"New York is a State of Mind": Race, Marginalization, and Cultural Expression in

Postwar New York City

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

While the urban crisis debate has expanded to examine a variety of American cities, the general exploration of how African Americans have responded to, and challenged, racial and urban inequality remains focused on grassroots political and community activism. This account of postwar New York City seeks to examine how structural discrimination created racial inequality, how African Americans suffered from a complex system of social consequences that further marginalized them, and how a politically conscious art form emerged from the destitution of the urban crisis. As illustrated through Robert Merton's theory of Anomie, restricted opportunity for social and economic advancement created an environment vulnerable to crime. Not only were African American neighbourhoods susceptible to crime, but the conservative agenda tended to demonize African Americans as dangerous criminals, targeting them in the rise of mass incarceration. Resources were funneled into imprisoning more people, and African Americans were disproportionately represented in the American corrections system. As a result of this, African Americans were consistently excluded from certain jobs and denied basic civil rights. This thesis will also explore how African Americans responded to, and challenged, racial and urban inequality through the arts. The Black Arts Movement emerged from New York City in the mid-1960s. The movement was both confrontational and socially conscious. Artists sought to articulate the struggles of urban African Americans while empowering, educating, and protesting racial injustices. The Black Arts Movement was fundamentally political, and a predecessor to the Hip Hop culture which emerged from the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City.

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INTRODUCTION

The World War II era marked the pinnacle of America's industrial efficiency. Production fueled the efforts for victory in Europe and the Pacific, and domestic manpower reached a level of resourcefulness that has yet to be paralleled in the United States. High demand for wartime goods forced employment opportunities to open to previously excluded minorities. As a sign of the changing times, President Roosevelt issued the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), established on June 25, 1941, which barred "discrimination of defense jobs because of race, creed, color or national origin."[1] For many African Americans, passage of the FEPC seemed to end exclusion from manufacturing and mass-production industries and signal their opening to the American mainstream economy. African Americans flocked to industrial centres in hopes of capitalizing on employment shortages in manufacturing plants that were awarded lucrative defensive industry contracts. However, employment discrimination persisted and African Americans were isolated in racially segregated ghettos in the urban industrial centres of the Northeast, Midwest and West.

After World War II, African Americans in urban ghettos further endured economic discrimination and many were victims of perpetual poverty. Polarization of wealth and opportunity hardened residential segregation, forming urban African American ghettos. White Americans, with the aid of government subsidization programs,

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[1] "President Orders an Even Break for Minorities in Defense Jobs: He Issues an Order That Defense Contract Holders Not Allow Discrimination Against Negroes or Any Worker," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1941.

fled the city centre and built new lives in the "lily white"[2] suburbs. Marginalization and deterioration plagued inner cities in a myriad of forms including, deindustrialization, underemployment, disinvestment, taxpayer flight, urban renewal, crime and mass incarceration. There is no simple explanation for the emergence of persistent, concentrated, and racialized poverty in the post-World War II American urban metropolis.

Academic interest has produced a variety of interpretations that recognize salient characteristics of inner-city decline and racialized poverty. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton thoroughly illustrated the devastating effects of residential segregation in their book *American Apartheid*. Massey and Denton argued, "because of residential segregation, a significant share of black America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm," consequently, "social and physical deterioration abound" these urban neighbourhoods.[3] However, not until recently has historical scholarship pursued explanations for the causes and origins of the urban crisis. Thomas Sugrue's pioneering account, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996), traces industrial decline and urban deterioration of America's racially isolated inner-city neighbourhoods to the twenty-five years immediately preceding World War II. Sugrue contends, "the coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics and, politics…set the stage for fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America."[4] Furthermore, Sugrue claims, "that

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[2] "Lily White," was a popular term used by the media to describe the exodus of white middle class families from urban neighbourhoods to suburban communities. As described in "Urban Renewal: A Costly Dream," *The Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1958.

[3] Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

[4] Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality."[5] Sugrue's case study of Detroit has added much needed historical scholarship to the field of postwar urban decline and race in America. However, not all scholars viewed African Americans as victims of structural discrimination and abandonment. Heather Ann Thompson, in her book *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, argues, "African American middle class, supported by hopeful poor and working class blacks…triumphed in this drawn out civic conflict," emerging with electoral control of numerous urban centres.[6] While Sugrue's book triggered debate, there is a growing consensus, and it is the position taken in this paper, that Sugrue has correctly identified the origins of the urban crisis during the quarter century following World War II. While the literature has evolved to examine additional industrial cities, the focus of case studies has broached a deeper understanding to the nuances that transformed America's inner cities during mid-twentieth century. For example, Robert Self's book *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, illustrated that African American political groups contested and shaped the postwar urban centres. Self explained that African Americans were victims of structural discriminations, however they, "too imagined the city and its possibilities, reacted to urban decline and decay, and fashioned politics and social movements with the ambition of making their neighborhoods and cities better places to

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[5]   Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 5.
[6]   Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 6.

live."[7] Academic interest has pushed scholarship to examine how both white and black Americans formed the state of urban America.

Some social scientists produced foundational scholarship and maintained that pathological behaviours were the cause of African American poverty and the unraveling of America's inner cities. Conservative scholars argued that the culture of poverty was chiefly responsible for the moralistic and physical deterioration of urban industrial centres. However, the work of these scholars, such as Edward C. Banfield, lacked the historical exploration to adequately contextualize behavior such as racial riots. Some conservative scholars contended that violence, crime, and unemployment due to indolence amongst African Americans produced the urban crisis.[8] While other scholars in the Culture of Poverty school focused on the breakdown of the nuclear family among urban African Americans as a significant contributing factor of urban decline. The respected work of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for example, related inequality to unwed pregnancies and the corruption of the traditional family structure.[9] However, it is the intention of this paper to prove that, while the cycle of poverty is a vicious consequence of the urban crisis, it is not the cause of the crisis. Scholars from this school of thought do not examine the role of economic and political discrimination, and lack a thorough historical examination, leaving their interpretation flawed.

Liberal scholars attempted to discredit conservative interpretations by examining the structural discriminations that fueled racial inequality and caused the urban crisis. As

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[7]   Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.
[8]   Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*, (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1968).
[9]   Lee Rainwater, William L. Yancey, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1967).

mentioned above, Sugrue's historical account of Detroit was pioneering in its assertion

that economic and political inequalities perpetuated poverty. A new generation of

historians would thoroughly chronicle urban decline in America's post-World War II

Northeastern, and Midwestern cities informed by his work.[10] While the literature did not

always directly focus on race and deindustrialization, urban decline through may lenses,

such as: the emergence of grassroots conservatism;[11] the demographic, political, and

economic shift to the Sunbelt regions of the South and Southwest;[12] the construction of

suburbia;[13] and the flight of capital and deindustrialization.[14]

The next phase in the urban crisis debate builds on Sugrue's *Origins*. Historians in

the field examined economic and political inequalities, inner city marginalization, and

how urban African American residents challenged racial injustices. The evolution of the

historiography has benefitted greatly from this most recent shift in scholarship, as

interpretations illustrate the diversity of how African Americans responded to the

complexities of racial discrimination in their respective urban communities. From

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[10]   Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[11]   Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[12]   Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, forthcoming), Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 0000).
[13]   Andrew Wise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[14]   Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. (See Sugrue's notes).

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grassroots activism to popular culture, African Americans struggled to challenge social, economic, and political inequalities.[15]

One fundamental danger, when explaining the urban crisis and how African Americans challenged racial inequality, is to universalize the experience and response as one shared by all African Americans. While some themes and characteristics are shared by a number of inner cities, each community's story is unique and should be treated as a separate and significant piece of history. Similarly, not every African American was a grassroots activist or a militant; individuals responded to racial inequality in an array of forms. It is important to document the variety of distinct characteristics and responses, and to avoid generalizing the African American experience as universally shared.

New York City's path to the postwar urban crisis differs from other cities. Cities like Detroit or Cleveland spiraled into urban deterioration on an economy primarily centred on manufacturing, whereas New York City had historically distinguished itself with a diversified economy. Another distinct characteristic of New York City's urban crisis was its multiethnic composition, as opposed to the more prominent narrative of a

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[15] The historiography of how African Americans challenged urban inequality is a growing body of literature and is becoming quite extensive. This list attempts to illustrate the broad range of interpretations. For grassroots political response to the urban crisis see Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Matthew Countryman, *Up South: The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). For an opposing argument see Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). For an exploration of African American women's involvement see Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggle against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Felicia Kornbluh, *A Right to Welfare? Poor Women, Professionals, and Poverty Programs, 1935-1975* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,). For a discussion of African American cultural response to the urban crisis see Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

predominately black and white social division. As this account will illustrate, despite a more developed economic base and a more complicated array of racial communities, African Americans in New York City endured social, economic, and political discrimination which perpetuated severe racial and economic inequalities.

This analysis of New York City in postwar America builds on the structural explanation of urban decline. An exploration of a multitude of factors will demonstrate how political and social practices discriminated against African Americans, segregating and isolating them in racial enclaves. Racial enclaves became characterized as ghettos, imprisoning African Americans in deteriorating slum neighbourhoods through a cycle of poverty, furthering social and economic inequities.[16] Consequently, African American ghetto residents were victims of devastating social ills, such as crime, violence, mass incarceration, and racial demonizing. One method through which African Americans responded to social, economic, and political limitations in New York City was combative and confrontational poetry. Inspired by Malcolm X's call for a cultural revolution, artists like The Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron challenged inner city poverty and racial inequality in an attempt to empower African Americans to overcome American apartheid.

In this work I hope to build on the standard account of the urban crisis and how African Americans responded to its negative social consequences. Without diminishing the significance of spatial and economic discrimination, or the importance of African American grassroots political response to the urban crisis, the emphasis of this account will be on the destructive social effects of inner city marginalization and the efforts of artists that contested racial discrimination. I will argue that the urban crisis created

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[16] "Harlem is a Way of Life Called Poverty," *The Chicago Defender Magazine*, Tuesday, May 28, 1963. Pg. 9.

African American ghettos in New York City through a process of victimization that resulted from a lack of opportunity and exclusion from mainstream American society. Consequently, African American communities in New York City suffered from poverty, underemployment, crime, violence, racial profiling, media demonization, and mass incarceration. I contend that the Black Arts Movement emerged from the cruel conditions of the urban crisis. The Black Arts Movement provides valuable insight to how African Americans responded to the urban crisis. The art simultaneously illustrates frustration and despair, and hope for social change and racial equality.

Chapter one will define the urban crisis, and describe the construction of African American ghettos in New York City through the structural explanation of urban inequality. New York City had a substantial African American population before World War II; however, wartime production attracted more Southern African American migrants, and relocated some existing residents to form additional racial enclaves. African Americans were typically forced to settle in deteriorating neighbourhoods that had been abandoned by whites. White flight to outer neighbourhoods or newly constructed suburbs segregated African Americans in slums, and racially restrictive housing covenants prevented residential integration and upward social mobility. Poverty furthered the deterioration of African American neighbourhoods; joblessness, underemployment, and job discrimination were common characteristics in neighbourhoods that perpetuated economic inequality. In an attempt to combat white flight, the municipal government subsidized a number urban renewal projects in hopes of preventing urban deterioration and retaining white middle-class taxpayers. A series of urban housing projects were constructed in African American neighbourhoods, some of

which completely dislocated African Americans to other black enclaves. As well, infrastructure developments achieved a process of disinvestment in African American neighbourhoods, which lowered the value of property and precipitated urban decay. Spatial and economic inequalities created racial ghettos and contributed to the urban crisis for African Americans in New York City.

Chapter two will attempt to push the urban crisis literature beyond its current scope to examine the social consequences of urban inequality on African American ghetto residents. Urban decline and racial marginalization had horrific effects on the African American community in New York City. Exclusion from mainstream American economy and society created an environment susceptible to moral breakdown. African American communities in New York City were victimized by the cycle of poverty, which enabled crime, violence, and narcotics to flourish. While crime, violence, and narcotics were not a universal response by African Americans from the ghetto, crime rates did increase during the urban crisis years. American media and government officials racialized crime and escalated resources to fighting "street crime," a term that became synonymous with African American crime during the urban crisis years.[17] Rhetoric called for a war on crime, and governments funneled more money into policing, the judicial system, and prisons, in hopes of cleaning up the streets. What the war on street crime did accomplish was a new era of mass incarceration and raised to disproportionate amounts the number of African Americans with criminal records, thereby further excluding them from mainstream America. African Americans were disqualified from certain jobs and democratic freedoms. The urban crisis landscape excluded African

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[17] "National Affairs: The Negro Crime Rate: A Failure in Integration," *Time Magazine*, Monday, April 21, 1958.

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Americans from mainstream society, rendering slum neighbourhoods vulnerable to crime and violence. Ultimately, ghetto residents were victims of racial demonizing and mass incarceration.

Chapter three examines how African American artists responded to moral breakdown and the proliferation of social ills in the poor neighbourhoods of New York City. In addition to structural discrimination, African Americans also encountered the psychological challenges of urban inequality and social decay. During the urban crisis years, African American neighbourhoods attracted and produced artists who wrote poems challenging urban inequality, and inspired psychological and physical liberation. Limited opportunity in mainstream America produced an urban African American culture that was socio-political in nature, allowing artists to militantly criticize social, political, and economic inequalities. The poetry that emerged from New York City's African American ghettos united a community of oppressed peoples, and empowered them in a repressive society. The Black Arts movement inspired New York City artists who confronted the indignities and created a cultural expression that promoted racial pride. As well, their poetry provided a valuable conduit for social commentary, protest, and resistance. However, the most significant contribution of the Black Arts movement was its influence in the development of hip-hop culture. Hip-hop emerged from the underclass ghetto of the South Bronx to become an enduring national African American institution. The belligerent and confrontational poetry produced in the Black Arts Movement was a product of the destitute conditions of the urban crisis.

The story of African Americans in New York City during the postwar years bears similarities to other metropolises, especially when it comes to the question of how urban

inequality was shaped by political, economic and spatial discrimination. While there are undoubtedly characteristics unique to each urban centre, structural discrimination was a national problem and a significant factor in the origins of the urban crisis. However, distinct to each community was the response to the crisis. This paper will explore the response of African American residents of New York City who challenged urban inequality through aggressively confrontational poetry. African Americans in New York City created an urban culture that was belligerently socio-political and endured for future generations of oppressed inner-city residents. This examination is by no means a complete history of postwar New York City; rather, it is meant to enhance the literature of the urban crisis through an exploration of the social consequences in African American neighbourhoods and how militant socio-political poetry challenged these urban inequalities, later evolving into an African American institution.

CHAPTER ONE: "Subsidized Discrimination": The Construction of New York City's Urban Crisis

African Americans have endured a long and institutionalized history of oppression. Throughout the period of slavery and legalized racial discrimination in the South, African Americans looked to the American North as a land of freedom, opportunity, and social, economic, and political equality. However, this Northern urban and industrial landscape would provide new forms of racism and exclusion from mainstream American society. Generally, high paying industrial and managerial jobs were reserved for whites, while blacks found themselves trapped in a series of temporary and menial positions. African Americans were also typically trapped in poverty stricken, deteriorating racial enclaves, systematically barred from white upper and middle class neighbourhoods. A changing economic base and an exodus of industrial jobs in New York City exacerbated the cycle of poverty, which furthered residential and economic inequalities. Together, deindustrialization, the white flight to the suburbs, and economic and spatial discrimination led to the marginalization of black inner city neighbourhoods in New York City. The term "urban crisis" became commonly used to describe the race riots of the 1960s and the state of racial communities during that period. However, the urban crisis in New York City began long before black communities erupted into riots, and for many African Americans in New York City, social and economic inequity and systematic oppression continues to be a challenge today. This chapter will explore the structural causes of the African American urban crisis in post-World War II New York City and will examine the factors that intensified urban inequality for blacks.

While a significant population of African Americans had settled in New York City prior to World War II, Southern blacks continued a mass migration to New York

City in hopes of securing a stable, well-paying factory job in the defense or textile industries. The existing black community attracted Southern migrants to established racial enclaves. Postwar social and economic discrimination would invigorate urban inequalities. African Americans were forced to live in deteriorating slums with little opportunity for exodus to middle class, integrated communities. Government subsides energized the construction of suburbia, and restrictive real estate covenants would prevent blacks from settling in newly constructed white neighbourhoods. The process of whites leaving older decaying inner city neighbourhoods as African Americans began to move in became known as "white flight."

As veterans returned from the war, and industries converted back to a peacetime economy, African Americans began to experience employment discrimination. High paying jobs for African Americans became almost nonexistent, and underemployment and unemployment were common conditions for African Americans in poor neighbourhoods.[18] In addition to economic discrimination, industrial and blue collar jobs became increasingly scarce as factories began to relocate outside of the city centre. Urban renewal projects were undertaken in an attempt to prevent middle-class whites from leaving, and attract those who had fled to the suburbs back to the city centre. However, housing and urban renewal projects dislocated African Americans from their existing residence and further concentrated blacks in racial enclaves. As well, infrastructure developments, like subways and expressways, reduced the property value of African

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[18]   Underemployment is described by the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders as, "part-time workers looking for full-time employment, or full-time workers earning less $3000 per year, or had dropped out of the labor force." *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York: New York Times Company, 1968), 257.

American neighbourhoods and stimulated more urban deterioration. A combination of factors – a shift from industrial to post-industrial economy; inner city abandonment and escape to suburbia; investment and disinvestment – explains the story of the African American urban crisis in New York City.

Migration that began during World War I and continued through World War II resulted in New York City having the largest concentration of African Americans in the United States. Restricted European immigration and a robust wartime economy created a labour shortage in New York City's manufacturing sector. A combination of job opportunities in the North and a downturn in the agricultural economy of the South caused by floods and boll weevils were key pull and push factors in African American migration.[19] The mass migration of blacks from the American South and Caribbean to industrial centres of the American North became known as the Great Migration.[20] Newcomers to New York City, according to James Weldon Johnson, were mostly "from cities and towns of the Atlantic seaboard states," and "were far better prepared to adapt themselves to life and industry in a great city." The aura of "opportunity for Negro labour exerted a pull that reached down to the Negroes of the West Indies."[21] Settlement in New York City for African Americans was designated to specific sections of the city. It was

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[19]   W.E.B. DuBois, "The Migration of Negroes," *The Crisis*, June 1917, 63-65, (accessed April 4, 2011).
[20]   Walter White, "Segregation Moves North at Fast Pace: Increases Along with Population," *The Chicago Defender*, October 31, 1925, (accessed April 4, 2011).
[21]   James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, (New York, Arno Press and The New York Times, 1930), 152-153.

during the Great Migration that Harlem became renowned for its opportunity and as the "'capital' of the African race."[22]

The constant stream of African American migrants during the interwar years caused a boom of racial enclaves throughout New York City, a factor which augmented the severity of the urban crisis. According to census figures prepared by the Land Utilization Committee of the New York Building Congress for the year 1930, and described by Vere E. Johns in the 1934 *Chicago Defender* article, "World's Largest Race Community Shows Great Need of Slum Clearance Program," the African American population in Harlem more than tripled, from approximately 75,810 in 1920, to approximately 237,247, in 1930.[23] Dramatic increases in the African American population intensified the depressed housing situation in Harlem and pressured residents and migrants to relocate and settle in other neighbourhoods in the metropolis. Whites resisted residential integration, and African Americans were resigned to settle in deteriorating and destitute communities. Poor areas of the South Bronx, and the neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, began to house a concentration of blacks as whites moved away from deteriorating buildings into newly constructed houses.[24]

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[22]   "Negro Migration North," *New York Times*, March 10, 1925, (accessed April 5, 2011).

[23]   Vere E. Johns, "World's Largest Race Community Shows Great Need of Slum Clearance Program: Story of Harlem Life is Revealed! Residents Dwell in Overcrowded Apartments, Writer Declares Cites Need of U.S. Aid," *Chicago Defender*, June 9, 1934 (accessed April 5, 2011).

[24]   Johns, "World's Largest Race Community;" Emanuel Perlmutter, "Our Changing City: Northern Brooklyn; Area Has Had Big Population Shifts, but Is Still Drab," *New York Times*, July 22, 1955 (accessed April 6, 2011).

The interwar period represented the formative years of urban segregation and isolation of African Americans. "[T]here have also been great drawbacks in this urban movement," noted Alain Locke, "chiefly the unfavorable conditions in the almost ghetto-like city centers where so many migrant masses have been forced to congregate." Adding to the isolation and abandonment was, "the precarious marginal position of the Negro on the fringe of the labor market."[25] Economic and social prospects encouraged hundreds of thousands to migrate to the "great city." However, African Americans quickly became aware of the financial and spatial restrictions. Employment and housing discrimination isolated blacks in some of the poorest and rundown neighbourhoods in the city, and racial communities became generally referred to as ghettos.

The outbreak of another World War signaled opportunity for blacks from the American South, as well as the Caribbean, drawing hundreds of thousands to capitalize on the increase of production in wartime industries. While economic opportunity was available for blacks during World War II, social equality was not. Spatial discrimination hardened and ghetto conditions intensified in African American slum neighbourhoods. As New York City converted manufacturing plants to wartime production, its industrial economy maintained a diverse composition. As World War II began, New York City's manufacturing industry was constructed of nearly 26,000 small plants, 99% of those plants employing fewer than two hundred and fifty workers, and 92% of those plants employing less than fifty workers.[26] Initially, smaller independent manufacturing plants

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[25]   Alain Leroy Locke, "The Present-Day Problem," in *The Negro in America* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1933) 35 (accessed April 6, 2011).
[26]   "Sloan Seeks Aid for Small Plants: City Commerce Head Urges U.S. to Establish Unit Here to Spread Contracts," *New York Times*, January 15, 1943, (accessed April 6, 2011).

did not attract war production contracts to the extent that larger industrial complexes did, like the factories in Detroit or Los Angeles. While large industrial complexes were awarded the contracts for military hardware, airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles, New York City's small plants were subcontracted for the building of smaller components, and awarded contracts for smaller equipment, like optical elements and textiles for parachutes.[27] As wartime production reached its peak, New York City had been awarded five billion dollars in war production contracts, which was the fourth highest amount per district in the United States.[28] "New York City was slow in getting contracts in the early part of the war," noted one account, "most of the 30,000 small manufacturing plants are busy, with many of them working at capacity on war contracts or subcontracts."[29] The demand for manufacturing labour in New York City seemed limitless, and drew thousands of men and women hoping to capitalize on employment opportunities.

Employment prospects in the defense industries of New York City signaled an opportunity for the existing African American population, and the Southern blacks living in a racial caste system, to secure steady full-time work, earn greater wages, and enter mainstream American society. While defense industries initially resisted hiring African American workers, President Roosevelt supported the opportunity for minorities in manufacturing labour when he declared, "that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color,

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[27]   "Reports Gain Here in War Contracts: Sloan Lauds War Department's Team-Work with Industry at Exhibit Preview; Ordinance Awards Listed: $2,000,000 Subcontract Given to Six Small Firms – Others Get Parachute Work," *New York Times*, March 16, 1943 (accessed April 6, 2011).

[28]   "N.Y. Area Put at Top in War Contracts: Leads Other Regions, Report Shows, with 29.3 Billions of 189-Billion Total," *New York Times*, July 7, 1944 (accessed April 6, 2011).

[29]   "N.Y. Area Put at Top in War Contracts," *New York Times*, July 7, 1944.

or national origin."[30] As the war progressed, and industrial work opened the doors for

African American employment, "Negro workers from the South Atlantic states" followed

"well worn paths" to New York City for economic and social amelioration, as noted by

the *Chicago Defender*.[31] In addition to higher wages in northern defense manufacturing

industries, "mechanical cotton pickers" were running Southern African Americans out of

town.[32] "Each cotton picker displaced 40 good workers, or about 60 run-of-the-mill

workers," said one observer, as the mechanization of farming in the American south

eliminated the demand for inexpensive African American manual labor.[33] In addition,

improvements in the quality of education and desegregated school system attracted

thousands of Southern African Americans to New York City.[34] This combination of an

established African American community, work opportunity, and perceived social

progress attracted thousands more to the "capital of the African race."

The flow of African American migrants during and after World War II

exacerbated New York City's overcrowded racial enclaves and stimulated growth of

other black communities throughout the metropolitan area. Census figures illustrate the

drastic increase of African American population in Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and

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[30]   The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1941, *The President Establishes the Committee on Fair Employment Practices and Reaffirms the Policy of Full Participation in the Defense Program by All Persons, Regardless of Race, Creed, Color, or National Origin. Executive Order No 8802. June 25, 1941* (Scranton: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 234, (accessed April 11, 2011).
[31]   "Workers Flock North for Jobs," *The Chicago Defender*, September 9, 1944, (accessed April 11, 2011).
[32]   Nat Caldwell, "South's Social Problem Soon May be Nation's," *The Washington Post*, January 7, 1945, (accessed April 12, 2011).
[33]   Carl Wiegman, "See Continued Migration of Negro to North: Farm Machinery Speeds Exodus, Experts Say," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1950, (accessed April 12, 2011).
[34]   Anges E. Meyer, "North to Literacy: Mass Migration of Negroes," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1946, (accessed April 12, 2011).

Manhattan. Upon arrival, black migrants were confined to certain residential areas of New York City, which were increasingly becoming more segregated, overcrowded and more dilapidated.[35]

Each borough – Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx – had its own segregated inner city ghettos. In 1950, the Manhattan ghetto of Harlem was the most heavily populated and most segregated African American neighbourhood. Black Harlem stretched from 110th Street on the south to 155th Street on the north, and from Amsterdam Avenue on the west to the Harlem River on the East.[36] This Census tract had a segregation rate of 94%, and a total African American population of approximately 305,000. While none of the other ghettos matched Harlem's numbers, their segregation rate and African American community was quite significant, and would become more inflated as the urban crisis deepened. The South Bronx African American enclave stretched from 161st on the south to St. Pauls Place on the north, and from Prospect Avenue on the east to Webster Avenue on the west, with a segregation rate of 84% and black population of approximately 40,000.[37] The Jamaica, Queens neighbourhood, which stretched from 110th Avenue on the south to Jamaica Ave on the north, and from 180th Street on the east to Sutphin Boulevard on the west, housed approximately 17,000 African Americans and had a segregation rate of 82%.[38] Finally, the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood in Brooklyn, which ran from Atlantic Avenue on the south to Lafayette

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[35] "Negro Migration to Harlem Heavy: Starvation Conditions in Some Sections of Deep South Cited as Reason," *New York Times*, November 19, 1941, (accessed April 14, 2011).

[36] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population: 1950; New York City Census Tracts* (Washington D.C: United States Government Printing Office, 1952) 600.

[37] *1950 New York Census Tracts*, 597, and 9-33.

[38] *1950 New York Census Tracts*, 603

Avenue on the north, and from Ralph Avenue on the east to Washington Avenue on the west, had a African American population of approximately 103,000 and a segregation rate of 87%. While the black population varied significantly among the four racial enclaves, the four neighbourhoods shared high segregation rates and all are encircled by white neighbourhoods with little integration.

African Americans found themselves with no choice but to live in some of the worst neighbourhoods in the city, confronted with discrimination which limited their opportunity for mobility and advancement. Typically, blacks did not have the luxury of settling in new communities or suburbs, and were often relegated to rented housing in "declining and often blighted areas," of New York City.[39] Living conditions in these neighbourhoods were abysmal. *The Crisis* described them as, "vermin-infested, dilapidated tenements which appear as though they will cave in any minute."[40] Living conditions in most of the African American ghettos were so inhumane that they "violate[d] the Health, Sanitation, Fire and Tenement Departments regulations at the same time."[41] As well, opportunity for advancement was limited. Blacks were forced to pay inflated rent rates because of their race, which inhibited their ability to save money to move out of the poor neighbourhoods.[42] African Americans were restricted to certain neighbourhoods in the New York metropolitan, and forced to pay more money to inhabit overcrowded and destitute housing, which prevented integration into mainstream American society.

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[39] Walter White, "Changes in Racial Patterns in Big Cities Affecting Life in America," *The Chicago Defender*, February 28, 1953, (accessed April 19, 2011).

[40] "Harlem Slums," *The Crisis*, December, 1941, 378. (accessed April 19, 2011).

[41] "Harlem Slums," 378.

[42] "Low Income, High Rent," *The Crisis*, February 1957, 93, (accessed April 19, 2011).

Barriers to racially pluralistic neighbourhoods were complex and pervasive. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insured mortgages for financial institutions and lending companies against potential losses in order to stimulate the economy and clear slums, thereby solving the national housing problem.[43] According to an article by Charles Abrams in *The Nation* magazine, the FHA recommended in its official manual, that, "'to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.'"[44] Through federal subsidies, lending institutions, and real estate brokers, residential segregation was ensured by way of prejudicial mortgage practices and restrictive covenants in the least desirable neighbourhoods of New York City.[45] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) observed discrimination in numerous federal programs that reinforced inequalities, such as the programs "for slum clearance and urban redevelopment, public housing, FHA-insured mortgages, financing of the government-insured lending institutions, defense housing, and GI home loan guaranty."[46] Spatial discrimination, sponsored by Federal subsidies, enabled the construction of suburbs and racially segregated housing projects. Ultimately, African Americans had restricted access to adequate housing, or were confined to the poorest neighbourhoods in the city.

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[43]   Federal Housing Administration, *National Housing Act as Amended: and Provisions of Other Laws Pertaining to the Federal Housing Administration*, (September 15, 1941), 53, (accessed April 20, 2011).

[44]   Charles Abrams, Race Bias in Housing: I. The Great Hypocrisy," *The Nation*, July 19, 1947, (accessed April 20, 2011).

[45]   "A Crack in the Ghetto?," *The Crisis*, September, 1946, 265, (accessed April 20, 2011).

[46]   "Resolutions Adopted by the Forty-Forth Annual Convention of the NAACP at St. Louis, Missouri, June 27, 1953: Housing," *The Crisis*, August – September, 1953, 438, (accessed April 20, 2011).

Federal programs for slum clearance perpetuated ghetto conditions by subsidizing construction for segregated housing projects, and granted private property developers the authority to displace slum dwellers. In 1945, the Federal Slum Clearance program handed out a $25,000,000 tax exemption to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for the construction of Stuyvesant Towns housing projects.[47] While it was anticipated that slum clearance and urban redevelopment programs would assuage the housing problem and uplift poor slum dwellers, the programs were quickly "perverted from slum clearance to Negro clearance."[48] Decayed property and slum dwellers were removed from the projects sites; however, "not a single slum dweller" was "actually rehoused," only "crowded into other slums."[49] Stuyvesant Town was a segregated housing project which excluded African American tenants. Yet, Metropolitan Life would adhere to Jim Crow – separate, but equal – and construct another housing project in Harlem that was open to black tenants, called Riverton.[50] Metropolitan Life bluntly asserted, "'Negroes and whites don't mix."[51] Subsidized discrimination separated white communities and isolated African Americans in overcrowded segregated neighbourhoods, like the Riverton housing project in Harlem.

The construction of postwar suburbia, also largely funded by Federal programs, created a haven for white people from deteriorating inner city housing and integrated

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[47] Charles Abrams, "The Walls of Stuyvesant Town," *The Nation*, March 24, 1945, 328, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[48] Robert C. Weaver, "Habitation With Segregation," *The Crisis*, June-July 1952, 347, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[49] Abrams, "The Walls of Stuyvesant Town, 328.

[50] "Fight Against Bias in Housing Urged: Court Action, Legislative Drive and Education Campaign Cited as Timely Need," *New York Times*, April 4, 1947, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[51] Charles Abrams, "Slum Clearance Boomerangs," *The Nation*, July 29, 1950, 106, (accessed April 21, 2011).

neighbourhoods. The GI Bill, together with FHA insured loans, allowed for a drastic influx of homeownership among middle-class whites.[52] The accessibility of, and demand for, homeownership in the suburbs produced an "[a]ssembly-line construction of thousands of one-family houses in a single development."[53] As mentioned, federally insured loans and mortgages were not as generally accessible to African Americans because of local discrimination. However, loan and mortgage discrimination was not the only obstacle for black mobility to the suburbs. According to the vice-president of the National Bar Association (1948) and member of the NAACP legal committee, Loren Miller, racially restrictive covenants barred blacks from buying homes in certain neighbourhoods and became precursors for FHA home-construction loans for builders and real-estate developers.[54] Despite the landmark case of *Shelly v. Kraemer* in 1948, which prohibited enforcing racially restrictive covenants, developers and real-estate agents continued with racially restrictive practices. William Levitt, a New York suburban property development mogul, ensured white homogeneity in his Long Island suburban development.[55] The growth of suburbia and inner city abandonment became characterized by *The Chicago Defender* as, "the flight of white families to the suburbs to

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[52] Charles Hurd, "The Veteran: Unpublicized 'Second Option' in the GI Bill Eases the Home-Buying Problems of Veterans," *New York Times*, September 2, 1945, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[53] Charles Grutznert, "Cities and Suburbs in Race Against Spreading Slums: Turn to Urban Renewal Projects to Halt Blight on Housing – Middle-Income Families Caught in Squeeze," *New York Times*, January 31, 1957, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[54] Loren Miller, "A Right Secured," *The Nation* May 29, 1948, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[55] "Levittown Incident," *New York Times*, August 25, 1957, (accessed April 21, 2011).

escape Negro invasion of lily-white communities."[56] African Americans were isolated in deteriorating inner city neighbourhoods, like Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, while middle-class America moved to the suburbs in Long Island, Queens or Richmond, and barred blacks from joining them.

With so many discriminatory policies, programs, and practices working against African Americans, entrenched poverty was the result. African Americans left the south with hopes of employment in the robust wartime economy, but in so many cases, their hopes were dashed.[57] As the American economy returned to peacetime production and veterans returned to work, African American labour was no longer needed to the extent that it was during wartime. Thousands of blacks were fired and they became victims of a vicious cycle of unemployment.[58] In addition, the end of the war signaled an end to government contracts, which resulted in the "immediate striking fact…that 500,000 war workers in New York State will be out of jobs."[59] Last hired, first fired was the common rule, and the elimination of thousands of jobs polarized African Americans in poor neighbourhoods and widened the gap of inequality.

Highly segregated racial enclaves in New York City, with the exception of the Jamaica Queens neighbourhood, had a median unemployment rate at, or near, 'recession' levels. The South Bronx neighbourhood's median unemployment rate was 6%, the median unemployment rate for the Bedford-Stuyvesant community in Brooklyn was 5%,

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[56] "Our Opinions: Urban Renewal: A Costly Dream," *The Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1958, (accessed April 21, 2011).

[57] "Let My People Work: Job Prejudice Gnaws Away at Nation's Strength in War Production," *The Chicago Defender*, September 26, 1942, (accessed April 29, 2011).

[58] "750,000 Negroes Migrated to Wartime Jobs," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 19, 1946, (accessed May 3, 2011).

[59] "Text of Report on State Plans for Post-War Business and Employment," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1945, (accessed May 4, 2011).

and Harlem's median unemployment rate was 6%.[60] Employment inequality expanded

during the 1950s and into the 1960s. According to the Kerner Commission, "since 1954,

even during the current unprecedented period of sustained economic growth,

unemployment among Negroes has been continuously above the 6.0 percent 'recession'

level."[61]

Even in the traditional blue collar employment sector, African Americans were at

a disadvantage as they faced discrimination in New York City's construction industry.

According to an article in *The Crisis* magazine, "'qualified Negro workers are unlawfully

excluded from membership and from participation in the skilled crafts in the construction

of all the numerous public works in the City of New York.'"[62] As prosperous as the

construction industry was in the post-war era with urban renewal programs, public works,

and suburbanization, African Americans experienced barriers to training programs and

unions, which limited employment opportunities.[63] Alienated from the mainstream

economy, many African Americans were relegated to an impoverished life within

deteriorating inner-city ghettos.

Further complicating matters was the deindustrialization of cities, a postwar trend

adversely affecting the lives of inner-city blacks. The deindustrialization of American

cities was an extensive process, which varied in form, response, and results, depending

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[60]   All figures were calculated using the 1950 Census Data, *1950, New York City Census Tracts* (1952), information for the Bronx pages 162-163, Brooklyn pages 223-231, Harlem 320-327, and Queens 355-367.
[61]   *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York: The New York Times Company, 1968), 253.
[62]   "Job Bias in New York," *The Crisis*, November 1963, 551, (accessed May 4, 2011).
[63]   Herbert Hill, "Job Crisis in the Urban North," *The Crisis*, November 1965, 565-572, (accessed May 4, 2011).

on the particular city one examines. The study of post-industrial New York City requires

a comprehensive monograph in order to fully capture the intricacies and the enormity of

its impact. For the purpose of this paper, a study was undertaken, examining the exodus

of blue collar industries, and the resettlement and development of industrial gardens in

New York City's neighboring suburban communities.

Mirroring the white flight of city centre residents to newly constructed suburbs

was the move of blue collar warehouses, manufacturing plants, and industrial complexes.

Nassau and Suffolk counties, commonly referred to as Long Island, are approximately

thirty-five and ninety miles from Harlem respectively, and are the quintessential example

of postwar suburbia. As postwar suburbia grew, Nassau and Suffolk began to appeal to

industrial development largely because of vast open lots, the escape of congested New

York City, and the elimination of commuting for tens of thousands of white Long Island

residents.[64] One of the salient attractions for factories to develop in Nassau and Suffolk

was the construction of immense industrial parks. In general, industrial parks were large

in square footage, located on, or closely to, major industrial arteries, and accommodated a

number of interdisciplinary industries. *The New York Times* described one of the many

industrial parks located in Long Island: "factories included a supplier of rare inorganic

metals, a hi-fi manufacture, a medical optics company engaged in research, development

and manufacturing, and an airplane propeller servicing company." Of the companies

located in this industrial park, "thirteen are nondefense manufactures, four have defense

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[64]   "L.I. Held in Need of Light Industry: Builder Sees Economic Future of Nassau-Suffolk Dependent on Factory Expansion." *The New York Times*, February 11, 1951, (accessed May 8, 2011).

subcontracts, and three are engaged in both civilian and defense production."[65] The city's

municipal bureaucracy resisted the movement of blue collar industries to suburban

industrial parks through reports and newspaper articles.[66] However, the appeal of large

interdisciplinary industrial parks was too great, and Long Island attracted the relocation

and development of hundreds of manufacturing plants and companies from New York

City.[67]

The relocation of industry from traditional city centre sites to predominantly

white suburbs symbolized the polarization of white middle-class and the poor blacks, and

the marginalization of inner city communities. Blue collar jobs, which had traditionally

been the main avenue for African Americans into the mainstream American economy,

were rendered inaccessible for poor blacks living in the ghettos of Harlem, Bedford-

Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx.[68] In 1960, the median family income for the heavily

segregated neighbourhoods were all lower than the national mark of $5,600, and even

more disproportionate to the median family income in their respective counties. However,

even more striking is the comparison of the median family income of the segregated

African American neighbourhoods of South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem with

the suburban counties, and sites of industrial relocation, Nassau and Suffolk. The median

family income for the South Bronx neighbourhood was $4,082 in 1960, compared with

[65]   Brian Porterfield, "Suffolk Opening Land to Industry: New Manufacturing Parks Offer Ready Sites Without Encroaching on Homes," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1963, (accessed May 8, 2011).

[66]   "Brooklyn Backed in Bid to Industry: State Commerce Report says Borough can Duplicate the Facilities of Suburbs," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1957, (accessed May 8, 2011).

[67]   Ronald Maiorana, "L.I. Population Passes 2 Million: Study says Gains Since '60 Make it Fourth Largest Urban Area in U.S. INDUSTRY GROWTH CITED, July 17, 1962, (accessed May 8, 2011).

[68]   "Negroes in the Urban Trap," *The Crisis*, February 1969, (accessed May 8, 2011).

Nassau county's $8,515 and Suffolk county's $6,795 – the median family income for the

heavily segregated black neighbourhood of the South Bronx was 48% of Nassau county

and 60% of Suffolk County's median family income. The racial enclave of Bedford-

Stuyvesant had a median family income of $4,448, which was 52% of Nassau and 65%

of Suffolk County's median family income. Finally, Harlem, the most severely

segregated of the African American neighbourhoods, had the poorest median family

income of $3,882, which was 46% of Nassau County's median, and 57% of Suffolk

County's median family income. Traditional blue collar jobs were less accessible for

African American residents living in segregated inner city neighbourhoods as white

middle-class families and industry moved away from city-centres to the vast open areas

of suburbia.[69] As a result, black inner-city residents earned a disproportionately low

income, and endured further poverty and limited employment opportunities.

Marginalization was strengthened by abandonment, and abandonment was made

feasible by the construction and extension of interstate expressways, which created more

accessible commutes from the suburbs to the business districts of New York City. Again,

federal government programs helped redistribute wealth and solidify class divisions with

the creation of the Federal-Aid Highways Act, which subsidized ninety percent of the

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[69]   Statistics for this paragraph were calculated from, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population: 1960; New York City Census Tracts* (Washington D.C: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), For the Bronx page 34, for Bedford-Stuyvesant pages 69-79, for Harlem pages 125-130. For County Statistics, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *County and City Data Book, 1967: A Statistical Abstract Supplement*, (Washington D.C.: United Sates Government Printing Office, 1967), page 253. For the National average, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports: Consumer Income*, (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, January, 1962) page 3.

cost of construction for interstate highways.[70] President Eisenhower initiated the

Highways Act in 1955 for a number of reasons, but one of the main purposes for the

construction of more highway systems running in and out of major cities was to alleviate

road congestion.[71] The New York Metropolitan area developed extensive interstate

highways and rail line systems. Numerous arteries stretched from the suburbs to city

centre business districts, which created a more efficient means of travel for daily

commuters.[72] The construction and expansion of transportation infrastructure had a two-

fold devastating effect on inner city African Americans. The most immediate and

concrete form was, according to Evin Galantay of *The Nation*, "the apocalyptic menace

to the habitat of minority groups and other low-income families."[73] For example, the

expansion of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway dissected the northern section of the

Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood.[74] A major interstate expressway running through a

residential community lowered the value of housing and perpetuated deterioration. Less

visible, but more prominent, commuter infrastructure fueled the redistribution of wealth

from city centre business and financial district to suburban communities. Thousands of

suburban residents commuted to New York City for jobs, however they would take their

tax dollars back to the suburbs. This helped further inequality, with public services and

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[70] Douglas Dales, "$410,679,000 To Go into State Roads: City's Share $126,000,000 in Year that Began April 1," *The New York Times*, April 12 1962, (accessed May 8, 2011).

[71] *Public Papers of the President of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1955* (Washington D.C : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 272-280.

[72] Joseph C. Ingraham, "Barnes Offers 100-Million Plan to Triple L.I. Expressway Flow," *The New York Times*, July 15, 1963. (accessed May 8, 2011).

[73] Ervin Galantay, "Architecture," *The Nation*, February 12, 1968, (accessed May 8, 2011).

[74] Emanuel Perlmutter, "Our Changing City: Northern Brooklyn, Area has had Big Population Shifts, but is Still a Drab," July 22, 1955, (accessed May 8, 2011).

community facilities in poor inner city African American neighbourhoods falling victim to disinvestment, taxpayer flight and urban decay.

The first twenty-five years after World War II witnessed the marginalization of African American inner city neighbourhoods and their residents in New York City, and created the landscape for the urban crisis. Prior to World War II, New York City had the largest concentration of African Americans in the United States, the majority of them migrating from the Atlantic southern United States and the Caribbean. Many of the early African American newcomers settled in Harlem, and when they exhausted housing availability in that neighbourhood, African Americans began to establish black communities in other sections of New York City – mainly South Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant. The onset of World War II signified a moment of opportunity for African Americans. President Roosevelt banned discrimination in defense industries, manufacturing labour was pushing full capacity, and thousands more south Atlantic state African Americans migrated to existing black communities in New York City. However, opportunity was short lived, and social and economic mobility was restricted by structural powers. Crowded housing became overcrowded and the housing shortage inflated racial enclaves, outward movement was resisted, and white middle-class families began to flee the city centre. Spatially, African Americans were relegated to some of the poorest sections of the city, and vast sections of the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem and Jamaica Queens were transformed into black ghettos. The process pushed African Americans to the fringe of mainstream America, both socially and economically.

Subsidized discrimination stimulated the abandonment and deterioration of New York City's African American racial enclaves. The FHA and the GI Bill funded the white

flight to the developing suburbs, while local mortgage and loan agencies excluded African Americans from federal programs and inhibited their mobility to better housing. Restrictive housing covenants forbade the sale of property to African Americans in certain public housing and suburban developments, and helped solidify residential segregation. Life in the poor ghettos became a vicious cycle, and became very difficult to escape because of employment discrimination and the relocation of blue collar labour. African Americans' entry into the mainstream labour force was limited by the discrimination they faced. Often, African Americans were not hired or accepted to unions because of their race, and if they were able to find employment they received unequal wages and were restricted to the most menial jobs. Blue collar industry began to relocate to New York City's suburb counties, which narrowed the opportunity for African Americans' entry into traditional factory work. Transportation infrastructure came to embody the abandonment, disinvestment, deterioration and redistribution of wealth of post-World War II New York City. Major transportation arteries were constructed to reduce traffic congestion and make the daily commute from the suburbs to New York City more efficient. Some infrastructure developments dissected African American neighbourhoods, which reduced the value of property and perpetuated deterioration. Ultimately, this made it more difficult for ghetto residents to sell their homes for upward social mobility. Finally, major expressways allowed white middle-class suburban residents to commute to work, earn their livelihood and return to their homes in other counties. This process fueled the inequality and marginalization of the inner city. Tax dollars commuted with motorists back to the suburbs and were used on local services and facilities, severely diminishing the tax pool in inner city communities.

Federal programs subsidized the growth of the suburbs and the deterioration of inner city African American neighbourhoods. Local financial and real estate agents enforced spatial discrimination, while employers and union leaders furthered economic inequality. The redistribution of power and wealth fled the city centre to the suburbs and African American communities were left abandoned and marginalized. This was the landscape of the urban crisis. African Americans were segregated, destitute, socially and economically unequal. This crisis, created by structural agents, excluded blacks from mainstream America and relegated them to the fringes of society.

CHAPTER TWO: Inner City Crime and Racial Demonizing: The Social Consequences of the Urban Crisis

Postwar New York City experienced many transformations and innovations. However, the hundreds of thousands of African Americans living in poor inner-city ghettos endured the all-too-familiar feelings of institutional exclusion and inequity of America's urban racial caste system. As discussed in the previous chapter, the urban crisis for African Americans was created by multiple structural factors. The geographic redistribution of white middle-class families and the shift in taxpayers' dollars and industrial jobs from New York City to the suburbs perpetuated severe inequities. African Americans in South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Harlem were segregated, abandoned, and marginalized. Employment opportunities dwindled, guaranteeing a continuation of the poverty cycle for blacks. Economic disparities between blacks and whites grew, and poor African Americans residing in segregated neighbourhoods became further entrenched in the urban crisis. Spatial and economic inequalities would have enduring social consequences for African Americans living in segregated neighbourhoods. Urban decline, spatial and economic exclusion created an environment for crime to flourish. Crime was not a collective response by all black residents living in segregated neighbourhoods, yet the urban crisis landscape created conditions that allowed crime to proliferate. Crime rates in New York City increased during the urban crisis years, and have long since endured. The media and federal government targeted African Americans in response to the growth of inner city crime. Ultimately, blacks were further excluded socially, but they would also become constitutionally prohibited from their full democratic rights and entrance into mainstream American society.

Using the theory of Anomie, which argues that one turns to illegitimate, or criminal, means of achieving societal goals when institutional avenues are restricted, this chapter will illustrate how social and economic exclusion created an environment and attitude that enabled crime to proliferate. As a consequence of the urban crisis, some African Americans responded to social and economic exclusion with crime. Crime was not a collective response, and, unfortunately all of the convicted individuals may not have actually been guilty. However, the significant increase in the crime rate resulted in the characterization of African Americans in poor inner city ghettos as criminals by the media, politicians and law enforcement officials. News outlets portrayed New York City crime in racial terms, and "street crime" became synonymous with "Negro crime," in the parlance of the times. The media's racializing of crime demonized inner city African Americans. In response to the problem of "street crime", the federal government initiated a series of "tough-on-crime" programs aimed at inner city residents. A conservative agenda directed massive funds into building more corrections facilities, creating more judgeships, and forcing lawyers and law enforcement officials to convict more people in a shorter period of time, leading to more severe sentences and lasting consequences. Certain offences carried penalties that would disqualify guilty persons from certain government jobs and, later, the right to vote.

Exclusion from mainstream American society had severe social implications, but the psychological toll was also apparent. According to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "the capacity to obtain and hold a 'good job' is the traditional test of participation in American society." The importance of "[s]teady employment with adequate compensation provides both purchasing power and social

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status," which provides the "capabilities, confidence and self-esteem an individual needs to be a responsible citizen."[75] Economic equality was as precursor for social equality. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan contended, "in America what you do is what you are: to do nothing is to be nothing; to do little is to be little."[76] The goal of economic wealth and social status encompassed almost all citizens, including African Americans, who were fully cognizant of the American dream and the barriers to mainstream society. Ralph Ellison eloquently described the cruel realities of second-class citizenship and societal exclusion for urban blacks in New York City:

> You see little Negro Batmen flying around Harlem just as you see little white Batmen flying around Sutton Place. It is in the blood. But while the white child who is taken with these fantasies has many opportunities for working them into real life situations, too often the Negro Child is unable to do so. This leads the Negro child who identifies with the heroes and the outlaw of fantasy to feel frustrated and to feel that society has designated him the outlaw, for he is treated as one. Thus his sense of being outside the law is not simply a matter of fantasy, it is a reality based on the inconvertible fact of race. This makes for frustration and resentment.[77]

Media outlets helped forge an idealized American dream, yet this vision contrasted sharply with the harsh realities of exclusion for African Americans. Assata Shakur described her feelings of isolation and limited economic opportunity as a child growing up in New York City: "every white man on television was able to support his family with no particular strain." While the veracity of the media's portrayal was not truly authentic, it did reinforce feelings of frustration and exclusion. Shakur explained that, "black people accepted those role models for themselves even though they had very little to do with the

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[75] *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York: The New York Times Company, 1968), 252.
[76] *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York: The New York Times Company, 1968), 252.
[77] Ralph Waldo Ellison, "The Crisis of Optimism," *The City in Crisis* (New York: A. Phillip Randolph Educational Fund, 1966), 11, (accessed May 23, 2011).

reality of their own existence and survival." The hundreds of thousands of African

Americans in New York City's ghetto communities felt that, "everything is against them.

Just being poor is one of their biggest obstacles."[78] Psychologically, economic

discrimination relegated African Americans to second-class citizens, frustrated and

keenly aware of the barriers to economic and social mobility.

Cognizant of structural discrimination, inequalities and restricted from

mainstream America, New York City's African American ghetto neighbourhoods became

increasingly susceptible to crime and delinquency. Robert K. Merton's theory on social

structure and Anomie explained the presence of crime and deviance in America, and has

become one of the most enduring sociological theories in the field.[79] According to

Merton, "aberrant behavior may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation

between culturally prescribed aspiration and socially structured avenues for realizing

these aspirations."[80] Entrenched in American culture was the pursuit of monetary success,

status and power – commonly referred to as the "American Dream."[81] Access to

institutional avenues as a means of achieving financial and social success was denied to

thousands of African Americans, thus rendering their communities susceptible to crime

and delinquency. Merton described five modes of individual adaption to explain how the

social structure influenced individuals' behavior and social activity.[82] Two of the five

modes, "conformity" and "ritualism," conform to legitimate avenues of participating in

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[78]   Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill
& Company, 1987), 73-74.
[79]   Donald J. Shoemaker, *Theories of Delinquency: An Examination of Explanations
of Delinquent Behavior*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123.
[80]   Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," in *Social Theory and Social
Structure*, (Toronto : Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd, 1967), 134.
[81]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," 136.
[82]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," 140.

the economy and society.[83] The fifth mode of adaptation, "rebellion," is unique in the

sense that a collective group attempts to break down and modify both cultural aspirations

and institutional avenues for the entire society – a category some Black militants'

ideology would fit.[84] However, the purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the social

consequences of the urban crisis – how crime proliferated – and will not discuss the

political response of militant black activist groups. The modes of adaptation that will be

the focus of this argument, and that apply to African Americans in poor segregated

neighbourhoods in New York City, will be "innovation" and "retreatism."

The "innovation" mode of individual adaptation consists of persons that are in

pursuit of the American Dream, and engage in illegal means to achieve monetary success

and social improvement. According Merton, the combination of "poverty, limited

opportunity and the assignment of cultural goals," can be explained as the cause of high

crime rates and criminal behavior.[85] "Retreatism" is the rejection of the American Dream

and the institutional means of participating in society. While the least common of

Merton's five modes of individual adaptations, it is generally used to explain drug

addiction and chronic drunkenness.[86] Merton contends that individuals are most likely to

adopt retreatism when "both the culture goals and the institutional practices have been

thoroughly assimilated by the individual and imbued with affect and high value, but

accessible institutional avenues are not productive of success."[87] Both "innovation" and

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[83]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," for an explanation of Conformity see page 141, and for an explanation of Ritualism see pages 153-155.
[84]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," for an exploration of Rebellion see pages 155-157.
[85]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," 147.
[86]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," 153.
[87]   Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," 153.

"retreatism" explain that restrictions to monetary success and ultimately social mobility create a social environment susceptible to crime and deviant behavior. Poor African Americans living in South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem faced structural discriminations that restricted employment opportunities and social mobility. Consequently, the crime rate and drug use for African Americans increased throughout the postwar years in large part because of the urban crisis environment.

This next section is difficult, controversial, and should be handled with the utmost of sensitivity. As mentioned above, the urban crisis established a landscape where criminal activity was a normal response. During and after those years, African American crime rates in New York City increased. However, we must acknowledge that crime rates and arrest rates of African Americans distort the veracity of the historical reality. African Americans have long been the victims of police harassment, which has produced some imprecise criminal and arrest statistics throughout history. Crime and delinquent behavior was not a collective response. However, as an unfortunate consequence of the racial oppression and discrimination of the urban crisis, African American crime did rise in inner-city ghettos and it deepened their marginalization and solidified their position on the fringes of society.

As early as the late 1950s, inner-city crime became a prevalent issue on a national scale. Adding to the fear factor was the fact that the majority of offenses were violent crimes or crimes that threatened violence. In 1958, *Time* magazine reported that, while only 14% of New York's population was African American, "of the prisoners confined in houses of detention last year to await court deposition of their cases, 44% of the males

and 65% of the females were Negroes."[88] Keeping in line with Merton's theory, *Time*

concluded, "Negroes are more prone than whites to break the laws, rules and customs of

society because they are excluded from full membership in it."[89] However,

acknowledging the vulnerability of poor inner city communities to crime did not alleviate

crime or create better conditions in the ghetto neighbourhoods. As a young girl growing

up a second-class citizen in New York City, Shakur recalled the words of an adult friend:

"'that's right, I steal and my kids steal too. They tryin' to take my house from me. Tryin'

to take everythin' I got. I got to survive by the best way I know how."[90] However, crime

rates in New York City were not only growing among African Americans. In fact, major

crimes consistently increased among the total population throughout the urban crisis and

post-urban crisis years. *The New York Times* classified murder, non-negligent

manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and automobile theft

as major crimes.[91] From 1958 to 1962, the crime rate increased 23.8 percent in New York

City.[92] The 1962 crime rate increased by 7.2 percent for major crimes and 8.2 percent for

misdemeanor crimes over the previous year.[93] The following year, "major crimes rose 6.5

percent in New York City in the first three months."[94] This trend would not only continue,

but it would become more severe as the urban crisis deepened and inner city deterioration

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[88]   "National Affairs: The Negro Crime Rate: A Failure in Integration," *Time*,
Monday, April 21, 1958, (accessed May 26, 2011).
[89]   "National Affairs: The Negro Crime Rate."
[90]   Shakur, *Assata*, 77.
[91]   "Upsurge in Crime Reported by F.B.I.: Major Cases at 1,861,300 in '60, Up 98%
in 10 Years," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1961, (accessed May 27, 2011).
[92]   "Crime Rose 4.7 Pct. Here," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1964, (accessed May
27, 2011).
[93]   "Crime Rate in N.Y. Shows Rise for '62," *The New York Times*, February 18,
1963, (accessed May 27, 2011).
[94]   "Major Crime in City is Up 6.5% in 1963," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1963,
(accessed May 27, 2011).

worsened. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that in 1967 the New York City crime rate increased 18 percent from the previous year.[95] By 1975, the social consequences of the urban crisis had been firmly established and the annual crime rate escalated by 21.3 percent from the previous year. Crime was pervasive throughout the entire New York metropolitan area, not only among African American neighbourhoods. Crime flourished in the urban crisis and post-urban crisis years in New York City as poverty became more entrenched and communities became more vulnerable to crime.

Illegal drug addiction proliferated throughout New York City during, and after, the urban crisis years. In particular, heroin gripped the metropolitan area with many of its victims either dying or becoming further marginalized. Illegal drug addiction was by no means solely a problem in African American communities. In fact, as America moved through the 1960s illegal drug usage by other ethnic groups increased and African Americans' slightly decreased.[96] However, "Negro addicts still outnumbered all other groups combined in national totals,"[97] and sections of African American neighbourhoods in New York City were characterized for their rampant drug use, as *Time* described the Harlem section of 118th and Lenox as "junkie corner."[98] According to a 1972 article in *The Crisis*, there were "about 125,000 heroin addicts in New York City by conservative

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[95] "… And Crime in the Streets," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1967, (accessed May 27, 2011).

[96] "The Narcotics Menace," *The Crisis*, March, 1970, 77-78, (accessed May 30, 2011).

[97] Murray Schumach, "Study Finds Drop in Negro Addicts: Federal Unit Reports 15% Decline in Last 10 Years," *The New York Times*, March 6, 1967, (accessed May 30, 2011).

[98] "Nation: No Place Like Home," *Time*, July 31, 1964, (accessed May 30, 2011).

estimate."[99] Pundits agreed that one of the reasons for the proliferation of drug use in New York City was "as a route of escape from reality."[100] Drugs became the quick escape from the cruel realities of ghetto.

Structural discrimination played a salient role in the construction of the urban crisis; however, too often the contribution of the media and public discourse is ignored when examining the social and psychological impacts of the urban crisis. The media demonized African Americans as criminals and violent deviants, socially alienated them and psychologically demoralized them. One of the most influential studies of urban African Americans for both liberal and conservative policy, was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 account, *Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family*, commonly referred to as *The Moynihan Report*. The report attempted to explain persistent urban poverty among African Americans yet it largely neglected structural causes of the urban crisis and instead blamed inner city residents for underemployment, disproportionate income, and social inequity. *The Moynihan Report's* exploration of inner city crime merely demonized poor black inner city resident as violent criminals. "It is probable that, at present, a majority of crimes against the person, such as rape, murder, and aggravated assault are committed by Negroes," declared the report[101] Major national newspapers also conveyed the message that African Americans were violent criminals, as *The New York Times* reported in 1968, "[t]he easy explanation for today's outcry about 'crime in the streets' is to blame the Negroes…There is little doubt among the police –

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[99] William R. Edmondson, "The Narcotics Addiction Epidemic," *The Crisis*, March, 1972, 79, (accessed May 30, 2011).
[100] Edmondson, "The Narcotics Addiction Epidemic," 80.
[101] William Ryan, "The New Genteel Racism," *The Crisis*, December, 1965, 628, (accessed May 30, 2011).

though statistics are lacking – that the bulk of street violence, apartment burglaries, and store holdups are committed by Negroes."[102] The media's reporting made street crime synonymous with "Negro crimes"[103] and greatly sensationalized the threat of violent street crimes, which created degradation and fear of inner city African Americans, further alienating blacks. "We have the sociological situation where if two or three Negroes commit a crime in a given city, then the entire Negro population is generally stigmatized in the minds of Americans," observed Ralph Ellison.[104] As America moved beyond the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s into a period of perceived colorblindness, where explicitly racist language was no longer accepted, public discourse embarked on a mission to sensationalize the violence of 'street crimes.' In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were systematically attacked and stigmatized as threats to society, consequently they were barred from mainstream America through constitutional conduits.

By the late 1960s, political discourse echoed similar language when discussing the problem of "street crime." Rhetoric sensationalized the threat of violence and fear of inner city crime, and laid the groundwork for the mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States. The Johnson Administration attempted to quell the rising crime rate of America's inner cities with the creation of the Omnibus Crime and Safe Streets Act of 1968. The political debate surrounding this bill illustrates the rhetoric of

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[102] Murray Schumach, "Crime Statistics: A Numbers Game: Police here Find 14% Rise in Major Violations, but Figures are Deceptive," *The New York Times*, February 4, 1968, (accessed May 30, 2011).
[103] Arthur Krock, "In the Nation: Street Crime and Rioting as a National Issue," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1964, (accessed May 30, 2011).
[104] Ralph Waldo Ellison, "The Crisis of Optimism," *The City in Crisis*, (New York; A. Phillip Randolph Educational Fund, 1966), 23, (accessed May 30, 2011).

fear and the alienation surrounding the 'street,' which by this time was synonymous with African American inner city neighbourhoods. Peter Rodino, House Representative from New Jersey, is but one example of this political discourse. Rodino warned, "the people of this Nation are aroused and many are frightened" and staying "off the streets at night because of their fear of crime." "I must emphasize," Rodino continued, "that the crimes we are talking about – the street crimes" are "robbery, rape, aggravated assault, burglary."[105]

Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign built a platform around fear and "law and order." Nixon asserted, "lawlessness is crumbling the foundations of American society." Nixon indirectly spotlighted crime in African American neighbourhoods as a primary concern and national problem saying, "fire and looting, causing millions of dollars of property damage, have brought great suffering to home owners and small businessmen."[106] Throughout Nixon's presidential career he distanced mainstream America from African Americans with his devotion to a rhetoric of fear and street crime. In 1972, Nixon pledged "a tireless campaign against crime – to restore safety to our streets, and security to law-abiding citizens who have a right to enjoy their homes and communities free from fear."[107] Adding another dimension to the polarization of the inner city was the war against crime focused on the narcotics menace. New York City representative Ed Koch maintained the fear culture when he stated, "in New York, at least

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[105]   Congressional Record – Excerpts from House Floor Debate, *Omnibus Crime and Safe Streets Act 1968*, (Washington D.C : Office of General Counsel Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, January 23, 1973), 57, (accessed June 2, 2011).
[106]   Republican Party Platform of 1968, August 5, 1968, *American Presidency Project*, (accessed June 2, 2011).
[107]   Republican Party Platform of 1972, August 21, 1972, *American Presidency Project*, (accessed June 2, 2011).

50 percent of the street crime is attributable to drug addiction."[108] Narcotics became

another target, along with street crime, in the conservative agenda. Institutional

instruments were established that left African Americans further politically, economically

and socially disadvantaged.

The dominant conservative agenda against street crime and narcotics served as the

foundation for mass incarceration of African Americans. Similar political priorities with

regards to crime control initiated programs that funded the construction and updating of

prison systems, more judges and courts to prosecute more individuals, and more severe

jail terms for drugs – a problem already associated with inner city African Americans.

NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins noted in 1965 that African Americans have long

been the victims of police harassment and brutality, "the Negro is more easily arrested

than a white person. Dragnet arrests for crime committed by one or two persons

frequently haul a dozen Negroes to the jail."[109] So when the government passed the

Crime Control Act of 1973, which released more funds to local and state governments for

a "better coordinated" and "intensified" criminal justice system, it was clear that more

African Americans would be arrested and disproportionately represented in correctional

facilities.[110] The Conservative agenda expanded the ability and efficiency of punishment

and imprisonment. Section 451 of the act provided subsidies for "States and units of

general local government to develop and implement programs and projects for the

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[108]   Congressional Record – Excerpts from House Floor Debate, *Crime Control Act 1973*, (Washington D.C.: Office of General Counsel Law Enforcement, August 21, 1973), 92, (accessed June 2, 2011).
[109]   "Expert Disputes Figures," *New York Times*, July 27, 1965, (accessed June 3, 2011).
[110]   Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, *Crime Control Act of 1973*, ((Washington D.C.: Office of General Counsel Law Enforcement), 308, (accessed June 3, 2011).

construction, acquisition, and renovation of correctional institutions and facilities."[111]

Nixon's programs were designed "specifically to combat street crime" and to increase the

swiftness of the court system.[112] Nixonian policies subsidized law enforcement agents to

step up arrests, prosecute in a shorter amount of time, and imprison more people. With an

emphasis on mass incarceration, Nixon's crime policies put untold numbers of African

Americans behind bars.

Mirroring this national agenda, New York in the 1970s proved to be one of the

nation's leading states in developing strict policies, building prisons and advocating mass

incarceration. In early 1973, New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller led a charge

against the narcotics problem in New York City when he proposed "mandatory life

sentences – with no possibility of parole and no 'plea bargaining'" for drug possession

and trafficking.[113] The rigid drug laws, commonly referred to as the 'Rockefeller Laws,'

underwent some minor revisions before going into effect on September 1, 1973. The so-

called "Rockefeller Laws" were regarded as "the toughest in the nation," and in the first

two years under the law "1,132 offenders were sentenced to… 'indeterminate lifetime'

imprisonment."[114] Longer jail sentences resulted in more inmates in New York State's

correctional facilities, and thus the need for more correctional facilities. In order to house

more prisoners the state doubled the amount of detention facilities during the 1970s. In

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[111]   *Crime Control Act of 1973*, 322.
[112]   "The Law: Street Crime: Who's Winning?" *Time* October 23, 1972, (accessed June 3, 2011).
[113]   Tom Wicker, "The 'Mandatory' Illusion," *New York Times*, January 9, 1973, (accessed June 6, 2011).
[114]   "U.S. Study Backs Critics of New York's Drug Law," *New York Times*, September 5, 1976, (accessed June 6, 2011).

1971, there were sixteen state prisons[115] and by 1980 thirty-three state facilities.[116] The state's prison population, most of whom came from New York City and the surrounding boroughs, dramatically grew throughout the 1970s, increasing from 13, 855 in 1970[117] to over 20,000 in 1980.[118] A dominant conservative agenda enabled the criminal justice system to imprison more individuals, target 'street crime,' and heighten patrol in African Americans neighbourhoods. Mass incarcerations, resulting from the "law and order" agenda further marginalized African Americans.

Convicted felons in New York were constitutionally barred from full participation in mainstream America, even after serving their sentence. As the policy of mass incarceration took hold, felons and ex-felons were stripped of some of their fundamental rights– particularly the right to vote.[119] In addition, blatant job discrimination in New York State was legal if an individual is an ex-felon. According to a 1974 article in *The Crisis*, "there are approximately 72 laws that bar an ex-felon from 50 occupations."[120] Also, ex-felons were not able to obtain specific licenses, which closed off avenues for employment. African Americans were disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and consequently continued to be victims of constitutional exclusion from mainstream America.

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[115]   C. Gerald Fraser, "Fortune Society Scores Plan for Top-Security Prison," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1971, (accessed June 6, 2011).
[116]   Selwyn Raab, "Carey Offers 275 Million Plan to Expand State Prisons," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1980, (accessed June 6, 2011).
[117]   Fraser, "Fortune Society Scores Plan for Top-Security Prison," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1971.
[118]   Raab, "Carey Offers 275 Million Plan to Expand State Prisons," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1980.
[119]   "Ex-Convict Right to Ballot Sought: Incoming Attorney General Pushes for Arkansas Law," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1976, (accessed June 7, 2011).
[120]   Warren Howard, "Project Rebound," *The Crisis*, January, 1974, 18, (accessed June 7, 2011).

The urban crisis created an environment of limited opportunities, inequalities, discrimination, marginalization, frustrations, and both social and physical deterioration. Structural discrimination produced the urban crisis and the hardships were intensified when the American media and politicians targeted the negative social consequences of limited opportunity and urban decline. Inevitably, the social consequences of crime and illicit drugs served to entrench social exclusion far beyond privatized and subsidized discrimination. The urban crisis alienated African Americans from mainstream society, leaving poor blacks limited opportunities to achieve financial success and social mobility. Restricted avenues to the American dream produced communities of oppressed people vulnerable to crime and substance abuse. Crime and arrests rates for African Americans are deceptive; African American have long been victims of police harassment and brutality. However, some African Americans, because of their limited institutional opportunities, committed crimes as a means of survival. Both crime and narcotics proliferated in the urban crisis and post-urban crisis years. Although they were not a collective response, crime and narcotics were disastrous issues addressed by black leaders, the mainstream media, and the American government. Unfortunately, the mainstream media sensationalized the threat of violent crimes and narcotics, exaggerating the dangers of black inner city neighbourhoods. Mainstream media and the government racialized crime, making "Negro crime" synonymous with street crime. These two institutions stigmatized African Americans as criminals and propagated the rhetoric of fear. The Nixon Administration established a race-relations policy on the rhetoric of fear and law and order. The conservative agenda funneled funds into combating street crime, which inevitably established the origins of mass incarceration, constitutional repression, and

exacerbated African Americans' position as a disadvantaged member of American society.

CHAPTER THREE: "Poetry for the People, by the People": New York City and the Black Arts Movement

Due to continuous marginalization and failure to enter mainstream society, poor African Americans were regarded as second-class or underclass citizens. Ghetto residents had little autonomy in mainstream America. However, African Americans did not entirely resign themselves to the role of bystander. African Americans attempted to counteract systematic discrimination through a "cultural revolution." While this "cultural revolution" was fundamentally political, it also established tenets of psychological enlightenment. African Americans in the post-Civil Rights "equal opportunity" age had to combat racist rhetoric that attempted to relegate them to the underclass of American society. This African American "cultural revolution" was a response to the discriminatory nature of the urban crisis, the social consequences of the urban crisis, and the psychological effects of urban inequality and public discourse. Art simultaneously represents the society that produced it and the environment from which it emerged. The Black Arts movement was an agent of urban cultural politics, which instigated social change and community identity. The exploration of the Black Arts movement in New York City reveals how the development of a strong black urban community created unique opportunities for the development of an evocative independent black culture, and how this confrontational culture participated in the larger struggle for racial equality.

This chapter examines how African American residents responded to institutional and structural discrimination, urban decline, and exclusion from mainstream American society through an investment in a cultural buildup. New York City provides an excellent vantage point from which to examine this history, as it is where the leaders of the Black Arts Movement created the movement's manifesto and large numbers of artists produced

politically conscious art. In particular, the South Bronx neighbourhood of New York gave birth to hip-hop culture and rap music in the mid-1970s. The Black Arts Movement was national in scope and touched on every aspect of art including paintings, sculpting, theatre, and literature. However, while this chapter will evaluate the purpose and goals of the Black Arts Movement in its entirety, the focus and examination of the art will be confined to an exploration of the poetry produced in the New York Metropolitan area and its contributions to black culture. The ideas of a "cultural revolution" materialized from the urban crisis environment in the early 1960s, and blossomed into a full-fledged movement by the mid-1960s.

The Black Arts Movement espoused themes of Black Power and confrontational socio-political commentary. The leaders and participants of the movement toured racial ghettos in New York City exhibiting and performing to build community unity, cultural enlightenment and psychological emancipation. The poetry produced was militant and evocative, created for African Americans and rejected negative Euro-centric aesthetics of "Black Art." African American artists took the initiative to establish their own concept and aesthetics of "Black Art". The Black Arts Movement opposed mainstream or politically moderate art. Poetry was a vehicle for autonomy, expression, and racial pride. The Black Arts Movement faded, however its influence, ideologies, and legacies gave birth to arguably the most enduring and significant form of black culture – hip-hop culture and rap music. Hip-hop culture was born in the heavily segregated African American neighbourhood of the South Bronx in 1974, and has emerged as one of the dominant forms of African American culture. African Americans engaged in cultural institutions as a means of challenging urban inequality and systematic discrimination, and

what emerged out of New York City was one of the most enduring and influential forms of black culture in American history.

The Black Arts Movement had two very influential antecedents: the Harlem Renaissance, and Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. On the surface, the earlier of the two influences, the Harlem Renaissance, shared many characteristics and ideologies with the Black Arts Movement. However, the leaders of Black Arts Movement developed goals directly opposed to the Harlem Renaissance. During the 1920s, "Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere." Harlem quickly became the most significant center for black artists and home of the "Negro Renaissance."[121] The "Negro Renaissance" was celebrated as a "psychological ripening" for African Americans and white Americans; a "new spiritual dynamic in artistic self-expression" was produced in Harlem.[122]

The "Negro Renaissance" in Harlem coincided with the first mass migration of African Americans out of the southern system of Jim Crow to the integrationist north, roughly around the end of the First World War and into the early 1920s. African American leaders and key members of the artistic community articulated this movement as a reawakening of black Americans to their African heritage, a race consciousness of pride, protest, and independence.[123] Poems from the 'Negro Renaissance', such as "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay or "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, represented this new

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[121] Langston Hughes, *Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 13: The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, Joseph McLaren ed. (University of Missouri Press, New York, 2002) 186, (accessed June 21, 2011).
[122] Alain Leroy Locke, *The Negro in America*, (American Library Association, Chicago, 1933), 45, (accessed June 21, 2011).
[123] Saunders J. Redding, *To Make a Poet Black*, (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1939), 100-101, (accessed June 21, 2011).

socio-political consciousness of African American artists in Harlem. However, this new race consciousness was about the only characteristic manifested in the ideology of the Black Arts Movement, and the Black Arts leaders opposed the mainstream audience and Euro-centric elements of the "Negro Renaissance."

Haki Madhubuti, the highly active writer in the Black Arts Movement, was vehemently outspoken about the white mainstream audience of the Negro Renaissance. In a 1971 essay Madhubuti contends, "the black arts movement in the twenties was of minimal influence and virtually went unnoticed by the majority of black people in the country. More whites knew about what was happening than brothers and sisters."[124] Highly acclaimed Negro Renaissance writer Langston Hughes described the mainstream segregation of the 1920s movement: "White people began to come to Harlem in Droves," for several years the Cotton Club – a Jim Crow nightclub – was packed, "all of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 20's was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked."[125] The Negro Renaissance of the 1920s was intertwined with mainstream America, from the target market to the artistic style. Aesthetically, the Black Arts movement was directly opposed to the Negro Renaissance. The African American art that flourished in the 1920s was "part of the avant-garde development of Western culture."[126] Leaders of the Black Arts Movement viewed the Negro Renaissance as a failure because it did not capture the mythology and

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[124]   Haki Madhubuti, "Renaissance I to Renaissance III?: An Introduction," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 2006), 13.
[125]   Langston Hughes, *Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 13: The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, Joseph McLaren ed. (University of Missouri Press, New York, 2002) 176-177, (accessed June 21, 2011).
[126]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Not Just Survival: Revolution," in *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979*, (William Morrow and Co. Inc.: New York, 1984), 41, (accessed June 21, 2011).

lifestyles of African American ghetto residents.[127] The Negro Renaissance of the 1920s was significant to the Black Arts Movement for establishing New York City as a centre for race-conscious black artists; however, artistic development in the 1920s was perhaps most influential as the antithesis of the Black Arts Movement.

The closest and most inspirational predecessor of the Black Arts Movement was Malcolm X. In his final year (Malcolm was assassinated on February 21, 1965), he proclaimed, "a cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves."[128] For the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, Malcolm X was the quintessential leader of the Black Liberation Movement and Black Power.[129] Confrontation, self-determination, self-respect, unity, and self-defense were all principles of Malcolm that were cornerstones of the Black Arts Movement.[130] According to Amiri Baraka, one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, "the Black Arts Movement of the sixties basically wanted to reflect the rise of militancy of black masses as represented by Malcolm X."[131] In addition to themes of militancy, the Black Arts Movement also adopted Malcolm's

[127]   Larry Neal, *The Black Arts Movement* (New York University School of Arts: New York, 1968), 39, (accessed June 21, 2011).

[128]   Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* 2nd ed. (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 55.

[129]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Not Just Survival: Revolution," in *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979*, (William Morrow and Co. Inc.: New York, 1984), 44, (accessed June 21, 2011).

[130]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Not Just Survival: Revolution," in *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979*, (William Morrow and Co. Inc.: New York, 1984), 45, (accessed June 21, 2011).

[131]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Revolution Tradition in Afro-American Literature," in *Daggers and Javelins: Essay, 1974-1979*, (William Morrow and Co. Inc.: New York, 1984), 147, (accessed June 22, 2011).

rejection of mainstream America and black bourgeois.[132] After Malcolm X's

assassination in Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom, the Black Arts Movement continued

Malcolm's forceful rhetoric and exhorted a revolution of oppressed African Americans.

The Black Arts Movement created a political movement centered on the arts that

provided a distinct voice and institution for African American residents that were victims

of structural discrimination and social inequalities created by the urban crisis.

The origins of the Black Arts Movement were not only grounded in Malcolm's

theoretical teachings, they were also influenced to establish the movement in Harlem, in

1965. According Baraka, "[t]he month after Malcolm's assassination a group of us

[artists] arrived in Harlem…to seek permanent residence and to avenge Malcolm's

murder."[133] The group of artists, consisting of Baraka, Larry Neal, Max Stanford,

Cornelius Suares, Clarence Franklin, Askia Toure, William White, Charles and William

Patterson and Sun Ra, "rented a brownstone on W. 130th near Lenox," in the heart of

Harlem and began to work.[134] It was there, where the group of artists coined the term for

the movement – the Black Arts.[135] The Cultural Revolution began; the group created the

Black Arts Repertory Theater School and the taught classes on history, politics, and

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[132]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle," in *Daggers and Javelins: Essay, 1974-1979* (William Morrow and Co. Inc.: New York, 1984), 317, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[133]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Arts Movement, excerpted from the LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 498, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[134]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Arts Movement, excerpted from the LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 498, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[135]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Arts Movement, excerpted from the LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 498, (accessed June 22, 2011).

drama.[136] The Black Arts movement was truly created for the oppressed African

Americans excluded from mainstream America. In addition to the Repertory School, the

artists "performed in projects, parks, the street, alleys, playgrounds. Each night in a

different location."[137] The street performances were directed at the oppressed African

Americans of the urban crisis. Performances were belligerently critical of the American

politics and attempted to enlighten black people about their place in society.[138] According

to Black Arts participant, Ademola Olugebefola, during this period all types of artists,

"poets, musicians, dancers, and dramatists," were "taking themes of black unity,

spirituality, pride… power," and African heritage to the streets and community centers to

fuse the empowerment of the arts to the socio-political movements of the time.[139]

The Black Arts Movement was created in opposition to earlier moderate civil

rights and black cultural movements. The Black Arts argued that African American civil

rights leaders and artists approached and conformed their politics and art from within the

existing white paradigm.[140] The fundamental purpose of the Black Arts Movement,

observed Black Arts writer James T. Stewart in 1968, was to, "emancipate our minds

from Western values and standards." African Americans must acknowledge their

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[136]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Arts Movement, excerpted from the LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 499, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[137]   Amiri Imamu Baraka, "The Black Arts," in *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 212, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[138]   Larry Neal, *The Black Arts Movement* (New York University School of Arts: New York, 1968), 32, (accessed June 21, 2011).

[139]   Ademola Olugebefola, interview by Sharon Fitzgerald, *Artist and Influence*, (New York: Hatch Billops Collection, March 14, 2004), 125, (accessed June 22, 2011).

[140]   James T. Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolution Artist," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, (William Morrow & Company, Inc.: New York, 1968), 3.

oppressed position in relation to "white Western civilization, and from this starting point in his estrangement begin to make new definitions founded on his own culture – on definite black values."[141] Western aesthetics and culture demonized the black aesthetic, and associated it with evil, dark forces, and witchcraft,[142] but the need for a self-defined black aesthetic was crucial for the Black Arts movement. Without a self-defined aesthetic, "to accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society," that oppressed and excluded blacks from mainstream America.[143] The Black Arts Movement resisted Western constraints and standards, and responded to being systematically disadvantaged and alienated with a distinct cultural form that allowed autonomy and positive self-definition. The reordering of the black aesthetic was the most fundamental objective of the Black Arts movement. First, the black aesthetic would extinguish the conventional white aesthetic, and secondly, the Black Arts movement established an affirmation of ethics that attempted to convey the reality of the world through the experience of an oppressed people.[144] Together, through the destruction of conventional Western aesthetics and reordering of black aesthetics and ethics, the Black Arts movement resisted social and psychological injustices and attempted to transform society.

While the Black Arts movement promoted the creation of a black aesthetic in all different forms of art, there was a significant propagation of poetry during this period that would influence and establish future institutions of African American culture. In addition

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[141]   Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolution Artists, 10.
[142]   Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony*, August 1969, 56, (accessed June 24, 2011).
[143]   Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *Drama Review*, (New York: New York University School of the Arts, 1968), 30, (accessed June 24, 2011).
[144]   Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *Drama Review*, (New York: New York University School of the Arts, 1968), 30, (accessed June 24, 2011).

to the reordering of black aesthetic, "the Black Arts movement aimed at poetry that celebrated black Americans even as it articulated their rage, their dreams, and their vision of a new social order."[145] Poetry during the Black Arts movement was an avenue for autonomy, expression and resistance for oppressed African Americans who generally had restricted opportunity for steady and equal employment, and social mobility. Artists consciously rejected mainstream association, "'[p]oetry for the people' became the bywords of the day, and scores of young black people…aspired to write poetry that would speak of, for, and to their communities."[146] The poetry produced during the Black Arts movement was a belligerent form of socio-political conscious resistance to the marginalization created by the urban crisis and hundreds of years of racial oppression. According to Larry Neal, "[p]oetry is a concrete function, an action…Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplane poems, and poems that shoot guns. Poems are transformed from physical objects into personal forces."[147] The poems embodied, "the collective conscious and unconscious of Black America."[148] The strength of poetry as a form of resistance and empowerment for the oppressed African Americans of New York City's inner city ghettos was not its publication in books and magazines, but rather live street corner performances in black communities.[149] Poetry during the Black Arts movement was a salient conduit for the artist community to express a positive self-

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[145]   Virginia C. Fowler, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1992,) x, (accessed June 27, 2011).
[146]   Fowler, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, x.
[147]   Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *Drama Review*, (New York: New York University: School of the Arts, 1968), 31, (June 27, 2011).
[148]   Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 32.
[149]   Margret Walker Alexander, "Phillis Wheately and Black Women Writers, 1773-1973," in *On Being Female, Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1997), 39, (accessed June 27, 2011).

definition and a critical socio-political commentary of American race-relations for oppressed African American communities.

Poetry was a prominent component of the Black Arts movement because of its potential for multiple facets: the poetry written during the height of the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s represented self-conscious themes of the new black aesthetic, African Americans' heritage, racial pride and unity, self-determination, contemporaneous socio-political commentary, nationalism, and revolution. Many of the poems were written in New York City by black New Yorkers, or described New York City's racial ghettos. The new black aesthetic created during the Black Arts movement attempted to destroy the negative Western symbolism of 'black' and reconstruct 'black' in a positive sense.

Poetry attempted to destroy the conventions of Eurocentricity by illustrating the racism, cruelty and repression of white America and colonialism. The poems criticized Western repression and conquering of Africans and black Americans. The poetic style was confrontational and forceful, as illustrated in Bobb Hamilton's poem, "Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At": "Man, your whole history/Ain't been nothing but a hustle/You're a three card melly Mother fucker." Hamilton continued his attack on Western subjugation, "Your greedy gray eyes around, lusting after our shining black women, and our gold and silver."[150] Hamilton described American colonizers' history and culture as a repressive scam. Poems attacked the foundation of Western American culture and the racist pillars of which white America conquered the United States. Gil Scott Heron reflects the outspoken criticism of Western subjugation in

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[150]   Bobb Hamilton, "Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of African American Writing*, (William Morrow & Company, Inc.: New York, 1968), 447-451.

his poem "The Ones Who…" In it, Heron states, "The ones who slaughtered

Indians…also broke my family tree and used it for kindling…also invented Tarzan, Aunt

Jemima, and Julia…also gave meaning to war, rape, murder, adultery and hell, where

they shall all someday reside."[151] The poets' diatribe was an attempt to discredit

Eurocentric cultural conventions, and illustrate Western subjugation and repression,

including the repression of the black aesthetic. Essential to the Black Arts movement was

self-conscious black aesthetic. Poets embraced the black symbolism as something that

was positive and beautiful. Clarence Reed, in his poem "The Invaders," connects the

black aesthetic to many affirmative images as he talks about how the "night smiled," and

"lovely black things."[152] LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, in his anthem for black

aesthetics in poetry, asserts:

> Let Black People understand
> That they are the lovers and the sons
> Of lovers and warriors and sons
> Of warriors Are poems & poets &
> All of the loveliness here in the world
>
> We want a black poem. And a
> Black World.
> Let the world be a Black Poem
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem[153]

Poetry produced during the Black Arts movement in New York City attempted to

dismantle the Eurocentric demonized connotations of black symbolism in art and create

their own definition of black aesthetic – one that embodied pride and empowerment. By

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[151]   Gil Scott-Heron, "The Ones Who…," *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox: A Collection of Black Poems*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970), 10.
[152]   Clarence Reed, "The Invaders," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of African American Writing*, (William Morrow & Company, Inc.: New York, 1968), 400.
[153]   LeRoi Jones, "Black Art," in in *Black Fire: An Anthology of African American Writing*, (William Morrow & Company, Inc.: New York, 1968), 303.

establishing their own black aesthetic, African American artists reclaimed their autonomy in black culture and resisted mainstream discrimination.

The poetry produced during the Black Arts movement reflected ideologies and attitudes from the Black Power movement. The poetry contained confrontational and belligerent elements, and advocated themes of African American history, racial pride, unity, and revolution. As well, the poems were often self-conscious, socio-political commentaries of oppressed people in America. Many poems describing the roots of African Americans began their story in Africa when black people were rulers of kingdoms and noble warriors. Lethonia Gee begins her poem "Black Music Man" by identifying the African American in his more dignified days as an African soldier, "As a Masai warrior, With his Burning Spear, Blessed by the Gods, The epitome of Man, BLACK MUSIC MAN."[154] Gee goes on to describe the black musician playing mournful music in cafés, and their isolation in American society. Poetry that connected black heritage to Africa would often describe the subjugation and victimization of the slave trade. Lebert Bethune, in the poem "Bwagamoyo," illustrated the oppression of the slave trade and attempted to depict the feelings of being captured, forced from one's homeland and sold to the slavers: "Bwagamoyo was an ancient collection point for slaves on the Tanganyikan coast," and the word Bwagamoyo has four definitions – one the "beginning and end," two, "crush your heart for all is lost now," three, "throw off melancholy the terrible march is ended," and four, "lay down your heart here on the coast of your homeland." Despite the atrocities of the slave trade, poets often referred to their African heritage to educate not only about the victimization, but also of a time before blacks were

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[154]   Lethonia Gee, "Black Music Man," *Black Fire*, 222-223.

oppressed. The Last Poets describe both the pride and degradation in their poem "For the

Millions:"

> For the millions of Africans
> Chained to the slave ships
> For the millions of scars
> On the Backs and Faces by the bullwhip
> For the millions who jumped overboard
> for the blood that poured
> on the shores of North America
> … no matter how much liquor and crack
> nothing can kill the fact
> that we are a divine creation started civilizations
> built the pyramids and the Sphinx
> …it's time to return
> to our Spiritual Home
> reclaim our Throne
> and leave this American nightmare
> Alone.[155]

Poetry produced during the Black Arts movement educated the audience about the history

of subjugation of African Americans. The poets were outspoken against the racist slave

trade, against contemporary oppression in America, and attempted to promote self-

awareness through ones African heritage.

African American poetry has functioned to create a conscious collective identity

as discriminated people, uniting them in their struggle for social and economic equality.

Poetry during the Black Arts movement created a conscious self-definition, attempted to

unite a community of oppressed people and psychologically empower them from their

repressive society. Racial pride was evident throughout the poetry in the Black Arts

movement. Bob Bennett asserts in his untitled poem, "the girl with the natural, Without

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[155]   Abiodun Oyewole, "For the Millions," in *On a Mission: Selected Poems and a History of The Last Poets*, (New York: Herny Holt and Company, Inc, 1996), 148-151.

words speaks of black and soul feeling, GLAD TO BE BLACK."[156] Artists exemplified

the ability of African Americans to display dignity and determination in cruel and

discriminatory American society. Bethune described the scene in Harlem and an African

American man's ability to persevere, despite being marginalized because of his race: he

"smiles a grim smile, as he hears a voice of Harlem scream, 'WE ALL SUPPOSED TO

BE DEAD BUT WE AIN'T,' And his slow strut moves him on again."[157] Racial pride

and unity were cornerstones in the poems created by Black Arts poets in their attempt to

create a political cultural movement. The Last Poets wrote, "My people let's be together,

understand that we've lived together understand that we've died together…"[158] The

poetry produced created a modern collective empowerment among poor African

Americans confronted with urban decline, economic, social, and political inequalities.

The poetry attempted to shed feeling of abandonment and isolation, and establish a sense

of racial pride and community.

Poetry served as a viable vehicle for expression of political themes, such as self-

determination, Black Nationalism, revolution and social change. Poems that discussed

revolution and self-determination were often very confrontational and forceful as

illustrated in The Last Poets, "Niggers R Scared of Revolution:"

> …Niggers are players. Niggers play football baseball and basketball
> while the whiteman is cutting off their balls… Niggers will
> tell you they're ready to be liberated but when you say let's go take our
> liberation. Niggers reply…oh…I was just playing… Niggers are scared of
> revolution.[159]

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156   Bob Bennett, (title), in *Black Fire*, 423.
157   Lebert Bethune, "Harlem Freeze Frame," in *Black Fire*, 382.
158   Abiodun Oywole, "My People," *On a Mission*, 57.
159   Umar Bin Hassan, "Niggers R Scared of Revolution," *On a Mission*, 63.

The ideology for self-determination against the oppressive establishment of white America, which became prominent during the Black Power movement, developed into a popular theme and was manifested in the poetry during the Black Arts movement. Bennett vigorously called for a revolution after he accused American politicians of a "double genocide" in Vietnam and in the ghetto: "It's time for action. Loud revolutionary action, Action that turns things upside down, Action that stirs my bleeding heart, Action that's gonna *mean* something for change."[160] African Americans wrote poems that not only discussed revolution directly but also implicitly described social change through violent riots. The Race Riots of the mid and late 1960s were the personification of aggressive, confrontational action for social change, and poets like Heron reflected these attitudes in poems like "flashback:"

> We are tired of
> praying and
> marching and
> thinking and
> learning. People want to start
> shooting and
> cutting and
> looting and
> burning.
> You are three hundred years
> ahead in equality,
> but next summer may
> be too late to look back. [161]

Poetry was a cultural conduit that allowed black artists to discuss aggressive social change. The Black Arts movement adopted the confrontational, violent, and revolutionary attitude of the Black Power movement, and articulated those feelings in

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[160] Bob Bennett, "It is Time for Action," *Black Fire*, 420-422.
[161] Heron, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, 31.

poems. While economic and social equality eluded Africans Americans living in New York City's highly segregated neighbourhoods, psychological self-determination and Cultural Revolution formed resistance to oppression, marginalization, and mainstream exclusion.

The Black Arts Movement emerged as a means of resistance to institutional discrimination, and psychological enlightenment from the discontent of the harsh conditions of the inner city ghetto. This Cultural Revolution surfaced during a period of intense social and political criticism, and the poetry served as a popular conduit for socio-political commentary of oppressed peoples. Occasionally, the social commentary in the poems was brief and direct, as in Odaro's poem "Alafia," when described the commonality of growing up poor in one of New York's black ghettos, "I am 20 years Black, born in Harlem, Poverty's little girl, Black Woman…"[162] Odaro's nonchalant social commentary illustrates the unexceptional experience of being black, poor, and isolated in a heavily segregated African American neighbourhood. However, more often than not, the social commentary of poems reflected the cruel and violent conditions of the South Bronx, Harlem, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. In the poem "Walking East on 125th Street," Ray Johnson described inhospitable realities of prostitution and pimping, drunkenness, crime, racism, and violence one encounters walking down a street in Harlem.[163] Poetry armed itself with critical social commentary that allowed it to highlight the extreme inequalities and injustices of the ghetto in a culturally accessible form. The Last Poets described the vicious cycle of structural discrimination in New York City in their poem, "New York New York The Big Apple":

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[162]   Odaro, "Alafia," in *Black Fire*, 356.
[163]   Ray Johnson, "Walking East on 125th Street," in *Black Fire*, 418-419.

New York New York the big apple
New York is a prerequisite to America
A disguised sin
Where some brother from that closed southern shit
Comes to some open northern shit
For a vacation for an opportunity…
For an opportunity that takes him home with
Dope in his arms and Clairol on the brain…
New York is an exploited colony called Brownsville
Bedford Stuyvesant or Harlem where tiny fat Jews
Are holding the firey hoop watching you burn your
Ass jumping through it…
New York is a state of mind that doesn't mind
Fucking up a brother.[164]

The poets of the Black Arts movement were a powerful medium that conveyed

experiences about the brutal conditions of the inner city ghetto neighbourhoods of New

York City. Poetry was for the oppressed African American people; it provided them a

voice when they were socially, politically, and economically discriminated against. It was

a confrontational expression of resistance for a group of people that were generally

excluded from mainstream America.

While the Black Arts movement did not win any concrete rights in congress, or

assuage social, economic or political inequalities, it did create the foundation for hip-hop

culture and rap music to emerge out of the South Bronx neighbourhood. Hip-hop and rap

music originated in the mid-1970s as an alternative form of resistance for inner city youth,

created by inner city youth, against the negative social conditions of the urban crisis, such

as crime, drugs, and gang violence.[165] Afrika Bambaataa, a leader in one of the largest

New York City gang's, The Black Spades, turned away from violence and toward music,

creating the Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation, according to Bambaataa, was "a large body of

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[164]   Abiodun Oyewole, *On a Mission*, 97-99.
[165]   Robert Palmer, "Rap and Hip-Hop Music in 'Wild Style," *The New York Times*,
February, 22, 1984, (accessed June 29, 2011).

youths, young adults and some adults trying to survive." Some members were "into

giving parties, some into break-dancing and rapping and signing; others…into college,

and political things, and religion."[166] Hip-hop culture was established as a positive

institution, an alternative to the negative consequences of the urban crisis and a form of

resistance to the marginalization of mainstream America. Like the poetry created during

the Black Arts movement, Hip-hop culture emerged from the segregated African

American neighbourhoods for fellow members of the underclass. The origins of hip-hop

consisted of deejaying, MCing (or rapping), graffiti and break-dancing. *Time* magazine

described hip-hop culture as assertive, racial pride, empowerment, competition, and

expression.[167] The Black Arts movement was heavily influential in the development of

hip-hop culture. Hip-hop culture would evolve from an artistic expression of the

underclass, to a national institution that articulated both the struggles and achievements

of African Americans.

The first twenty-five years after World War II witnessed the urban decline of New

York City for African Americans, from centers of opportunity to pockets of deterioration,

isolation, and abandonment. The establishment of the urban crisis had severe

consequences for inner city residents; unemployment, crime, violence and widespread

narcotics use. However, African Americans did not acquiesce to the structural and

institutional discriminations, nor the parasitic social consequences produced by urban

crisis. As urban decline firmly entrenched itself in African American neighbourhoods in

New York City, black artists responded with a proliferation of socio-political, self-

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[166] Jon Pareles, "Of Chicago Blues, Improvisation and Hip-Hop," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1985, (accessed June 29, 2011).
[167] Jay Cocks, "Living: Chilling Out on Rap Flash," *Time*, March 21, 1983, (accessed June 29, 2011).

conscious poetry. Cultural politics took shape in the Black Arts movement in response to urban decline and the many manifestations of racial inequality. This unique and powerful art form was political in nature, and challenged the growing polarization between poor urban blacks and white America. African American artists began the Black Arts movement in an attempt to unite the disadvantaged African American community, and instigate social, political, and economic reform in the oppressed communities of the United States. While the Blacks Arts Movement's superficial predecessor could be found in the Harlem Renaissance, artists of the 1960s and 70s would view the earlier movement as a failure, and aimed to develop art that was more oriented to the masses. The Black Arts Movement fundamentally rejected mainstream America, designed their movement around a self-defined black aesthetic and produced art for oppressed African Americans. The movement put considerable emphasis on the propagation of poetry. In addition to the new black aesthetic, the poetry exhibited themes of self-determination, African American history, racial pride and unity, revolution and critical socio-political commentary. African American artists articulated their frustrations about mainstream exclusion and marginalization through confrontational, assertive, and belligerent poetry. The attitudes, themes and ideologies would influence a new culture response of the underclass and help establish the African American institution of hip-hop.

CONCLUSION

On September 18, 2004, almost forty years after leaders of the Black Arts community congregated in New York City to organize a movement of cultural politics, Dave Chappelle assembled a new generation of black artists in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The aim of this assembly was to celebrate the creation and achievements of the unique culture that emerged from one of New York City's disadvantaged African American communities. Chappelle organized a concert featuring social and politically conscious hip-hop artists, later to be edited into a full-length motion picture entitled *Block Party*, and released in 2006. The group of influential hip-hop artists is a product of the "cultural revolution," which Malcolm X spoke of, and was inspired by the poetry and aesthetic of the Black Arts movement. First and foremost, the hip-hop artists were gathered to celebrate the accomplishments and longevity of hip-hop culture, in its fundamentally cultural and political form. However, one cannot fail to recognize that many of the themes and tenets of the Black Arts movement have transcended in contemporary hip-hop culture nearly forty years after its genesis. What, then, can we conclude from this snapshot of current black culture politics and the story of marginalized black communities in New York City?

Many of the issues highlighted in this account have endured, and in some cases, are direr than they were in the developmental stages of the urban crisis. The hardships that have plagued African American life – concentrated poverty, high rates of unemployment, racial and economic inequality, crime, drugs, and mass incarceration – remain largely undiminished. Nationally, African Americans median annual income was 61% of white households. While the unemployment rate was 9.5%, compared with 4%

for whites. Crime and drugs are still significant problems in black communities across the United States, and the disproportionate representation of black men in the penal system has increased to alarming levels. African American males make up 41% of the more than two million men incarcerated, that is approximately 836, 000 men held in state or federal prisons. Also, the emergence of crack cocaine and HIV infection are additional threats to life in poor inner city neighbourhoods. Conversely, hip-hop culture has emerged as one of the dominant African American institutions in the United States and continues to provide an alternative to crime, violence, and drugs, and challenge racial inequality in the United States.[168]

African Americans established a significant community in New York City, beginning with the first Great Migration during World War I and into the early 1920s. The first concentration of African American New Yorkers settled in Harlem, but as the population increased throughout the inter-war period and housing capacity was exhausted, new racial enclaves were created in poor sections of the South Bronx and Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhoods. Spatial discrimination generally relegated African Americans to some of the poorest and most dilapidated dwellings in the city. As World War II began, multiple push and pull factors attracted hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the South-Atlantic states and the Caribbean. As the black population increased, racial enclaves swelled and abysmal living conditions worsened because of overcrowding. The hope of economic opportunities attracted African Americans from the South; however, racial discrimination was a barrier to full-time steady employment,

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[168]   All figures in this paragraph are taken from Michael Eric Dyson, *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How it Changed America*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008) 91-110.

resulting in a lack of social mobility and an intensification of poverty in black communities.

The World War II domestic economies offered short-term opportunities for African Americans in industrial and manufacturing jobs, but as the war ended and veterans returned thousands of workers were displaced. Employment opportunities were scarce for African Americans, and the experience of racial discrimination was customary again. In particular, construction unions excluded African American from membership because of their race. Inequity deepened during the post-war period, economic discrimination worsened the deterioration of African American neighbourhoods, and segregation became more entrenched.

Federal government subsides contributed to the urban crisis. Construction of suburbia enabled white middle-class families to leave the city centre, while local loan agencies denied black families homeownership in the newly developed neighbourhoods. Industrial plants also left the city centers, making job opportunities even more remote. Urban renewal projects, designed to prevent the white middle-class from fleeing the city, displaced poor residents into already overcrowded racial enclaves and maintained a Jim Crow policy for housing projects. Government funded construction of new highways served to isolate and marginalize inner city residents.

Limited access to institutional avenues for social and economic advancement created an environment that was susceptible to the proliferation of crime and drugs. While it was not an organized or collective response to the racial discrimination and inequalities, crime amongst African Americans did increase as a result of persistent social and economic exclusion. The media and political leaders stigmatized African Americans

as criminals, and targeted them in their development of tough-on-crime policies that resulted in mass incarceration. The conservative agenda was to hire more police officers, arrest more people, and build more prisons to incarcerate the deviants. The deviants, as it turned out, were disproportionately African Americans. Upon their release from prisons, African Americans were constitutionally excluded from full participation in mainstream America, and further marginalized.

In response, African American artists challenged racial inequality with an investment in the black arts. Leaders of the Black Arts Movement assembled in Harlem in 1965 to establish a movement of cultural politics that would inspire, educate, and empower African Americans during this period of urban decline. While this was not the first time an explosion of self-conscious art emerged from Harlem, it would be a departure of the 1920s "Negro Renaissance." In attitude and aesthetic, the Black Arts movement would be the antithesis of the early production of art. Inspired by Malcolm X's call for a 'Cultural Revolution,' the Black Arts movement rejected western aesthetics and embodied the belligerent attitude of the Black Power movement. Poetry was paramount to the Black Arts movement and in the struggle for racial equality, no longer was "black" symbolic of evil, but representative of beauty, assertiveness, and empowerment. The poetry was confrontational, evocative, and powerful; it introduced a critical socio-political commentary of racial injustices.

The Black Arts movement was crucial for the development of one of the most important African American institutions – hip-hop culture. The emergence of hip-hop culture grew out of the disadvantaged African American community of the South Bronx and was an alternative to gang life, crime, and drugs. The culture embodies many of the

same themes and tenets of the Black Arts movement, and continues to voice the struggle for racial equality in America.

It is commonplace in the historiography of the urban crisis to explain the origins and the responses to urban decline by African Americans. The fact that structural discrimination has victimized African American communities, and that these residents have challenged these obstacles, has been established. However, there is a need to push beyond the twenty five years immediately preceding World War II and the transitory political responses to racial inequality by African Americans. Inner city residents continue to struggle with, and be challenged by, racialized poverty and a lack of legitimate avenues for advancement. Historians need to assess more thoroughly why so many African Americans remain on the fringe of society in the age of post-Civil Rights equal opportunity. Why, fifty-five years after 'the end of racial discrimination' in America, do blacks continue to be disadvantaged? How can urban African Americans confront persistent poverty? Both positive and negative cultures have emerged in response to the barriers of limited opportunity and racial inequality in poor black communities; some have endured to this day. If we examine these cultures more deeply, we will gain a more comprehensive understanding as to why the African American ghetto has become a constant part of urban America. Looking at the various neighbourhoods, the destructive social ills, and the constructive establishment of hip-hop in New York City is one way to do this.

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