and wanted to be grown. (23)

Ruby's marriage didn't last long. Looking back on that time in her life, Ruby recalls that the marital bond for sharecroppers was an extremely unstable one. Marriage was an institution lightly entered and lightly left. As she puts it: "People would get married on a plantation one week, and the next week one of them would be gone" (32). When Ruby was in her seventies, she could think of only one longstanding happy marriage among the people she had well known, "her aunt Addie Green's, and even Addie had had two marriages break up before she got into the good one" (32). In his anthropological study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois sums up experiences such as Ruby's as he elaborates on troubled family life in rural Georgia: "The plague-spot in sexual relations is easy marriage and easy separation....in too many cases family quarrels, a roving spirit, a rival suitor, or perhaps more frequently the hopeless battle to support a family, leads to separation, and a broken household is the result" (131).

Nevertheless, despite the shifting nature of marriage in black rural communities, there were several factors which had a stabilizing effect on black family groups. For one, the traditional control exercised by the church strengthened family and community life. Further, extended families accepted illegitimate children into their household with little or no social disgrace caused for the unmarried mother. Finally, the outdoor lifestyle common in rural areas relieved much of the tension which was generated by the limited living space in the sharecroppers' cabins.

All of these stabilizing factors, which had shaped black rural communities in the South, were lost as blacks migrated to urban areas. This became apparent at first in southern towns and cities where family instability was considered characteristic of black communities and increased significantly in northern cities after the mass migrations during and following WWI (see Frazier, *Negro* 630).

- **The Effects of the Great Black Migration on Black Family Life**

Frazier describes the migrations to the North as an enormous social upheaval affecting black family and community life on every level.

Among the million or so migrants there were thousands of men and women who had cut themselves loose from family and friends to seek work and adventure. When many such persons arrived in the northern city, they had already experienced considerable personal disorganization. The simple folk culture of the rural community had been shed or had lost its significance. Their sexual life had become a casual affair in which sympathy and affection played little part. The numbers of these unattached men and women were constantly swollen by the husbands and fathers who had deserted their families when they arrived in northern cities. In fact, family desertion has been one of the chief forms in which family disorganization among urbanized Negroes has manifested itself. (*Negro*, 630)

Thus, desertion, illegitimacy, family break-ups, and female headed households increasingly characterized black family structure in northern cities among poor African Americans. Frazier reports that the illegitimacy rate among African Americans usually coincided with the rising number of southern blacks arriving in northern cities (see *Negro*, 630). Since illegitimate children posed an economic burden for the unmarried mothers which they were unable to shoulder alone the children of these family groups often faced neglect and material destitution. In such cases, the unfavorable financial situation was further aggravated by the type of housing facilities available to impoverished blacks. They usually lived in deteriorated structures in the least desirable areas crowded into living spaces “beyond the limits of health, hygiene, safety or decency” (*Negro*, 630). Racial segregation and exploitation by white landlords often required two or more family groups to share an apartment or take in lodgers. Thus, there was virtually no privacy for families or individual family members, which further impeded a positive development of black urban family living.

With rising unemployment rates during the postwar years, the situation in black households often took on dimensions of extreme poverty. In his classic autobiography, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown describes a young friend’s living situation which exemplifies the destitution experienced by a migrant family living in Harlem, New York. The mother of

the family, Miss Jamie, was unemployed and her children often were left home alone fighting over the bare necessities to survive.

I went up to Bucky's house to show him a homemade that I had found a week before. I didn't have any bullets for it yet, but that wasn't important—I knew somebody I could steal them from. As I walked through the door—which was always open because the lock had been broken and Miss Jamie never bothered to have it fixed—I saw Bucky on the floor with his arm around his little sister's throat. He was choking her. Meanwhile, his big sister was bopping him on the head with a broom handle and they were all screaming. After I had watched the three-way fight for a minute or less, I started toward Dixie to grab the broom. Before I could get close enough to grab the broom handle, everything stopped. For a whole second, everything was real quiet. Dixie threw down the broom and started crying. Debbie was already crying, but I couldn't hear her because Bucky was still choking her. He let her go and started cursing. When Debbie got up, I saw what she and Dixie were crying over and what Bucky was cursing about. The three of them had been fighting over one egg, and the egg was broken in the scuffle. Bucky had run out of the house cursing, and I was standing where he had left me. Dixie and Debbie were facing me on the other side of the room... [Dixie] went over to what was left of that old ragged couch they had in the living room, threw herself down on it, and went on crying into the cushions... I told her to wait there while I went to steal her some eggs... Less than a minute after I had left Dixie crying on the couch I walked in the house with a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread. Dixie was sitting up on the couch now. Her eyes were red, but she wasn't crying; her face still had tearstains on it, and her mouth was stuck out as if she were mad at somebody. Not saying anything, I walked over to her and offered her the eggs and the loaf of bread. I was standing in front of her holding out the eggs and the loaf of bread. She just sat there staring at me as if she didn't believe it or as if she wondered how I had come by these things. Seeing that she needed a little encouragement, I pushed the eggs and bread against her chest saying, "Here, take it." She took them and started walking slowly toward the kitchen. It seemed as though she still didn't believe it was really happening, that if she should make a fast or sudden move, the eggs and bread would be gone. She carried the food to the kitchen like somebody carrying a large basin of water that was filled to the brim. (33-4)

Migrant families such as the ones described by Brown, who inhabited the urban ghettos after the mass migrations, laid the foundation for the social group later referred to as the "underclass". The social dislocations of this group increased in extent and intensity during the postwar years.

1.1.5. African American Family Structure from 1945 - 1965

There is a very real possibility that many, even most, of the children of the poor will become the fathers and mothers of the poor. If that were to take place, then America, for the first time in its history, would have a hereditary underclass. (Michael Harrington, 1962)

The poor inhabit a world scarcely recognizable, and rarely recognized by the majority of Americans. It is a world apart, whose inhabitants are isolated from the mainstream of American life and alienated from its values. (Economic Report of the President, 1964)

By 1945 the main locus of African American family life had shifted from a southern rural context to northern cities. While the institution of black marriage had already been unsteady in sharecropper communities in the South, it was destabilized even further as separation and desertion affected the nature of the migrating families. Thus, a sharp rise in illegitimacy and female headed households marked the character of black family life in the period of 1945 to 1965. Further, the increase in juvenile delinquency and the overall deterioration of black urban slums alarmed mainstream society and led Labor Assistant Secretary (later Senator of New York) Patrick Moynihan to release a report on the pathological patterns in African American family life. While the downward trends in black urban ghettos were striking, they were not, however, characteristic of the nation as a whole. The postwar economy boomed, and many blacks were able to partake in the rising economic tide. The following section will examine the prominent features of African American family life during that period: the increase in social dislocations in black family life and the rise in welfare costs.

- **Increase in Social Dislocations in Black Family Life**

In 1934, sociologist Charles S. Johnson published a study of black sharecroppers in rural Georgia, *Shadow of the Plantation*, in which he wrote almost prophetically about the disruptions which were to affect black families in the decades to come. "This group...has taken form...outside the dominant current of American culture...The very fact of this cultural

difference presents the danger of social disorganization in any sudden attempt to introduce new modes of living and conceptions of values” (Johnson qtd. in Leman 31).

At the time of publication nobody would have imagined that the “new modes of living” introduced to blacks in the urban North and the subsequent social disorganization in African American family life were so close at hand. Therefore, narrative accounts of black urban ghetto inhabitants in the 1940s and 1950s are usually rendered in a tone of distant incredulity. One such example is given by Amiri Baraka as he describes the living quarters of his childhood friend Eddie Clay, a recent migrant from the South.

And in that shack, like a ghost of the black South—a drunken building—were some living ghosts, poverty-struck and mad. Old toothless snuff-champing ladies. Staring old men. People with hard rusty hands. A woman named Miss Ada (I always thought it was Ator, a weird radio-drama monster name) who wandered and staggered and stared and got outrageous drunk and cursed out history. (Baraka 6)

While older ethnic slums like Little Italy or Chinatown were gradually disappearing, impoverished black urban pockets were growing, populated mainly by “dregs,” who were not able to advance beyond the ghetto and by ill-prepared migrants from the South, all of whom were regarded with great suspicion by the rest of society.

The inhabitants of these racialized pockets of poverty displayed a social behavior which was considered immoral by white mainstream standards. Scholars of black life worried about the breakdown of black families in the slums and the growing tendency of young adults to engage in “serial monogamy.” This euphemistic term, referring to a frequent change in sexual partners, pointed to the escalating illegitimacy rate which, among blacks, jumped from 35.6% to 90.1% between 1940 and 1962 (see Patterson 101). Closely related to the rising illegitimacy rates were the increasing numbers of female headed households, “one of the most striking demographic trends of the 1940s and 1950s,” according to Patterson. “The number [of households] headed by women under fifty-five jumped from 2.5 million in 1940 to 4.4 million in 1962. Nearly half of these families were poor and many were black” (Patterson 101-2).

DuBois describes the development in black family organization, which was perceived as deeply troubling by the conservative elements in American society, in his study *The Philadelphia Negro*. “Among the lowest class of recent immigrants and other unfortunates there is much sexual promiscuity and the absence of a real home life...Cohabitation of a more or less permanent character is a direct offshoot of the plantation life and is practiced considerably” (DuBois qtd. in Leman 31-2).

DuBois’ observation that cohabitation and large “patchwork families” headed by females were common among poor black families in the postwar period is attested to as well by many autobiographers in that period. One such example is given by Carl Upchurch, who grew up in New York in the 1950s. He describes his grandmother as presiding over the multi-generational household with authority and discipline.

From my point of view, my grandmother, Gomere, was a true matriarch, holding all the responsibilities her role entailed—leader of the family, disciplinarian, and breadwinner. Even though there was never enough money to feed the whole family, we always knew that she would bring something home for dinner. I was long gone from South Street before I found out that she had stolen meat and eggs from local stores so that we could eat. (8)

Family situations such as the one described by Upchurch were morally objectionable for most whites and were aggravated even further by free sexual practices common among many poor blacks. Upchurch provides his readers with some insight into these practices. His aunt Lil, for example, stood out in moral terms in Upchurch’s family since “she was the kind of woman who never had sex with a man until she really liked him which was not the general rule in our house” (9). His grandmother, who was “the only one in the house working,” supplemented her income from cleaning houses by working as a prostitute. Children were introduced to these sexual activities at an early age. Upchurch describes the parties at his house, which were regular events not just on the weekends. “The two-room apartment would fill up with dope dealers, pimps, prostitutes, and other characters. People would get drunk, smoke pot, or even have sex right in front of everybody else” (11).

Since such sexual practices constituted a world apart from the official white standard of sexual behavior, scholars like Harrington argued that “the poverty of the 1950s and 1960s was deeper and more pathological than before” (Harrington qtd. in Patterson 105). This was reflected not only in the sexual mores of the poor, but in a general proliferation of social problems in black urban neighborhoods. Juvenile delinquency, high divorce rates,

illegitimacy, and female headed households, along with deteriorating conditions in black neighborhoods led Patrick Moynihan to release his report on black family life in 1965 entitled: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In it he suggested that many impoverished African American families were caught in a tangle of pathology, resulting in high illegitimacy and divorce rates. As a result, the costs for the federal assistance program AFDC, Assistance to Families with dependent children, commonly known as welfare, had risen dramatically over the previous decades (see Patterson 89).

- **The Rise in Welfare Costs**

The federal welfare program Aid to Dependent Children was established in 1935 as a part of the law that created the Social Security system. The law aimed at financially supporting indigent widows in raising their children. Over time, however, the program was altered and came to serve primarily the unwed, separated and divorced mothers. Presumably, the planners of the program did not know much about the social circles of Carl Upchurch, Claude Brown, and other autobiographers used in this study, in which it was commonplace for women to have children out of wedlock or to separate from their partners. As Leman suggests, they “certainly never dreamed that the American public would over the years become convinced that AFDC was mainly a support system for black women and their illegitimate babies” (79).

By 1960 AFDC had developed into the largest federal welfare program. Families receiving welfare increased from 701,000 to three million and it constituted a substantial part of all transfer payments (see Patterson 86). Yet, the program exhibited a variety of flaws: for one, it was insufficient in itself to lift people out of poverty. In the 1960s, households depending on AFDC often lacked flush toilets and hot water, and many had to do without running water at all. Another obvious flaw of the program was its unpopularity with the general public, who felt it had created a haven for indolent welfare queens. “It is not moral,” one such critic stated in 1961, “to appropriate public funds to finance crime, illegitimacy, disease, and other social evils” (Patterson 107). Finally the effects of AFDC on the recipients themselves were called into question, as some scholars contended that it had worsened the plight of the needy. Each of these shortcomings, voiced by critics to this day, shall briefly be considered.

The national average payment to families receiving AFDC in 1960 amounted to \$2,150 per year, a sum which was considerably below the poverty line of \$3,000 at that time (see Patterson 87). In New York City, where social agencies had set the subsistence level budgets at \$ 2,660 per year for a family of four, additional guidelines were established which limited the amount of goods a family was permitted to possess. Such guidelines included, for example,

owning two chairs for the living room as well as a drop-leaf table for eating, and two straight chairs. The floor could be covered with linoleum, not rugs. There could be one or two lamps, but electricity was to be carefully used. The family could have a refrigerator and an electric iron and could play the radio an hour a day—there was no provision for using TV. The weekly food budget allowed for meat, but not for frozen foods, tobacco, beer, or telephone calls...Breakage (say of light bulbs) or spillage (of flour) meant that the family did without. (Patterson 86)

Carl Upchurch, who grew up in New York at the time when such rules were enforced, recalls the visits the welfare lady paid them, in order to ensure they did not possess more than they were entitled to.

When we were on welfare, the welfare lady would come once in a while to take inventory to make sure we didn't have more stuff than the welfare check allowed. Fooling her became almost a game for us. When my uncle John went into the air force, he gave us his new television. Whenever the welfare people came, I had to hide it under the bed so they wouldn't cut us off. We drilled a hole in the door so that when somebody knocked, we could see if it was the welfare lady. Then I'd run around hiding the stuff we weren't supposed to have. (5)

Apart from the special regulations enforced in New York City, visits from the welfare people were common in all states. Malcolm X recalls the visits by state agents to his family after his father's death with great resentment.

[My] mother would talk back sharply to the state Welfare people, telling them that she was a grown woman, able to raise her children, that it wasn't necessary for them to keep coming around so much, meddling in our lives. And they didn't like that. But the monthly Welfare check was their pass. They acted as if they owned us, as if we were their private property. As much as my mother would have liked to, she couldn't keep them out. She would get particularly incensed when they began insisting upon drawing us older children aside, one at a time, out on the porch or somewhere, and asking us questions, or telling us things, - against our mother and against each other. (12-3)

While welfare payments to poor families with a single (widowed) parent in rural areas usually did not cause any public resentment, the public controversy surrounding the rising number of urban families receiving AFDC stirred a heated national debate. Most critics had households such as Bucky's home in mind when they opposed the increase in transfer payments. Claude Brown recalls the tragicomic situation whenever the welfare check would arrive at his friend's house:

Bucky, [Brown's friend], had lots of sisters and brothers, and his mother was still having more sisters and brothers for him. He also had some sisters and brothers who, he said, lived with his aunts. These I had never seen. Bucky didn't have a father, and his mother was on relief. All the kids in Bucky's family knew when the relief check came. On that day, they would all follow Miss Jamie around until she cashed it. Then they would beg her to buy some food before she started drinking up the money. Every month when check day rolled around, Bucky and his brothers and sisters would always be arguing with their mother. Miss Jamie was forever telling them to wait someplace until she cashed the check, that she would come back and buy some food. But they all knew that if they ever let her out of their sight with that check, they wouldn't see her for days. When she did show up, she would tell them how she got robbed or how her pocket was picked or how she lost the money. So she would spend half of the day trying to duck the kids, and they would stick with her. If there was only one kid around, or even two, she could easily get away. She would usually go into a bar, where she knew the kids couldn't follow her, and she would leave the bar by another exit. When the kids got wise to this, one of them would start looking for the other exit as soon as she entered the bar. But even then, she could get away if there was only one at the exit she used. She would give him fifty cents as a bribe and jump into a cab. (31-2)

The situation in Bucky's home was considered to be representative of black welfare families by many whites. The growing concern that family breakdown, illegitimacy, and welfare had a weakening effect on the nation as a whole is expressed in the following quote by a white Chicago cab driver. "What do I think about welfare? It ought to be cut back. The goddam people sit around when they should be working and they're having illegitimate kids to get more money. You know, their morals are different. They don't give a damn. Stop it. That's what I say. These people they don't work. They don't pay taxes" (Patterson 90).

Opinions such as this one reflected the perspective of the general public and supported a variety of regulations adopted by state administrators seeking to control the rising welfare costs. Most states issued "suitable home" regulations aimed at denying aid to "undeserving" mothers. To receive AFDC, mothers had to sign affidavits like the following:

I ... do hereby promise and agree that until such time as the following agreement is rescinded, I will not have any male callers coming to my home nor meeting me elsewhere under improper conditions. I also agree to raise my children to the best of my ability and will not knowingly contribute or be a contributing factor to their being shamed by my conduct. I understand that should I violate the agreement, the children will be taken from me. (Patterson 88)

In order to ensure that such affidavits were kept, many states and towns dispatched agents to pay unannounced visits to welfare recipients. Ruby Lee Daniels recalls one such visit, which caused her to lose her aid check and, subsequently, her apartment.

Having told her social worker that she was not currently involved with a man, Ruby was on public aid, getting \$246 a month, but she had to worry about her relationship with Luther being discovered. She told him he ought to arrange to be out on Saturdays, when the social workers usually came around. He refused, saying (in accordance with his view that Ruby should go out and get a factory job like his, but without much logic) that *he* wasn't on public aid so he didn't have to dodge anybody. One Saturday, two social workers, a man and a woman, paid an unannounced visit to the apartment. Luther was sitting in the living room. They asked him who he was. He said he was James Mayfield. They asked to see some identification, and, of course, the name on the card he showed them was Luther Haynes—a name well known to the social workers, since he was listed on Ruby's aid application as the father of Johnnie and Robert. The male social worker went into the bathroom and saw that Luther's razor was there. When he came out, he said, as Ruby remembers it, "Luther Haynes, we've been looking for you. You have children to support. We could assess you for back payments, but we won't. Support your children from now on." (Leman 104)

The idea that AFDC payments were received differently by single mothers than originally intended by its planners—namely as a regular income source and as a way of life—is frequently confirmed by black autobiographers. One account implicitly expressing this notion is given by Cupcake Brown, autobiographical author of *A Piece of Cake*, when she describes her friend's reaction to Brown's decision to terminate her pregnancy. "Girl, don't you know what that kid is worth? ... Welfare! You can get money for that baby! ... Girl, why you think I got all these kids? I get a fat check and Uncle Sam pays my rent. I get food stamps, free medical, and I don't have to move my fat ass! ... Chile, you betta git with the game!" (228).

Attitudes such as this one fueled further criticism among observers who felt that the program was not only too expensive—by 1962 the annual costs had reached 1.4 billion—but that it was also ineffective in its attempt to lift people out of poverty. Policy discussions on high government spending for African American families inevitably raised questions about the

nature and origin of the “Negro Problem,” as it was then called. Before 1965, the discussion was dominated by the idea that African American families had been incapacitated by slavery and therefore needed to be culturally “mended” and integrated into mainstream society. This idea was strongly opposed by liberal forces who denounced the view that African American culture was in any way depraved after the release of the Moynihan report in 1965. The conflict of ideological perspectives inherent in the debate will be elaborated on in the following synthesis, while returning to the central theme of the chapter: the role of cultural family values in the formation and persistence of black urban ghettos today.

1.2. The Underclass Debate

Synthesis: The Loss of Traditional Family Structure

When one views in retrospect the waste of human life, the immorality, delinquency, desertions, and broken homes which have been involved in the development of Negro family life in the United States, they appear to have been the inevitable consequences of the attempt of a preliterate people, stripped of their cultural heritage, to adjust themselves to civilization. (E. Franklin Frazier, 1939)

The idea that certain aspects of African American culture, such as black family life, need special guidance since they were destroyed in the course of history is advanced primarily by conservative thinkers. By “destroyed,” historians and policymakers mean that black fathers were historically absent, creating a matrifocal lineage system which disadvantages black children. This line of thought further maintains that the high level of social dislocations in African American families constitutes the crux of black inner-city poverty today. In the following, this conservative behaviorist explanation for the emergence and persistence of black urban ghettos shall be contrasted with the liberal response that ensued after 1965. The conclusion of the section will offer representative examples of African American families living in impoverished urban neighborhoods today.

1.2.1. Social Dislocations in African American Family Life as a Cultural Explanation for Black Ghetto Formation

While there is a myriad of conflicting social theories explaining the origins and the perpetuation of different class strata within a society, theorists usually agree that the family as an institution lies at the heart of any cultural group. This idea, generally emphasized by

conservative scholars is exemplified in the controversial “culture of poverty” thesis, which was popularized by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1950s and 1960s. The theory seeks to explain the distinctive cultural features shared by marginalized groups. Lewis suggests that the family functions as a medium passing on the distinctive subcultural lifestyle which provides the poor with a structure and a rationale necessary for making sense of their everyday lives (see Baldwin et al. 112). He thereby identifies several traits which he considers characteristic of the so-called culture of poverty. According to Lewis, underclass families typically display certain features, including the following:

- Absence of a lengthy childhood phase of the life-cycle
- Early initiation into sex
- Free unions or consensual marriages
- High incidence of abandoned wives and children
- Female-centered households

(see Baldwin et al. 112, 114)

All of these traits were representative of the majority of African Americans settling in northern cities, thereby constituting an ethnic urban underclass. The standard explanation for the high rates of disorganization in black family life up to 1965 was that slavery had loosened the family bonds of African Americans. As a result, female-headed family groups, illegitimacy, divorce, desertion, and other ills afflicted black families after emancipation and were passed on, as Lewis suggests, in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. The responsibility to break out of this cycle lies, according to conservative cultural theorists, with the individual. Only through discipline, hard work, and sexual constraint can the moral fabric in black ghettos be changed.

The view that slavery and racial oppression are at the core of black family disorganization is advocated by Fannie Barrier Williams, as she suggests in her autobiography, published in 1904:

I think it is but just to say that we must look to American slavery as the source of every imperfection that mars the character of the colored American. It ought not to be necessary to remind a Southern woman that less than 50 years ago the ill-starred mothers of this ransomed race were not allowed to be modest, not allowed to follow the instincts of moral rectitude, and there was no living man to whom they could cry for protection against the men who not only owned them, body and soul, but also the souls of their husbands, their brothers, and alas, their sons. Slavery made her the only woman in America for whom virtue was not an ornament and a necessity. (21)

While Williams is primarily concerned with the moral and emotional effects of slavery on the lives of black women, Frazier's scientific approach to African American family life includes various social and economic aspects as well. Widely recognized in academic circles, social scientists and policy makers used Frazier's work as a point of reference in debating the issue. One of the publications which followed Frazier's line of thought and which inadvertently changed the direction of the debate was the Moynihan Report. Like Frazier, Moynihan linked the pathological behavior pervasive in black family life to the heritage of slavery and to subsequent neo-slavery policies, suggesting that black cultural traits led to family instability (see Patterson 102). The report became famous over night and provoked an outcry in the black community as well as in liberal academic circles. Leman suggests that the report was perceived as an insult since it brought to mind "all the white Southern mythology about unrestrained black sexuality" (175). Further aggravating the negative reception, Moynihan emphasized out-of-wedlock childbearing while ignoring economic aspects, such as unemployment. Leman also observes that the Moynihan Report stands as probably the most refuted document in American history today—despite the fact that its dire predictions about the poor black family all came true. Attacks on it are still being published. He notes that the practical effect of the controversy over the report was exactly the opposite of what Moynihan had intended—"all public discussions in mainstream liberal circles of issues like the state of the black family and the culture of poverty simply ceased" (177).

1.2.2. The Liberal Structuralist Response

Following the Moynihan report, liberal voices dominated the discussion on the nature of impoverished black family life. Shortly after the review had been published, a white psychologist from Boston, William Ryan, coined the term "blaming the victim," which sums up liberal interpretations of various cultural explanations for black family disorganization (see Leman 176).

Another milestone in the discussion was provided by Herbert Gutman, who, in his book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, refutes the idea that black family life was permanently

incapacitated by slavery. Gutman attempts to show that stable marriages were the dominant institution in African American family life during and immediately after slavery.

Disorganization during the sharecropper system and in the following decades, according to Gutman and other scholars, is due entirely to structural factors, such as racism and economic disadvantages (see Gates, *Future* 128).

The liberal view today holds that the relative absence of black males in African American families is historically attributable to shifts in post Civil War and post WWII migration of black males for employment purposes, as well as in the racist lack of employment for blacks. Nevertheless, regardless of the perspective one might adopt, the fact that social dislocations in impoverished African American families today are common is uncontested, as following representative examples will illustrate.

1.2.3. African American Family Life in Impoverished Urban Communities Today

The structure of poor black families in impoverished urban communities today has not changed much since the Moynihan report was released in 1965. Social dislocations such as teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, illegitimacy, and female headed households are still disproportionately high in black urban communities. Two young autobiographers LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman who published their book, *Our America*, in 1997 describe their family situation, which is representative of many others, in frank detail. Both grew up in a multi-generational household headed by females. In Lloyd's family, his older sisters, thirteen and fourteen years of age, take on full responsibility for their siblings after their mother's early death. Their father, a chronic alcoholic, visits his children only sporadically and does not contribute financially to the household.

LeAlan is fortunate enough to grow up in a home with both of his grandparents and it is the grandmother who runs the family affairs. While LeAlan's mother and his siblings live in the same household, the grandparents hold legal custody over the children due to their mother's mental illness. LeAlan's siblings all have different fathers and LeAlan does not know—neither does his mother—who his father is. LeAlan's older sister, who is a single mother at age 16, and her baby live in the same household with the grandparents.

Thus, as these representative examples show, the patterns of social dislocations in impoverished African American families have remained virtually the same since emancipation. The question whether it is justified to link these patterns to slavery has been largely avoided in the academic discourse since they are considered “racially sensitive.” Cornel West is one of the few scholars who dares to draw a connection between the oppressive history experienced by the African American people and the way sexuality and family life are practiced in black communities. He suggests that white supremacist beliefs and ideals have caused a lack of self-esteem and psychological scars in blacks, wounds which are also reflected in their sexuality:

The refusal of many black Americans to love their own black bodies, especially their black noses, hips, lips, and hair [is directly linked to] two hundred and forty-four years of slavery and nearly a century of institutionalized terrorism in the form of segregation, lynchings, and second-class citizenship in America... This white dehumanizing endeavor has left its toll in the psychic scars and personal wounds now inscribed in the souls of black folk... These scars and wounds are clearly etched on the canvas of black sexuality. (*Race* 122-23)

Apart from West’s bold analysis, however, the question, whether social dislocations in black family life today may be traced back to slavery, remains largely unanswered in the public discourse. Quite unexpectedly then, the relative silence on the issue was broken by Barack Obama while he was still campaigning for the presidency in 2008. In his speech “A More Perfect Union” Obama links the African American past of slavery and discrimination to the dismal situation in black urban communities today. While he does not refer to social dislocations in black families explicitly, he points to historical racism as a significant structural factor which still influences the lives of poor African Americans today, a factor which will be considered in the following chapter.

The present chapter will conclude with a literary case-in-point analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ autobiographical narrative by examining the role of women at the time of emancipation in the light of the conservative behaviorist explanation for black ghetto formation.

1.3. Literary Case in Point: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

1.3.1. Harriet Jacobs: Her Life (1813–1897)

Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1813. Orphaned as a child, she was taken into her kind mistress' home, who taught her to read and sew. At age eleven she was willed to the mistress' young niece and sent to live in the house of Dr. Norcom, the licentious and abusive master called Dr. Flint in the narrative. Thus, in her early teenage years Jacobs was left with only two relatives, her grandmother, a well-respected free black woman, and her younger brother. As she was subjected to the continual sexual harassment of her new master, Jacobs sought protection in a clandestine liaison with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a white unmarried lawyer, by whom she had two children, Joseph (born around 1830), and Louisa Matilda (born 1833). When Norcom punished her refusal to become his concubine by sending her out to hard labor on a plantation and threatened to do the same to her children, Jacobs forestalled his plans by hiding in a crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother's house in the summer of 1835. She hid in that "little dismal hole" for seven years, desperate for air, light, and other basic physical necessities but comforted by the fact that she was near her children, who had been given in custody of her grandmother. In 1842 Jacobs succeeded in fleeing to the North, where she reclaimed her daughter from Sawyer, who had purchased the child and sent her to Brooklyn, New York, without emancipating her. She further secured a place for her son to live in Boston with her brother and took on work as a nursemaid to the baby daughter of Mary Stace Willis, wife of the popular conservative editor, poet, and magazine writer Nathaniel Parker Willis.

For ten years after her escape to the North, Jacobs lived the uncertain existence of a fugitive slave keeping on the move and enlisting the aid of antislavery activists in New York in a strained effort to evade Norcom's attempts to locate her. The author's final steps into freedom are relayed in the last chapter of her narrative entitled "Free at Last," when her employer's second wife, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, pays her ransom.

Jacobs worked in favor of abolition and women's rights for many years. She devoted herself to relief work in the country's capital during the war and engaged in further relief work among the freedmen and freedwomen in Savannah, Georgia, after 1865. In the mid-80s, Jacobs returned to Washington, D.C. where she helped organize the National Association of Colored Women. She died on March 7, 1897.

1.3.2. Harriet Jacobs' Autobiographical Work:

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

After her arrival in the North, Jacobs was urged by friends such as the white Quaker abolitionist and feminist Amy Post to make her story public. Apprehensive of her own ability to do so, Jacobs sought to enlist Harriet Beecher Stowe's aid in getting her life story published. Yet, Stowe showed little interest in cooperating with Jacobs in any kind of creative project, and she therefore decided to embark on the task herself.

In a letter to Post, Jacobs writes: "Don't expect too much from me, dear Amy. You shall have truth, but not talent" (qtd. in Yellin 484). Apart from overcoming self-doubt, Jacobs had to face the fear of being discovered since her employer, Mr. Willis, was known to take a pro-slavery stand. Jacobs further feared the "criticism and ridicule of educated people" (qtd. in Yellin 484) and was aware of the fact that the depiction of her sexual history would not always be received favorably by the average Victorian reader. Jacobs' editor, Lydia Maria Child, therefore encouraged her to publish *Incidents* under a pseudonym and addressed the concerns in her introduction to the work:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty (Child 4).

Nevertheless, despite all doubts and fears the autobiographical narrative was published in 1861 just prior to the formal outbreak of the Civil War. It was reviewed favorably by the abolitionist press and initially fairly well distributed but soon faded into obscurity amidst the upheavals caused by the war. When the mid-twentieth century scholarship on African American women writers rekindled interest in the narrative, the authenticity of the work, published under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, was doubted. The narrative was widely believed to be either a fiction or the product of Child's pen, and it was considered mediocre at best in its employment of the literary style of the period, known as sentimental literature. Yet, the discovery of a cache of Jacobs' letters by Jean Fagan Yellin in 1981 confirmed the authenticity of *Incidents* and established Jacobs as the author. As Yellin emphasizes, the discovery transformed "a questionable slave narrative into a well-documented pseudonymous autobiography" (Yellin 479).

Once the authenticity of *Incidents* was established, the work, now considered to be among the most important slave narratives, received intense critical attention. Due to the relative lack of access to written modes of expression by black women of the early nineteenth century, female autobiographers from that period represent less than ten percent of all book-length slave narratives. Yet it is not only the scarcity of black women writers within the genre which attracts the interest of literary critics, it is also the "unprecedented mix of confession, self-justification, and societal exposé," turning Jacobs' work into a "unique analysis of the myths and the realities that defined the situation of the African American woman and her relationship to the nineteenth century's 'cult of true womanhood'" (Andrews, "Jacobs" 209).

The popular literary genre of Jacobs' time, the sentimental novel, which represented the Victorian image of true womanhood, influenced Jacob's work in various ways. For one, she implicitly refers to this idealized female image throughout her book in order to demonstrate that it represents a moral standard which black slave women are denied since they are constantly subjected to the sexual harassment of white men. Jacobs further employs the literary style to relay certain passages in her account, thereby creating a contrast to the overall style of her narrative. This contrast points to the tension between "truth and fiction," which is always present in autobiographical accounts. In Jacobs' case, this tension is reflected in her construction of two seemingly conflicting stories: On the one hand she is the slave mother, who relays her classic slave narrative in direct and vivid language, interwoven with long stretches of anti-slavery rhetoric. On the other hand, she is the "fallen woman" who relays her

oppressor's attempts to seduce her and her own sexual strategy in vague diction and elaborate sentences. Thomas Doherty points out that "the sentimental novel's *sine qua non* was the seduction motif, a moral conflict that might seem especially well-suited for abolitionist exploitation" (3) and Herbert Ross Brown observes that "no other theme was able to provoke more purple patches or inspire more poetic flights" (qtd. in Doherty 4). Thus, by couching parts of her story in the familiar formula fiction, Jacobs not only appeals to her target readership, but also finds an elegant solution to convey "delicate and indelicate matters."

John Sekora notes that "[i]n stature and eloquence, *Incidents* is regarded as highly as the earlier narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown" (1). Owing to the distinction of presenting a woman's firsthand account of her sexual exploitations during slavery, thereby defying societal rules of sexual propriety, Jacobs' work stands out as a unique contribution in the canon of early African American literature.

1.3.3. Critical Analysis: Redefining the Victorian Concept of New Womanhood

As this chapter seeks to evaluate the conservative behaviorist argument which claims that the disintegration of black family structure has played a significant role in the evolvement of the black urban ghetto, the present literary analysis will consider the relevance of Jacobs' work in the context of the conservative behaviorist argument. To this end, Jacobs' response to the Victorian notion of "true womanhood," prevalent at her time, shall be considered and it shall be suggested that Jacobs offers a different set of definitions of womanhood and motherhood in her narrative which provides a positive alternative to the conventional imagery, which was by necessity linked to a two-parent stable family life. As will be seen in blending the cultural and the literary analysis, Jacobs' response is still representative of and relevant to urban African American communities today.

The pseudonymous protagonist in Jacobs's life narrative, Linda Brent, is introduced to the concept of true womanhood early on in life by her kind mistress and her family. Yet, as she is subjected to the constant threat of rape by her later master, Dr. Flint, during her early teenage years, she seeks protection with a white unmarried man in the community who becomes her lover and by whom she has two children. She thus finds herself "caught between the brutal exploitative bonds of oppression and the idealized bonds of true womanhood" (Sherman 167). As Sarah Way Sherman notes in her critical essay, "The first she resists with great spirit and no ambivalence; the other she resists only with great pain and guilt, after deep disillusionment. Both systems denied her a selfhood; neither had words to authorize her choice" (167). In her narrative directed at a white genteel readership, Brent struggles for words as she confesses her sexual history: "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (55). She further concedes that "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day" (55). Brent's avowal alludes, of course, to the genteel code, in which virginity before marriage was equated with female self-worth and moral integrity. Yet, being denied this choice, "Brent is forced to recognize that it

is through the moral exercise of her right to choose that...she gains integrity, not through the physical virginity with which the choice is associated” (Sherman 169).

Understanding, thus, that the cult of true womanhood is unattainable to her, she chooses survival and self-determination. She confronts the ideology which questions her very existence as a true woman and mother by asserting that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (55). She also points to the fact that her choice was limited to the lesser of two evils when she explains: “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (55). Insisting that her point of view be conveyed as such, namely a conscious act of self-determination, Jacobs turned down Harriet Beecher Stowe’s offer to integrate her story into Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* since it would have meant that “her history would have been circumscribed by the bounds of convention” (Carby 47).

Apart from being denied the status of a true woman due to her acts of sexual self-determination, Brent was also considered outside of the accepted norm since she had no husband or intact family home to give meaning to her existence as a woman. Being excluded from the domain of the home—which defined the power and influence of the Victorian woman—Brent’s womanhood and motherhood were “rendered meaningless” (Carby 46). Nevertheless, as Hazel Carby concludes in her critical essay, Jacobs redefines the meaning of her own motherhood and womanhood in her written life causing her readers to question the standards of conventional true womanhood: “The narrative of Linda Brent’s life stands as an exposition of her womanhood and motherhood contradicting and transforming an ideology that could not take account of her experience. The structure of Jacobs’ narrative embodied the process through which the meaning of Linda Brent’s and Jacobs’ motherhood and womanhood were revealed” (48).

In celebrating the love for her children in her own life, Brent places her integrity as a woman outside of the conventional moral system. As Sherman points out “[t]he central experience of her mature morality is neither virginity nor its loss, but motherhood” (171). Thus, Brent—and Jacobs—question the conventional standards of female behavior by pointing to their irrelevance in the experience of black women. In constructing Linda Brent’s life journey, Jacobs was able to reconstruct –and lend meaning to– her own life as a woman and a mother.

1.3.4. Incidents in the Context of the Underclass Debate

The challenges faced by Jacobs are imbued with relevance for the situation of many black women today. While Jacobs was prohibited by law and social convention from marrying her children's white father, many young black women living in an urban context today find themselves in circumstances which render marriage nearly impossible due to high rates of unemployment, drug use, incarceration, and crime. Sociologist Julius W. Wilson suggests that the overrepresentation of female-headed households among African Americans is linked to structural changes in the urban economy starting in the 1980s. Based on his research, Wilson concludes that there is a direct link between a lack of employment opportunities and the high number of female-headed households (cf. Wilson, *Disadvantaged*, 20). Along the same line, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein note in their study on single mothers, *Making Ends Meet*, published in 1997, that "growing up in a ghetto neighborhood [with little access to employment] makes it more likely that a young woman will bear a child in her teenage years" and will not get married to the child's father who usually has no means of supporting the young woman and their child (193).

How then can these single black mothers today construct a positive identity in their socially stigmatized situation? How does Linda Brent find her way toward redefining true womanhood as a single mother against all odds? One decisive factor in Brent's case is the influence of her grandmother, Aunt Martha, a free black matriarch, who embodies womanly strength and integrity and whose power is closely linked to her role as a nurturer since she served as a nurse, cook, and mammy throughout her life. Carby characterizes the grandmother as embodying aspects of "a *true* womanhood, . . . pure and pious, a fountainhead of physical and spiritual sustenance for Linda, her whole family, and the wider black community" (55). Yet, Carby points out that Aunt Martha's lived definition of womanhood diverges from its conventional Victorian definition in one decisive way: "The [one] quality . . . the grandmother did not possess was submissiveness" (55). Brent, therefore, in shaping her own identity as a woman and mother focuses on her grandmother's positive example which she admires and seeks to emulate.

In the context of this study it is interesting to note that every one of the primary literary sources which are used involves an Aunt Martha figure who plays a significant role in the protagonist's development. While Nathan McCall and Claude Brown rely on their mothers'

support in their coming-of-age years, LeAlan Jones depends on his grandmother for sustenance and stability during his childhood and youth. Malcolm X is taken in by his half-sister and Cupcake Brown by her aunt, both of whom seek to steady their youthful wayward ways, and Lloyd Newman is adopted by his teenage sisters, who nurture him and his younger siblings as if they were their own children. All of these women take responsibility for children and young adolescents with or without a male figure in the home. They all embody moral authority, intimacy, nurturing, warmth, and dependability. The reasons explaining the absence of a male partner vary: mental illness, death due to alcoholism, incarceration, or simply a lack of loyalty to name but a few. Nevertheless, like Linda Brent, all these women delight in their children and consider their role as (surrogate) mothers to be a joyous and deeply satisfying one. LeAlan Jones's sister, Janell, who has a baby at age 16 and who lives in the same household with LeAlan and her grandparents, exemplifies this attitude. Even though the child's father is no longer part of her life and she has to forego her education to take care of her baby, she asserts that she does not regret having the child. "I'd do it all over again. He's the most precious thing in my life. I love everyone in my family, but my baby is the most important thing to me right now" (Jones/Newman 61).

While the Aunt Martha figures in the various narratives are all deeply devoted to nurturing and caring for younger ones, the task constitutes a challenge in the absence of reliable male partners. Therefore African American women often fall back on the long-standing tradition of "othermothering," which testifies to the strong communal bonds within African American communities. In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* Patricia Hill Collins explains that the traditional role of "othermothers"—women assisting bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibility—has always been an important social institution in African American communities. In accordance with the African saying "It takes a whole village to raise a child," the boundaries which distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. While bloodmothers are generally expected to care for their children, "African and African American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible" (178). Therefore, Hill Collins points out, othermothers traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood (cf. 178).

The institution of othermothering is reflected in the life stories of LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, both of whom are under legal custody of an "othermother." In LeAlan's case, his

grandmother took custody over her daughter's children due to her daughter's mental illness. She explains in an interview with LeAlan that "[t]he state said they would put you all up for adoption because of your mother's mental condition, so rather than let the state take you and we would probably never get to see you again, I just told them I would take all three of you" (Jones/Newman 54).

After Lloyd's mother died, Lloyd's teenage sisters, Sophia and Precious, decided that they would raise their younger siblings, the youngest one being six years old at the time. When asked if she considers herself a mother raising her brothers and sisters, Sophia answers: "Yes. Sometimes people ask: 'Do you got kids?'" And I say, 'Yeah, I got four of them. They're my brothers and my sisters, but I take care of them and I love them like they was my own!'" (Jones/Newman 69).

Mirroring Linda Brent's definition of womanhood, which she defines through her identity as a mother, her will to self-determination, and the community surrounding her, modern day black women construct their identity in a similar way: while they do not define their womanhood through the presence or absence of a male partner, they find joy in motherhood and in the community that supports them. The importance of the black woman in sustaining the social fabric of the African American community has been praised in innumerable literary efforts. In a speech delivered in 1886, Anna J. Cooper, an African American teacher and activist, extols black women's centrality to human progress and calls it "a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race:"

Woman, Mother,—your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold! To trifle with it, to ignore or misuse it, is to treat lightly the most sacred and solemn trust ever confided by God to human kind. The training of children is a task on which an infinity of weal or woe depends. Who does not covet it? Yet who does not stand awestruck before its momentous issues! (559)

In returning to the initial question of this section pertaining to the insights which may be gained from examining Jacobs' work in the context of the cultural conservative argument which claims that the high number of female headed households is a crucial factor in understanding the development of today's black urban ghettos the following thoughts by Jacobs and Carby seem relevant:

In her work Jacobs represents the African American family structure of her period in that she was not granted the right to choose a husband, to marry, or to experience romance—stages of

development considered natural for the white American women of her time. In *Incidents* Linda Brent explains this as follows:

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning. How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink. (80)

Later on in the narrative, Brent illustrates her thoughts within her own life. When she receives a marriage proposal from a free black carpenter, her master, Dr. Flint, who has plans for Brent to become his concubine, refuses to let her purchase her freedom.

Conservative reasoning holds therefore that, given the exemplary nature of Brent's—and Jacobs'—life, it appears natural that the later development of disrupted family patterns within the African American community would occur. As Hazel Carby points out: "The consequences of being a slave woman did not end with the abolition of slavery as an institution but haunted the texts of black women throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth" (61).

The reasons as to why the number of female headed households is still disproportionately high today, 150 years after the abolition of slavery, remains subject to discussion between conservative cultural and liberal structuralist theorists, as was shown in the synopsis to the cultural analysis earlier in the chapter.

Nevertheless, Jacobs' work appears remarkable within the literature relevant to the debate in that it exemplifies the bravura with which black women have mastered the difficulties of sustaining black families and black communities from early slave days on. For this, W.E.B. DuBois praises the strength and the virtues in black women in a passionate "love letter" written to all black women:

For... their promise, and for their hard past, I honor the women of my race. Their beauty,— their dark and mysterious beauty of midnight eyes, crumpled hair, and soft, full-featured faces—is perhaps more to me than to you, because I was born to its warm and subtle spell; but their worth is yours as well as mine. No other women on earth

could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain. I have always felt like bowing myself before them in all abasement, searching to bring some tribute to these long-suffering victims, these burdened sisters of mine, whom the world the wise, white world, loves to affront and ridicule and wantonly to insult. I have known the women of many lands and nations,—I have known and seen and lived beside them, but none have I known more sweetly feminine, more unswervingly loyal, more desperately earnest, and more instinctively pure in body and in soul than the daughters of my black mothers. This, then,—a little thing—to their memory and inspiration. (*Women* 752)

2. The Original Sin of Slavery and Historic Racism

The Liberal Structuralist Perspective: Racial Injustice as a Structural Force in the Development of Black Urban Ghettos

2.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

2.1.1. The Expression of White Racism and the African American Response

Any intelligent, honest, objective person cannot fail to realize that this white man's slave trade, and his subsequent devilish actions are directly responsible for not only the presence of this black man in America, but also for the condition in which we find this black man here. (Malcolm X, 1965)

Racism as it is commonly defined in Cultural Studies “articulates cultural difference with structured inequality, using perceptions of these differences to validate oppression” (Baldwin et al. 27). “Race” therefore, like gender, is a social rather than a biological category, as James Baldwin aptly phrased it: “The value placed on the color of the skin is always delusive” (Baldwin qtd. in West, *Race* XIII).

The chapter at hand investigates this notion of race as it has been used in American history to assert cultural domination over blacks “as an essential element of economic and political control” (Baldwin et al. 27). Primary emphasis will thereby be placed on the evolvment and construction of black urban ghettos.

The following socio-historical analysis is divided into two chronological periods: before and after 1965 with general reflections on racism as a hegemonic ideology preceding the two sections. As African Americans have responded differently to white racism in its various forms during the two time periods, each section will separately offer thoughts on (1) the expressions of (structural) white racism and (2) the African American response.

2.1.2. Racism as a Hegemonic Ideology

When men oppress their fellow-men, the oppressor ever finds, in the character of the oppressed, a full justification for his oppression. Ignorance and depravity, and the inability to rise from degradation to civilization and respectability, are the most usual allegations against the oppressed. The evils most fostered by slavery and oppression, are precisely those which slaveholders and oppressors would transfer from their system to the inherent character of their victims. Thus the very crimes of slavery become slavery’s best defense. By making the enslaved a character fit only for slavery, they excuse themselves for refusing to make the slave a freeman. (Frederick Douglass)

In Cultural Studies, racism is usually linked to the ideology and structures of power. “Racism becomes a dominant or hegemonic ideology when it is used within a particular society to legitimate the social divisions and organization of that society” (Baldwin et al. 38-39). This notion corresponds with various forms of racism at any given time in US history and is exemplified in Leman’s analysis of white racism in the South during the sharecropper system.

While sharecropping as an economic arrangement had already existed prior to emancipation, it was limited to impoverished whites, who had worked the land of wealthy landowners during their absence. After the Civil War, however, it became one of the main pillars to maintain racist structures in the South as the unskilled and penniless freedmen and –women

sought for ways to secure their survival. The economic system based on white cultural hegemony nurtured myths about biological deficiencies in African Americans. As the above quote by Fredrick Douglass on the nature of slavery suggests, these myths were further compounded by the system itself. Leman explains that “white people [in the South] responded to their need to believe in the system of economic and political subjugation of blacks as just, fair, and inevitable by embracing the idea of black inferiority” (24). Black inferiority, according to whites, was evident in the chaotic aspects of sharecropper society which they attributed not to deprivation or pain inherent in the system, but incapacity. Blacks, the argument went, were born without a conscience and without the ability to shoulder responsibility. According to David Cohn, they were “childlike and emotionally unstable,” viewing life as “a long moral holiday” (Cohn qtd. in Leman 249). Therefore planters felt justified in not keeping up their end of financial dealings with blacks since they believed blacks would only waste the money. The education of the sharecroppers’ children was haphazard as a convenience to the planters but also by design since blacks were thought to be intellectually deficient. Planters further felt that “there was nothing wrong with winking at all sorts of violations of the law by their sharecroppers, from moonshining to petty theft to polygamy to murder,” because blacks had no moral life to begin with (Leman 25). The white ideal of a Southern planter, therefore, portrayed him as a father and the sharecroppers as his children, “dependent, carefree, and grateful” (25). Leman relays a ritual exemplifying this Southern mindset, which was carried out by a rich planter in the Mississippi Delta at Christmas time: “One of the big planters in Clarksdale, Roy Flowers, used to have his sharecroppers stand out in the fields at Christmas time while he proceeded down the turn rows with a pot of silver dollars, handing out (as another planter puts it) a little bit of the money he had stolen from them at the settle” (25).

Thus, blacks in the South were still subject to child-like treatment and to various forms of racial violence, such as lynchings and fire-bombings, until long after the demise of slavery in order to secure and perpetuate the system of white hegemony. The following sections will consider the expressions of racial control and the ensuing black response before and after 1965 respectively. Historical racism in its various forms shall then be linked to the emergence and persistence of impoverished, racialized urban ghettos as they exist today.

2.1.3. Expressions of White Racism Prior to 1965:

Embodying the Notion of Black Inferiority

Being a Negro in America is not a comfortable existence. It means being a part of the company of the bruised, the battered, the scarred, and the defeated. Being a Negro in America means trying to smile when you want to cry. It means trying to hold on to physical life amid psychological death. It means the pain of watching your children grow up with clouds of inferiority in their mental skies. It means having your legs cut off, and then being condemned for being a cripple. It means seeing your mother and father spiritually murdered by the slings and arrows of daily exploitation, and then being hated for being an orphan. Being a Negro in America means listening to suburban politicians talk eloquently against open [non-discriminatory] housing while arguing in the same breath that they are not racists. It means being harried by day and haunted by night by a nagging sense of nobodiness and constantly fighting to be saved from the poison of bitterness. It means the ache and anguish of living in so many situations where hopes unborn have died. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, the overwhelming majority of blacks continued to work for whites as agricultural laborers, and “a substantial degree of coercion continued to characterize relations between planters and laborers” (Kolchin 224). Thus, despite their newly gained freedom, white racism limited the opportunities of blacks in every aspect of their daily lives. The expressions of structural white racism were multifarious and pervasive. In 1883, the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 to be unconstitutional, and in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case in 1896 the Supreme Court established that “separate but equal” facilities were in accordance with the Fourteenth Amendment, thus approving racial segregation. Following these decisions, various social codes and laws restricting vocations and movement of freed blacks, known collectively under the name Jim Crow, constituted a solid structure of white dominance.

Legal expressions of white racism were matched by spontaneous outbursts of racial violence imbuing the black populace with fear and terror. Countless black families were driven from their homes or burned out of them. Black churches were set on fire, and black men, women, and even children were lynched. In 1866 the Memphis Massacre, representative of many similar events in the South, left forty-six African Americans killed and many more injured. Ninety houses, twelve schools, and four churches were burnt. That same year, the violent white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan was formed. Reflecting on the collective acts of

racial violence, Cornel West concludes that “it goes without saying that a profound hatred of African people...sits at the center of American civilization” (*Race* 106). Therefore, innumerable accounts of racist acts directed at African Americans constitute a major issue in nearly all black autobiographies. Two such acts, both occurring in the late 1920s and representative of many others, shall illustrate the racial climate pervasive throughout the entire South.

One such instance is told by George Hicks, a Southern black from Clarksdale, Mississippi, on his way to the black movie theater in town, accompanied by his bold and defiant uncle.

Leman relays the story as follows:

...George was walking along Issaquena Street with his uncle, on their way to the black movie theater. A white policeman was coming the other way on the sidewalk. The etiquette in such situations was that the black people were supposed to step off the sidewalk, assume expressions of deep deference and humility, and let the white man pass. George's uncle didn't do this. He kept on walking on the sidewalk, and, since the policeman kept walking too, they bumped into each other and the policeman fell down. George's uncle was taken to jail, where who knows what might have happened if a higher power hadn't intervened. The uncle was running day labor to plantations in trucks, so the planters needed him; one of them found out he was in jail, put in a call to the sheriff, and had him released. (42)

As a rule, encounters with white policemen were humiliating for blacks in the South since most law enforcement officials enjoyed harassing blacks just to keep them “on their toes.”

Sometimes George, like any black kid growing up in Clarksdale, would be harassed by the police. Some of the policemen liked to keep black boys on their toes by creating hostile encounters. George might be standing on a corner, and a policeman would come up to him and say, “Boy, what are you doing?” The proper response was to avoid eye contact and say “yessuh” and “nossuh” a lot, in which case, after a while, the policeman would move on. (42-43)

While interactions such as the above, which were part of the official public code of race relations, were humiliating to blacks, the hidden acts of racial violence by white supremacist groups were terrifying. The traumatizing experience of a family barely escaping the flames in their own house after it had been set on fire by two white men is famously recorded in the autobiography of Malcolm X, who was later to become one of the most outspoken voices against white supremacist ideology.

I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white

men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down. (3)

The black response to these various forms of white racist expression until the mid twentieth century is eloquently phrased by W.E.B. DuBois as black “double-consciousness,” the sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (*Souls* 7). African American voices testifying to this state of self-perception are manifold and dominated black self-reflective accounts prior to 1965.

2.1.4. The African American Response to White Racism Prior to 1965: Double Consciousness

One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 1903)

In his study *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois explains that the state of “double-consciousness” has developed in the African American in the process of “his longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (3). Du Bois writes:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of other, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (*Souls* 7)

DuBois therefore argues that African Americans perceive themselves through the eyes of others, namely whites, thereby living in two worlds: “within and without the veil” (3). Locked into a quest for white approval, always vulnerable to white racist assessment, they become prone to self-loathing and self-contempt, as Carl Upchurch states in his autobiography: “I grew up believing that I deserved society’s contempt just because I was black” (X). Frazier observes that it is primarily “the lower-class Negro, as opposed to the middle class, [who] tends to accept the estimation which whites place upon the Negro’s ability and characteristics” (*Negro* 304). Yet, other authors such as Angela Davis contend that black self-contempt instilled by white racist beliefs is not limited to poor, uneducated blacks, but that it is pervasive throughout all social strata of black life. Davis recalls educated schoolteachers during her early schooldays in Alabama who passed the white racist explanation for black poverty on to their students: “[M]any teachers tended to inculcate in us the official racist explanation for our misery. The way out of this torment was education, so that every black student could lift himself singly and separately out of the muck and slime of poverty “by our own bootstraps” (213-14).

In keeping with the self-perception of double-consciousness, blacks voiced explanations which deviated from the official one only secretly “in whispers and private feelings,” as Leman points out (34). In daily life, any resentment that blacks felt for whites was usually kept hidden “under a mask of slightly uncomprehending servility that black people knew fit whites’ basic picture of them” (Leman 36).

DuBois himself testifies to the experience of a sense of “twoness,” namely the contradiction between his outer calm comportment and his inner rage, whenever he is asked about the “Negro problem.”

They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville.... Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (*Souls* 6)

Thus, for centuries, blacks interacted with whites only through a racial lens, putting on a front of subservience, while their self-image was obscured by the DuBoisian veil. Hortense Powdermaker, who studied sharecropper society in the 1930s, remarks that the psychological effects suffered by victims of racism influence their notion of self and their actions: “Perhaps

the most severe result of denying respect to an individual is the insidious effect on his self-esteem. Few can long resist self-doubt in the face of constant belittling and humiliation at the hands of others” (Powdermaker qtd. in Leman 31).

Yet, as history has repeatedly shown, the oppression a people can bear before, as Martin Luther King phrased it, “the cup of endurance runs over,” is limited (*King* 297). Crowded into urban ghettos, denied opportunities for economic advancement and subject to racial humiliation, blacks in the 1960s started to feel increasingly reluctant to accept racial injustice. “We can throw off our brainwashing and self-hatred,” Malcolm X proclaimed speaking for millions of black Americans. Riding the crest of social discontent, Malcolm X emerged as the “Prophet of Rage” encouraging his followers to no longer view themselves through a white lens. Together with Martin Luther King Jr., who spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement, the two black leaders called on the African people on the North American continent to unite, standing proud and tall so as to look the white man in the eye and demand justice. As such, they were instrumental in converting black double-consciousness into a state of analytic sobriety.

2.1.5. Expressions of White Racism after 1965: The Crumbling of the White Hegemonic Citadel

The time has come, God knows, for us to examine ourselves, but we can only do this if we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here. (James Baldwin)

In 1945, a variety of socioeconomic factors combined to unsettle the traditional order of race relations. The heightened awareness of racial injustice among returning WWII soldiers, increasingly cramped ghettos, black employment set-backs in the postwar economy and the

presence of civil rights activists in small communities throughout the country all constituted a force which challenged the fortress of white sociopolitical hegemony. Strengthened by the rise of charismatic black leaders, the African American community called on the nation to make good on its creed stating that “all men are created equal.” This call was heeded with the passing of the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 1965 respectively, thus finally granting African Americans equality before the law.

Having been exposed to places where segregation did not exist, many African American soldiers returning after the Second World War felt that they were entitled to their full rights as citizens in their home country. Yet, in most areas of American domestic life they found their hopes denied. In the professional sector, blacks watched “fair employment” vanish as employers favored white males once the war was over.

“Last hired, first fired” reflected job reality, especially in skilled and industrial jobs. In 1943 more than a million African Americans were employed in the aircraft industry. By 1950, the number had shrunk to 237,000. The decline was less marked in the automobile, rubber, and shipbuilding industries, but minority job levels dropped there too, as employers routinely chose to exclude nonwhites from many of the skilled and higher-paying positions. (Berkin 854)

Compounding the unfavorable employment situation of blacks was the steady influx of black masses from the South, who moved into the already cramped and spatially limited urban ghetto areas. Restrictive covenants, which constituted legal restrictions on transferring property to blacks in white neighborhoods, rigidly maintained the color line.

In the social sector of public life, change was slow in coming as well, especially in the South. In 1955 Frazier applauds the progress the white police force was making in “gradually becoming representatives of the *law*, rather than conceiving of themselves as persons embodying certain attitudes toward Negroes” (*Negro* 695). Jim Crow laws still dominated the South and blacks were subject to various forms of racial humiliation, such as sitting behind a curtain on the train or being excluded from shops, restaurants, amusement parks, and other areas of public life.

The racially charged climate in the postwar years intensified as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum and whites had to cede previously segregated areas of public life. One of the most significant landmarks in black progress during the period was the integration of schools, following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling in 1954. The

integration “showdown” of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957, when the school reluctantly opened its doors to African American students, is recalled by Daisy Bates, one of the first black pupils to enter the school.

At the corner I tried to pass through the long line of guards around the school so as to enter the grounds behind them. One of the guards pointed across the street. So I pointed in the same direction and asked whether he meant for me to cross the street and walk down. He nodded ‘yes.’ So I walked across the street conscious of the crowd that stood there, but they moved away from me.

For a moment all I could hear was the shuffling of their feet. Then someone shouted, “Here she comes, get ready!” I moved away from the crowd on the sidewalk and into the street. If the mob came at me I could then cross back over so the guards could protect me.

The crowd moved in closer and then began to follow me, calling me names. I still wasn’t afraid. Just a little bit nervous. Then my knees started to shake all of a sudden and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life.

Even so, I still wasn’t too scared because all the time I kept thinking that the guards would protect me.

When I got right in front of the school, I went up to a guard again. But this time he just looked straight ahead and didn’t move to let me pass him. I didn’t know what to do. Then I looked and saw that the path leading to the front entrance was a little further ahead. So I walked until I was right in front of the path to the front door.

I stood looking at the school—it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students go through.

The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in. He too didn’t move. When I tried to squeeze past him he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets.

They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn’t know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me.

They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, “Lynch her! Lynch her!”

I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob—someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.

They came closer, shouting, ‘No nigger bitch is going to get in our school! Get out of here!’

I turned back to the guards, but their faces told me I wouldn’t get help from them. Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, ‘If I can only make it to that bench I will be safe.’

When I finally got there, I don’t think I could have gone another step. I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again. Someone hollered, ‘Drag her over to this tree! Let’s take care of this nigger.’ Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said, ‘Don’t let them see you cry.’ (Bates 197)

Such spectacles of racial animosity were not uncommon in the South as Civil Rights groups started to make their presence felt in rural communities. The heightened tension worried the

old school generation of blacks who feared that they would bear the brunt of the anger aimed at Civil Rights activists in their efforts to achieve progress. “Why don’t you get out of here before you’ll get all of us killed?” Anne Moody was repeatedly asked by terrified blacks when she set up a CORE office with other volunteers in a rural community in Mississippi (Moody 349).

Some whites responded to black activism with heightened aggression hoping to reverse the inroads blacks were making into securing their rights as equal citizens. When criminal offences against blacks which had become commonly accepted started being questioned, whites were outraged and (rightly) blamed the new black activism embodied in the Civil Rights Movement. One white farmer, after raping a young black high school girl picking cotton, told his beer drinking mates: “Them Niggers even got the nerve to complain about getting rid of a little pussy since that damn organization [meaning CORE] moved in” (Moody 355).

While racially aggressive acts were more common and more overt in the South, they occurred in the North as well, if only in small gestures and concealed actions. Ruby Lee Daniels recalls a situation in Chicago in 1945 which reminded her of the Southern codes of segregation—only in a slightly altered version:

One night when Ruby was on her way home from work, she decided to stop in at a corner tavern to get a cup of coffee. She was standing in the doorway when a white lady inside saw her and quickly put a sign up in the window that said ‘Members Only.’ Ruby decided to take the hint and forgo the cup of coffee. She was beginning to realize that the stories that had circulated in Mississippi about how you could go anywhere in Chicago were nowhere near true. (Leman 67)

The North was changing rapidly between 1945 and 1965. By 1960 Chicago had “more than half a million more black residents than it had had twenty years earlier,” a fact which led David Cohn to prophesy that “race relations were inevitably going to become not just an issue, but *the* issue in the North” (Leman 70). Cohn’s prescient statement pointed to a new black mindset and the emergence of a young generation of African American activists and leaders, most prominently Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who stressed the contradiction between the American creed of democracy and the denial of rights to African Americans. While the style among the activist groups varied, ranging from nonviolent resistance to a militant assertion of black rights, a sense of urgency in fighting for racial

equality united the movement. In 1946, Martin Luther King, Jr. voiced the demands of the new generation of African Americans as follows:

We want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens: The right to earn a living at work for which we are fitted by training and ability; equal opportunities in education, health, recreation, and similar public services; the right to vote; equality before the law; some of the same courtesy and good manners that we ourselves bring to all human relations. (King, Jr., in Ling 20)

King's courtesy of tone contrasts sharply with Malcolm X's language. While King spoke primarily to educated middle-class African Americans, Malcolm X appealed to the masses of discontented blacks crowded into the northern urban ghettos. Yet, despite their differences—King was Christian, Malcolm X was Muslim; King pursued an integrationist path to equality, Malcolm X advocated separatism; King followed Gandhi's example of non-violent resistance, Malcolm X was ready to fight for equal rights "by any means necessary"—despite these differences, the two black leaders were united at core in their vision: both were outraged by their country's history of racial oppression and both sought equality and uplift for their people.

2.1.6. The African American Response to White Racism after 1965: Boiling Rage

For the white man to ask the black man if he hates him is just like the rapist asking the *raped*, or the wolf asking the *sheep*, 'Do you hate me?' The white man is in no moral *position* to accuse anyone else of hate! Why, when all of my ancestors are snake-bitten, and I'm snake-bitten, and I warn my children to avoid snakes, what does that *snake* sound like accusing *me* of hate-teaching? (Malcolm X, 1965)

With their bold demands on the nation to rectify its past of racial injustice, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X opened a new chapter in the history of American race relations. When the two African American leaders first embarked on their mission of instilling collective racial pride and individual self-confidence in African Americans by pointing to the past as an

important factor in understanding their present-day situation, they were treading on new territory. Up to that point “the racism that had suffused American scholarship... made it easy for historians to dismiss slavery as a significant issue” (Kolchin 171). Only when scholars began to take seriously the history of African Americans, “they found it impossible to relegate slavery to the role of an insignificant peripheral nuisance” (Kolchin 171). Martin Luther King and Malcolm X paved the way for a new African American consciousness to emerge, a new kind of self-understanding and self-awareness which developed under their leadership during the Civil Rights Movement and which caught hold and eventually exploded in the urban ghettos after 1965.

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X played a crucial role in placing the country’s racially oppressive history in the forefront of the nation’s conscience. Both of them were driven by a ferocious sense of rage in the face of the injustice committed against their people and by a sense of utmost urgency to act on behalf of racial justice.

In his famous letter from Birmingham Jail, King, who was incarcerated for participating in civil rights demonstrations, voices the new black consciousness when he explains to eight white clergymen who had openly criticized him for “inciting civil disturbances” why the struggle for “freedom, justice and equality” could not wait:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; ... when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored,’ when your first name becomes ‘nigger’ and your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged in an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. (King, *Testament* 292-3)

The same urgency and dedication driving Martin Luther King is reflected in Malcolm X's message, yet his is imbued with biting wit and relentless anger. Walter Dean Myers compares King and Malcolm X to a sword complementing each other in the struggle for racial justice. "It was Malcolm...that put the hard edge on the movement that provided the other side of the sword, not the handle of acceptance and nonviolence, but the blade" (Myers X). Thus, while Martin Luther King advocated reconciliation and integration, Malcolm X embraced separatist black-nationalist ideology, expecting reconciliation to gradually emerge as blacks and whites were able to meet as equals. He urged his followers to no longer view themselves through white lenses. As the "prophet of black rage" Malcolm X compelled his people to "believe... themselves capable of taking control of their own destinies" (West, *Race* 136). Again and again he calls on African Americans to recognize the truth about the black condition in America: "Four hundred years of black blood and sweat invested here in America, and the white man still has the black man begging for what every immigrant fresh off the ship can take for granted the minute he walks down the gangplank" (183).

Thus verbalizing black rage, Malcolm X was often portrayed as a hate monger for his militant stance of black resistance since he thought it unacceptable to remain passive in the face of brutal white oppression. Yet, at the core of his message was the assertion of black worth, beauty, and strength which had been degraded for centuries in an oppressive racial system. Urging his followers to defend black dignity, Malcolm X explains: "I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that's how 'Christian' philosophy is interpreted, if that's what Gandhian philosophy teaches, well, then, I will call them criminal philosophies" (374).

Malcolm X further believed that equality before the law would not suffice to truly emancipate black people. Rooted in the Black Nationalist tradition of Marcus Garvey, he was convinced that civil rights alone "would have no meaning if African Americans still thought of themselves as a racially crippled people" (Myers 190). "Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will," was Garvey's slogan which would guide Malcolm from his early childhood on (Malcolm X 7).

Malcolm X embodied black rage like no other black leader. It was the rage that was festering in the black communities of his time. This rage was based on the awareness that the racial oppression of the past four centuries was directly responsible for the dismal plight of the poor black ghetto dweller. As such, Malcolm X's sharp criticism of America's original sin—racism and slavery—is insistent to this day. The rage of today's young black generation who

faces the raw reality of guns and drugs, despair and violence is approximated only by Malcolm X's speech. In identifying with Malcolm X's short life, they find their rage articulated and their humanity affirmed.

2.2. The Underclass Debate

Synthesis: Slavery and Historic Racism

**Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.
(Barack Obama, 2008)**

When Barack Obama became the first African American to secure the nomination of a major national party, political commentators dubbed him the nation's first "post racial" candidate. Nevertheless, this epithet soon lost its credibility as various incidents caused the delicate and volatile issues of race and social class to surface during his presidential campaign. In response, Obama delivered a momentous speech addressing these issues which immediately attracted intense national and international interest. In the course of the debate following the speech, which was described by historians as "almost without precedent" and perhaps "the most important speech on race of this century" it became evident that the term "post racial" does not, in any way, apply to American society today. In fact, most socio-political analysts hold the opposite to be true and agree with Nathan McCall that "race remains America's foremost preoccupation" (McCall, *Holler* XVI).

Thus, in accordance with McCall's observation, the liberal structuralist perspective links past and present forms of racial oppression to the evolvment of black urban ghettos. While this link is considered to be self-evident among structuralist theorists, the conservative behaviorist line of thought tends to ignore—or deny—a connection between the country's legacy of racial injustice and the persistence of a black underclass today. The debate will conclude with a section on race relations as they are experienced by African Americans today. Finally, the chapter's literary case-in-point analysis will critically examine Malcolm X's autobiography by placing it in the context of the Underclass Debate.

2.2.1. Racial Injustice as a Structuralist Explanation for Black Ghetto Formation

While most scholars would agree that white supremacist ideology and its racist expressions were instrumental in the construction of black urban pockets of poverty today, they usually state this idea only implicitly and with caution. It is perhaps due to this unspoken taboo that Barack Obama's candid address concerning the issue of race was hailed by historians and commentators to be "almost without precedent" (Knowlton 4). In his speech "A More Perfect Union," Barack Obama, who was then the democratic presidential candidate, links the country's history of racial injustice to the economic disparities within the black community.

We do not need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow... Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire department—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities. ("Union")

Speaking on behalf of those "who didn't make it out of history's confinement" and who inhabit the neighborhoods within the black community that serve as "repositories for all the scars of past racial oppression," Obama calls into memory the nation's ugly racial past. "Rightly or wrongly," he observes, "white guilt has exhausted itself in America" (*Hope* 293). Nevertheless, in order to progress on the shared path as a nation, he considers it necessary to acknowledge that "what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people" ("Union"). In his address, Obama further points to the "legacy of discrimination... and current incidents of discrimination, [which]—while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed" ("Union").

Due to his simple, yet unequivocal choice of words, the *International Herald Tribune* associated Obama's speech in its "frankness... only with speeches by Presidents Johnson,

Kennedy, and Lincoln” (Knowlton 4). The *Tribune*’s columnist Janny Scott points out that Obama broke a public taboo by offering “a primer on the link between today’s racial disparities and the system of legalized discrimination” in the country’s past (4). Flattering comments hailing the momentous significance of the speech, such as: “a spellbinding display of rhetorical brilliance” (*London’s Daily Telegraph*), “an extraordinary moment of truth-telling” (*Washington Post*), and “one of the most important [speeches] of this century” (*Seattle Post – Intelligencer*), virtually flooded the international media for days (cf. Knowlton 4). The overwhelmingly positive reaction and the intense public interest in Obama’s address—transcripts of it zoomed to the number one or two spots on the most e-mailed lists of virtually every major US newspaper or broadcast website—seem to confirm that race is not an issue of declining significance in the US today. Instead, despite attempts to relegate it to the sphere of the past, it intractably reappears in the arena of American public life as a major issue deeply implicated in the existence of black urban ghettos today.

“Racism is still alive and well,” the black theologian James H. Cone observes at the end of the twentieth century as he establishes a connection between current forms of racism and the continuous social isolation and economic disparity of millions of African Americans. Comparing today’s racial climate with the racism during the Civil Rights period, Cone finds that “the main difference... is its refinement and more subtle manifestation” (316). While the country today officially advocates a “liberal approach to the race issue...the black masses remain trapped in a world of poverty and death” (316). Concluding that “America is not redeemed” he describes the living circumstances of those “at the bottom of the social heap” (316).

[V]ery little has changed to uplift the quality of life for the black underclass, the people Malcolm described as living ‘at the bottom of the social heap’ in an ‘extremely wretched condition.’ They are the nation’s ‘truly disadvantaged.’ Unemployed and underemployed, their children are having babies who will be locked in the same cycle of poverty as their parents. Fifty percent of black babies are born in poverty! Where is the American dream for them? (316)

The denial of the American dream occurs, as Cone points out, on a structural level. Thus, it is due to a structure of racial inequality that the American Dream is denied to millions of impoverished African Americans. They are denied educational and economic opportunities and are left to fend for themselves in neglected neighborhoods in the large metropolitan cities of the country. Cone’s reasoning, representative of the majority of liberal theorists, contrasts

sharply with the conservative perspective, which holds that the structural conditions for black progress have been established decades ago.

2.2.2. The Conservative Behaviorist Response

In his book *The New Politics of Poverty* Lawrence Mead argues that “the trouble [with the liberal view] today is that in the 1960s national policy decisively changed” (111). Since the Civil Rights act mandated equal opportunity and an end to discrimination against minorities, there is no reason, according to Mead, why blacks should not progress economically on the same level as whites. Mead further points out that “the shift [in public policy] was backed by public opinion, as rising majorities of whites... endorsed the principle of equal treatment. Most whites abandoned prejudice in its traditional form—the belief blacks were innately inferior regardless of personal attributes” (111).

Yet, Mead acknowledges the fact that inter-racial relations have been—and still are—burdened. This is due partially to semantics, Mead suggests, since the meaning of the term “racism” has been twisted. “Racism” today usually connotes, “not support for the Ku Klux Klan, but a defense of social standards against the perceived disorder of the ghetto” (113). Thus, Mead explains, whites are falsely accused of harboring racist attitudes toward blacks when they criticize certain aspects of their lifestyle.

Given the preponderance of blacks among violent criminals and the long-term poor and dependent, those characterizations [and the criticism thereof] are not inaccurate, although they do not apply to the majority of blacks. The drift of white attitudes is away from denying the potential equality of blacks and toward a criticism of their shortcoming in the common society. (112)

Myron Magnet agrees with Mead in most points. Representative of other conservative scholars, he argues that “the pervasive racial discrimination that [once] limited [black] economic opportunity” needed to be outlawed (139). And even though he agrees that racism has not been expunged from the fabric of American life altogether he argues that “the crucial barriers have fallen. They fell years ago, giving way before the force of the Civil Rights Movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act” (140). As a result, Magnet observes, institutional

racism has been “dramatically abated,” a trend which was accompanied by a positive change in interracial relations (140). Therefore, Magnet concludes, “the disproportionate amount of blacks among the long-term American poor, amounting to 65 to 90 percent,” cannot be justified by claiming racist structures (139). Even though “doors still remain to be unlocked, ... as a general principle opportunity is open for whoever wishes to seek it” (141).

While these ideas are representative of mainstream conservative thinking among US citizens, they tend to ignore the expressions of racism which are experienced by African Americans from all social groups on a daily level and which continue to burden interracial relations in the US today.

2.2.3. Race Relations Today

In the preface to his book *Race Matters*, published in 1993, Cornel West relays a representative incident of racism which happened as he travelled through New York City in order to meet the photographer and designer for the cover of the book.

I left my car—a rather elegant one—in a safe parking lot and stood on the corner of 60th Street and Park Avenue to catch a taxi. I felt quite relaxed since I had an hour until my next engagement. At 5:00 P.M. I had to meet a photographer who would take the picture for the cover of this book on the roof of an apartment building in East Harlem on 115th Street and 1st Avenue. I waited and waited and waited. After the ninth taxi refused me, my blood began to boil. The tenth taxi refused me and stopped for a kind, well-dressed, smiling female fellow citizen of European descent. As she stepped in the cab, she said, ‘This is really ridiculous, is it not?’ Ugly racial memories of the past flashed through my mind. Years ago, while driving from New York to teach at Williams College, I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, ‘Yeh, and I’m the Flying Nun. Let’s go, nigger!’ I was stopped three times in my first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour... [These] memories cut like a merciless knife at my soul as I waited on that godforsaken corner. Finally I decided to take the subway. I walked three long avenues, arrived late, and had to catch my moral breath as I approached the white male photographer and white female cover designer. I chose not to dwell on this

every-day experience of black New Yorkers. And we had a good time talking, posing, and taking pictures. (XV-XVI)

Later in the book, West links the riots following the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles in April 1992 to the fact that “whites have often failed to acknowledge the widespread mistreatment of black people...by law enforcement agencies” (8-9). He further observes that America has been historically weak-willed in ensuring racial justice and “has continued to resent fully accepting the humanity of blacks” by tolerating double standards and differential treatment (7). As an example, West notes the harsh condemnation of the rap performer Ice T “while former Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates’s anti-black comments are received in polite silence” (7). Likewise, Nathan McCall points to the fact that the use of crack—primarily by poor urban blacks—receives much stiffer sentences than the use of powder cocaine, an expensive drug which poor blacks usually cannot afford (cf. McCall, *Holler* XV).

Another form of subtle racism which is commonly accepted is remembered by one of Obama’s friends and campaign helpers. The campaign helper, Robert, who is Caucasian and who grew up in the southern part of Illinois, relays an incident which happened at a small social club in Alton which he was invited to join.

Robert had never been to the place, but it seemed nice enough. The food had been served, the group was making some small talk, when Robert noticed that of the fifty or so people in the room not a single person was black. Since Alton’s population is about a quarter African American, Robert thought this odd, and asked the men about it. It’s a private club, one of them said. At first, Robert didn’t understand—had no blacks try to join? When they said nothing, he said, It’s 2006, for God’s sake. The men shrugged. It’s always been that way, they told him. No blacks allowed. Which is when Robert dropped his napkin on his plate, said good night, and left. (Obama, *Hope* 284)

Accounts like these lead Obama to conclude that inter-racial relations in the US today are far from being harmonious. The complex issue of race relations in the US has reached a “racial stalemate,” Obama notes, “wherein blacks and whites harbor resentments toward one another but are unable to find productive means of expressing them” (“Union”). This reluctance and reserve seems to seize Americans of all colors when they address issues of race. Tufts psychologist Sommers, whose research has probed into the powerful, yet largely subliminal effects of race, comments on the reticence of Americans to talk about skin color: “It fascinates me how race is potentially relevant to so many situations in life, but it is this giant elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about” (Blanding 26). It is only when a major event such

as the O.J. Simpson trial or hurricane Katrina stir the national debate that “race rears its head out of the flood waters of ignorance to show that it is still a grave and lingering problem in America” (Blanding 26). As in all large-scale social conflicts, decades and centuries of friction have fed into the resentments which have built up over time on both sides. Obama observes that “[t]he anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races” (“Union”).

The narratives nurtured on either side of the chasm consider the “racial problem” from an entirely different vantage point. In line with the white narrative, which builds on the American immigrant experience, whites feel that they had to build everything from scratch and were not privileged in any way. Therefore, when they hear that “an African American is getting advantaged...resentment builds over time” (“Union”). Blacks, on the other hand, hold whites responsible for the dismal situation millions of poor blacks find themselves in today. In a chapter entitled “Airing Dirty Laundry,” McCall states:

I’m not sensitive to the delicacy involved in airing dirty laundry. I’m hip to the hurt blacks feel. I also understand how our laundry got so downright funky in the first place. It started long ago, when an entire race of people nearly had its identity stamped out and was left confused about who it was. And it didn’t help that in the years since then popular white culture has compounded the pain by portraying blacks in unflattering ways. In literature, film, and practically every other aspect of American culture, blacks have been mocked ruthlessly, from Amos and Andy and Buckwheat to J.J. Walker. White America has found fault—and laughter—in our every characteristic, from the width of our noses to the way we speak. They continue to ridicule blackness, and they seem to take a special delight in condemning black men. (*Going On*, 18)

While angry outbursts such as this are rare in academic circles, the racial tension which inhabits the public realm in the US today is an open secret. Progress since the Civil Rights Movement has assuaged the wounds of race but not closed them. The black urban ghettos today are physical manifestations of these wounds, and racial injustice, according to structuralist thinking, has played a vital role in constructing these sites of black poverty and destitution.

Structuralist thinkers further contend that racial injustice has been most keenly felt on the economic level since unequal employment opportunities have severely disadvantaged black progress since the early days of black manumission. This second pillar supporting the structuralist line of thought will be considered as it affected African Americans during and

after the Great Migration in the ensuing chapter, following the literary case-in-point analysis of Malcolm X's autobiographical work.

2.3. Literary Case in Point: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

2.3.1. Malcolm X: His Life (1925-1965)

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925, to Louise and Earl Little. His father, who was a Baptist preacher, while being active in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, was murdered in a crime which was never solved when Malcolm was only six years old. However, during the short time in which Malcolm experienced his father, he offered him a vision of political activism and black separatism.

During his youth, Malcolm X embarked on a career as a “hipster and hustler” which eventually landed him in prison after he was arrested for burglary and sentenced to ten years of confinement. In the penitentiary he was exposed to the ministry of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, an African American nationalist group, commonly referred to as the Black Muslims. As a result, Malcolm redirected his energies immersing himself in the Bible and the Quran while cultivating his oratory skills in prison debates. After his release in 1952, Malcolm X emerged as Elijah Muhammad's preeminent spokesman preaching racial justice while advocating black separatism. A charismatic figure, Malcolm X was much sought after as a key-note speaker at public events and greatly adored in impoverished African American communities.

However, Malcolm's charisma, combined with his burgeoning independent political vision, proved too much for the Nation and its official leader. Elijah Muhammad felt increasingly threatened by Malcolm's growing influence and in 1963 he placed an order of silence on Malcolm, ostensibly in response to his comment that President John F. Kennedy's assassination was an example of “chickens coming home to roost.” When Malcolm discovered that Elijah Muhammad had committed a number of sexual and economic improprieties, he became disillusioned with his spiritual father. The psychological divorce was finalized when Malcolm was told by loyal brothers that Elijah Muhammad had placed a death order on him.

On March 8, 1964, Malcolm announced his resignation from the NOI and his formation of the Muslim Mosque, Inc. That same year he made his pilgrimage to Mecca where he embraced a more orthodox Islam. He abandoned some of the radical racial doctrines taught by Elijah Muhammad—such as “the white man is the devil”—and acknowledged the “true brotherhood” of man. In his autobiography Malcolm recalls how the pilgrimage “broadened [his] scope probably more in twelve days than [his] previous experience during [his] thirty nine-years on this earth” (348).

In the summer of 1964, Malcolm formed the Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU), a black advocacy network based upon the Organization of African Unity. His goal was to start building a black infrastructure within America which he considered a necessary prerequisite for racial reconciliation.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, by gunmen affiliated with the Nation of Islam, while speaking at the Audubon Ballroom in New York. Despite the fact that three black Muslims were convicted of first-degree murder in the assassination of Malcolm X, “controversy still surrounds his death—including implications of involvement from the Federal Bureau of Investigation” (Bradley 271).

The OAAU did not outlive its founder, and Malcolm left no immediate institutional legacy. Nevertheless, his work inspired such 1960s groups as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the younger generation of civil rights activists. “His most palpable impact” however, according to Adam F. Bradley, “came with the black power movement, whose agenda included community control, black pride, and African liberation” (271).

Malcolm’s influence has proved much more varied than his well-known phrases, such as “by any means necessary”. As the socio-economic downward spiral in black urban ghettos suggests, “his prophetic critique of America’s original sins—racism and slavery—and its potential redemption is all the more insistent today” (Bradley 271).

2.3.2. Malcolm X's Autobiographical Work:

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which appeared in 1965 after his assassination, has proved an enduring and much discussed publication for its frank self-portrait of one of America's most important activists. It was transcribed and constructed by then unknown journalist Alex Haley from extensive conversations he had with Malcolm X in the early 1960s. Since then the legacy of Malcolm X has repeatedly been revived and the literary work has enjoyed great critical acclaim. *Time Magazine's* "Best of the Century" issue named *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* one of the top ten works of nonfiction of this century and Spike Lee's cinematic adaptation of his autobiography, *X: The Movie*, reflects the increasing mainstream acceptance of the controversial black leader. By 1991 nearly three million copies of Malcolm X's autobiography had been sold worldwide and innumerable literary works have used the life narrative as their subject matter.

In fact, it was the book itself which fundamentally transformed Malcolm X's reception in the American public sphere, changing his image from that of a polarizing, highly controversial, and much contested figure into a well-respected spokesman for the African American people. During his lifetime, the white press and many widely acknowledged black leaders had viewed Malcolm X's influence as detrimental to race relations. Among his critics was the African American Federal Judge Thurgood Marshall, who was instrumental in winning the famed *Brown vs. Board of Education* lawsuit, integrating public schools, and who functioned as the N.A.A.C.P. chief attorney for many years. His unflattering opinion of Malcolm X and his fellow Muslim leaders as "a bunch of thugs organized from prisons and jails and financed, I am sure, by some Arab group," was shared by many whites and blacks alike (Bradley 401). A similar perspective was expressed by *The Saturday Evening Post* in the magazine's September 12, 1964, issue, which reads: "If Malcolm X were not a Negro, his autobiography would be little more than a journal of abnormal psychology, the story of a burglar, dope pusher, addict and jailbird—with a family history of insanity—who acquires messianic delusions and sets forth to preach an upside-down religion of 'brotherly hatred'" (qtd. in Haley 426).

Yet, while Malcolm's public image in the American media was usually accompanied by negative epithets, such as "the hate that hate produced," the majority of African Americans living in impoverished urban ghettos and a large group of black middle-class followers saw in him a hero. It was this image, accentuating his qualities as an outspoken, charismatic leader advocating the rights of poor blacks, which was to prevail over time.

The question as to how closely Malcolm X's autobiography reflects "the naked truth" and how much of the joint literary effort between Haley and Malcolm X was influenced by ideological principles, thereby "molding the facts," recurs in the critical literature on the work. In his prodigiously researched biography, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, published in April 2011, Manning Marable suggests that Malcolm exaggerates the stories of his criminal forays to create an "allegory documenting destructive consequences of racism" (qtd. in Kakutani 1). Marable points out that the life story centers around Malcolm's conversion experience following his wayward youth, a literary pattern commonly found in spiritual autobiographies. The conversion provides the zeal for reform on a personal and community level—an element that is readily apparent in Malcolm's work and that cannot be overestimated as the single most important factor motivating his literary endeavor.

In a festive ceremony in 1999, in which the US government honored Malcolm X by issuing a special commemorative stamp, acknowledging the black leader's legacy, David Fineman, member of the Board of Governors of the US Postal Service, commented on Malcolm X's life:

Today we honor not only a great African American but a great American. Malcolm X was one of the most charismatic and pivotal figures of our time. He was a passionate and persuasive voice for change, and his controversial ideas helped bring race relations to a national stage.

[Malcolm] X poured his energy and anger into speaking the truth about the plight of African Americans. He spoke with a rare passion and eloquence. He became a worldwide hero. A symbol of strength and defiance. He wasn't shy about telling us where society was going wrong.

[Although] it has been thirty-four years since we lost Malcolm X, his words, his voice, his vision, his story of transformation lives on. They have become part of us in a journey to wholeness.

We must never forget the challenge Malcolm X issued to us. 'Let us learn to live together in justice and love'. (qtd. in Shabazz XVII)

Even today, almost twenty years after the Spike Lee's movie release, Malcolm X is still highly visual in American public life. Young males are named Malcolm after him and a whole new generation of youngsters internationally claims his philosophy and his speeches for

shaping their own life stories. Atallah Shabazz, one of Malcolm X's daughters, reports that she received letters from parents of those youngsters expressing their relief and gratitude for the influence her father's life had on their children.

Parents of the '90s were not as apprehensive as the parents of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Instead, as their many letters and comments informed me, they were relieved that at a stage when their children's discipline and social mores were being challenged, their son or daughter had claimed characteristics and habits associated with Malcolm's. (XXI)

This "resurrection of Malcolm X," Atallah Shabazz notes, "pays tribute to his immeasurable contributions on behalf of one's innate right to self-preservation and human dignity" (IX). More importantly, however, Malcolm X's life story continues to serve as a moral uplift for innumerable African Americans from all walks of life, as Spike Lee confirms on the cover of the 1999 edition of the book: "[Malcolm's autobiography] changed the way I thought; it changed the way I acted. It has given me courage I didn't know I had inside me. I'm one of hundreds of thousands whose life was changed for the better."

2.3.3. Critical Analysis: The Name Search

Alienated from the world to which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen yet surrounded by the successful values of that world, and country, how can the Negro define himself? (Robert Penn Warren)

Within the forty years of his life, Malcolm X underwent enormous changes. "That a man who had inhabited the 'lower depth' of life could rise in triumph as a reproach to its ills, and become an uncompromising champion of his people, is ... a remarkable feat," the sociologist John Henrik Clarke noted in a critical review about Malcolm's life the year after his death (48). In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the "total man", Clarke argued, the "significant components that went into his making" had to be understood (48). Thus, Malcolm's distinct and interrelated phases in life under their respective names need to be considered in order to understand "the man [who was] in search of a definition of himself and his relationships to his people, his country, and the world" (48).

Malcolm X's identity search took place at a time when the civil rights and the black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s were actively shaping their identities—and it took place as a defining element within those movements. In applying Erik H. Erikson's psychoanalytical theory of identity development to Malcolm X's life, Lawrence B. Goodheart points out that his maturation—as was the case in Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther's lives—was characterized by “the interconnection between [his] life history ... and the historical moment, a linkage that [proved to be] momentous as [Malcolm X's] psychic needs were resolved in a manner that crystallized communal aspirations” (48). Accordingly, the constructing of Malcolm's sense of self “as a counterpart to the historic oppression of African Americans constitutes a central theme in his life” and narrative (48).

Various critics have explored the developmental stages in Malcolm X's life from different angles. While Clarke examines the synthesis of Malcolm's distinct phases in life from a sociological perspective, John D. Groppe employs Erikson's developmental stage theory to demonstrate Malcolm X's “growth into trust” in his 1983 essay “The Role of Trust in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.” Goodheart also uses Erikson's theoretical framework in examining Malcolm X's identity at different stages in his 1990 essay “The Odyssey of Malcolm X: An Eriksonian Interpretation.”

In joining the concerted literary effort of illuminating the life of one of America's most influential black leaders, the present study will explore the parallels between Malcolm X's life narrative and the history of the African American people as a whole. The author's quest for identity, which constitutes the narrative's most prominent pattern and which is reflected in the respective names of each period, shall thus be mirrored in the historical evolvement of African Americans and their collective identity search within American society.

To this end, Malcolm X's life narrative will be conceived of as divided into four distinct phases, each represented by a different name. During the first phase, his childhood in Nebraska and Michigan, he was **Malcolm Little**. It was during these formative years that Malcolm painfully experienced the effects of white supremacy and the murder of his father, which wrecked his family's life. It was also in his early years that he learned about black separatist ideas, since his parents were active in Marcus Garvey's U.N.I.A. (Universal Negro Improvement Association), an organization which advocated the return of Blacks to Africa.

The second phase in his life started when Malcolm moved to Boston to live with his half-sister Ella. During this time, which might be called his hipster and hustler career, he was

Detroit Red, or **Big Red**, due to the reddish hue of his skin and hair. Convicted of burglary, Malcolm served a seven year prison sentence during which his fellow inmates gave him the name “Satan” for his blasphemous language. Malcolm’s conversion to the Black Muslim faith while still in prison marks the transition from the second to the third period.

Released from prison, he began a new life as the Black Muslim minister, **Malcolm X**, the X representing the loss of his ancestral identity. As Elijah Muhammad’s eloquent and highly visible spokesperson, Malcolm X appealed to the masses of impoverished African Americans thereby stirring a national debate. This is the period with which Malcolm X is usually associated today.

Finally, after his break with the Nation of Islam, his identity search concluded with a turn to orthodox Islam and the rejection of some of Elijah Muhammad’s tenets while embracing the idea of an interracial brotherhood. The name he adopted during this, his shortest, period was the Muslim name **El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz**. Since the name Malcolm X represented him when he was most visible as a public figure, it is under this name that his posthumous legacy lives on.

Malcolm X’s quest for identity might be seen as reflecting the collective African American search for identity as a people. Their names have ranged from Slaves, Freedmen, Niggers, Negroes, Colored, and Black to African Americans and various historical and political events frame distinct phases in their history on the North American continent. *The initial phase of racial oppression*—slavery, segregation, and Jim Crowism—signals the loss of African identity, corresponding with Malcolm X’s childhood. *The second phase*, Malcolm’s hipster and hustler time, reflects the development of **black inner-city ghettos**. This phase also includes his time as “Satan” in prison, a period of utter hopelessness and despair. *The third period*, Malcolm’s cultural transformation among the Black Muslims, will be compared to **black separatist and nationalist movements** such as the Nation of Islam. *The final phase*, during which Malcolm turned toward interracial cooperation, represents the concept of **coalition-building** as a means of furthering transracial understanding.

Stages in Malcolm X's Life as a Reflection of African American History

(1) Malcolm Little: African American History of Oppression

a) Malcolm Little:

The first stage in Malcolm X's life is generally considered a period of loss and oppression. Goodheart, following Erikson's terminology, labels it "a violent example of ... surrendered racial identity" which was initiated by Malcolm's "earliest vivid memory" when the Michigan equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan burned his family house down (48). Groppe calls the period "the disintegration of trust," as Malcolm's ability to trust either in his surroundings or in his own attributes is assaulted and destroyed (438).

Malcolm's early orientation in his world, therefore, is characterized by racial animosities. The assaults create an awareness of victimization in him which cause him to respond strongly to Marcus Garvey's separatist philosophy, as he learns about it in the U.N.I.A. meetings his father organizes. Even though Malcolm is less than six years old at the time, he recalls that "[t]he image of [my father] that made me proudest was his crusading and militant campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey. As young as I was then, I knew from what I overheard that my father was saying something that made him a 'tough' man" (6).

Malcolm never enjoys going to church, even though his father is a Baptist minister and the collections he gets for his preaching "were mainly what fed and clothed us" (6). At the U.N.I.A. meetings, however, he is always impressed by the bearing of the members, even those he usually sees "jumping and shouting" in church (6).

[My father] sometimes took me with him to the Garvey U.N.I.A. meetings, which he held quietly in different people's homes. There were never more than a few people at any one time—twenty at most. But that was a lot, packed into someone's living room. I noticed how differently they all acted, although sometimes they were the same people who jumped and shouted in church. But in these meetings both they and my father were more intense, more intelligent and down to earth. It made me feel the same way. (6)

After Malcolm's father was murdered by whites who resent his separatist activism, the Little family "was so poor that we would eat the hole out of a doughnut" (6). His father carried two insurance policies, which he was very proud of, to protect the family in case of death. However, the company that issued the bigger policy refuses to pay the money after his death, claiming that Mr. Little committed suicide. Left with eight children and no protector or provider, the burden to sustain her family weighs heavily on Malcolm's mother. She is "above everything else, a proud woman, and it took its toll on her that she was accepting charity...Pride was just about all we had to preserve" (13). The enormous pressure eventually proves too much for Mrs. Little's fragile sensibilities and she falls prey to a mental illness.

When she began to sit around and walk around talking to herself—almost as though she was unaware that we were there—it became increasingly terrifying We children watched our anchor giving way. It was something terrible you couldn't get your hands on, yet you couldn't get away from. It was sensing that something bad was going to happen. (19)

The "Welfare people," who are constantly "meddling in [their] lives" place the eight children in custody of other families (18). They are "state children" now; court wards and a white judge in Lansing has authority over them. "A white man in charge of a black man's children! Nothing but legal, modern slavery—however kindly intentioned," Malcolm would later rage (21).

Recounting his early childhood memories to Haley in 1963, Malcolm X makes no effort to conceal the bitterness he associates with that phase of his life. "I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family, it destroyed ours" (22). Concerning his mother he remarks,

I have rarely talked to anyone about my mother, for I believe that I am capable of killing a person, without hesitation who happened to make the wrong kind of remark about my mother...I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush a people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight. (22)

The years following the break-up of the family are not marked by the physical hardship Malcolm X had previously experienced. In fact, "it was better, in a lot of ways" (20). At the detention home, Malcolm has a room of his own, is well fed and soon becomes the supervising couple's favorite. At school he is well liked, his grades are among the highest in the school and in 7th grade he is elected class president by his all-white classmates. Yet, without being fully aware of it, Malcolm feels his racial sensibilities constantly assaulted.

While his environment, which consists primarily of whites, makes every effort to express their appreciation for him, Malcolm feels that “they never did really see me...They didn’t give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position” (28). Rather, he feels looked upon as a pet, a “pedigree pup.”

It is in school that decisive events take place, which instill in him the desire to leave his comfortable environment in Michigan and move to Boston to live with his half-sister Ella. When he confides in one of his teachers that he would like to pursue the career of a lawyer,

[he] looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, ‘Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be. You’re good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you’d get all kinds of work’. (38)

Knowing that his marks are higher than those of his classmates, Malcolm feels his sense of self-worth insulted. “It was then that I began to change inside,” he recalls later (38). The encounter with his teacher marks an identity crisis, “a racist preemption of young Malcolm’s self-perception” (Goodheart 48). Malcolm realizes that as a “nigger” he is predestined to the “netherworld of the racial caste system of the U.S.” (48). He soon decides to leave the small town in Michigan behind to flee its racially oppressive climate and explore the possibilities open to him, a proud and intelligent African American.

b) African American History of Oppression

Goodheart notes that “Malcolm’s childhood memories reveal a life representative of the collective African-American experience as he became ensnared in the racist perversion” (48). Repeatedly, Malcolm X reflects and elaborates on the cruel oppressive history endured by his people. Their search for a group identity that was destroyed when Blacks were brought to North America in chains runs like a cohesive thread through the narrative. “The black man in America [is] the earth’s only race of people who [has] absolutely no knowledge of his true identity,” Malcolm X states (165). Claiming Elijah Muhammad’s theology, he explains that “the devil white man cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them off from any knowledge of their own language, religion, and past culture” (165).

The loss of identity, according to Malcolm X’s teaching, is closely linked to the loss of the black man’s original physical attributes.

In one generation, the black slave women in America had been raped by the slavemaster white man until there had begun to emerge a homemade, handmade, brainwashed race that was no longer even of its true color, that no longer even knew its true family names. The slavemaster forced his family name upon this rape-mixed race, which the slavemaster began to call ‘the Negro.’ (166)

Stripped of their identity, their language, their culture and their pride, blacks were unable to defend themselves against white exploitation, humiliation, and oppression. In the light of their deprived state and ongoing oppression, Malcolm X argues, blacks had not even gained their full *human* rights yet, which made their fight for civil rights all the more ludicrous. He further advocates an involvement of the United Nations in U.S. domestic affairs, since “the American black man is the world’s most shameful case of minority oppression” (183).

Malcolm X views the state in black urban ghettos as inseparably linked to the African American history of oppression. He parallels this fact with his own life, drawing a connection between his racially humiliating childhood experience and his later career as a hustler which would land him in prison: “I think that an objective reader may see how in the society to which I was exposed as a black youth here in America, for me to wind up in a prison was really just about inevitable. It happens to so many thousands of black youth” (386).

Conditioned by a racially oppressive childhood, Malcolm X takes the traditional migration route to the Urban East to immerse himself in the hustling subculture of Roxbury and Harlem—a step mirroring the migration of millions of blacks to northern urban centers in search of new opportunities.

(2) Detroit Red: Urban Ghetto Formation

a) Detroit Red

When Malcolm first meets his half-sister Ella he is most impressed. She is “the first really proud black woman [he] had ever seen in [his] life” (34). Humiliated and disappointed with racial relations in Michigan, Malcolm decides at the age of fourteen, to join Ella in Boston. This move significantly enlarges the boundaries of his world and marks the beginning of the second phase in his life. “I was to become one of the most depraved parasitical hustlers among New York’s eight million people,” he introduces this period of his life (86). “Barred from emulating dominant cultural ideals, Malcolm seeks self-respect through illicit activities on the margins of society” (Goodheart 51). Initially embarking on a career as a shoeshine boy and a dining car waiter with high intentions of being hip and successful “in the white world, he was nevertheless destined to enact a kind of inverse parody of the white man’s rise to success as he sank deeper and deeper into a life of crime” (Eakin 154). Malcolm’s experience of getting his first conk, the painful process of straightening kinky hair, mirrors his attempt to live up to the white world. He is trying to “beat the system” of racial inequality by exploring the limited means available to him—conked hair, a white girlfriend, and the life of a petty criminal. Only later does Malcolm X recognize the irony and self-defeat involved in this process:

How stupid I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking ‘white’. This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are ‘inferior’—and white people ‘superior’—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards. (56)

At some later point during a particularly cold winter, Malcolm realizes, after he has already applied the chemical concoction to his hair, that the cold has frozen the water pipes, which forces him to wash the burning lye off his scalp by dunking his head into a toilet. “The image of becoming excrement [him]self, disgusting black refuse that should be flushed away from the sight of decent people, was not lost on the older Malcolm,” Goodheart observes.

“Outrageous adornment [such as the zoot suit] served to mark Big Red’s entry into an underworld and outwardly compensated for his sense of racial inferiority” (52). As society does not offer him a culturally acceptable identity, **Detroit Red** or **Big Red**, as he is now called, follows the alternative path for black males to demand respect: by demonstrating heightened masculine aggressiveness and sexuality. In attracting a white girlfriend, Malcolm feels he has validated himself as the equal of any white man.

Toward the end of his turbulent hustler years, Malcolm describes his life as spiraling deeper and deeper into pathological behavior, violence, and fear. While his mind is confused with “the muddled thinking that’s characteristic of the addict,” he has a reputation in Harlem and Boston of being tough and uncompromising (131). “No one knew that I hadn’t killed anyone, but no one who knew me, including myself, would doubt that I’d kill” (133). With threats on his life looming from various corners, he recalls “I’d gotten to the point where I was walking on my own coffin (149). I was trapped in so many cross turns I knew that any minute now something had to give” (135). A ten year prison sentence on charges of burglary probably saves his life. It is in prison that Malcolm’s psychological reaction to his adverse personal history peeks. “I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself. And my favorite targets were the Bible and God.... Eventually, the men in the cellblock had a name for me: ‘Satan,’ because of my antireligious attitude” (156). Malcolm X has reached the nadir of his life. Without orientation and with no prospects for his life’s future, Malcolm X has become one of the millions of urban black men who turn from oppression to violence, thereby sinking “to the very bottom of the American white man’s society” (230).

b) Urban Ghetto Formation

The plight of the African American inner city male has not changed much since Malcolm's Harlem days. Shortly after the election of President Barack Obama, a signal of hope for the black community, Elijah Anderson published a book which calls attention to the situation of millions of black men living in desperate circumstances in the inner cities to remind the public that racial equality in the U.S. still has a long way to go. "Living in areas of concentrated ghetto poverty, ... shadowed by the legacy of slavery and second-class citizenship, too many young black men are trapped in a horrific cycle that includes active discrimination, unemployment, poverty, crime, prison, and early death" (*Wall* 3).

Like Malcolm X, these men had left rural, primarily southern, areas to escape the narrow confines of a racist environment in search of jobs, adventure, and a less oppressive new life. Yet, as they flocked into the segregated living quarters of the cities, their environment increasingly became characterized by the structural bars of job-flight and discrimination consigning them to a life of poverty, crime, incarceration, suicide, and drugs.

In his autobiography, Brent Staples, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board, describes his hometown, Chester, Pennsylvania, as an "angry, heavily black, heavily poor, industrial city southwest of Philadelphia" (311). Staples, whose brother Blake was murdered at twenty-two by a former friend over a "senseless rivalry," recalls that in their neighborhood growing up he was "introduced to mortality, not by the old and failing, but by beautiful young men who lay wrecked after sudden explosions of violence" (311). Staples had gone to visit his brother a year before he received the tragic news of his death. At that point, Blake had eagerly adjusted to the environment around him which Staples describes as: "hopeless, idle young men ... in a desolate public housing project ... crashing against one another" (313). Concerned that his brother's "romance with street life and the hustler image had flowered dangerously," Staples listens to his brother's forays into crime and his scrapes with police and street thugs (313). Behind the tough image of dark glasses and the swagger, however, Staples glimpses "the baby-faced toddler he'd once watched over".

I lacked the language simply to say: Thousands have lived this for you and died. I fought the urge to lift him bodily and shake him. This place and the way you are living smells of death to me, I said. Take some time away, I said. Let's go

downtown tomorrow and buy a plane ticket anywhere, take a bus trip, anything to get away and cool things off. He took my alarm casually. We arranged to meet the following night—an appointment he would not keep. We embraced as though through glass. I drove away. (313)

When Blake Staples died, he was in the group – black, male, and in its teens and early twenties – that is the most likely to murder or be murdered (see Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 24). At that same age, Malcolm X narrowly escaped a similar destiny. Yet, given a “fortunate twist of fate” he was incarcerated on the day he expected to get murdered by a rival, which led him to enter a new phase in his life during which he acquired a new identity, a new faith, a new community, and a new name.

(3) Minister Malcolm X: Black Separatism

a) Minister Malcolm X

During his time in prison, Malcolm X undergoes a momentous spiritual conversion to the Nation of Islam. This phase marks the stage in Malcolm X’s development during which he recognizes that “there were more effective ways to cope with a racist society than his previous dead-end roles” (Goodheart 51). When Malcolm’s family introduces him to Elijah Muhammad’s theology as the “natural religion for the black man,” Malcolm embraces the Black Muslim doctrines and undergoes a spiritual conversion. Muhammad’s dogma claiming that the white man is the devil appeals to him since it offers affirmation to blacks by denigrating whites. Elijah Muhammad “had imaginatively inverted the axioms of white racism,” thereby allowing the oppressed to project their negative identity onto the oppressor (Goodheart 51).

Goodheart, in applying Erikson’s theory, identifies this stage in Malcolm X’s life as a period of “totalism, [which is] something you can totally identify with or against” (52). The simple yet clear-cut world view of the Black Muslims offers Malcolm a stable reference point against which he can define himself, reject his personal history while embracing the collective history

of his people, and envision a future for himself in spiritual service to his people. His newly found sense of identity and self-worth allows him to “remake” himself. In studying the dictionary and in reading voraciously, he educates himself and learns to employ rhetorical skills to defend his newly found cause. He thus prepares himself for his later role as Elijah Muhammad’s preeminent spokesperson, preaching the “Muslim case for separation as the only solution in which the Negro could achieve his own identity, develop his own culture, and lay the foundations for a self-respecting productive community” (Handler XXVii).

As Minister Malcolm X he is “unreservedly committed to the cause of liberating the black man in American society rather than integrating the black man into that society,” (Handler, XXVi). In fact, while Malcolm’s views undergo remarkable changes throughout the various stages of his life, the idea of black separatism and Black Nationalism, instilled in him by his father, stay with him in all four phases of his life. After his break with Elijah Muhammad, when Malcolm is in the process of devising his own Black Nationalist organization, he explains:

Why Black Nationalism? Well, in the competitive American society, how can there ever be any white-black solidarity before there is first some black solidarity? If you will remember, in my childhood I had been exposed to the Black Nationalist teachings of Marcus Garvey—which, in fact I had been told had led to my father’s murder. Even when I was a follower of Elijah Muhammad, I had been strongly aware of how the Black Nationalist political, economic and social philosophies had the ability to instill within black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the black race needs today to get up off its knees, and to get on its feet, and get rid of its scars, and to take a stand for itself (382).

b) Black Separatism

Malcolm’s involvement with the Black Muslims, which he transformed to national size, mirrored and spurred the evolvement of a new sense of self-confidence among African Americans. “Twenty-two million black victims of Americanism are waking up,” Malcolm X proclaims. “And they’re gaining a new political consciousness, becoming politically mature” (“Bullet” 95-6). The collective awakening engendered a variety of cultural and political movements, such as the Black Arts Movement and the Black Panthers, which were based on separatist and nationalist ideas, emerged in the fifties and sixties, and propagated black pride in conjunction with Black Nationalism. These political and

cultural movements were characterized by a strong emphasis on their African origins and by openly condemning white dominance. Malcolm X embodied this new African American self-confidence, as he “put American society on the defensive by questioning its intentions toward its people and by proving those intentions to be false. This is an act of manhood,” John Henrik Clarke writes, “and it is the basis for most of the trouble that Malcolm had in this country in his lifetime” (48). The audacity and novelty of this new attitude at the time is expressed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his 1993 essay “Malcolm, the Aardvark and Me.” Gates recalls when “Malcolm first came into [his] life some three decades ago when [he] was nine years old and Mike Wallace and CBS broadcast a documentary about the Nation of Islam”:

It was called *The Hate that Hate Produced*, and it showed just about the scariest black people I had ever seen: black people who talked right into the faces of white people, telling them off without even blinking. While I sat in our living room, I happened to glance over at my mother. A certain radiance was slowly transforming her soft brown face, as she listened to Malcolm naming the white man the devil. ‘Amen,’ she said, quietly at first. ‘All right, now,’ she continued, much more emphatically. All this time and I had not known just how deeply my mother despised white people. The revelation was terrifying and thrilling. (Aardvark 11)

When asked about his mission, Malcolm X states that it is his goal to “revolutionize the American black man’s thinking, opening his eyes until he would never again look in the same fearful way at the white man” (qtd. in Clarke 50). This militant black identity, which signaled the end of black psychic inferiority, decisively defined the climate among young black activists at the time. Malcolm’s influence as a moral critic advocating black self-determination—which meant black separatism—and as “an exemplar of a new black identity” is still present in poor black communities today (Goodheart 64). Young urban blacks look to Malcolm X as their spokesperson since, as Goodheart points out, “[h]e captured to a degree unattained by anyone else the frustration of the ghetto underclass whose degraded position remains largely unchanged since the Second Reconstruction” (64).

(4) El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz: Coalition-Building

a) El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

The last phase of Malcolm's life would be his shortest, but also his most significant. During this phase he no longer advocated a racial theory that was simplistic and reactionary, but embraced a conciliatory vision of unprecedented maturity.

Soon after his traumatic separation from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm embarked on extensive travels to Europe, Africa, and Asia. The international experience broadened his horizon and allowed him to "change his understanding of racism from a crude demonology to a sophisticated cultural analysis" (Goodheart 60). In Mecca he converted to a more orthodox Islam becoming a Sunni Muslim and acknowledging the "true brotherhood" of man. It was during his travels to Mecca and Medina that he changed his name to **El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz**.

While—or perhaps because—Malcolm realized at this point that the inter-racial challenge lay not in "fantasizing devils ... but in chang[ing] the psychology of racism and the system that nourished it," he did not abandoned his Black Nationalist stance (Goodheart 61). Instead, he redirected it toward its ultimate goal of racial reconciliation. His vision had evolved from that of a street corner nationalist to a more subtle mix of orthodox Islam, anticolonialism, socialism, and the doctrine of racial solidarity known as Black Power. Unfortunately, Malcolm did not have much time to recruit followers for his newly founded Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU). He died known mainly for his affiliation with the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad's theological doctrines.

In his biography on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Louis E. Lomax, who had befriended both of the civil rights leaders, points to the irony in Malcolm X's life that "he embraced the notion of love at a time in history when it became fashionable for black men to openly express their hate" (254).

Nevertheless, his final commitment to transracial harmony looms large and encourages his followers across national and racial boundaries to pursue the goal he had advocated and ultimately had given his life for.

b) Coalition-Building

Which legacy did Malcolm X leave to his people? Apart from instilling a sense of racial pride, he also articulated black rage in a manner unprecedented in American history (see Watkins 25). His rage was rooted in his “great love for black people” (West, *Race* 136). “This love,” West points out, “was neither abstract nor ephemeral. Rather it was a concrete connection with a degraded and devalued people in need of psychic conversion.... The conversion,” according to West, “would allow them to affirm themselves as human beings, no longer viewing their bodies, minds, and souls through white lenses, and believing themselves capable of taking control of their own destinies” (136).

Another way of building on Malcolm X’s legacy is to “cement networks and groups in which black community, humanity, love, care, and concern can take root and grow” (West, *Race* 149). West suggests that these spaces aim at building principled coalitions and democratic alliances, which was Malcolm X’s main concern during the last phase of his life. The coalitions, which “extend” Malcolm’s work, focus black rage “on any form of racism, sexism, homophobia, or economic injustice” and seek to further inter-racial understanding (150).

As the “first real black spokesperson who looked ferocious white racism in the eye, didn’t blink, and lived long enough to tell America the truth about [its] glaring hypocrisy,” (West, *Race* 151) Malcolm X was the embodiment of the evolution of black political consciousness, “from separatism to coalition-building. Perhaps the latter will be his greatest gift to the twenty-first century” (Bradley 271).

2.3.4. *Malcolm X* in the Context of the Underclass Debate

“I’m one of the twenty-two million black victims of Americanism... We don’t see any American dream. We’ve experienced only the American nightmare,” Malcolm X proclaims in his famous speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” (“Bullet” 95).

Within the context of the underclass debate, Malcolm X is certainly the best-known spokesman for the liberal structuralist argument claiming that historical racial oppression is responsible for the evolvment of black urban ghettos: “Any intelligent, honest, objective person cannot fail to realize that this white man’s slave trade, and his subsequent devilish actions are directly responsible for not only the presence of this black man in America, but also for the condition in which we find this black man here” (271).

Yet, Malcolm X does not only blame *past* racism for the state of blacks in the urban ghettos. He considers the *present-day* racism of the 1960s, which assigned blacks to the role of second class citizens, to be a modern-day, *twentieth century version of slavery*, perpetuating the racial caste system of the U.S. (see “Bullet” 95). Extending this perspective into the 21st century, the black theologian James H. Cone observes that present-day America is “a nightmare for the poor of every race.... Despite all the window dressing,” Cone notes, “very little has changed to uplift the quality of life for the black underclass, the people Malcolm described as living at ‘the bottom of the social heap’ in an ‘extremely wretched condition’” (Cone 316).

In fact, as Cone points out, the socio-economic situation for the black urban poor has deteriorated since the 1960s. “In this land of plenty, there are nearly 40 million poor people who are trying to survive with little or no resources for their emotional and physical well-being” (316). Young urban blacks “who have no respect for themselves or for anybody else ... have begun to kill each other with a frequency that boggles the human imagination.... It is not easy to survive in a society that says you do not count,” Cone concludes (317).

What then does Cone suggest in response to the inhabitants of neglected and destitute inner city areas? “There is no need to look for messiahs to save the poor,” he reminds his readers. Malcolm was no messiah. He simply showed us “what ordinary people can accomplish through intelligence and sincere commitment to the cause of justice and freedom” (315). In emulating this commitment, Cone holds, the best of Malcolm X’s legacy will live on.

3. The Lure of Big City Lights: The Great Migration

The Liberal Structuralist Perspective:

Economic Disadvantage as a Structural Force in the Development of Black Urban Ghettos

3.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

3.1.1. The Most Significant Change in Modern American History

I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis—and in America itself. (Claude Brown in his foreword to *Manchild in a Promised Land*)

The mass movement of blacks out of the rural South into the industrial centers of the North represents a crucial moment in African American history. The southern travelers who ventured north to “better their condition” had high hopes as they left behind a racially restricted environment with dim economic prospects in search of the “Promised Land.” The section at hand will explore the migrants’ expectations and dashed hopes as they relate to the economic structure which was created in urban African American communities as a result of the massive relocations. The two aspects which will be of particular interest in examining the economic conditions in urban black ghetto formation relate to racially skewed employment practices and housing restrictions during the Great Migration. In exploring these two aspects, the structuralist line of thought, which argues that economic adversity has hampered black progress and has thereby contributed to the development of impoverished black residential urban areas, shall be represented.

Most historians and sociologists agree with James Patterson that the migratory movement of black southerners “to the North and the cities was the most significant change in modern American history” (80) portending enormous economic, political, and social upheavals that would transform the United States.

The conditions for the *initial massive influx* of black southerners into northern industries were created by World War I and its concomitant economic boom. Until then, immigrants from Europe had provided northern employers with a pool of labor that they considered preferable to American blacks. The outbreak of war in 1914, however, halted the flow of European immigrants and caused employers to consider previously unacceptable alternatives.

The impetus for the *second major movement* “pulling” African Americans into northern centers was provided by the labor shortage during World War II. Simultaneously, technological advances in agriculture, most notably the invention of the mechanical cotton picker in 1943, provided a decisive “push” factor for over a million African American displaced farm workers. Thus, given the economic restructuring in the first half of the twentieth century, the Great Migration represented a rational response to a change in the labor market. While 80% of African Americans still lived in southern rural areas in 1870, the census of 1970 shows 80% of African Americans living in urban areas, nearly half of these outside the South.

Nevertheless, apart from the economic push and pull factors, race relations were just as decisive in persuading southern blacks to leave behind their familiar surroundings in search of

a more amiable racial environment. Many migrants interpreted their journey as the “Second Emancipation” which led them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Racially motivated physical abuse, random outbursts of violence, and the habitual mistreatment by law enforcement officials played an important role in spreading the “migration fever” across the South. Chicago Urban League workers found that after a lynching, “colored people from that community [would] arrive in Chicago inside of two weeks” (Johnson qtd. in Grossman 16) and the *Atlanta Constitution* observed in December 1916 that “the heaviest migration of Negroes has been from those counties in which there have been the worst outbreaks against Negroes” (*Atlanta Constitution* qtd. in Sernett 12). In 1916 the *Houston Observer* reflected on the racially precarious situation of blacks in the South and concluded that “when such conditions are placed and forced upon a people and no protest is offered, you cannot blame a race of people for migrating” (*Houston Observer* qtd. in Grossman 18).

Yet, while northern race relations were decidedly less oppressive, racial tensions grew as blacks started to flock into northern railway stations by the thousands importing southern rural folkways which appeared crude and unrefined to northern city dwellers. “The great black migration [therefore] made race a national issue in the second half of the century”. Race relations became “an integral part of the politics, the social thought, and the organization of ordinary life in the United States” (Leman 7).

Milton C. Sernett points out that the mass moment out of the South is “important to understanding the peril and promise of contemporary American society” (1). It represents the “unfinished business” of the nation’s “original sin of slavery,” in the form of persistent black urban poverty in metropolitan cities.

The present chapter will explore this structuralist argument by considering the migrants’ hopes and expectations which motivated them to embark on their journey. Ensuing sections will then analyze various chronological phases of the migration with regards to racially motivated housing and employment restrictions. The socio-historical analysis will conclude with a synthesis, juxtaposing the liberal structuralist and the conservative behaviorist perspective in interpreting the significance of the Great Migration for the development of black urban ghettos. Finally, the chapter will end with a critical analysis of Claude Brown’s autobiographical account, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, in the context of the liberal structuralist perspective.

3.1.2. Out of Egypt

They wished we'd go back to Africa, but Chicago was close enough. (Aaron Henry)

At the turn of the century, the South was not an agreeable place to be for African Americans. The country had legally abandoned the fundamental principles of Reconstruction in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision of 1896, which defined black personal liberty, regardless of education or location, in spatial terms. Politically, this decision had been preceded by the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1876 signaling federal withdrawal from “internal southern matters.” Between 1896 and 1903 at least 730 African Americans were lynched and in 1898 Georgia inaugurated “the white primary” which barred blacks from voting in Democratic primary contests. The “grandfather clause” was adopted by Louisiana into its state constitution reducing the number of blacks registered to vote in that state from 130,344 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1900. Black Congressman George H. White’s efforts to introduce an anti-lynching bill failed. With the conclusion of White’s second term in 1901, black representation in Congress ended until 1928. Therefore, “to say that the status of Negroes was at its ‘nadir’...is to understate perilous conditions” (Gates, *Future* 127).

In their daily lives, blacks encountered obstacles and humiliation at every turn. When the white leaders of a Mississippi town asked blacks to draw up a list of grievances which they promised to heed (in order to urge black emigrated labor which was needed on the cotton plantations to move back south), the black leaders noted down the following:

No good jobs. Cheating at the settle. Lynchings. Being denied the courtesy titles of “Mister” and “Missus.” Poor schools. No hospitals. No sidewalks, gutters, or garbage collection in the black neighborhoods. Confronted with all this, the whites did nothing; the list of grievances could have been resubmitted virtually intact in the early 1960s. (Leman 48)

Possibilities for economic advancement were highly restricted for African Americans.

“Preach, teach, or farm” summarized black career options at the time. But even these options

were limited by white dominance in various ways. Teachers were often required to sign an affidavit that they were not members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and sharecroppers sometimes depended entirely on the plantation owners' goodwill by receiving scrip instead of money. Leman reports that Martin Luther King, Jr., on a visit to an Alabama plantation in 1965, "was amazed to meet sharecroppers who had never seen United States currency in their lives" (17).

Thus, given the unfavorable circumstances which defined the lives of African Americans in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that the news of a distant land welcoming blacks set off a wildfire, which was soon to permeate the South.

3.1.3. Land of Milk and Honey

These were the poorest people of the South, who poured into New York City during the decade following the Great Depression. These migrants were told that unlimited opportunities for prosperity existed in New York and that there was no "color problem" there. They were told that Negroes lived in houses with bathrooms, electricity, running water, and indoor toilets. To them, this was the "promised land" that Mammy had been singing about in the cotton fields for many years.

Going to New York was good-bye to the cotton fields, good-bye to "Massa Charlie," good-bye to the chain gang, and, most of all, good-bye to those sunup-to-sundown working hours. One no longer had to wait to get to heaven to lay his burden down; burdens could be laid down in New York:

So, they came, from all parts of the South, like all the black chilun o'God following the sound of Gabriel's horn on that long-overdue Judgment Day. The Georgians came as soon as they were able to pick the train fare off the peach trees. They came from South Carolina where the cotton stalks were bare. The North Carolinians came with tobacco tar beneath their fingernails. They felt as the Pilgrims must have felt when they were coming to America. But these descendants of Ham must have been twice as happy as the Pilgrims, because they had been catching twice the hell. Even while planning the trip, they sang spirituals as "Jesus Take My Hand" and "I'm On My Way" and chanted, "Hallelujah, I'm on my way to the promised land!" (Brown 7)

In the foreword to his autobiography, Claude Brown describes the hopes and expectations of southern migrants as they embarked on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. His family and friends who ventured north mirror the hopes and expectations of innumerable migrants on their way to “Canaan.” Most of them had heard about the northern cities from emigrated southerners returning south for a short visit with wondrous news. In the North, they reported, black people could go anywhere, they had the right to vote, they were not required to sit in the back of the bus, they were not called “boy,” they did not have to step off the sidewalk in order to let whites pass, and they were not compelled to say “yes ma’am” or “yes sir” to white people whether they wanted to or not.

“There was no racial fear,” the black novelist Richard Wright recalls in his novel *Black Boy*. “Black people and white people moved about, each seemingly intent upon his private mission Indeed, each person acted as though no one existed but himself” (Wright qtd. in Grossman 2). One black migrant woman relays her experience of boarding a streetcar in Chicago for the first time and, observing black people sitting alongside whites, recalls: “I just held my breath, for I thought any minute they would start something. Then I saw nobody noticed it, and I just thought this is a real place for Negroes” (CCRR qtd. in Grossman 119).

Yet, it was not just the prospect of dignity and respect that motivated blacks to travel north. Opportunities for economic advancement represented an equally enticing factor in the decision to leave the rural South and travel north. Leman sums up the economic situation as “that moment...when virtually every member of a large class of people were guaranteed an immediate quadrupling of income, at least, simply by relocating to a place that was only a long day’s journey away” (41). He then illustrates this fact by rendering a black migrant’s experience as he arrives in Chicago from Clarksdale, Mississippi, to stay with his sister.

Uless’s sister lived in a kitchenette building full of people whom Uless began to meet the minute he walked in the door. One of the women in the building told him her boyfriend had a good job in a restaurant that was looking for more help. She called her boyfriend over and made him phone the restaurant right then and there; the man handed the phone over to Uless, who found himself being offered a job as a dishwasher by the owner. He had come to Chicago only for a brief holiday; he had been in his sister’s building for less than an hour. Now the owner of the restaurant was telling him he could come to work on Monday morning and make twenty-five dollars a week. His job in Clarksdale paid less than a quarter of that. Kitchenettes in the building rented for only seven or eight dollars a week, so he would come out far ahead if he took the restaurant job. Without hesitation he told the owner he would be there Monday, and now he was a resident of Chicago instead of a visitor. (62)

In making the move to Chicago, Uless became one of millions of blacks who abandoned their dream of gaining independence through land ownership in the rural South and turned to the city, to industry, and the North “for access to the prerequisites of American citizenship” (Grossman 13).

3.1.4. Intra-Racial Struggle

SELF-HELP

1. Do not loaf. Get a job at once.
2. Do not live in crowded rooms. Others can be obtained.
3. Do not carry on loud conversations in streetcars and public places.
4. Do not keep your children out of school.
5. Do not send for your family until you get a job.
6. Do not think you can hold your job unless you are industrious, sober, efficient, and prompt. Cleanliness and fresh air are necessary for good health. In case of sickness send immediately for a good physician. Become an active member in some church as soon as you reach the city. (*The Chicago Defender* – tips published by the Chicago Urban League to help newly arrived migrants adjust to life in the North)

As thousands of largely uneducated southern blacks poured into northern black communities, they were greeted by self-help posters and the well-intentioned advice of older settlers trying to support them in getting established. The *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper, instructed the newly arrived to “be clean...[since] water is cheap. Avoid loud talking, and boisterous laughter on streetcars and in public places” (*Chicago Defender* qtd. in Halpern 21). The paper further advised migrants to mind their dress since people in Chicago “make it a practice to look as well in the week as they do on Sunday” (21).

The majority of established middle-class blacks eyed the newcomers with suspicion and unease since they feared that the migrants with their rural southern manners would disrupt the community and embarrass the race. These mostly young men and women “indulged in forms of public behavior characteristic of young urbanites,” frequently antagonizing the more established elements of the community “with their apparent repudiation of conventional morality and attraction to the ‘gay life’” (Grossman 146). Grossman points out that the “migrant adjustment problem [was in part] a youth problem [since] the migrants were, on the

whole, considerably younger than the adult black population” already living in the metropolitan cities of the North East (150). Moreover, “the importance of bright lights and leisure opportunities had been central to migrants’ image of Chicago as a ‘freer’ environment than the rural or small town South” (150).

The second generation youth in northern cities usually made a point of not being associated with the southern country folk as Amiri Baraka points out in his autobiography: “We were cool because we were not ‘country,’ not first generation. We’d been up here and dug what it was and we could sound like we had been up here and know what was going on” (61).

Nevertheless, neither the well-intentioned advice, nor the hostility toward most things southern, which had come to symbolize class tensions within black Chicago, caused the migrants to measure up to the standards of conduct demanded by the old settlers. In fact, most blacks sought to guard their self-respect and way of life by residing and socializing close to their friends and kin from down South, maintaining a similar life-style and culture. “It’s no difficult job to get people out of the South,” the *Chicago Whip* remarked in reference to the massive influx of blacks arriving daily in the northern terminals with their cultural baggage in tow, “but you have a job on your hands when you attempt to get the South out of them” (*Whip* qtd. in Grossman 154).

Timuel Black, who worked as a school teacher after his family had migrated north during WWI, reflects on the intra-racial class and culture struggles in Chicago after 1941. He sees a marked difference between the migrants of the first and the second migration and regrets that the old settlers did not aid the later migrants adjust, which according to Black, resulted in the evolvment of a distinct social group of African Americans in Chicago.

The change in the character of the community began to come at the beginning of World War II, December 7, 1941, when there was again a need—as there had been during World War I—for cheap labor. The restrictions on certain potential immigrants from Europe then made jobs available for well-trained Southern young men and women of that period. They flocked north because there was very little work for them in the South, given the kind of training they had. That was the first flood of primarily young African Americans, male and female, and the start of the Second Great Migration.... So the people of the Second Great Migration were mostly from the rural agricultural South. They came to Chicago with less training and less motivation. They had been isolated in these areas of the South in the cotton fields and tobacco fields and other large plantation-like places. They’d been denied the opportunity for education, and their reading ability was scanty. The wave of new immigrants pushed off the land in the South, came north with almost no context. They didn’t have relatives already living in the North, and they brought with them a different culture. Many times their hopes and dreams were not that big. They’d heard of the Promised

Land of Chicago, where there were plenty of jobs, a diversity of job opportunities. There was a saying during the first migration, when my mother and father came north: if you can't make it in Chicago, you can't make it anywhere. That meant that if you got without a job in one place, the stockyards, for example, you'd go to a steel mill or some other place. It was very open to colored labor, to cheap labor... Stylistically, the two Great Migrations were different, not inferior or superior to each other. Different people. Walked different, talked different. The new migrants brought with them country blues, not city jazz. Country Negroes. That's what we unfortunately labeled those who came with the second migration. We gave them almost no help. The separation was dramatic and complete. The class separation was pronounced right away. If they lived on the West Side, those of us who lived on the South Side already had a snobbish attitude towards them. Still do.... A lot of people don't understand that blacks have been divided among ourselves by class for a long, long time. And that separation removed the knowledge, the experience, and much of what we had been given by those who were part of the first Great Migration.... The new black migrants of the 1940s and 1950s plummeted almost immediately. I was teaching school, and I noticed the difference in attitudes towards education. I noticed the difference in the students I was teaching in the early 1950s. By that time, as a result of *Shelley vs. Kraemer*, the most fortunate had moved to neighborhoods like Hyde Park and Woodlawn... It was like two streams that just started to diverge. The rural Southern people in the second migration then went one way and became poor, and the other people went into the middle class. (Gates, *Color Line* 362-6)

The matter of class was, of course, closely related to economic issues. Old settlers feared that the new migrants, "refusing" to become "northernized and urbanized" would jeopardize the economic benefits promised by the cash generated by new industrial jobs. They further worried that racial progress, which depended on the relationship between individual accomplishment and community prosperity would suffer a set-back as stereotypes of visibly outlandish newcomers began to dominate perceptions of the black community. As will be seen in the following section these concerns were not unfounded since generalized racial images soon came to bear heavily upon employment practices and housing restrictions.

3.1.5. Employment Opportunities for African Americans in Industrial Cities

In following his aspirations, the Negro has crossed over his Jordan in multitudes to a land of Canaan in America—a city named Detroit. (*Detroit Free Press*, 1957)

Both, the First and the Second World War created an economic boom in American industry which opened up previously unavailable opportunities to African Americans. As they began to pour into (mostly northern) industrial cities, leaving behind a racially oppressive and economically restricted context, they encountered new—if less overt—forms of racial discrimination hampering the economic progress of blacks as an ethnic group and thereby contributing to the evolvement of black urban ghettos.

- Employment Opportunities during WWI and WWII

In 1916, the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations published a report which described the hiring process of black men in 1910, before the establishment of employment services in 1920.

There would be a long row out in front of the employment office as a rule anywhere from 200 to 1,000 men.... The employment agent would look over the group generally and pick out those who seemed to be the sturdiest and best fitted to do the unskilled work. So far as I could see there was no bargaining and discussion about wages, terms of employment, or anything of that sort. Just the employment agent would tap the one he wanted on the shoulder and say ‘Come along.’ (US Commission on Industrial Relations qtd. in Grossman 187)

Finding a job through a newspaper advertisement was rare among black jobseekers prior to WWII. Most migrants found a position through personal referral, “which was frequently an

extension of the same network that had facilitated the migratory process” (Grossman 185). Industrial employers usually felt that the personal recommendations provided them with at least a minimal amount of reference to their future employees since “industrial managers knew as little about African Americans in 1916 as the migrants knew about northern factories” (Grossman 198). Most assumed, according to popular notions which were sporadically voiced by various newspapers and journals, that the “Negro Character” was lazy, unreliable, and slow. Accordingly, most industrial employers considered their labor contracts with blacks a temporary experiment at best. Given this vantage point, it is not surprising that a 1917 survey of 500 Illinois firms employing at least fifty blacks each, reported that only fifty percent intended to keep black workers on their payroll any longer than necessary (see Grossman 198).

Had it not been for the severe labor shortage during the war economies, therefore, blacks would have probably not been able to secure inroads into northern industry, as the *New Republic* prophetically declared on the eve of the Great Migration: “The Negro gets a chance to work [in the North] only when there is no one else” (*New Republic* qtd. in Grossman 198). It was precisely this situation which presented itself to African Americans during WWI. In Chicago, both, the steel and the meat packing industry were constantly in need of labor. “A Negro could always get a job in the stockyards,” a railroad porter recalled at a later point. “They could go to the stockyards any day of the week and get a job” (Foster qtd. in Grossman 183). Grossman reports that, by 1918, the stockyards in Chicago employed between ten and twelve thousand black workers. The situation in Chicago’s steel industry almost matched the stockyards in employment numbers. “They were hiring day and night,” a former steel worker recalled years later. “All they wanted to know was if you wanted to work and if you had a strong back” (Gottlieb qtd. in Grossman 184)

Most other industrial jobs available to black workers included food products industries (other than meat-packing), the Pullman Car shops, steam laundries, and a few tanneries (see Grossman 184). Other types of work readily accessible to African American men in Chicago during the Great Migration could be found in the unskilled nonindustrial labor sector (such as laborers, porters, draymen, and teamsters) and in the service sector (as servants, waiters, or janitors). Female migrants were most likely to find employment in unskilled service occupations, as domestic servants and hand laundresses. Since most migrants arrived in the northern cities without any skills transferable to the urban industrial economy, they were content to start their “career” on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. Yet, those blacks

who had previously acquired an education—skilled craftsmen, teachers, or business professionals—found themselves ranked on the same level as their untrained fellow migrants due to powerful labor organizations, discriminatory practices and a lack of private financial resources. Thus, while the northern industrial job market was decidedly welcoming to African Americans during the war time economic boom of both world wars, the employment options available to blacks were severely restricted. On the whole, black workers generally endured the worst conditions in any company as Grossman depicts in his description of black men working in the Chicago stockyards:

Most black men worked in the killing floors, cold storage areas, and loading docks. Amid hot temperatures and without ventilation, men in killing gangs stood on wet, slippery floors, as grease, old water, and warm blood flowed at their feet. In the beef casing room, where temperatures reached 115 degrees Fahrenheit, one reformer reported that ‘ceilings are low, the artificial light bulbs unshaded and inadequate to illuminate the room. The few windows provide a bit of natural light only for a bench of workers seated beneath them. The majority of workers in this room are Negro men.’ Black men laboring in the cold storage areas did not have to endure the heat; temperatures there ranged from 30 to 38 degrees. Beef luggers, who carried meat from the cooler to the loading area, had to bear continuous cold because carcasses loaded at room temperature might “sweat.” It was easy for a migrant to get a job as a beef lugger; most white men refused to do it. (Grossman 189)

Black women did not fare much better as another description by Grossman depicts:

Relegated to positions left vacant by white women during the war-time labor shortage, black women toiled in some of the most noxious rooms in the packinghouses. The most unfortunate among them landed in the beef casing, beef tallow, mutton tallow, hog-killing, casing, packing, hog head, bone, and hair departments. Barred from the less unpleasant tasks of canning and wrapping, black women spent their days inspecting, washing, grading and measuring casings; cutting bungs; washing chitterlings; packing and trimming fat; and trimming lungs, hearts, kidneys, ovaries, paunch, snouts, and tongues. In the packing rooms these women wore coats to keep warm. In the trimming rooms at one medium-sized firm the only ventilation came from opening the outside doors, a harsh alternative during the winter when these rooms were already cold. In this company’s “newer” building, trimming room ventilation consisted of a door to another room. (Grossman 189-90)

Given these highly unpleasant working conditions, therefore, it is not surprising that migrants found it difficult to adjust to the rigid demands on their time and strength at the workplace, which severely undermined what they had considered their newly acquired freedom. Unfair “color” treatment and outright discriminatory practices further demotivated blacks eager to climb the economic ladder and hampered the adjustment process.

Alarmed by complaints about the migrants' performance, old settlers in various cities started a "campaign" to support the adaptation process of recent migrants to the industrial environment. The *Chicago Defender* summed up the perspective of Chicago's black establishment, who considered the prosperity of their fellow African Americans essential to their own professional interests: "Our entrance into factories, workshops and every other industry open to man places us on an entirely different footing; we become a factor in the economy to be reckoned with....We are on trial" (*Chicago Defender* qtd. in Grossman 200).

Thus, intent on increasing the migrants' work performance and efficiency, the National Urban League sought to inculcate values of punctuality, zeal, regularity, and ambition in black workers. Charles Johnson of the National Urban League described this undertaking as "the recreation of the worker" (N.U.L. qtd. in Grossman 203)

In Detroit, the Urban League distributed cards to black factory workers which epitomized the message established northern blacks south to convey to new migrants:

WHY HE FAILED

He watched the clock.
 He was always behindhand.
 He asked too many questions.
 His stock excuse was "I forgot."
 He wasn't ready for the next step.
 He did not put his heart in his work.
 He learned nothing from his blunders.
 He was content to be a second rater.
 He didn't learn that the best part of his salary
 was not in his pay envelope-SUCCESS.
 (*Crisis* qtd. in Grosman 203)

Nevertheless, watching the clock and asking too many questions were not the main reasons why many blacks found themselves without employment in the decades to come. Instead, a decreasing demand for unskilled labor in the 1950s along with racially skewed hiring practices paved the way for large scale unemployment in black ghetto neighborhoods—an economic factor which is largely responsible for the development of impoverished inner-city neighborhoods and the intergenerational cycle of poverty among African Americans in these communities today.

- **Employment Opportunities for African Americans: 1945 – 1965**

World War II represented a turning point in black employment prospects. Due to the tight labor market many northern companies accepted blacks into their work force in unprecedented numbers. The historian Thomas J. Sugrue identifies three factors which contributed to the opening of industrial jobs to African Americans during the 1940s: The chronic labor shortage during the war years and the postwar economic boom, the central role of unions and civil rights organizations in determining the terms on which blacks were hired, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, mandating nondiscrimination in war industries and creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission (see Sugrue 26-7). Thus, the 1940s embodied a period of optimism for blacks, as well as for the country as a whole. The postwar boom in civilian production caused the unemployment rates in most major cities to remain at wartime low and hopes that the underlying causes of racial inequality—housing and employment—would eventually be resolved were high.

These high hopes had to give way to the economic reality of the 1950s when all major northeastern and midwestern industrial cities witnessed the beginning of a long-term and steady decline in manufacturing employment. The process of deindustrialization, which succeeded the abatement of the postwar economic boom and which was to restructure the economic landscape of most major U.S. cities, severely affected the employment opportunities of African Americans.

Yet, while jobs were declining, migrants from the rural South were still pouring into northern cities, exacerbating the labor surplus. With the employment of the mechanical cotton picker after 1943, 2.3 million agricultural laborers were displaced, the majority of whom left the rural South. In the 1940s, the black population in Chicago increased by 77%, from 278,000 to 492,000 and in the 1950s numbers kept rising by 65% to 813,000. At one point 2,200 African Americans were moving to Chicago every week (see Leman 70). Thus, the high migration rates in the 1940s and 1950s coincided with a slackening off of the demand for unskilled labor, thereby raising the unemployment rates in the newly established cramped urban communities to unprecedented numbers.

Apart from the devastating effects of deindustrialization on employment opportunities for African American workers in the 1950s, blacks had to face the additional obstacle of racial discrimination in hiring practices. In his study of Detroit's postwar economy, Sugrue observes

that “employment discrimination was manifest in the underrepresentation of African Americans in most of the city’s better paid, safer, and higher-status jobs” (92). While black workers were disproportionately concentrated in low-wage secondary sector jobs, they barely had access to the coveted primary sector jobs involving skilled and semi-skilled work. Thus, blacks were often restricted to “dead end” jobs which—due to separate seniority lines—did not allow them to move into better-paying positions (see Sugrue 92). Thus, the combination of the decrease in well-paying low-level manufacturing jobs, racially skewed employment practices, and the continuing influx of migrants from the South into northern cities set the stage for long-term and large-scale unemployment rates in black inner-city residential areas.

Compounding the socio-economic downward spiral of African American urban communities in the postwar period were strict segregation practices in housing patterns. Backed by neighborhood associations, these practices prevented blacks from moving outside of the “designated” black ghetto areas—a fact which contributed significantly to the long-term development of black ghetto isolation.

3.1.6. Housing Patterns during the Great Migration

[We] have talked about taking an area and moving the whites the hell out—and moving the Negroes in. You won’t have peace and quiet until you have such an area. I’d like to see the Negro get a city of his own, with his own school. We need a Harlem for them.
(Detroit Common Councilman William Rogell, 1946)

As southern blacks kept arriving in northern cities in the 1940s and 1950s, the population density in the already cramped, segregated black neighborhoods reached new heights. Housing outside of the black ghetto was not available to blacks, and landlords therefore just “chopped up” regular apartments into tiny living units, the so-called kitchenette apartments, which were outfitted with an icebox and a hot plate. The bathroom was usually shared by all

residents of one floor. (Bigger Thomas, Wright's protagonist in *Native Son*, lived with his mother and sister in one such kitchenette apartment in Chicago, at the imaginary address of 3721 Indiana.) Established middle-class blacks regarded the kitchenettes "with something close to horror, as breeding ground for immorality and ruiners of good neighborhoods" (Leman 53). This impression of the newly established living quarters in Chicago is rendered by the black anthropologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton as "the beach upon which broke the human flotsam which was tossed into the city streets by successive waves of migration from the South" (Drake/Cayton 577).

Chicago was no exception in the type of restricted, isolated, and usually decrepit housing it offered to black arrivals from the South. Living conditions were bleak in most other densely packed black neighborhoods as well, with poverty visible and crime rampant. The majority of residences open to African Americans were classified as substandard by federal housing officials—a category that described dwelling units without modern amenities such as plumbing, heating, lighting, or running water. Donald Stalling, a black city sanitation worker in Detroit moved his family into a "partitioned basement utility room" in the Black Bottom, the oldest and poorest section of Detroit in 1949. As the family soon found out after settling in, their dim one-room apartment was often covered with coal soot from the poorly functioning furnace (Sugrue 183). Thus, inner city housing possibilities open to blacks hardly resembled the visions of the Promised Land which blacks had in mind when leaving the South. Nevertheless, as Leman points out: "What made Chicago's South Side look so good—to most migrants moving there, was the comparison to the South: money and dignity were indisputably in greater supply in Chicago" than in the rural South (86). However, as blacks began to get settled in their new urban environment, the reality of restricted housing became a source of frustration, especially to those migrants who had arrived with great aspirations for upward mobility. For many African Americans migration to the North embodied the promise of steady, well-paid employment and the possibility of saving in order to purchase property. Therefore, those migrants who had held high expectations about the possibility of independence through home-ownership grew increasingly resentful about the segregated housing market in northern cities.

To white city residents the wretched conditions in the African American urban ghettos were the fault of irresponsible blacks, not greedy landlords or neglectful city officials. And as the population density in black neighborhoods intensified—the black population in many northern cities doubled between 1940 and 1950—whites looked upon the black slums as a

place that confirmed their worst fears. Racial tensions increased even further as black joblessness rose in the 1950s and unemployed African Americans were seen lingering on street corners, a sight most whites found threatening. As the economy in most major cities slumped further, rates of burglary, robbery, and murder began to rise and with it interracial fear and suspicion. Thus, the very setting of segregated black and white neighborhoods co-existing in isolation from each other reinforced negative perspectives of race.

The effects of the Great Migration therefore, namely the relocation of millions of blacks into a segregated urban context while racially discriminatory practices took shape in those cities' labor and housing markets, were to point the way for the continual downward spiral of poor African American communities in all of the country's metropolitan centers.

3.2. The Underclass Debate

Synthesis: The Great Migration

The coming problem of agricultural displacement in the Delta and the whole South is of huge proportions and must concern the entire nation.... The country is upon the brink of a process of change as great as any that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution.... There is an enormous tragedy in the making unless the United States acts, and acts promptly, upon a problem that affects millions of people and the whole social structure of the nation. (David Cohn in 1947)

The Great Migration revolutionized the social and demographic landscape of the United States and thereby set the stage for black urban ghettos which were to evolve out of the clusters of migrants who had settled in back communities in northern industrial centers. In concluding the chapter, the liberal structuralist perspective, which considers the discriminatory practices in the housing and labor market during the Great Migration to constitute an essential element in constructing impoverished racialized ghettos, shall be contrasted with the conservative cultural perspective. The cultural argument, as it is expressed by political scientist Lawrence Mead, emphasizes that “each man is the master of his own destiny” and is therefore solely responsible for overcoming obstacles of various kinds. It is due to this mindset that uncomfortable questions such as the ones posed by David Cohn were ignored. In 1947, Cohn issued a dire prediction concerning the massive displacement of blacks urging the country to actively face the social and economic challenges at hand:

The time to prepare for it is now, but since we as a nation rarely act until catastrophe is upon us, it is likely we shall muddle along until it is too late.... Five million people will be removed from the land within the next few years. They must go somewhere. But where? They must do something. But what? They must be housed. But where is the housing?

Most of this group are farm Negroes totally unprepared for urban, industrial life. How will they be industrially absorbed? What will be the effect of throwing them

upon the labor market? What will be their reception at the hand of white and Negro workers whose jobs and wages they threaten?

There are other issues involved here of an even greater gravity. If tens of thousands of Southern Negroes descend upon communities totally unprepared for them psychologically and industrially, what will the effect be upon race relations in the United States? Will the Negro problem be transferred from the South to other parts of the nation who have hitherto been concerned with it only as carping critics of the South? Will the victims of farm mechanization become the victims of race conflict? (Cohn qtd. in Leman 51)

However, preoccupied with the task of resuming a “normal life” after the war and dazzled by the growing prosperity of the postwar years, the country was not inclined to heed jeremiads such as Cohn’s. Instead, the public debate was dominated by optimistic predictions that poverty would naturally wither away within a decade. After all, America was at the peak of economic and global strength during the 1940s and 1950s and the nation’s rate of economic growth was astonishing. Yet, as Sugrue points out “the celebration of affluence masked significant regional variations and persistent inequality” (Sugrue 6). Thus, the stunning growth of the postwar economy was profoundly uneven. “Capitalism left behind huge sections of the United States, mainly older industrial cities in the North and East and rural areas in the South and Midwest” (Sugrue 6). As a consequence the restructuring of the economy during that period, which proceeded with the support of the government, led to the urban crisis in America. Sugrue, whose perspective is informed by structuralist thought, further points out that “African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of [the] inequality” which was created by the capitalistic expansion in the postwar years (8). This line of thought shall be outlined in the following chapter.

3.2.1. The Great Migration as a Structuralist Explanation for Black Ghetto Formation

“I argue that the coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America today” (Sugrue 5). With his

perspective Sugrue places today's urban crisis—with African American impoverished residential areas at its center—into the context of a multiplicity of structural factors in mid-twentieth-century America. These structural factors, played out most notably in the postwar cities' housing and labor market, shaped and perpetuated traditional patterns of race and class inequality—patterns, which had been handed down from the post-Reconstruction order and which were, quite literally, in flux in the aftermath of World War II.

The combination of deindustrialization and hardening ghettoization proved devastating for the newly arrived migrant communities in northern cities. Pervasive racial discrimination caused black workers to suffer disproportionately the effects of deindustrialization and urban decline. In addition to overt discriminatory practices in the workplace residential segregation in the postwar cities was “the most visible and intractable manifestation of racial inequality,” reinforcing negative stereotypes among white city residents (Sugrue 8).

Thus, while the Great Migration might generally be considered a success—Leman notes that most migrant found a much better life than they would have if they had stayed home in the South—it also set the stage for the development of impoverished black urban communities which were to progressively degenerate.

Summing up the structuralist line of thought on the intersection of the Great Migration, deindustrialization and ghettoization, Sugrue explains that “it is only through the complex and interwoven histories of race, residence, and work in the postwar era that the state of today's cities and their impoverished residents can be fully understood” (5).

3.2.2. The Conservative Behaviorist Response

Cultural conservative voices contest this explanatory approach taken by structuralist thinkers. The difference in thought is reflected in the respective response given to the question why migrants consistently fared better than non-migrants in terms of their socio-economic progress. Larry Long of the U.S. Census Bureau, who authored several studies comparing migrants to non-migrants offers a solution which is representative of structuralist reasoning:

“[I]n Northern ghetto areas daily exposure to drugs, crime, violence, and overcrowded living conditions makes growing up and leading stable adult lives especially difficult,” thereby hampering the progress of black non-migrants in city areas (Long qtd. in Leman 287). The conservative behaviorist response, as represented by Mead, Murray, and Magnet counters that individuals should be held accountable for their actions irrespective of the social forces surrounding them. It is misleading and counterproductive, according to conservative thinkers, to excuse poverty and “dysfunctional behaviors,” such as dropping out of school, early pregnancy, crime, drug use and unemployment by invoking forces which supposedly “crippled the capacity to cope at a formative age” (Mead 129).

“Men are shaped by their world,” President Johnson proclaimed at the dawn of the Great Society, a proclamation cultural conservatives disagree with as much as they disagree with the basic tenets of the social reform of the early 1960s. Lumping “causes of problems that are initially personal...together with social causes,” according to Mead, is indicative of a determinist line of thought which “construes the personality as essentially passive” and does not acknowledge the individual as self-reliant and independent. To David Ellwood, another proponent of conservative cultural thought, the black ghetto is not primarily a product of “deprivation, concentration, isolation, discrimination, [and] poor education,” but rather of “crime, drugs, alcohol, the underground economy, and welfare” (Ellwood qtd. in Mead 130).

To conservatives, therefore, the social forces in the black urban ghettos, which emerged out of the migrant communities in northern industrial cities, constituted not prohibitions but challenges to the individual African American residing there. Mead explains that “conservatives find [structuralist] sociological thinking demeaning, precisely because it leaves competence in the hands of outside forces. A person who is only an expression of social pressures is not a person at all” (131).

Thus, it is essential, Mead argues, not to succumb to a philosophy of “determinism and despair” but to view each individual as “free, willing, and ready to actively overcome the tension[s] in their environment” (132).

3.2.3. The Effects of the Great Migration on Black Urban Ghettos Today

Barack Obama implicitly refutes the cultural conservative creed of individualism by pointing to a sense of collective identity which exists within the black community. “For black Americans, [an individualistic] separation from the poor is never an option, and not just because the color of our skin—and the conclusions the larger society draws from our color—makes all of us only free, only as respected, as the least of us” (*Hope* 302).

Obama then draws a link between the collective sense of identity held by blacks and their collective history. In his famous speech on race, Obama points to another indirect effect of the Great Migration which shapes the color line of economic inequality to this day. The discriminatory practices of preventing blacks—often through violence—from owning property or denying them access to FHA mortgages, or excluding them from unions—practices which black migrants to the North had to face on a daily basis, “meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generation” (*Hope* 59). The wealth and income gap that exists between black and white, as well as the “concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today’s urban and rural communities” must be understood from within that background, Obama contends.

Thomas Shapiro, Professor of Law and Social Policy at Brandeis University, confirms Obama’s point of view by pointing to the importance of assets, which are usually accumulated over generations, in understanding “the enigma of racial inequality [which] is still festering public and private conversation in American society” (7). Shapiro calls attention to the fact that the baby boom generation, which grew up during the postwar years at the same time when black migrant communities in northern cities established themselves, “is in the midst of benefitting from the greatest inheritance of wealth in history” (5). It logically follows that the (mostly Caucasian) wealth inheritance, which was accumulated during the period when black migrants to the North were severely discriminated against, will exacerbate the already rising economic inequality between black and white.

Claude Brown was one of the first to document a life story which was representative of millions of blacks who had migrated north and settled in cramped urban ghettos. His autobiographical narrative, published in 1965, which frankly portrays his coming of age in

Harlem in the 1950s, shall be critically analyzed in the context of a liberal structuralist perspective and will thereby conclude the present chapter.

3.3. Literary Case in Point: *Manchild in the Promised Land*

3.3.1. Claude Brown: His Life (1937–2002)

Claude Brown grew up in Harlem as part of the first generation of blacks who had left the South in search of a northern Promised Land of racial equality and material prosperity. His early life as it is depicted in his autobiography embodies the shattered hopes of his generation trapped in vastly overcrowded and violent urban ghettos. His father, a dockworker and chronic alcoholic, who frequently resorted to violence, symbolizes the pinned-up anger of newly arrived urban blacks. His mother, who repeatedly pleaded with the juvenile court to assign her son to the best state delinquency programs, watched him spend years in and out of juvenile detention centers and juvenile homes as a result of stealing, alcohol consumption, gang wars, and drug trafficking. While at the Wiltwyck Reformatory School in upstate New York, Brown was influenced by the director of the school, Dr. Ernest Papanek, an emigrated Austrian psychologist, who encouraged him to seek an education. As a result, Brown left Harlem and moved to Greenwich Village where he began attending night classes while supporting himself by working odd jobs. He graduated from Howard University in 1965, where his teachers included the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and the writer Toni Morrison, and went on to attend Stanford and Rutgers law schools.

Brown spent most of his professional life as a full-time essayist and lecturer, but also became increasingly involved in critical urban issues, especially with respect to at-risk black adolescents. He devoted his work to the cause of improving the situation in inner-city ghettos through criminal justice and rehabilitation thereby seeking to understand what motivated the violent, feral behavior of youth gangs and young criminals, a phenomenon that seemingly became progressively worse with the passage of time.

In 1976 Brown published his second book, *The Children of Ham*, about Harlem teenagers struggling against heroin addiction, and in the 1980s he attracted attention with a series of magazine articles about the epidemic of crack cocaine. Claude Brown died of respiratory failure in 2002.

3.3.2. Claude Brown's Autobiographical Work: *Manchild in the Promised Land*

Manchild in the Promised Land is a naturalistic autobiography which tells the story of Brown's coming of age during the 1940s and 1950s in Harlem. The book was published in 1965 when Brown was in his late twenties and immediately proved a critical and a commercial success recognized as not just *his* story, but that of an entire generation of African American youth. With its realistic portrayal of Harlem, the book has been heralded as the definitive account of everyday life for the first generation of African Americans raised in the northern ghetto of the 1940s and 1950s. "There was a tremendous difference in the way life was lived up north," Brown writes in the beginning chapter of his young life's account (1).

There were too many people full of hate and bitterness crowded into a dirty, stinky, uncared-for, closet-sized section of a great city. The children of these disillusioned colored pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—the disappointments, the anger. To add to their misery, they had little hope of deliverance. For where does one run to when he's already in the Promised Land? (1)

Brown started his career as a writer while attending Howard University. Motivated by a new perspective on his childhood years, which he gained after leaving Harlem, Brown wrote an article for the magazine *Dissent* about his early youth. The piece attracted the attention of a publisher who encouraged him to write his autobiography. The autobiographical novel, which has been in print for over thirty years, has become the second bestselling book MacMillan has ever published (the first being *Gone With the Wind*). Translated into fourteen languages, the work has sold four million copies as of 2000 and launched Brown's career as a writer, giving him a platform to publish in *Esquire*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Look*, and the *New York Times Magazine*.

Brown's personal account continues to resonate generations later, not only because of its honesty and its dignified anger, but also because of its universal appeal inherent in the author's affirmative and inspiring approach to life.

3.3.3. Critical Analysis: *Manchild* and the Black Arts Movement

- An Honest Account without Ulterior Motives

Claude Brown's autobiographical narrative is a story of displacement, the displacement of a generation and the displacement of an entire people. In the foreword to his classic life story the author, named "Sonny" in his narrative, announces:

I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrow, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis—and in America itself. (7)

The characters Brown depicts are the "sons and daughters of former Southern sharecroppers," his friends, Turk, Sugar, Danny, his brother Pimp, and, of course, Sonny, the protagonist himself (7). Their parents have travelled north during the first wave of the Great Migration, full of high hopes and great expectations—only to wake up to the dim reality of black urban ghetto life. "Before the soreness of the cotton fields had left Mama's back," Brown recalls, "her knees were getting sore from scrubbing 'Goldberg's' floor" (8). With the subtle irony that runs through the book, the author then concludes: "Nevertheless, she was better off; she had gone from the fire into the frying pan" (8).

Brown's parents, whose understanding of society had been socially conditioned in the segregationist South, attempted to maintain the values and habits familiar to them and were "baffled by the complexities of a new world. With parents and children inhabiting different mental worlds," parents grew weary and frustrated in their attempt to raise and understand their rebellious offspring while the younger generation viewed the parents as backward and obsequious (Stewart 1). In a 1965 *New York Times Book Review* Romulus Linney describes the displaced sharecroppers as possessing a "dogged persistence...in their failure to comprehend their own situation. [Thus, they] must defend their own abject existence against the rebellious rages of their children" (1).

While the story ends on a hopeful note for Sonny, the actual main character and real hero of the book, namely Harlem itself, is caught on a downward spiral of hopelessness and despair.

The children of these disillusioned colored pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—the disappointment and the anger. To add to their misery, “they had little hope of deliverance [for] where does one run to when he’s already in the promised land?” (8).

- Critical Reception

Manchild was published at the height of the cultural and political transformations of the sixties. At the time of its publication, in 1965, the black freedom movement was omnipresent in the American media since legislation granting full civil rights to African Americans was passed that year. The Black Power Movement was poising itself for further activism and revolt and The Black Arts Movement was claiming its rightful place in the American literary scene.

Thus, when Brown’s book appeared, it was received with great interest by a broad readership. As the first personal account of life in the African American urban ghetto, it was called “the voice of a generation and a people” (cf. Stewart 2). Irrespective of the overwhelming commercial success, however, the critical response was varied. While Arnold Rampersad, a well-known literary critic who had authored Langston Hughes’s biography dubbed Brown “the true epic poet of modern Harlem” (Rampersad 25), Anatole Broyard, writing for the *New York Times*, found that “Mr. Brown cannot write at all” (Broyard 25). In reference to the “hip” language of the street used by Brown to relay dialogues, Broyard comments that “[t]hese ‘translations’ do nothing to disguise the banality and puerility of what is being said. They suggest, rather, that it may be time for these particular blacks to consider closing the gap between themselves and white society by speaking English. If it is ‘understanding’ they want, this would be one of the ways of approaching it” (25).

While some critics agreed that Brown’s literary style was “not professional,” the majority of reviews acknowledged the book as an honest account of a young black man’s coming of age, significant in its role of conveying the experience of a new urban generation to a wide readership. William Matthes, for example, concedes that “[Brown] is not read for his writing ability. [He] makes all the mistakes one can make in his autobiography, including mixing the language and jargon of his new academic self with the slang of Harlem” (459).

Yet, according to Mathes, it is precisely this lack of studied professionalism as a writer which constitutes the appeal in Brown's work. It is this "literary innocence" which bestows on the book its "lasting quality, its candor...and its ability to convey in words something of [his] experience" (460). Mathes therefore applauds Brown's contribution to the American letters for his "instinctive sense of psychological drama [and] his apparently natural ability to communicate complex and highly evocative patterns of contemporary life" (460).

With regards to the autobiographical tension between fictional and authentic narration, Brown's work has often been denounced as a piece of "social science fiction" that dramatizes the stereotypes of urban sociology (see Aaron 204). Yet, other critics such as Daniel Aaron point to the similarities with Richard Wright's and Edward Dahlberg's anti-pastoral autobiographies and note that Brown's work stands as "an honest account of one American life" (Aaron 204).

It might be due to Brown's literary inexperience referred to by Mathes and other critics, why *Manchild* is difficult to place within the literary movement of its time. The following analysis will critically examine the parallels and the differences of Brown's autobiography in the context of the Black Arts Movement while demonstrating that his life story deserves a unique place within the African American literature of the period.

- ***Manchild* and The Black Arts Movement**

Even though Claude Brown's autobiographical narrative was published at the height of the Black Arts Movement, it cannot be considered typical for that literary genre; neither is it possible to categorize *Manchild* as a work of urban realism, dominant between 1940 and 1960, as it contrasts with several prominent characteristics of the period's oeuvre. The following analysis shall explore the literary "inbetween space" Brown's life story inhabits by comparing and contrasting various similarities (common themes and language) and dissimilarities (protest sentiments and color consciousness) between *Manchild* and The Black Arts Movement.

Protest in the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement viewed itself as a collective effort to bring about social reform within the American racialized context. As such, black artists sought to engender a transformation in how African Americans were portrayed and represented in American public life. In 1968 Larry Neal, one of the towering intellectuals of the Black Arts in the 1960s, defines the movement as being:

radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (1960)

The radical concept these black activists had in mind is not represented in Claude Brown's narrative. While the literary movement "advocate[s] a cultural revolution in art and ideas" (Neal 1960-1961) which sought to "destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil" (Lee qtd. in Neal 1961), *Manchild* does not even seem to be aware of the existence of writers such as Faulkner, neither does he mention works by DuBois, Nat Turner, or Kwame Nkrumah. And while poet Etheridge Knight predicts that "unless the Black artist establishes a 'Black aesthetic' he will have no future at all" (Knight qtd. in Neal 1961), Brown's narrative does not seem to be conscious of, let alone concerned about, the future of black art.

In fact, Brown's autobiographical work, which he produced while an undergraduate student at Howard, does not seem to have an agenda other than recording his life experience as a young adolescent growing up in Harlem. His goal was to lend names and faces to the mean streets of Harlem. "I'm trying to show more than anything else the humanity of the Negro," Brown stated in an interview in 1965. "Somebody has to stop problemizing and start humanizing the Negro" (Stine 1). *Manchild* is therefore surprisingly free of political goals and objectives, despite the fact that Brown spent his childhood in the "worst case scenario" of urban America. Yet, he does not express the anger which he shows is justified. And critics praise him for it. William Mathes explains in a critical review of the book that he expected it to be yet another expression of that "somewhat high-pitched anger of James Baldwin and his imitators," an anger that Mathes finds has lost its power to convey its essential message (459).

In such anger there is limited communication. What is needed now is not more of such blatancy, such shrill response to hurt and deprivation, but words that convey hurt and deprivation themselves, words that can permit many people—especially white people—to identify with the Negro. So far we have lacked words that impart the feelings of what it is like to be a Negro in this country at this time. Claude Brown answers this need. (459)

Manchild seeks to tell, relay, observe—and create understanding, but it is refreshingly devoid of accusations and rancorous anger. By refusing to adapt to the en vogue black style of the day, it offers to the reader an honest, frank, and unpretentious account of what it was like to be part of the first black urban ghetto generation coming of age in mid-century Harlem.

Color Consciousness in the Black Arts Movement

“[T]here are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white,” (1960) Larry Neal explains in his theoretical essay on The Black Arts Movement, thereby capturing the bipolar vantage point of the movement. In fact, one of the movement’s declared goals was to find a new way of being black in the world of the Americas. It was time, according to these activist artists, to reject integrationist poetics, which tried to imitate the “masterpieces” of the West since, after all, Western thought and culture were intrinsically linked to the brutality of colonialism and imperialism.

“Black. Poet. Black poet am I. This should leave little doubt in the minds of anyone as to which is first,” Haki R. Madhubuti states in his “Introduction [to Think Black],” making it clear that being black is in itself a mission and an identity which informs his art in its very essence (1978). This type of proud color consciousness, prevalent in and characteristic of the Black Arts Movement is, like the protest sentiments, not present in Brown’s narrative.

Naturally, skin color is an issue in *Manchild*. But it is not a battleground. It is dealt with, like everything else in the novel, as a mere fact of life observed by the young Sonny. As a young hoodlum he and his friends are more concerned with surviving and “having a good time” than with “wearing their skin, their hair, and their features ‘natural’ and with pride” (Fuller 1813). Maulana Karenga’s words, “Let our art remind us of our distaste for the enemy [and our] revolutionary struggle,” do not resonate in Brown’s vocabulary, much less in his consciousness (Karenga 1973).

Thus, Brown does not use skin color as a reference point in his work. Instead, it naturally blends into his narration whenever he considers it significant as part of his experience: when he strikes up a friendship with an Italian boy at a juvenile correctional center, when he falls in love with a white girl, or when he observes his father’s obsequious behavior in the presence of

a white judge—but in none of these instances is the skin color itself a factor of importance. In fact, Sonny explicitly rejects racial thinking when he defends his Italian friend, Minetti, who is about to be pummeled by a group of black boys. Having told his black friend not to bother Minetti, Brown reflects on the situation:

It was real wrong to call somebody a nigger in front of a paddy boy. That's the way they felt. It made me feel a little bit bad myself. This sort of cooled everything down. But saying "nigger" wasn't the main thing to me. The main thing was that these cats were trying to fuck over this paddy boy. And this paddy boy was more man than any of those cats there. I didn't care. Between us, there was no nigger thing. There was no white, no color thing. To me, he was a beautiful cat; and if you dug people and if people had something that was beautiful about them, they were raceless. And that was the only fucking thing that mattered. I told those cats, 'Don't try to tell me how to carry myself. I been through twice the shit all you niggers been through. And as far as I'm concerned, that paddy boy is twice the nigger any of you cats might think you are or might ever try to be.' After that, nobody ever said anything to me about it. (132)

Skin color per se, therefore, is irrelevant in Sonny's world view and in Claude Brown's life narrative. Unlike his fellow writers of that explosive period, Brown does not attach the collective history of a people to the skin color of the individuals he meets. It is probably this honest, unprejudiced, "child-like" way of approaching others without the (justified) outrage, anger and protest—precisely the aspects which distinguish *Manchild* from the literary patterns of the day—which created the book's appeal to an exceptionally broad readership.

Common Themes in the Black Arts Movement

While *Manchild* positions itself outside of the dominant literary tradition of its period in significant ways, as shown above, its central themes and the language used are very much in line with the literary movement. Apart from *Manchild*'s prominent motif, which is to portray ghetto life from an adolescent perspective, the central themes of displacement, searching for one's roots, and establishing a positive black identity are common subjects of choice of many Black Arts writers.

In his essay "Toward A Black Aesthetic" Hoyt Fuller elaborates on the significance of the black ghetto as the scene where national politics have failed:

The rebellion in the streets is the black ghetto's response to the vast distance between the nation's principles and its practices. But that rebellion has roots which are deeper than most white people know; it is many-veined, and its blood has been sent pulsating to the very heart of black life. Across this country, young black men and women have been infected with a fever of affirmation. They are saying, 'We are black and

beautiful,' and the ghetto is reacting with a liberating shock of realization which transcends mere chauvinism. They are rediscovering their heritage and their history, seeing it with newly focused eyes, struck with the wonder of that strength which has enabled them to endure and, in spirit, to defeat the power of prolonged and calculated oppression. (1813)

Harlem, **the black ghetto**, is what *Manchild* is all about. Brown forcefully and vividly portrays the complex society of his surroundings: the street children, their hardworking parents, the preachers, hustlers, numbers runners, prostitutes, and drug dealers. They are all part of his home. And Brown describes this home with surprising warmth and fondness, despite the grim reality surrounding it. He talks about the dilapidated old tenement building his family lives in as

[t]he building where Mr. Lawson had killed a man for peeing in the hall. I remembered being afraid to go downstairs the morning after Mr. Lawson had busted that man's head open with a baseball bat. I could still see blood all over the hall. This was the building where somebody was always shooting out the windows in the hall. They were usually shooting at Johnny D., and they usually missed. This was the building that I loved more than anyplace else in the world. (12)

During Brown's adolescent years in Harlem, major racial unrest took place in the city. Fuller refers to the violence which occurred in the process of the rioting as "the piper [that] is being paid for all the long years of rejection and abuse which black people have experienced at the hands of white people—with few voices raised in objection" (1810). Referring to the long history of lynching and random violence committed against blacks he observes: "Black people are being called 'violent' these days, as if violence is a new invention out of the ghetto" (1810). Fuller notes that the US as a system had not really changed since "brutalization is inherent in all the customs and practices which bestow privileges on the whites and relegate the blacks to the status of pariahs" (1810). Yet, what has changed is the black reaction to the system. This reaction is necessary, Fuller claims in quoting Dr. Charles De Leon, in order for "young Negroes...to avoid the unnecessary burden of self-hatred (via identification with the aggressor) [as] they will have to develop a keen faculty for identifying, fractionating out, and rejecting the absurdities of the conscious as well as the unconscious white racism in American society from what is worthwhile in it" (1811).

While Brown's memories of the rioting in Harlem are vivid, he renders his recollections without a racial interpretation. In fact, to young Sonny the event seemed like a big adventure.

I dreamt about waking up in the middle of the night...thinking that the Germans or the Japs had come and that the loud noises I heard where bombs falling. Running into Mama's room I squeezed in between her and Dad at the front window. Thinking that we were watching an air raid, I asked Dad where the sirens were and why the street lights were on. He said, 'this ain't no air raid—just a whole lotta niggers gone fool. And git the hell back in that bed!' I went back to bed, but I couldn't go to sleep...I thought, Boy, I sure wish I was out there. I bet the Stinky brothers are out there. Danny and Butch are probably out there having all the fun in the world. The next day, as I was running out of the house without underwear or socks on, I could hear Mama yelling, "Boy, come back here and put a hat or something on your head!" When I reached the stoop, I was knocked back into the hall by a big man carrying a ham under his coat. While I looked up at him, wondering what was going on, he reached down with one hand and snatched me up, still holding the ham under his coat with his other hand. He stood me up against a wall and ran into the hall with his ham. Before I had a chance to move, other men came running through the hall carrying cases of whiskey, sacks of flour, and cartons of cigarettes. Just as I unglued myself from the wall and started out the door for the second time, I was bowled over again. This time by a cop with a gun in his hand. He never stopped, but after he had gone a couple of yards into the hall, I heard him say, 'Look out, kid.' On the third try, I got out of the building. But I wasn't sure that his was my street. It seemed that all the cops in the world were on 145th Street and Eighth Avenue that day. The cops were telling everybody to move on, and everybody was talking about the riot. I went over to a cop and asked him what a riot was. He told me to go on home. The next cop I asked told me that a riot was what had happened the night before. Putting two and two together I decided that a riot was 'a whole lotta niggers gone fool.' (12-3)

As a child, Sonny makes it unmistakably clear that he is proud of being part of the young black generation who is truly urban, suave, and street-wise. When his parents send him down south to live with his relatives for a year, hoping that the southern rural environment will calm their boisterous youngster, Sonny feels no connection whatsoever to his parents' original home. In fact, it is Sonny who now feels the **displacement** as keenly as his parents feel it in Harlem. "They sure seemed to be some dumb country people to me," he remarks upon his return, "it was probably eating corn bread and biscuits all the time that made those people act like that" (48, 37). His father, who gets religious "in his own way" and starts singing spirituals on Saturday nights after downing a bottle of liquor, tells Sonny "how somebody [Sonny] had never heard of sang [those songs] in the cotton fields or at somebody's wedding or funeral 'down home'" (28).

The cultural distance between the two worlds, the southern rural and the northern urban environment, is considerable and most migrants therefore cling to their imported southern habits, such as soul food, corn liquor, and gospel songs with great fondness. This is not the case for their youngsters, however, who feel no connection with southern country mores and usually have little appreciation for their parents' rural background. Claude Brown repeatedly

expresses his contempt for black southern culture, especially after meeting his visiting relatives:

[t]his woman, [his aunt visiting from the South] just reached up and grabbed me with both hands, saying, 'Boy, come here and kiss your aunt.' Before I could defend myself, she was smothering me to death between two gigantic breasts. I was let up for some air, but before I had taken two breaths, the lady was washing my face with sloppy kisses that stank from beer. I was getting mad and thinking that maybe I'd better tell her I didn't go for all that baby shit and that I didn't mean to have any more of it, aunt or no aunt. But when my long-lost aunt regained her senses and let me out of her bear hug, I wasn't mad any more. I had realized that this was just another one of those old crazy-acting, funny-dressing, no-talking people from down South. As I stood on the other side of the room looking at her, I was wondering if all the people down South were crazy like that. I knew one thing—I had never seen anybody from down there who looked or acted as if they had some sense. Damn, that was one place I never wanted to go to. (37)

However, while the second generation of migrants rejects their parents' countrified roots, they do not feel at home in their new environment either. Their newly found home, a segregated ghetto neighborhood, does not offer them a setting they can identify with. Thus, as Brown observes, "these cats were out there looking for themselves, not knowing how they were gonna make it" (240). Feeling part of a misplaced generation, they are not able to fit in with established black settlers, whose ambitions of being upwardly mobile are not accessible to them.

Sonnnny, unable to relate to his father's stories, rejects his southern roots while embracing the urban youth culture of his own generation as he indulges in the latest trends, listening to the Orioles, the hip music of the day, and dancing the grind, "a dance anybody could do [since] all you had to do was stand still and move a little bit" (99).

Yet, in approaching adulthood he increasingly recognizes the self-destructive despair of this generation. When Sonny realizes that "sooner or later [he would have] to get a gun [since he] would soon be expected to kill a nigger if he mistreated [him]" if he did not want to lose respect, he decides to leave the neighborhood in order to sort out his **identity**. Brown's journey of orientating himself in the white world, working various odd jobs, learning to play the piano, and going to evening school, initiates in him a process of maturation which will allow him to acquire the perspective necessary to report on his childhood and early adolescent experience from a neutral perspective. Romulus Linney comments on Brown's exceptional

achievement, not only of surviving his ghetto years “intact,” but also of acquiring the maturity which would allow him to produce his exceptional autobiography.

[T]he final strength of [Brown’s] autobiography rests in the survival of the author himself. How did it come about? What miracle was passed, that an almost murderous hoodlum whose personality was dissolving in the fears of his youth could achieve not only self-control, but a judgment so balanced and a compassion so undeceived? (14)

Brown’s act of writing his life narrative was certainly tied up to his search for a positive identity, an identity which needed **roots** to take hold and take shape. The roots of the African American people, an ever-present theme among artists of the Black Arts Movement, is closely linked to the displacement of blacks as a people. The response of many African Americans to nationalistic groups such as the Black Muslims and the Coptic faith mirrors this quest. After leaving Harlem, Brown begins to explore his roots tentatively through art, playing jazz on the piano and acquainting himself with black musicians who are passionate about their African heritage. He later takes an interest in various spiritual movements such as the Coptic faith, which intrigues him not so much because of the faith itself but because of its fidelity to African culture and language.

Brown considers his search for roots, a cause which is also prominent among the artists of his time, to be deeply relevant for the plight of Harlem. He therefore expresses this search in Harlem’s own language. Karenga, a spokesperson for the Black Arts Movement, advocates this literary style as “art...from the people and for the people” (1975).

The Language of the Black Arts Movement

African American writers in the 1960s were generally committed to the goal of black mass communication. Instead of dazzling their readers with allusions to Western mythology, their message was simple in language and straightforward in its purpose as exemplified by Nikki Giovanni, an early Black Arts movement poet, in her poem *For Black Boys*:

Where are your heroes, my little Black ones
 You are the indian you so disdainfully shoot
 Not the big bad sheriff on his faggoty white
 horse
 You should play run-away-slave
 or Mau Mau
 These are more in line with your history
 Ask your mothers for a Rap Brown gun
 Santa just may comply if you wish hard enough

Ask for CULLURD instead of Monopoly
 DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING
 GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS
 This is a game you can win. (1799)

Claude Brown, whose narrative voice echoes the language of the streets, thereby establishing an animated immediacy between the reader and the characters, relies heavily on naturalistic description and dialect. His work is imbued with a sense of adventurous gaiety delivered in a tone of humorous understatement which insists on an affective response by the reader.

Nevertheless, Brown does not shy away from informing his reader about the dark sides of ghetto life. As a spokesman for his people who is “non-pious” and “non-furious,” (Mathes 459) he describes the deep despair that has beset a whole generation of young urban blacks, many of whom do not survive ghetto life as they fall victim to drugs and crime. In an article in the *New York Times*, Fremont-Smith calls Brown’s life story “A Report from Hell”. The passage he chooses in order to justify this dark label relays Brown as an adolescent running into Sugar, his childhood sweetheart. He recognizes her addiction to drugs as they have left ugly marks on her physique. When she wants to borrow money, (claiming she will pay him back by “turning a trick or two”) he declines, but gives her the money. Then he watches her inject the heroin which “take[s] her to her private ‘promised land’” (2). Fremont-Smith soberly comments that “the passage sums up the quiet terror of this book, and the fate of a generation of Negroes who came of age in Harlem” (2-3).

Brown renders the above scene in the sober, yet sad, tone of a participant observer. And it is probably precisely this combination: terror described in direct, yet non-accusatory language, which lends its unique and appealing quality to *Manchild*. Romulus Linney therefore describes Brown’s work as

written with brutal and unvarnished honesty in the plain talk of the people, in language that is fierce, uproarious, obscene and tender, but always sensible and direct. And to its enormous credit, this youthful autobiography gives us its devastating portrait of life without one cry of self-pity, outrage or malice, with no caustic sermons or searing rhetoric. Claude Brown speaks for himself—and the Harlem people to whom his life is bound—with open dignity and the effect is both shattering and deeply satisfying. (2)

3.3.4. *Manchild* in the Context of the Underclass Debate

What is Brown's answer to the need for the black ghetto's redemption? Where does he locate the Promised Land? As LeFev points out, Brown does not "offer a didactic scheme for black salvation," neither does he "provide a roadmap out of the ghetto"(4). Instead, he paints a realistic portrayal of his environment, thereby raising public awareness and contributing significantly to the underclass debate.

Manchild's importance for the debate, therefore, lies in its role as a pioneering work opening the invisible—yet very real—walls surrounding the dark urban ghetto to a wide readership. The structuralist argument, which points to the significance of the Great Migration in the evolvment of black urban poverty, is presented in a disarmingly honest fashion. It calls for a response by the American public. In a review of *Manchild* in *The Sunday Herald Tribune* Nat Hentoff points to public policy solutions which aim at turning around the anger in the Claude Browns and which seek to ameliorate the condition of the country's Harlems.

True, impotent anger finally turns inside. And Brown was able to transmute his rage into a sense of his own worth. He created his own self-fulfilling prophecy. And that's why his story will reassure at the same time as it disturbs the other, white America. If Claude Brown could do it, others can. Through Operation Head Start. Through 'quality, integrated education' some day. Through that 'War on Poverty' with its wooden bullets. But where are enough jobs to come from for those in today's Harlems? And radically rehabilitated housing—not just one block—let alone integrated neighborhoods? Without counter-power, political counter-power, the promised land will continue to be a desert for most of the poor. And for the black poor, it will be a desert with fewer and fewer mirages. (1)

Thus, at the time *Manchild* was written, the future of the ghetto was up in the air. Some critics, such as William Mathes, speculated about the development of the ghettos and about the development of some of the issues documented in the book. Referring to *Manchild* as a "contemporary tragedy" he notes: "His has the seed of a greater tragedy, if only a few of us are able to share it, share the feeling of being a Negro in America today. By the time Brown's book is a classic, the issues he documents will have destroyed or transformed our nation" (2).

How will America deal with the poverty in its newly born urban settlements? The question has not lost any of its topicality within American domestic issues since 1965. In fact, the issue

is more relevant today than ever. Within this context, Claude Brown's contribution stands out as an honest and "mature autobiography of the coming of age of one hidden human being, whose experience and generation are absolutely crucial to any future history of the American people" (Linney 2).

IV. Analyses Post-1965

4. Sex, Drugs, and Rock'n Roll – The Cultural Revolution

The Conservative Behaviorist Perspective:

The Cultural Revolution and its Effect on Black Urban Communities

4.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

4.1.1. An Experiment with Cultural Values

When white America gets a cold, black America gets pneumonia. (American Saying)

The 1960s witnessed profound social and cultural changes within US society. America's "grand experiment with elite cultural values," according to conservative scholar Myron Magnet, "loosened its crime and welfare policies, had its fling with the sexual revolution,

remade its mores from top to bottom, instituted affirmative action, and turned its universities into academies of the new culture (2).” These changes, according to Magnet and other conservative behaviorist thinkers, negatively affected American culture as a whole and had catastrophic consequences for urban African American neighborhoods.

Magnet concedes that the visions and desires which had prompted the change in culture had been well intentioned. Distinguishing between the “Haves,” (American mainstream white culture) and the “Have-Nots” (the poor and the black), he identifies two distinct strands of motivation within the activist forces of the 1960s. For one, the Civil Rights Movement, guided by democratic ideals, sought “the political and economic liberation of the Have-Nots,” (14). On the other hand, the Haves sought liberation for themselves as they tried to escape “a sense of anxious, stifling conformity” prevalent in the 1950s (15). The latter manifested itself in two expressions: the sexual revolution, “whose attitudes ... so transformed values and behavior that they ultimately reshaped family life, increasing divorce, illegitimacy, and female-headed families on all levels of society,” and the “sixties counterculture ... [which] rejected traditional bourgeois culture as sick, repressive, and destructive” (15). To Magnet, the effects of the Cultural Revolution were devastating, particularly in the black ghettos:

Instead of ending poverty for the Have-Nots—despite the civil rights movement, despite the War on Poverty—the new cultural order fostered, in the underclass and the homeless, a new, intractable poverty that shocked and dismayed, that seemed to belong more to the era of ragged chimney sweeps than to modern America, that went beyond the economic realm into the realm of pathology. Poverty turned pathological ... because the new culture that the Haves invented—their remade system of beliefs, norms, and institutions—permitted, even celebrated, behavior that, when poor people practice it, will imprison them inextricably in poverty. (17)

Irving Kristol describes the new predicament of poor blacks by pointing out that “[i]t’s hard to rise above poverty if society keeps deriding the human qualities that allow you to escape from it” (qtd. in Magnet 17). As a consequence, Magnet points out, black urban residential areas were turned into “anarchy ... [by ruining] their schools [in] making racial balance, students’ rights, and a ‘multicultural’ curriculum more important than the genuine education vitally needed to rise” (18). Thus, Magnet concludes, not only did the Haves harm themselves with the new cultural order they brought into being by weakening their family and community life, the Have-Nots were failed by the new cultural program as well, as is evidenced in the increase of the underclass and the homeless.

The cultural changes in American society during the 1960s are, of course, noted by all social and historical analysts. Nevertheless, the interpretation of how these changes affected American society varies. Christopher Jencks observes that “single parenthood began its rapid spread during the 1960s, when elite attitudes toward sex, marriage, divorce, and parenthood were undergoing a dramatic change” (134). However, unlike Magnet, Jencks does not think that these changes had a negative effect on *all* of American society. Concerning the educated elite, Jencks holds that the liberalization of morals “certainly improved their lives,” as it afforded them a greater measure of freedom and self-determination (134). Jencks agrees with Magnet, however, that “poor children have suffered the most from our newly permissive approach to reproduction” (135). Caught in the “conjunction of economic vulnerability and cultural change,” the demise of traditional norms about marriage and divorce placed most of them on the outer margins of society (135). As Jencks points out: “Shotgun weddings and lifetime marriages caused adults a lot of misery, but they ensured that almost every child had a claim on some adult male’s earnings unless his father died. That is no longer the case” (135). As a result, two thirds of all black children living in female headed households are poor, a figure which has remained virtually the same from 1970 onward (see Jencks 130).

Jencks considers the cultural changes of the 1960s “a byproduct of growing individualism and commitment to personal freedom,” supported by growing material prosperity. There is no question that the social changes which occurred in American society at large affected black inner-city communities as well. However, it is a matter of contention among scholars of the underclass debate *how* and *why* African American urban ghettos changed so dramatically during that period. Was it primarily a matter of changed values which wreaked havoc in the black ghetto, as cultural behaviorist scholars suggest, or are structural forces to blame which accelerated the outmigration of middle- and working class blacks, leaving behind the most unfortunate segments of the black urban population? These questions shall be contended with in the synopsis of the present chapter after landmark changes in urban African American communities which took place during the 1960s have been considered. The chapter will conclude with a literary case-in-point analysis of Cupcake Brown’s bestselling life narrative, *A Piece of Cake*.

4.1.2. New Black Consciousness in African American Communities

We knew that what's on your head is as important as what's in it. (Marita Golden commenting the Afro hairstyle of the 1960s)

The 1960s ushered in an era of a highly visible new black consciousness which was embodied by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Blacks had become a political force to reckon with, dominating not only the media but also the cultural landscape of the era. Young black revolutionaries displayed a newly acquired sense of pride and “said it loud” by sporting dashikis and brazen Afros. In his autobiography, *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes how the “emerging creed of blackness” permeated his hometown Piedmont in West Virginia as preferences in hairdos and skin hues were reappraised:

This people who had spent a couple of hundred years ironing, frying, greasing, and burning their hair, doing everything but pulling it out by its roots in an attempt to make it unkinky, had all of a sudden become converts to a new religion, the Holy Order of the Natural Kind. It drew sharp divisions in our communities: B.C. and A.D.—Before Crinkle and After Da Straightener. An Afro looked like a crown of cultural glory on the right head. If you took care of your Afro, kept the split ends cut, and washed and combed it regularly, it could emerge like a radiant halo of blackness. Cotton candy of kinkiness. Bad hair was now ‘good,’ and lots of people with ‘good’ hair—especially the guiltily light-complected—were busy trying to kink theirs up. The world had turned upside down. Light-complected people were attempting to become darker, to distance and deny their white ancestors, intruders in their genetic line. One-fifth Yoruba, one-fifth Ashanti, one-fifth Mandinka, one-fifth this, and one-fifth that... (186-7)

Yet, pondering one's history and one's roots was not always a light-hearted affair. Many African Americans perceived the cultural changes which took place in their communities and which led to a reappraisal of black-white relations as a painful “coming into consciousness” after many years of numbing oppression. In one of his letters from Folsom Prison, black activist Eldridge Cleaver expresses these sentiments as follows:

Of course I'd always known that I was black, but I'd never really stopped to take stock of what I was involved in. I met life as an individual and took my chances. Prior to 1954 [the year the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine was overturned], we lived in an atmosphere of novocain. Negroes found it necessary, in order to maintain whatever sanity they could, to remain somewhat aloof and detached from ‘the problem.’ We accepted indignities and the mechanics of the apparatus of oppression without reacting by sitting-in or holding mass demonstrations. Nurtured by fires of controversy over segregation, I was soon aflame with indignation over my newly discovered social

status, and inwardly I turned away from America with horror, disgust and outrage. (3-4)

Cleaver's sentiments were echoed in all aspects of black life. In his socio historical study of Detroit in the postwar years, Thomas J. Sugrue describes the emerging new black consciousness as it was expressed in demands for equality in the political and economic sphere of the city:

Beginning in the late 1950s, African American civil rights activists in the city, after a period of retrenchment, engaged in a renewed militancy. As part of the nationwide civil rights movement, black Detroiters founded new, insurgent organizations like the Trade Union Leadership Council and began to refashion the agenda of established groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In the early and mid-1950s, organized African American resistance to discrimination in work and housing accelerated. (263)

Thus, new black resistance to discrimination was made public through various venues in the 1950s, extending into the 1960s. As the movement progressed, insurgent sentiments among young blacks spread and revolutionary rhetoric started to replace the initially peaceful modes of black communication. As Sugrue reports, "many civil rights activists grew impatient with the glacial pace of change," searching for "an alternative to the mainstream civil rights activism of the postwar years" (263). In Detroit, a younger generation of African Americans, "who watched entry-level jobs vanish and who chafed at ongoing discrimination in Detroit's factories, grew more militant on the shop floor, eschewing the consensus politics and integrationism of the UAW for a new 'revolutionary unionism'" (263).

Martin Luther King's movement had, in a sense, outgrown its founder. Young blacks eager to assert their rights and fight for them "by any means necessary" dominated the newly reshuffled inter-racial powergame in American public life and appeared as the harbingers of looming racial unrest, soon to sweep through inner city streets. In her autobiography, *Migrations of the Heart*, Marita Golden recalls the effect of King's assassination on black-white relations in her high school:

The days after King's death saw an invisible barricade of tensions rise between the white and black students at Western High School. The black students did not know then that in a few months many of us would repudiate our white friends, no longer finding them 'relevant.' Finding instead their mere presence inconsistent with a 'commitment to the struggle,' which is what our lives became overnight. We did not know it, but some of us sensed it, caught tortured, shadowy glimpses of it in the changes festering like mines in the open, dangerous field we would enter upon graduating in June. (17)

Thus capturing her dark premonition, Golden characterizes the consciousness of her generation at the time. On the eve of the bloody and turbulent racial upheavals, most young black activists felt that Martin Luther King's message of non-violent protest was outdated. The times when African Americans "cloaked [their] anger in folk songs" had passed (Golden 18). Instead, young blacks positioned themselves on the front lines ready to enter the battle ground. When Golden's friend Andrea declares that "King's death was a blessing," her response is a mixture of incredulity and protest. However, when her friend explains: "Let's face it. The movement has changed. He was from another era. He couldn't deal with the ghetto and I think he knew it," Golden feels Andrea's words resonating within her since they "so precisely articulated [her] own doubts" (17-8).

Yet, regardless of the stance taken by activist members of the Civil Rights Movement—whether they clung to King's vision of peaceful protest or advocated revolution—the violent protest in America's streets had already gained a foothold. Unprecedented rioting in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965, racial unrest in the black neighborhoods of 75 cities in 1967, including Detroit, Chicago, Memphis, Cincinnati, and Newark, and finally racial rioting in 168 cities throughout the United States after King's assassination in 1968. Nobody realized at the time, that for a large segment of the black population, the bloody end of the civil rights movement was just that: an end to their socio-economic progress.

4.1.3. Racial Unrest

When the knowledge came, its taste was sweet, bitter, eye-opening. A drug pulsing hot led fire and ice through our veins. As clenched fists became the stars giving light to our night, the sound of ‘brother,’ ‘sister,’ our anthem, tumbled through full, determined lips. Turned the curse into a sacrament. Brow-beating, insistent, unforgiving, we took the offensive and for a moment turned white hatred into fear that drained blood from the face.

The tremors from the riots that convulsed the city had shuddered outward, piercing the solid certainty of the surrounding white world with bulging veins of doubt. (Golden 20)

In her life narrative, Golden relays the violence of the racial turmoil of the 1960s in the subjective and impressionistic manner of a deeply implicated participant. From an outsider perspective, however, loss and danger characterized the volatile situation, which shook up the entire nation: hundreds of lives lost, millions of dollars worth of property damage, and widened racial trenches between black and white. It was from this perspective that the political response to the racial protest was launched. Black battle cries of “Burn, baby, burn!” and “Black Power,” were met with Ronald Reagan’s—then Republican governor of California—explanation that “mad dogs” and “lawbreakers” were solely to blame for all the trouble. The government’s effort to crack down on the radicals, especially the Black Panther Party, were met with approval by the majority of Americans, who could not understand why the racial protest occurred so shortly after the most sweeping civil rights legislation had been passed. In response to the issue, socio-historical analysts offer various theories. While one group of theorists points to *historical racism* as the key element in understanding the racial unrest of the period, others hold that the policies and practices of *residential segregation* were mainly responsible for the racial turmoil. A third group, consisting primarily of autobiographical writers, insists that the race riots between 1965 and 1968 can only be explained by considering the *lingering effects of racism* on black-white relations even after the civil rights laws had been passed. The three explanations shall briefly be considered in the following:

- Historical Racism as an Explanation for Racial Unrest

In his study *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson advocates the idea that “historic discrimination is more important than contemporary discrimination in understanding the plight of the ghetto underclass” (141). While Wilson agrees with the perspective which claims that discrimination continues to “aggravate the social and economic problems of poor blacks”, he asks, “is discrimination really greater today than it was in 1948, when black unemployment was less than half of what it is now, and when the gap between black and white jobless rates were narrower?” (140). Implying a negative answer, he explains that one must look to historic discrimination (i.e. discrimination prior to the mid-twentieth century) in conjunction with economic issues in order to understand the plight of the black ghettos, a plight which is closely linked to the racial unrest of the 1960s.

Similarly, Massey and Denton interpret the “cataclysm of destruction and rage” in the cities of the 1960s as the “anger [which manifested its discontent] with the conditions of racial oppression and economic deprivation that had been allowed to fester in the ghetto for sixty years” (*Apartheid* 59).

- **Residential Patterns as an Explanation for Residential Unrest**

Related to the concept of historic discrimination, is the concept which holds that residential patterns in urban areas following the Great Migration provide the underlying current necessary for understanding the eruption of the race riots in the 1960s. In the preface to his book *Making the Second Ghetto* one such scholar, Arnold R. Hirsch, relays that the connection between the violent racial protest of the 1960s and the shifting of residential lines became apparent to him as he was conducting the research for his book:

As the riots of the 1960s receded into the past and the grim fascination with violence cooled, it became increasingly clear that inter racial confrontation—although certainly meriting study in its own right—was just an occasional and spectacular manifestation of a deeper struggle. All the riots that I unearthed in the immediate postwar period had a common impulse: Each resulted from the shifting of racial residential boundaries in modern Chicago. More than a simple legacy of the past, the contemporary ghetto appeared a dynamic institution that was continually being renewed, reinforced, and reshaped. (XVI)

Massey and Denton, who have also conducted extensive research on black urban residential patterns, confirm Hirsch’s theory that “systematic, institutionalized racial discrimination

within urban housing markets” were instrumental in bringing about the racial strife of the 1960s.

- **Contemporary Racism as an Explanation for Racial Unrest**

While the significance of historic racism is uncontested, a group of black autobiographical writers emphasizes racial discrimination of the 1960s in explaining the racial unrest of the period. These writers, whose life stories include the years of the Civil Rights Movement in their narratives, express their anger toward white society, which they feel continued to oppress and discriminate against blacks despite the de jure commitment to equal rights. Eldridge Cleaver writes in 1965 that the young black fellow inmates he associated with in prison perceived their treatment in society, like Cleaver himself, “as a continuation of slavery on a higher plane.”

We cursed everything American—including baseball and hot dogs. All respect we may have had for politicians, preachers, lawyers, governors, Presidents, senators, congressmen was utterly destroyed as we watched them temporizing and compromising over right and wrong, over legality and illegality, over constitutionality and unconstitutionality. We knew that in the end what they were clashing over was us, what to do with the blacks, and whether or not to start treating us as human beings. I despised all of them. (4)

In his rage, Cleaver decides that from then on he would “act,” rather than simply “react” in expressing his anger and his convictions (5). An ardent admirer of Malcolm X and a devout Black Panther Party member, Cleaver, like many other young blacks of his time was committed to the black cause and ready to physically express his anger.

Marita Golden feels similar about the state of racism in the mid-60s and about its connection to the race riots. When she learns that Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed, she laments that “no one man had killed the prophet. Rather, the combined weight of racism and an absence of moral courage had crushed him. A constitution ignored, laws denied, these were the weapons. America pulled the trigger” (16). Consequently, the looting and burning which followed King’s assassination and which lasted for three days is referred to by Golden as a “cleansing ... destroying the core of the inner city” (16).

The destruction of the black residential areas of the inner cities prompted changes which caused the areas to decline even further. The demolition of the sparse infrastructure left the communities denuded and even more isolated, and those blacks who could afford to leave the black neighborhoods moved, leaving behind the most unfortunate, and disadvantaged segments of the black ghetto population which were soon to become known as the black urban underclass.

4.1.4. The Emergence of the Underclass

There is no culture there, it's only a wilderness, and damn monstrous, too. We are talking about a people consigned to destruction, a doomed people. Compare them to the last phase of the proletariat as pictured by Marx. The proletariat, owning nothing, stripped utterly bare, would awaken at last from the nightmare of history. Entirely naked, it would have no illusions because there was nothing to support illusions and it would make a revolution without any scenario. It would need no historical script because of its merciless education in reality, and so forth. Well, here is a case of people denuded. And what's the effect of denudation, atomization? Of course, they aren't proletarians. They're just a lumpen population. We haven't even conceived that reaching it may be a problem. So there's nothing but death before it: Maybe we've already made our decision. Those that can be advanced into the middle class let them be advanced. The rest? Well, we do our best by them. We don't have to do any more. They kill some of us. Mostly they kill themselves. (Saul Bellow)

In the late 1970s, the specter of an emergent underclass started to invade the public discourse. In an address to the annual convention of the NAACP, Senator Edward Kennedy summoned attention to this new, troubling phenomenon, calling it: “[t]he great unmentioned problem of America today—the growth, rapid and insidious, of a group in our midst, perhaps more dangerous, more bereft of hope, more difficult to confront, than any for which our history has prepared us. It is a group that threatens to become what America has never known—a permanent underclass in our society” (qtd. in Auletta 26).

The year before Kennedy's speech, *Time* magazine had published an article which reported on the emergence of a newly developing dangerous and isolated social group within America's major cities. “Behind the ghetto's crumbling walls,” the article stated, “lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachable: the American underclass” (qtd. in Katz, *Introduction*

4). The article proceeds to explain that this new class is different from the “conventional poor” and that a large percentage of the cities’ criminal elements emerge from within it:

Their bleak environment nurtures values that are often at odds with those of the majority—even the majority of the poor. Thus the underclass produces a highly disproportionate number of the nation’s juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, drug addicts and welfare mothers, and much of the adult crime, family disruption, urban decay and demand for social expenditures. (qtd. in Katz, *Introduction* 4)

At the time, the term “underclass” had not entered the vocabulary of the American public discourse yet, and its use “conjured up a mysterious wilderness in the heart of America’s cities; a terrain of violence and despair, a collectivity outside politics and social structure, beyond the usual language of class and stratum ...” (Katz, *Introduction* 4). Removed from American mainstream culture in a myriad of ways—in language, in customs, in living and eating habits, in clothing, in education, in forms of interaction, in values, and in just about every aspect involved in life style—these mostly black inner city dwellers seemed to be part of a new culture which reproduced itself by feeding on its own pathologies. Given the high rates of crime, urban analysts wondered aloud, was there a future for this social group beyond self-destruction? Had the rest of America nurtured this group by its withdrawal and negligence? Why had slum life become a permanent condition for southern black migrants rather than a temporary lot as was the case in other migrant communities? And why had the “forward march of the black poor ... ground to a halt ... only a few years after the great civil rights victories?” (Leman 28).

The conservative behaviorist response to these questions emphasizes the Cultural Revolution as a paramount factor in explaining the momentous social changes which occurred in black urban ghettos at the time. When American culture as a whole abandoned its traditional values of thrift, discipline and hard work, the change in culture “rubbed off” on the black urban poor. It should therefore not come as a surprise, conservative theorists argue, that black urban ghettos experienced a sharp rise in social dislocations in the late sixties and early seventies: The unemployment rate of black male sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds nearly doubled between 1966 and 1974 in all black urban communities, and the welfare rolls between 1960 and 1969 rose from 3 million to 6.7 million, climbing even further to 10.9 million in 1972. The numbers were representative of other social indices as well: The arrest rate for black males, the percentage of black children born out of wedlock, and the number of female-

headed households all increased dramatically in the late sixties and early seventies (see Leman 282-3).

Moderate conservatives and liberals point out that the “change-of-values argument” does not account for the intra-racial gap which started to widen in the late sixties. According to these theorists, the widening intra-racial gap is due to the exodus of the black middle class from the segregated black communities. The outmigration of black middle and working class families left poor people isolated and deprived of “the beneficial effects of the old ghetto institutional structure” (Leman 284). It thereby created a schism within black society which allowed those who had left to enter into mainstream American culture while those left behind were trapped spiraling downward on the socio-economic scale.

In his study on the Great Migration, Nicholas Leman observes that “it is plain that the ghettos deteriorated most severely [when] the middle class began to pull away from the black poor” (282). Thus, while social aberrations in black urban ghettos increased dramatically during the late sixties and early seventies, the income of black married couples, most of whom had left their former inner-city neighborhoods behind, rose to match that of whites, while their birth rate dropped below that of whites.

Having established a black culture of their own, middle-class blacks increasingly felt resentful about being “lumped together” with ghetto blacks: “They still can’t differentiate the average black person from the ghetto criminal,” George Hicks, a migrant from Mississippi, complains about whites after settling with his family in a suburb of Chicago (Leman 280). Implicitly verbalizing the emerging rift in the social stratification of African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement, Hicks hereby points to a process which would intensify over the following decades: While one segment of the black urban community succeeded in taking advantage of the removal of legal barriers by advancing into the mainstream middle-class, others were not able to make those socio-economic strides. For those “left behind,” isolation and deprivation continued to characterize their daily lives and the social dislocations which had markedly risen in black ghetto communities in the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to increase. The result of this continued development was the emergence of a distinct subculture which spread through urban black communities from the seventies onward.

4.1.5. The Emergence of a Distinct Subculture

Frustrated in their isolation from the main streams of American life, and in their impotence to control their fate decisively, Negroes tend to admire an aggressive Race man even when his motives are suspect. They will applaud him because, in the face of the white world, he remains “proud of his race and always tries to uphold it whether it is good or bad, right or wrong.” (Drake and Cayton, 1970)

Given their history as an oppressed people, blacks in the United States have always found appeal in resisting their oppressor; be it in the direct manner of the “aggressive race man” of the 1940s invoked by Drake and Cayton or in the indirect manner of adhering to a subculture which defies the white system and its values.

The appeal of the ghetto hustler, embodying defiance of white culture and white oppression, is referred to in many (primarily male) autobiographical accounts. Malcolm X, for example, describes the hustler as having “less respect for the white power structure than any other Negro in North America. The ghetto hustler is internally restrained by nothing. He has no religion, no concept of morality, no civic responsibility, no fear—nothing” (318). Malcolm X explains that what makes the hustler dangerous within the black community is his

glamour image to the school-dropout youth in the ghetto. These ghetto teen-agers see the hell caught by their parents struggling to get somewhere, or see that they have given up struggling in the prejudiced, intolerant white man’s world ... So the ghetto youth become attracted to the hustler worlds of dope, thievery, prostitution, and general crime and immorality. (318)

Being in a similar situation—namely young, black, oppressed, and angry—Nathan McCall talks about his admiration for his friend Turkey’s father who “was so hip that the fellas and I figured that he was a hustler” (*Holler* 80). What made him so appealing to the group of young rebellious blacks growing up in an urban context in the 1970s, was the fact that, unlike other fathers, he “didn’t bow before the white man” (80). In comparing Turkey’s father, Country, with other fathers, including his own, McCall remarks:

They looked bent over and defeated. Country stood tall and proud. They seemed depressed and standoffish. Country often stopped in the den when we were shooting pool and laughed and joked with us. They were always dirty and tired. Country drove Cadillac Eldorados, sported a shiny gold tooth, and was always as clean as the Board of Health. I wasn’t sure how Country got his money, but that didn’t matter. All that

mattered to me was that he chose not to earn his living slaving at the shipyard or bowing to white folks on some other gig. (80)

The hustler image has not changed much since McCall's adolescent years. Yet, for the majority of young urban blacks today involved in the typical hustler career, their life style is not one of choice. Instead, they usually find themselves trapped in a situation which does not offer many alternatives. Wilson describes today's typical hustlers as "individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force; [Most of them are] individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior" (*Disadvantaged* 41). Their families, Wilson notes, usually "experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency" (41).

Forms of interaction among these young black men in inner-city communities are usually regulated through an informal but well-known code of the street. It comprises a set of rules—based primarily on an individual's ability to command respect—which is a powerful and pervasive form of etiquette. These rules govern the way in which people interact and negotiate public spaces. Elijah Anderson examines these rules in his study *Code of the Street* and points to the ways in which these strict forms of interaction provide a frame for responding to the lack of jobs, racial stigma, drug use and a general sense of hopelessness pervasive in most inner-city black communities. In the preface to his work he states:

In some of the most economically depressed and drug- and crime-ridden pockets of the city, the rules of civil law have been severely weakened, and in their stead a 'code of the street' often holds sway. At the heart of this code is a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, or informal rules, of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence, among so many residents, particularly young men and women. Possession of respect—and the credible threat of vengeance—is highly valued for shielding the ordinary person from the interpersonal violence of the street. In this social context of persistent poverty and deprivation, alienation from broader society's institutions, notably that of criminal justice, is widespread. The code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of 'people's law,' based on 'street justice.' This code involves a quite primitive form of social exchange that holds would-be perpetrators accountable by promising 'an eye for an eye,' or a certain 'payback' for transgressions. In service to this ethic, repeated displays of 'nerve' and 'heart' build or reinforce a credible reputation for vengeance that works to deter aggression and disrespect, which are sources of great anxiety on the inner-city street. (10)

Young ghetto blacks therefore, according to Anderson, are left to fend for themselves in most areas of their public and social lives. Their obsession with respect is derived not only from the need to secure survival in a segment of society which is regulated by its own code but also as a means of compensating their disrespected status within society as a whole.

Nathan McCall recalls the code of respect in his adolescent years as being central to any interaction among his friends. He links the intense need for respect to the “irony ... that white folks constantly disrespected us in ways seen and unseen, and we tolerated it” (*Holler* 52). Therefore, it was vital for young blacks in the street to learn how to “rumble” and fight with their hands in order to gain each other’s respect. In his autobiographical narrative McCall explains that:

For as long as I can remember, black folks have had a serious thing about respect. I guess it’s because white people disrespected them so blatantly for so long that blacks viciously protected what little morsels of self-respect they thought they had left. Some of the most brutal battles I saw in the streets stemmed from seemingly petty stuff, such as Shane’s unwillingness to give me a ride. But the underlying issue was always respect. You could ask a guy, ‘Damn, man, why did you bust that dude in the head with a pipe?’

And he might say, ‘The motherfucka disrespected me!’ That was explanation enough. (*Holler* 52)

Isolated from mainstream society, therefore, urban black communities had to find ways of responding to the special needs in their environment. The lack of civil law and the stigma of their social status are met by adhering to the code of the street. In a similarly “homemade” fashion, the lack of jobs is met by constructing an underground economy which constitutes a system of unregulated, unreported, and untaxed work, providing a system of living for the community’s residents. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh has researched the informal economy, prevalent in all inner-city black neighborhoods, by investigating the underground economic system of a neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. While narcotics are certainly the most important commodity being traded by gang members, Venkatesh shows how the economic system of the ghetto poor entails much more than drug trafficking:

I soon discovered that the seemingly random collection of men and women in the community—young and old, professional and destitute—were nearly all linked together in a vast, often invisible web that girded their neighborhood. This web was the underground economy. Through it the local doctors received home-cooked meals from a stay-at-home down the block; a prostitute got free groceries by offering her services to the local grocer; a willing police officer overlooked minor transgressions in exchange for information from a gang member; and a store owner might hire a local

homeless person to sleep in his store at night, in part because a security guard was too costly. In one way or another, everyone here was living underground. (*books* Xii)

While structuralist theorists explain the emergence of a distinctive subcultural system such as the one described above as “a response to social structural constraints and opportunities,” which marks a positive adaptation process (*Disadvantaged* 8), conservative behaviorist theorists consider the emergence of such a distinct subculture to be an expression of socially aberrant behavior rooted in questionable morals and supported by misdirected social policies. The following synopsis shall offer a juxtaposition of these two opposing perspectives as they pertain to the conservative cultural argument which holds that the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s constitutes a significant element in the evolvment of the aggravated situation in black urban ghettos.

4.2. The Underclass Debate

Synthesis: The Cultural Revolution

One way to read the sixties is to say it was a failed experiment whose price was paid by the Have-Nots. The rest of us landed on our feet. (Christopher Jencks)

4.2.1. The Cultural Revolution as a Cultural Explanation for the Emergence of Black Urban Ghettos

George W. Bush, at the time governor of Texas, praises Myron Magnet's work *The Dream and the Nightmare*. On the back cover of the book, which was published in 1993, he explains that it "crystallized to [him] the impact the failed culture of the sixties had on our values and society. It helped create dependency on government, undermine family, and eroded values which had stood the test of time and which are critical if we want a decent and hopeful tomorrow for every single American" (qtd. in Magnet).

Magnet advances the cultural argument which suggests that the Cultural Revolution is to blame for the downward spiral black urban areas have experienced since the 1960s. The **change of values** advocated by majority culture and "its elite institutions—the universities, the judiciary, the press, the great charitable foundations, even the mainstream churches"—proved disastrous in the black ghettos (1). As "personal responsibility, self-control, and deferral of gratification" were replaced by "self-indulgence" and a misguided sense of authenticity, society as a whole entered a stage of confusion and decadence. The poor, however, whose lives have less margin for error, suffered most (1). The perverted value system caused them to lose whatever tools for self-improvement and success they had and—thanks to misguided social policy—allowed them to settle for welfare as a way of life.

To illustrate his point, Magnet presents the reader with a “convert” to his theory whose story is “particularly instructive” (2):

Doe Fund president George McDonald ... in 1993 was as strident an advocate for the homeless as you could find. We had a vituperative television debate back then, in which he preached the ascendant gospel that the homeless were victims of a heartless society, needing only ‘housing, housing, housing’ to solve their problems. But closer acquaintance with the homeless in the intervening years caused him to revise his views: surveys of residents of the homeless shelter he ran showed that four out of five of his charges were chronic drug users, whose problem wasn’t unaffordable housing but self-destructive behavior—enabled by a culture that showered them with housing, handouts, and sympathy. What the homeless needed, he came to believe, was a strong message of work, sobriety, and personal responsibility from the surrounding culture, and the success of his “Ready, Willing & Able” program in rehabilitating the homeless according to those principles (which he had so vehemently rejected in our TV debate) bears out that belief. (2)

It is Magnet’s goal, therefore, to show “how powerful a force culture has been in forming the underclass” (2). As “American culture went awry in the sixties,” those at the margins of society bore the brunt of the new “if it feels good, do it” culture (5). What the poor need, according to Magnet, is a true and supportive value system which enables them to help themselves. Yet, having been led astray by majority culture, poor ghetto inhabitants are left without any values to guide them out of their predicament. Underclass culture is, after all, not an invention of the poor. Rather, it is a distinct inflection of the American mainstream, a “dialect” which is shaped by the culture as a whole. This then is how, Magnet argues, the prosperous are implicated in creating the underclass: by radically remaking American culture, turning values upside down and inside out in order to engage in the self-gratifying process of the Cultural Revolution, a process which deeply impacted poor urban ghettos.

Of course, Magnet concedes, the new culture is not a unitary system. Rather, it is a set of unexamined assumptions, a “Zeitgeist,” the norm for a generation which is generally adopted as a matter of sympathy, fashion, and political correctness. It was shaped primarily by “opinion makers, policymakers, and mythmakers ... who are overwhelmingly a liberal, left-of-center elite,” and it was adopted by American mainstream culture in the newspapers, classrooms, pulpits, novels, movies, television sitcoms, advertisements, popular music, and courtrooms (20).

As these left-wing influences permeated American culture, left-wing politics took over America’s political institutions. Magnet criticizes liberal policies as misguided in their basic

concepts, since they ignore the human element of choice. The problem with the liberal view, according to Magnet, is that it “makes the self so passive and shrunken as to deprive it of moral significance or dignity or even individuality. In doing so, liberalism ignores and devalues the entity that social policy’s proper object is to promote” (27). The consequence of such thinking, Magnet points out, are extreme practices such as “busing and especially affirmative action” (21).

Conservative scholar Charles Murray agrees with Magnet on many issues in explaining the origins and the perpetuation of the underclass. Yet, unlike Magnet, who places his primary emphasis on culture, Murray considers **social policy** to be the prominent factor in understanding inner-city problems. “The welfare state produces its own destruction,” he declares, by “degrad[ing] the traditions of work, thrift, and neighborliness that enabled a society to work at the outset; then it spawns social and economic problems that it is powerless to solve” (*Hands* 3-4). Thus, within decades, Murray concludes, the welfare state is financially and socially bankrupt.

In the United States, the process of “welfare decay” started in the second half of the twentieth century when an increasing number of people “who were not just poor, but who behaved in destructive ways that ensured that they would remain poor” emerged (3). “Sometimes living off their fellow citizens, sometimes preying on them,” this group of young men and women were unprepared to work as they reached adulthood and were incompetent to nurture their own children (3). “As their numbers grew, they acquired a new name: the underclass” (3). Murray explains that the liberal political response in the 60s and 70s sought to deter these developments by “investing” welfare money into this social group—a response which encouraged the very behavior it was trying to halt. Nevertheless, it took several decades for the government to realize that it was “exacerbat[ing] the problems it was trying to solve” (3).

What then, according to conservative behaviorist theorists, is the most effective way of resolving the problem? Which method should be used to ensure that members of the underclass are successfully ushered into mainstream American culture? The answer which is supported by all prominent cultural theorists is quite simple. As Thomas Sowell, a black conservative theorist puts it: “If people could just stop making things worse, it would be an enormously greater contribution than they’re likely to make any other way” (qtd. in Magnet 21). “The bitter paradox that is so hard to face,” Magnet agrees, “is that most of what the Haves have already done to help the poor—out of decent and generous motives—is part of the problem. Like gas pumped into a flooded engine, the more help they bestow, the less able do

the poor become to help themselves” (21). Thus, the problem, according to Magnet, Murray, Sowell, and other conservative cultural scholars, is not that society has not done enough, but rather that they have done too much of the “diametrically wrong thing” (Magnet 21).

Suggestions for social policy measures offered by liberal structuralist theorists naturally differ greatly from the conservative behaviorist perspective since liberal theorists—as a matter of principle—tend to shy away from discussing value systems (see West, *Race* 20). Instead, they foreground structural factors in explaining social phenomena such as the deterioration of black urban ghettos on structural factors.

4.2.2. The Liberal Structuralist Response

If ever America undergoes great revolutions, they will be brought about by the presence of the black race on the soil of the United States,—that is to say, they will owe their origin, not to the equality, but to the inequality, of conditions. (Alexis De Tocqueville, 1840)

While conservative behaviorist thinkers vilify the sweeping changes that took place in American society during the sixties, most liberal structuralist theorists valorize that time as

a watershed period in American history because for the first time we decided as a people to overcome the racial divide *and* declare war on poverty. Within two years, legal barriers against black access to civil and voting rights were erased. Within eight years, half of America’s poor people were lifted out of poverty. And within a decade, the number of poor old people was more than cut in half. Contrary to the popular myths about the sixties, this was a brief moment in which we bravely confronted our most explosive issues as a people: *racial hierarchy and the maldistribution of wealth and power*. (West, *Race* 157)

Cornel West’s appraisal of the period is representative of the majority of liberal scholars. However, given this positive interpretation of the events in the 1960s, how do liberal thinkers account for the sharp rise in social dislocations in most black urban neighborhoods during that time?

As mentioned earlier, a factor which is considered central in this context is the **outmigration of middle- and working-class blacks** in the years following the sweeping civil rights victories. For Wilson, the term “underclass [signifies] the groups ... left behind, who were collectively different from those that lived in these neighborhoods in earlier years” (*Disadvantaged* 41). With the exodus of those groups of blacks who were part of the mainstream labor market, a key “social buffer” was removed. The loss denuded black urban residential pockets of mainstream role models and eroded institutional life. The “truly disadvantaged” group left behind was subject to extreme social isolation—since they had little contact with individuals and institutions representing mainstream society—and to the demoralizing effects of concentrated poverty. Further aggravating this unfavorable situation, Wilson points out, was the **changed urban labor market**. Unlike the southern migrants during the first half of the century, who had been beckoned by a labor market in dire need of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, those left behind in the ghettos inherited an economy increasingly devoid of manufacturing and unskilled jobs.

Wilson explains that the lack of unskilled jobs available to inner-city blacks in the 60s and 70s favored the increase of social dislocations. Thus, high unemployment among young black men increased the crime rates and reduced the likelihood of stable two-parent black families, as a large percentage of black men were in jail, murdered, in the armed forces, or simply unable to support a family (see *Disadvantaged* 7-8).

In direct response to the behaviorist argument that “people are poor or on welfare because of their own shortcomings,” Wilson points out that “it is important to remember that one of the effects of living in a racially segregated poor neighborhood is the exposure to **cultural framing**, a term which connotes habits, styles of behavior, and particular skills that emerge from patterns of racial exclusion” (*Race* 43). Thus, the adaptation to their isolated, economically disadvantage environment, often adversely influences blacks trying to enter into the mainstream economy. In his study *Off the Books*, Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh observes that the “underground economy enables people to survive but can lead to alienation from the wider world” (385).

David K. Shipler illustrates the effects of cultural framing as an isolating factor by relaying a conversation he overheard at a halfway house in Washington D.C.:

One evening, at a halfway house for recovering drug addicts within sight of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., a group of men talked among themselves about their search for jobs. They were tough. They had survived the crack wars in Washington.

Many had lived on the streets. A few had been in prison. Yet the emotion they talked about feeling as they looked for work was fear. They were afraid to apply. They were afraid of being asked about their police records. They were afraid of being rejected. And a couple even said that they were afraid of being accepted into jobs they did not think they could do. (*Dots 18*)

Shipler explains that the fear experienced by these black men is a natural result of their personal history. While they had mastered their lives successfully in terms of the ghetto's isolated cultural framing, in terms of American mainstream culture their lives exemplified a story of defeat.

Another group of subjects observed by Shipler resides in housing projects in Los Angeles. Since their lives had been characterized by the isolation of the projects, they were afraid to leave their familiar environment even if it promised them job prospects:

At a couple of Los Angeles housing projects that had job-placement programs, I asked staff members what obstacles faced the residents. All put 'fear' near the top of the list. People in the projects wanted to work, but they wanted jobs with the Housing Authority inside the projects. They were afraid to go out into the larger working world whose customs and procedures they did not know. The projects were centers of gang and drug activity (I was advised not to interview there after dark), but that is where residents felt most comfortable. (*Dots 18*)

Thus, as Shipler's observations illustrate, the environment young blacks in the ghetto find themselves in requires them to adapt to a set of values which are alien to members of mainstream culture. Apart from distinct codes of interaction centered around factors such as "respect," their lives do not entail visions or models of upward mobility—schooling, work experience, and other elements which are essential in American mainstream culture. In fact, for most young men living in a black ghetto culture involved in the underground economy and proficient in the code of the street notions of success—as defined by their isolated ghetto culture—are quite "contradictory to mainstream ideas of how work and family should fit into a man's life" (Wilson, *Race* 81).

What then, according to liberals, accounts for the prevalence of a ghetto culture that seems diametrically opposed to notions of success in mainstream culture? Is it, as conservative behaviorists suggest, a spin-off effect of the Cultural Revolution? Or is it simply the historical lack of such qualities as discipline, the willingness to work, and deferred gratification among blacks rooted in their history of oppression?

In his work *Race Matters*, Cornel West offers an alternative answer which is comprehensive in its approach as it includes historical, economic and cultural aspects. In response to the conservative behaviorist perspective, West points to contemporary culture characterized by consumerism and hedonism as the main source of influence in the lives of young ghetto blacks today:

[C]onservatives claim that the decline of values such as patience, deferred gratification, and self-reliance have resulted in the high crime rates, the increasing number of unwed mothers, and the relatively uncompetitive academic performances of black youth. And certainly these sad realities must be candidly confronted. But nowhere in their writings do ... conservatives examine the pervasiveness of sexual and military images used by the mass media and deployed by the advertising industry in order to entice and titillate consumers. ... [C]onservatives thus overlook the degree to which market forces of advanced capitalist processes thrive on sexual and military images. (*Race* 84)

According to West, this culture of “conspicuous consumption and hedonistic indulgence” started its crusade in the early seventies with the eclipse of the U.S. economic predominance in the world and the structural transformation of the American community. “Since the end of the postwar economic boom,” West explains,

certain strategies have been intensified to stimulate consumption, especially strategies aimed at American youth that project sexual activity as instant fulfillment and violence as the locus of machismo identity. This market activity has contributed greatly to the disorientation and confusion of American youth, and those with less education and fewer opportunities bear the brunt of this cultural chaos. Ought we be surprised that black youths isolated from the labor market, marginalized by decrepit urban schools, devalued by alienating ideals of Euro-American beauty, and targeted by an unprecedented drug invasion exhibit high rates of crime and teenage pregnancy? (*Race* 84-85).

In finalizing his argument, West directs a concluding word at conservatives who view the behavior of poor ghetto blacks primarily in individualistic terms without taking their social context into consideration:

My aim is not to provide excuses for black behavior or to absolve blacks of personal responsibility. But when ... conservatives accent black behavior and responsibility in such a way that the cultural realities of black people are ignored, they are playing a deceptive and dangerous intellectual game with the lives and fortunes of a disadvantaged people. (*Race* 85)

What then do liberal theorists propose should be done? In regarding structural forces as central to the problem, they naturally invoke structural forces as the only way out of the dismal situation in the nation's inner cities: Tighter labor markets, more job training, children's allowances, subsidized childcare for working mothers, and other programs which would "build a ladder" for isolated ghetto residents to climb into mainstream society are advocated by most structuralist scholars. In addition, some liberal thinkers, most notably Cornel West, point to the need to respond to the destructive youth culture of black ghettos by investing in the "public square" (*Race* 11). By this West means everything that contributes to the "quality of our lives together" (11-2). Rather than leaving the development of the public sphere up to free market forces, West suggests that American society as a whole should take responsibility in shaping the public arena. His vision does not only include material goods such as public infrastructure, but also the encouragement of civil institutions which help to shield individuals from the influences of profit-hungry corporations. Only in confronting the structural conditions in black urban ghettos *along with* a strengthening of black cultural institutions will it be possible to reach the inhabitants of today's "asphalt jungles ... ruled by a cutthroat market morality" in order to bring about positive change (West, *Race* 25).

The theoretical "bickering" of conservative and liberal scholars aside, which perspective is advocated by autobiographical authors who have experienced a modern black ghetto environment first-hand? The answers are never simple and straight-forward, yet tendencies leaning in one or the other direction can usually be detected. One of the few female authors representing the underclass in her life narrative is Cupcake Brown, who published her autobiography in 2006. In the following section her work shall be critically examined and placed in the context of the underclass debate.

4.3. Literary Case in Point: *A Piece of Cake*

The feminist cause is grossly underrepresented in the literature of the urban underclass. Brown's autobiographical narrative, therefore, representing African American women in poor urban communities, takes on a significant role in communicating these women's struggles. Her life story reflects the characteristic literary patterns of modern feminist confessional writing, thereby following in the tradition of Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was critically reviewed in chapter one. The following sections will consider Brown's life narrative in the context of this tradition, analyzing it in reference to feminist theories by critics such as Rita Felski, bell hooks, Mary G. Mason, and Nellie Y. McKay. Parallels to Jacobs' critical analysis will become apparent as some of the same critical essays used in *Incidents* will also be applied to Brown's narrative in order to show the continuation of the long tradition of feminist writing in the U.S. Similarities of the two life accounts, joined in purpose and literary genre, yet 145 years apart in their dates of publication, shall be elaborated on in a separate section at the end of the critical analysis.

The chapter will conclude by considering the cultural argument of the present chapter—namely the prominent role of the Cultural Revolution in the emergence of black urban ghettos—in the context of Cupcake Brown's autobiographical narrative.

4.3.1. Cupcake Brown: Her Life (1967*)

Born Lavette Burns in 1967, she was orphaned by the sudden death of her mother at the age of eleven and taken from her sheltered home in an African American community in California to a foster home in a white suburb near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. There she was left in the hands of a sadistic foster parent and subjected to severe verbal and physical abuse.

Brown recalls the foster home as the place where her “hell began” (9). She was allotted a tiny room, which she shared with other foster children and which she was not allowed to leave except for cleaning duties. From the first day on she was beaten, starved and repeatedly raped. Focusing all her energies on emotional survival, Brown used alcohol and drugs, which she financed with prostitution, as her main escape routes. She embarked on innumerable running-away escapades, trying to escape the violent reality of her foster home, always to be returned by police officers who picked her up hitchhiking on the highway. At age thirteen she got pregnant, but lost her child in the final stages of her pregnancy after a severe beating by her foster parent. She joined a gang in California when she was fourteen, but was again returned to her foster home in Pennsylvania after surviving a deadly gunshot injury, which nearly left her paralyzed.

At the age of sixteen she was legally granted emancipation and the permission to leave the foster home. She moved back to San Diego to be near her stepfather and her uncle, with whom she had maintained close ties throughout her time under state care. Cupcake Brown calls the following years “one of the happiest times in my life” (173). She was living in an impoverished neighborhood in San Diego, deriving her income primarily from dealing drugs: “Shit, I was successful. I had a lucrative business [dealing drugs], and tons of friends. I stayed loaded. And I was the most popular chick in the whole complex—if that ain’t success, what is?” (163).

This time of her life was also marked by a series of uncommitted sexual relationships, not knowing “that love and healthy relationships take time. I just went through one relationship after another, all the while thinking I was a ‘playa’” (160). Drugs played an increasingly important role in Cupcake’s life and, without being fully aware of it, her surroundings and the need to forget the painful memories of her past pushed her deeper and deeper into a life style of substance abuse. One of her friends, Tommy Brown, whom she would later marry, encouraged her to get a “real” job, since it might help her with her drug dependency. With Tommy’s help she learned to speak “proper white” English, made up a fake resume, and started a “career” as a typist. However, due to her drug use, she was never able to hold a job for very long. Tommy, who had also been using drugs, turned increasingly violent in their relationship and Cupcake sought shelter at a friend’s house. She finally arrived at the low-point, which was also to be the turning-point in her life, when she woke up next to a dumpster, beaten, raped, and with no place to go.

With the help of her boss she enrolled in a drug rehabilitation program at a local hospital and turned her life around. She regularly attended twelve-step meetings and decided to go back to school, all the while keeping her job as a legal secretary. After several years of hard work, Cupcake Brown graduated from college and was admitted to Law School at the University of San Francisco through a minorities program. Her autobiography ends with her graduation ceremony, during which she was granted an award for “Exceptional Distinction in Scholarship, Character, and Activities”.

An update on Cupcake Brown’s current activities can be found on her website. She practices law at one of the nation’s largest law firms in San Francisco and travels around the country as a motivational speaker.

4.3.2. Cupcake Brown’s Autobiographical Work: *A Piece of Cake*

Published in 2006, Cupcake Brown’s autobiography immediately became a *New York Times* bestseller. In her confessional memoir, Brown relays her life story in a style which conveys immediacy and an obstinate refusal to give in to even the most adverse of circumstances. Moving and at times almost transgressive in its frankness, Brown’s account reveals a resilient spirit of unyielding determination in the face of contemporary urban life.

Most critics agree in their review of Brown’s narrative that *Cake* does not represent an orthodox piece of “serious” literature in the sense of serving up “delectable metaphors or featur[ing] rhythmic prose” (Gaines qtd. in Holloway). The book’s greatest shortcoming might lie in its over simplification, which the author compensates for, as some critics have argued, with confessional bluntness (see Maslin 1). Brown presents her experiences in strong colors, painting her early childhood rosy and fairytale-like, while her biological father and figures holding custody over her appear dark and demonic. The stark contrasts take the reader on a roller-coaster ride in the author’s attempt to balance fictional and authentic elements in her narration. Nevertheless, as Patricia Gaines from the *Washington Post* points out, the account “dazzles you with the amazing change that is possible in one lifetime. We see a woman learn to build a family from strangers who help her because she is another human

being trying to overcome horrendous circumstances. It is a story that is poetic in its simplicity, beautifully stripped to the basics” (qtd. in Holloway).

4.3.3. Critical Analysis: *A Piece of Cake* under Feminist Critique

- *Cake as a Confessional Memoir (Rita Felski)*

In her essay “On Confession” Rita Felski assesses the meaning of women’s confessional accounts in the context of the literary and feminist discourse. As a confessional memoir, Cupcake Brown’s life story reflects Felski’s observations on feminist confessional autobiography in various ways and as such “it serves to articulate some of the specific problems experienced by women both communally and individually,” thereby playing a role in the process of identity formation and cultural critique (92).

Confession, a distinctive subgenre of autobiography, which has become prominent in the last two decades, connotes a type of autobiographical writing which “signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author’s life” (Felski 83). Francis Hart defines the genre as a “personal history that seeks to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth of the self” (qtd. in Felski 83). Its political significance, according to Felski, lies in its consciousness-raising by making public what has been private, “typically claiming to avoid filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment in its pursuit of the truth of subjective experience” (83).

Felski’s essay revolves around the central question of whether this type of confessional writing is an indispensable aspect of a critical self-understanding, which constitutes part of feminism’s emancipatory process, or whether the current fascination with intimacy and self-discovery “engenders an even more frantic pursuit for a kernel of authentic self which continually eludes one’s grasp” (84). The question exemplifies, according to Felski, “the problem of the relationship between personal experience and political goals within feminism as a whole” (84).

Felski observes that feminism has exerted a strong influence on women’s autobiographical texts, as is reflected in the recent surge of women’s confessional writing. These texts, usually written “in an unrelativized first person perspective, are strongly confessional, and encourage

reader identification” (84). Thus, feminist confessional literature is typically read as a truthful account of the author’s experiences “which is used as a springboard by readers from which to examine and compare their own experiences” (see Keitel qtd. in Felski 84). Reception is therefore strongly functional and collective.

Cupcake Brown’s narrative exhibits all of the characteristics identified by Felski. Her memoir offers the most personal and intimate details of her life and invites reader identification with phrases such as “let me put it to you like this,” or “don’t get me wrong”. The overriding tone in Brown’s text leaves no room for doubt that her story is truthful and authentic, an impression which is affirmed by the extensive list of names and references in the epilogue and acknowledgments. A further assertion of the truthfulness of the account is provided by the fact that various names of significant people in the narrative have not been changed, as is stated at the beginning of the book.

A functional and collective reception of Brown’s story is explicitly encouraged in the 2007 edition of the work, which includes a “Readers Group Guide” for group discussions. Felski describes the role of this type of feminist literature within the larger context of the women’s movement as exemplifying:

the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women’s experience. In other words, the shift toward a conception of communal identity which has emerged with new social movements such as feminism brings with it a modification of the notion of individualism as it is exemplified in the male bourgeois autobiography. (84)

Feminist confession, therefore, is less concerned with unique individuality or notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together. By combining authenticity with representativeness, it proceeds from the subjective experience of problems and contradictions as encountered in the realm of everyday life to those aspects of experience which are perceived to possess a representative significance in relation to the audience of women it wishes to reach. Feminist confession, as represented by Brown’s narrative, takes part in political discourse by discussing individual experience in relation to a general problematic of sexual politics. Feminist confession, therefore,

is instrumental in the delineation of a group identity through the establishment of norms, formulates elements of a more general feminist critique, and concretizes aspects of the aims and interests of the women’s movement. (Felski 85)

One such example in which Brown articulates her experience in a fashion representative of other women relates to the domestic violence she is subjected to by her husband. In addressing her recollections and feelings retrospectively, Brown abstracts from her perceptions at the time and analyses the reasons for the abusive incidents.

Somehow, my persistence in maintaining a job, *any* job, was threatening my relationship with Tommy. The more jobs I got and the more money I brought in, the more insecure he got. He would constantly accuse me of screwing around, or he would say crazy things like I would leave him when the “right” job came along. I tried to convince him that I loved him and I didn’t want anyone else. Still, the more I tried to assure Tommy of my love and dedication, the more insecure he got. And the more insecure he got, the more violent he got, though at first it was just pushing and shoving. (235) ... I justified the hitting by telling myself that he must *really* love me to be so adamantly vicious about the thought of losing me. I defended his behavior even further by telling myself that it was the dope and booze that caused him to act that way. I came to this conclusion because Tommy was only violent when he was loaded or drunk. Problem was, we were *always* loaded or drunk. I justified his behavior even further by convincing myself that, other than the violence, he was a good man—he kept a job, he drank, and he drugged—all I ever wanted in a man. I knew nothing about standards, principles, respect of boundaries. I even began to accept as true his own reasoning: that I deserved to get hit because I insisted on hitting back. No one ever told me that no woman deserves to get hit, period. (260-1)

Later on in her narrative, Brown relates her experience of domestic abuse to that of a friend’s whom she turns to for shelter every time Tommy gets violent. Her friend Rose, like many other women, has learned to accept physical abuse by men as the norm and keep silent about it. She has “watched family members endure physical abuse, and yet they have stayed in the relationships.” Those experiences have taught her to “shut her mouth and mind her own business” (264).

In relating these incidents and her analysis of domestic violence, Brown obviously perceives herself as part of a collective with shared experiences. It is on behalf of the women who have experienced similar situations that Brown seeks to raise awareness among the larger population.

Another representative aspect in feminist confessional literature, as observed by Felski, is the organizing of one’s life story around moments which have been revealed as turning points, a pattern rarely used in male autobiographies. “Such moments,” Felski notes, “are typically defined in terms of personal relation: the loss of a lover, the experience of childbirth, the death of a parent” (86).

Following this typical feminist pattern, Brown's life story is structured around two main turning points: the loss of her mother and the low point in her life following the break-up of her marriage, in which she recognizes her true condition as a helpless drug addict. The latter of the two turning points, both involving the loss of a loved one, allows her to discover yet another significant relationship in her life: the presence of God, whom she has only referred to as "the voice" up to that point. Realizing that she is "so horribly despondent and dismayed that she [can't] even afford to bargain" with God, she silently begs for help, inviting Him to enter her life (332). As her relationship with this Higher Power develops, Brown learns to establish and foster new relationships with the people surrounding her, as well as with herself.

The centrality of "relationships" in Brown's life narrative is another aspect which is representative for women's autobiographical texts.

The longing for intimacy emerges as a defining feature of the feminist confession at two inter-connected levels: in the actual representation of the author's own personal relationships and in the relationship between author and reader established in the text. (Felski 89)

Felski observes that the "consciousness of the writing self" encodes an audience (86). It "self-consciously addresses a community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated public" (86). The implied reader of the feminist confession, therefore, who is addressed through a tone of intimacy, is the sympathetic female confidante. The importance of her role "is directly related to the belief that she will understand and share the author's position" (Felski 86).

Brown's memoir contains "relational" rhetorical devices encoding a bond with her understanding female audience on nearly every page. Implicitly, her style of writing conveys a sense of closeness and immediacy. Thus, Brown's narrative reflects Offenbach's observation on autobiographical texts:

The confession is a cry for love, allowing the author to express powerful emotional feelings to an unknown reader without fear of rejection. The writing self is profoundly dependent upon the reader for validation, specifically the projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathize, and identify with the author's emotions and experiences. (qtd. in Felski 89-90)

Apart from emphasizing relational bonds with their surroundings and their readership, female confessional writers frequently include a spiritual relational dimension in their life accounts. The spiritual dimension inherent in Brown's confession as she describes her evolving relationship with God points to the historical roots of the confessional genre in general. The

confessions of Saint Augustine or the life of Saint Teresa, in which self-analysis is valued not for its own sake but as a means of affirming the ultimate authority of a divine knowledge are among the early examples of spiritually oriented confessional accounts. When the genre turns toward celebrating unique individualism, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, religious forces still exert a strong influence on the literary development of confessional life stories (see Felski 87). Protestantism's emphasis on the importance of the individual struggle for salvation "prepare[s] the way for the self-consciousness necessary for autobiography proper" (Felski 87). The strong Protestant element in the feminist preoccupation with subjectivity as truth, in turn, explains why the feminist confession appears to be a relatively rare phenomenon within the Catholic and rhetorically conscious French tradition, whereas Protestant countries, such as the U.S. and Germany have seen the development of a vast body of confessional literature (see Felski 91).

In this context it is interesting to note that two of the primary authors in this study, Malcolm X and Cupcake Brown, are rooted in the Christian tradition through their father and grandfather respectively, who served as ministers in small black evangelical churches. The heritage of self-scrutiny and spiritual introspection is apparent in each of their life stories.

While most of Felski's observations pertain to feminist confessional writing at large, some observations refer specifically to oppressed groups of women. For such groups, Felski claims that

the depiction of one's life and experiences as a woman, a black person, a homosexual, can be a potentially liberating process insofar as it expresses a public self-acceptance and a celebration of difference. (88)

In her memoir, Brown repeatedly recalls feelings of inferiority due to her dark skin color. After her conversion experience, however, she embarks on the liberating process of accepting herself as a black person and as a woman. She relays this process as she follows her mentor's advice to put up pictures of well-known African American women in her apartment.

I began to go through black magazines and cut out pictures of black women with dark or brown skin: Oprah, Alfre Woodard, Cicely Tyson, Tina Turner. These women had been around for years, I always threw their images aside. It wasn't until I began to post them all over my house that I realized that black was beautiful. I couldn't remember who had convinced me that brown or dark skin was ugly—or why. It was a lie. Black women come in all shades –and all shades were beautiful—including mine. (410)

Valorizing her blackness symbolizes Brown's decision to acknowledge and accept her entire painful past. This acceptance is reflected in her positive disposition toward the very act of writing her memoirs. In the acknowledgments she thanks one of her previous professors from College who had encouraged her to publish her life story. "You know that you started all of this—convincing me to ... get honest about my past—and I thank you tremendously for it. You always insisted that my story needed to be told. Here it is" (468).

Brown's act of writing down her past serves as an affirmation of her experience as an African American woman and endows her subjective experience with "authority and meaning" (Felski 90). Her long and painful path through the most adverse of circumstances, which culminates in her surrender to a Higher Power, is thus rendered visible. Millet points to the scriptotherapeutic effect the act of writing one's life story has on the author: "The writing into existence [causes a] magical transformation of pain into substance [and] meaning" (qtd. in Felski 91). It is a form of closure, a form of triumph over the adverse forces in one's life. Cupcake Brown claims this phenomenon for her own life as follows:

I can now close the door to this part of my life. I have completely forgiven everyone who's ever hurt, harmed, failed, or doubted me, starting with—and *especially*—me. (465) ... To those who believed in me and knew I could turn my life around if only I had the willingness, thank you for allowing me to prove you *right*. (470)

Returning to her central question, pertaining to the role of feminist confessional literature in the literary and political discourse, Felski concludes that it is "difficult to pronounce any one final judgment upon feminist confession as a genre, either to celebrate it as radically subversive or simply to reject it as self-indulgent and naïve" (93). Nevertheless, she does consider the surge in feminist autobiographical literature to constitute a valuable contribution to the feminist political cause. Its underlying fundamental message, that women's problems are not private but communal, point to the institutionalized nature of sexual oppression. Since women's lives have, until recently, been largely defined by their location within the private sphere, their coming out into the public realm constitutes the starting point for critical reflection (see Felski 92). It is within this context of feminist concern that the significance of women's confessional literature such as Cupcake Brown's story lies.

The scriptotherapeutic aspect of confessional autobiographical writing, referred to by Millet and Felski, is further elaborated on by bell hooks, a prominent feminist literary critic.

Concerning her own autobiographical writing process she recalls that

telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill the self in writing. Once that self was gone – out of my life forever – I could more easily become the me of me' (*autobiography* 429).

However, as hooks discovered, the killing of her childhood self proved more difficult than anticipated. There were larger forces at work blocking her ability to tell her story. Among others, "secrecy and silence were central issues" (429). The feeling of being trapped in the fear that a bond would be lost or broken in the telling was omnipresent (see 429). A decisive insight, however, allowing hooks to shed her apprehension of writing—a process which would take her many years—was related to recognizing her goals. Apart from seeking to slay her childhood self, hooks realized that the longing to tell her story was also "a longing to recover the past in such a way that [she would] recover a sense of reunion and a sense of release" (431).

These motivational aspects of release and reunion are echoed by Cupcake Brown, every time she reflects on her past experiences. Throughout her early adolescent years, the longing for release dominates Brown's recollection process. In a gang initiation rite, during which she is physically attacked by the other females in the gang, Brown experiences a painful surge of memories seeking release.

As they pounded me, I began to flash back on the last couple of years of my life: finding my mother dead, that asshole Mr. Burns, losing my daddy and Uncle Jr. They kept pounding. The strength of their blows was knocking me to the ground. Still, I wouldn't fight. Still the punches kept coming. I continued remembering: Diane, the rapes, the abuse, the cheerleading practices. The girls now added kicks to the punches. My past continued flashing: getting pregnant, getting jumped, losing my baby. All of a sudden the anger began to rise up in me. The rage I had been holding in for years began to quickly swell at the possibility of finally being released. And released it was, in a flurry of fists as I began to fight—and cry. (111-2)

Later in her life, Brown is encouraged by her husband Tommy to make up a “new” past in order to be accepted into the white world of employment opportunities more easily. In the process of defining a new past for herself, a past void of pain, struggle, and humiliation, again the aspect of release dominates.

I decided it would be better to stick with the parts of the past I could change—if only in make-believe. So the Brady story is the story I adopted as my own. But instead of the three brothers and two sisters Marcia had, I told people I had five brothers. I figured that if I really had had five brothers, Pete wouldn’t have raped me and Mr. Bassinet wouldn’t have forced me into [sexual practices]. And although I would say that my mother had died, I’d leave out the part about finding her. That was still just too painful. (217-8)

The painful memory of finding her mother dead is not “touched” by Brown until years later, when sobriety and her newly-found faith in God provide her with enough strength to face her past. At that point, Brown starts the internal process of reclaiming her past as she focuses on “obtaining self-acceptance, self-love, and self-esteem” (409). Rather than running from her own life story, trying to slay the self of her childhood, Brown now embarks on rescuing her. At this point the child Lavette Burns is “no longer the enemy within, the little girl who [has] to be annihilated for the woman to come into being” (hooks, *autobiography* 432). Instead, Brown reclaims that part of her self, the part she has “long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she [has] often felt uncared for as a child” (hooks, *autobiography* 432). As for bell hooks, for Brown “remembering [becomes] part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of [her] heart’ that the narrative [makes] whole again” (hooks, *autobiography* 432).

The joy of reunion, claimed by hooks in her autobiographical writing process, is referred to by Brown in another more concrete sense, as she dedicates her life story to her late mother and grandmother: “For my Momma and my Grandma. How I miss you so. I love you. I’ll see you both after a while.”

- **Relational Aspects in Cupcake Brown’s Autobiography (Mary G. Mason)**

In her essay “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” Mary G. Mason observes that the discovery of the female self in most women’s life narratives is closely linked

to the identification of some “other”. Prototypical male autobiographies, according to Mason, tend to present the self as self-contained, self-sufficient, and isolated beings, “where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author’s evolving consciousness” (Mason 321). This model of male life writing does not accord with the deepest realities of women’s experiences and is therefore inappropriate in relating the female perception of self. Mason is aware of the disadvantages inherent in distinguishing literary works by gender. However, she argues that

in the specific instance of autobiography, where a life is so intimately joined to the act of writing, one can achieve certain important insights into the possibilities and necessities of self-writing if one first isolates according to gender and then brings female and male autobiographical types back into proximity in order that they may throw light (at times by sheer contrast) on one another. (321)

Mason then compares the prototypical male autobiographers Augustine and Rousseau to various female autobiographical writers and concludes that the patterns established by these representative male autobiographical writers are nowhere to be found in women’s autobiographies. Neither the experience of self as battleground for opposing spiritual forces represented by Augustine, nor the detached “egoistic secular archetype” of Rousseau capture the typical female experience (321). Instead, the evolvment of the female self always seems intimately related to the awareness of another consciousness.

Applying Mason’s theory to the context of this study, one will find the literary gender distinction to be most appropriate. While Malcolm X’s autobiography presents relational aspects as marginal, Cupcake Brown portrays the development of her identity as profoundly contingent on others. Brown therefore affirms Mason’s hypothesis that “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness” (321).

In Brown’s case, establishing relations with “the other” takes on two distinct, yet intertwined dimensions. For one, it leads her to acknowledge and trust a “Higher Power,” which she discovers to be omnipresent in her life, and secondly it entails the involvement in the community surrounding her. The second of these two relational aspects, the identification with a communal consciousness, is deeply and inherently dependent on the first, her “discovery of self” through the trusting relationship with a divine being.

In documenting her relational journey, feminist confessional writing accompanies the author in her “anxious, often uneasy struggle to discover [her] female self, a struggle which ... constitutes a necessary moment in the self-definition of ... a community” (Felski 94).

- **Comparing Jacobs’s and Brown’s Confessional Memoirs: Sisters within the
Feminist Tradition**

In drawing parallels between Jacobs’ and Brown’s confessional memoirs, the reader will find similarities in virtually every representative characteristic identified by Felski. While Brown offers the personal details of her story in a rather descriptive form, not shying away from disclosing the most intimate aspects of her experiences, Jacobs’ revelation of her sexual exploitation was, at the time, considered scandalous and “too delicate” for the ears of the average genteel reader of sentimental literature (see Felski 83). In disclosing highly personal experiences, both life stories seek to reveal their intimate stories in order to draw a collective response from a female readership on behalf of other women who are in need of their readers’ sympathetic support (see Felski 84-5). Both narratives are therefore functional, aiming at the collective reception of their readership (see Felski 86). Finally, both authors delineate past difficulties in their lives which are specific to women, thereby creating a “feminist ‘counter-public sphere’ [as] an oppositional discursive space within contemporary society,” which joins them together in the feminist cause (Felski 94).

Brown does not only—perhaps not even primarily—seek to create a discursive space for the feminist cause, however. She is also intent on conveying the dim reality of individuals—male and female—who are trapped in the vices of the ghetto. The way out of this netherworld, advocated and experienced by Brown herself, is inevitably linked to hard work, spiritual guidance and will power, a line of thought closely related to conservative behaviorist reasoning as will be elaborated on in the concluding section of this chapter.

4.3.4. *A Piece of Cake in the Context of the Underclass Debate*

Cupcake Brown's autobiographical narrative is relevant in the conservative-liberal underclass debate as it exemplifies the conservative behaviorist belief in individual choice as the decisive factor in overcoming morally adverse circumstances. The emphasis placed on the aspect of individual choice over environmental factors in determining a person's development is illustrated in Brown's narrative in an exemplary fashion.

Immersed as a young girl in extremely adverse circumstances, she survives every thinkable form of abuse and inevitably turns into a (self-described) "dope-fiend-gangsta-thief-preteen-teenage-adult-prostitute-high-school-dropout-no-GED-card-carrying-drung" (Holloway). As an adolescent she spends several years in an impoverished African American neighborhood in San Diego, which, from Brown's description, inevitably conjures up biblical images of Sodom and Gomorrah in the reader's mind. Brown's life at this point is characterized by a constant state of narcotization, prostitution, gang activity, changing sexual partners, repeated abortions, and petty crime. At this point in her life, Brown's life style and her living environment correspond to what Magnet calls "a culture gone awry," a phenomenon in modern day America which he attributes to the Cultural Revolution in the sixties (6). Yet, it is at the low point in Brown's life, when all hope seems lost (from a liberal structuralist's perspective), that Brown experiences a spiritual conversion and turns her life around. As a result, she puts into practice the virtues extolled by conservative theorists—hard work, self-discipline, and deferred gratification—and succeeds in performing a minor miracle by becoming a highly successful professional, who feels at home in America's mainstream culture.

When asked in an interview by *Ebony Magazine* what had led her to write her story, Brown answers that "first and foremost, it is the message that all things are possible with God" (Holloway). Including a **spiritual dimension** in interpreting one's life story is not only representative of conservative behaviorist thought, it also makes Brown part of a long-standing tradition in American religiosity: In his essay "Religion und Wettbewerb. Der amerikanische Sonderweg" in Waldemar Zacharasiewicz's collection *Transatlantische Differenzen* Michael Zöller shows how religion continues to function as a vehicle for social participation in American society, while being closely connected to the essentially American concept of individualism. These observations are played out convincingly and appealingly in

Brown's narrative as crucial elements in her conversion and in her efforts of leading a life which is "in accord with [her] nature, a life that most fully realizes [her] potential for freedom, dignity, happiness—indeed, for humanity" (Magnet 5).

The essential determinant, therefore, in leading a successful life, according to conservative behaviorist thinkers, who are indebted in their ideology to various forms of Christian theology, centers around the element of *choice*. Again, Brown's narrative illustrates this concept in an exemplary fashion. In the interview with *Ebony*, Brown states that "I had to make a choice to change my life. I had to want to". This step implied "work—hard work—to change, [including] perseverance, determination, commitment, and dedication" (Holloway).

Then, in a slight that seems directed at structuralist thinkers, she adds: "I was the type of person 'society' said could not change. Yet, with the characteristics I just mentioned, together with strong faith and a positive support group, I was not only able to change, but was able to make drastic changes" (Holloway).

Further supporting the behaviorist line of argumentation, Brown denies that she was disadvantaged in her life's journey on the basis of race. "My story ... involves universal issues," she explains. "[It] is a people story, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief (or the lack therefore) and educational or social economic background. Everyone is, has, or will struggle with some type of personal issue ... any challenge can be overcome" (Holloway).

Leaving her readership with one final message of inspiration, Brown states that "You can change—if you want it bad enough. We are responsible for our choices, and God makes the impossible possible" (Holloway).

5. Living in the Hood

The Liberal Structuralist Perspective:

Racial Residential Segregation as a Structural Force in the Development of Black Urban Ghettos

5.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

5.1.1. The Hardening of the Color Line

So the rage continued, taking shape in a death-wishlike spiral that devoured only the ghetto, until it was spent and whimpers of regret replaced the shouts. (Marita Golden commenting the race riots in the urban ghettos in 1968)

In the aftermath of the riots that erupted in the nation's black ghettos in the late 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois to identify the causes of violence and to propose policies to prevent its recurrence. The Kerner commission released its report in March 1968 with the shocking admonition that the United States was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal" (qtd. in Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 4). Prominent among the causes that the commission identified for this growing racial inequality was residential segregation. In stark, blunt language, the Kerner Commission informed white Americans that "[d]iscrimination and

segregation, [which] have long permeated much of American life, now threaten the future of every American” (4). This, the commission maintained, was due to the fact that segregation had produced “a destructive environment in the racial ghetto totally unknown to most white Americans (4).”

The report argued that to continue present policies was “to make permanent the division of our country into two societies: one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs” (4). Commission members rejected a strategy of ghetto enrichment coupled with abandonment of efforts to integrate, an approach they saw as “another way of choosing a permanently divided country” (4). Rather, they insisted that the only reasonable choice for America was “a policy which combines ghetto enrichment with programs designed to *encourage integration* of substantial numbers of Negroes into the society outside the ghetto” (emphasis added; 4).

America chose differently. After the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, racial segregation was readily replaced by other topics on the national agenda. Massey and Denton observe that “by the end of the 1970s residential segregation became the forgotten factor in American race relations” (4). This was partially due to the suburbanization of the white middle-class, which had started in the 1920s and intensified in the 1950s. It was aided by the construction of freeway networks through the hearts of cities thereby creating “barriers between the sections of the cities, walling off poor and minority neighborhoods from central business districts” (Katz, *Debate* 462). Wilson notes that the highway systems in several cities essentially followed old boundaries which had been established as part of those cities’ racial zoning laws dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. (see Wilson, *Race* 29). Accelerating the process of white urban flight, the government offered housing-market incentives to middle-class whites such as mortgages for veterans and mortgage-interest tax exemptions for developers which enabled the quick, cheap production of massive amounts of tract housing. “Although these policies appeared to be nonracial,” Wilson points out, “they facilitated the exodus of white working and middle-class families from urban neighborhoods and thereby indirectly contributed to the growth of segregated neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty” (*Race* 30).

The suburbanization of America proceeded at a rapid pace and the white middle-class deserted the inner cities in massive numbers. Only one third of U.S. metropolitan residents were suburban residents in 1940 but by 1970 suburbanites constituted a majority within metropolitan America (see Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 44). Between 1950 and 1970, the percentage of blacks more than doubled in most large northern cities, going from 14% to 33%

in Chicago, from 16% to 38% in Cleveland, from 16% to 44 % in Detroit and from 18% to 34% in Philadelphia (44). Massey and Denton point out that

[w]hat is striking about these transformations is how effectively the color line was maintained despite the massive population shifts. The white strategy of ghetto containment and tactical retreat before an advancing color line, institutionalized during the 1920s, was continued after 1945; the only change was the rate at which the leading edge of the ghetto advanced. In a few short years, the population of vast areas of Chicago's south and west sides became virtually all black. (Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 45-6)

By 1970, blacks in all northern cities were more likely to live with other African Americans than with whites, and in four cities, Chicago, Cleveland, Gary, and St. Louis, the average black person lived in a neighborhood that was over 80% black (see Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 48).

In his study on Detroit in the postwar years, Sugrue sums up the development of isolated racial enclaves in the city center as “the confluence of residential segregation by race and by class with lack of employment opportunity and poverty” (269). Representative of all other rustbelt cities in the postwar years which experienced violent racial tensions as blacks probed and whites defended the color line, Sugrue explains that:

[w]hite Detroiters invented communities of race in the city that they defined spatially. Race in the postwar city was not just a cultural construction. Instead, whiteness, and by implication blackness, assumed a material dimension, imposed onto the geography of the city. Through the drawing of racial boundaries and through the use of systematic violence to maintain those boundaries, whites reinforced their own fragile racial identity. Ultimately, they were unsuccessful in preventing the movement of blacks into many Detroit neighborhoods, but their defensive measures succeeded in deepening the divide between two Detroits, one black and one white. (Sugrue 234)

In assessing the progress of racial residential integration since the 1960s, Arnold R. Hirsch observes in 1993 that “the civil rights era ban on racial discrimination did not affect the hard-core economic problems that continue to plague central cities and their residents,” since deeply rooted patterns of segregation persist (Hirsch, *Jim Crow* 94). In fact, Hirsch notes, the ghetto “shows no signs of disappearing and, indeed, may now present the dual problems of race and poverty in more concentrated form than ever before” (94).

The chapter at hand will consider the most concentrated form of urban racial isolation: the public housing projects and will then consider the social isolation that follows from the spatial

isolation. The impact of segregated schooling shall be examined in a separate section as it is vital in perpetuating the racialized class system. Subsequently, these socio-historical factors will be synthesized by placing them in the context of the underclass debate. The literary case-in-point analysis will conclude the chapter by critically examining Nathan McCall's autobiographical narrative, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, within the framework of racial residential segregation.

5.1.2. The Construction of the Projects

What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it. (The Kerner Commission Report)

As the postindustrial urban order developed, the disinvestments in the centers of cities at the expense of suburbs locked cities into a spiral of decline. To support the interests of large capital investors who were tied to the cities by spatially immobile facilities and long-standing traditions—universities, hospitals, libraries, businesses—Congress passed the housing acts of 1949 and 1954 which provided federal funds to local authorities to acquire slum properties, assemble them into large parcels, clear them of existing structures, and prepare them for “redevelopment”. During the 1950s and 1960s, local elites manipulated housing and urban renewal legislation to carry out widespread slum clearance in growing black neighborhoods that threatened white business districts and elite institutions. “As a result, public housing projects were typically built on cleared land within or adjacent to existing black neighborhoods. In order to save money, maximize patronage jobs, and house within the ghetto as many blacks as possible, local authorities constructed multi-unit projects of extremely high density” (Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 56). These massive segregated housing projects soon became the new ghettos for minorities and the economically disadvantaged.

In an interview with two teenage project residents, Vincent Lane, who served as chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority from 1988 to 1995, explains the emergence of the Ida B.

Wells Housing Projects on Chicago's Southside, which involved slum clearance and redevelopment, in simple terms:

I think we have to look at the genesis of these developments. I was around when they built the high-rises. And before they built them these were nice low-rise, low-density neighborhoods—single-story, two-flat buildings where everybody knew everybody. When they built the expressways and had urban renewal, they destroyed a lot of that housing and built these high-rise buildings. And they built them cheaply. So there was cost in mind: 'Why should you spend money on poor people?' And there was also an element of racism: the containment of blacks. When you look at the concentration of public housing in Chicago there's nothing like it anywhere else in America.

We've got to get back to the point where we don't stack poor people on top of each other. Also, there are no role models: fathers, brothers, sisters that get up and go to work every day and who are doing positive things. We don't have Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Little League—almost anything. So when you don't have any alternatives, I don't know why society would be surprised at what happens in public housing today. (Jones/Newman 106)

In a 1993 proposal to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Lane describes the situation of the Cabrini-Green projects, a public housing site on Chicago's near Northside, in a more bureaucratic prose: "This isolation, over time, is also reflected in an absence of external public, private and social service resources available to the community. Like many of Chicago's public housing and low income communities, the Cabrini-Green area and families are chronically underserved" (qtd. in Bennet/Reed 127).

Statistics of the Robert Taylor Homes, Chicago's largest public housing project, offer insights into the socio-economic marginalization of the project's residents:

Robert Taylor Homes is a complex of twenty-eight sixteen-story buildings covering ninety-two acres. The official population in 1980 was almost 20,000, but, according to a recent report, 'there are an additional 5,000 to 7,000 adult residents who are not registered with the housing authority.' In 1983 all of the registered households were black and 69 percent of the official population were minors. The median family income was \$5,470. Ninety-three percent of the families with children were headed by a single parent. Eighty-three percent of the (nonelderly headed) families with children received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Unemployment was estimated to be 47 percent in 1980. Although in 1980 only a little more than 0.5 percent of Chicago's more than 3 million people lived in the Robert Taylor Homes, 11 percent of the city's murders, 9 percent of its rapes, and 10 percent of its aggravated assaults were committed in the project. (Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 25)

The indices, representative of other public housing projects, have not changed much over the past thirty years, reflecting only slight alterations in correlation with the economic state of the country as a whole (see Boger 8-30). In interpreting the statistics, William Julius Wilson quotes the sociologist James Q. Wilson who advances the hypothesis that the abrupt rise in the number of young persons, characteristic of many projects, had an “exponential effect on the rate of certain social problems.... [It set of] a self-sustaining chain reaction ... that create[d] an explosive increase in the amount of crime, addiction, and welfare dependency” (38).

From an onlooker’s perspective, the buildings housing the city’s most marginalized exude a ghost-like air, as Kevin Coyle writes:

From afar, each building appears to have been formed out of a single gargantuan brick and shoved endlong into the earth. The only signs of life come from the windows, many of which display shades, greenery, or in a few cases, lace curtains. Many others, however, are burned out, empty, hollow. It is the empty windows, particularly those on the upper floors, to which the eye is instinctively drawn. (qtd. in Bennet/Reed 127)

LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, two teenagers living in the Ida B. Wells Housing Projects in Chicago describe the same setting from an insider perspective. In their book, *Our America*, which chronicles the lives of project residents in Chicago, they take their readers on a walk through the ghetto neighborhood:

It’s Friday afternoon after school, and we’re going to take you on a tour of our neighborhood. It’s about sixty degrees today—feels good out. Walking down the streets. See an abandoned building, graffiti on the wall. See some little kids playing on a little shopping cart that they got from Jewel Supermarket.

Walking by some abandoned houses—looks like some Scud missiles just bombed them out. A lot of trash here—glass and things. Used to be little snakes in this field in the summertime and we’d catch them. People out here pitching pennies. Houses boarded up.

Walking through puddles of water. Bums on the street. An abandoned church. A helicopter. There goes somebody we thought was dead—guess he ain’t dead.

By the old library, which is no longer in business—there was a murder in there last year and they closed it down. See a “Rest in Peace” sign. Birds flying. There’s the store that they burned down when the Bulls won the championship. Going by the gas station where they sell liquor and food. Now we see some spray paint that says: ‘Justice for Rodney King/Revolution Is the Only Solution.’

Now we’re walking in the Ida Bees, which is 50 percent boarded up. Now we’re by Lloyd’s house. Abandoned apartments. Broke down basketball hoops. We see little kids just sitting around looking at us.

Now we’re walking in the parking lot where they play loud music in the summertime. Little trees growing up in the concrete cracks. See a trash Dumpster and graffiti. See

an airplane overhead. A bum walking down the street. We're walking through the ghetto. Our neighborhood. (Jones/Newman 36)

LeAlan Jones then offers his readers a glimpse of the omnipresent violence in the neighborhood perceived through a child's eye.

Our neighborhood is a fun neighborhood if you know what you're doing. If you act like a little kid in this neighborhood, you're not gonna last too long. Cause if you play childish games in the ghetto, you're gonna find a childish bullet in your childish brain. If you live in the ghetto, when you're ten you know everything you're not supposed to know. When I was ten, I knew where drugs came from and I knew about every different kind of gun. I knew about sex. I was a kid in age but my mind had the reality of a grown-up, cause I seen these things every day!

Like when I was eight years old, my cousin Willy had a friend named Baby Tony and another friend, Little Cecil. They used to hang out—watch TV, go to the park and hoop, sell drugs. They all went to jail. When Baby Tony came out he was walking through the park when a boy lit him up and blew his face off. His face was *entirely* blown off. And then a couple of days later Little Cecil sold somebody a dummy bag of plaster from off the walls, so the man who was using it came back and asked him for his money back. Little Cecil took off running and the man shot him. And Cecil was dead. That was both of my cousin's friends that died in one week! And I heard about his when I was *eight*! I had just seen Baby Tony the day before he died.

It's like Vietnam. I remember one time I was over at my auntie's house spending the night. We were playing Super Nintendo and I heard this lady say, "I heard you been looking for me, nigger!" Then she just—BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! She left off about eight shots. Then I heard the other gun fire off. And we were just still there playing like nothing happened. In Vietnam, them people came back crazy. I live in Vietnam, so what you think I'm gonna be if I live in it and they just went and visited? Living around here is depressing! It's depressing! Just look outside—this isn't Wally and the Beaver! (Jones/Newman 35-6)

To most white middle-class Americans, even those living within close range of the housing project, the lives of the two thirteen year old teenagers are a world apart. "Abnormality, danger, emptiness ... are the terms that key most Chicagoan's understanding" of the public housing projects (Bennet/Reed 128). In her study on the politics of race and class in a Chicago neighborhood, Mary Pattillo sums up the verdict which is accepted across political lines in stating that "public housing has been a failure in the United States" (186). The spatial isolation of the housing projects, intensified by their concentration, poor design and construction, horrendous management, violence, and racially discriminatory siting and tenantry breeds an isolated subculture which again amplifies the marginalization of the residents, an inevitable process as shall be shown in the following section (see Patillo 187).

5.1.3. The Social Isolation in Black Urban Ghettos

Racial segregation, like all other forms of cruelty and tyranny, debases all human beings—those who are its victims, those who victimize, and in quite subtle ways those who are mere accessories. (Kenneth B. Clark)

By 1970, after two decades of urban renewal, public housing projects in most large cities had become black reservations, highly segregated from the rest of society and characterized by extreme social isolation. The replacement of low-density slums with high-density towers of poor families also reduced the class diversity of the previous ghetto and brought about a geographic concentration of poverty that was previously unimaginable. Massey and Denton point to the inevitable connection between spatial and social isolation as essential in understanding the desolate situation in urban ghettos: “In a very real way ... barriers to spatial mobility are barriers to social mobility, and where one lives determines a variety of salient factors that affect individual well-being: the quality of schooling, the value of housing, exposure to crime, the quality of public services, and the character of children’s peers” (*Apartheid* 150).

The spatial concentration of poverty always gives rise to a distinct subculture which takes shape within an ecological niche emerging from the intersection of social, economic, and demographic characteristics. Thus, as the density of poverty rises within a community, so does the density of joblessness, crime, family dissolution, substance abuse, disease, and violence (see Massey 204). Among the most destructive consequences of concentrated poverty is the proliferation of crime and violence. “The greater the concentration of poverty in one’s neighborhood, the greater the chances of becoming a victim of crime or violence” (Massey 206). As shown earlier, the endemic violence and the risk of victimization in ghetto neighborhoods has led to the adoption of a distinct “code of the streets,” which is characterized by an obsessive concern with respect, as Nathan McCall recalls from his adolescent years: “Not striking back meant that another offense [would] soon follow” (*Going On*, 147). To demonstrate the pattern which works to perpetuate structurally imbedded characteristics such as violence in poor ghetto neighborhoods, Massey explains:

Asking residents of poor neighborhoods to choose a less violent path or to ‘just say no’ to the temptation of violence is absurd, given the threatening character of the ecological niche in which they live. To survive in such areas, one must learn, and to a significant extent internalize, the code of violence ... and in this way aggression is passed from person to person in a self-feeding, escalating fashion. (Massey 206-7)

Wilson points out that the distinct cultural frame which emerges in poor inner-city areas has not only been shaped by race and poverty, “but in turn often shape[s] responses to poverty, including ... responses that may contribute to the perpetuation of poverty” (*Race* 16). As the spatial concentration of poverty creates an environment which is marked by harsh and destructive behavior, therefore, values and attitudes are perpetuated which, “while adaptive within a niche of intense poverty, are injurious to society at large and destructive of the poor themselves” (Massey 205).

Naturally, the greater the isolation of a particular segregated group, the more problematic its interaction with members of the mainstream society becomes. The juxtaposition of a distinct culture of poverty and culture of affluence “within a single urban ecology ... heightens class awareness and promotes social stereotyping. High rates of crime, delinquency, and social disorder within poor neighborhoods are all too evident to the affluent and harden their negative stereotypes about the poor while inculcating a deep sense of fear of people who exhibit visible markers associated with poverty” (Massey 208). These markers, Massey points out, may be physical—skin color and hair texture for example—or cultural, such as speech, clothing, and bearing. Those belonging to the subculture of poverty, on the other hand, observe the discrepancy in living standards between the Haves and the Have Nots and develop a sense of relative deprivation, which is often expressed in acts of crime against the affluent. Whatever the predominant sentiments toward the “others” may be, they are always marked by suspicion and anxiety. Alex Kotlowitz illustrates the fear experienced by the respective others in an anecdote in which young boys from the Henry Horner Housing Projects in Chicago watch a commuter train to the Western suburbs pass by:

A friend sighted a commuter train approaching from downtown. ‘There’s a train!’ he yelled. James frantically helped Lafayette climb into the open boxcar, where they found refuge in a dark corner. Others hid behind the boxcar’s huge wheels. Pharoah and Porkchop threw themselves headlong into the weeds, where they lay motionless on their bellies. ‘Keep quiet,’ came a voice from the thick bushes. ‘Shut up,’ another one barked. The youngsters had heard that the suburb-bound commuters, from behind tinted train windows, would shoot at them for trespassing on the tracks. One of the boys, certain that the commuters were crack shots, burst into tears as the train whisked

by. Some of the commuters had heard similar rumors about the neighborhood children and worried that, like the cardboard lions in a carnival shooting gallery, they might be the target of talented snipers. Indeed, some sat away from the windows as the train passed through Chicago's blighted core. For both the boys and the commuters, the unknown was the enemy. (Kotlowitz 6-7)

Racial segregation, therefore, is of persisting significance in American society today. Massey and Denton suggest that race remains the dominant organizing principle of U.S. urban housing markets: "When it comes to determining where, and with whom, Americans live, race overwhelms all other considerations" (*Apartheid* 110). They compare the spatial isolation of blacks in the U.S. to the situation in South Africa since "both provide a firm basis for a broader system of racial injustice" (15). The geographic isolation of Africans within a narrowly circumscribed portion of the urban environment—whether African townships or American ghettos—forces blacks to live under extraordinarily harsh conditions and to endure a social world where "poverty is endemic, infrastructure inadequate, education is lacking, families are fragmented, and crime and violence are rampant" (Massey/Denton, *Apartheid* 15). The authors conclude that "until the black ghetto is dismantled as a basic institution of American urban life, progress ameliorating racial inequality in other arenas will be slow, fitful, and incomplete" (8).

5.1.4. Education

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students. (Barack Obama in his speech "A More Perfect Union")

Education is an essential element in perpetuating the social and color lines within the U.S. socio-economic system. "For much of American history," Massey writes, "most African Americans were relegated by law to a separate educational system that was poorly funded, meagerly staffed, and badly organized; the huge racial differentials in the quantity and quality

of education that resulted left most black citizens unprepared for successful competition within markets” (25). Although legal segregation was abandoned in public schools in the famous *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, residential segregation leads to “a variety of de facto mechanisms [which] continue to operate to deny African Americans ... equal access to education” (25).

In racially isolated areas, where joblessness is high and interaction with mainstream American institutions is infrequent, “the relationship between schooling and postschool employment takes on a different meaning. The development of cognitive, linguistic, and other educational and job-related skills necessary for the world of work in the mainstream economy is thereby adversely affected” (Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 57). Urban residential segregation intensifies the effects of ineffective schooling by grouping children whose background does not appreciate the connection between education and later success together in segregated inner-city educational institutions. The consequences of this de facto segregation are dramatic. In Chicago’s non-selective segregated high schools, only 10 percent of students graduate and are able to read at or above the national average level suggesting “a shockingly high degree of educational retardation in the inner city” (Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 58).

The financing method of schools aggravates the uneven educational playing field. Since most school districts depend largely on local property taxes, the segregation of neighborhoods by race and by class severely affects the quality of education the schools can provide. This low educational standard in the chronically underfunded inner-city schools is further compounded by an oppositional black culture which inverts the criteria for success in an environment where expectations are low and failure by conventional norms are likely (see Ogbu 433-56). In areas of concentrated poverty, therefore, “success in school is devalued, hard work is seen as a sellout, and any display of learning is viewed as distinctly uncool” (Massey 208).

Apart from the negative effects of residential segregation on black inner-city schools, Gary Orfield points to decisions in the legal realm which had significant consequences for the American educational system. In his essay “Turning Back to Segregation,” Orfield examines the effects of various Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s, which went largely unnoticed by the American public. These decisions had a decisive impact on the quality of schooling in urban areas.

Four decades after the civil rights revolution began with the Supreme Court’s unanimous 1954 school desegregation decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court reversed itself in the 1990s, authorizing school districts to return to segregated and unequal public schools. The cases were part of a general reversal of

civil rights policy, which included decisions against affirmative action and voting rights. After decades of bitter political, legal, and community struggles over civil rights, there was surprisingly little attention to the new school resegregation policies spelled out in the Court's key 1990s decisions in *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, *Freeman v. Pitts*, and *Missouri v. Jenkins*. The decisions were often characterized as belated adjustments to an irrelevant, failed policy. But in fact, these historic High Court decisions were a triumph for the decades-long powerful, politicized attacks on school desegregation. The new policies reflected the victory of the conservative movement that altered the federal courts and turned the nation from the dream of *Brown* toward accepting a return to segregation. (135)

Jonathan Kozol, an author and journalist who taught in public schools for many years, describes the climate in New York's inner-city, de facto segregated schools in the 1990s in his book *The Shame of the Nation*:

[N]o matter what the hopes that had been stirred in many cities only a short time before, no matter what the progress that had frequently been made in districts where court-ordered integration programs had been in effect or where a civic leadership had found the moral will to act without court orders in a principled attempt to integrate their neighborhoods and schools, a clear reality was now in place: Virtually all the children of black and Hispanic people in the cities that I visited, both large and small, were now attending schools in which their isolation was as absolute as it had been for children in the school in which I'd started out [in 1964]. (8)

The isolation of inner-city schools is reflected in the racial ratio of an elementary and middle school in the South Bronx, called P.S. 65, which Kozol repeatedly visited. In 1997 there were 26 white students in the school with a total enrollment of 11,000 children, a segregation rate of 99.8 percent. One of the teachers at the same school pointed out a white student to Kozol with the comment: "I've been at this school for 18 years.... This is the first white student I have ever taught" (*Nation* 9). She concludes that she "cannot discern the slightest hint that any vestige of the legal victory embodied in *Brown v. Board of Education* or the moral mandate that a generation of unselfish activists and young idealists lived and sometime died for has survived within these schools and neighborhoods" (*Nation* 10).

Kozol notes that most Americans who have no first-hand knowledge of realities in urban public schools "have a vague and general impression that the great extremes of racial isolation they recall as matters of grave national significance some 35 or 40 years ago have gradually, but steadily, diminished in more recent years" (18). As an expert in the field, Kozol points out that this notion is mistaken. In 1995 he writes that:

[t]he truth, unhappily is that the trend, for well over a decade now, has been precisely the reverse. Schools that were already deeply segregated 25 or 30 years ago, like most of the schools I visit in the Bronx, are not less segregated now, while thousands of other schools that had been integrated either voluntarily or by the force of law have since been rapidly resegregating both in northern districts and in broad expanses of the South. (18)

Thus, education is one of the mechanisms which institutionalizes class positions along color lines in the American socio-economic ecology. Under the current system “best-prepared students [are concentrated] in areas of resource abundance while ... the least-prepared [are gathered] in areas of resource scarcity” (Massey 197). Since “access to high-quality education has become a crucial factor that determines one’s position in the post-industrial stratification system,” the perpetuation and reinstatement of a racially segregated educational system virtually guarantees the intergenerational transmission of class positions” (Massey 197).

In summary then, liberal structuralists are convinced that the promotion of a rigid stratification system takes place on the structural level, which includes the creation of segregated residential patterns due to racist practices. Conservative behaviorists, on the other hand, point to black “redneck” culture as the essential element in creating the ghettos. The two opposing views shall be contrasted in the following synopsis which concludes the socio-historical analysis of the present chapter.

5.2. The Underclass Debate

Synthesis: Racial Residential Segregation

Given the fact that black poverty is exacerbated, reinforced, and perpetuated by racial segregation, that black-white segregation has not moderated despite the federal policies tried so far, and that the social costs of segregation inevitably cannot be contained in the ghetto, we argue that the nation has no choice but to launch a bold new initiative to eradicate the ghetto and eliminate segregation from American life. To do otherwise is to condemn the United States and the American people to a future of economic stagnation, social fragmentation, and political paralysis. (Massey/Denton)

5.2.1. Residential Segregation as a Structuralist Explanation for Black Ghetto Formation

“Residential segregation is not a neutral fact,” Massey and Denton write in their landmark study on American segregation, *American Apartheid*; “It systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in the United States” (2). In their work, Massey and Denton represent the liberal structuralist view which considers concentrated poverty in the form of racial residential segregation to be the primary cause for the emergence and persistence of impoverished inner-city ghettos. Massey and Denton point to the deleterious neighborhood conditions which are built into the structure of poor urban communities as a central factor in understanding the self-perpetuating cycle of socioeconomic decline:

They occur because segregation concentrates poverty to build a set of mutually reinforcing and self-feeding spirals of decline into black neighborhoods. When economic dislocations deprive a segregated group of employment and increase its rate of poverty, socioeconomic deprivation inevitably becomes more concentrated in neighborhoods where that group lives. The damaging social consequences that follow from increased poverty are spatially concentrated as well, creating uniquely disadvantaged environments that become progressively isolated—geographically, socially, and economically—from the rest of society. (*Apartheid* 2)

Thus, residents of isolated impoverished communities are relegated to a social context of joblessness, poverty, illegitimacy, poor education, welfare, and crime—an environment which drastically reduces the individual's chances for social and economic success.

What makes the situation of African Americans unique compared to other ethnic minority groups, is the degree and the duration of segregation: “No group in the history of the United States has ever experienced the sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years” (Denton/Massey, *Apartheid* 2).

This pattern did not just “happen,” Massey and Denton explain. “The black ghetto ... was manufactured by whites earlier in the century to isolate and control growing urban black populations, and it is maintained today by a set of institutions, attitudes, and practices that are deeply embedded in the structure of American life” (Massey/Denton, “Ghetto” 114).

The authors contend further that as conditions in the ghetto have worsened and as poor blacks have adapted socially and culturally to this deteriorating environment, “the ghetto has assumed even greater importance as an institutional tool for isolating the byproducts of racial oppression: crime, drugs, violence, illiteracy, poverty, despair, and their growing social and economic costs” (“Ghetto” 114).

The vices of the ghetto are well known today. Images of the underclass are ubiquitous in film and TV, in rap music and videos, and on the nightly news. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama describes segregated inner-city neighborhoods as “communities [whose] immune system has broken down almost entirely, weakened by drugs and gunfire and despair [where] a virus has taken hold and a people is wasting away” (297). Obama reminds his readers that the collective story of black inner-city residents is inextricably linked to the ghetto's history of segregation. The story, Obama points out, begins with: “the great migration from the South, [when] after arriving in the North blacks were forced into ghettos because of racial steering and restrictive covenants and stacked up in public housing, where the schools were substandard and the parks were underfunded and the drug trade was tolerated” (302). At a later point Obama notes that “the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us” (“Union”).

Referring to the underclass debate, Obama remarks: “We know that many in the inner city are trapped by their own self-destructive behaviors but that those behaviors are not innate” (*Hope* 303). He then points to the importance of effective social policy measures in changing the plight of black ghettos: “[I]f America finds its will to do so, then circumstances for those trapped in the inner city can be changed, individual attitudes among the poor will change in kind, and the damage can gradually be undone, if not for this generation then at least for the next” (303). Among others, Obama advocates strategies such as an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit, jobs that offer gainful employment to inner-city residents, affordable child care, improved schools, more effective policing in the neighborhoods and community-based health centers that emphasize prevention—including reproductive health care, nutritional counseling, and in some cases treatment for substance abuse (see *Hope* 303-7).

Wilson, whose structural work has significantly shaped the academic discourse on the underclass debate and on policy measures to effectively break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, suggests that “the most realistic approach to the problems of concentrated inner-city poverty is to provide ghetto underclass families and individuals with the resources that promote social mobility.” (*Disadvantaged* 158). Social mobility would lead to geographic mobility, Wilson concludes, which again would be greatly enhanced if accompanied by efforts to improve the economic and educational resources of inner-city residents. At the same time, “the practice at all levels of government [to] routinely locate housing for low-income people in the poorest neighborhoods of a community where their neighbors will be other low-income people usually of the same race” and the manipulation of zoning laws and discriminatory land use controls that prevent “the construction of housing affordable to low-income families ... in communities that provide the services they desire” would have to be eliminated in order to affect progress in poor urban communities (Taylor qtd. in Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 158).

Massey and Denton point to the prerequisite which is necessary for liberal social policies to take hold: “Residential segregation,” they suggest, “will only be eliminated from American society when federal authorities, backed by the American people become directly involved in guaranteeing open housing markets and eliminating discrimination from public life” (*Ghetto* 114-5). This involvement is necessary, structuralist thinkers argue for effective change in racial residential patterns to occur.

Cultural theorists disagree. Racial residential segregation and subsequent ghetto formation is not due to the racially discriminatory practices of any ethnic group, black conservative scholar

Thomas Sowell contends. Instead, he explains, the heterogeneity of American society, which implies behavioral differences between various groups at various times, explains quite naturally, the residential patterns within American society.

5.2.2. The Conservative Behaviorist Response

In response to the liberal structuralist perspective which claims that spatial isolation is largely responsible for the emergence of black inner-city ghettos, cultural theories emphasize the importance of *cultural* and *economic* factors in explaining the high rates of racial residential segregation in American society.

It is evident, Thomas Sowell, a prominent representative of the new black conservatism, argues that the “blanket application of the term ‘racism’ as a causal explanation ... cannot explain why blacks who were living in white neighborhoods at the beginning of the twentieth century could no longer do so two decades later or five decades later” (*Rednecks* 61). After all, “those who lived interspersed among whites in the earlier period were of the same race as those who could not do so in the middle of the twentieth century” (61). As an explanation for this phenomenon, Sowell points to the *cultural upheavals* within black northern communities brought about by the massive influx of southern blacks.

In 1900, for the first time, more than half of all blacks living in New York State had been born outside that state. Newcomers from the South became growing majorities in Northern urban black communities in other states as well. The record-breaking migrations of blacks from the South to the North during the first decade of the twentieth century was nearly tripled during the second decade—and that in turn was almost doubled again during the decade of the 1920s. Moreover the proportion of these migrants coming from the Deep South, as distinguished from the Upper South, increased over time—which meant that the least educated and least acculturated became a growing proportion of the black migrant population moving into the Northern cities. There were about 30,000 blacks living in Chicago in 1900 but this grew to well over 100,000 by 1930 and more than 277,000 by 1940. In Detroit, the black population grew from a little more than 4,000 in 1900 to more than 40,000 in 1920 and more than 450,000 by 1940. (Sowell, *Redneck* 47)

This group of newly arrived migrants, a “far less acculturated group,” displayed “very different behavior patterns [which] shocked both blacks and whites at the time” (47). These behavior patterns, which Sowell refers to as “black redneck culture,” were soon keenly felt in northern communities. Referring to data procured by the sociologists E. Franklin Frazier, Sowell demonstrates that in Pennsylvania, for example, the rate of violent crimes committed by southern migrants was nearly five times higher than the rate of such crimes committed by blacks born in Pennsylvania. Likewise, the illegitimacy rate among blacks in Washington more than doubled after the large influx of southern blacks during the late nineteenth century (see Sowell, *Redneck* 47).

W.E.B. DuBois observes the tensions created by the arrival of southern migrants in black northern communities as early as 1901:

[I]t has everywhere been manifest in the long run that while a part of the negroes were native-born and trained in the culture of the city, the others were immigrants largely ignorant and unused to city life. There were, of course, manifold exceptions, but this was the rule. Thus the history of the negro in Northern cities is the history of the rise of a small group by accretion from without, but at the same time periodically overwhelmed by [newcomers] and compelled to start over again when once the material had been assimilated. (qtd. in Sowell, *Redneck* 48)

The redneck culture imported by black southern migrants naturally affected race relations. “One indication of the white reaction was that blacks no longer remained as free to live in white neighborhoods,” Sowell remarks (Sowell, *Redneck* 47). “In many cities, blacks were prevented from moving into existing white neighborhoods but, in other cases, whites simply moved out when blacks moved in.... In one way or another, residential segregation became the norm in Northern cities” (48).

In order to adequately understand the emergence of racialized housing patterns following the massive influx of blacks from the rural South, according to the behaviorist line of reasoning, one must not mistake “*economic adjustments* to real differences as simply racial discrimination” (emphasis added; *Culture* 114). In other words, the concept of racial discrimination must be distinguished from “the mere economic reflection of actual differences among groups” (114).

Since the establishment of residential patterns is always closely connected to economic considerations, the costs arising from one’s immediate residential environment are a key factor in understanding the emergence of such patterns. Due to the heterogeneity of the

society in which one lives, behavioral differences between groups translate into costs for either or both groups. “If one group is more prone to crime or disease, that imposes costs on any other group in contact with them, whether at work or living in the same neighborhood,” Sowell explains. “Where there are language differences, costs are imposed on both groups. Such costs are real and do not depend upon perceptions or stereotypes, nor do they necessarily entail prejudice or animosity” (*Culture* 113). And since people naturally seek to minimize their own costs in various ways, Sowell’s argument goes, a natural “sorting out” of housing preferences occurs.

“In short,” Sowell summarizes the behaviorist perspective, “cultural differences have had a major economic and social impact” on historical and current residential patterns. In direct response to liberal structuralist argumentation, Sowell remarks that “[d]iscrimination and segregation are and have been among the ugly facts of life in various countries around the world.” However, he points out, “these facts need to be confronted where they exist—not trivialized by having the terms applied by redefinition to situations where they do not exist, and where very different factors need to be confronted” (*Culture* 153). The real issue at stake that needs to be addressed when discussing racial residential segregation is black redneck culture as a way of life, Sowell concludes. It “has been tested before and found wanting” (*Redneck* 63). Liberal structuralist policy measures will therefore not prove successful, as long as liberals make black redneck behavior “a sacrosanct part of black cultural identity, [which they] excuse, celebrate, or otherwise perpetuate, [thereby] preserv[ing] it among that fraction of the black population which has not yet escaped from it” (63). Thus, in their failure to confront the real problem, namely the underclass culture embraced by ghetto blacks, liberals, according to conservative behaviorists, perpetuate and worsen the present condition of interracial relations.

One of the contemporary black autobiographical authors who deals with the issue of racial stereotyping and racial animosity compounded by racial residential segregation is Nathan McCall. His narrative, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, will be considered in the ensuing literary case-in-point section.

5.3. Literary Case in Point: *Makes Me Wanna Holler*

5.3.1. Nathan McCall: His Life (1955*)

When McCall was nine, his parents moved to a pleasant section of Portsmouth, Virginia, where his stepfather worked in the naval shipyard. The neighborhood, Cavalier Manor, which had just been built when McCall's family moved there, soon turned into a closely knit community of aspiring, hard-working black families. Yet, it was strictly segregated and it was situated adjacent to a hostile, low-income, white community, where blacks did not dare to even drive through.

As a young adolescent McCall got involved with street-life. Drug deals, stabbings, random beatings, shootings, burglaries, armed stickups and gang rapes were all part of his coming of age rites. When he shot a man at point-blank range over a grudge, he received a mild sentence of probation and four weekends in jail. Eventually, however, an armed robbery landed him in a Virginia prison with a twelve year sentence. McCall's time in prison "seems to be a rare example of how a stint in a correctional facility actually corrected," Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes in his review of McCall's autobiographical narrative ("Influence" 99). "Up to that point, I'd often wanted to think of myself as a bad nigger, and as a result, I'd tried to act like one," McCall remembers. However, being behind bars

forced me to go deep, real deep, within and tap a well I didn't even know I had.... Through that painful trip, I'd found meaning. No longer was life a thing of bewilderment.... I knew that there was purpose and design in creation and that my life was somehow part of that grand scheme. (159)

Upon his early release after three years, McCall studied journalism at Norfolk State College and took on work as a reporter at the *Virginia Pilot-Ledger-Star*, his hometown newspaper. He was later hired by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and eventually got a position with *The Washington Post*.

His life as a black upwardly mobile professional did not prove easy, however. While McCall successfully climbed the socio-economic ladder in his career, his private life continued to be marked by tension, primarily in inter-racial matters and in his relationship with women. Nevertheless, as Paul Ruffins relays in a review of McCall's autobiography, it is McCall's hope that his life story will "help ... thousands of other young black men in America to avoid—or recover from—the self-destructive cycle by teaching them the value of thinking, and of voicing the emotions they may feel but can't express" (2).

5.3.2. Nathan McCall's Autobiographical Work: *Makes Me Wanna Holler*

When McCall's autobiography was published in 1994, it prompted overwhelming praise by several "giants in the field." Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. remarked that "every generation must find its voice. It may be that ours belongs to Nathan McCall, whose memoir is, finally, a stirring tale of transformation," ("Influence" 95) and Claude Brown, famous author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, commented on the book jacket that "*Makes Me Wanna Holler* will become a modern classic. It is *Manchild in the Promised Land* for a new generation."

Critical reviews on *Holler* unanimously point to the fact that McCall's work is "unrelenting and startling in its honesty" and that the author's discipline as a newspaperman served him well in his autobiographical endeavor (Gates, "Influence" 94). "[His] prose is richly inflected with the vernacular of his time and place," Gates notes (94). "In fact, his colloquial style is so unshowy and unforced that his mastery is easy to overlook. There are no traces here of the anxious autodidact—no labored sentences, no straining for deep thoughts; ... he's a writer" (95).

Gates further notes that McCall "never succumbs to the temptation to endow his earlier self with a consciousness beyond his years," a fact which other critics find problematic. Gene Lyons interprets the "unretouched" and "unvarnished" rendering of the author's violent adolescent acts in the world view of a seventeen-year-old as simplistically "explained, if not

quite excused,” thereby making light of his responsibility for his actions (Lyons 56). “Only rarely does he seem to wonder what the consequences of his anger have been for others, especially those he attacked in his street days,” Adam Hochschild notes (12).

Anger is, in fact, one of the central motives of McCall’s story; anger in reaction to his world, which is dominated by white racism in which hatred and mad violence seem the only possible response (see Lyons 56). Yet, as understandable as this anger may be, McCall’s tendency to “blame the white world for almost everything he suffers” creates in the reader a feeling of “mounting exasperation,” Hochschild observes (11). This characteristic in McCall’s writing, a “weakness for early-seventies-style racial Manichaeism,” (“Influence” 97) as Gates puts it, does not allow him to do full justice to the story’s characters, black or white, according to some critics. The reader therefore feels manipulated into accepting the author’s colored point of view, which seems overly eager to place all the blame for black misery on whites. Lyons observes that

where McCall falters is not merely in the all-too-familiar the-white-man-made-me-do-it casuistry that pervades the book, nor in his constant demeaning references to ‘tweedy, pencil-head white men’ and ‘flour-faced, blue-haired’ white women—offensive though they are. The truth is that he doesn’t do a whole lot more persuasive job with the book’s one-dimensional black characters, beginning, unfortunately with himself. (57)

The same criticism has repeatedly been voiced in response to one of his great autobiographical predecessors namely Richard Wright. While Wright’s artistic influence is unquestioned, critics have pointed to the missing complexity of Wright’s characters as a weak point in his protest writing: “For all his talent,” literary critic William Peden writes in 1975, “Wright’s people—misunderstood, exploited, vilely misused by Whites—tend to be almost as one-dimensional as many of the stereotypes of the proletarian short fiction of the thirties” (231). The comparison of the works by McCall and Wright is revealing since, as Gates points out, they are both part of an “overarching narrative,” namely the “subsuming saga [representing the] multivolume project of *Narrating the Negro*” (“Influence” 94). As such, McCall’s life story may be viewed in certain respects as a “sequel” to Wright’s work.

Within this literary framework of McCall’s “birthright” to the vast “ursaga of the African American narrative,” (Gates, “Influence” 94) ensuing section will seek to shed light on the dominant and, as shown in the critical reception above, explosive themes in McCall’s

narrative, namely racial identity and violence, by juxtaposing the motives and actions of one of Wright's protagonists Bigger Thomas with McCall's life story.

5.3.3. Critical Analysis: The Modern Bigger Thomas

- **Father of the Post-WW II Black Novel: Richard Wright**

No study on African American autobiography would be complete without mentioning Richard Wright's work. As his life story served the imprisoned McCall as a mirror reflecting his own experience, Wright's life and work shall briefly be discussed at this point.

Usually considered to be the precursor of the Black Arts movements of the 1960s and the most influential protest writer in America, his work also had a profound impact on the African American novel in the post-WW II era. Following the publication of *Native Son*, Wright's most important and commercially most successful novel, literary critic Irving Howe declared: "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever" (qtd. in McDowell / Spillers 1377). Even though this enthusiastic judgment has come to be regarded as an overstatement, it is certain that the novel established Wright as a major twentieth century writer.

Born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908, Wright experienced intense hardship and turmoil during his childhood years. Acutely aware of the racism that restricted his life chances as an adolescent, he felt drawn to the works by Mencken, which inspired his own literary ambitions and allowed him to sharpen his stylistic tools as social protest writer. Early on in his career, Wright also read the fiction of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser. His own stories usually center on black men who, deprived of material possessions and personal freedom, revolt against society. Wright was among the first writers to portray—in graphic and often brutal language—the debasing

and dehumanizing effects of racism. His mix of “urban realism, sociological theory, and naturalistic determinism helped to define and influence almost the entire sweep of African American fiction” of the post war era (McDowell / Spillers 1377).

The first part of Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*, was published in 1945 and proved an immediate critical and commercial success. It topped best-seller lists, became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and sold more than 400,000 copies. Drawing on several slave narrative conventions, the author fashioned a coming-of-age plot which followed the “stock pattern of the American myth of the ‘self-made man,’ of which Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Douglass’s *Narrative* are prototypical examples” (McDowell / Spiller 1378-9). The second part of Wright’s autobiography, *American Hunger*, focuses on his experience in Chicago from 1927 to 1937 and was published posthumously in 1977.

His life story reflects the experience of millions of urban African Americans who left their home in the racially oppressive South for the industrialized urban North with great hopes and expectations only to discover that they had traded Southern plantations for urban ghettos. Living in the black belt of Chicago, Richard’s economic status resembled that of his impoverished Southern heritage since his low-wage earnings from the postal service barely allowed him to sustain his family. Depicting his situation in the late 1930s in *Black Boy*, Wright writes:

The depression deepened and I could not sell insurance to hungry Negroes. I sold my watch and scouted for cheaper rooms; I found a rotting building and rented an apartment in it. The place was dismal; plaster was falling from the walls; the wooden stairs sagged. When my mother saw it, she wept. I felt bleak. I had not done what I had come to the city to do.

One morning I rose and my mother told me that there was not food for breakfast. I know that the city had opened relief stations, but each time I thought of going into one of them I burned with shame. I sat for hours, fighting hunger, avoiding my mother’s eyes. Then I rose, put on my hat and coat, and went out. As I walked toward the Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare to plead for bread, I knew that I had come to the end of something. (qtd. in McDowell/Spillers 1467)

After the commercial success of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright moved to Paris with his second wife and daughter to escape the racial tension of his home country and remained there until his death at fifty-two in 1960. Even though critics generally agree that “Wright’s career as serious literary artist ended in 1945, when he left the United States,” no one doubts the fact that he is a prominent seminal figure in African American literature (McDowell/Spillers 1379). Ralph Ellison, one of his great admirers, paid tribute to Wright with following

observation: “[He] converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and ‘going underground’ into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (Witalek 5).

- McCall’s Alter-Ego

In his classic essay “How Bigger was Born,” Richard Wright proclaims that the protagonist in *Native Son* would prove “a symbolic figure of American life, a figure who holds within him the prophecy of our future [and] the outlines of action and feeling which we would encounter on a vast scale in the days to come” (xx-xxi). Bigger Thomas, according to his creator, was a harbinger of future generations. Henry Louis Gates Jr., recalling Wright’s prediction when he read Nathan McCall’s autobiography, writes: “*Makes Me Wanna Holler* is about the unfolding of that dire prophecy, no more and no less” (“Influence” 98).

McCall’s own reaction to his alter-ego is revealing when he comes across a copy of *Native Son* in the inmate library during his prison term. He later remembers that after finishing the book he “broke down and sobbed like a baby” (157).

I identified strongly with Bigger and the book’s narrative. He was twenty, the same age as me. He felt the things I felt, and, like me, he wound up in prison. The book’s portrait of Bigger captured all those conflicting feelings—restless anger, hopelessness, a tough façade among blacks and a deep-seated fear of whites—that I’d sensed in myself but was unable to express. Often, during my teenage years, I’d felt like Bigger—headed down a road toward a destruction I couldn’t ward off, beaten by forces so large and amorphous that I had no idea how to fight back. I was surprised that somebody had written a book that so closely reflected my experiences and feelings. (157)

The mirroring image McCall sees when he reads about Bigger Thomas reflects the black man who feels he has limited options in life and, as a result, turns to hatred and violent crime. “Is Nate McCall another Bigger?” Gates asks and promptly offers his own answer: “In some respects, I’d venture that the young McCall was closer to Bigger Thomas than Richard Wright was. The first part of *Makes Me Wanna Holler* gives us a portrait of the artist as a serial rapist, stickup artist, drug dealer, gunman, brawler, and burglar. It’s no surprise that the earth moved for McCall when he read *Native Son*” (*Influence* 95). Some of the passages, McCall later recalls, “so closely described how I felt that it stunned me” (157).

Black rage, personified in McCall's life and in the lives of many of his literary predecessors has a long history in the African American narrative. Richard Wright, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson and others have witnessed the disastrous effects of ghetto life on the black male consciousness. And compared to today's black inner-city ghettos, "the social landscape they recorded was a veritable church picnic" (Gates, "Influence" 94). However, what is puzzling about McCall's story is the fact that he did not grow up surrounded by the stereotypical black urban mayhem usually associated with black male rage such as his. His early life was characterized by a caring, stable two-parent home, the role models of an upwardly mobile working-class community, and basic financial stability. What went wrong? How did a Bigger Thomas emerge from this progressive African American context? "McCall ultimately doesn't have a clue, and neither do I," Gates admits while applauding the fact that the author doesn't reach for easy solutions ("Influence" 97). McCall does, however, offer the reader signposts to follow in understanding his life narrative. He points to poor self-esteem and self-hatred as the result of internalized oppression and to the fact that he and his running partners perceived their choices as being limited. Nevertheless, his final words on his life's riddle remain tentative.

The following sections will seek to probe into McCall's romance with street life, the period of his life that is characterized by violent and criminal pursuits, thereby using Bigger Thomas as a reference point for understanding McCall's racial stereotyping and the violence that results from it. The concluding section of the chapter will then view McCall's narrative in the context of the underclass debate by exploring the role of neighborhood and racial residential segregation in his life story.

- **Racial Stereotyping Amid Faceless People**

When Bigger Thomas murders Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, he does not see their faces, Stephen K. George notes in his critical essay "The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (497). George points to the symbolic meaning of this literary construction in the brutal acts of murder as reflecting Bigger's state of consciousness: The fear and anger that inhabit and control him also blind him to the humanity

and individuality of those around him, especially whites. Wright explains his protagonist's racial perception of his environment by employing tropes which are not human but invoke nature's might: "To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people [at all]; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (*Son* 109).

George points out that Bigger's inability to see others as individuals, stems from the (lack of) relational context he experiences within his racist society. "Instead of real communication and interaction with others," George notes, "Bigger's world is one of stereotypes and mere surfaces as he categorizes other people" (497). It is in this respect, that McCall's ancestry might be traced directly to Wright's protagonist.

In his autobiography, McCall expresses his racial perceptions, which set the tone throughout the narrative, by typing and categorizing his environment. When referring to whites, the reader rarely gets the impression that the author is depicting a three-dimensional person. Whites, in McCall's book, are restricted to two possible roles: they are either victims or oppressors. In both cases they are faceless.

In the opening scene of the first chapter, entitled "Get-back," McCall describes an incident of racial violence during which he and his friends pummel an unsuspecting young white man riding his bike through their neighborhood.

I don't know if he was lost or just confused, but he was definitely in the wrong place to be doing the tourist bit. Somebody spotted him and pointed him out to the rest of us. 'Look! What's that motherfucker doin' ridin' through here?! Is he crraaaaaazy?!'

It was automatic. We all took off after him. We caught him on Cavalier Boulevard and knocked him off the bike. He fell to the ground and it was all over. We were on him like white on rice. Ignoring the passing cars, we stomped him and kicked him. My stick partners kicked him in the head and face and watched the blood gush from his mouth. I kicked him in the stomach and nuts, where I knew it would hurt. Every time I drove my foot into his balls, I felt better....

We walked away, laughing, boasting, competing for bragging rights about who'd done the most damage. 'Man, did you see how red that cracker's face turned when I busted his lip? I almost broke my hand on that ugly motherfucka!' (3-4)

McCall strategically places this incident at the beginning of his narrative to arouse the reader's curiosity as to what might have created a racial climate in which young black men inflict such brutal violence indiscriminately on whites, just for being white. The answer runs like an underlying current through McCall's narrative. Similar to Bigger Thomas, he perceives whites as a faceless entity constituting a "system that made his life hell" (155). He

feels trapped “like an alien in a hostile world where he couldn’t win; like the victim of recurring injustices against which there were no appeals” (155-6).

The acts of violence in which both Bigger and McCall lash out against their oppressive environment seem justified to them since, in their eyes, they are simply retaliating, paying back their dues. After Bigger has accidentally suffocated Mary, he reflects: “Hell, she *made* me do it. I couldn’t help it! She should’ve known better! She should’ve left me alone, god-dammit! He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being.... He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she made him feel” (*Son* 108).

McCall’s internal monologue as he participates in the abusive ritual of thrashing the white biker is reminiscent of Bigger’s reasoning: “With each blow I delivered, I gritted my teeth as I remembered some recent racial slight: THIS is for all the times you followed me round in stores.... And THIS is for the times you treated me like a nigger.... And THIS is for G.P.—General Principle—just ‘cause you white” (3-4).

Thus, in response to the racial oppression the protagonists have experienced, they objectify and dehumanize the whites they interact with by reducing them to symbols of their oppression. Due to their hatred and fear, the process of dehumanizing extends to blacks as well, as both Bigger and McCall view “both black and white ... no longer [as] people but things,” (George 497). This becomes evident in the fact that both protagonists commit the same violent acts—even to a heightened degree—onto blacks as well. The pain they inflict upon their faceless environment is, in their mind, a just levy they exact from their surroundings for denying *them* *their* individuality; for stereotyping and categorizing *them* as faceless and dangerous blacks. Luis Tremaine points out that “[a]ll of this typing, both of self and of others, takes its toll [by] continually frustrating [the protagonists’ longings] for genuine acceptance and understanding,” a frustration which explodes in violence as their only means for expression and control (qtd. in George 498). Through violence, then, they attempt to transgress the boundaries the white world has set for them, thereby reinforcing the stereotyped and categorized image they are trying to escape.

- Violence as an Attempted Act of Liberation

“Violence is a personal necessity for the oppressed,” John Reilly declares in the afterword to *Native Son*. “When life in society consists of humiliation, one’s only rescue is through rebellion. It is not a strategy consciously devised. It is the deep, instinctive expression of a human being denied individuality” (395). Thus having been denied their full humanity, Bigger and McCall make their violence “the seedbed out of which [their] sense of esteem and identity grows,” John H. Bryant observes in his essay “Richard Wright and Bigger Thomas: Grace in Damnation” (201).

In an attempt to liberate themselves from an environment which stunts their personal growth and limits their possibilities in life, both protagonists explore their narrow options for heroic action and a sense of dignity in acts of violence. To them the moral trespassing they engage in represents the only venue of self-determination, the only alternative to becoming a “compliant nullity” (Bryant 201).

Both Bigger and McCall perceive their choice of gaining autonomy through violent acts as superior to the lives of “adjusted” blacks. Bigger considers his family, who lives in a small kitchenette apartment on the segregated Southside of Chicago to be victimized “not of any literal physical violence from the white world surrounding the Southside Chicago ghetto where they live but of their own timidity. They have sold out to the racist social and moral system which demands not only that they should be what the system says they are but that they affirm that identity as natural and right” (Bryant 199). Thus acquiescing in the mental and moral darkness in which they are assigned to live by whites, Bigger feels in them “a force inarticulate and unconscious, making for living without thinking, making for peace and habit, making for a hope that blind[s]” (*Son* 102).

Likewise, McCall and his friends find the role models in their working-class community unappealing to them as heroes. “They couldn’t stand up to the white man. They didn’t fulfill our notions about manhood” (“Generation” 273). The author remembers watching his stepfather “humbl[ing] himself and smil[ing] when white folks were around” (273). It is difficult sometimes “to pinpoint defining moments in a life,” McCall later reflects.

But I’m certain that that period [of watching my stepfather interact with whites] marked my realization of something it seemed white folks had been trying to get across to me for most of my young life—that there were two distinct worlds in

America, and a different set of rules for each: The white one was full of the possibilities of life. The dark one was just that—dark and limited. (17)

The role models admired by the young blacks in Cavalier Manor wore their manhood on their sleeves: “[W]e revered the guys on the streets, the thugs who were brazen and belligerent. They wore their hats backwards, left their belt buckles unfastened and shoelaces untied. They shunned the white establishment and worshipped violence.... In our eyes they were real men.” (“Generation” 273).

The defiance displayed by the young blacks in Portsmouth may have stemmed partly from youthful rebellion, “but it came mostly from rage at a world we sensed did not welcome us,” McCall explains (“Generation” 273). We “could not bear to think about a future in which we were wholly subject to the whims of whites” (273). Working within the white system was an option that did not seem inviting since “it carried a price: humiliation on some level” (274).

Bigger and McCall, therefore, in refusing to “collaborate in their own oppression by remaining in their [racially approved] bounds,” find meaning in their lives through revolt (Bryant 205). Bigger, after committing his murderous acts, experiences a heightened sense of self previously unknown to him. “He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes” (224). His self-determined act of stepping outside of his moral bounds was a hidden “thrust for freedom,” an attempted act of liberation (Bryant 206). McCall experiences a similar sense of heightened self-awareness after shooting a friend who had insulted his girlfriend. “I felt like God. I felt so good and powerful that I wanted to do it again. I felt like I could pull that trigger, and keep on pulling it until I emptied the gun” (115).

The emotional reaction of the protagonists after committing their brutal acts of violence leaves most readers with a mixed feeling of estrangement. Bryant points to the ambiguity Wright creates by endowing Bigger with few endearing qualities:

We cannot say that he is defending the lives of his family or his honor as a man, or that he is justly retaliating against a particular white outrage upon a black victim. He is hot-tempered and brutal. He is a petty thief with only enough courage to rob other Negroes.... We cannot warm to Bigger and cannot condone his violence, in which there is nothing we could call admirably manly. (198).

Wright hereby obviates any sympathy the reader might feel for his protagonist by creating a problematical hero “who not only takes full responsibility for the two heinous crimes [he

commits] but [who] experiences total exhilaration for having committed them” (Bryant 198). Bigger, therefore, by defying the tradition of the black unblemished hero who remains morally upright despite white oppression, is “the first black character to reject all aspects of the white moral system and to substitute his own” in order to declare black independence, Bryant observes (206).

In this context, one should be reminded that Wright deals with the moral dilemma which he creates “not as a polemicist, moralist, or philosopher,” but as an artist (Bryant 198). In creating Bigger Thomas he does not advocate a particular path for blacks to take but delineates that which he thinks will inevitably follow. McCall’s story, in which he remembers that “often, during my teenage years, I felt like Bigger Thomas ... propelled down a destructive road over which I had no control,” pays tribute to this foresight. Wright “sums up half a century of black novel writing about racial violence and lays the foundation for the half century to come,” Bryant notes (210). “Fifty years later,” Gates concludes, “Bigger lives on” (“Influence” 98).

5.3.4. *Holler* in the Context of the Underclass Debate

Gates sums up the central question of the underclass debate in his review of Nathan McCall’s autobiographical narrative by asking: “Is [McCall and] black America ailing as a result of behavioral or structural causes?” (96). Similarly, Richard Wright seems to be torn between the existentialist versus the behaviorist modes of human action in his novel *Native Son*, as well as in his subsequent works. To what extent was Bigger Thomas’ environment responsible for the heinous acts of crime he committed? And why did the protagonist take full responsibility for his acts in claiming with twisted Cartesian certainty, “What I killed for, I *am*!”?

In the context of the present chapter the question revolves around the role of the protagonists’ residential environment. Did racial residential segregation as a structural force play a significant role in Nathan McCall’s as well as in Bigger Thomas’ violent behavior?

Richard Wright seems to lean toward the structuralist perspective when he states in his essay “How Bigger Thomas Was Born” that “I’d better indicate more precisely the nature of the environment that produced these men, or the reader will be left with the impression that they were essentially and originally bad” (xii). He goes on to identify two factors which characterized the lives of Chicago’s black ghetto residents at that time: For one, Bigger, like many of the blacks in the urban ghetto, had become “estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race.” What is more, they were “trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to [them] through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life” (xiii). Thus, African Americans on the Southside of Chicago in the 1940s found themselves in a cultural no-man’s-land. They had abandoned their southern agricultural heritage, yet, they were not granted access to the tantalizing “glitter” of white city life. Restricted to tiny and overpriced kitchenette apartments, they were relegated to a desolate life in overcrowded and segregated parts of the Chicago.

At various points Bigger Thomas equates the isolation of his living environment with racist and hostile forces. When he talks about the omnipresent white force surrounding the ghetto, he explains:

As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. *As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it.* (emphasis added;109)

At a later point, in a conversation with Gus, one of his gang members, Bigger asks:

‘You know where the white folks live?’
 ‘Yeah,’ Gus said, pointing eastward. ‘Over across the ‘line’; over there on Cottage Avenue.’
 ‘Naw; they don’t,’ Bigger said.
 ‘What you mean?’ Gus asked, puzzled. ‘Then, where do they live?’
 ‘Right down here in my stomach,’ he said.
 Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though ashamed.
 ‘Yeah; I know what you mean,’ he whispered.
 ‘Every time I think of ‘em, I feel ‘em,’ Bigger said.
 ‘Yeah; and in your chest and throat too,’ Gus said.
 ‘It’s like fire.’ (Son 18-19)

A final decisive reference to the significance Wright attributes to the environmental context of his protagonist is given when Mr. Max, Bigger’s lawyer, explains his predicament to him as

he is awaiting his death sentence: “It’s because others have said you were bad and they made you live in bad conditions. When a man hears that over and over and looks about him and sees that life is bad, he begins to doubt his own mind” (*Son* 114).

Wright therefore, seems to place significant weight on the structural forces his protagonist is exposed to by living in a racially segregated and desolate part of the city. Bigger Thomas is the product of his environment. He fights rats over floor space in his tenement and his interaction with whites is restricted to that of a servant. The connection here seems obvious. But what about McCall? He was raised in a world that was middle-class by black standards—“a world,” Gates notes, “which bore less resemblance to Richard Wright’s soul-destroying South Side than to Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills” (“Influence” 96). Can the liberal structuralist perspective, which emphasizes racial residential segregation in ghetto formation, be applied to McCall’s life and argue effectively that his living environment is—partly at least—to blame for the destructive and criminal acts of his adolescence? Structuralist reasoning would clearly answer with yes.

At the beginning of the second chapter, McCall describes the neighborhood his family moved to in 1964 when he was nine years old. Despite the absence of whites—since the neighborhood was segregated—McCall associates an invisible white presence with it comparable to Bigger’s intangible white force:

For as long as I can remember, it seems that there was no aspect of my family’s reality that wasn’t affected by whites, right on down to the creation of the neighborhood I grew up in. Known as Cavalier Manor, it was located in Portsmouth, Virginia. Most of Cavalier Manor was built in the early 1960s by a local construction bigwig named George T. McClean. Neighborhood lore had it that he was a white liberal do-gooder who felt blacks in Portsmouth needed a community that would inspire pride and help improve their lot. But just as many people thought McClean was a racist who got alarmed by the civil rights movement and built Cavalier Manor to encourage blacks to move there rather than into white neighborhoods. (5)

The neighborhood, though segregated, offered everything a family could wish for: driveways, garages, and lawns. Yet, for some reason, between the broad side-walks, the steady humming of lawnmowers and the newly paved streets, McCall and his friends emerged as violent street criminals of the type usually associated with poor inner-city neighborhoods. “Somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, something inside us changed. Our optimism faded. Our hearts hardened, and many of us went on to share the same fates as the so-called

disadvantaged” (“Generation” 272). He admits that he is “not exactly sure why, but that [he has] a good idea” (272).

A psychologist friend once explained that our fates are linked partly to how we perceive our choices in life. Looking back, the reality may well have been that possibilities for us were abundant. But in Cavalier Manor, we perceived our choices as being severely limited. Nobody flatly said that. But in various ways, inside our community and out, it was communicated early and often that as black men in a hostile world our options would be few. (272)

The isolated setting of a black working-class neighborhood in which McCall and his friends grew up did not expose them to options other than “slaving” for the white man. “In a curious way,” McCall remembers, “we saw anything that brought us into the mainstream as a copout. We came to regard the establishment as the ubiquitous, all powerful ‘white man’ who controlled our parents’ lives and, we believed, determined our fates as well” (“Generation” 272-3). Since nobody in their segregated working-class community had gone to college, McCall and his friends “couldn’t make the connections that seem so basic in the world.... The concept of education, for instance, as a passport to a better life was vague to us. We saw no relation between school and our reality” (“Generation” 273). Since interactions with whites were minimal, negative images and stereotypes McCall and his friends harbored were progressively reinforced.

McCall’s story as an adolescent mirrors the effects of racial isolation in a society in which racial prejudice is omnipresent. Every time he goes back to visit his hometown, which is still a segregated community, his friends bear living witness to the disastrous consequences that result from growing up “separate and unequal” even after 1965.

Trips to my old neighborhood ... bring a distressingly close-up view of black America’s running tragedy. When I’m there, it dawns on me over and over again that this “endangered species” thing is no empty phrase.

Consider this: Most of the guys I hung out with are either in prison, dead, drug zombies or nickel-and-dime street hustlers. Some are racing full-throttle toward self-destruction. Others already have plunged into the abyss: Kenny Banks got 19 years for dealing drugs. Baby Joe just finished a 15-year bit for a murder beef. Charlie Gregg was in drug rehab. Bubba Majette was murdered. Teddy sleeps in the streets. Sherman is strung out on drink and drugs. Since I began writing this story several weeks ago, two former peers have died from drugs and alcohol.

Many of my former running pals are insane—literally; I’m talking overcoats in August and voices in their heads. Of the 10 families on my street that had young males in their households, four—including my own—have had one or more siblings serve time. One of my best buddies, Shane, was recently sent to prison. He shot a man several times, execution-style. He got life. (“Generation” 270-1)

McCall's story, therefore, according to structuralist theory, suggests that racial residential isolation within a racist society not only *perpetuates* class differences, it potentially *creates* poverty and a group identity which is inherently in opposition to mainstream culture.

"Residential segregation lies beyond the ability of any individual to change," Massey and Denton maintain. "It constrains black life chances irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements.... The effect of segregation on black well-being is [therefore] structural, not individual" (*Apartheid* 2-3).

McCall points to the fact that young blacks in segregated neighborhoods perceive their options to be limited. This factor is compounded by an economy in which menial jobs for unskilled workers dwindle away at a rapid rate due to processes of *deindustrialization* and *relocation*. The situation of isolated urban blacks with limited education in the context of the postindustrial city will be explored in the next, and final, chapter of this study.

6. Lost Jobs

The Liberal Structuralist Perspective:

The Transformation of the Urban Economy as a Structural Force in the Development of Black Urban Ghettos

6.1. Socio-Historical Analysis

6.1.1. The Urban Economy Transformed by Global Changes

Just as attempts to provide blacks with a greater slice of the labor market pie began in earnest, the pie shrank. (Thomas Sugrue)

The world economy has been going through profound changes since the late 1950s. Under the driving twin forces of *technological change and international competition*, the global economic landscape has metamorphosed, thereby fundamentally transforming traditional urban centers. In the large urban agglomerations of the US, such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, manufacturing has ceded place to a different set of activities centered around information processing and the transaction of business deals. As this new urban economy

shifted from goods to services, it relegated smokestack cities to the past and altered its occupational profile. White collar positions replaced the unskilled and low-skilled jobs which had been essential to the former industrial, capital and labor intensive, economy.

These changes had a profound impact on urban African American communities in northern city centers. Millions of blacks who had migrated north from the rural South in search of employment opportunities were laid off as the new urban reality took shape. Wilson reports that the decline in demand for unskilled labor had been most severe in the older central cities of the North. "The four largest (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit), which in 1982 accounted for more than one quarter of the nation's central-city poor, lost more than a million jobs in manufacturing, wholesale, and retail enterprises between 1967 and 1976 alone" (Wilson, *Disadvantaged* 101). By 1980, "nearly half of the adult male population [in those cities] had only tenuous connections to the city's formal labor market" (Sugrue 262). The inner-city manufacturing jobs, for which the minority poor had been recruited in earlier decades, were thus irrevocably gone. Sugrue notes that "the deproletarianization of the city's black population had far-reaching consequences: it shaped a pattern of poverty in the postwar city that was disturbingly new. Whereas in the past, most poor people had had some connection to the mainstream labor market, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the urban poor found themselves on the economic margins" (262). It seems almost ironic, therefore, that the urban magnets of opportunity which had attracted the greatest number of black southern migrants during the first half of the twentieth century developed the largest impoverished minority communities in the second half of the century since these older, manufacturing-dependent cities were hit hardest by the economic transition (see Bartelt 142).

While the Great Migration and technological change constitute two central variables in creating the setting for isolated black underclass communities to emerge, a third variable is essential to a proper understanding of today's minority ghetto as well: *relocation and globalization*. These processes, which have taken place on a national and global scale, shall be dealt with in the ensuing section before exploring the cultural effects of widespread, long-term joblessness in black inner-city communities. Low-wage work, a phenomenon which has created a large group of working poor and which has drawn increasing attention in the last few years, shall also be explored in the course of the chapter. Finally, the analysis of these economic developments and their socio-economic effects on the urban poor shall be synthesized in the underclass debate before illustrating the subject in the literary-case-in-point analysis with John Edgar Wideman's book *Brothers and Keepers*.

6.1.2. National and Global Economic Trends

If there's class warfare going on in America, then my class is winning. (Warren Buffet, second richest man in the world, 2007)

Ironically, soon after blacks had gotten settled in the great industrial cities of the North, their work left. Jobs were moving to the suburbs and the sunbelt, going overseas, or disappearing altogether under the influence of technological advances.

Corporate *relocation* within the US started in the mid 1970s, when “the employment balance between central cities and suburbs shifted markedly to the suburbs” (Wilson, *Agenda* 92). These relocations severely limited the economic opportunities of inner-city workers since the majority of them did not have the resources to follow the exodus of employment. Production plants were no longer in reach of urban residents, who found themselves increasingly isolated due to the sprawl and economic stagnation, barring them from access to meaningful social and economic opportunities. Thus, following the outmigration of higher-income families *and* work opportunities to the suburbs, inner-city neighborhoods—now populated primarily by minority groups of low mobility—transformed into isolated enclaves of concentrated poverty and deteriorated physical conditions.

The suburbanization of manufacturing, wholesale, and retail companies, formerly located in the inner cities was followed by an increasing trend toward *internationalization* in the 1980s with firms spreading their production facilities to countries around the world where low labor costs minimize economic activities. The rising speed of telecommunications and the declining costs of transportation facilitated the relocations across national borders while “computers transformed productivity in manufacturing and services, [and] expanded the geographic reach of markets during the 1980s and 1990s” (Massey 32). Harvard economist Richard B. Freeman points to the revolutionary changes in this new economic reality by quoting a 2005 issue from the British Institute of Directors: “Anything that does not demand physical contact with a

customer can be outsourced to anywhere on the globe.... Welcome it or fear it, it is happening anyway, and we had better get used to it” (qtd. in Freeman 61)

The interaction between technology and international competition has thus created a new economic situation in which “investors scour the world incessantly looking for companies and countries that offer higher returns to their capital” and vast sums of money are moving across borders with only a few keystrokes (Massey 32). What is more, the world as a global market has expanded. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the institution of market-based reforms in India and China, “the entire world came together into a single economic world based on capitalism and markets” (Freeman 55). Freeman calls this phenomenon “The Great Doubling,” since it “increased the size of the global labor pool from approximately 1.46 billion workers to 2.93 billion workers” (55).

Given these massive, monumental changes on a global scale, what are the implications for the U.S. economy and how do these changes affect the marginalized inner-city poor? Does this new global economic order, which is often referred to as a “winner-take-all” system whose rising tide only lifts a few selective boats, adversely affect the financial situation of the average American and the urban underclass in particular? In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama acknowledges the “significant benefits” of globalization for the American consumer. However, he also points to the “increased economic instability for millions of ... Americans” in the new economic order. “Over the past decade,” he writes in 2006, “we’ve seen strong economic growth but anemic job growth; big leaps in productivity but flatlining wages; hefty corporate profits, but a shrinking share of those profits going to workers” (173). David Cay Johnston confirms Obama’s analysis in an essay for the *New York Times* Company entitled “Richest are Leaving even the Rich Far Behind”: “The hyper-rich have emerged in the last three decades as the biggest winners in a remarkable transformation of the American economy characterized by, among other things, the creation of a more global marketplace, new technology, and investment spurred partly by tax cuts. The stock market soared; so did pay in the highest ranks of business” (186).

Pay in the lowest ranks, however, has dwindled. While wages for the average American workers have stagnated and the “middle-class squeeze” has affected the majority of the American population, cities have borne the brunt of these large scale transformations. Wilson reports that job growth in the rustbelt cities of the North has been lagging far behind national average in the last two decades. “While national employment increased by 25 percent between 1991 and 2001, job growth in these older central cities either declined or did not

exceed 3 percent” (*Agenda* 91). And the job growth that did occur in the cities affected primarily highly-qualified white collar employment. The urban poor therefore find themselves in a precarious situation, which exacerbates their economic marginalization even further.

Freeman refers to the situation in the U.S. labor market today as “the greatest challenge since the Great Depression,” and Massey observes that “by the end of the twentieth century all of the declines in inequality achieved under the New and Fair Deals had been wiped out and the United States had unambiguously returned to levels of inequality not seen since the laissez-faire era of the 1920s” (Massey 36). Much is at stake, liberal analysts agree, and the challenge the country faces in adjusting to the global marketplace is of utmost concern to all Americans. “If the United States adjusts well, the benefits of having virtually all of humanity on the same economic page will improve the living standards for all Americans. If the country does not adjust well, the next several decades will exacerbate economic divisions in the United States,” Freeman prophesies (55).

However, with the *technological revolution* incessantly progressing, the economic steamroller of massive global changes has not come to a halt yet as national economist and best-selling author Jeremy Rifkin predicts in this sensational book *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. Considering the steady and inevitable decline of jobs due to sophisticated computers, robotics, telecommunications, and other Information Age technologies, Rifkin anticipates a fundamental global transformation in the nature of work societies will have to grapple with. While the immediate future sees a short-term rise in “knowledge sector” employment and in new jobs being created by new markets abroad, they will not accommodate, according to Rifkin, the vast numbers of workers displaced by the new technologies.

Rifkin illustrates these changes as they have already occurred in the mid-twentieth century by pointing to the steel industry—a sector whose job loss has greatly impacted black urban communities. Rifkin observes that

the steel industry in the United States is typical of the transition taking place. In the past twenty years, U.S. steel production rose from 75 million tons to 102 million tons. In the same twenty-year period, from 1982 to 2002, the number of steel-workers in the U.S. declined from 289,000 to 74,000. American steel manufacturers, like manufacturers all around the world, are producing more output with far fewer workers, thanks to dramatic increases in productivity. ‘Even if manufacturing holds on to its share of GDP,’ says University of Michigan economist Donald Grimes, ‘we are likely to continue to lose jobs because of productivity growth.’ Grimes laments that there is little we can do about it. ‘It’s like fighting a huge headwind.’” (xix)

Yet, it is not just blue-collar jobs that are being lost. Rifkin shows that “white-collar and service industries are experiencing similar job losses as intelligent technologies increase productivity and replace more and more workers” (xix). Banking, insurance, and the wholesale and retail sectors are also eliminating support personnel as smart technologies are being introduced. One such example is Internet banking. “The Internet banking company NetBank is illustrative of the high-tech trend. Net Bank has \$2.4 billion in deposits. A typical bank that size employs approximately 2000 people. NetBank runs its entire operation with just 180 workers” (xix).

In summarizing these revolutionary structural changes foreseen by Rifkin, Paul Saffo of the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California, concludes in a purposefully simplified manner: “In the 1980s business was about people talking to other people—now, it’s about machines talking to machines” (qtd. in Rifkin xix).

With regards to urban minorities, the effects of large-scale economic changes have reinforced and cemented the structural factors which had previously contributed to the construction of poor black residential areas in the inner cities, thereby compounding a widening gap in wealth and class between mainstream America and the urban poor. And the rift is deepening. Wilson points out that “[d]espite increases in the concentration of poverty since 1970, inner cities have always featured high levels of poverty, but the current levels of joblessness in some neighborhoods are unprecedented” (*Work* xiii). The consequences of long-term unemployment are reflected in the patterns and norms of behavior in these socially isolated communities which deviate from the society at large. The changes in class structure which thereby occur will be elaborated on in the following section.

6.1.3. The Nexus of Class and Work

**It is not easy for men to rise whose qualities are thwarted by poverty.
(Juvenal in *Satires*)**

William Julius Wilson, who is often called America's foremost authority on race and poverty, maintains that the key to understanding *the social pathologies* associated with impoverished inner-city communities lies in the disappearance of blue-collar jobs in the wake of a globalized economy. "The consequences of high neighborhood joblessness are more devastating than those of high neighborhood poverty," Wilson argues. "A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless. Many of today's problems in the inner-city ghetto neighborhoods—crime, family dissolution, welfare, low levels of social organization, and so on—are fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work" (*Work* xiii).

The culture which is created as a result of wide-spread and long-term unemployment creates a self-perpetuating cycle which adversely affects the socio-economic situation of a community. Wilson holds that neutral terms, such as "lower class" or "working class," do not adequately capture the social changes which occur in these communities. Instead, he uses the term "underclass" in describing communities of urban African Americans whose culture has been severely impacted by the effects of joblessness and isolation.

One central aspect of poor inner-city culture fostered by high unemployment rates pertains to family structure. Wilson suggests that the high percentage of single-parent households in impoverished urban areas is directly related to the labor market status of black males. Since black men are often not in a position to support their families, incentives to marry in inner-city communities are low, resulting in high numbers of female-headed households.

Another important effect of long-term joblessness in inner-city neighborhoods is related to the underground economy. With the decline of manufacturing employment, which had offered unionized, relatively stable and well-paying jobs, employment for low-skilled workers in the postindustrial urban economy are almost exclusively minimum wage retail and service jobs. Christopher Jencks remarks that "no native-born American male can imagine supporting a family on [minimum wage]. If that is the only 'respectable' alternative, he will usually

conclude that respectability is beyond his reach and slip into crime, alcohol, or [drugs]" (127). Obama also points to the nexus of unemployment and crime in the inner city. Referring to the rampant drug trade in inner-city ghettos he remarks:

The conventional wisdom is that most unemployed inner-city men could find jobs if they really wanted to work; that they inevitably prefer drug dealing, with its attendant risks but potential profits, to the low-paying jobs that their lack of skills warrants. In fact, economists who've studied the issue—and the young men whose fates are at stake—will tell you that the costs and benefits of the street life don't match the popular mythology: At the bottom or even the middle ranks of the industry, drug dealing is a minimum-wage affair. (*Hope* 305)

Kalais Chiron Hunt is one of many black males who serve time in the Cook County Correctional Facility in Chicago "for the typical reasons: drugs, crime, and gangs" (Gates, *Color Line* 407). In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. he describes his background, an impoverished inner-city community, as a place where "it is easier for me to, say, sell drugs than to go and get a job" (407). This holds true for most of Hunt's friends,

guys like me that don't have job training and don't know how to fill out an application coming out of these places or coming out of the penal institutions.... [N]ine times out of ten, that means you are either selling drugs or you are doing something that's against the law. It ain't something that you want to do, but if you be around it so much growing up, that's something that you start to take on. You start saying, okay, well, I think this is the norm. It's as easy for me to sell drugs as to expect to go to school. It's as easy for me to sell drugs as it is to expect to play basketball. That's the pain of it all. (407-8)

Hunt demonstrates how closely class and work are related by pointing to the absence of role models in most isolated urban communities. Emulating the role models who *are* present and who influence the choices of the inner-city youth usually leads to the perpetuation of inter-generational poverty: "The average kid growing up on the West Side or the South Side of Chicago, they tend to look at drug dealers, hustlers, players—so-called players—and pimps in their neighborhood. They don't look at the schoolteachers, the firemen, the police officers, or the professors. They don't look at that because they're not around in the neighborhood" (408).

Given these limited options then, how *do* low-skilled inner-city residents stay economically afloat? Kasarda, Ehlers, and Friedrichs see mainly two alternatives which "dominate the livelihood of the urban disadvantaged: the welfare economy and the underground economy. These alternative economies," the authors note, "have mushroomed in cities, functioning as

institutionalized surrogates for the declining goods-producing economies that once attracted and sustained large numbers of disadvantaged residents” (Kasarda et al. 272). Other sociologists, however, point to a third option, one that has increasingly attracted attention in recent years: the working poor. Their solution to the economic inner-city dilemma shall be presented in the following section.

6.1.4. The Working Poor

**But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.
(William Butler Yeats)**

Most Americans associate poverty in the U.S. with black long-term welfare recipients. Yet, a closer look at statistics will show that this image is not correct. In her study on the working poor in the inner city, sociologist Kathrin S. Newman reports that “the largest group of poor people in the United States are not those on welfare. They are the working poor” (40). They are part of the more than 30 million Americans in low wage jobs, who do not earn enough to secure the basic necessities of life (see Shulman 114).

Beth Shulman, who works as a lawyer and consultant on work-related issues, compares the American economy to an hourglass “with most of the jobs created in the last two decades clustered at the high and low ends of the income scale” (114). At the high end are those white-collar jobs that require at least a four-year college education. At the low end are “jobs such as home health aides, janitors, security guards, hotel workers, nursing-home workers, and food workers that pay little more than minimum wage” (114)

Millions of these workers were “pushed into a region of adversity by federal welfare reform’s time limits and work mandates” enacted in 1996 (Shipler, *Working* 4). The welfare reform act was passed during a time of economic growth and is “credited by many welfare recipients for inducing them to travel beyond the stifling world of dependence into the active, challenging, hopeful culture of the workplace” (4). Many more, however, David K. Shipler reports, “are stuck at such low wages that their living standards are unchanged. They still cannot save,

cannot get decent health care, cannot move to better neighborhoods, and cannot send their children to schools that offer a promise for a successful future” (4). The earnings of these men and women do not cover more than the immediate basic necessities for their daily living and sometimes even less. In 2007 Obama points out that the minimum wage hadn’t been changed in nine years and that it had less purchasing power in real dollars than it did in 1955 (see *Hope* 214).

It does not come as a surprise therefore, that minimum wage does not allow workers to enjoy amenities considered basic (and often necessary) in the American mainstream: “The man who washes cars does not own one. The clerk who files cancelled checks at the bank has \$2.02 in her own account. [And] the woman who copyedits medical textbooks has not been to a dentist in a decade” (Shipler, *Working* 3). Incidents which merely inconvenience an affluent family—car trouble, illness, disrupted child care—often turn into a veritable crisis for those “moving in and out of jobs that demand much and pay little,” causing them to “tread just above the official poverty line, dangerously close to the edge of destitution” (3).

“Harlem’s working poor are perpetually one paycheck away from disaster,” Newman confirms and explains that “almost half of Americans who work under the poverty line lack health insurance of any kind” (53). For those who do qualify for Medicaid, the quality of the care has greatly suffered after major budget reductions in 1996. Meanwhile, Newman points out, “the need for health care among the poor continues to grow. Chronic asthma rates are rising at alarming rates among ghetto residents [and] diabetes is also far higher among African Americans” (54). Newman calls this condition “a national disgrace in its own right,” which, however, creates further problems as it perpetuates the cycle of poverty for the working poor by setting “the stage for employment instability as parents struggle to cope with the endless rounds of hospitalization and doctor visits that treatment for chronic asthma requires” (54).

Bestselling author and *New York Times* columnist Barbara Ehrenreich has published her firsthand account of life in low-wage America working as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home aid and Wal-Mart associate in her book *Nickel and Dimed*. In the afterword to the second edition, Ehrenreich quotes letters she received from low-wage workers with surprisingly diverse backgrounds. One of them reads:

Nickled and Dimed is far from fiction. It is pretty much my life. With 2 college degrees, I have struggled, and with no health insurance, I’ve incurred a ton of debt. I have not done as well as my parents, who came out of the Depression. Our

government says there are jobs, but they are low-pay jobs with no benefits. Not livable wage jobs. Not jobs that will give you a house and savings for retirement. Nothing glimmers in this dust. (226)

The psychological costs that come with performing low-wage duties, not valued by society, add to the burden of barely making ends meet. Working as a “temporary” cleaning maid, Ehrenreich describes the feeling she derived from her job as doing “an outcast’s work, invisible and even disgusting. Janitors, cleaning ladies, ditchdiggers, changers of adult diapers—these are the untouchables of a supposedly caste-free and democratic society” (117). Ehrenreich notes that

when I watch TV over my dinner at night, I see a world in which almost everyone makes \$15 an hour or more, and I’m not just thinking of the anchor folks. The sitcoms and dramas are about fashion designers or schoolteachers or lawyers, so it’s easy for a fast-food worker or nurse’s aide to conclude that she is an anomaly—the only one, or almost the only one, who hasn’t been invited to the party. And in a sense she would be right. (117)

Low-wage labor is not part of American culture at large. It does not appear in the political rhetoric, public intellectual discourse, or daily entertainment. Perhaps it is this lack of representation, Ehrenreich concludes, that makes the low-wage worker feel “like a pariah” (117).

Shulman suggests that it is time to return to the days in American labor policies in which the hour clock offered employment in the middle section as well: “Millions of manufacturing and technical jobs [used to] practically guarantee a hardworking American a good wage, decent health insurance, vacation time, and even a pension. The U.S. Congressional Budget Office estimates that “the manufacturing sector alone has lost more than three million jobs between July 2000 and January 2004” (114). It is therefore necessary, Shulman insists, to turn today’s “bad” jobs into “good” ones since “nothing intrinsic in a particular job chains it forever to low pay and miserable conditions” (115). With broad support and political will, today’s low-wage service jobs—which fortunately cannot be shipped overseas—can easily become the “good jobs of the twenty-first century [ensuring] that America’s economic growth and profitability translates into a better life for all working Americans” (115).

Liberal structuralist thinkers would wholeheartedly agree with Shulman while conservative behaviorist theorists harbor doubts—which they will voice in the following section.

6.2. Underclass Debate

Synthesis: Urban Restructuring

I'll steal before I'll take charity. (Saul Alinsky)

6.2.1. Urban Restructuring as a Structuralist Explanation for Black Ghetto Formation

The transformation of the urban economy in the wake of global economic changes constitutes a central factor for understanding the emergence of impoverished urban African American communities, according to structuralist theorists. In other words, if the jobs which had been available to blacks in the industrial cities of the North at mid-century had not disappeared in the course of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and globalization, black urban neighborhoods would not have slipped into the vicious cycle of decline prompted by unemployment and residential isolation. The question that still lingers among historians pertains to the questionable inevitability of the process. Could the economic changes, which started in the 1950s and which detrimentally affected black inner-city communities, have been channeled in ways to avoid the catastrophic outcome in urban ghettos?

The historian Thomas J. Sugrue poses this question in his study on postwar Detroit. His findings, he reports, “complicate the conventional narratives of post-World War II American history” (6). He recalls that the U.S. was “at a peak of economic and global strength in the 1940s and 1950s [when] America’s midwestern and northeastern cities lost hundreds of thousands of entry-level manufacturing jobs” (6). And while

pundits celebrated America's ... unprecedented prosperity, ... the manufacturing industries that formed the bedrock of the American economy, including textiles, electrical appliances, motor vehicles, and military hardware, automated production and relocated plants in suburban and rural areas, and increasingly in the low-wage labor markets of underdeveloped regions like the American South and the Caribbean. (6)

What is appalling in this context, according to liberal scholars, is the fact that "the restructuring of the economy proceeded with the full support and encouragement of the American government" without paying any notice to matters of *predictably worsening economic inequality*. While federal highway construction and military spending facilitated and fueled industrial growth in nonurban areas, the economic hardship of those on the fringes of the postwar economy became invisible in "the postwar veneer of consensus and civility" (6-7).

It was not until the early 1960s, that the American public became alert to isolated pockets of poverty and depression in black inner-city ghettos through publications such as Michael Harrington's, then ground-breaking, book, *The Other America*. The anti-poverty programs which were enacted under President Johnson in response to this new awareness of poverty embodied, according to Sugrue, "the conventional wisdom of mainstream economists and social welfare advocates, and focused on behavioral modification as the solution to poverty" (264). Since they did not respond adequately to deindustrialization and discrimination, however, they "failed to eliminate income poverty or reduce income inequality [or] to increase the aggregate supply of jobs in urban and other labor markets" (Jackson qtd. in Sugrue 264). The majority of the War on Poverty programs therefore proved ineffective.

As a result of massive production relocation and automation in the postwar period, then, the switch was thrown for class divisions in American society to deepen. *New York Times* correspondents Janny Scott and David Leonhardt report in 2005, that class "has come to play a greater, not lesser, role [over the past three decades] in important ways.... In fact, the economic mobility, which once buoyed the working lives of Americans as it rose in the decades after World War II, has lately flattened out or possibly even declined" (2). This trend was reinforced by conservative lawmakers aiming at reversing the ideology embodied in the reforms enacted in Roosevelt's New Deal. Obama, then Senator of Illinois, discusses the consequences of these conservative political efforts in his second book and remarks that "the social compact FDR helped construct is beginning to crumble" (*Hope* 210). He relays a conversation he had with Warren Buffet, one of the country's most affluent business men,

who “wanted to know why Washington continued to cut taxes [in 2007] for people in his income bracket when the country was broke. I’ve never used tax shelters or had a tax planner,” Buffet explains, but “after including the payroll taxes we each pay, I’ll pay a lower effective tax rate this year than my receptionist. In fact, I’m pretty sure I pay a lower rate than the average American. And if the President [George W. Bush] has his way, I’ll be paying even less” (qtd. in Obama, *Hope* 225). From Buffett’s perspective, Obama notes, “the discrepancy was unconscionable” (225). Buffet explains his reasoning in simple economic terms:

The free market’s the best mechanism ever devised to put resources to their most efficient and productive use. The government isn’t particularly good at that. But the market isn’t so good at making sure that the wealth that’s produced is being distributed fairly or wisely. Some of that wealth has to be plowed back into education, so that the next generation has a fair chance, and to maintain our infrastructure, and provide some sort of safety net for those who lose out in a market economy. And it just makes sense that those of us who’ve benefited most from the market should pay a bigger share. (qtd. in Obama, *Hope* 224).

Shipler echoes Buffet’s analysis in emphasizing the *cooperation* between government and the private sector:

The entire society needs governmental tools to help those working at the bottom of the economic hierarchy—both to lend them a hand in what they cannot do alone and to assist them in developing the capacity to do what they can ultimately do themselves. No dichotomy exists here between societal help and self-help. Government can be neither absent nor all-encompassing. It cannot fail to maintain a safety net, cannot avoid direct grants to the needy, cannot be blind to its role as the community’s resource. But it also has to blend its power in creative interaction with the profit and nonprofit worlds, with private industry and private charity. (*Poor* 290)

What type of policies, then, do liberal theorists propose in overcoming the urban labor crisis? “The most evident point of attack,” Shipler argues, “is the wage structure ... induced by revised tax structures” (*Poor* 290). In this respect the federal government has been lagging behind state legislation in not tying the federal minimum wage to the inflation index. While twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have placed their own 2008 minimum wages at \$6.62 to \$8.08 an hour, the federal rate that year remained at \$6.55 an hour (see Shipler, *Poor* 291).

Another measure, one that is usually supported by liberal and conservative policy makers alike, is the Earned Income Tax Credit reward. John Karl Scholz, former deputy assistant

secretary at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, notes that the EITC has beneficial labor market effects. “By increasing after-tax earnings, the credit provides unambiguously positive employment incentives for those entirely out of the labor market” (107). Numerous studies have shown, according to Scholz, that these incentives increase employment. Due to its “targeting, employment incentives, and administrative advantages, further modifications and expansions of the EITC may be an important component of a reform agenda to better assist low-income working families” (Scholz 108).

Finally, liberal policy makers agree, private industry could be asked for more than mere job creation in return for being heavily subsidized by states, counties, and cities competing to attract new industry. Extensive job training could be offered, unions could be strengthened and—on a broader administrative level—vocational education and a net-work of apprenticeships could be implemented (see Shipler, *Poor* 292).

All of these policies would go a long way, liberals argue, to effect significant change similar to the social realignment of the time period following the civil rights movement. Obama points to those years as exemplary of how liberal policy is able to lift disadvantaged minority groups within the national socio-economic structure: “The combination of economic growth, government investment in broad-based programs to encourage upward mobility, and a modest commitment to enforce the simple principle of nondiscrimination was sufficient to pull the large majority of blacks ... into the socioeconomic mainstream within a generation” (*Hope* 295).

Needless to say, these policy suggestions contrast sharply with conservative behaviorist ideas about what needs to be done to effect meaningful changes in inner-city labor markets.

According to these behaviorist theorists, the high levels of unemployment in urban areas are not a matter of lacking economic opportunities but of opportunities not taken, as will be explained in the ensuing section.

6.2.2. The Conservative Behaviorist Response

Conservative behaviorists disagree with the structuralist interpretation that changes in the economy which affected the urban labor market are in any significant way related to the emergence and persistence of the black underclass. “How can structural changes in the economy be blamed for the existence of the underclass,” Myron Magnet asks, “if the changes happened well *after* the underclass was fully formed and sizable?” (46). Magnet concedes that there may be individual “casualties” of economic restructuring in the rustbelt cities, but he adds that these men are not the rule. Yes, one might “find men [who had been] fired in the industrial restructuring [who are now] marooned on ghetto street corners, wasted by drugs or drink,” but such cases are few, Magnet is convinced. In any event, the stories of these individuals are not “congruent with those of the underclass, in anything but the unhappy ending” Magnet explains (46).

Thus, economic restructuring in the form of relocation, automation, and downsizing are *not* to blame for the continuing downward spiral of black inner-city communities. Instead, according to conservative behaviorists, one must look to the economic changes of the 1980s in order to understand the true crux of the matter. During this period of “red-hot job creation” it became apparent that even the increased employment opportunities “failed to draw additional young black males into the labor force” (Magnet 46). This social group of “nonworkers,” as Magnet calls them, was constituted by “high school dropouts who lived in the ghetto public housing projects and who had been born to teenage single mothers with low incomes and little education—in other words, the underclass” (46).

Magnet laments the fact that these “out-of-work inner-city black youths ... generally disdain the readily available hamburger flipper or checkout clerk jobs as low-paid or leading nowhere, even though over the last decade up to a million or more immigrants, from Asians to West Indians, have been finding in menial jobs their gateway to the American dream” (46-7). Behaviorists consider the fact that young African Americans do not seem to respond to these low-wage job opportunities particularly troubling since these jobs could teach “underclass kids lacking basic skills [what they need] to learn about managing the world of work: how to

show up on time, look presentable, be efficient, and deal pleasantly with customers and bosses” (47).

Magnet illustrates his point with the story of a recent ghetto renovation project in Newark, New Jersey, “a city with a large underclass population, [which] could not attract local workers at five or six dollars an hour and ended up importing union labor from the suburbs” (47). Magnet points out that these jobs paid “well over the minimum wage, were right in the neighborhood, and were teaching skills that clearly could lead somewhere” (47).

Thomas Sowell affirms Magnet’s point of view, and depicts how upward mobility through hard work has manifested itself to be effective throughout various time periods and cultures: “In country after country, immigrants from China, Italy or Japan, for example, have begun at the bottom of the occupational ladder, in arduous, unskilled, ‘menial,’ and low-paid work, often in jobs disdained by the local population. Yet, with the passing years and generations,” Sowell explains, “these immigrant groups have typically risen above the average incomes and occupational levels of those around them” (*Culture* 82). Sowell concedes that “some poverty is indeed persistent across generations,” but he maintains that “the differences between those individuals and groups who remain mired in poverty and those who advance must be sought in other factors besides their initial earnings” (*Culture* 82).

Thus, Sowell argues, so-called dead-end jobs do not predetermine one’s future, as can be seen in the fact that Italian immigrants, most of whom started out shining shoes in major cities like New York, rose from such jobs “probably no less rapidly than people working in civil service or other jobs with present promotional ladders” (*Culture* 83).

The problem in urban underclass communities, therefore, according to conservative theorists, is not a lack of employment opportunities, but the unwillingness of black urban residents to accept the jobs that are available and to exert themselves in their work. In fact, social policy analyst Charles Murray considers the employment level of young adults in a given community to be a sure index of a particular *type* of poverty, characterized by deviant attitudes towards work, crime, and parenting. At a conference organized by *The Sunday Times* in Britain in 1989, Murray was invited to compare the British and the U.S. situations of marginalized groups. Describing himself as a “visitor from a plague area come to see whether the disease is spreading,” he explained that “the definite proof that an underclass has arrived is that large numbers of young, healthy, low-income males choose not to take jobs” (*British* 37). And even though Murray’s rhetoric is more aggressive than that of most other conservative theorists, the

accepted consensus among behaviorists is that the residents of black urban impoverished communities are responsible for their own plight due to a lack of work ethic. As Christopher Jencks, a moderate conservative remarks concerning the high unemployment rate among inner-city African Americans: “When sane, healthy adults refuse to follow norms of behavior that most of society endorses, the claim that we should help them arouses intense controversy” (121).

Therefore, suggestions like the ones advanced by Beth Shulman, who proposes raising the minimum wage, indexing it to inflation, and supporting unionization are met with criticism by most conservative behaviorists. Lawrence M. Mead, for example, finds these ideas problematic. In the past, he notes, if “positions paid well because they were unionized, not because they were demanding or difficult to fill,” the economy suffered since international competitiveness was lowered (73). He illustrates this with the stagnating American economy between 1973 and the late 1980s, a time during which imported products flooded the market and many “manufacturing firms failed all over America, especially in the industrial Midwest” (73). Mead considers the slump in the economy to be partially due to the fact that after 1973 “the productivity of workers in the American economy virtually ceased to improve” (73). This, Mead argues, was occasioned—among other reasons—by “lofty wages and benefits” management had to concede in return for labor peace (73).

The key to the problem, therefore, as Magnet summarizes the conservative argument, lies “not in the job but in the motivation, aspiration, and realism of expectation the worker brings to it” (49). In agreement with Magnet’s line of thought, Murray concludes: “When meaningful reforms finally do occur, they will happen not because stingy people have won, but because generous people have stopped kidding themselves” (*British* 52).

John Edgar Wideman, an African American writer who teaches literature at the University of Amherst, Massachusetts, has been dealing with questions pertaining to the origins of the underclass in his literary work. Following his younger brother Robby’s arrest for armed robbery for which he was sentenced to life in prison without parole, Wideman wrote the autobiographical narrative, *Brothers and Keepers*, which shall be critically examined in the context of the underclass debate in the following section.

6.3. Literary Case in Point: *Brothers and Keepers*

6.3.1. John Edgar Wideman: His Life (1941*)

Wideman was born on June 14, 1941, as the oldest of five children of Edgar and Betty French Wideman in Washington D.C. The family moved to Homewood, a black neighborhood on the eastern side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, shortly before Wideman turned one. This community, which had been home to the extended Wideman family for generations, starting with his great-great-great-grandmother, a fugitive slave, would later become the source of Wideman's most significant literary work.

Wideman's father worked as a waiter, a garbage man, and paperhanger, striving to move his family into a middle-class setting. Wideman attended the predominantly white Peabody High School where he was successful as a basketball star and popular as the senior class president. Valedictorian of his class, he won a Benjamin Franklin Scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. At this point in his life, Wideman lived a compartmentalized racial existence. While many of his friends surrounding his educational endeavors were white, his family background and his friends back home embodied a black experience that seemed irreconcilable with the upwardly mobile life he was seeking to embrace. In his autobiographical work, *Brothers and Keepers*, he later describes these two opposing worlds as "just two choices as far as I could tell: either/or. Rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose.... To succeed in the man's world you must become like the man and the man sure didn't claim no bunch of nigger relatives in Pittsburgh" (*Brothers* 27). Thus, Wideman continued his life in the fast lane. He won all-Ivy status as a forward on the basketball team, competed in track, and became the second African American to win a Rhodes Scholarship (Alain Locke had been the first, fifty-five years earlier). After graduating with a bachelor of philosophy degree from Oxford University's New College in 1966, Wideman returned to the States with his wife Judith Ann Goldman, whom he had married in 1965, and began his career as a writer and lecturer. As Kent Fellow at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop from 1966 to 1967,

Wideman wrote and published his first novel, *A Glance Away*. His second novel, *Hurry Home*, was published in 1970 while Wideman was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Both of these novels are postmodernist in style and deal with general existential questions thereby deemphasizing racial aspects.

However, between Wideman's second and his third novel, a distinct change marks his creative activity which is expressed in the theme and tone of his third novel. The change was effected by Wideman's newly-found appreciation for African American literature, which "awakened in [him] a different sense of self-image," (qtd. in Christian 2327). Rather than expressing his own experience in post-modernist characters, a form which no longer seemed to authentically capture his background and his interest, Wideman turned to this black heritage for inspiration in his literary work. His third novel, *The Lynchers*, published in 1973, centers around a failed plot by a group of black men in a Philadelphia ghetto trying to lynch a white policeman as a representative act of vengeance for the thousands of black lives lost to lynching. The themes explored in this novel, especially African American history and the relationships among blacks, will take on a central role in his later works.

"For Wideman, the novel's emphasis on pain, degradation, and hopelessness led to an impasse in his writing career," Barbara Christian observes in the *Norton Anthology for African American Literature* (2327). Leaving the highly competitive atmosphere of the north-eastern academic world behind, he moved to Laramie, Wyoming, with his family and sought to "forge a new language for talking about the places I'd been, the people important to me" (qtd. in Christian 2327). A personal event, the incarceration of his younger brother Robby, who was sentenced to life in prison without parole for armed robbery and murder in 1975, decidedly influenced his works of the 1980s and 1990s. *The Homewood Trilogy*, three works which were originally published separately and which contain collections of related short stories, revolve around Sybela Owens, Wideman's ancestress, who had escaped slavery with the help of her owner's son (who would later become her husband) and settled in Homewood in the late 1850s. The stories are dedicated "To Robby," and include a character whose life story resembles that of Wideman's younger brother.

His next work, *Brothers and Keepers*, published in 1984, is Wideman's only non-fiction and probably his most popular work. The memoir narrates—in Robby's voice—the events leading to his brother's arrest, framed by Wideman's confessional thoughts about his own leaving and returning to Homewood. Both the *Homewood Trilogy* and *Brothers and Keepers* exemplify

the author's authentic and mature voice and his unique style as the P.E.N./Faulkner Award for the last part of the Trilogy affirmed.

Later works by Wideman include *Reuben*, *Philadelphia Fire*, *Valaida*, *Little Brother*, *Fever*, and *All Stories are True*, all of which center around issues of race and community. For his work he has been rewarded with honors and reputation-building accolades. Sven Birkerts notes in a general overview of Wideman's work that his public reception has not been as sensational as the ones of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker since "his prose is more demanding and his subject matter is less sexy" (42). Nevertheless, Birkerts claims, Wideman easily fills "the gaping hole marked 'leading African-American male writer'" and *The New Republic* adds after the publication of *Brothers and Keepers*, "[Wideman] is now our leading black male writer and (casting the nonsense of these divisions aside) one of our very finest writers, period" (42).

6.3.2. John Edgar Wideman's Autobiographical Work: *Brothers and Keepers*

The publication of Wideman's memoir, *Brothers and Keepers*, which was nominated for the National Book Award, represented a breakthrough in his career as a writer since it received "the type of media attention—[it was featured on the TV program 60 minutes]—that sells books in a big way" (Rosen 533). In his work, the author has tried to better understand "the twists of fate that have made him what he is, while his brother, Robby, is serving a lifetime prison sentence" (Rosen 530).

The narrative opens in Laramie, Wyoming, where Wideman works as a writer while teaching literature at the university. It is November 1975. Wideman's mother calls him from Pittsburgh to tell him that his brother Robby is on the run since he is wanted by the FBI for armed robbery and murder. Three months later the fugitive brother and his companions appear call Wideman from a bowling alley near Widemans's home. They spend the night at his house before they move on. The next day Robby and his friends are arrested and taken

back to Pennsylvania for trial. After two years in custody, Robby is sentenced to life in prison without parole.

The text is carefully crafted out of a series of interior monologues and detailed descriptions, easing back and forth between various time frames and points of view while shifting between formal constructions of Standard English and black spoken vernacular. The employment of numerous linguistic styles proves effective in Wideman's attempt to illustrate the "polarized circumstances" in which the two brothers meet during the visits in prison, "expressing the duality of the African American psychological legacy in the United States," as Barbara Seidman points out (1).

Ironically, [both brothers] pursued a path [they] equated with the American Dream of material success and personal self-definition: John in the "safe" and deracinated terms of career and family championed by white society, Rob along more dangerous lines that challenge racist obstacles through illegal channels promising the glamour of the outlaw. Both men, despite their very different choices, now find themselves fumbling to recover what they sacrificed in pursuit of America's elusive seduction of "making it." (1)

While John views himself as an incongruous figure in both the black and the white world in his "lifelong efforts to straddle black and white cultural expectations," Robby acknowledges the dead end his life as a "bad guy" has led to (1).

The narrative ends rather abruptly with a speech Robby gives upon receiving his associate's degree through a prison education program. And while the abrupt ending is reminiscent of the postmodernist skepticism of Wideman's earlier works, the narrative as a whole diverges radically from the author's early novels by framing his brother's plight within the context of a caring family community, which allows him to retain a positive and comprehensive perspective despite all odds.

6.3.3. Critical Analysis: From Postmodernism to Traditional Black Storytelling

The analysis at hand will examine the transformation of Wideman's literary style from distinctly postmodernist to traditional black storytelling, which occurred after the author reorientated his literary subject matter toward his African American family roots. The section

will end by supporting the structuralist perspective for the emergence of urban minority ghettos by examining Wideman's autobiographical narrative in the context of urban restructuring.

Wideman's creative literary activity divides into two phases: During his early phase of fiction writing between 1967 and 1973 he embraced the white literary tradition of Joyce, Eliot, and Faulkner by employing a formally complex literary style. The characters and the subject matter which characterized Wideman's early novels were distinctly postmodernist, reflecting the author's sense of being—in Cornel West's terminology—a “dangling individual,” estranged from his black roots, yet not at home in the white mainstream world either.

The second period, during which Wideman established his unique and authentic style, commences with the publication of *The Homewood Trilogy* in 1981 and extends to his subsequent works published in the 1980s and 1990s, including his memoir, *Brothers and Keepers*. The literary elements which characterize his mature style are based on African American history, literature, and life, signaling the author's return to his black roots as a way of understanding his own identity and history. In embracing his background, Wideman was able to enrich his linguistic style with elements from the black oral tradition, leading to—in the words of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*—“a reinvention of black English” (Christian 2328).

These two phases of Wideman's work shall be explored in the following analysis by examining the protagonists of a representative work of each phase, namely Edgar Lawson in *A Glance Away* and John in *The Homewood Trilogy*. The chapter will then conclude by considering Wideman's autobiographical work, *Brothers and Keepers*, published in 1984, in the larger context of this study, focusing on the effects of urban unemployment in the aftermath of deindustrialization and globalization.

- **Edgar Lawson: Self-Conscious Postmodernist Writer**

The protagonist in Wideman's fictional narrative *A Glance Away* embodies the mindset and the fate of a prototypical postmodernist figure. Eddie Lawson, a young black man who feels distraught about his inadequacies in being a son, a brother, and a lover, returns home after a year in a drug rehabilitation unit only to learn, “as have innumerable other protagonists of

modern fiction, that you cannot go home again” (Marshall E. 1). Faced with the death of his love affair, the physical death of his mother, and the death of his vision to redirect his life, Eddie, finds his life in shambles, a fragmentariness which is reflected in the narrative and character construction of the novel. He is paralyzed by circumstances and unable to complete his potential for growth as he seeks in vain to live up to the ideal image of his older brother, Eugene, who, at the time of Eddie’s return, has been dead for a long time. The overarching narrative strands therefore jointly converge into death as the morally undernourished characters “never have quite enough so hunger grows faster than appetites and satisfaction never comes” (Wideman, *Glance* 35). The story ends with Eddie’s inner being trapped within his incapacity to express himself. Unable “to master the first word” or reach outside himself, his reunion with his family and his lover never occurs. His final words, “I cannot move. I cannot speak,” define his state of consciousness as the loss of his roots and the lack of a viable future vision lock him into a permanent state of despair (Wideman, *Glance* 182).

Two themes which have traditionally been of concern in African American literature emerge in Wideman’s novel: the theme of *masking*, living behind a mask, and the quest for a *lost heritage*. Reminiscent of the DuBoisian veil of double-consciousness mentioned earlier in this study, Eddie perceives himself as split into two personae, one of the day and one of the night. Disconnected from his heritage and unable to reconcile with his family, he identifies the shadow Eddie as his truer self. He is a stranger to the white world surrounding him, which “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (DuBois, *Souls* 7). The mask Eddie wears is most apparent in his relations with his family. His incapacity to share himself with his family and their inability to understand and accept what he has become cripple him even further and bar him from reuniting with his lost heritage. When Eddie’s mask is finally stripped away, after he has lost his mother, his sister, and his lover, “the self-conscious voice that exists behind the mask thus reveals its impotence to penetrate life and extricate Eddie’s imagination, here representative of the black imagination, from its acquiescent victimization” (Marshall E. 4).

The confused, detached, and fragmented character Edgar Lawson bears not only the author’s middle name, but also reflects various autobiographical aspects of Wideman’s life at the time of writing. Recalling his relationship with his younger brother Robby when he returned home from college he writes: “I had been a stranger, a student, foreign to the rhythms of their lives, their talk as I sat, home from college in the kitchen talking to Robby’s mother” (Wideman, *Brothers* 10). In fact, after realizing that his life in white academic institutions had estranged

him from his family, Wideman actively sought to distance himself from his roots by moving from Pittsburgh to Laramie, Wyoming. When he learned about Robby's flight from the police, wanted for armed robbery and murder, he later explains that for him:

[i]t had been better to keep my feelings at a distance. Let the miles and years protect me. Robby was my brother, but that was once upon a time, in another country. My life was relatively comfortable, pleasant, safe. I'd come west to escape the demons Robby personified. I didn't need outlaw brothers reminding me how much had been lost, how much compromised, how terribly the world still raged beyond the charmed circle of my [new] life. (*Brothers* 11)

However, while Wideman felt a certain relief of his background's burden in his new life out west, he did not realize yet that his physical and psychological distance from black inner-city Pittsburgh along with his brother's arrest would generate a profound change in him which would eventually lead him to embrace his background and his family ties. Wideman's first work which witnesses the metamorphosis that transpired in the author's inner life during the 1970s was published as the *Homewood Trilogy* in the early 1980s, consisting of three separate works, each containing a collection of short stories: *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981), and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983). The narratives center around Homewood, the black working class neighborhood in Pittsburgh, where Wideman's family has lived for several generations. The stories celebrate his black roots and dissolve the issue of double-consciousness in his life.

In the first part, *Damballah*, he illustrates the "need to look at oneself with two sets of eyes," as Ashraf Rushdy phrases it, with his ambivalence toward watermelon (4). In a letter addressed to his brother Robby, the protagonist John recalls:

I never liked watermelon as a kid. I think I remember you did. You weren't afraid of becoming instant nigger, of sitting barefoot and goggle-eyed and Day-Glo black and drippy-lipped on massa's fence if you took one bit of the forbidden fruit. I was too scared to enjoy watermelon. Too self-conscious. I let people rob me of a simple pleasure. Watermelon's still tainted for me. But I know better now. I can play with the idea even if I can't get down and have a natural ball eating a real one. (*Damballah* 56)

Rushdy calls this response to the double bind of double-consciousness "fooling oneself by attempting to avoid living a life that conforms to a caricature constructed by a white society and grafted onto the white perspective of the doubly conscious black" (7-8). John's fear of "being caught being black" is released when he listens to his Aunt Gerladine's stories

(Rushdy 8). She explains to him that “the melon is a letter addressed to us. A story for us from down home” (*Damballah* 57). She explains “home” as the collective historical experience of African Americans. “Down Home being everywhere we’ve never been, the rural South, the old days, slavery, Africa” (*Damballah* 57). As John learns to understand and treasure the lives of his ancestors, he is relieved not only from his double-consciousness, but also from the pain his fragmented and disconnected identity had caused him. He thus begins to write his own narrative of self-discovery through writing letters which are both “his stories and histories” (Rushdy 8).

- **John: Black Storyteller**

The main character in the *Homewood Trilogy* reappears throughout the short story collections of the three books under various names: John, Doot, and others, but he always unmistakably represents the multiple John Edgar Wideman. The new alter ego of the author is light years away from the postmodernist Eddie, who was lost in his solipsistic mind and desperately searched for words and visions to reorientate his life.

In many respects, Wideman’s new protagonist has moved back in time, shedding the “post” in order to fit into the image of a modernist character. While he is still portrayed in highly subjectivist terms, revealing his inner state of being in long stream of consciousness monologues which shift in and out of various characters and timeframes, he no longer faces a seemingly insurmountable chaotic world. His identity as an African American is now embedded in a frame of reference: he has reconciled himself to his family and has returned to embrace his black urban community Homewood.

The importance Wideman attributes to community, both of his immediate family and of the Homewood neighborhood, is evidenced in the prefaces to the three volumes. While two of them emphasize the communicative aspect of his new writing style in the form of a dedication: “To Robby,” and in the form of “Stories and Letters,” the third features a “begat chart,” laying out the family tree underpinning many of the stories. The genealogical chart begins with a fugitive slave, Sybela Owens, who escaped slavery in the nineteenth century before settling in Homewood, and ends with John, the author and protagonist, born in 1941. Elaine Marshall observes that the elements which appear in the prefaces, namely the

“distinctly biographical foundations, [the] roots in African American folklore and myth, and [the] communicative function as personal “letters” to family, friends, and readers,” weave like central threads through the narratives.

The short stories of the three works relay anecdotes and events involving various characters who reappear in different settings and who are all united in the community of Homewood. Throughout the stories, “family members appear and disappear, shedding light on each other and themselves” (Marshall E. 3). In the 1992 edition of the collected volumes, Wideman explains the underlying motif of the trilogy:

The three books offer a continuous investigation, from many angles, not so much of a physical location, Homewood, the actual African American community in Pittsburgh where I was raised, but of a culture, a way of seeing and being seen. *Homewood* is an idea, a reflection of how its inhabitants act and think. The books, if successful, should mirror the characters’ inner lives, their sense of themselves as spiritual beings in a world where boundaries are not defined by racial stereotypes or socioeconomic statistics. (v)

At the center of the colorful group of characters is John, who returns to Homewood and only now discovers the richness and the meaning of his cultural heritage. Upon his return he recognizes that “the community, its history, its music, and its language, provide a cultural safety net for its residents” (Marshall E. 3). Connected with the community’s foreparents and supported by its values and strengths, the protagonist feels urged to chronicle the life stories of the web of people who sustain him: “Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest” (*Yesterday*, iii). In this recognition, the individuality and isolation of Eddie Lawson gives way to a sense of community experienced by John in Homewood where “the integration of self and Other” constitutes an element of “magic” (Rushdy 316). Wideman illustrates this magic, created through closeness and intimacy, in the address of a father to his dead son: “You are in me and I am in you so it never stops. As long as I am, there’s you. As long as there’s you, I am. It never stops” (*Damballah* 74).

The stories presented in the trilogy invite the reader to “celebrate and affirm” (*Damballah* iv) community with the author as they “provide the friendship, family, and community that are the antidotes to the isolation, and alienation of so much of twentieth century American urban living” (Marshall E. 4). Complementing each other in order to create a complex and

comprehensive picture, the narratives depict the consciousness of a people, namely African American consciousness lived out in urban communities in the twentieth century.

Wideman depicts the mode of being in contemporary black urban America in his own distinct language. While his first three novels relied primarily on postmodernist methods presented in a style reminiscent of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, the *Homewood Trilogy* is rendered in the oral tradition of black story telling. Fritz Gysin notes that “Wideman has been widely praised for his powerful language, his imaginative use of myth and ritual when dealing with the past, and his sensitive approach to characterization and focalization” (715). His own “patented stream of consciousness, sliding easily through tense and point of view” links his characters and invests them with the “power of the most righteous prayer,” Randall Kenan observes. By eschewing quotation marks, Wideman has his speakers “shift and shift and at times meld—as if into one mind, one voice” (25).

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Michael Gorra remarks that a comparison between Faulkner’s and Wideman’s fiction is “particularly apt” (13). He points to the many parallels between the two writers which, he concludes, inevitably link the works of the two authors. A comparison is appropriate, Gorra writes,

because the stretched-to-the-breaking-point syntax with which Mr. Wideman captures his characters’ inner lives seems at time an echo of Faulknerese. It is appropriate because both are concerned with the life of a community over time. It is appropriate because they both have a feel for the anecdotal folklore through which a community defines itself, because they both often choose to present their characters in the act of telling stories, and because in drawing on that oral tradition they both write as their characters speak, in a language whose pith and vigor has not yet been worn into cliché.... The comparison seems appropriate too, because Mr. Wideman, like Faulkner, is better at creating a whole imagined world than at creating individual pieces of fiction. (13)

Pointing to Wideman’s loose structure of individual pieces, Gorra remarks that the “open-ended irresolution” the author thereby creates is risky. “[I]t makes me suspect that new readers will at first find Mr. Wideman’s work confusing, in much the same way as one’s first taste of Faulkner can seem bewildering. But to my mind the rewards of his work more than repay the initial effort” (13).

Wideman’s work has proven itself to be rewarding in the growing reputation accredited to his writing. In creating his unique literary style in the process of returning to his black roots, Wideman takes part in that vast literary tradition of recreating black historical narratives.

After a fling with postmodernist uncertainties, Wideman returned to his own sustaining background thereby forging a distinct black language. “He has moved from working primarily within a white literary tradition to developing new literary elements based on African American history and culture,” Barbara Christian observes. These include: “a reinvention of black English; the technique, dream time; his engagement with the violence imposed on African Americans; and his contemporary rendition of the inner lives of historical characters, including members of his own family” (2328).

In this distinct voice Wideman probes into the social circumstances which have shaped the lives of his relatives and community members over time. The individual fate which runs like an underlying current throughout most of the narratives is embodied in his brother Robby’s life. In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman addresses the forces which have forged his brother’s fate, a fate representative of millions of young black men, by rendering the narrative through Robby’s voice.

6.3.4. *Brothers in the Context of the Underclass Debate*

In Wideman’s only non-fiction work, *Brothers and Keepers*, he situates his brother Robby’s life in the larger context of the socio-historical developments as they have shaped and affected their family and their urban community in Pittsburgh. The following section will trace these developments and will place a particular emphasis on the economic shifts that occurred in the urban and national economy during the 1960s and 1970s in order to draw a link between these shifts and Robby Wideman’s situation, who is serving a life sentence in prison.

In the first chapter of the book, Wideman goes back in time to his paternal grandfather, Harry Wideman, as he embarks on his migration from Greenwood, South Carolina, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1906. Upon his arrival

he found a raw, dirty, double-dealing city. He learned its hills and rivers, the strange names of Dagos and Hunkies and Polacks who’d been drawn, as he had, by steel mills and coal mines, by the smoke and heat and dangerous work that meant any strong-backed, stubborn young man, even a black one, could earn pocketfuls of money.

Grandpa's personal quest connected him with hordes of other displaced black men seeking a new day in the promised land of the North. (22)

When Harry Wideman, "a short, thick, dark man whose mahogany color passed on to Daddy," arrives in Pittsburgh and looks out over the city and the nearby country side from Bruston Hill, he has dreams and visions. He longs for a companion and he is eager to plant his seed and shape history.

He sees things with his loins as much as his eyes. Hills rolling to the horizon, toward the invisible rivers, are breasts and buttocks. Shadowed spaces, nestling between the rounded hills, summon him. Whatever happens to him in this city, whatever he accomplishes will be an answer to the soft, insinuating challenge thrown up at him as he stares over the teeming land. This city will measure his manhood. (22)

In outlining their grandfather's journey to Robby in his communicative narrative, Wideman includes the rapidly changing urban context their forebear encountered in Pittsburgh. While the city was already crowded for newly arriving black migrants, forcing his grandfather to rent-share his bed with other men working shifts, new migrants were continually arriving. "In the twenty years between 1910 and 1930, the black population of Pittsburgh increased by nearly fifty thousand" (23).

Eventually, the ghettos exploded—and soon afterwards jobs disappeared. In his narrative, Wideman abruptly leaps forward in time as he ponders the river running next to the correctional facility which has become his younger brother's new and permanent "home". It's a "working river," he remarks, "nothing pretty about it; ... a place to dump things, to empty sewers. The Ohio's thick and filthy, stinking of coal, chemicals, offal, bitter with rust from the flaking hulls of iron-ore barges inching grayly to and from the steel mills. But viewed from barred windows, from tiered cages, the river must call to the prisoners' hearts, a natural symbol of flight and freedom" (25).

The irony of the juxtaposition is not lost on the reader: While the Ohio River summoned Harry Wideman to its shores, imbued with erotic images enticing him to realize his manhood in a city full of economic promises, Robby Wideman's perspective of the same river is limited to a view through barred windows, exposing only a gutter-like waterway which is polluted with the litter and refuse of a bygone economic era.

Why is the young Robby Wideman not able to share in the promises the industrial city gave to his grandfather? Repeatedly, the author points to the importance of structural changes in understanding the disparate predicaments of grandfather and grandson. The most obvious

change took place in the labor sector. While well-paying unionized manufacturing jobs were available to “strong-backed, stubborn—even black—men” when Robby’s grandfather arrived in Pittsburgh early in the century, those jobs were lost in the postwar years due to deindustrialization and relocation, a fact which has extensively been elaborated on earlier in the chapter. Thus when Robby and his running partners arrived at the labor market in the early 1970s, it had nothing to offer them. Unlike the opportunities open to his grandfather, Robby’s prospects of obtaining a job that paid him a living wage were minimal.

The historian Thomas J. Sugrue explains the structural inequality which emerged in America’s cities in the postwar years and which has extended into the twenty-first century as “the consequence of the unequal distribution of power and resources” (14). The same phenomenon is described by Wideman in poetic terms as he observes his native community, Homewood, spiraling down a vortex of economic and cultural decline:

Because Homewood was self-contained and possessed such a strong personality, because its people depended less on outsiders than they did on each other for so many of their most basic satisfactions, they didn’t notice the net settling over their community until it was already firmly in place. Even though the strands of the net—racial discrimination, economic exploitation, white hate and fear—had existed time out of mind, what people didn’t notice or chose not to notice was that the net was being drawn tighter, that ruthless people outside the community had the power to choke the life out of Homewood, and as soon as it served their interests would do just that. (74-5)

Robby Wideman and his friends get caught in the tight net suffocating the neighborhood. Isolated in a racially segregated, impoverished community, cut off from mainstream society, and without any training or skills to benefit them in the working world, they retreat into their own subculture where issues of masculinity and success are redefined to match their options. And these, they know, are limited. In an extended stream-of-consciousness interaction between Robby and his friend Garth they ponder their possibilities for material success in life:

The world’s a stone bitch. Nothing true if that’s not true. The man had you coming and going. He owned everything worth owning and all you’d ever get was what he didn’t want anymore, what he’d chewed and spit out and left in the gutter for niggers to fight over. Garth had pointed to the street and said, If we ever make it, it got to come from there, from the curb. We got to melt that rock till we get us some money. He grinned then, Ain’t no big thing. We’ll make it, brother man. We got what it takes. It’s our time. (64)

Garth never makes it. He contracts an intestinal disease which is not properly diagnosed for months, and dies in his early twenties. Robby does not make it either. Despite his big dreams and high hopes to make money from dealing drugs so he can “come... home one day with

[his] pockets full of hundred-dollar bills and buy... Mommy a house and anything else she wants," he does not rise very far. Instead he becomes part of the growing statistics of black males crowding the nation's prisons. In his book, *Why Are so Many Black Men in Prison*, Demico Boothe reports that out of the more than 11 million black adult males in the U.S. population, nearly 1.5 million are in prisons and jails with another 3.5 million linked to the prison system through previous offenses (see Boothe 1-10). The numbers reveal a dramatic racial disproportion of the incarcerated population. Structuralist theorists contend that the lack of employment opportunities in inner-city areas where African Americans are concentrated—which is linked to black crime—is due to urban restructuring. They therefore interpret Robby's fate as being intimately linked to the economic forces which have affected inner-city blacks in the second half of the twentieth century.

Most moderate theorists will also point out, however, that economic forces are but one facet in the bigger picture which is necessary for a proper understanding of the plight of today's urban blacks. The ensuing final conclusion will build on this approach by integrating the cultural *and* the liberal factors elaborated on in this study. It shall be argued that a comprehensive perspective of the evolvement of black urban ghettos and the present day situation of inner-city African American communities can only be reached by synthesizing the liberal and the cultural points of view.

V. Conclusion

Dr King did not die so that *half* of us would “make it” and *half* of us perish, forever tarnishing two centuries of struggle and agitation for our equal rights. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West)

The central purpose of this study has been to explore the factors which have led to the emergence of impoverished black inner-city communities today. As the first three chapters have shown, the background which *set the stage* for black inner-city ghettos to emerge goes back to the origins of slavery. During this “peculiar institution,” which exemplified the “gap between the ideal and mid-19th century realities of American society,” African Americans were denied the right to establish regular family patterns (Zacharasiewicz 271). Bereft of their roots, their language, their kin, and their dignity, they started out in a state of hopelessness facing “a distinctive form of the Absurd” as Cornel West has called it (*Race* 23). Only with the “genius of ... black foremothers and forefathers [who] equipped black folk with the cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness,” African American communities survived the “ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs” (*Race* 23; 27). After emancipation many left the southern, racially oppressive plantation system and migrated to urban areas in search of economic opportunities and a better life, a movement which accelerated during the first half of the twentieth century, culminated in the 1940s and 1950s, and ended in the late 1960s. At mid-century, African Americans started asserting their rights as citizens in individual incidents as well as in a full-fledged movement for civil rights which culminated in the passing of the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Act, granting African Americans full equality before the law.

At this point, however, which also marks the mid-point of this study, the success story ends. Or rather: it splits into two distinct stories. While two-thirds of the black population moved out of the black ghetto and up the socio-economic ladder, one third was left behind, *locked into the spiral of decline* of concentrated poverty in inner-city residential areas. Since then, the situation in these racially and socially isolated urban areas has not improved. Quite to the contrary: “I see a younger, meaner generation out there now,” McCall writes, comparing his

own wayward youth on the streets of Portsmouth, Virginia, in the sixties with young urban blacks in the late 90s. They are “more lost and alienated than we were and place even less value on life” (*Generation* 276).

Scholars and theorists from every political persuasion recognize the fact that the situation in black urban ghettos has been deteriorating steadily since the late 1960s and that there is an urgent need for change. Yet, as has been shown in the juxtaposition of perspectives and policy suggestions, proposals to affect such change vary greatly. The following section will suggest an inclusive perspective which seeks to combine the structural and the cultural arguments like puzzle pieces into a comprehensive picture. The role of the “new autobiography” in the post-modern literary crisis shall then be presented in the context of this study. Finally, a brief overview of the most prominent policy suggestions shall be given before concluding the study with a larger historical perspective of African American history offered by Barack Obama in the wake of his presidency—a historic moment not only for the African American community but for the country as a whole, which also marks the chronological conclusion of this work.

1. Assembling the Pieces

African Americans understand that culture matters but that culture is shaped by circumstances. (Barack Obama)

The interplay between individual *choices* and the *circumstances* individuals find themselves in lies at the heart of the underclass debate. It is this “old dialectic of fate and will,” Gates notes, the dialectic “between social structure and individual agency” which provides the frame for action in which we forge our lives. This locus, Gates further observes, “has been the shared preoccupation of naturalist fiction and sociological analysis” (“Influence” 96).

The debate over which one of the two factors weighs more heavily in shaping lives—individual behavior versus structural features—is also central to the political discourse and policy proposals aimed at alleviating the situation of the poor are generally framed around one or the other of these two explanations. Referring to the Ownership Society, a term used by George W. Bush in connection with tax-cut proposals and conservative models of health care and social security, Obama defines the philosophy behind this concept as “You’re on your own” (*Hope* 211). “It’s a tempting idea,” Obama concedes, “one that’s elegant in its simplicity and that frees us of any obligations we have toward one another. However,” he then adds, “there’s only one problem with it. It won’t work—at least not for those who are already falling behind in the global economy [since it] magnifies the risks and rewards of today’s winner-take-all economy.” (*Hope* 211-2). In such a system, Obama explains:

If you are healthy or wealthy or just plain lucky, then you will become more so. If you are poor or sick or catch a bad break, you will have nobody to look to for help. That’s not a recipe for sustained economic growth or the maintenance of a strong American middle class. It’s certainly not a recipe for social cohesion. It runs counter to those values that say we have a stake in each other’s success. (*Hope* 213)

Shipler equals the two sides of the political “sterile game of blame” involved in the underclass debate to a myth and an antimyth. The myth, representing conservative reasoning, holds that “anyone who works hard can prosper in America,” while the antimyth sees even “the most persistent ambitions of those who begin life as poor” thwarted due to societal institutions (*Dots* 15). The problem is, as Shipler points out, that people usually do not fit into such clear-cut categories. Life is too complex to be reduced to the confines of either liberal or conservative theory. Referring to his encounters with long-term unemployed and low-wage workers, Shipler notes:

I’ve had trouble finding poor folks whose own behavior has not contributed something to their hardships: having babies out of wedlock, dropping out of school, doing drugs, showing up late to work or not at all. Yet it is also difficult to find behavior that has not somehow been inherited from the legacy of being badly parented, badly schooled, badly housed in neighborhoods where the horizon of possibility is so near at hand that it blinds people to their own potential for imagination. (*Dots* 15)

Poverty, therefore, is a “constellation of difficulties that magnify one another,” Shipler explains: Limited abilities may lead to dead-end jobs; the restrictive effects of low wages are sometimes exacerbated by unwise spending; poor housing may go hand in hand with poor

parenting, and a lack of health insurance is even more keenly felt by persons leading an unhealthy life-style. “The troubles run strongly along both macro and micro levels, as systemic problems in the structure of political economic power, and as individual problems in personal and family life” (Shipler, *Poor* 285).

The interactions between environmental assaults and detrimental behavior are even more entrenched where the personality formation of people is affected, such as the link between “nurturing and a baby’s brain development, between a woman’s childhood abuse and her later parenting, between the lack of self-esteem and the lack of employability, between the high cost of housing and the high price paid for malnutrition and cognitive impairment” (Shipler, *Dots* 20). There is no single variant, therefore, causing inter-generational patterns of poverty. The full array of factors involved in creating and perpetuating economic distress needs to be considered in order to understand the complex processes involved.

“Imagine,” Shipler suggests, “if conservatives who care and liberals who dare to listen would each bring their pieces of the puzzle to the table and assemble them all together. Then they would have a full picture of the problems of poverty” (*Dots* 15). A full picture is necessary in order to define the problems accurately. “If you don’t allow yourself a complete definition, you will never approach a thorough solution,” Shipler maintains. Thus, attempts to solve the problems of inter-generational poverty in isolated urban areas will only be effective if a comprehensive picture, including all the variables, is taken into account.

2. Autobiography as a Literary Beacon of Hope

The “new autobiography” emerged in a time of artistic crisis. (Alfred Hornung)

While social scientists and policy makers seek to analyze and reconstruct the comprehensive picture invoked by Shipler, it is the literary artist who paints the picture in words in order to make it visible to the interested onlooker. Life stories relaying firsthand accounts of black

urban ghettos therefore play a significant role in making the living environment of millions of urban African Americans accessible to the broader public.

In the context of this study it is interesting to note that the literary landscape has witnessed an “autobiographical turn” since the 1970s, both in Europe and the United States (Hornung, *Avant-garde* 9). Alfred Hornung points out that “[t]his turn to autobiographical writing is particularly noticeable among those contemporary novelists who appear to be playful practitioners of fictional games or who – from the perspective of their marginal or ethnic backgrounds – seem to be in search of their ethnic identity within a dominant white culture” (*Avant-garde* 9). This “new autobiography,” as Alain Robbe-Grillet has called it, advocates the “interrelation of art and life” (*Avant-garde* 10). Thus, writers such as John Edgar Wideman, whose work is a classic representation of the new autobiography, reveal a strong concern for social reform in their life stories. Defying the aesthetic assumptions of postmodern culture, particularly the “pronouncement of the death of the author and [the] denial of an extratextual reference,” these new autobiographers are actively involved in “the avant-garde project of making art possible for life” (*Avant-garde* 9). They boldly offer their point of view and relay their experiences despite their awareness of the “precarious representation of the self which they question but affirm at the same time” (*Avant-garde* 10).

In the larger picture of African American history therefore, Wideman testifies to the continuation of the collective literary effort which started with the early slave narratives and reaches into the autobiographical avant-garde of post-modernism. In their literary efforts to make their voices heard and bring about social reform for all black Americans, autobiographical writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X, Claude Brown, Cupcake Brown, Nathan McCall, and John Edgar Wideman have contributed their words to the *long steady march of African Americans*, following James Weldon Johnson’s call in his “Negro National Anthem,” written in 1900:

Lift ev’ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.
(768, emphasis added)

Returning to the work of social analysts and political policy makers, the following section will offer a sketch of the most important policy measures relevant for the improvement of the socio-economic situation in urban minority neighborhoods.

3. In Search of Effective Social Policy: Obama in Good Company

We will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and privately. (Abraham Lincoln)

In searching for adequate and comprehensive policy measures for improving the lives of the most disadvantaged in the American economic system, Barack Obama turns to some of his presidential predecessors—most notably Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt—to explore the role national government has historically played in effective presidential leadership. Reminiscent of the dialectic interplay between fate and will, Obama points to the “constant balancing act [in the American economy] between self-interest and community, markets and democracy, the concentration of wealth and power and the opening up of opportunity” (*Hope* 229). He concludes that this balance has been lost in Washington under the conservative administration in the early years of the new millennium: “[W]ith unions weakened ... and lobbyists for the powerful pressing their full advantage, there are few countervailing voices to remind us of who we are and where we’ve come from, and to affirm our bonds with one another” (229). Therefore, Obama suggests, Americans should take a collective look at their own history in order to understand how the country has mastered national crises in the past, crises which ultimately strengthened the country as a democratic nation.

The idea of government investment in the young nation's infrastructure and the notion of an active national government was thoroughly embraced by *Abraham Lincoln*. His presidency was marked not only by the Civil War but also by the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. As a Republican, Lincoln considered capitalism to be the best means of creating opportunity and he considered "free labor" to be the quintessential American way of success. Yet, he embraced strong government investment in America's infrastructure in order to ease the socio-economic upheavals created in families and communities due to the effects of industrialization. Therefore, while the Civil War was raging, Lincoln "embarked on a series of policies that not only laid the groundwork for a fully integrated national economy but extended the ladder of opportunity downward to reach more and more people" (Obama, *Hope* 180).

The next major economic crisis after the Industrial Revolution was triggered by the stock market crash of 1929. Obama points out that the subsequent depression was "the last time [the country] faced an economic transformation as disruptive as the one [it] faces today" (*Hope* 209). During the Great Depression, "the government's vital role in regulating the marketplace became fully apparent" and a series of government interventions that arrested further economic contraction were carried out during *Franklin D. Roosevelt's* presidency (*Hope* 108). The New Deal administration sought to create a regulatory structure aimed at limiting the risk of economic crisis and supported a new social compact between government, business, and workers that "resulted in widespread prosperity and economic security for more than fifty years" (*Hope* 209). Thus, by recognizing that an active national government is indispensable in dealing with market failures, FDR "saved capitalism from itself by ... invest[ing] in its people and infrastructure, regulat[ing] the marketplace, and protect[ing] labor from chronic deprivation" (*Hope* 183).

The only problem with these stories of liberal triumph, Obama notes, is that "capitalism would not stand still ... and is still not standing still" (*Hope* 184). In the new economic world order, defined by globalization and technological innovation, "a new mix of policies" is needed to provide "widespread economic security ... and to reinvigorate a dynamic free market" (188). Traditional conservative approaches of lowering taxes, reducing regulations, and diminishing the safety net even further are no longer effective options, liberal policy makers hold. As has been seen by the widening gap between the middle and the upper classes since 2001, these measures serve only to maximize the effects of the current winner-take-all economic system. David K. Shipler illustrates these trends, which were aggravated under

George W. Bush's conservative administration, in numbers: According to the Federal Reserve, the richest ten percent of the nation increased their wealth by 6.1% between 2001 and 2004, averaging their net worth at \$3.11 million, while the poorest 25 percent, "whose assets equaled their debt in 2001, dropped to a net worth of minus \$1,400 in 2004," plunging them headlong into debt (*Dots* 14). Needless to say, the urban minority poor are at the very bottom of these statistics.

"What might a new economic consensus look like," Obama asks in search of bipartisan common ground. What are the ideological "places where, in the tradition of ... Lincoln, we can invest in our infrastructure and our people ... and begin to modernize and rebuild the social contract that FDR first stitched together in the middle of the last century?" (*Hope* 188). Some of the proposals advanced in response to this question during the 2008 presidential election campaign, which are supported by moderates from both major parties, shall be outlined in the following section.

4. Attempting Solutions

**Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.
(Frederick Douglass)**

"The chief business of the American people is business," Calvin Coolidge once said, and Ted Turner famously added: "In America money is how we keep score" (qtd. in Obama, *Hope* 176-7). In this long-standing tradition, conservatives hold that reducing government to a minimum, thereby strengthening the economy to create jobs, is the best strategy to devise antipoverty programs. They further advocate non-preferential job practices and self-help programs embedded in free market strategies as a means of empowering marginalized groups with high poverty levels.

Liberals agree with the basic tenet that a strong economy is the country's best engine of creating opportunities on every social level, but they add further policy suggestions aimed at spreading the wealth generated by the domestic economy. "[We] lobby for those social programs that have made a demonstrable difference in the lives of those sufficiently motivated to seize these expanded opportunities, and to reinforce those programs that reignite motivation in the face of despair," Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West announce in the foreword to their book *The Future of the Race*. Incidentally, both of these influential African American scholars, who were trained at Yale and Harvard respectively, profited from the newly implemented affirmative action programs in the late 1960s, which ended the schools' racist quotas after centuries of white male dominated scholarship. Yet, more importantly, they add, "we have to demand a structural change in this country, the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for our cities, as the national Urban League has called for repeatedly" (*Future* xiii-iv).

Marion Crain, director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina, and sociology professor Arne Kalleberg suggest adopting the "broadest possible definition of poverty [thereby] emphasizing proposals for policy reform that create opportunity not only by improving jobs, providing income supports, and encouraging savings, but also by strengthening the community and family institutions that mediate economic opportunity" (8). The general definitions offered in these proposals constitute the ideological background to most antipoverty programs and will be spelled out in the form of representative policy suggestions in the following paragraphs.

As one of the top priorities in considering policy reform for impoverished Americans, liberals and moderate conservatives advocate measures to *raise the wages for low-skilled jobs*. "We must build an economy that values work," (260) presidential candidate and Senator John Edwards insists in 2007 in unison with Barack Obama who advocates increased "opportunities [for workers] to earn a living wage" (*Hope* 291). Alluding to the widening gap between the very rich and the middle- and working-classes, Edwards suggests that "this includes reversing tax cuts that have shifted the tax burden away from wealth and onto work" (260). Since policies that support low-wage workers would be more likely to be enacted if they were encouraged by unions, workers should be guaranteed a meaningful right to organize, liberals across the spectrum agree. Strong unions could transform poorly-paying service jobs into the "good" manufacturing jobs of the past, thereby building the foundation of the middle-class today.

Training marginalized and low-skilled workers for occupations relevant to the highly technological economy of the 21st century is another essential factor in reducing high poverty rates. This could be realized by supporting youth apprenticeships with corporations, as proposed by David K. Shipler, or by creating and expanding innovative programs designed to prepare willing workers without skills, experience, or references. One such example is the successful Jobs for Life (JfL) initiative, founded by Chris Mangum and Donald McCoy in 1996, which combines job- and life skills-training and connects the trainees with work and a community of support. At the same time, Edwards suggests, government can create “short-term jobs to serve as stepping-stones, helping people work their way out of poverty [in order to] get the experience they need for better jobs in the future” (261).

Education, of course, is another issue on top of the priority list for long-term changes in the social fabric of American society. “Throughout our history, education has been at the heart of a bargain this nation makes with its citizens,” Obama states. “If you work hard and take responsibility, you’ll have a chance for a better life. And in a world where knowledge determines value in the job market ... too many of America’s schools are not holding up their end of the bargain” (*Hope* 189). Reforms which are identified as having a high impact on student achievement should be implemented and funded adequately, Obama suggests. He also proposes higher pay for highly skilled teachers and suggests that “those willing to teach in the toughest urban schools should be paid even more” (*Hope* 192).

Policies to help impoverished households *save money* include strong protection against predatory lending and establishing bank accounts for the 22 million American households without them, thereby saving these families “billions of dollars every year for services most banks provide for free” (Edwards 261). To help poor families build assets, homeownership could be encouraged by implementing a progressive tax credit, thereby supporting first-time homebuyers (see Edwards 261).

In order to *strengthen families and communities*, the marriage penalty, which burdens poor workers with a tax increase if they choose to get married, should be changed, Edwards suggests. (see 261). Community-based programs with a proven track record in preventing unwanted pregnancies and marriage education workshops could also encourage the increase of two-parent stable households according to Obama (see *Hope* 394).

With regards to the *costs* created by additional policy measures, Shipler asks: “Can the wealthiest country in the world afford to pay? – You bet we can,” is his reply, “especially if

those at the top are willing to sacrifice a little” (*Poor* 297). Obama agrees and explains: “What’s missing is not money, but a national sense of urgency” (*Hope* 197). Alluding to those “at the top” who would have “to sacrifice a little” he adds: “Once your drapes cost more than the average American’s yearly salary, then you can afford to pay a bit more in taxes” (*Hope* 229).

Finally, in agreement with conservatives, liberals point out that policy reforms in black urban ghettos will not prove effective if they are not accompanied by *responsible individual agency*. “Each member of the black community [must] accept individual responsibility for her or his behavior,” Gates remarks (Gates, *Future* xiii). Not to demand this from everyone—whether “that behavior assumes the form of black-on-black homicide, violations by gang members against the sanctity of the church, unprotected sexual activity, gangster rap lyrics, misogyny and homophobia—is to function merely as ethnic cheerleaders” (*Future* xiii). At the same time, however, Gates points out that the structural changes necessary to uplift downtrodden black urban communities need to be implemented. Only if responsible agency is met by structural adjustments, Gates maintains, will meaningful change among impoverished African Americans occur.

5. Audacious Glimpses of Hope

There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America. (Barack Obama)

In the African American journey, which led them as an oppressed minority from the southern slave plantations into the desolate urban cores of the twenty-first century, what does the election of Barack Obama signify? “There is no more important event in the history of black people in America than the election of Barack Obama,” Gates maintains in an interview with the Harvard magazine *The Root*. “I cried when he was elected, and I cried at his inauguration.

Nevertheless,” he continues, “that does not change the percentage of black men in prison, the percentage of black men harassed by racial profiling. It does not change the number of black children living near the poverty line. Which is almost a similar percentage as were under poverty when Martin Luther King was assassinated” (1).

Obama affirms Gates’ assessment. “To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters—that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in the country today are largely self-inflicted” (*Hope* 275). Like Gates, Obama points to the socio-economic indicators which show blacks lagging behind on every level: from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership. “Yet,” Obama continues, “there has been a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature” (*Hope* 276-77).

In fact, the interracial struggle in the U.S. has come a long way. In *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin writes: “[t]he history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually been met” (*Notes* 129-30).

In the wake of his presidency, Barack Obama encourages all Americans to situate interracial relations in this historical context while maintaining a vision of “faith in the larger project of American renewal” (*Hope* 256). Referring to the countless forebears of African Americans who had to endure hardship and suffering in leveling the path for future generations and who succeeded in building “cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities,” (West, *Race* 23), Obama notes: “We need to remind ourselves of this achievement. What’s remarkable is not the number of minorities who have failed to climb into the middle class but the number who succeeded against the odds... That knowledge gives us something to build on. It tells us that more progress can be made” (*Hope* 295).

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English Summary:

Black Urban Ghettos Portrayed in Autobiography: The Long Steady March from Lincoln to Obama

1865 – 2009

According to President Barack Obama “the deteriorating condition of urban African American neighborhoods is an issue, which fan[s] the flames of racial conflict and undermines the progress that’s been made” (295, *Audacity of Hope*). The underlying question of my thesis might be phrased as follows: What explains the emergence and persistence of concentrated, racialized poverty in American metropolitan cities?

In an attempt to take a comprehensive approach to the issue, this study will compare prominent conservative and liberal theories to the views African American autobiographers express implicitly or explicitly in their life writings. Cultural forces to be considered, which are usually emphasized by conservative theorists such as Frazier, Murray, and Magnet, include the loss of traditional family structure, the cultural revolution of the 1960’s and the social transformation in African American neighborhoods. Liberal thinkers, on the other hand, such as Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and W. Julius Wilson, focus on the structural forces in their explanation of black urban poverty. They hold that historical and contemporary racism, segregation, and macro-economic changes are primarily responsible for the plight of the inner-city poor. The literary sources which will be referred to in the frame of these cultural and structural theories include autobiographical works by Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Claude Brown, Cupcake Brown, James McBride, Nathan McCall, John Edgar Wideman, and LeAlan Jones. The timeframe which will serve as the basis for my analysis commences with the abolition of slavery in 1865 and ends with the election of President Barack Obama in 2009. My work will conclude with a glimpse into the future by briefly surveying President Obama’s policy suggestions as they apply to inner-city neighborhoods.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung:

Afro-amerikanische Ghettos in Autobiographien: Der lange Weg von Lincoln zu Obama

In seinem Buch *The Audacity of Hope* wies Barack Obama auf die sich ständig „verschlechternden Zustände in den städtischen afro-amerikanischen Vierteln hin, welche die Rassenkonflikte weiter anheizen und den Fortschritt auf diesem Gebiet unterminieren“ (295). Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es die Gründe für die konzentrierte, andauernde Armut und die soziale Isolation in den afro-amerikanischen Großstadtghettos anhand von Autobiographien und sozio-kulturellen Theorien zu beleuchten.

Um einer umfassenden Perspektive gerecht zu werden, werden sowohl konservative als auch liberale Ansätze herangezogen, um repräsentative autobiographische Werke zu examinieren. Die konservativ-kulturellen Argumente, welche das Wertesystem der afro-amerikanischen Gemeinschaften in den Vordergrund stellen, betonen den Mangel an traditionellen Familienstrukturen, die kulturelle Revolution der 1960er Jahre und die sozio-kulturellen Veränderungen der vergangenen Jahrzehnte in den schwarzen Ghettos. Liberal-strukturelle Argumente andererseits stellen vorwiegend auf Faktoren wie Rassismus, Segregation, und makro-ökonomische Veränderungen ab.

Zu den Vertretern der konservativ-kulturellen Theorien zählen E. Franklin Frazier, Charles Murray und Myron Magnet, während Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates , Jr. und William Julius Wilson zu den liberalen Denkern auf diesem Gebiet zählen.

Die autobiographischen Werke von Harriet Jacobs, Malcolm X, Claude Brown, Cupcake Brown, Nathan McCall und John Edgar Wideman bilden die Grundlage für die kultur-und literaturwissenschaftliche Analyse, wobei sie verschiedene Zeitepochen in der Entwicklung der städtischen afro-amerikanischen Ghettos repräsentieren. Der Zeitrahmen beginnt mit dem Ende des amerikanischen Bürgerkriegs 1865 und endet mit der Amtseinführung von Präsident Barack Obama, dem ersten afro-amerikanischen Präsidenten, im Jahr 2009.

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