

“A STRANGELY ORGANIC VISION”: POSTMODERNISM, ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE, AND THE NEW URBANIST NOVEL

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation examines critical engagements with the “new urbanist” movement in late 20th and early 21st century U.S. novels, including Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*, and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*. I argue that these novels reflect new urbanism’s valorization of neighborhoods that are walkable, green, and diverse, even as they critique the movement’s inattention to environmental injustice and the long history of urban rights movements. Moreover, I argue that contemporary fiction’s engagement with new urbanism has driven formal and stylistic innovation in the novel. The “new urbanist novel,” I argue, blends elements of the postmodern literary mode, such as metafiction and narrative fragmentation, with elements that are arguably anti-postmodern, such as representations of stable collective identity and utopian visions of organic urban community.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: “REDISCOVERING THE CITY”:

URBANISM AND THE AMERICAN NOVEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The past three decades have been decades of tremendous and at times convulsive social change, especially in large cities, and the tide of the fourth great wave of immigration has made the picture seem all the more chaotic, random and discontinuous, to use the literary clichés of the recent past. Despite all the current talk of ‘coming together,’ I see the fast-multiplying factions of the modern cities trying to insulate themselves more diligently than ever before . . . So the doors close and the walls go up! It is merely another open invitation to literature, especially in the form of the novel.

Tom Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” (56)

In the 1989 essay “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” Tom Wolfe argues that, after decades of neglect, it is time for American novelists to “return to the city.” Wolfe especially valorizes the stylistics of urban novelists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, writers such as Dickens, Zola, and Sinclair Lewis, who went beyond their own experiences and approached the novel as reporters of the urban condition (52). Their model, Wolfe argues, can guide contemporary writers toward what he sees as the essential subject of the urban novel: “What truly presses on the heart of the individual, white or nonwhite, living in the metropolis” (52). Wolfe seems to assume, however, that the hearts of “white or nonwhite” individuals are best revealed by white male writers; in charting the history of urban-centered novels he ignores mid-20th century novels by nonwhite writers, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Wolfe also derides the postmodern writers of the 60s and 70s who disavowed a unified, realist vision of the city in favor of modes of representation that were “chaotic, fragmented, random, and discontinuous” (49). Wolfe argues that the author has an obligation to reach beyond “personal experience” to convey a sense of the city in its totality (52), an obligation that he believed postmodern literature had betrayed. Wolfe’s essay evokes a rhetoric of urban

decline that had become mainstream among in the 1980s;¹ however, his argument for a return to realist representations of the city also dovetails with an implicit argument for the repossession of urban space by an autonomous white subject. The synchronicity of these two arguments is sustained by Wolfe's inability to perceive or acknowledge "personal experiences" of the city that would contradict his own.

Wolfe's 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* exemplifies the realist urban aesthetic he advocates in "Billion-Footed Beast," as well as the project of "urban repossession" that undergirds that aesthetic. *Bonfire* follows the wealthy bond trader Sherman McCoy, a "master of the universe" who gradually loses control of the infrastructure of white privilege: the highways that allow him to bypass predominantly black neighborhoods, the courts that speed low-income and minority defendants into the prison system, and the markets that men like McCoy can manipulate to accumulate personal wealth. McCoy's fall from the echelons of power is set in motion when he and his mistress take a wrong turn and end up lost in the Bronx. McCoy sees the Bronx neighborhood adjacent to the expressway as "utterly empty, a vast open terrain" (84), and he becomes disoriented and bewildered: "He had lost track of the grid pattern altogether. It no longer looked like New York" (97). As they try to make their way back to Manhattan, McCoy and his mistress hit a young African-American man, Henry Lamb, whom they imagine to be a mugger, and then drive off without stopping. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* ends with Sherman McCoy violently defending his privileged access to the city by facing down a group of protestors at the courthouse—led by an Al Sharpton stand-in, Reverend Bacon—after his arraignment for the hit-and-run of Henry Lamb. As McCoy begins attacking one of the protestors, the crowd disperses: "The mob in the

¹ See, for example, Liam Kennedy's *Race and Urban Space in American Culture* (2013).

corridor held back, not sure what they were dealing with. Sherman sought out their faces, as if ready to obliterate them with his very eyes . . . The little band beat a retreat down the marble halls” (685). As McCoy is drawn out of the spaces of privilege and into the criminal justice system, he finds himself losing his sense of self (550-551); only by striking out at this racialized and unindividuated mob is he able to reclaim it.

Although Wolfe’s essay argues that novelists ought to be “cramming as much of New York City between two covers as you could” (45), *Bonfire of the Vanities* is predicated on the invisibility and exclusion of huge swaths of the city and its history, particularly the stories of people of color. The “empty terrain” where Sherman McCoy first encounters Henry Lamb was the result of one of the most expansive and expensive urban renewal projects ever undertaken in the United States: the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which was orchestrated by the modernist city planner Robert Moses. The consequences of this project for the neighborhoods bisected by the expressway were immediate and well-documented: thousands of displaced people, decaying infrastructure and housing stock, environmental health problems, rising rates of crime and drug addiction.² This story is, undoubtedly, a part of Henry Lamb’s cognitive map of the city, as present as the subway lines and highways. But this narrative is not part of Sherman McCoy’s cognitive map, nor, it seems, is it part of Wolfe’s. The absence of this story—and the absence of Henry Lamb’s personal experience of that story—makes McCoy incapable of imagining Lamb as anything but a violent predator. The violence that McCoy visits on Henry Lamb is enabled by privileged access to the infrastructure of the

² See, for example, Robert Caro’s biography of Moses, *The Power Broker* (pages 885-894) and Marshall Berman’s reflection on Moses’s modernism in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.

city and by the narrative invisibility of Lamb's history and experience in the world that McCoy inhabits.

Wolfe's reliance on falsely universalized white fears of the inner city and on racialized tropes of the "urban jungle" contribute to what Michael Bennett calls the "general sentiment of anti-urbanism" that has sustained disinvestment from cities and white flight into the suburbs and exurbs since the 1950s (172). This kind of anti-urbanism has also helped to perpetuate many varieties of urban environmental racism: the relocation of environmental hazards to racially segregated urban neighborhoods, the non-enforcement of environmental regulations, withdrawal of funding for urban social programs, NIMBY ("Not in My Backyard") campaigns against affordable housing, and the militarization of urban surveillance and policing (174). However, in Wolfe's case, this anti-urbanist sentiment is joined not with an argument for urban disinvestment and abandonment but with a "rhetoric of repossession": a kind of neo-conservative notion that writers (like Wolfe) and capitalists (like McCoy) have both a fundamental right to the city and an obligation to restore it to order and unity. Wolfe's defense of the privileged access to urban amenities enjoyed by wealthy white men like Sherman McCoy, and his argument for totalizing artistic representations of the city, may seem to make him an ideological and stylistic outlier among late 20th century novelists.³ However, *Bonfire of the Vanities* did presage a trend toward representations of urban communities in the imagination of white writers of literary fiction, many of whom were steeped in postmodernism, but, like Wolfe, growing resistant to its fragmentation,

³ Wolfe's call for expansive social realist representations of the city was taken up in some post-Cold War American novels, such as T.C. Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain*, a realist novel that takes on themes of immigration, racial violence, suburbanization and spatial segregation, but which is at its center, like Wolfe's novel, about the loss of white male identity.

foundationlessness, irresolution, irony, and self-referentiality.⁴ Wolfe's novel was followed by writers whose works reach toward a cohesive representation of the city, and valorize urban life as an alternative to the sprawl of suburbia, but which fail to account for the experiences of the poor and people of color, overlook the unjust distribution of environmental dangers and urban amenities, and efface the violent histories of American urbanism, like the freeway developments that shaped Henry Lamb's experience of the Bronx.

Many of these "back-to-the-city" novels take the form of nostalgic or elegiac laments for a golden age of urban neighborhoods, or envision the urban neighborhood as a "garden in the wilderness," a sanctuary of connection between others in an increasingly divided world. For example, Jonathan Lethem's critically-acclaimed 2003 novel, *Fortress of Solitude*, tells a story about the gentrification of Brooklyn and the disintegration of an interracial friendship, framed within a middle-aged rock journalist's search for authenticity and identity. Michael Chabon's 2012 novel *Telegraph Avenue*, set in Oakland in the early 2000s, shares a similarly nostalgic longing for spaces of face-to-face, pre-capitalist interaction in a kind of urban village, and for the possibility of interracial friendship. In Lethem's and Chabon's novels, the city isn't the proving ground for the autonomous individual but for the possibility of organic community: a place of effortlessly utopian interpersonal connection (Joseph IX). Other urban novels—such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*—operate on the

⁴ Some scholars—Jeremy Green, for example—have argued that the 1990s saw the inauguration of a "post-postmodern" or "late postmodern" literary style, characterized by critical rejection of aspects of postmodernism. This shift can be seen partly as a reaction to mounting criticisms regarding the political inefficacy of the postmodern novel: For example, Linda Hutcheon's assertion that because postmodernism presupposes the inescapability of systems of power and domination, such as patriarchy and capitalism, that it offers at best a "complicitous critique" (5).

scale of the 19th-century novels Wolfe discusses, and similarly attempt to bring the whole of the city into view; however, unlike Wolfe, their work proceeds from a foundation that pre-supposes the radical fragmentation of postmodernity. These novels are described by critic James Wood as examples of “hysterical realism,” a genre aimed at conveying a “fervid intensity of connectedness,” but whose connections to one another are “conceptual rather than human . . . a formal lesson rather than an actual enactment.” Both novels begin with a neighborhood-level narrative perspective but sprawl outward toward a universalizing vision in which city dwellers—and, ultimately, *all* people—are drawn together in communion by their shared connection to nuclear bombs and garbage (DeLillo) or by toxicity and addiction (Wallace). These modes of urban representation—the hysterical realist novel and the novel of neighborhood nostalgia—may seem benign in comparison to Wolfe’s white supremacist rhetoric of urban repossession. But these narratives can work in tacit support of repossessionist rhetoric by what they, too, leave out: the connection of urban neighborhoods to a continuous history, for example, or the disparities in access and exposure that undergird the vast overarching connections between city-dwellers.

The New Urbanist Novel

In order to counter the rhetoric of urban repossession propagated by Wolfe and other novelists—and by mainstream environmentalists who have also begun to head “back to the city”—my dissertation, “‘A Strangely Organic Vision’: Postmodernism, Environmental Justice, and the New Urbanist Novel,” focuses on late 20th and early 21st century novels by Ethnic American writers. In particular, I am interested in writers who represent the city in formally and stylistically innovative ways, but whose work is also

founded in a commitment to social and environmental justice. Collectively, these novels offer new ways of theorizing urban environmentalisms, social movement organizing, and the politics of postmodern literature. I refer to this cluster of novels—including Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1996), Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), Ed Park’s *Personal Days* (2007), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2012)—as “new urbanist novels.” Throughout the dissertation, I read these novels through an environmental justice framework, which aims to make visible the intersections between social location and both exposure to urban environmental hazards and access to environmental amenities. This environmental justice framework also focuses attention on the foundations of environmental injustices in existing structures of domination and oppression, and on the possibilities for transforming those structures. I see these novels as interventions into both the literary representation of cities and the rhetoric of emergent social movements—particularly the New Urbanist Movement—that seek to transform urban space. I argue that these new urbanist novels reflect new urbanism’s valorization of neighborhoods that are walkable, green, and diverse, even as they critique the movement’s inattention to the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards and to the long history of urban rights movements. The perspectives offered in these novels are critical to the future of the New Urbanist Movement: to the stories the movement tells about itself, to the tactics it chooses, and to the ways it envisions the 21st century American city.

New urbanism most often refers to a mode of planning and urban design that favors mixed land uses, such as commercial, residential and industrial sites within the same neighborhood; the reuse of historic buildings; the creation of a range of housing

choices, including multi- and single-family homes alongside luxury and affordable housing; the creation of “walkable” and transit-linked neighborhoods; the protection of neighborhood access to parks and green space, including urban gardens; and the cultivation of fairness, transparency, and diverse stakeholder participation in planning and design decisions (Duany et. al.). The Smart Growth Movement, which I will sometimes refer to alongside the New Urbanist Movement, has goals that are similar to new urbanism’s, but on a regional scale.⁵ For example, smart growth advocates aim to create higher density growth within existing communities, partly as a means of preserving open space and farmland (Soule 34). In most accounts, the benefits of both smart growth and new urbanism are framed in opposition to the negative impact of suburbanization or “sprawl,” which David Soule defines as “low-density, auto-dependent land development,” in which undeveloped land outside of urban centers is transformed into “single-family residential subdivisions and campus-style commercial office parks and diffuse retail uses” (3). Both the New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements have brought the attention of policymakers to critical urban social and environmental issues, such as insufficient transit infrastructure and disappearing parkland.

However, these movements have also missed opportunities to listen to the voices of people of color, advocated policies that obscure enduring social and environmental injustices, and whitewashed the role that structural racism has played in shaping the landscape of the American city. As the environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard writes: “Every decade or so Americans rediscover the city,” while longtime residents of

⁵ The largest non-governmental organization devoted to advocating new urbanist planning and design, The Congress for New Urbanism, was founded in 1993. Maryland Governor Parris Glendening signed influential legislation encouraging smart growth in 1997, and is largely responsible for popularizing the term (Soule xii). The largest smart growth NGO, Smart Growth America, was founded in 1999.

the city suffer the attendant consequences of rediscovery: urban renewal, gentrification, displacement (7). Many of the leading voices in the New Urbanist Movement have demonstrated a lack of concern for the impact of urban revitalization efforts on the disempowered, particularly the poor and people of color. For example, Andres Duany, a cofounder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, offered “three cheers for gentrification” in an article for *American Enterprise Magazine*, without acknowledging gentrification’s potentially harmful social and economic consequences for the current residents of urban neighborhoods.⁶ The “rediscovery” of the city has been abetted by cultural narratives that serve as support for new urbanist ideas, including novels by white postmodernists like David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Lethem. Although these authors do not engage in Wolfe’s full-throated defense of the structures of white supremacy, I would argue that they do share his investment in the privileged access to the city afforded by whiteness, and, invariably, reproduce that privilege in their writing. I argue that literary representations of new urbanism by ethnic American writers offer a valuable counterpoint to such privileged perspectives on the city, and a timely intervention into the New Urbanist Movement’s vision for the future of the city.

The formally innovative works of Yamashita, Viramontes, Park, and Whitehead share with authors like Wallace and DeLillo an investment in “postmodern” literary style, along with some of their skepticism toward postmodernism. However, the narrative representations of the city in *Tropic of Orange*, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, *Personal Days*, and *Zone One* also foreground issues of social and environmental justice which are often occluded in works by white writers. Unlike other postmodern novels of the late 20th

⁶ Similarly, Kaid Benfield, director of the “Sustainable Communities Campaign” at the National Resources Defense Council, made the case for gentrification in his 2014 book *People Habitat: 25 Ways To Think About Greener, Healthier Cities* (2014).

and early 21st century, such as *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest*, in which fragmented urban narratives sprawl outward, *away* from the city, the novels I consider in the dissertation narrate unlikely convergences of city-dwellers, in a kind of “anti-sprawl aesthetic.” These spatial convergences become a way for the new urbanist novel to explore utopian possibilities for social movement formation and the transformation of the city. Moreover, while several of these novels look to the historical past for a lost sense of neighborhood cohesion—like Lethem and Chabon—the feelings of neighborhood nostalgia they evoke are used to galvanize resistance to oppressive conditions in the present. Ultimately, I argue that the commitment to social and racial justice that undergirds these emergent “late postmodern” characteristics of the new urbanist novel—which also include temporarily grounded truth claims, narrations of shared visions of the future, contingent metanarratives, and coherent, if transitory, social movement identities—offer both an antidote to the limitations of white postmodernism and a response to the litany of critiques regarding postmodernism’s political inefficacy.

Moreover, I read novels such as *Tropic of Orange*, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, and *Zone One* as critical responses to New Urbanism, and as vehicles for shepherding these movements toward deeper engagement with issues affecting the socially and environmentally vulnerable. Like the new urbanists, the novels I discuss in the dissertation imagine collective efforts to access urban environmental goods like public transportation and healthy food, and to mitigate environmental threats, like air pollution. However, these novels also point to valuable critiques of new urbanist rhetoric, and to shortcomings in their vision of the future of urban space. For example, in the chapter on Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, I argue that advocates for new urbanist design often draw

on pastoral imagery to envision the transformation of cities into places of leisure and organic community. Yamashita's novel troubles new urbanism's pastoral narratives by making visible enduring inequalities in exposure to environmental hazards and by helping readers connect new urbanist "innovations" to a long history of struggle for livable cities that stretches back to the civil rights era. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the models of urban social movement organizing envisioned by multi-ethnic American writers like Yamashita can help to redirect conversations about urban livability toward the principles of social and environmental justice.

Building an Urban Environmental Justice Ecocriticism

I focus on urban narratives by Ethnic American writers partly in the hopes of expanding the scholarly discourse on environmental justice issues in fields of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. In spite of important critical interventions by Bennett and Teague (1999), Ashton Nichols (2011), and Paul Outka (2013), the study of urban environments continues to have an uncertain place in the ecocritical conversation. Because cities have traditionally been a locus of struggles for environmental justice since the movement's emergence in the 1980s, this oversight both reflects and sustains the relegation of environmental justice issues to the peripheries of ecocritical discourse. Many environmental critics have been, and remain, critical of environmental justice approaches to environmental problems. One persistent criticism of environmental justice has focused on its tendency toward particularism when framing problems and solutions. In a short history of ecocriticism published in *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, the authors argue that environmental justice ecocriticism "fell short of making the shift to a genuinely global perspective as long as it focused on

the environmental rights of U.S. minorities alone and pitted a minoritarian sense of place against that of the white Anglo mainstream, still relying on the same trope of rootedness” (421). The implications of this critique are troubling. The first generation of ecocritics once valorized the development of a strongly-rooted sense of place, represented primarily by rural white writers like Wendell Berry, against the rootlessness and ‘ecological detachment’ of migrant urban minorities. Now, urban minorities’ strategies for building environmental social movements from a foundation of relocalization are critiqued by a new wave of ecocritical theorists for being insufficiently global in their scope.

Ecocriticism’s recent attentiveness to global environmental problems, particularly climate change, is a necessary shift in a theoretical framework that aims to inform environmentalist practice; however, it should not come at the expense of engagement with the particular experience of environmental injustices in particular places, and especially with those resource-poor communities that may be otherwise left out of a new “cosmopolitan” vision of environmentalism. Contrary to Buell, Heise, and Thornber, I contend that “minoritarian sense[s] of place” can be foundational for social movement organizing. In this vein, I follow and extend the work of innovative EJ scholars like Sarah Wald, Mitchum Huehls, Sarah Jaquette-Ray, Priscilla Ybarra, and others who suggest that an environmental justice ecocriticism should be attentive to the ways that oppositional senses of place are constructed and mediated in narrative fiction, and the way that those senses of place can contribute to the creation of social movement identities. In addition, making visible the experience of place within marginalized communities—their particular ways of seeing and knowing the environment,

environmental problems, and potential solutions—is necessary to ensuring a more just distribution of environmental harms and goods.

A key aspect of my intervention is to place critical race theory and comparative ethnic studies methodologies into conversation with ecocriticism. Critical race theory offers a lens for understanding why the study of texts by people of color is essential to ecocriticism and to environmentalism more broadly. In *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*, Paula Moya argues that the experiences of oppressed people are “individual and particular, but can have implications for all Americans” (3). Moya argues that our social locations, defined as “the particular nexus of gender, race, class and sexuality in which a given individual exists in the world” (26), shape our experience of the world, and form the foundation for claims to knowledge about the world (57). She claims that the categories that *comprise* social location, as unfixed or artificially constructed as they may be, “have real material effects” (44-45). For Moya, a realist theory of identity would create the possibility for “non-essentialist” categories of self-identification (“women of color,” for example), which are grounded in an understanding of the epistemological and experiential consequences of one’s social location. The implications of these categories of self-identification are reflected in what Moya calls the “epistemic privilege” that comes from a particular body of experiences: “a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society . . . operate to sustain matrices of power” (38). In the works I consider in the dissertation, characters offer a privileged perspective on issues of urban environmental justice that emerges from both their experience of racialization and their embodied knowledge of urban environments. In the work of Yamashita, Park,

Whitehead, Viramontes, and other formally innovative ethnic American novelists, that “realist” sense of the material consequences of social location provides a foundation for moving past the spatial and historical foundationlessness of postmodern narratives and for making claims to temporarily stable identities and values. Moreover, the notion that experiences of environmental racism offer a privileged perspective on power relations is a strong argument for the centrality of these texts to environmentalist discourse.

Throughout the dissertation, I consider the ways that ethnic American writers construct a sense of urban place, and how that sense of place informs the possibilities for social movement action in urban space. In several of the novels I consider, the characters’ sense of place and their experience of racialization are deeply connected; for example, in Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*, the principal characters live in an East Los Angeles neighborhood that has been designated as a “quarantine zone,” a racialized space that has been separated from the social body. However, these novels also reveal how racialized senses of place can inform collective identity formation and serve as foundations for social movement action. As Julie Sze notes in her study of environmental justice struggles in New York, environmental justice activism coalesced around people who possessed a “shared sense of place and identity, centered on their belief that they were targeted as victims of environmental racism” (3). Moya’s theory of “realist” identities and the epistemic privilege that inheres to particular social locations is one way to understand why environmentalism needs to be attentive to the senses of place that are cultivated among the disempowered and oppressed. The experience of spatialized racism conveys a kind of privileged knowledge about matrices of power, but also a privileged relationship to forms of social movement identity that can inform new urbanist and

environmental movement practice. For the new urbanists in particular, attention to the construction of place among people of color is necessary for organizing grassroots coalitions of city-dwellers that cross boundaries of race and class. Centering the stories of people of color is also essential for preventing potential harms—like the displacement effects of gentrification—that new urbanist transformations of the city might cause.

Attention to the “privileged knowledges” of writers of color can also help disrupt the unthinking environmental privilege of “mainstream” environmentalists that can stand in the way of coalitions with environmental justice activists. The unequal distribution of environmental harms and goods is sustained, in part, by the construction and reproduction of collective identities rooted in what the environmental justice scholars Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow call “environmental privilege,” which comes from the “economic, political, and cultural power” that allows some groups access to environmental amenities, such as clean water and open space, and insulation from environmental hazards, such as polluted air (together with the belief that they have *earned* those privileges) (4-6).⁷ Many white environmentalists mistakenly believe that facets of their social location, such as educational opportunities, tourism and travel, and access to cultural archives like the nature-writing canon, have granted them a kind of epistemic privilege that allows them to see environmental problems and solutions more clearly than others. Similarly, investment in environmental privilege—even through the cultivation of ostensibly ‘oppositional’ identities, such as ‘environmentalist’—can be a means of preserving exclusive access to

⁷ Work by scholars such as George Lipsitz in the field of critical whiteness studies offers a lens for challenging environmental privilege and for examining the vehicles through which that privilege is disseminated, such as the novel and other cultural texts. Environmental privilege—and the solidity of collective identities based in the preservation of those privileges—can be seen as a counterpart to what Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness,” the cultural, social and economic incentives that drive white people to “remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, opportunity, and power” (viii). Kari Norgaard argues that interrogating environmental privilege “is as crucial to the field of environmental justice as critical white studies is to the field of race” (216).

tangible resources, such as unpolluted airsheds and waterways, and recreational access to ‘pristine’ and unpopulated wilderness areas. At its worst, ecocriticism can be a vehicle for reproducing an uncritical sense of environmental privilege: the sense that one’s appreciation for nature comes from an enlightened pursuit of knowledge rather than from a privileged social position that makes such appreciation possible. To be successful in the 21st century, the environmental movement has to move beyond the discourses of privilege that have dominated environmental thought since its emergence. In their study of the environmental justice movement *From the Ground Up*, Cole and Foster argue that the particular experiences of people among “the grassroots,” “[are] experiences that cannot be shared by those situated differently but that they must understand in order to do justice to the others” (12). Narrative fiction provides one way to make those experiences visible to others who cannot possibly share them; however, literary works that challenge and decenter environmental privilege remain understudied by scholars in the environmental humanities. If the environmental humanities is to meaningfully contribute to the environmental movement, it’s vital to create a central place in the conversation for the work of ethnic American writers, and particularly for works that consider the distribution of environmental hazards and environmental amenities in urban spaces.

New Urbanism, Environmental Justice, and “New Social Movements”

The debates surrounding the New Urbanist Movement help to bring into view the interconnected issues of urban place-making and social and environmental justice, along with competing visions of social movement action. New Urbanism emerged in the 1990s contemporaneously with the environmental justice movement, but there has always been tension between the two discourses. As the New Urbanist Movement grew, a stark

contrast emerged between advocates for incremental change—working for improvements to urban livability within existing regimes of city planning and urban redevelopment—and advocates for structural change that would address entrenched systems of class- and race-based oppression that shape the city (Talen 284-289). This conflict is particularly apparent within the growing professional movement organizations, such as Smart Growth America and the Congress for the New Urbanism, that have begun to drive the conversation about new urbanism. For Bullard and other environmental justice activists, the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements offer opportunities to address a range of problems that were central to the rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, and that had faded from discussions of public policy during the intervening years: “environmentally degraded land, polluted air, traffic congestion, loss of green space, concentrated poverty, urban disinvestments, housing abandonment, bank and insurance redlining, and growing social and economic polarization” (Bullard 25). The movement also offers an opportunity to redress inequitable distribution of urban environmental hazards—such as air pollution and superfund sites—along with unequal access to public environmental goods—like public transportation, city parks, or fresh food. Many of these disparities can be linked to racialized patterns of residential segregation (Cole and Foster 66; Banerjee and Verma 203), and have been exacerbated by sprawl-driven development (Bullard 371). However, among many of the new urbanist advocates with the greatest power to shift the conversation, those structural issues affecting people of color have been pushed to the bottom of the agenda (Bullard 4).

These tensions within the New Urbanist Movement—between professional organizations committed to incremental change and a grassroots base committed to

transformative justice—are representative of a broader conflict that has been taking place with the environmental movement since its origins in the 1970s. The 80s and early 90s were a period of rapid expansion of national and international environmental organizations—such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, and National Resources Defense Council—a period in which these organizations’ budgets and supporting membership rolls grew, staff expanded, and movement tactics shifted to include massive advertising and marketing campaigns, corporate partnerships, and advocacy for market-based solutions to environmental problems (Shabecoff 256-265). The failure of new national environmental policy initiatives in the 80s and 90s drove these organizations to advocate solutions through existing federal regulatory frameworks (like The Clean Air Act), rather than through new regulations. As a result, lawsuits have become one of the most commonly used tools for seeking redress of environmental harms. Environmental justice scholars have criticized the mainstream environmental movement’s reliance on legal action and policy advocacy, because these forms of redress merely perpetuate a status quo that does not benefit the people who are most often the victims of environmental harms (Pulido 28). Such tactics have also led to professionalization in the environmental movement: organizations that rely on a full-time staff of lawyers, policy analysts, lobbyists and public relations specialists (Cole and Foster 30). The professionalization of mainstream environmentalism has led to the marginalization of local community activists, and—as the staff of mainstream environmental organizations is largely white—especially people of color within the environmental movement (Brulle 91).⁸ Mainstream environmentalism’s neglect of the movement’s grassroots base has resulted in narrower

⁸ In 1990, for example, a group of civil rights leaders wrote an open letter to several of the major U.S. environmental organizations criticizing them for hiring practices that kept people of color out of leadership positions, and for ignoring environmental issues affecting marginalized communities (Shabecoff 264).

definitions of both environmental problems and solutions. As the major environmental organizations work to influence discussions of environmental issues in the public sphere, in the courts, and in state and federal legislatures, environmental problems affecting the poor are often left out of the conversation. Mainstream environmentalism's inattention to environmental problems facing the poor, and particularly the urban poor, was a significant reason for the emergence of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s and 90s.

In the United States, environmental justice has developed as a kind of hybrid form of environmentalism, a balance between what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier call “northern,” post-industrial or post-material environmentalism and “southern” environmentalism (or “the environmentalism of the poor”), which is driven by competition for material resources.⁹ Often, U.S. environmental justice organizing is rooted in the struggle for community resources, such as preventative health care, or the prevention of direct harms, such as the siting of polluting industries near marginalized communities. Environmental justice movements are also often place-based, emerging from established social networks that exist in some urban neighborhoods, or from shared work space, such as the labor camps of agricultural workers. Finally, U.S. environmental justice activists have been much more likely than professional environmentalists to deploy direct action tactics, such as sit-ins, strikes and boycotts. At the same time, environmental justice activists have used strategies that are commonly associated with new social movements: they have built temporary coalitions with mainstream

⁹ According to Guha and Martínez-Alier, southern environmentalism uses modes of collective organizing that are based in pre-existing social structures of villages; they are more likely to deploy strategies of direct action, such as strikes and roadblocks (14). Conversely, northern environmentalism is organized through temporary and contingent networks and uses methods of redress available in “more complete democracies,” such as litigation, lobbying and appeals to the media (17-18).

environmentalist organizations; they have strategically adopted cultural symbols of pre-existing social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement; they have lobbied Congress and launched lawsuits. While some critics have argued that such diffuse strategies and tactics are a critical weakness of the environmental justice movement,¹⁰ understanding and balancing the tensions between these different modes of activism is critical to the future of global environmentalism, which will need to draw on strategies from both the north and south.

The Social Movement Work of Urban Environmental Justice Narratives

Imaginative literature can help to mediate between “postmaterialist” social movement strategies and strategies rooted in struggles for resources. Balancing these strategies is essential to creating social and environmental movements that are both just and effective. Urban environmental organizing narratives bring into focus the negotiations between different interpretations and analyses of environmental problems among people of different social locations within the shared space of the city. Urban narratives—like Yamashita’s, Viramontes’s, Park’s, and Whitehead’s—are critical to social movement organizing in three key ways.¹¹ First, the novel can be a vehicle for collective identity formation: for the construction and transmission of the shared grievances and goals that are constitutive of social movement identities. Narratives can be a means of representing varieties of collective social movement agency, interrogating

¹⁰ See, for example, Pellow and Brulle’s collection *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement*.

¹¹ These three qualities of the novel loosely correspond to what Manuel Castells describes as the three varieties of social movement identities: “legitimizing identities,” which are founded on the assertion of legitimate claims to recognition within existing power structures; “resistance identities,” which entail the rejection of norms and narratives of the dominant culture; and finally the cultivation of “project identities,” which are cemented through the articulation of utopian alternatives and the pursuit of radical social transformation (Hames-Garcia 317).

competing visions of community, and cultivating new forms of collective organization. Second, urban environmental justice narratives can be deployed to dismantle and correct popular narratives about urban spaces that have been used to legitimate neighborhood displacement, disinvestment, environmental racism, repressive violence, and other harmful interventions. Narrative, as Rob Nixon writes, can give access to “sights unseen” (15); they can also reveal disparities in the distribution of environmental hazards within and across those spaces. Finally, novels can be a way of articulating and negotiating shared visions for the future, and for imagining social and spatial relations that are not possible within existing social and economic systems. Ultimately, I argue that understanding the possibilities for narrative in the early 21st century—and particularly the novel, a form that provides for exploring multiple intersecting stories and multiple individual and collective identities across time and space—is essential to understanding the possibilities for social movements in the early 21st century.

First, urban narratives can serve as vehicles for the establishment or the imagination of collective identity. Stories enable social movement actors to identify the goals and grievances that draw them together, and help collective organizations to “reaffirm themselves as groups with particular attributes” (Davis 19). While collective identity within environmental justice movements may be mobilized by calling on an individual or community’s pre-existing awareness of oppression and marginalization from outside, cultural tools, such as narratives, provide a way to sustain those pre-existing collective identities, or to galvanize them for collective action. For example, place- or neighborhood-based identity, which might seem to emerge organically, must be imagined and narrated continuously in order to sustain movement action. Moreover,

novels offer a window into the slow, sometimes laborious processes through which collective identity is formed, as well as into the processes that erode collective identity or stand in the way of collective action. For example, Ed Park's office novel *Personal Days* shows how a group of white-collar office workers come to identify themselves as a collective, how they unthinkingly define themselves against those beneath them in the office hierarchy, and how the possibility of collective action in the office begins to disintegrate. Such narrative representations of collective identity formation help to reveal the ways that collective identity is shaped by particular places and offer strategies for social movement actors working to build senses of shared purpose.

Second, urban narratives of environmental organizing create opportunities to make visible and intervene in discourses of urban space that justify environmental harm among people of color. The consequences of these negative representations by the dominant culture go *beyond* the realm of culture, influencing policy, planning, and ultimately the structure of everyday life. Cultural studies scholars have argued that the discursive representation of urban space—in popular media, books, television, statements by politicians, etc.—plays a significant part in determining patterns of development (Klein 10). For example, the urban renewal programs of the 60s and 70s were justified in the public sphere by narratives of urban “blight” that threatened to infect otherwise healthy areas of the city (Pritchett 3). Urban narratives create opportunities to reassert the imaginative presence of the displaced, disempowered, and marginalized, and to assert their entitlement to the benefits of the state and society. For example, Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* gives narrative presence to the residents of East Los Angeles whose lives were upended by urban renewal and freeway construction,

and whose stories are not often represented in the mainstream urbanist discourse. These excavated histories help to reveal the violence and oppression upon which spatial and environmental privilege rests, and to establish new foundations for collective claims for restorative justice.

Moreover, by giving imaginative presence to the most disempowered and environmentally vulnerable residents of the city, city narratives can reveal tensions between different interpretations and analyses of environmental risks that are ostensibly shared by citizens. Social movement theorists, particularly those interested in collective responses to urban redevelopment, have asserted theories of shared risk as a catalyst to organizing efforts that are rooted in particular places.¹² Shared urban risk has been a central theme in the work of several socially privileged “new urban” novelists like Wallace and DeLillo; the discourse has also been deployed by mainstream new urbanist advocates as a means of universalizing the dangers posed by sprawling, highway-dependent development. However, many environmental risks that might seem to be

¹² Here, I draw from the field of risk theory, developed in the social sciences but since incorporated by many scholars in the environmental humanities. The sociologist Ulrich Beck, who helped to develop and popularize risk theory, argues that the end of the Cold War and the global expansion of capitalism have created a new “global risk society,” which he defines as a culture that is “increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced” (“Living in the World Risk Society” 332). In *Ecological Enlightenment*, Beck argues that hazards such as nuclear radiation and climate change are “egalitarian” and “democratic” in the sense that these risks easily cross the borders that separate nations, cultures and social classes and defy efforts of containment and disposal (27). Ultimately, Beck sees the confrontation with risks as an opportunity for critical interrogation of the project of modernity, but also for coalition-building, democratization, and a new kind of global coalitional or ‘cosmopolitan’ politics.

Prior to Beck’s work on the “world risk society,” urban studies scholars were using the concept of risk to understand urban space and the connections between city-dwellers. For example, in their influential study of urban redevelopment *Urban Fortunes*, John Logan and Harvey Molotch argue that place identification is strongest when routines are disrupted by risk: oil spills, toxic leaks and other threats to shared experience of residential life (102). Like Beck, they believe that the confrontation with such risks creates space for a coalitional politics that crosses borders of race and class: “All residents of a given locality are potential victims of toxic wastes, a nuclear meltdown, or an oil spill. These effects cannot be confined to poor neighborhoods. This collective liability produces a new potential for cross-class coalitions within the locality to oppose such installations” (208).

shared across social locations are in fact mediated by privileged access to physical infrastructure, social support networks, and cultural knowledge. City narratives—and especially the novel, a medium that is uniquely suited to the imaginative juxtaposition of multiple voices, multiple spaces, and multiple temporalities—can reveal tensions between different people’s and different communities’ interpretations of “shared” environmental risks. Likewise, these narratives can reveal disparities in access to environmental goods, like access to transportation infrastructure or public spaces, which are intended to be universally accessible.

Finally, the novel can be a means of asserting possible futures or utopian alternatives to the established social order. Cultural studies scholars have argued that the novel is most significant in its power to map social relations, not as they are, but as they *could be*: that the novel gives us a way to envision the possibility and shape of new forms of citizenship and public engagement, and to interrogate their pitfalls and potential. Raymond Williams argues in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* that literature can be a vehicle for representing “possible consciousness,” an imagination of social and economic relationships at their “highest and most coherent level” (23). Elsewhere, Williams refers to cultural artifacts, such as the novel, as vehicles for the articulation of ‘emergent’ forms of oppositional or alternative culture; they can be the gateway to “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences” (‘Base and Superstructure’ 10). The novel as a form makes it possible for readers to envision contingent futures that would be impossible under current structural and social conditions. For example, Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* explores the possibility of radical transformation of urban space and social relations through a temporary utopian

community that emerges on a Los Angeles freeway. Urban narratives can give shape to new ways of thinking about community and social movement organization and reveal—and perhaps help to reconcile—tensions between different visions.

The novel, a traditionally bourgeois form, may not seem to be the most likely vector for transformative social change. The novel as a cultural form has carried, and continues to carry, the weight of ideologies of domination and oppression. As Benedict Anderson and Edward Said have argued, the novel has been an essential vehicle for narrating the community of the modern colonialist/imperialist nation. Similarly, the novel has helped to reproduce the possessive individualism of capitalism. Nancy Armstrong writes in *How Novels Think*: “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same” (3). However, both literary and social movement scholars have argued that collective social movement identities are narrative as well (Fine 229). As new narratives emerge from the environmental crises of late modernity—and as these narratives self-reflexively interrogate the novel’s failure as means of responding to those crises—the nationalist, individualist foundation of the novel is being shaken. The form that new narratives, such as the novels I mention above, have taken—their structure and style, and particularly the ways that they revise and repurpose existing narrative and narrative strategies—reveal the ideological horizons of late modernity: the possibilities for alternative subjectivities and identities, new social formations and modes of organizing, and new strategies for responding to environmental crisis.

Postmodernism, Late Postmodernism, and Just Urbanism

In *Tropic of Orange*, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, *Personal Days*, and *Zone One*, new urbanism and environmental justice are more than just thematic concerns: they shape basic elements of the novels' form, structure, and style.¹³ Attention to the intersection of theme and form is critical to understanding how narratives represent environmental crises and how they enable and disable the formation of collective identities in response to those crises. The narrative theorists Pavel Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin argue that the technical aspects of the novel—things like structure, genre, and style—aren't merely the 'support' for the ideology of the novel: they are a *constitutive* element of the work's representation of an ideological horizon, the limit of possible consciousness (19). Susan Lanser, drawing on Bakhtin, argues: "Narrative technique is not just the product of ideology, but ideology itself: narrative voice, situated at the juncture of social position and literary practice, embodies the social, economic and literary conditions under which it has been produced" (5). But because the relationship between the form of the novel and the ideology it conveys is mutually constitutive, novels also contain kernels of ideological resistance, and glimpses of the horizons of ideology.

Since the 1980s, literary scholars have debated the relationship between ideology and the cultural and literary mode referred to as "postmodernism." Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernism is the "cultural dominant" of late capitalism, a formal instantiation of ideology, and the cultural means of reproducing that ideology. However, Jameson's definition of postmodernism and its characteristic formal qualities draws primarily from an archive of white writers and artists, and overlooks a history of complex

¹³ M.H. Abrams defines 'form' as "the principle that determines how a work is ordered and organized" (Abrams 108); it is often defined in contrast to 'content' ("Oxford Dictionary" 134). By contrast, style is described as how form and genre are created on the sentence-level (Abrams 312).

engagements with postmodern form by writers of color. Consequently, Jameson's postmodernism overlooks the possibilities for resistance that are embedded in works by Ethnic American writers. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval argues that the fragmentation experienced by the first-world subject in postmodernity mirrors the fragmentation of identity experienced by the sub-altern; what has occurred in postmodernity, she argues, is simply a "democratization of oppression" (33). She argues that first world subjects will overcome their "postmodern despair" when they find the "survival skills" and "decolonizing oppositional practices" that have been deployed in postcolonial struggles across the world (33). While some of these tools—such as direct action, strikes, and occupation—are linked to the struggles for resources, other resistant practices are located in the cultural and narrative forms deployed by oppressed people. The claims that postmodernism is a political dead end are partly based on a narrow reading of postmodern literature that overlooks the investment in collective identity and social movement agency in postmodern works by Ethnic American authors. While I agree with Jameson that postmodernism represents the "cultural dominant" of late capitalism, I hold with Sandoval that attention to literary works by people of color can reveal "emergent" cultural tools that enable resistance to the social and spatial order of late capitalism.

Novels such as Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* reflect the ideological horizons of postmodern style. These novels retain key aspects of postmodernism, such as the use of historiographic metafiction to challenge dominant historical narratives and the use of irony to critique discourses of power.¹⁴

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as a type of historical fiction that "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" (114). These fictional narratives deviate from established histories,

However, these novels also reflect a keen awareness of the pitfalls of aspects of postmodernism and can be, at times, overtly hostile to postmodern literary conventions. I argue that moments of fissure in the novels—the moments in which the novels diverge sharply from the conventions of postmodern style—emerge partly from the author’s efforts to imagine meaningful collective responses to environmental crisis. These novels reflect a postmodern style that is informed by the experience of racialization, by the violent and seldom told history of American urbanism, and by the social movement strategies associated with what Guha and Martínez-Alier call the environmentalism of the poor. Consequently, these novels more often evoke resistance strategies used in struggles for resources, such as the occupation of public space. Moreover, the aspects of postmodernism that are most often put into question in these works, such as extreme solipsism and skepticism toward metanarrative, are often the most antithetical to the aims of collective organizing and social justice. Instead, in what I call the new urbanist novel, novelists have experimented with formal vehicles for reestablishing temporarily stable systems of meaning and value, for making truth claims, and for asserting new possibilities for collective identity and agency. These strategies include various iterations of the omniscient narrator, the ‘closed’ ending, the cultivation of contingently stable senses of place-based identity, the strategic and contingent deployment of Marxist and environmentalist metanarratives, and the re-unification of narrative fragments to assert the possibility of collective, if only partial and temporary, response to environmental crises. It is this shift—from the dismantling of orthodoxies and oppressive and disabling modes of social organization to the reassemblage and reassertion of alternative identities

often adding elements of fantasy to otherwise historically accurate narratives, in order to draw attention to omissions and erasures in the collective memory of history.

and alternative ideologies—that distinguishes the narratives that I discuss in the dissertation.

Throughout the dissertation, I expand on several characteristics of the new urbanist novel that bend or revise the narrative form and style associated with postmodern narrative. These formal qualities align with the three essential qualities of social movement narratives that I describe above: the creation of collective social movement identities, the deconstruction of harmful or oppressive narratives reproduced by the dominant culture, and the imagination of shared utopian visions for the future. One way that the urgency of solidifying social movement identities is represented in these novels is in gestures toward collective narration. While postmodern novels are often characterized by fragmented narration (Harvey 48), the novels I consider in the dissertation—such as Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, which is narrated partly in the first-person plural—engage possibilities for omniscient or collective narration. As a cultural tool for the mobilization of social movements, collective narrations can be a means of asserting and defining a collective oppositional identity, for defining and solidifying shared knowledge and values, and for forming a foundation for collective action. In addition, in several of the novels I consider, narrative trajectories are oriented toward spatial convergence. This narrative movement—which I refer to above as an “anti-sprawl aesthetic”—underscores the novels’ investment in the cultivation of place-based social movement identities. While the central characters of the new urbanist novel—from Viramontes’s Ermila to Yamashita’s Emi to Park’s Jonah—still experience their own identities as something fragmented and incomplete, the novels hold out contingent hope

for the cultivation of meaningful collective identities, and for meaningful collective action that coheres around those identities.

Postmodernism provides a language of resistance that can be used to challenge dominant narratives; however, in the new urbanist novel, that language is also used to repurpose dominant narratives as active tools of resistance. In some canonical postmodern works—like *White Noise*—the unknowability and indeterminacy of environmental risks is a source of dread and anxiety. However, the new urbanist novel deploys a postmodern approach to environmental risk—emphasizing the ways that environmental hazards are socially and culturally constructed—specifically to show how power is present in the articulation of risk, and how language can be manipulated to define environmental threats in a way that disempowers and divides (Opperman 117). Moreover, even as these narratives call attention to the social construction of urban environmental risk, they point to inequities in risk distribution as a way solidifying place-based identity and motivating collective action. For example, *Their Dogs Came with Them* uses postmodern irony to call attention to the imaginary danger of a rabies outbreak that is used to justify various forms of spatialized racism, such as heightened police surveillance and neighborhood segregation. However, for several of the protagonists, the shared risk of police brutality helps to galvanize a nascent sense of opposition and resistance in the novel. The flexibility of strategies and tactics in *Their Dogs Came with Them*—in which characters call attention to the “artificiality” of some risks while building social movement identities from exposure to others—is one of the hallmarks of the orientation toward postmodern style that I identify in the new urbanist novel.

Finally, the new urbanist novel bends the conventions of postmodern form as a means of negotiating visions of a shared future. Stanley Trachtenberg argues that postmodern fiction is characterized by “oppos[ition] to closure, the absence or erasure of plot, [and] indeterminacy” (16). However, while the new urbanist novel retains much of postmodernism’s narrative indeterminacy, it also maintains some hope in the possibility of asserting alternative futures outside of the systems of domination and oppression that shape everyday life. One way that the new urbanist novel experiments with closed narratives is through genre play. In *Tropic of Orange* Yamashita links each of her seven principal characters to a genre associated with the representation of urban space (and Los Angeles in particular), such as film noir or the cyberpunk genre. The characters who meet “bad ends” seem to highlight the failure of particular genres as vehicles for envisioning or building a better future. Gabriel Balboa, whose narrative incorporates generic characteristics of the postmodern detective story, starts out on a quest to redress a particular injustice; however, as his narrative advances, he loses his foundation and spins off into a disorienting web of information. The narratives that achieve some measure of hopeful resolution in Yamashita’s novel (particularly the narrative of Buzzworm) are those which are “grounded” in the city and oriented toward the work of collective organizing. By pushing beyond the radical indeterminacy of postmodern narrative form to claim some temporary foundation from which to imagine the future, new urbanist novels like *Tropic of Orange* help to enable the articulation of shared visions that are necessary to social movement organizing.

The artistic obligation that Wolfe describes in his essay—to “get all of [the city] between two covers”—has been taken up by a set of ambitious and formally innovative

American novelists, and particularly by white postmodernists like Lethem and Wallace. This desire for a thread to connect the entirety of the city, for a single unifying story, seems to be a dream among many of the new urbanists themselves, who aspire to build new cities of cohesion and community from the fragmented pieces of a sprawling postmodern suburbia. Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* represents the allure of imagining the city as a cohesive whole; her character Manzanar, a homeless man who conducts traffic from atop a freeway overpass, avidly pursues this "strangely organic vision" of a city whose voices are all in tune (119). But, like the other novels I consider in the dissertation, *Tropic of Orange* dwells only temporarily in this utopian vision of organic community. Moments after he conjures this "strangely organic vision," Manzanar's attention is drawn away from his harmonic city composition and toward a homeless family fleeing a fire near their encampment along the side of the freeway. He watches over the family from the overpass until they reach safety, mindful of their invisibility to most other residents of the city. It is this kind of vision—one which balances the imagination of utopian futures and attention to issues of injustice and environmental vulnerability in the present—that distinguishes the new urbanist novels I discuss in the dissertation. And it is this kind of vision that holds the best hope for the future of new urbanist and environmental movements in the 21st century.

Chapter Outlines

The second chapter, "Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* as New Urbanist Critique" looks at Yamashita's 1996 novel through the lens of the New Urbanist Movement. My reading of the novel focuses on the characters Buzzworm, a community organizer from South L.A., and Manzanar, a homeless former surgeon who stands atop

an overpass, conducting a symphony from the traffic passing beneath him. I argue that these characters represent contrasting but ultimately complementary orientations toward city space, storytelling, and community organization. Manzanar envisions the city as a unified or organic body, a vision that I link to the pastoral mode in music and literature. Buzzworm, on the other hand, engages the city as an unending labor of place-making and community-building, a project he refers to in a hybrid Spanish phrase as “gente-fication.” I read *Tropic of Orange* in conversation with mainstream new urbanist rhetoric, which envisions dense, walkable, mixed-use/mixed-income urban neighborhoods as vehicles recovering a lost sense of social cohesion and mitigating environmental problems such as rising carbon emissions and loss of green space. I argue that Yamashita’s novel offers a critique to the new urbanist vision of urban community, which, like Manzanar’s vision of a pastoral city, often leaves out the labor of its own construction. However, while *Tropic of Orange* critiques Manzanar’s “organic” vision of the city, it also highlights the ways that utopian visions of community can reveal horizons of possibility for social movement action. I argue that this dialectical tension—between narratives of organic community and narratives of community organizing—is embedded in the structure of the novel.

The third chapter, “Social Justice and the Construction of Spatial Privilege in the 21st Century Office Novel,” looks at a genre of novels that take place in urban office buildings— a genre I call the modern office novel—and which represent collective responses to social and environmental threats among white-collar office workers. Ed Park’s *Personal Days* (2007) uses postmodern literary techniques to reveal and destabilize the larger structures of power that disempower and alienate office laborers. I argue that the office laborers’ recognition of their own loss of individual agency and

inability to navigate also allows them to create a kind of contingent collective identity, represented in the novel's extensive and innovative use of first-person plural narration. However, this sense of collective identity, rooted in the shared space of the office and the shared risk of exposure, is maintained partly through the unthinking exclusion of service workers, who continue to bear a disproportionate share of the social, economic, and environmental risks that coalesce in the office. I go on to put *Personal Days* and the 21st century office novel genre in conversation with Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* (2012), which follows a team of "sweepers," charged with cleaning out office buildings in Lower Manhattan in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse. I read *Zone One* as an environmental justice response to the contemporary office novel and, more broadly, to the "back-to-the-city" narratives constructed by advocates for smart growth and new urbanism.

The fourth chapter, "Neighborhood and Narrative Form in Helena Maria Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*," focuses on Viramontes's 2007 novel, which follows several residents of East Los Angeles in the 1960s, each of whose lives are affected by the construction of the Los Angeles freeway system. I argue that the novel provides a counter-point to recent new urbanist narratives of neighborhood revitalization that elide the history of state-sponsored neighborhood destruction in the urban renewal era. However, the novel also posits that the space of the neighborhood, fractured as it may be, remains a possible foundation for collective identity formation and social movement organizing. The possibility of stable neighborhood identity is also represented in Viramontes's experiments with the subjunctive mood, which allow her characters to narrate visions of contingent futures, possible only if a set of unlikely conditions is met.

In addition, the novel's omniscient, "roving eye" perspective gives a kind of coherence to the disparate narratives Viramontes creates in the novel. By deploying the discourse of "neighborhood" to bind these narratives together, Viramontes pushes the boundaries of exclusive definitions of neighborhood that rely on assumptions of home ownership, citizenship, and homogeneity of racial, cultural, and sexual identities. The result is a kind of de-centered collective narration of neighborhood, albeit one that is deeply and violently fractured.

CHAPTER II

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S *TROPIC OF ORANGE* AS NEW URBANIST

CRITIQUE

The New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements—perhaps more than any other U.S. social movements in recent history—have helped to bring issues of urban livability back onto the agenda of policy-makers, private funders and foundations, and mainstream environmental organizations. However, as the movements have grown, a fundamental and largely unaddressed tension has emerged between grassroots activists committed to the principles of environmental justice and planners and professional environmentalists invested in a top-down, policy-driven approach to urban redevelopment. Both the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements have faced criticism from environmental justice activists for their failure to directly address issues of concentrated poverty, environmental racism and unequal access to public infrastructure, and for failing to prioritize equal public participation in decision-making processes by engaging the poor and people of color. Critics of the movements have also suggested that smart growth and new urbanist policies have failed to gain broader ground because their strongest advocates are established special interest groups, particularly mainstream environmental organizations—such as the Sierra Club and Trust for Public Land—professional planners, and developers, rather than grassroots social movement organizations or citizen's groups (Downs 368). Robert Bullard writes: “Like its mainstream environmental movement counterpart, much of the smart growth conversations, meetings, and action agenda have only marginally involved people of color, the working class, and low-income persons” (Bullard 3-4).

The marginalization of social and racial justice issues in these movements is abetted by a tendency toward universalizing and utopian rhetoric that effaces enduring disparities in access to environmental goods, and toward simplified narratives about urban history that obscure decades of struggle for urban livability among people of color. In many accounts of these movements—and particularly among the major environmental groups that advocate smart growth initiatives—smart growth and new urbanist policies are positioned as utopian remedies for an array of deeply rooted social and environmental problems. Andres Duany, founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism and co-author of *The Smart Growth Manual*, describes smart growth as a “unified field theory,” a panacea for social ills from obesity to poverty to environmental crisis (xii). Most significantly, the movements have been framed as a way to recover a lost sense of community. Such arguments are often steeped in nostalgia, evoking “the remarkable feelings of community cohesion that Americans felt at the end of World War II” (xi). Looking backward to a mythical past in search of an organic community—to a period before the rights movements of the 60s—obscures the ongoing struggles for inclusion in the social body by women, people of color, and other marginalized groups.¹⁵ In addition, movement narratives often point to “sprawl” as the source of this lost sense of community, which obscures the structures of power that drove—and continue to drive—sprawling development: racist narratives about urban space, the cycles of investment and disinvestment that create higher exchange values, and white Americans’ deep investment in the perpetuation of infrastructural privilege. When smart growth activists fail to acknowledge the history of racist urban planning policy, or the long history of struggle

¹⁵ This critique of the smart growth movement intersects with the critique of the nostalgic orientation of Robert Putnam and other social capital theorists. See, for example, *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and "Bowling Alone"* (2002).

for livable cities by people of color, they're assisting in the work of forgetting that allows concentrated poverty, decaying urban infrastructure, and other environmental injustices to be represented as natural phenomena. In its failure to address these structural causes of environmental injustice and spatial inequality, the mainstream environmentalists' vision of urban community mirrors the logic that directed white flight out of urban centers and into the suburbs in the 1950s and 60s.

In this chapter, I read Karen Tei Yamashita's 1996 novel *Tropic of Orange* as an intervention into the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements. *Tropic of Orange* helps to illuminate the politics of spatial representation that undergird enduring white supremacist narratives about urban spaces: the unthinking privilege of access to infrastructures of power, the falsely universalizing lens of whiteness, the erasure of urban history. However, the novel also provides a complex critique of the nominally progressive narratives of urban community that have emerged during the post-Cold War era of urban revitalization, and which are rooted in appeals to environmentalist thinking. For environmental justice activists, the smart growth and new urbanist frameworks can be a tool for making visible and ultimately remediating—through state action at the local, regional and federal levels—the legacy of state-sponsored segregation. But, as Yamashita shows, unless the problem of spatialized inequalities linked to race, class and gender is placed at the forefront of smart growth arguments and advocacy, smart growth and new urbanist policies seem destined to repeat many of the worst injustices of the urban renewal era. Though the novel is clearly sympathetic to the goals of the New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements—and to new urbanist amenities like walkable urban spaces and community gardens—I argue that Yamashita's novel asserts the necessity of

an environmental justice foundation for smart growth and new urbanist planning, one based on the principles of fair and equitable distribution of both environmental goods and environmental risks.

Tropic of Orange begins to construct that environmental justice foundation in three key ways: First, the novel highlights the legacies of structural racism that are “sedimented” in the built environment and infrastructure of cities, and which continue to shape people’s access to the goods of the city in the present.¹⁶ *Tropic of Orange* reveals enduring disparities in access to urban infrastructure and inequities in the distribution of environmental risks. Reimagining the city in a way that is more environmentally just—a way that ensures more equitable distribution of both environmental goods and environmental hazards and gives protection and consideration to the use values of all city dwellers—requires a reimagination of urban infrastructure. Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* is, at the core, a novel about that process. The novel’s commitment to making infrastructures of power more visible makes *Tropic of Orange* an important environmental justice counterpoint to novels that valorize privileged access to infrastructure (like Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*) as well as to novels in which those privileges are simply assumed. Yamashita illustrates these disparities principally through L.A.’s freeway system, which functions as both an instrument of marginalization and racialization, and as a potential channel for transformative action.

Second, Yamashita’s novel draws attention to the stories and experiences that are often excluded from the discourse surrounding transformation of the city, particularly the experiences of people of color, immigrants, and the unhoused. I argue that *Tropic of*

¹⁶ The term infrastructure typically refers to those aspects of the built environment which facilitate the flow of people, goods and services, such as roads and transit systems or the electrical grid.

Orange makes these stories visible through an imaginative representation of what I call the “narrative infrastructure” of Los Angeles. I use the term narrative infrastructure to refer to those physical structures or elements of the built environment that facilitate the generation and distribution of narratives: the pathways that create opportunities for storytelling in the city and among the individuals and communities that make the city their home. Narrative infrastructure might refer to a community’s media channels, such as newspapers and radio stations; however, it might also refer to more “grassroots” channels for storytelling, such as public spaces that facilitate face-to-face contact between people, or local businesses that allow activists to host meetings or distribute literature.¹⁷ Like access to the environmental amenities of the city, access to the city’s narrative infrastructure is mediated by facets of social location, such as race and class. Yamashita’s attention to the city’s marginalized voices offers a rhetorical counterpoint to well-meaning “mainstream” new urbanist activists who take for granted their accumulated social and cultural capital and the privileged access to mass media, public forums, and decision-makers that such capital confers.

Finally, Yamashita’s novel challenges the discourse of community that much smart growth and new urbanist rhetoric implicitly appeals to, by putting it in conversation with the discourse of community organizing. The new urbanist community is often envisioned as a kind of “urban pastoral” that effaces both the history of racialized urban exclusion and marginalization, and the labor of creating healthy and equitable urban environments. I argue that Yamashita draws a distinction in the novel between narratives

¹⁷ One specific example of grassroots narrative infrastructure in the city is the presence of “ghost bikes,” all-white bikes permanently chained near intersections where bicyclists have been killed in traffic accidents. Ghost bikes help to facilitate storytelling about the value of bike-friendly streets, and offer an alternative map of the city that decenters the automobile and foregrounds the bicycle.

of organic community, which are rooted in the perception of the city as unified or organic body, and narratives of community organizing. Narratives of community organizing envision the city as an aggregation of many different people and groups of people engaged in the collective labor of placemaking. Placemaking can refer to the construction of shared meanings, values, and identities based in place (Martin 2003, Lepofsky and Fraser 2002). However, placemaking can also imply the construction of an *oppositional* sense of place, one that resists the spatial or social order imposed on a place by the dominant culture. As Yamashita explains in an interview with Elizabeth Glixman, “I guess what in part I try to say is that the city is a layered geography traversed and negotiated every day differently by different people, and those layers may merge or be distinct yet also represent the city. The city is nothing without its people, and every new group of immigrants appropriates the given structures and infrastructures to take ownership of a new home.” Yamashita’s observation underscores the significance of infrastructure to urban place-making, and its centrality as a theme in her novel. The necessary visibility of the labor of place-making is, I argue, one of the central principles of urban environmental justice that *Tropic of Orange* articulates in both its narrative content and its form.

Infrastructural Privilege and Infrastructural Racism on the Harbor Freeway

Tropic of Orange tells the story of a convergence of multiple narratives, temporalities and spatialities, and contrasting visions of the city of Los Angeles. The novel is focalized through seven characters—characters whose pathways intersect, but who are each given their own distinct chapters—across seven days at the start of summer in the mid-1990s. There are three characters who are distinguished by their connections

to transnational commerce and migration: Bobby Ng, who migrates from Singapore to Los Angeles as a child by posing as a Vietnamese refugee; his estranged wife Rafaela, who is living with their son near Mazatlán; and the poet and performance artist, Arcangel, who makes his way north to Los Angeles from Mazatlán over the course of the novel. The novel also features two middle-class L.A. media professionals: Gabriel Balboa, a Latino newspaper reporter who styles himself after Rubén Salazar, and Emi Murakami, a second generation Japanese-American television producer. Finally, there are two characters with intimate knowledge of the city's social and racial "margins": Buzzworm, an African-American community organizer and Vietnam veteran, and Manzanar, a homeless Japanese American who stands atop the 110-Freeway overpass "conducting" the traffic below. Significantly, each of Yamashita's seven principal characters is a person of color. The absence of white characters in Yamashita's text speaks to Patricia Yaeger's notion of "infrastructural privilege" (17). In an interview with Elizabeth Glixman, Yamashita remarks that, in too many novels, people of color are treated as "incidental characters or background material"; she explains that *Tropic of Orange* contains no major white characters as a means of "turn[ing] those tables." Instead, Yamashita tells the stories of seven characters who *don't* have the privilege of overlooking infrastructure, and whose access to structures of power has been mediated by race, gender, ethnicity, social class, and citizenship. Yamashita's characters draw on different strategies to navigate the city and to appropriate urban infrastructures that have historically excluded them. These seven narratives come together at the conclusion of the novel in a fantastic convergence on the Harbor Freeway—one of L.A.'s archetypal

infrastructures of social and racial exclusion—a moment which crystallizes Yamashita’s vision of hope for urban transformation.

My reading of the novel focuses chiefly on the characters Buzzworm and Manzanar, who I argue come to represent contrasting but ultimately complementary orientations toward city space, storytelling, and community organization. Buzzworm and Manzanar, I argue, are the characters most deeply embedded in the landscape and history of the city of Los Angeles. Both Buzzworm and Manzanar have lived in Los Angeles nearly all their lives, but each has also had the experience of displacement as a consequence of state-sponsored racism: Buzzworm, an African-American who was born and raised in South Los Angeles, witnesses the disruption of his community by the expansion of the Santa Monica Freeway (I-10) and the construction of the Harbor Freeway (I-110), which divided his neighborhood from the rest of the city at its north and east ends, respectively. Later, as a young man, Buzzworm is sent to fight in Vietnam and returns to a city in which he is racially marginalized and spatially segregated. Manzanar, a first-generation Japanese-American immigrant, is sent to a concentration camp in the Owens Valley during the years of Japanese internment. When he returns, he becomes a successful surgeon; however, midway through his life, he leaves his job and his family to live among the unhoused and indigent in the shadow of the freeways. For most of the novel, Manzanar stands atop a highway overpass, conducting an imaginary city symphony. Buzzworm, on the other hand, acts as a community organizer for his South L.A. neighborhood, connecting people with social services and, with Gabriel’s help, drawing media attention to the needs of his community.

The ability to access and successfully navigate the city's infrastructures to meet one's needs and avoid harm is a critical part of what urban theorists John Logan and Harvey Molotch call the "use value" of a place: the ways that a particular place "uniquely fulfills a complex set of needs" and enables the fulfillment of life's "crucial goals" (20). They argue that conflict over the spatial organization of cities is driven by coordinated efforts among landowners, city planners, elected officials and others in positions of power to maximize a place's exchange or rent value—its value as a source of surplus capital—often at the expense of use values. The infrastructure of urban spaces bears the record of the valorization of exchange over use value, in the ways that it maximizes the goods and minimizes the risks apportioned to areas of high exchange value, and bypasses or underserves areas of low exchange value. Linked to this process of valorizing places of high exchange value are the urban infrastructures that distribute environmental dangers, such as hazardous wastes, noise pollution, or smog. The city's waste disposal systems, for example—what Manzanar, the symphony conductor of the 101 Freeway, calls "the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents" (57)—are foundational means by which environmental risks are channeled. In addition, the creation of infrastructure to provide goods and services for some residents of the city inevitably displaces environmental hazards onto others. For example, maintaining the electrical grid typically requires the operation of dirty energy generation facilities, which are often sited in low income or minority neighborhoods; creating new roads and highways displaces current residents and creates new environmental risks, like elevated air pollution, in adjacent neighborhoods. Consequently, struggles for control of urban infrastructure have been central to environmental justice organizing since the movement's beginnings in the

1980s, through campaigns against new highway development and new high-emission power plants, for the cleanup of hazardous waste and unsightly dump sites, and for investment in public transit and neighborhood transportation infrastructure.¹⁸

One of the most significant effects of these struggles for environmental justice has been to reveal the ways that infrastructure functions as an instrument of racialization. Physical infrastructures, such as freeways and transit lines, often delineate the borders of racially segregated spaces; the boundaries of those racialized spaces often determine a person's life chances, like their access to education or their risk of exposure to environmental hazards. As George Lipsitz puts it: "People of different races in the United States are relegated to different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems. The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially shared system of exclusion and inclusion" (12). Lipsitz calls this recursive process—in which race is partly produced by space, and space is partly produced by race—"the racialization of space and the spatialization of race." The contours of racialized space are made visible throughout *Tropic of Orange*, particularly through characters' access to and experience of the Los Angeles freeway system.

Buzzworm and Manzanar are the characters most closely linked to the freeway, and, in a broader sense, to the project of making visible the infrastructure of the city. Their narratives also communicate their experiences of the freeway as an instrument of racialized marginalization. *Tropic of Orange* is rich with references to the history of freeway construction and its present day social and environmental consequences,

¹⁸ See, for example, Robert Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie* (1990).

conveyed through smog reports from the Air Quality Monitoring District (171), the smell of noxious diesel exhaust (120), reports of children hit by cars (105), and memories of lost homes and businesses (82-83). Knowledge of the freeway gives Buzzworm and Manzanar a kind of privileged understanding of the city and to the regimes of power that determine the distribution of resources and risks across urban space. Their knowledge of the freeway is also shaped by their shared experience of racialization and state-sponsored racism. For example, on one rare occasion when Buzzworm accepts a ride along the freeway, he observes from above the ways that physical and social infrastructures, such as the highway system, are maintained to separate his neighborhood from other parts of the city: “He realized you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever” (33). Buzzworm is also aware that those barriers are not only maintained through spatial separation and the blindness of infrastructural privilege among those who drive the freeway, but also by the threat of repressive violence. When Buzzworm returns from Vietnam, he realizes: “He was considered the enemy. If he stepped over the invisible front line, he could get implicated, arrested, jailed, killed. If he stepped back, he’d just be invisible” (217). Buzzworm’s experiences in South L.A. and Vietnam make him uniquely aware of the double bind of spatialized racism: the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of visibility. Similarly, Manzanar’s view of the city from above the freeway is juxtaposed against the experience of thousands of people who encounter the city through the mediating lens of infrastructural privilege, who imagine themselves “disconnected from a sooty homeless man on an overpass,” and who drive over, under, or around him without noticing (35).

Buzzworm's and Manzanar's experiences of the freeway illustrate how urban infrastructure can be an instrument of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant refer to as "racial projects," which function simultaneously as "explanation of racial dynamics" and as "an effort to redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). Though the freeway system is a conduit for global exchange and transnational migration, it is also a living artifact of the Cold War, a product of nationalist fears of an invading foreign enemy and racist fears of integrated cities.¹⁹ Many of the Los Angeles highways that appear in *Tropic of Orange*—Interstate 405, I-10, and much of the Harbor Freeway—were built, re-routed or drastically widened in the 1950s and 60s, during the height of the "urban renewal" era, which was inaugurated by federal policy changes such as the Housing Act of 1949 and the Highway Act of 1956. The construction of freeways helped to lay the groundwork for other massive, top-down redevelopment projects during these years—such as the redevelopment of L.A.'s Chavez Ravine neighborhood to make way for a new Dodgers' Stadium, which resulted in the displacement of thousands of mostly Latino residents of neighborhood—and for the widespread use of eminent domain to remove members of lower-income and racially marginalized groups from access to public rights of way (Avila, "Race, Culture, Politics" 337). Urban renewal projects such as the freeway construction and the relocation of Dodger Stadium marked ethnic neighborhoods for displacement, created new pockets of segregated space in the city, separated people of color from environmental goods (like green space), and exposed them to new environmental hazards, such as air and noise pollution. In this way, these urban renewal projects were also, unmistakably, racial projects. The socio-spatial relations engineered

¹⁹ See, for example, Kevin D. Kuswa's "Suburbification, Segregation, and the Consolidation of the Highway Machine" (2002), Robert Bullard's *Highway Robbery* (2004), and Eric Avila and M.H. Rose's "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction" (2009).

through these racial projects are deeply embedded in the U.S. urban infrastructure, and have endured long beyond the political and social transformations effected by policies such as the Civil Rights Act. As Laura Pulido argues in “Rethinking Environmental Racism”: “Since landscapes are artifacts of past and present racisms, they embody generations of socio-spatial relations, what might be called the “sedimentation of racial inequality” (538).²⁰ Insofar as the sedimented impact of urban renewal is still felt today—in the form of concentrated poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods, and decaying inner-city infrastructure—those racial projects are ongoing.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita uses the central figure of the freeway system to highlight disparities embedded within the urban infrastructure of Los Angeles. Most Los Angeles historians agree that the freeways harmed communities of color by dividing and isolating neighborhoods like Buzzworm’s South L.A and by accelerating “white flight”—and the flight of investment capital—to the suburbs (Fulton 1997, Avila 2006). However, the freeway is still foundational to the distribution of both harms and goods across the city, to representations of Los Angeles in the social and cultural imaginaries, and to the possibilities for interaction and collective organizing among individuals and communities. The novel reveals new ways to think about how infrastructure is simultaneously influential and unseen: the ways that city infrastructure determines access to goods and exposure to harm and hazard. The characters who are most intimately linked with the freeway—Buzzworm and Manzanar—help to illustrate how infrastructure is marshalled to preserve and maintain systems of race and class inequality. However, these characters also reveal—in contrasting but ultimately complementary ways—how

²⁰ Pulido draws the phrase “sedimentation of racial inequality” from Oliver and Shapiro’s 1995 book *Black Wealth, White Wealth*.

infrastructures like the freeway can be repurposed for transformative action. Yamashita's novel does not advance a determinist theory of "infrastructuralism"; it envisions ways that individuals and communities can organize to reappropriate and reshape those infrastructures to protect existing local use values and create new value. As Yamashita makes clear in *Tropic of Orange*, the freeway can also be a locus for potential intervention and social transformation, a channel for the redistribution of environmental harms and benefits in a way that is more equitable and just.

Buzzworm and Manzanar: Dialectical Perspectives on Urban Space

While Manzanar and Buzzworm share a kind of intimate and embedded knowledge of the freeways, their ways of perceiving the city and its infrastructure are vastly different: Manzanar looks down on the city from above, while Buzzworm experiences the city at the street level, chiefly as a pedestrian. Their different perspectives on the city mirror the schism in urban planning and design between the "street centered model," focused on neighborhood-level planning and design decisions and associated with the movements for smart growth and new urbanism, and the "aerial" model, based on the top-down perspective of the city as a single entity and associated with the modernist architects of urban renewal, like Robert Moses (Luria 387, 398). Moreover, Buzzworm's and Manzanar's different orientations toward space also initially reflect a contrasting orientation toward the formation of communities and the possibility of social action. While Manzanar's aerial view corresponds with his vision of the city as an organic whole, Buzzworm's experience as a pedestrian corresponds to a vision of a city divided by visible and invisible barriers separating his neighborhood from others (and from the benefits that inhere to other city spaces). Yamashita, I argue, presents these two

characters as counterparts, and envisions the reconciliation of their projects and perspectives as an impossible but necessary goal. The differences in their visions of the city are used to highlight a productive tension between risks and goods that are shared and those that are stratified, between choirs of voices and shouts in the street, and between visions of community and visions of social movement organizing.

Manzanar spends the bulk of the novel standing above the 101 Freeway, conducting an imaginary city symphony, a composition which attempts to bring all of the parts of the city into a coherent whole. Atop the overpass, Manzanar maintains what Lawrence Buell calls a palimpsestic vision of the city, in which urban space is conceived “in terms of layers or stages of growth in place through time” (9). Through his city symphony, Manzanar aims to bring all the various layers of the map into a kind of harmony: “There are maps and there are maps and there are maps. The uncanny thing was that he could see them all at once” (56). Manzanar is capable of seeing layers that are overlooked and ignored by most of the city-dwellers who pass beneath his perch on the Harbor Freeway: “Ordinary persons never bother to notice, never bother to notice the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport” (57). Manzanar’s vision of the city begins with what geographer Meredith Cooper calls “the green infrastructure” of the city (119): “artesian rivers” and the “complex and normally silent web of faults” beneath the earth’s surface (57). His vision of the city highlights qualities of the urban infrastructure—like shared residence along active fault lines—that are ostensibly experienced by all residents of the city equally. This sense of organic unity and shared risk is underscored by Manzanar’s tendency to speak of the city as an undifferentiated

and autonomous body. He describes the changes that take place in his symphony “when the city rioted or when the city was on fire or when the city shook” (36) without differentiating where and why the rioting takes place, whose homes are burned by fire, and whose lives are most vulnerable to disaster. For Manzanar, at least in the first movements of his symphony, the various infrastructures of the city are shared infrastructures, just as the fates of its citizens are shared fates. The “organic living entity” of the freeway becomes a conduit for a vision of community and social harmony: “the greatest orchestra on Earth” (37).

While Manzanar’s view of urban infrastructure is shaped by his position *above* the streets, Buzzworm most often experiences the city as a pedestrian: “Only way to navigate,” he says, “was to feel the streets with your own two feet” (219). Buzzworm initially commits himself to improving livability at the street level, within the established urban infrastructure. Buzzworm is first described as a kind of “walking social services” (26), a conduit between the residents of his neighborhood and the benefits of recognition by the state. Similarly, he frames the livability of his neighborhood in terms of domestic improvements, not in terms of the larger structures of power outside: “Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees” (83). But Buzzworm’s race, class, and spatial location, along with his sensory experience as a walker in the city, also give him a kind of privileged understanding of the larger systems responsible for the distribution of goods and risks. In a conversation with Emi, Buzzworm notes the absence of basic amenities in his neighborhood, such as supermarkets, medical facilities, banks, and workplaces. The absence of such essential services, Buzzworm concludes, exacerbates spatial inequalities and maintains existing,

unequal social relations: “In this city, you have to risk your life, go farther and pay more to be poor” (175). Buzzworm’s perspective as a pedestrian reveals disparities of access to infrastructure that Manzanar can’t see from his position atop the freeway overpass.

It is important to note, however, that Buzzworm’s street-level view of the city and his project of neighborhood improvement are placed in tension with his awareness of the larger power structures that support the continued marginalization of his neighborhood. This is particularly clear in Buzzworm’s recognition of the way that maps are deployed to assert control over the production of space. When Gabriel shows Buzzworm a map of South Central gang territory from Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz*, he is unimpressed: “If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture” (81). In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Franco Moretti argues that maps don’t offer self-evident explanations but rather “a model of the narrative universe which rearranges its components in a non-trivial way, and may bring some hidden patterns to the surface” (53-54). In other words, maps can create new meaning within a pre-existing narrative framework, but they only take on meaning in relation to that framework. Buzzworm rejects Davis’s map of his neighborhood because it doesn’t correspond to his own “narrative universe” or to his story of the neighborhood, which he imagines not as Bloods or Crips territory, as the map would have it, but *his* territory. Buzzworm’s response to the map implies a critique of the “top-down” planning practices of the urban renewal era, in which neighborhood-level perspectives were rarely incorporated in the planning process. However, his conditional assertion that he could see more clearly “if someone could put down all the layers of the real map” is also a call for the kind of imaginative mapping of a city’s physical and social infrastructure that Manzanar seems to be undertaking from his

position above the freeway. Though Buzzworm recognizes the danger of holistic, map-level views of the city (like Manzanar's)—particularly the ground-level struggles for justice that they obscure—he also recognizes their necessity to the project of urban transformation. The necessity of both perspectives of the city is an important part of the dialectical relationship that Yamashita builds between Buzzworm and Manzanar throughout *Tropic of Orange*.

The “gang territory” map that Gabriel shares with Buzzworm also speaks to the erasure of the racist planning practices of the urban renewal era from history and memory. Buzzworm's encounter with Davis's map causes him to recall a confrontation between a community activist and a group of city and highway planners at a town hall meeting before the widening of the freeway. When an older woman stands up and challenges the planners to reveal the “master plan,” they simply delay, obfuscate and deny: “Bureaucrats acted like she was crazy paranoid. But they knew better . . . Time and paper on their side” (82). As the story of the community meeting progresses, the acting subject “they,” referring to the bureaucrats, gradually drops out of the sentences: “They said it wasn't going to affect her. They'd be around to make sure . . . make sure the houses left to broken into and tagged . . . Slow down the foot traffic and the flow . . . Stop people from using the shops that used to be convenient” (83). The disappearance of the acting subject in these sentences—the bureaucrats who talk down community resistance to the freeway widening project—mirrors the disappearance of culpability for urban renewal as time passes. The narrative of displacement by urban renewal and the organized resistance to that displacement gradually disappear from the representation of South Los Angeles in the social imaginary, replaced by mute maps, onto which dominant

narratives about urban space—as a violent wilderness, or as an underutilized resource—are then projected.

By writing the violence of urban renewal back into the history of his neighborhood—and making visible the connection between the arrival of the freeway in South Los Angeles and social problems like homelessness, unemployment, pollution-related illnesses—Buzzworm offers a resistant counter-narrative that remakes the meaning of the map. Buzzworm overlays the map with a narrative, and with acting subjects: both the planners who engineered the segregation of Buzzworm's neighborhood, and the community members who struggled against it. Buzzworm's response to the map's erasures also functions as an implicit critique of new urbanist and smart growth rhetoric. Both smart growth and new urbanism are often presented as radically new approaches to city planning, but many of the innovations that have come to define "livable communities" within the rubric of new urbanism and smart growth—such as accessible neighborhood public transportation infrastructure—were first articulated by civil rights activists during the 1950s, 60s and 70s (Bullard vii). By connecting his own ongoing project of community organizing around urban livability to a longer history of activism, beginning with resistance to urban renewal, Buzzworm is correcting that historical erasure.

The Narrative Infrastructure of the City

Buzzworm's story about the community meeting illustrates the significance of maps (and, more significantly, the narratives that guide our interpretations of those maps) as means of exerting control over infrastructure. The story also shows how those in power maintain their infrastructural privilege by silencing counter-narratives. Throughout

Tropic of Orange, physical infrastructures—such as the highway system—determine characters’ access to environmental goods and exposure to environmental risk; however, the novel also reveals the ways that networks of intersecting and overlapping *narrative* infrastructures shape the city. I use the term narrative infrastructure to refer to the pathways and possibilities for narrative representation of both the city itself and the individuals and communities that make the city their home. As with the city’s physical infrastructures, there are social, economic, and cultural barriers that determine access to those narratives. Like physical infrastructures, narrative infrastructures can shape the possible use values of a particular place: the ways that space enables or disables individuals and communities to fulfill their material and emotional needs. The metaphor of narrative infrastructure underscores the idea that, like physical infrastructure, narratives provide pathways between people—both individuals and communities—and environmental goods and harms.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita’s project of making visible the disparities in the physical infrastructure of Los Angeles is accompanied by a complementary project of making visible disparities in the narrative infrastructure of the city. Social movement theorists like Gary Fine have argued that stories are a means for people to organize collectively with others, to solidify collective identity, to articulate shared grievances and to explore potential solutions to common problems. Without infrastructure that creates opportunities for those kinds of movement stories, struggles for social and environmental justice are at a disadvantage. However, while both physical infrastructure and narrative representation are seen by many as “public” and accessible to all, they are shaped by disparities that make them inaccessible to marginalized communities. For example,

access to public highways requires a car; access to narrative representation typically requires the accumulation of cultural and social capital in various forms, such as formal education, fluency in discourses of power, and recognition by the state. One of the persistent criticisms of mainstream Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements is that they have taken for granted the privileges of access to narrative infrastructure—to the media, to public meetings, and to decision-makers—and have not done enough to bring unheard voices into the conversation. *Tropic of Orange* provides an environmental justice critique of mainstream urban environmentalism by giving attention to these marginalized voices, to the structures that perpetuate their exclusion, and to the opportunities for transformative social action that arise when those voices are given presence.

The novel brings those marginalized perspectives into view after a homeless community occupies the Harbor Freeway midway through the novel. This repossession of the exclusionary physical infrastructure of the freeway also allows the homeless community to repossess similarly exclusive narrative infrastructures, like the television news. When a series of car accidents immobilizes traffic and sparks a fire that races through a homeless encampment alongside the freeway, the displaced homeless take possession of the newly-abandoned cars along the stretch of freeway (112-113; 120-122). The occupation of the freeway is a means of making visible the ways that infrastructure creates disparities in access to resources and exposure to risks, but can also be a means of reapportioning those risks and resources more equitably. The residents of the freeway community create an alternative physical infrastructure, with new streets (156), telephone connections (157), an electrical grid (168), gardens and foodways (191), and waste management systems (218). The carnivalesque repossession of these urban infrastructures

by the community of the unhoused helps to make visible their original dispossession from the environmental goods that many city-dwellers take for granted. But the new residents of the freeway community also tap into the narrative infrastructure of the city, reworking and reshaping the ways they are represented. Buzzworm approaches this new community as a coordinator of micro-narratives, giving narrative presence to unheard stories, at times functioning literally as a talk show host. As Gabriel Balboa, a reporter for the *L.A. Times*, says of Buzzworm: “He wanted desperately to see in print the stories of the life surrounding him, to see the wretched truth, the dignity despite the indignity” (43). Buzzworm’s access to narratives, however, is shaped by his awareness of the “invisible lines” that prevent him, and other excluded and marginalized people, from asserting presence and visibility in the social imaginary. The sense of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of visibility within the established social order informs Buzzworm’s relationship to Gabriel. Gabriel relies on Buzzworm for his privileged access to and knowledge of marginalized people, such as the homeless community encamped near the freeway. Buzzworm relies on Gabriel to tell the stories of those people, who are not given a presence in the social imaginary. “Forget the social agenda,” he tells Gabriel. “Just tell the story. Point is there’s people out here. Life out here” (111). In other words, giving narrative presence to people who might otherwise be invisible is an end in itself.

Initially, the work of creating presence for previously invisible people requires Buzzworm to work within existing power structures by harnessing the access that Gabriel has as an educated, middle-class culture-maker. But that dynamic changes with the occupation of the freeway, which allows the homeless unprecedented access to the narrative infrastructure of the city. As the news media converges on the freeway,

Buzzworm co-opts an interview with a talk show host and is soon running his own show, “What’s the Buzz” (180), which offers the homeless an opportunity to tell their stories. Buzzworm sees this as an opportunity to create “TV from the bottom . . . Lifestyles of the poor and forgotten” (192). The media strategy that Buzzworm deploys during the freeway occupation is a means of re-asserting the presence of the displaced, the excluded, and the forgotten in the social imaginary of the city. Yamashita’s depiction of the freeway occupation also suggests that creating more equitable access to cultural representation requires direct action: the voices of the unhoused would not be heard without the massive disruption caused by the freeway occupation. This is an important critique of the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements, which valorize strategies that presuppose access to the city’s physical and narrative infrastructures, such as policy lobbying and press conferences: strategies that Ramachandra Guha argues are hallmarks of “northern” or postmaterialist environmentalism (14-18). Instead, *Tropic of Orange* suggests that the struggles for urban livability and environmental justice require a hybrid strategy that incorporates strategies rooted in the struggle for resources: “the environmentalism of the poor.” Buzzworm and the other occupiers of the freeway acknowledge the value of cultural representation as a means of staking a claim to the resources of the city. However, they also acknowledge that strategies of direct action are sometimes necessary to access the infrastructures of representation.

Once they have access to channels of narrative representation, Buzzworm and the residents of the freeway deploy a variety of different counter-narrative strategies—what

Chela Sandoval calls “meta-ideologizing”—for legitimating their claim to the freeway²¹. They draw mainly on existing hegemonic narratives that have been used to exclude and marginalize the homeless, such as the discourse of homesteading and the discourse of self-sufficiency. For example, a homeless occupant of one of the abandoned cars uses homesteading rhetoric to establish his right to occupy the vehicle: “I consider my occupation of the vehicle a short-term one. I’m just borrowing it. But I want the man or woman who owns it to know I’ve made considerable home improvements” (217).²² This argument for a right of possession based on improvements made to the property parallels the colonialist rhetoric that many cultural critics have observed being used in service of gentrification: the white pioneer salvaging use value from an urban wilderness. Here, *Tropic of Orange* critiques gentrification rhetoric by suggesting that “community development” isn’t the exclusive domain of the housed. Related to this discourse of homesteading is a claim to rights to the freeway based on the community’s autonomy and self-sufficiency, specifically their ability to feed themselves. In an essay discussing the struggle over a vacant lot in South Los Angeles that was converted into a community garden,²³ Janet Fiskio argues that the community gardeners’ claims to the space were founded on “a kind of urban usufruct: their grounds are their ability to feed themselves from the land and the community they have formed in this space” (317). The residents of

²¹ “Meta-ideologizing” refers to the process of repurposing dominant cultural narratives for subversive or counter-hegemonic purposes; in other words, it is resistant ideology that is deployed *within* the language of the dominant ideology (108-110).

²² This strategy is similar to the ways in which Japanese immigrants aimed to defuse racism during the interment period by adopting the discourse of Western pioneers. See Sarah Wald’s essay “Japanese Roots in American Soil” in the collection *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship* (2013).

²³ This conflict was documented in the 2008 film *The Garden*, which Fiskio reads in her essay. The South Los Angeles Garden, once the largest urban community garden in L.A., existed on a site that the city had once been designated for a toxic garbage incinerator.

the freeway make a similar argument about the garden plots they produce in abandoned cars: “Call it urban gardening. We gonna be feeding ourselves, don’t you worry” (217).

To tell their stories, the freeway occupiers draw on existing *forms and styles* of narrative—such as homesteading narratives or the daytime talk show—in the same way as they draw on existing narrative channels, such as the newspapers and televisions. These forms, genres, and styles of discourse constitute a kind of “infrastructure of narratives,” embedded within the physical infrastructure, that can be used to lay claim to goods, defend particular use values, and articulate alternative, counter-hegemonic modes of living in the city. Reading discourse from an infrastructural perspective helps to show how the social context of discourse is always, at least in part, concrete: composed of physical structures, edifices, and barriers that mediate access to goods and exposure to harm in the city. The metaphor of infrastructure also evokes the idea that many modes of storytelling are deeply embedded in place. The sedimented history of narrative representations of Los Angeles, for example, creates opportunities for telling stories about Los Angeles that are unique to that place. But the production of space in Los Angeles—and the production of spatial representations, the images and narratives that define urban space in the cultural imagination—is also deeply intertwined with a national history of social and racial inequality, which in turn shapes access to those stories. Finally, interpreting discourse through the lens of infrastructure foregrounds opportunities for discursive *intervention*: ways of critiquing and co-opting narratives of exclusion and creating new narratives of access. Thinking about *Tropic of Orange* as a representation of the complex narrative infrastructure of Los Angeles helps to add a layer

of complexity to the questions of unequal access to physical and social infrastructure that the text raises.

Yamashita foregrounds the overlapping questions of access to physical infrastructure and access to narrative infrastructure in the overarching structure of *Tropic of Orange*, and particularly in the use of different styles and genres to represent *each* of the seven main characters. As many readers have observed, the style of each chapter comes to represent the individual subjectivity of each character;²⁴ however, the different styles and voices that Yamashita uses also represent various modes and genres for framing and understanding Los Angeles as a place.²⁵ For example, Gabriel's narrative deploys conventions of Chandleresque detective fiction, such as first-person narration, and film noir; Emi's incorporates elements of cyberpunk novels and futurist urban dystopias, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*; Bobby's story begins with a second-person address and proceeds in short sentences punctuated by Chicano slang, mimicking the patterns of spoken, rather than written language. These different modes of representation, like the different languages that Bakhtin claims are simultaneously present in the novel form,²⁶ shape the boundaries of what is possible for each character,

²⁴ In the essay "Magical Realism in the Peripheries of the Metropolis," for example, Hande Tekdemir writes: "The multivocal textuality that one finds in Yamashita . . . is centered on individualism and the characters' unique rather than collective voices . . . it is as if Yamashita's characters are literally handed the microphone" (46).

²⁵ In addition to these modes of representation, the novel contains dozens of references to the imaginative history of Los Angeles: contemporary Hollywood romances like *L.A. Story*, Mike Davis's postmodern urban geographies, Nathanael West's apocalyptic novel *The Day of the Locust*, John Rechy's *City of Night*, Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels, and many others.

²⁶ In "Discourse of the Novel." Bakhtin argues that language is never unified, but always stratified and heteroglot: "[language] represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past . . . between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form" (291). These different languages "knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents . . . they involve specific forms for manifesting intentions, forms for making conceptualization and evaluation concrete" (289).

their orientation toward the city and toward one another. Yamashita describes how she came to incorporate these disparate stylistic and generic elements in an interview with Jean Gier and Carla Tejada:

In the course of looking at Los Angeles as literature, I look at detective noir, the genre most associated with Los Angeles. That has been the myth, or the Hollywood representation of Los Angeles seen in *L.A. Confidential*, for instance. I began to wonder about that vision of the City; could that be the only one? So I wanted to hear different narrative voices, see different visions or points of view representing the City.

The use of seven distinct styles throughout the novel conveys Yamashita's notion that the multiple "mythic realities" of the city are, like the physical infrastructure of the city, re-appropriated by the many people who make their home in the city. But, at the same time, each of these seven characters is interpellated through these distinct frameworks for interpreting the city: their subjectivities are constituted by these modes of seeing the city. As Buzzworm observes: "Everyone gets plugged into a myth and builds a reality around it. Or was it the other way around?" (265).

The choices that Yamashita makes in apportioning a distinct style of narration to each character reflect an awareness of each character's social location and the access that each has to particular narratives and narrative forms. That Gabriel so closely identifies with film noir protagonists, for example, speaks to a certain kind of cultural capital available to him as a middle-class professional. As Hande Tekdemir observes, Bobby's narrative style, with its clipped, declarative sentences, reflects the fast-paced, hardworking lifestyle of a first-generation immigrant struggling to improve life chances for his family (46-47). The absence of interactions between characters from different spaces, and particularly the lack of intersection between U.S. citizens and characters from Mexico and Latin America, also speaks to this theme of narrative infrastructure. Rafaela

never interacts with Emi, Manzanar or Buzzworm. Arcangel, whose narrative draws on the performance art projects of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the epic, pan-American poetry of Pablo Neruda, encounters Buzzworm and Manzanar only in passing. When Arcangel appears in Los Angeles, he is basically invisible to Buzzworm, who sees him as an “old fellah doing some juggling” (219). This suggests that the narrative framework in which Arcangel appears remains unintelligible to Buzzworm; it also speaks to the enduring discursive invisibility of residents of the global south in the U.S. social imaginary. In its representation of the impact of social location on the kinds of discourses that different characters can access, *Tropic of Orange* implies that the city’s narrative infrastructure contributes to the racialization of space in the same way that physical infrastructures, like the freeway, do.

Yamashita invests the greatest hopes of the city in the narratives of Buzzworm and Manzanar, characters who are most intimately connected to both the physical and narrative infrastructure of Los Angeles. In the previous section, I argued that Manzanar and Buzzworm can be taken to embody two different approaches to city planning and design: a street-level, new urbanist approach and a large-scale, modernist, top-down approach. As an extension of that argument, I would assert that these characters represent two contrasting orientations to storytelling: Manzanar embodies an omniscient view of the city; he functions like the narrator of a 19th century novel (the approach to urban storytelling that Tom Wolfe advocates in the essay “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast”), filtering the experiences of millions of city-dwellers through a single dominant perspective. By contrast, Buzzworm embodies the valorization of personal experience as a lens for interpreting the city, which is reflected in his desire to give narrative presence

to the dispossessed. The tension between Manzanar's and Buzzworm's approaches to narrative is like the tension that Bakhtin argues is embedded in the novel as a form, between all the "social and historical voices" that populate language and "the structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author" (300).²⁷ Manzanar is also depicted as a coordinator of different narratives, controlling "an incredibly vast repertoire, heralding every sort of L.A. scenario" that he is conducting "in accordance with the seasons and the climate of the city" (36). But while Buzzworm's coordination of micro-narratives reflects his awareness of divisions and disparities within the city, Manzanar's composition is initially a fantasy of monological unification, an urban pastoral vision of Los Angeles that brings all citizens together in a kind of communion.

The Narrative of Pastoral Community and the Narrative of Community Organizing

While Gabriel's narrative draws on characteristics from detective fiction and film noir as modes of representing and interpreting Los Angeles, Manzanar's narrative seems most to embody the long and complex history of Los Angeles's representation as a place of pastoral leisure. As Mike Davis writes in "How Eden Lost Its Garden," pastoral imagery—and particularly images of orange orchards—was foundational to Los Angeles boosterism from the end of the 19th century until the Depression (61). This pastoral fantasy of Los Angeles was founded on a historical erasure—a forgetting of the expulsion of Mexican residents of California after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848—and on the occlusion of low-paid farm labor necessary to sustain California agriculture. To a certain extent, these early 20th-century representations of a "pastoral" Los Angeles are

²⁷ Here, I am also drawing on Ramon Saldivar's reading of Bakhtin and Saldivar's concept of "dialectic of difference" in *Chicano Narrative*.

mirrored in contemporary “back-to-the-city” rhetoric, which imagine cities as places of leisure and communion, and which often efface the history of displacement and expulsion of people of color through urban renewal and gentrification. Particularly in the rhetoric of the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements, the urban pastoral has become an influential corollary to the “city as wilderness” trope that we see in texts like Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, in which city centers are represented as desolate, value-less wastelands ripe for reclamation and cultivation by white gentrifiers. By contrast, the contemporary urban pastoral imagines the city as a place of leisure, a haven for environmentalist values (which are positioned against the anti-environmentalist ethos of the sprawling suburbs), a place where community and social cohesion spring forth organically, and where the social iniquities of the past will be redeemed and restored. I argue that this narrative of urban pastoral community is evoked, and ultimately critiqued, throughout Manzanar’s narrative.

The pastoral is a vexed term; for some critics and literary historians, the idea of an urban pastoral will always be a contradiction in terms. Lawrence Buell, for example, defines the pastoral as “all literature-poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction-that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” (23, n.1). I would argue, however, that elements of the pastoral’s “ethos of rurality”—particularly its vision of leisure and communion, and its fantasy of separation from history and capitalism—have been deployed in service of the “back-to-the-city” project of mainstream environmentalists.²⁸ I’m not interested in the pastoral tradition *per se*; instead, I invoke the pastoral in this section partly to draw on the long history of persuasive critique that it

²⁸ Gerald Creed makes a related argument in “Community as Modern Pastoral,” where he asserts that urban communities have been repositioned as “a cosmopolitan replacement for a lost rural idyll” (23).

has inspired. As Paul Outka puts it: “the pastoral has often been used in the past as a mode to occlude the histories of human suffering, racism, and labor by naturalizing the viewpoint of some fantasized, leisured observer getting away from it all” (“Radical Pastoral” 62). Partly as a result of these critiques, the pastoral, Buell reminds us, is now “guilty until proven innocent” (“Radical Pastoral” 65). My purpose here is not to make a straw man of city stories that draw on the pastoral mode: I believe that the pastoral can help us to envision utopian landscapes and reimagine relationships between humans and nonhumans. Ultimately, such expansive visions are essential to the project of social and environmental justice. However, by reading Manzanar’s symphony as a vision of urban pastoral, I hope to draw attention to the embedded social and racial inequities that such expansive visions inevitably obscure (inequities that, critically for the dialectic that Yamashita builds throughout the novel, are brought into view by Buzzworm’s street-level perspective). Ultimately, I assert, alongside Yamashita, the necessity of an environmental justice foundation for future discussions of urban livability.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Manzanar composes a vision of Los Angeles that echoes the rural idylls of the classical pastoral tradition, the orange grove fantasies of early 20th century L.A. boosters, and the contemporary rhetoric of urban environmentalists. There are four qualities that lead me to describe Manzanar as a pastoral figure and his symphony as a vision of pastoral community: first, the symphony he imagines bears uncanny aesthetic similarities to the 19th century pastoral symphony; second, his symphony functions as a convening call—analogous to the convening call of the shepherd—which draws people back into the city center; third, Manzanar’s symphony bends the laws of space and time to offer a fantastic vision of a space outside of

commerce and capitalism; and finally, Manzanar's vision of the city mimics the nostalgic orientation of the pastoral mode, which often hearkens back to a golden age lost to history. While Yamashita acknowledges the attraction of Manzanar's vision of pastoral community, and even the ways that such utopian visions can galvanize social action, she illustrates throughout the novel how narratives of urban pastoral support the urban wilderness narrative by rendering invisible the expulsion of unlike others, the labor of *creating* the pastoral, and the waste and toxicity that are its inevitable byproducts.

The pastoral orientation of Manzanar's narrative is initially reflected in the descriptions of its aural qualities. His symphony—"mostly strings . . . exchanging melodies with the plaintive voice of the oboes"—seems to be characteristic of the most famous examples of pastoral music, such as Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony (33-34). Later, Yamashita makes reference to Manzanar's composition of an adagio (57), a musical tempo often described as "leisurely," most famously used by the twentieth-century composer Samuel Barber in a piece inspired by Virgil's *Georgics*. In addition, the fact that Manzanar chooses symphonic music to represent the city speaks to the vision of coherence that undergirds his composition. Mark Chiang observes that Manzanar "responds to the bewildering convolutions engendered by globalization with a quintessentially nineteenth-century aesthetic practice" (841). While Chiang is referring to the aesthetic practice of symphonic composition, Manzanar's vision of the city also calls to mind the 19th century urban social realist novels that Tom Wolfe extols. On a meta-textual level, Manzanar seems to be positioned as a potential conductor of the "choir of voices" we hear throughout *Tropic of Orange*, an omniscient narrator who can bring unity and coherence to heteroglossic novel we are reading. Manzanar acts as a shepherd

of the disparate narratives that abound in the novel, subordinating them to his all-encompassing vision of the city.

As Manzanar's narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that his symphony is linked to a larger vision of community, a reimagination of Los Angeles as an urban village. His symphony is described as a "strangely organic vision" (119), a fantasy of communion between all residents of the city, without regard to the social and infrastructural barriers that separate them. In *What Is Pastoral?*, Paul Alpers describes the tradition of the "pastoral convening," a poem in which a shepherd calls together a community of others "for songs and colloquies that express and thereby seek to redress separation, absence, or loss" (81). Standing atop an overpass at the intersection of Highways 110 and 101, conducting traffic into a vast symphony, Manzanar seeks to redress the divisions of the city and, ultimately, the globe: "He bore and raised each note, joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound" (35). His symphony is an act of shepherding: he is bringing home to the Harbor Freeway the millions of those who have strayed from the city, drawn away by visions of greener suburban pastures.

Manzanar's symphony is also linked to the fantastic elements of the novel, such as the bending of space and time that allows for the great convergence of city-dwellers on the Harbor Freeway at the novel's conclusion. Michael Ziser argues that the pastoral provides "an alternative space in which fantasy or allegory can unfold without the constraints of physical laws or the resistance of natural objects" (163). Manzanar's vision of community requires the fantastic manipulation of both space and time to accommodate the possibility of communion. In one of the final movements of Manzanar's symphony,

in what he calls “the greatest jam session the world had ever known” (206), the homeless occupiers of the freeway are joined by millions of other residents of Greater L.A., who have left their homes and entered the inner city to be entertained. The residents of Greater L.A. converge on the freeway simultaneously, creating a massive traffic jam and bringing them together with the homeless community that is already occupying the freeway. This convergence represents the ideal of an “urban village,” the fantasy of a community founded on the possibility of face-to-face interaction among all people.²⁹

The notion that the pursuit of leisure will bring millions of suburbanites back to the city is also significant in relation to Manzanar’s deployment of the pastoral mode. Initially, Manzanar’s symphony evokes a vision of a community that exists outside of capitalism: to bring these millions into the city and away from their televisions, they must “leave commercial time” (206). This element of his vision underscores its utopian orientation: the symphonic convergence represents the dream of an organic community—a community that is not divided by difference and inequity—outside of capital. Manzanar experiences in this great convergence “a kind of solidarity” that belies the differences between himself, a homeless man, and those millions of others: “All seven million residents of Greater L.A. out on the town, away from their homes, just like him, outside” (206). While this fantastic convergence appears utopian, a vision of a possible future, it is also nostalgic, rooted in an image of a lost past. Ziser argues that the pastoral mode is “marked by a nostalgic orientation,” often the memory of a distant golden age (193-194). For Manzanar—and for many urbanists—that golden age is a time before suburbanization, before the freeway, and perhaps even before the last orange groves left

²⁹ See Iris Marion Young’s critique “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in which she argues that community denies difference between and within subjects and privileges face-to-face interactions that are “not mediated by space and time distancing” (237).

the city. By calling the residents of Greater Los Angeles back into the city center, Manzanar asks us to envision a city before sprawl.

But if Manzanar's vision of convergence, this communion of all those who have left the city, is a nostalgic evocation of a city before sprawl, it is also a way of envisioning a city before his own internment. Manzanar takes his name from the Manzanar concentration camp in the Owens Valley, where he is said to have been born. However, if *Tropic of Orange* is set in the 1990s, and Manzanar is Emi's grandfather, it would seem more likely that Manzanar arrived at the concentration camp as a boy or young man. In this chronology, Manzanar is speaking figuratively when he says that he was born in the concentration camp: he is born for the second time as a racialized subject marked by the state for exclusion. Consequently, his pastoral vision is an attempt to return to a self that existed before this historical moment: before being expelled from the garden. Manzanar reflects on this when he recalls an effort to remove him from the overpass, undertaken by other Japanese Americans:

The Japanese American community had apologized profusely for this blight on their image as the Model Minority. They had attempted time after time to remove him from his overpass . . . they had even tried to placate him with a small lacquer bridge in the Japanese gardens in Little Tokyo. He could not confine his musical talents to the silky flow of koi in a pond . . . No. Only the freeway overpass, the towering downtown horizon rising around it, would do. (37)

The garden bridge to which the Japanese American community attempts to remove Manzanar is a confined and racialized space, full of orientalist signifiers like koi and bamboo and bonsai. Further, the Japanese-American community justifies Manzanar's displacement as the removal of "blight," which was the same term used to justify slum

clearance during the urban renewal era.³⁰ The removal is a stark reminder of Manzanar's racialization, and of his internment during the war. Manzanar rejects this racialized space in favor of the broad horizons of the city, an expanse of utopian possibility. On the overpass, Manzanar composes a fantastic vision of a city that is *not* marked by racial exclusion, or by the history of displacements and forced removals that are an integral part of the history of Los Angeles. Manzanar's vision of the organic body of the city is, initially, unindividuated and unraced: it is populated by the variegated "vehicles of the automotive kingdom" (120), rather than by human bodies. For Manzanar, the act of envisioning an organic community becomes a recuperation of trauma, a way to take the image of the "apple orchard" back from the concentration camp named Manzanar, and to reclaim his own place in the garden.

But as all the residents of the city converge on the freeway, Manzanar's fantasy is disrupted and his composition begins to change. In the final chapters of his narrative, Manzanar's symphonic communion is transformed by three interconnected realizations: the recognition of the presence of labor, the presence of individual bodies, and the presence of garbage. These three changes in Manzanar's vision represent an epiphany regarding the repression and hidden violence that are a part of any vision of organic community. Manzanar's symphony first changes with the addition of a "map of labor": "The railroads and the harbors and the aqueduct. These were the first infrastructures built by migrant and immigrant labor that created the initial grid on which everything else began to fill in" (237). Manzanar's new grid of labor provides a counterpoint to his vision of a convergence of leisure-seekers. This change in his composition enacts a return of the

³⁰ See Wendell Pritchett's "The 'Public Menace' of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain" (2003).

occluded labor of creating the infrastructure that enables leisure, labor performed largely by invisible, marginalized communities of immigrants and migrants. Manzanar's grid of labor also brings into view the labor of building *community*.³¹ Initially, Manzanar's envisions the urban community as something that coalesces effortlessly, with the wave of his baton. But as Manzanar considers the labor of constructing the city's infrastructures, he notices an "odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton," (238). Suddenly, he becomes aware of others who are calling together their own symphonies, weaving together their own visions of city space and their own visions of community. These "grassroots composers" are, like Manzanar, engaged in the labor of bringing to life their own vision of the city within the infrastructures set before them (254).

Manzanar's new awareness of the labor of the city is also reflected in a shift in his figurative thinking about the city that undermines the pastoral elements of his vision. Throughout the novel, Manzanar's organic vision of the city is communicated through the metaphor of the city as a human body—a metaphor that is linked to his career as a surgeon. As Lawrence Buell notes, the body has been a persistent frame for representing the city in literature; it makes possible both an "appeal to a shared, collective urban identity" and, because the metaphor implies that the city "should function like a healthy body," it creates a framework for diagnosing the health or sickness of the city (7-8). But when Manzanar begins to see the grid of labor, this metaphor begins to collapse. As millions of people begin abandoning their cars in the traffic jam, Manzanar once again confronts the frailty of individual bodies: "When the defenseless body emerged, for whatever reason, he often felt surprise and disgust. A memory was triggered and he was

³¹ The scholar Miranda Joseph discusses this tendency—toward what she calls "the fetishistic community"—in her book, *Against the Romance of Community*.

once again a surgeon cutting through soft tissue. He remembered intimately the cartography of the human body and that delicate complex thing within each car frightened him” (207). The fragility of these bodies undercuts his conception of the city as an organic and unified entity, and as a place of pastoral leisure: sickness rarely appears in pastoral fantasy. Instead, Manzanar recognizes that the city is composed of bodies, which are strong and weak, rich and poor, homeless and sheltered. Also, although it remains implicit, the recognition of individual bodies is inevitably a recognition of the ways that those bodies are racialized, and the consequences of that racialization (which would be intimately familiar to him). Later, Manzanar makes a direct connection between his new awareness of the grid of labor and the vulnerability of the body: “It was those delicate vulnerable creatures within those machines that made this happen: a thing called work . . . it was work that defined each person in the city” (237-238). Manzanar begins to see individual bodies as instruments of labor, and, perhaps, to see the stratified effects of that labor on those bodies. It is, ultimately, a realization that undercuts his pastoral vision of the city.

Finally, Manzanar’s pastoral symphony is complicated by a confrontation with Western garbage. During a moment of stasis in his composition, after the homeless community has occupied the freeway, Manzanar envisions a point of global convergence, where the West meets the East: “Manzanar looked out on this strange end and beginning: the very last point West, and after that it was all East. The inky waves with their moonlit spume stuttering against the shore seemed to speak this very truth—garbage jettisoning back prohibiting further progress” (170 – 71). Later, after the map of labor enters his symphony, this image becomes somewhat clearer and more pointed: “The waves of

natural and human garbage thrown back again and again . . . he had seen enough. And he had heard everything” (255). Manzanar’s vision of garbage tossed back to shore by ocean currents is an inversion of the originary pastoral vision of the American Eden. Manzanar stands at the Western terminus of that fantasy, facing the “natural and human” detritus it has left in its wake; confronted with the detritus of the pastoral, he experiences acute pastoral disillusionment. For Manzanar, this is a recognition of the human and environmental consequences of his idealized urban community: the history of expulsion and displacement, the labor of creating community, and the waste and pollution that it casts off.

Shortly after these interconnected realizations, Manzanar loses control of his composition. As the police helicopters begin firing on the homeless on the freeway, his symphony takes on a martial tone, reminiscent of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and it appears as if his pastoral vision is finally consumed by imperialism, rapacious capitalism, and repressive violence (240). But, unlike Gabriel’s narrative, Manzanar’s has a coda, which is suggestive of renewal and rebirth. The final chapter of Manzanar’s narrative describes him returning to memory, to an eclectic mix of pop and folk tunes, and to his family (255). He rises up from the freeway on the *NewsNow* helicopter, reunited with his estranged and dying granddaughter Emi. The helicopter represents the interconnection of repressive state violence and the “bird’s-eye,” modernist approach to seeing the city as a single entity. Manzanar looks down on the city and is unable to hear anything. The image of Manzanar rendered deaf to the sound of the city seems to suggest a closed ending: Manzanar’s symphony lost forever. And yet, the image of Manzanar spirited from his perch by a helicopter communicates the inevitability of his return, foreshadowed in the

beginning of the novel: “It was suggested that he could be taken by helicopter and left on a mountain top . . . But those who knew Manzanar knew he would find his way back, track the sounds back to the city” (37).

As Manzanar’s symphony comes to an end, he notices the many others working to bring the city into harmony: “The entire city had sprouted grassroots conductors of every sort” (254). Throughout the novel, Buzzworm functions as one of these grassroots conductors, drawing unseen parts of the city into view with pieces of stories, connecting those in need with the benefits of the city, and helping others to mitigate risks, such as drug addiction and hunger, that accumulate in marginalized urban spaces. However, in contrast to Manzanar’s vision of organic community, Buzzworm is almost exclusively concerned with the excluded and dispossessed, and with fragile individual bodies. Buzzworm’s narrative also draws into view the physical labor of making those connections, represented mainly in his constant, tireless walking across the city. But Buzzworm also clearly admires Manzanar’s expansive view of the city; as he explains to Gabriel: “He sees and hears things nobody else can. What he’s doing up there is a kind of interpretation. You can’t write about what you can’t see nor hear” (157). While Buzzworm is conscious of the ways that visions of organic community have excluded people like him and others in his neighborhood, he also seems to share aspects of Manzanar’s utopian vision. More importantly, perhaps, Buzzworm recognizes the importance of a view of the city from above—access to the “master plan” of its many intersecting infrastructures—to enacting the kind of radical social transformation that underlies his labor of community organizing. Through the tension between Manzanar’s pastoral narrative of community and Buzzworm’s narrative of community organizing,

Yamashita navigates what Sue Im-Lee calls the “impossible/necessary dialectic” of organic, universally inclusive conceptions of community. By keeping these two ideas in unresolved tension throughout the novel, Yamashita is able to critique the inevitable exclusions and erasures of the pastoral visions of community while maintaining their utility as a means of expanding the horizons of the conceivable.

Buzzworm is, like Manzanar, linked to a kind of pastoral vision of the city, but it is a vision that foregrounds the physical labor of building place-value and constructing community. Buzzworm’s labor of community building and place-making corresponds with a literary corollary to the traditional pastoral, the Georgic. Ziser argues that the theme of the Georgic is both “the engagement and toil involved in running a farm” and, by metaphorical extension, “the labor involved in writing a literary work” (180).

Buzzworm models the labor of place-making in his home: He lives a life of pioneer austerity to pay off the mortgage on the house his grandmother lived in, and his garden produces food (81). Buzzworm’s plan for community-building, which he calls “do-it-yourself gentrification,” is an extension of the Georgic labor he practices at home:

Buzzworm had a plan. Called it gentrification. Not the sort brings in poor artists. Sort where people living there become their own gentry. Self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification. Latinos had this word, gente. Something translated like *us*. Like *folks*. That sort of gente-fication. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees. Some laughed at Buzzworm’s plan. Called his plan This Old Hood. They could laugh, but he was still trying to go to heaven (83).

The play on the word “gentrification” in this description is reflective of Buzzworm’s orientation toward the dominant culture, the ways that he seeks to create new possibilities for livability *within* those structures while pushing the boundaries of what those structures will allow. The term “gente-fication” implies a double meaning, which refers

not only to the people's construction of place but also the making of the people themselves, the creation of a coherent community. This community is created partly through the shared experience of racialization: by the boundaries of racialized space created by the freeways and by the neighborhood's marginalization in the cultural imaginary. But there is also a recognition here that the community—even a community of shared and limited space, like the neighborhood—needs to be formed through labor. Buzzworm's Georgic engagement with the work of creating and organizing community—along with his awareness of structural barriers to that labor—is what ultimately distinguishes Buzzworm's "narrative of community organizing" from Manzanar's pastoral vision.

While Buzzworm deploys a variety of contingent, flexible strategies for place-making and community-building, and while he maintains a skepticism about metanarratives of redemption and healing, his community organizing has an unabashedly utopian aim: he is still trying to go to heaven (83). This tension between Buzzworm's day-to-day labor of place-making and a grand utopian vision is borne out in his strategic approach to the occupation of the freeway. The narrative strategies that Buzzworm and the residents of the freeway community use—their appropriation of homesteading discourse, or of claims to autonomy and self-sufficiency—are aimed primarily at changing how they are represented in the social imaginary of the dominant culture (that is, on television, in newspapers and on the radio) and subsequently at achieving recognition from the state. This strategy is consistent with Buzzworm's other forms of community organizing, such as his work connecting people in his community to existing social services. The stories that they transmit become vehicles for what Manuel Castells

calls “legitimizing identities,” the assertion of claims to recognition within the existing apparatuses of the state, and to the benefits that such recognition entails. But beneath the freeway occupiers’ call for recognition from the state is a radical counter-narrative, an implicit and revolutionary demand for the transformation of the infrastructures of power that perpetuate the unequal distribution of environmental goods and environmental risks.

That sense of distant revolutionary possibility represented by the occupation of the freeway is ultimately defused, as Yamashita draws attention to the limits of articulating counter-narratives *within* the pre-existing physical and narrative infrastructure of the city. Miranda Joseph argues: “In order to be considered a recipient of resources that emanate from the state, social actors must first constitute themselves as a legitimate community,” that is, a community that articulates itself within the bureaucratic and capitalist apparatus (28). If the group does not operate this way, it is not given the status of community, but remains a “gang” or a mob or a riot (28).³² While the homeless community on the freeway seems to make progress in articulating within the apparatuses of state power, winning at least tacit recognition from the authorities, the surveillance of the state remains constant throughout the occupation. And at what seems to be the moment of greatest revolutionary possibility, when the assembled masses along the freeway reach “grandiose proportions” and seem to be most unified—significantly, this is the moment when Arcangel arrives with his “motley parade” from the South—the repressive forces of the state begin to fire on the freeway (238-239). The use of repressive state violence against the freeway community ultimately suggests that re-appropriations of both physical and narrative infrastructure are, as Buzzworm calls the tags that mark gang territory, “futile gestures without a master plan” (83).

³² See also Magrit Mayer’s 2003 essay, “The Onward Sweep of Social Capital.”

In the final chapter of his narrative, in the aftermath of the massacre of the freeway community, Buzzworm seems to cast a skeptical eye on the great convergence on the freeway, and perhaps to the magical realist architecture of Manzanar's vision of organic community: "Things would be what he and everybody else chose to do and make of it. It wasn't going to be something imagined" (265). He returns home, waters the palm trees in front yard, plants some seeds from the freeway garden in his front yard, and considers his next steps: "He had some serious itineratin' to do" (265). The sense of Buzzworm's uninterrupted labor, like the uninterrupted labor of farm work represented in the Georgic, exemplifies the ethos of his narrative of community organizing against the narrative of pastoral community. But while the ending of Buzzworm's narrative seems to reaffirm his commitment to neighborhood activism and a ground-level view of the city, the final lines of the chapter suggest that his orientation toward the city, and toward the labor of organizing, has shifted. After hearing one too many love songs on the radio, Buzzworm unplugs his Walkman, which had been his guide to the city's street-level structures of feeling. He also gives away his impressive collection of watches, re-synchronizing his sense of time to the sun. Buzzworm, it seems, is going "off the grid," working to get outside the city's physical and narrative infrastructures and reorienting to the ecological infrastructure that grounds Manzanar's universalizing perspective of the city. The final image represents a kind of conciliation between Buzzworm and Manzanar's visions of the city and visions of community. As Buzzworm sets off to the unending labor of community organizing, he carries with him not the chatter of commercial radio, but the soundscape of utopian possibility: "Manzanar's symphony

swelled within his diaphragm, reverberated through his veteran bones. Solar-powered, he could not run out of time” (265).

Conclusion: Building Just Urban Communities

Yamashita’s critique of urban community is particularly relevant to those in the New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements who invest their hopes for the future in the transformation of the city. Many of the prominent voices in these movements ask us to envision urban communities that, like Manzanar’s first symphonic movement, leave out the labor of their own construction. The movements against urban and suburban sprawl can help bring into view environmental risks that are, at least in some measure, shared across borders of difference: elevated air pollution, automobile-dependent infrastructure, loss of green space. And smart growth and new urbanist innovations, like transit-oriented development, have the potential to benefit a broad spectrum of city-dwellers. But the smart growth narratives deployed by many professional environmental organizations during the 90s and 2000s have relied heavily on a pastoral re-imagining of the city that effaces existing disparities in infrastructure, access to goods and services, and exposure to environmental hazards. It is a vision of community that occludes the necessary labor of its own production: the work of eradicating spatialized racisms and dismantling the infrastructure of privilege. Without a commitment to the ongoing labor of creating fairness and ensuring justice—labor with which all community-building must begin—smart growth and new urbanism are just repackagings of urban renewal, certain to replicate its attendant displacements, its spatial homogenizations, and its social and environmental costs for the poor and marginalized. Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* troubles these trajectories, raises questions about our perception of urban space and

community, and suggests new possibilities for intervention into the physical and narrative frameworks that govern the spaces we inhabit.

Yamashita does this partly by drawing on formal and stylistic strategies of postmodernism, while maintaining a foundational commitment to social and environmental justice. Rachel Adams argues that *Tropic of Orange* represents an “afterword to literary postmodernism” and the inauguration of a new era marked by the globalization of American literature. Adams writes: “If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in one part of the world are inevitably affected by events in another” (268). But while it is true that Yamashita’s characters are each reaching out toward a “shared perception of community,” her novel also calls the reader’s attention to the disparities in access and exposure that shape those communities, connections to stories that are never told, and, above all, the labor of *producing* those connections. The novel’s attention to these things is what creates its ethos of environmental justice, and what separate it from narratives of urban pastoral. Just communities require a labor of organizing, regardless of whether they exist on the scale of the city block or on the scale of the planet. *Tropic of Orange*’s orientation toward its readers embodies that ethic. Yamashita reminds us that we’re always already experiencing the city through a mediating lens, such as a map or a text, and that we’re always at the periphery of the organic community. This is a fundamentally postmodern gesture: reminding us of the impossibility of coherence, of unity, of foundations. But, at the same time, Yamashita dares us to imagine that community. Even

as she dismantles the idea of a convocation of the organic community, she continues to call out to the reader engaged in the laborious leisure of reading: to hear the choir, and to hear its voices.

CHAPTER III

**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SPATIAL PRIVILEGE IN
THE 21ST CENTURY OFFICE NOVEL**

In April of 2000, after several weeks on strike, thousands of janitors represented by the Los Angeles chapter of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) won a new contract that would provide them with a significant wage increase, improved health care benefits, and greater job security. The 2000 janitors' strike was the culmination of a ten year campaign—most often called the “Justice for Janitors” campaign—of organizing and coalition building in Los Angeles and other cities across the U.S. Coming at a time in which union membership had been in steady decline and many labor organizations were forced to make major concessions to owners, these janitors' victories marked a rallying point for union organizers.³³ The Justice for Janitors campaign was also an important challenge to traditional models of unionism in the United States, first in its commitment to building participation, activism, and leadership skills among “rank-and-file” workers and, second, in its willingness to reach *beyond* the workforce to organize coalitions with other community organizations. Part of what made Justice for Janitors' Los Angeles strike so successful was the involvement and support of an array of community partners: immigrants' rights groups, interfaith organizations, and community organizations devoted

³³ The strike in Los Angeles helped to inspire a wave of successful contract renegotiations on behalf of janitors in other major metropolitan centers: San Diego, Cleveland, Chicago, and New York City (Wright). But while the Justice for Janitors campaign *has* taken hold in other cities, its greatest victories have been in Los Angeles. In spite of early successes, such as a massive Park Avenue march, the campaign has struggled to gain a foothold in New York City. Much excellent work has been done by labor studies scholars to explain the comparative geographies of urban labor movements in the U.S. See, for example, Lowell Turner and Daniel B. Cornfield's *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy* (2007), Luis L.M. Aguiar and Shaun Ryan's "The Geographies of the Justice for Janitors" (2009), and Jason Albright's "Contending Rationality, Leadership, and Collective Struggle: The 2006 Justice for Janitors Campaign at the University of Miami" (2008). On labor's decline, see, for example, Michael Wallerstein and Bruce Western's "Unions in Decline? What Has Changed and Why" (2000).

to social justice (Tattersall 157). This coalition-based organizing strategy, brought back into prominence in the 1990s by the Justice for Janitors campaign, has been referred to as “social movement unionism” or “community unionism.”³⁴ Critically for the issues that I’m raising in this dissertation—questions of environmental justice, community organizing, and urban redevelopment—community unionism has helped to bring union activism to issues that are central to the Smart Growth and New Urbanist Movements, such as environmental health and public transit campaigns (Savage 647). Community Unionist campaigns like Justice for Janitors can help urbanists engage underrepresented constituencies and underdiscussed urban justice issues, such as fair and affordable housing, immigrants’ rights, equitable distribution of environmental risks, and equal access to infrastructure and public services (LeRoy 143-144).

But while Justice for Janitors was successful in engaging community groups across the city, other laborers in the offices where janitors were protesting—the white-collar professionals, the so-called “knowledge workers,” creatives, and middle managers³⁵—were conspicuously absent from the campaign. The promise of a socially and environmentally just New Urbanist Movement is, at least in part, dependent on the possibility of alliances between white-collar, urban office workers and the low-wage service workers who labor in the same workspaces. In this chapter, I explore the modern

³⁴ While the term community unionism may be new, its core tactics are not. Lydia Savage argues that the shift to community unionism marks a revival of tactics from the 1930s: a time in which “rank-and-file members often deeply engaged in their local union’s activities and decision-making” (Savage 647). In the 1950s, however, unions traded “a reliance on worker activism that was deeply rooted in communities for a reliance on an organizational structure that has often weakened the involvement and commitment of the membership” (Savage 647). But although this model of “business unionism” was the norm among autoworkers, community or social movement unionism models remained prevalent in other sectors of the workforce (such as Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers Union, for example) (Milkman 10).

³⁵ Throughout this chapter, I will use the term “white-collar worker” as opposed to other, more recently-developed terms, such as “knowledge workers” or the “creative class.”

office building as a space in which possibilities for socially and racially just coalition-building are derailed and disabled. I argue that the modern office, like the suburb, helps to reproduce the unquestioned “spatial privilege” of the white middle class, and in particular the privileges of “not noticing” social and environmental injustices. My definition of spatial privilege draws from George Lipsitz’s theory of “the possessive investment in whiteness,” which refers to the cultural, social and economic incentives that drive white people to “remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, opportunity, and power” (viii). It also draws from the theory of “environmental privilege” described in Park and Pellow’s *Slums of Aspen* (2011) and Kari Norgaard’s *Living in Denial* (2011), which asserts that environmental privileges—such as access to open space and geographic insulation from harmful pollutants—inhere to aspects of social location, such as race and class.³⁶ The suburbs and the white-collar office share a history and an ideological foundation that helped to create and sustain spatial privilege: both served to insulate the white middle class from the social and environmental consequences of late modernity, such as industrial pollution, and from the reflexive consequences of suburbanization itself, such as decaying urban infrastructure, the social fragmentation of the inner city, and the concentration of poverty in racialized spaces.

In this chapter, I argue that the sense of spatial privilege that is reproduced in the modern office has been a significant barrier to coalitions between the middle class office workers who hold new urbanist ideals and the service workers who are often most harmed by social and environmental injustice. Now, amid movements for new urbanist redevelopment, many office workers—particularly in traditional FIRE

³⁶ My reading of office space and spatial privilege is rooted in Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the social production of space (1974), and in the work of Marxist geographers—such as David Harvey and Edward Soja—who developed and expanded on Lefebvre’s work.

(financial/insurance/real estate) industries and the rapidly-growing technology sector— seem to be returning to the city. Ensuring that environmental benefits and environmental hazards are equitably distributed in any new urban paradigm, depends, in part, on the power of this new class of urban office laborers to recognize inequities in the distribution of environmental hazards and environmental goods, to recognize their own location in the structures of power that generate and apportion those hazards and benefits, and to begin to imagine collective identities that can resist and transform those structures of power. The transformation of the middle class office worker depends, in part, on the power of cultural narratives to help imagine those things.

To this end, I turn to the literature of the modern office, and specifically to novels that are set primarily in urban office buildings and focus largely on the daily lives of office laborers, which I will refer to as the 21st century office novel.³⁷ In this chapter, I look closely at three novels that represent a continuum of this genre, and which each engage the possibilities for collective organizing and coalition-building among white-collar office workers: James Hynes's *Kings of Infinite Space* (2004), Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2010). I begin with a discussion of the historical context from which the 21st century office novel genre emerges: first, the gradual migration of white-collar laborers back into central business districts and, second,

³⁷ The 21st century office novel is part of a longer tradition of American office literature; this genealogy could be said to include Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955), and Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974). In the first decade of the 21st century, however, there was a remarkable surge in the publication of American novels set in the white-collar office; among these were Max Barry's *Company* (2006), Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), Matthew Norman's *Domestic Violets* (2010), Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask* (2010), David Foster Wallace's unfinished final novel *The Pale King* (published posthumously in 2010), and Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2012). Of course, there is also a growing field of film and television representations of office life, most notably the American adaptation of the British comedy series *The Office*, which ran from 2005 to 2013 (the BBC version debuted in 2001) and AMC's *Mad Men*.

the reorganization of the interior design of the office space. Then, I move to an analysis of James Hynes's *Kings of Infinite Space*, which I see as an archetypal, if somewhat outlandish, iteration of the genre. In *Kings of Infinite Space*, the uncertainty and alienation of office labor inspires a fantasy of heroic individuation and frontiersman-like escape. I go on to discuss Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), which engages similar issues of office alienation. However, unlike *Kings of Infinite Space* which focuses on the autonomous individual, *Personal Days* focuses on the possibilities for collective identity formation in the office, a theme represented in the novel's extensive and innovative use of first-person plural narration. But while Park's novel attempts to build a liberatory narrative of coalition-building in the office, that collective formation remains haunted by unacknowledged labor, waste and toxicity, and the exclusion and invisibility of people of color. In the final section of the chapter, I put *Personal Days* in conversation with Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* (2011), which follows a team of "sweepers," charged with cleaning out office buildings in Lower Manhattan in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse. *Zone One* explores the ways that racial and social hierarchies are deeply embedded in the infrastructure of the office, and can endure even through societal collapse. As a critique of the New Urbanist Movement, *Zone One* suggests that social and environmental justice won't spring organically from the transformation of urban space. To build a better city, Whitehead suggests, we must first dismantle the structures that perpetuate injustice.

As a genre, the office novel conveys a sense of the horizons of possibility for identity formation and social movement organizing in the office. In referring to this group of books as a "genre," I draw on John Frow, who argues that "all genres possess

historically specific and variable expressive capacities: they offer frameworks for constructing meaning and value” (72-73). The “generically specific world” created in the office novel provides a framework for constructing meaning and value of the space of the office itself: how readers imagine the office to act on them and how they imagine their own experience of office labor.³⁸ Traditionally, the office novel has been a vehicle for exploring the values and culture of the privileged white-collar worker (as we see in Hynes’s *Kings of Infinite Space*). I argue that the reproduction of spatial privilege in such novels has been a barrier to the kinds of coalitions between white-collar workers and service workers that are necessary to creating socially and environmentally just cities. However, recent interventions into the office novel by writers of color, such as Park and Whitehead, have helped to challenge the values and meaning embedded in the office and the office novel, and offer a vision of office labor that is more just and equitable. Particularly by making issues of race central to the genre, Park and Whitehead help to counter the colorblind assumptions that undergird the new urbanists’ vision of the return of office labor to the city. Ultimately, Park’s and Whitehead’s novels anticipate the potential dangers of the office worker’s return to the city—and of new urbanism more broadly--unless it is founded in a commitment to social and environmental justice.

The Cubicle and Its Discontents: The Office Novel in the 21st Century

Like *Tropic of Orange* and other novels I consider in the dissertation, the 21st century office novel is often set against and informed by new waves of urban gentrification, and the emergence of environmental justice, smart growth, new urbanism and other social movements focused on the transformation of urban space. The resurgent

³⁸ The relationship between genre and the social production of space is raised in Sara Blair’s essay, “Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary” (1998).

office novel genre also coincides with a historic transformation of office space itself: First, on a macro-geographic scale, we've started to see a slow abandonment of the suburban office parks that came to prominence in the 60s and 70s, and the potential for white-collar offices to return to the central business districts in which they were born. Second, on a micro-geographic scale, the interior design of many offices has begun to shift from the semi-privacy of cubicle-based workspace and toward more "open" floor plans designed for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. The spatial transformations of the office and especially the potential migration of office labor back to the city – long awaited by new urbanists and smart growth advocates – raises fears of new forms of gentrification and urban renewal, but also possibilities for new kinds of coalition-building between service workers and white-collar workers. In particular, a "back-to-the-city" migration of white-collar office workers could create possibilities for broader and better-funded environmental justice coalitions to address the environmental hazards facing city-dwellers: inequitable public transportation infrastructure, unjust siting of toxic pollutants and existing unremediated toxic sites, and insufficient and asymmetrical disaster planning and response measures. The office novel, as a genre, can help to make visible the possibilities and limitations of this new imagination of the city.

The barriers to coalitional politics between white-collar office workers and service workers have roots in the transformation of American cities after World War II. In the postwar era, corporations began to choose suburban locations for their new office complexes and corporate headquarters. In *Pastoral Capitalism*, Louise Mozingo argues that the suburban relocation of professional managerial class served three significant functions for the owning class. First, the relocation separated white-collar laborers from

the environmental and infrastructural risks of the city: industrial pollution of the air and waterways, noise pollution, traffic congestion, and other growing problems associated with reflexive modernization.³⁹ Second, it allowed corporations to continue *de facto* hiring discrimination against African Americans and other minorities. As structures of white supremacy—such as mortgage lenders, real estate agents and homeowners’ associations—ensured the whiteness of suburban space, the relocation of office space allowed employers to continue to exclude people of color from positions in middle management (26). Finally, the mid-century relocation of white-collar laborers to the suburbs from city also discouraged coalition-building between the unionized blue-collar workforce of the factory floor and the non-unionized office workforce (24). These three structural characteristics of the new work spaces of the middle class—their isolation of office workers from the toxic consequences of industrial modernity, from working relationships with people of color, and from the possibility of organized labor—stand as structural barriers to the coalition-building necessary for meaningful environmental justice organizing. These three factors have helped to create the bifurcated environmental movement that I discuss in the introductory chapter, split between a woefully ineffective “professional” environmental movement (largely staffed and supported by the office working class) and an environmental justice movement that has been influential but remains starved for resources.

In the early 21st century, however, there are signs that corporate suburbanism is undergoing another transformation. Mozingo and others argue that the massive sprawling

³⁹ Reflexive modernization is a term popularized by the sociologist Ulrich Beck; it refers to the idea that the radical acceleration of modernizing processes—manifest in new technologies such as genetic engineering and nuclear power—is causing “unintended and unknown side-effects” that undermine the institutions that support those processes (the nation state, for example).

suburbanization that has been dominant since the 1950s could not have taken place without a coincident relocation of capital to subsidize and expand infrastructure and services to suburbanites. Now, urbanists, anti-sprawl advocates, and others hope that a return of office workers to central business districts will accelerate the process of urban re-densification, reinvestment, and revitalization.⁴⁰ There is some evidence that this transformation is underway: For example, in Chicago, research has suggested that corporations are beginning to shift their offices from the suburbs back to the central business district (Cbd). The potential return of office space to the city coincides with the rise of the New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements, and what urban studies scholar Robert Fishman calls “the fifth great migration,” a “rediscovery and re-creation of the traditional urbanism of density that Mumford had declared obsolete” (359). Business analysts and urban theorists explain corporate urban relocation by pointing to a growing desire, particularly among young people, for new urbanist amenities: walkable neighborhoods, access to public transportation, and more opportunities for social interaction (Vanderkam).⁴¹ In 2011, Kaid Benfield, director of the Sustainable Communities Campaign at National Resources Defense Council, proclaimed: “Now, just as the tide has turned against large-lot suburban residential subdivisions, corporations are

⁴⁰ Urbanists have long hoped for a reversal in the trend of suburbanization of office space that has been taking place since the 1950s, and there is a certain amount of wishful thinking in these accounts of corporate awakening to the merits of new urbanist thinking. At this point, most evidence for a return of office workers to the city is anecdotal and not yet indicative of a large reversal in the long-term trend toward suburban relocation that began in the 1940s.

⁴¹ There are numerous explanations for this shift. Some argue that the risks that drove the corporate exodus from the inner cities have largely disappeared: heavy manufacturing is mostly gone from the inner cities, unions have been defanged, and nuclear warfare is no longer a grave concern. Others point to the decline in downtown rents and the lure of tax incentives.

moving back into town . . . The best and the brightest of the rising labor force, it turns out, don't care to live and work in sprawl.”

But the new urbanists' vision of urban transformation often falls into a kind of class- and color-blindness—what I refer to in the introduction as a “rhetoric of repossession”—that presumes the right of these “best and the brightest of the rising labor force” to return to the city and remake it in their image. This triumphant vision of returning office labor whitewashes the racist history of white-collar labor's original *departure* from the city and obscures enduring concerns for social and environmental justice among current residents of the city. While Benfield and others are optimistic about the return of corporate offices and white-collar labor to the city, unless the movement engages underlying issues of racial and social injustice in the city, the new urbanist transformation will inevitably reproduce the environmental, social, and infrastructural injustices that were characteristic of the urban renewal era. In the previous chapter on Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, I draw on George Lipsitz's concept of “racialization of space” to describe how infrastructures like the Los Angeles freeway system contribute to a “racial project” in which resources and risks are apportioned according to a racial hierarchy. In this chapter, I position the modern office as a similarly racialized space that helps to naturalize and reproduce the privileges of whiteness that perpetuate environmental injustice. In the essay “Rethinking Environmental Racism,” Laura Pulido theorizes the relationship between the “environmental privilege” of whiteness and environmental racism: “Environmental racism has been produced not only by consciously targeting people of color [as in the cases of waste incinerators sited in predominately black or Latino neighborhoods] . . . but by the larger processes of urban development,

including white flight, in which whites have sought to fully exploit the benefits of their whiteness” (33). While Lipsitz’s and Pulido’s arguments focus on the macro-geography of urban space, the office novel genre helps to reveal how similar dynamics are at work in the micro-geographies of office interiors. By both concealing and naturalizing the privileges of whiteness, the office—and the narratives generated within that space—prevents solidarity-formation and coalition-building between office workers and others. Like the freeway, the racialized space of the office undergirds a racial project that perpetuates a socially and racially unjust distribution of environmental goods and environmental hazards, both within the city and beyond. The office novel can be a means of making visible the privileged office worker’s investment in this racial project, as well as envisioning possibilities for resisting and dismantling it.

The notion that the office novel helps to conceal the spatial privileges of whiteness is underscored by many office novels’ detachment from the urban landscape in which they’re set. While most white-collar workers in the United States continue to labor in suburbs, most examples of the office novel genre take place in large cities. However, what is most striking about many of these novels is their *inattention* to the office building’s place in a larger urban geography. Max Barry’s *Company* describes the office as “hermetically sealed” from the rest of Seattle. In both *Then We Came to the End* and *Personal Days*, details that would clearly identify the office’s location in space are parsed out slowly and indirectly. The restricted setting of these novels closes off the city as a site of meaningful coalition-building. The office space produces feelings of alienation and isolation in these novels, but it also produces a safe retreat space from the responsibilities created by encounters with others in the city. By displacing its office worker protagonists

from the city, the office novel excludes from representation stories that might reveal or challenge the office worker's spatial privilege, such as encounters with minoritized spaces or the toxic externalities generated by office labor. In this way, office novels naturalize the spatial privilege that comes with office work. However, each of the novels I read in this chapter also reveals fissures in the construction of office ideology and emergent opportunities for counter-narratives. Reading the office novel in relation to broader issues of new urbanism, gentrification, and environmental justice organizing can provide insight into the ways that narratives of white-collar work justify and reproduce existing spatial inequalities, but also the ways that such narratives can potentially challenge those inequalities.

While the interior space of the office can help reproduce uncritical assumptions about spatial privilege, it can also reveal opportunities for narrating resistant identities, both by individuals and collectives. In my readings of these three office novels, I argue that the space of the office contains its own micro-geographic version of what I refer to in the previous chapter as a "narrative infrastructure." Like the built environment of the city, aspects of the interior space of the office help to facilitate the generation and dissemination of narratives among coworkers: for example, in common areas, like break rooms and water coolers, or along high-traffic hallways and corridors. However, this office infrastructure may also reproduce social and racial exclusions: for example, through kitchen facilities that are open to middle managers, but not to janitors. As Lydia Savage argues, such geographies are critical to the possibility of unionization: "How workplaces themselves are internally laid out can dramatically influence the relationships between workers and thus the possibilities for unionization . . . the result of such control

of the micro-geography of the workplace was a social fragmentation of the workforce based upon its spatial fragmentation” (649). The office novel offers access to the narratives constructed by and about office workers—the stories they tell about themselves, about their aspirations and grievances, and about their relationship to management, to others in the office, and to the city—and helps to show the opportunities for and barriers to constructing narratives that are available to office workers. The 21st century office novel provides access to cultural frameworks that shape thinking about spatial privilege, the relationship between service workers and the imperiled middle class office worker, and the possibilities for transformative coalition-building in response to the social and environmental hazards of late modernity.

The white-collar office’s spatial relocations—from the city, to the suburbs, and now possibly back to the city—are mirrored by transformations in the internal space of the office buildings themselves: their floor plans, layouts, and interior design. In the early 20th century, most offices used what we would today call an “open floor plan”: clerks, copyists and secretaries all sat at desks in an undivided room, with private offices reserved for upper management (*see appended image 1*). However, in the 1960s, at the time that many corporations were relocating to the suburbs, most offices began to shift away from open space and toward a floor plan based on individual work stations, subdivided with mobile, temporary walls and connected to one another via telephone (and eventually email) (*see appended image 2*). This now-ubiquitous style of office design is often described with the same terminology used in anti-suburban smart growth movements: modern offices are sprawling, alienating, sterile, predictable, monolithic, sedentary. Design scholar Jeremy Myerson argues that postwar offices were designed

based on “predictable principles of hierarchy, status and repetition” and in a way “that minimized movement, thus promoting a sedentary and isolated work style that kept people in their place and impeded the flow of new ideas and information” (“Radical Office” 14). Nothing more clearly represents the negative view of office space than the cubicle, which has become a metonym for the office as a whole, and particularly for the most disempowering and alienating aspects of office life.⁴² In the 21st century office novel genre, the cubicle is still a dominant image of the office’s interior geography: Hynes refers to the “cubicle horizon” that renders the protagonist’s coworkers invisible to him; Matthew Norman calls the office “cubeland,” and in Max Barry’s *Company*, cubicle dividers separate sections of the office that the staff call “East and West Berlin.” In these novels, the cubicle functions in the same way that the image of “white picket fences” or the *cul de sac* have been used ironically to stand in for the most alienating effects of suburban space. The cubicle, like the signifiers of suburbia, has come to represent the office working class’s growing dissatisfaction with spatial privilege in the late 20th century.

Though the cubicle remains ubiquitous in both office design and office novels, the 21st century has brought new challenges to the dominant spatial order of the office and, consequently, new ways of imagining office space in fiction and film. At the same time that new urbanist innovations such as mixed use development were gaining traction among city planners, office design innovations, such as the ‘open plan’ office, were beginning to appear for many of the same reasons (*see appended image 3*). In *Radical Office Design*, part of a trilogy of works aimed at capturing the most innovative trends in

⁴² Originally the cubicle was designed to *challenge* these problems of inflexibility, hierarchy, and isolation: cubicles were intended by their creator, Robert Propst, to be easily moved to accommodate both privacy and openness to the office environment (Schlosser).

21st century office design, Jeremy Myerson argues that “fixed, sterile office environments . . . no longer support the new styles of team-based, knowledge-driven working” (9). “Radical” revisions to the 21st century office, such as those Myerson documents, are founded in assumptions common to many new urbanist advocates. They’re also susceptible to many of the same criticisms. The open plan office was designed to facilitate unplanned exchanges between coworkers, based on the premise that “productivity is increased by random encounters that stimulate new ideas and thinking” (“Creative Office” 9). Here, Myerson’s argument echoes the principles of urban social theorists—for example, Thad Williamson in *Sprawl, Justice, and Citizenship* (2010)—who argue that the unplanned interactions made possible by urban space are essential to a just democracy. However, just as critics of new urbanism fear that gentrification will limit possibilities for “unplanned encounters” in urban space, the unplanned office encounters that Myerson imagines will likely take place among a homogenous class of knowledge workers, rather than a meaningfully representative cross-section of the corporation’s employees. After all, how “radical” can an office be if it doesn’t create conversations between janitors and white-collar workers?

The space of the office shapes opportunities for storytelling among coworkers, but it also shapes the *kinds* of stories that it is possible to tell. The office has always, inevitably, been a critical site for the reproduction of dominant ideologies: about capitalism, of course, but also about the nation, about race, class, gender and sexuality, and about the nonhuman world. The narratives about office life that the office genre captures are carriers for those ideologies, as well as vehicles for the kinds of subject formation and coalition-building that can take place in office space. As 21st century

corporations seek to redesign office space to create a new kind of “flexible,” “creative,” and “collaborative” office laborer, the significance of office infrastructure as a vehicle for the production of values and meaning becomes more tangible. For the modern corporation, the production of space and the production of pliant workers go hand-in-hand. Looking closely at the 21st century office novel gives us ways to think about how office space is experienced by office workers, and how office workers construct, independently and collectively, their own narratives in response to that experience. While the interior space of the office helps to shape the boundaries of possibility for office workers, the office novel offers new ways for workers to talk back to that space, to question its assumptions and exclusions, and to envision possibilities for transforming it in ways that are more socially and environmentally just.

James Hynes’s *Kings of Infinite Space*

James Hynes’s 2004 novel *Kings of Infinite Space* represents what I take to be a dominant cultural narrative about office work: an individual is awakened to the soul-crushing alienation of office labor, confronts the office hierarchy, then makes a miraculous or heroic escape from the office (often back to nature or to manual labor). This narrative arc is, I contend, reproduced in numerous other 21st century office novels, particularly by white male authors: Matthew Norman’s *Domestic Violets*, Sam Lipsyte’s *The Ask*, Max Barry’s *Company*, and others. Like these other contemporary office narratives, *Kings of Infinite Space* explores threats to entrenched white male privilege in the 21st-century workplace: the loss of guaranteed, permanent employment for college graduates, challenges to patriarchal office hierarchy, and the fear of being excluded from the new social body created by the global economy. In a broader sense, novels like *Kings*

of Infinite Space also adhere to a narrative that Catherine Jurca traces in *White Diaspora*, in which stories of suburban alienation ultimately reinforce the social, racial and spatial privileges of suburbia by appearing to disavow them (6-7). Narratives of suburban alienation, Jurca argues, “[have] more to do with self-pity than profound or even trite resistance to capitalist culture” (18). As in the suburban alienation narratives of the mid-twentieth century, the writers and protagonists of the 21st century office novel are almost exclusively white males who lament the soullessness and inhumanity of office labor even as they retain the material privileges it affords. In its representation of an individual office worker struggling to retain the privileges of whiteness, Hynes’s novel can offer only a partial critique of office space that falls short due to its unwillingness or inability to question the foundations of that privilege. Novels like *Kings of Infinite Space* appear to challenge the absurdity of 21st century office labor, but in fact reproduce and reinforce the ideology of spatial privilege that undergirds it.

Paul Trilby, the protagonist of *Kings of Infinite Space* and Hynes’s 1999 novella “Queen of the Jungle,” is a failed academic who had attempted to ride the coattails of his more successful wife to a tenure-track job. But when his wife finds out that Paul is having an affair with a graduate student, she declares to Paul her “personal crusade to ensure you never set foot in a classroom again, unless you’re pushing a fucking broom” (90). Paul manages to avoid janitorial service, but his sub-par scholarship and his infidelity reduce him to a low-wage, temporary position as a technical writer in a nondescript South Texas office complex. Daydreaming in his cubicle, Paul envisions his rebuke at the hands of an afternoon talk show host: “You had it all handed to you on a platter, Paul . . . You’re a white man with a college education . . . How could you let it all

slip away?” (48). But like other office novel heroes like *The Bonfire of the Vanities*’ Sherman McCoy and *White Noise*’s Jack Gladney, Paul Trilby is particularly haunted by his tenuous grip on *spatial* privilege. Throughout the novel, he remains deeply afraid of being cast “out there”: out of the office, out of his “leafy neighborhood,” and, ultimately out of the privileged social location that provides insulation from social, economic, and environmental dangers. For Paul, the office is a space in which both the privileges of whiteness and the *threats* to that privilege gradually become visible.

Paul’s sense of spatial privilege is underscored by his inability to see the other workers in the office, particularly service workers like janitors. The other workers are represented in the text as a kind of hauntingly absent presence:

Paul was still spooked by the eerie invisibility of most of his coworkers. Spread out before him in the weird, undersea light, the gray metal strips on top of the cube partitions outlined, like a map of itself, the labyrinth of right angles in all directions . . . What Paul could *not* see from where he stood was another single living human being, yet he heard the clatter of computer keyboards, the rhythmic burr of a ringing phone, the squeaking flex of an office chair . . . All of it, every rattle, click, and chirrup, without being able to see a soul. It was like being surrounded by ghosts.

The “eerie invisibility” of Paul’s coworkers is a consequence of the office’s floor plan, but also the socio-spatial transformations that separated blue and white collar workers in the mid-twentieth century. And indeed, the office floor plan that the description above evokes – one based on cubicles and temporary dividers – is linked to the integration of information technology into the office in the 1970s and 80s, but also mirrors the design of the postwar American suburb. The “labyrinth of right angles” that haunts Paul stands in as a microcosmic representation of the grid of suburbia. The grids of both the cubicle-based office and the suburb are designed to preserve a thin sense of community, while creating new possibilities for privacy. This sense of privacy and separation—and the

power to remain unaware of the consequences of capitalism—is foundational to the spatial privilege of the white-collar office laborer. The passage above is significant, then, because these absences are described in a way that suggests that spatial privilege is, itself, empty, alienating, even horrific.

In *Kings of Infinite Space*, Paul’s inability to resolve that tension—between his fear of losing his place of privilege and his sense that privilege is the source of his alienation—manifests itself in horror. Hynes, discussing the moment of epiphany that led him to write the passage above, explains: “The alienation of cube life was suddenly revealed to me as something *gothic*, a variation on the creeping dread of a Poe character.” The particular sense of dread that undergirds Hynes’s cubicle gothic,⁴³ and others like it, emerges in part from the awareness of the unseen harms and hazards that lurk on the peripheries of privilege. As many scholars have argued—most notably Andrew Smith and William Hughes in *Empire and the Gothic* and Avery Johnson in *Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*—the hauntings and horrors of gothic novels are often linked to the repression and exclusion of unlike others, particularly the colonized. The office gothic of *Kings of Infinite Space*—and of Park’s *Personal Days* and Whitehead’s *Zone One*, I will go on to argue—works in a similar vein to indicate the social and racialized exclusions that haunt the modern office building.

Paul’s sense of being haunted by invisible coworkers soon becomes material, as he learns that his colleagues have made a pact with a cabal of subterranean cannibals who

⁴³ The cubicle gothic that Hynes describes can be read as an appendage to the body of films and books that cultural studies scholar Bernice Murphy has called “the suburban gothic.” These narratives are characterized by tension between a “closely interrelated set of contradictory attitudes,” such as the notion that suburbs are simultaneously places to make a fresh start and places haunted by familial and communal past (3). Murphy observes the suburban gothic in numerous films and television series, as well as in late 20th century American novels such as Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* (1994), and many of the novels of Joyce Carol Oates.

sneak in to the office at night to do office work in exchange for blood sacrifices. Significantly, if perhaps unsurprisingly, the “cannibals” most resemble janitors, who also work unseen at night; who often live on the spatial periphery; and whose invisible labor, pushing the brooms that represent to Paul the lowest form of degradation, sustains the office. Paul begins the novel feeling alienated and disconnected from his coworkers, and uncertain about the safety net of race and class privilege that sustains him in his office job. But when the invisible coworkers that support Paul’s tenuous claims to middle class identity finally appear, they appear as inhuman horrors. Moreover, these service workers are represented as “cannibals,” a figure that has been used to mark a dehumanizing racial otherness in service of the colonial project in Africa and elsewhere. The shift to horror in the novel negates any possibility that Paul will resolve his own feelings of alienation by organizing or building a coalition with others who have also been disempowered. Instead, as in many narratives of eroding privilege, Paul comes to believe that the source of his problems are those *below* him in the established social and racial hierarchies. At the end of the novel, Paul exterminates the cannibals, leaves the office, and drives off into the sunset, simultaneously escaping his own feelings of oppression and absolving himself of complicity in the oppression of others. Hynes’s novel is representative of some of the most reactionary conventions of the office novel: its repression of social and racial difference, its assumption of privilege and abdication of responsibility for oppression, and its recentering of a narrative of white, masculine heroism.

In the following section, I turn to Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, which uses formal and stylistic innovations—and particularly an experiment in first-person plural narration—to push the horizons of what’s conceivable in the genre. While Hynes’s novel

suffers from its individualist ethos and its uncritical assumption of the spatial privileges of whiteness, *Personal Days* raises significant questions about the racialization of office space, and its impact on possibilities for collective action. Park, a Korean-American writer and runner-up for the 2009 Asian American Writers' Workshop fiction award for *Personal Days* (his first novel), has had an uncertain place in discussions of contemporary Ethnic American fiction. In the essay "Theorizing Asian American Fiction," for example, Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht suggest that *Personal Days* "obfuscates the nature of an Asian American literary framework as the novel does not center on Asian American characters, experiences, or contexts and instead explores the quixotic lives of office workers" (15). This claim underscores the difficulties that authors like Park face in foregrounding issues of racial, social, and environmental justice within the modern office novel. By placing in opposition Park's racial identity and the office theme and setting of his novel, critics like Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht imply that the representation of office life doesn't leave room for Asian American characters, experiences, or contexts. I argue that both *Personal Days* raises important questions about the erasure of race in office narratives, and that this is precisely what makes it such an important intervention into the literature of office work.

Ed Park's *Personal Days* and Collective Organizing in the Office

"You said yourself once, waiting for the stuff by the asthmatic printer, that the office generates at least one book, no, one novel every day, in the form of correspondence and memos and reports, all the reams of numbers, hundreds of sentences, thousands of words, but no one has the mind to understand it, no one has the eyes to take it all in, all these potential epics."

Ed Park, *Personal Days* [emphasis in the original].

Ed Park's *Personal Days* is a novel about white-collar office politics in the era of post-dot-com corporate layoffs; it is distinguished by elements of formal experimentation

such as a long section narrated in the first-person plural and a final section consisting of a 40-page, unpunctuated email soliloquy, from which the passage above is taken. This passage serves as a kind of mission statement for *Personal Days*, an affirmation of the office workers' struggle to make meaning from their labor, even as they navigate an uncertain and often toxic work environment. In an article for *The New Inquiry*, Erwin Montgomery refers to *Personal Days* as a kind of "first-person corporate" novel, reflective of the office laborer's stunted desire for individuation within the office. Montgomery reads the passage above as evidence of the ways that the office "seduces you into believing that you figure as the hero of a classically psycho-biographical narrative unfolding in real time, when really you function merely as one of many others in an anonymous collective." Contrary to Montgomery, however, I'd like to argue that *Personal Days* is less invested in the traditional function of the novel as a vehicle for narrating individual experience and individual subject formation, and more invested in the potential for a new epic form that captures the possibilities collective identity formation and collective action in the office. In *Personal Days*, the "anonymous collective" that Montgomery refers to isn't the dead end of frustrated individuals, but rather the only means for office workers to make meaning from a wilderness of information, to map their relation to risks, to space, and to power.

However, as the office worker protagonists of *Personal Days* build a sense of collective identity, they also become aware of their privileged places in a system that perpetuates social and environmental injustice. Ultimately, the possibilities for collective identity formation among office workers in *Personal Days* are complicated and disrupted by the reappearance of violence and injustice that white collar office labor represses: by

the invisible labor of janitors and service workers, the toxic byproducts of the office, and the racialized hierarchies that undergird office bureaucracy. These ghostly presences not only shape the narrative of *Personal Days*, but also manifest themselves in fissures in the form of the novel: for example, in Park's abandonment of the first-person plural narration with which the novel begins. I argue that the dissolution of the office workers' sense of collective identity and the lack of resolution in *Personal Days*' central narrative is, ultimately, caused by the office workers' inability to see connections between their disempowerment and alienation in the office and the exclusion and marginalization of others.

Personal Days concerns a small group of office workers—the reader never learns what the company, or any of its employees, actually do—confronting a wave of layoffs, and the intrigue and power struggles that surround those layoffs. The first section of the novel, titled “Can’t Undo,” is narrated largely in the first-person plural. It is told as a series of office-life vignettes, culminating in the firing of a central character (an indication of things to come). *Personal Days* begins by slowly introducing the reader to the eight office workers that make up the collective pronoun ‘we’ and to the boundaries that define the group. The office workers in *Personal Days* deploy strategies of collective narration and collective interpretation to build a group identity that allows them to define and interpret threats to their (spatially privileged) place in the office, and to find shared ways of coping with the instability and alienation associated with those threats.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The characteristics of the office workers' shared experience overlap with what many social movement theorists and urban studies scholars have suggested are the necessary foundations for meaningful collective action. For example, in *Social Movements in Late Capitalism*, Steven Buechler argues that collective social movement identity is solidified first through the establishment of boundaries between group and out-group; then through the development of interpretive frameworks that emerge from the group's struggle to realize common interests; and finally by the group's efforts to change symbolic meanings in private and public settings so as to advance a movement's cause (190).

Ultimately, though, this process of collective identity formation in *Personal Days* does *not* lead to meaningful collective action: at the end of part I, the office collective begins to fracture in the face of a call to action, and the remainder of the novel is an exploration of that coming-apart. Nevertheless, the initial process of collective identity formation that *Personal Days* conveys is worth examining both because it highlights the limits of building social movement identities from a foundation of spatial privilege and because it reveals possibilities for more effective coalition-building and more meaningful collective action haunting the periphery of such spaces.

In *Personal Days*, the office workers' sense of collective identity first begins to solidify through the experience of shared risk. The office workers' chief collective concern is the threat of being fired, and discussion of that possibility dominates the first part of the novel: "Think positive, we tell ourselves. There's no reason to think that a new owner would be any worse than the current one. But when have things ever gotten better? We know that the firings were just a taste of what's in store" (18). Here and elsewhere, the 'we' is defined both by a sense of shared uncertainty of their future employment and the reliance on shared coping strategies, like 'thinking positive.' In other words, the 'we' is a means of affirming a group identity rooted in shared risk: the risk of being fired. Consequently, the office workers' 'we' excludes those who are above them in the company's hierarchy. According to one of the axioms of the office: "friends don't fire friends" (4). The lack of clarity regarding the office's management structure leads to some confusion about the boundaries of the collective: "Is Maxine one of us? One of them? For the first few months we were under the misapprehension that she was someone's secretary, but then we started getting memos from her" (11). Maxine's

elevated place in the hierarchy—reflected in her ability to control the flow of information to the others—clearly marks her as “one of them.” The office workers’ collective awareness of the risk of being fired is both a means of establishing a collective identity among those similarly at risk, and a means of defining themselves *against* those who don’t share the same risk. However, while the office collective is explicitly defined against those “above” them in the company hierarchy, it also tacitly excludes those “below” them in the office hierarchy, who face different—and almost certainly *greater*—risks.

While the fear of being fired is the central risk around which the office workers coalesce, there are also *environmental* risks that bring the office workers together. The office, it seems, is making them all sick. Among the many medical and psychological problems experienced among the office workers—and attributed to their labor—are chronic teeth-grinding, carpal tunnel syndrome, and back pain, along with depression, anxiety, and vertigo. “Most of us are in therapy,” Park writes. “Occasionally one of us will quit for a while, laughably convinced we are better, before realizing there’s no such thing as *better*” (42). Later, Park writes, “They talked about physical ailments, recurring nightmares, psychosomatic afflictions, all of it blamed on the job. It was pure TMI of the most compelling variety” (116).⁴⁵ The notion that stories of office ailments—stories that might otherwise be considered TMI, or “too much information”—are compelling to the others indicate that these ailments might be commonly shared. For the office workers,

⁴⁵ The office workers’ sense of the health risks of office labor also evokes the literature of “sick building syndrome” (SBS). In her study of SBS, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*, Michelle Murphy writes that the primary symptoms of the syndrome consist of health effects “only foregrounded when larger dangers receded.” Consequently, Murphy argues, SBS indicates among the white-collar office workers who experience it “an expectation of comfort and safety as conditions of daily life for the beneficiaries of the privileges of race and class,” while at the same time revealing the ways that that “privilege was imperfect, even threatened” (3).

sharing the symptoms of office-related afflictions becomes a way of solidifying a collective identity founded on shared risk; however, it also reproduces their sense of entitlement to a safe and healthy work environment, and distances them from those others—like janitors—who bear a disproportionate share of the workplace’s toxicity.

The ‘we’ of *Personal Days* is *not* an expansive collective rooted in the risks shared by *all* the members of the office working class: its particularities, contingencies, and exclusions are, in part, defined by spatial proximity. The confined spaces of the office are particularly important because they provide opportunities for the kind of unplanned face-to-face interactions that new urbanists suggest are central to community formation. Park writes: “Week after week, you form these intense bonds without quite realizing it. All that time together adds up: muttering at the fax machine, making coffee runs” (14). However, the limits of spatial proximity as a foundation for collective identity soon become evident. Shortly before Jill, one of the eight office workers who compose the ‘we,’ is fired, she’s moved to “Siberia,” “a spacious cubicle on the sixth floor, miles from everyone else” (45). Jill’s spatial exile results in her gradual exclusion from the collective narration. She reaches out to the others via email, but they rarely make the journey to visit her. While the office workers who occupy contiguous space continue to have unplanned encounters in the office, the others have to *plan* to visit Jill: “Going to Siberia is an event. We gird ourselves for the climb, make sure our schedules are clear, pack provisions. Then we get distracted by a phone call and fail to swing by” (45). Jill continues to share the same risks as the other office workers, but her spatial isolation cuts her off from the benefits of inclusion in the collective, such as access to shared coping mechanisms. The collective’s failure to provide support to Jill after her exile illustrates

the fragility of the collective identity that the office workers have built and, significantly for the new urbanist project, the inevitable fragility of any collective identity whose foundation is spatial proximity or the possibility for face-to-face interaction.

By the end of Part I, the group has begun to fracture and it becomes clear that the collective identity that has been coalescing will never become collective *action*. When Jill—who had been slowly fading from the collective consciousness after her exile to Siberia—is finally fired, the rest of the office workers stand dumbfounded by her empty cubicle, considering Jill’s final request: “please water my plants” (83). The office workers puzzle and fret over the punctuation of Jill’s note, which omits the final period after “plants.” The plants, along with the missing period, suggest an enduring obligation, a necessarily permanent labor of cultivation. Jill’s request offers a direct challenge to the limitations that have defined the office collective to this point in the novel: a challenge to recognize a long-term commitment to building a better future, a challenge to extend a formal obligation to those outside their immediate proximity, a challenge to *do* something. But Jill’s directive sends the others scattering to different corners of the office. If Part I represents the germinal stages of a social movement identity in construction, its resolution suggests that these seeds were planted in infertile soil. In the remainder of the novel, Park’s characters encounter a series of new threats that begin to reveal some of the fundamental weaknesses of their collective identity, but also some of the distant possibilities for collective organization and meaningful action that haunt the peripheries of the office.

Collective Identity and the Gothic Disruption

In Part II, the first-person plural narration of *Personal Days* is replaced by an omniscient narrator who uses the third-person plural “they” to refer to the same collection of office workers that appears in Part I. With the shift to a more expansive and omniscient narrative viewpoint, the reader is called to see the threats to the office workers under a new light, and, more significantly, to consider who is omitted from the first-person plural pronoun in Part I. In Part II of *Personal Days*, the repressions and denials that allow the office workers to come together in Part I begin to haunt the characters and to draw them further apart. In this section, *Personal Days* adopts an almost gothic mode of storytelling, a shift signaled by an elevated sense of dread among the office workers, and by their experience of unexplainable phenomena and the awareness of “spectral presences” in the office (119). Allan Lloyd-Smith describes the central theme of the gothic as a “return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (1). Similarly, Fred Botting describes the gothic as “an exploration of physical, psychological, and social limits and boundaries” (1). In *Personal Days*, the gothic mode is deployed to explore the “social limits and boundaries” of the office collective that forms in Part I. However, as in Hynes’s *Kings of Infinite Space*, gothic hauntings in *Personal Days* also give presence to the occluded labor and repressed histories of racial exclusion that shape the modern office environment.

The shift to a gothic mode of storytelling in *Personal Days* is marked by the incursion of two office outsiders who defy easy categorization into the office workers’ us/them binary, and who also complicate the social and racial boundaries that the office

workers have created to define themselves in the office. The gothic elements of the novel coalesce around these two characters, “Grime,” a mysterious new British coworker (the nickname derives from a misheard pronunciation of his real name, Graham), and a janitor/service worker that the office workers collectively refer to as “The Unnameable.” As the reader eventually learns, Grime is a con man who has managed to trick his way into a position of power in the office where he is orchestrating the firings that have created a sense of omnipresent danger in the office. The Unnameable, on the other hand, acts as an inter-office messenger—often ferrying messages for Grime—but also as a janitor. Both Grime and The Unnameable come to embody, in different ways, the vulnerability and porosity of the boundaries of collective identity that the office workers construct in Part I, and the threats to the group’s stability.

As the novel progresses, Grime comes to represent an emerging world and workplace that is spatially and historically foundationless, and which lacks stable, coherent identities or core values: he is a resolutely “postmodern” character. Grime’s name first suggests impurity, filthiness, and disorder. Like dirt or toxicity, Grime crosses borders: between the various spaces of the office and between the office workers and the management. It’s never quite clear to the office workers in which circle he belongs. Grime uses the flexibility of his identity to build power in the office hierarchy, and to confuse and divide the other office workers. Grime, the reader later learns, maintains his position in the office primarily through storytelling: he talks his way into a position of power by manipulating middle management’s fear of those above them in the hierarchy. Unlike the office workers, who use stories to share grievances and to solidify a collective sense of identity and meaning, Grime uses stories to confuse, distort, and mislead, and to

elevate his own position in the office. Finally, Grime's ability to consolidate power by narrative misdirection and confusion is mirrored in his relationship to space: "that whole area where Grime had his cubicle was an obstacle course, a treacherous maze" (88); later, it is described as the center of "the labyrinth" (190). The labyrinthine quality of Grime's cubicle is part of a pattern of symbols that link him to the mythological tale of Theseus and the Minotaur — there is actually an ax among the detritus of Grime's cubicle, and his hair is once described as forming horns (89) — but it also draws attention to the ways that Grime uses space to exclude and deceive, rather than to commune and commiserate with the others in the office.

The Unnameable is a less malevolent, and certainly less powerful, presence in the office workers' imaginations, but he, too, seems to upset the office workers' sense of order and self-definition. Like Grime, the Unnameable seems to resist clear identification: "This man has been here forever but has only recently coalesced into an identifiable being. We don't know his name, though Jack II claims this person's name is also Jack. This is too unsettling—the mind cannot contain three Jacks, fired Jack a.k.a. the Original Jack and current Jack II and this supposed Jack III—and so we think of him as the Unnameable" (52).⁴⁶ This section is written with a comic tone, but it also shows that the office workers can only understand two identity positions: Jack inside the office and Jack outside the office; working Jack and fired Jack. The Unnameable represents a third term: he is inside the office, but seemingly far outside the office workers' day-to-

⁴⁶ *The Unnamable* is the title of a novella by Samuel Beckett; Mark Sarvas, in his review of *Personal Days* even suggests that "The Unnameable" — with his "healthy fringe of white hair and gleaming inquisitive eyes" (52) — is a representation of Beckett himself. "The Unnamable" is also the title of an H.P. Lovecraft short story about an experience that defies scientific or sensory description: an experience of the supernatural. As the experience is described to Lovecraft's narrator: "It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime—yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, it was the unnamable!"

day experience, and so he is excluded from identification. The Unnameable also lacks the power to speak: “He’s *different*. Slow. Language eludes him. When he tries to talk, it sounds like he’s gasping . . . Mostly you see the Unnameable only by accident. We wish he would make more noise” (53). The Unnameable’s inability to speak is consistent with traditional representations of ghosts in gothic literature, but it is also suggestive of a position of disempowerment, of those lacking a voice in the world of the office. In this way, his haunting presence is a reminder to the office workers of the tenuousness of what little agency they still collectively maintain within the office.

The office workers’ narrative about the Unnameable adheres to a pattern of racialized romanticization (one that is consistent with colonizers’ representations of Native Americans): “His ponderous gait gives the impression that he is rooted in the land: a spirit, a proud protector, an aristocrat of the corridors and cubicles” (52). The projection of this nostalgic longing onto the Unnameable speaks both of the office workers’ desire for rootedness and stability and their unthinking marginalization of The Unnameable’s labor by imagining him as removed from history. This pattern of nostalgia and marginalization is also highlighted later, when the office workers imagine The Unnameable as an artisan: “Who else in the office worked that hard, that efficiently, at anything? You could imagine strains of Vivaldi as some faded television star narrated the story of artisanal desk cleaners who have been cleaning desks for five generations” (111). The allure of “artisanry” as an alternative to office labor is a recurring theme in the novel; for example, when Pru is fired, she turns her knitting hobby into a job as a seamstress for a small company that makes maternity clothes from hemp. But while the office workers imagine the Unnameable as a haunting reminder of a lost past and the foreclosed

possibility of productive, meaningful, unalienated labor, he also signifies the parallel exploitation and disempowerment of others in the office that the small collective of office workers can't or won't see.

The office workers define themselves through their resistance to management, to the “the glib b.s. of corporate culture” (127), but they're unable see the connection between their struggle and the struggles of other workers, such as the janitorial staff. For example, the instability and flexibility of the office hierarchy, which is the main source of anxiety for the office workers in the second half of the novel, is also one of the central problems faced by service workers attempting to organize. As Andrew Ross points out, workers in “low-end services” and those in “high-end knowledge sectors” are united by “the temporary or intermittent nature of their contracts, the uncertainty of their future, and their isolation from any protective framework of social insurance” (41). Likewise, the various kinds of “environmental illness” that they discuss amongst themselves are also undoubtedly shared by other workers in the office. Throughout the novel, the Unnameable is associated with the presence of on-the-job hazards and with the potential toxicity of the office environment: at one point, he appears wearing an air filtration mask, he is frequently described as “gasping” for breath, and he is also missing a finger on one hand, which both emphasizes his position as a *manual* laborer and as someone whose work is physically hazardous. The Unnameable signifies risks that the office collective share with others *within* the office, both economic and environmental. The office workers' inability to see those connections ultimately makes it more difficult for them to make the transition from collective identity to collective action.

The Failure of the “Office Hero” and the Return to Place

The final section of the novel engages both the processes of collective formation that shape the first part of the novel and the exclusions that haunt its second part. As with Parts I and II, the form and style of Part III shift dramatically: the final section is written in the first-person singular, as a long email set in a different font with no paragraph breaks and minimal punctuation. The email, sent by Jonah to Pru as he waits for rescue in a disabled elevator in the office, brings together most of the novel’s loose threads by explaining the origins of the firings and Grime’s role in the office power structure. But while the turn to the first-person singular might seem to track with the narrative trajectory of other, more conventional office novels in which the narrative progresses from the experience of alienation to individuation through escape from the office, *Personal Days* instead turns back toward the issues of collective organizing that frame the novel’s beginnings. The final section of the novel also begins to turn toward issues that had been limited to the periphery of the text: to the workers outside the boundaries of the “we” and to the office’s place in the larger urban environment. This turn is, at last, suggestive of the enduring possibility of meaningful collective organizing within the office and the revisioning that is necessary for its future.

Jonah’s email begins as a “potential epic”—one of many scattered throughout the novel⁴⁷—a story of his own emerging agency in the office and the potentially heroic act

⁴⁷ The epic form is referenced numerous other times in *Personal Days*, most significantly in Part II when the office workers discover, in the remains of Jill’s personal effects, a collection of handwritten aphorisms, apparently taken from how-to-succeed-in-business manuals and CEO memoirs, titled *The Jilliad*. After a collective reading of the Jilliad, the group realizes that Jill wasn’t collecting these bits of business advice in the interest of career advancement, but is rather “taking a buzz saw to the rules, pointing out the absurd contradictions, the glib b.s. of corporate culture” (127). Consequently, the office workers reinterpret *The Jilliad* as “the encyclopedia of their despair, a catalog of futility” (127). Similarly, Mark Sarvas compares Jonah’s email soliloquy to the “Molly Bloom” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, suggesting that Park is participating in the modernist project of recasting everyday life according to the conventions of the epic.

of exposing Grime. However, this narrative is ultimately frustrated and diverted. Park conveys this sense of doomed heroism in Part III partly by parodying the conventions of detective fiction. After Jill's firing—and coincident with the events related in Part II—Jonah sets out to find the truth behind the firings and Grime's mysterious role in the office hierarchy. The story Jonah tells Pru in this email relates his unlikely promotion to middle management as a reward for uncovering Grime's true identity. In this way, Jonah's narrative initially fits squarely in the conventions of detective fiction. Roger Caillois argues that the narrative resolution of the classic detective story arrives with “the reduction of the impossible to the possible, of the inexplicable to the explained, of the supernatural to the natural” (quoted in Swope 207). Jonah's discoveries about Grime provide a clear, if unlikely, explanation for the firings and give logical order to Grime's haunting presence in the office: his control over the office, which had caused so much fear and anxiety among the others, is rendered absurd, laughable.

Also, just as the classic detective narratives of Dashiell Hammett and Mickey Spillane take the hero into “marginal spaces” of the inner city (Swope 218), Jonah is drawn into the marginal spaces of the office as he attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding Grime. When he first sets out to solve the mystery, Jonah adopts the work clothes of a janitor in order to follow Grime unnoticed: “I too would become unfamiliar, so that gradually in his mind I'd be hard to place, ever strange, anonymous” (205). His investigation leads him to Grime's noirish cubicle, which is described earlier as “a shade darker . . . and grainy to the touch” (88). The genre play here again evokes the trope, common in office novels, of using the grid of the office to mirror the grid of the city or suburbs. Jonah exploits his awareness of the invisibility of janitors (like the Unnameable)

to solve the mystery; impersonating a janitor gives him a newfound ability to navigate the office freely. Furthermore, the implication here is that Jonah needs to ‘get dirty’—by assuming the qualities of those subordinate to him in the office’s hierarchy—in order to reclaim the individuality and agency that had been lost or taken. This is a common trope in film noir and many other dominant cultural narratives, from *Heart of Darkness* to *Avatar*. In *Going Native*, Shari Huhndorf argues that these narratives ultimately stabilize the dominant racial and cultural hierarchies that they seem, at first, to challenge (3). Jonah temporarily adopts the Unnameable’s identity as a means of restoring his privileged status in the office, and denies the Unnameable control over his own representation in the process. This turn in Jonah’s narrative draws *Personal Days* dangerously close to the kinds of racist and colonialist tropes that *Kings of Infinite Space* collapses into.

But what separates *Personal Days* from *Kings of Infinite Space* is that the narrative of “heroic individualism” is acknowledged to be a dead-end for Jonah. In spite of Jonah’s apparent success in capturing Grime and resolving the threats to the office, the final resolution to Jonah’s detective narrative subplot ultimately highlights the foreclosure of possibilities for individuation and individual agency within the office. By exposing Grime, Jonah slays the Minotaur, and like the Theseus of myth, Jonah becomes king of the office as a consequence: he is installed by the head corporate office as the new local manager (provided he signs a nondisclosure agreement). But even though he’s gotten rid of Grime and ensured himself a stable position of power within the office, he’s narrating this story from a disabled elevator in a desperate plea for help. The disabled elevator signifies the limits of the office as a space of self-realization, individuation, or

recovery of agency. On his way to the top, Jonah gets stuck. Both the physical space of the office and the conventions of the office novel as a genre set clear limits for the narrative of heroic individuation: the individual can either rise to the top of the hierarchy or escape through the front door to greener pastures (as Paul Trilby, the hero of Hynes's *Kings of Infinite Space*, does). That the novel ends with Jonah, who remains literally stuck in the office, suggest that *Personal Days* is pointing to the spatial limitations of the office's "potential epics": to the inevitable failure of narratives of office heroes.

Though Jonah's narrative questions the possibility of office worker agency, it doesn't sink into the postmodern despair of authors like David Foster Wallace. Jonah's story undermines the tidy resolutions of narratives of heroic escape from the drudgery of office work, but it simultaneously tweaks the conventions of high postmodernist detective stories of writers like Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon, in which the protagonist is revealed to be enmeshed in an impossibly complex and interconnected system where they have little or no agency at all. The banal but apparently successful resolution of Jonah's detective story—Grime is unceremoniously removed from the office by the police and stuffed into a waiting squad car—suggests that the office workers *do* possess a kind of power to understand and respond to the threats that face them in the office. Ultimately, the resolution of *Personal Days* isn't about losing one's place in the system—Jonah knows precisely where he is: trapped in an elevator in an office building—but about the fragility of a single body, its embeddedness in the infrastructure of the city, and the necessity of organizing as a response to those conditions. Jonah isn't a character with no agency, but he is a character whose agency is limited by the confined spaces of the office, and by the stories that are available to him there.

In drawing the reader's attention to the limitations on Jonah's office narrative, Park also draws attention back to the office's place in the city. In the conclusion, Jonah's growing panic gradually brings the office's broader urban environment, which had been elided in earlier parts of the novel, back into view. Earlier, the office receives a notice from the Department of Environmental Protection that they will be conducting underground blasting as part of regular service to the city's water mains. Jonah slowly begins to realize that the beginning of the DEP's underground blasting is what has caused the elevator to become stuck. As he comes to the end of his email, Jonah's situation in the elevator becomes increasingly grave: "Now a fine mist is coating my face and hands . . . the air's getting kind of terrible now, like eggs and ammonia and gasoline" (240-241). The mist and the smell, which evokes the familiar description of landfills and sewage overflows, indicate ruptured sewer and water lines. Here, indeed, is a return of the repressed, as the wastes of the office—which had been spirited away by the city's sewer and water infrastructure and by the unseen labor of service workers like The Unnameable—rise up from below to confront a helpless Jonah. Jonah's experience in the elevator suggests a necessary reframing of the risks facing the office workers: the greatest barrier to effective organizing and meaningful action isn't Grime—a transparently toxic representation of a placeless, value-less, and identity-less future—but the toxic office culture they reproduce every day. In the end, Jonah is called to take account of his own place in the office hierarchy, his role in concealing and excluding the labor of service workers like The Unnameable, and his participation in the production of the wastes and toxic byproducts of office labor.

Personal Days closes with a moment of fragile, ambiguous hope, a vision of communion emerging from an experience of fear and isolation. It narrates a reaching out, a plea for rescue and for connection to others. The chapter's title, "Revert to Saved," suggests Jonah's desire to restore the original document, to return to things as they were in Part I when Jonah was safely ensconced in the first-person plural. Similarly, the novel's final line, "I remain,-your friend,-Jonah" (241), is a hopeful assertion of self-identity based not on individual autonomy, but on connection and the shared obligations of friendship. However, this sense of self is founded on the hope that the obligation is reciprocal and that his desire for friendship is returned. And as the reader already knows, Jonah will be unheard: the heading at the beginning of the chapter announces that Jonah's email has been misdirected to a job search web site and has bounced. Even as he emails a plea for rescue to Pru, Jonah also holds out hope that the Unnameable may be able to save him from the elevator. He imagines the janitor reaching out to him, "like [he] has sprouted wings and is hovering somewhere above me, my unexpected guardian angel, maybe reaching down to pull me up" (240). However, Jonah's hope of rescue by the Unnameable remains hypothetical, hallucinatory. Through his ordeal in the elevator, Jonah seems to recognize his indebtedness to the janitor, but as the reader surmises, this effort may come too late. Social movement theorist Alain Touraine argues that the subject is "an individual's quest for the conditions that will allow him to become the actor of his own history. And that quest is motivated by the pain of being torn apart, and by the loss of identity and individuation" (56). Jonah's email—and, indeed, *Personal Days* as a whole—narrates a collective subject's quest for the conditions that will enable the office workers to reclaim agency over their labor and their environment. But while the novel's

conclusion suggests that the recovery of agency must entail a new kind of collective subjectivity among office workers, one that acknowledges their wastes, their embeddedness in place, and the unseen labor that sustains them in the office, those conditions remain unmet, and Jonah remains trapped, hoping desperately still to connect.

Personal Days, Zone One and Collective Organizing in “Post-Racial” America

At the end of *Personal Days*, Jonah seems to acknowledge his embeddedness in place and his connection to service workers below him in the office hierarchy, and to envision the possibility of reconnection with others. And yet, even as Jonah holds out hope for the renewal of his bonds of obligation to others in the office, the novel defies resolution: the reader never learns if his offer of friendship is reciprocated, or even if he’s able to make it out of the elevator. I’d like to suggest that the novel’s deferral here—its refusal to provide resolution and group acceptance for Jonah—is connected to a significant and unresolved thread from Jonah’s narrative. Midway through the final chapter, Jonah mentions, in a parenthetical aside in his email to Pru, that he is “half-black.” Although *Personal Days* had previously raised issues of racial difference in the office—in an anecdote about a Human Resources employee who is unable to tell two Asian workers apart, for example—there is no discussion of racial difference among the eight central characters who make up the collective “we.” Consequently, the reader may assume that the group of office workers who make up the collective is racially homogenous. By disclosing Jonah’s racial difference in the final chapter of the novel, Park disrupts this assumption and draws the reader’s attention to a critical failure of first-person plural narration: its inevitable effacement of differences between the individuals who compose it. As Susan Lanser writes, “[Collective narrations] may be the most

insidious fiction of authority, for in Western cultures it is nearly always the creation of a single author appropriating the power of a plurality” (22). It’s never clear *whose* voice is behind the first-person plural narration in *Personal Days*, but it *is* clear that Jonah’s experience of racial otherness is excluded from the collective narration. Jonah’s racial identity isn’t mentioned again in the final pages of his email, but I believe this parenthetical disclosure is significant to understanding why the novel ends with him, why his narrative ends without resolution, and what *Personal Days* is ultimately communicating about the possibilities for collective organizing in the office.

Racial hierarchies are, like the invisible labor of service workers, a haunting presence in *Personal Days*. Racial difference clearly influences the office workers’ sense of collective identity, even as it remains largely unacknowledged in their day-to-day interactions. In the short essay “Race and Racelessness in Ed Park’s *Personal Days*,” Min-Hyoung Song argues that the office workers in the novel “become what might be called a proto-race—an emergent racial group based not on shared ancestry, tradition, or cultural practices but more simply on the day-to-day sharing of a common space and a common social position created by a total system of governance.” One way to think about Song’s suggestion that the office workers’ collective identity constitutes a kind of “proto-race” is through the “non-essentialist realist” identities that Paula Moya theorizes in her book *Learning from Experience* (57). Moya’s “non-essentialist” categories of self-identification are grounded in the lived epistemological and experiential consequences of one’s social location. Moya contends that a non-essentialist theory of identity can help form the foundation for truth claims about one’s knowledge and experience and, ultimately, for more effective political organization and action (57). In *Personal Days*,

the office workers' collective identity becomes the foundation for truth claims about the risks they face in the office and a means of navigating their relationship to those in power.

But if we take the office workers' "we" as an instance of a non-essentialist realist collective identity, it is also a failure in some meaningful ways. As it enables some collective experience-based truth claims—about health hazards in the office or the fear of being fired—it disables others, such as claims about experiences shaped by one's gender, race, or sexuality. For Jonah in particular, the 'we' is an identity that doesn't account for his personal experience of being racially marked. The other office workers in *Personal Days* seem to regard race as they regard The Unnameable: as an unspeaking and largely unspeakable presence, an object of some small fascination and nostalgia but with no corresponding sense of obligation or responsibility. In this way, the office collective seems to be rooted in what Bonilla-Silva calls "colorblind racism": particularly the belief that discrimination is no longer a determining factor in the life chances of people of color (1), and that existing racial disparities can and should be solved through political and economic liberalism, rather than through systemic or structural change (28). It is this uncritical assumption of whiteness within the collective, I contend, that causes it to fragment and causes Jonah's narrative to break from the others in the final section of the novel. When Jonah faces his moment of greatest risk at the end of the novel, he imagines that the Unnameable, with whom he shares a kind of solidarity of exclusion, will be the one to rescue him, rather than his coworkers. In these final moments, Jonah imagines a reversal of the office's social hierarchy, with the Unnameable "reaching down to pull me up" (240). The implication here is that Jonah's only potential redemption from office will

come from connecting with the socially and racially marginalized others, like the Unnameable, who suffer even greater risk. Jonah's inability to cohere within the office collective—and his tentative reaching out to those outside the collective—helps to make visible the colorblind assumptions at work within the office novel genre.

In *Personal Days*, the obscured presence of race among the office workers is a barrier to their social cohesion; Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* offers a different take on office solidarity. Whitehead, an African-American novelist, is well-known for his fantastic and allegorical engagements with racial formation in previous novels such as *The Intuitionist* (1999) and *John Henry Days* (2001). In this final section, I'd like to discuss a scene from *Zone One*, which contains a similarly striking revelation, late in the novel, that the protagonist, Mark Spitz, is black. I offer this reading of *Zone One* both for its own sake—as a complex and meaningful intervention into discussions about collective organizing and office labor—and as a means to reflect on the significance of race and office space in *Personal Days*. Like *Personal Days*, *Zone One* interrogates both the deadening effects of office labor and the potential of the office as a foundation for collective identity formation. However, while *Personal Days* ends in a moment of aporia, with the office workers still reflecting on their failure to cohere, *Zone One* reveals the structures of power that stand in the way of just coalition-building in the office and beyond. Whitehead shows how race- and class-based hierarchies are embedded in the bureaucratic regimes of everyday office labor and in the design of the office itself, and how those systems can endure even in the wake of catastrophe or collapse. By revealing such deeply entrenched barriers to coalition-building, Whitehead's novel ultimately directs our attention back to the necessary labor of dismantling those systems.

Personal Days and *Zone One* represent the erasure of race in the office through focal office worker characters whose racial identity remains obscure until late in the narrative, when it is somewhat suddenly—and with meaningful formal and narrative consequences, I argue—revealed. Each could be called “post-race fiction” in the sense that Ramón Saldívar uses the term: to indicate the representation of race “as a complex set of personal and social actions, a structure of doing, by which race is enacted and racial injustice perpetuated,” rather than as “an attribute of personal identity” (2). Both novels highlight those “structures of doing” that reproduce racial and social hierarchies in the office environment, particularly through their attention to ways that office space shapes opportunities for narrative construction. I argue that Whitehead and Park reveal how old racist, sexist, and classist narratives remain embedded in the space of the office; these narratives, in turn, foreclose opportunities for collective identity formation and coalition building in the office. But while the narrative of *Personal Days* collapses as it confronts the barriers to collective identity formation, *Zone One* offers a more rigorous interrogation of the systems that stand in the way of coalition building in the office. Like *Personal Days*, *Zone One* takes seriously both the deadening effects of office labor and the potential of forming coalitions from a foundation of shared risk. However, Whitehead’s novel also pushes the horizons of the office genre by making visible the deeply-embedded systems of power that produce the raced and classed space of the office and which close off opportunities for coalition-building both within the office and beyond.

Zone One takes place over three days in the post-apocalypse: a plague has transformed most human beings into flesh-eating zombies, and much of civilization as we

know it—the central government, systems of commerce, the electrical grid and communications systems—has collapsed. In *Zone One*'s narrative present, however, the plague seems to be ebbing, and the survivors have begun to reorganize and reconstruct those systems. Lower Manhattan—designated “Zone One”—is established as a beachhead of the reconstruction effort. The novel's protagonist, Mark Spitz, is part of a team of “sweepers,” civilian survivors charged with clearing out the last remnants of the plague from the walled-off city so that the real estate can be reclaimed. *Zone One* takes on an array of contemporary social and environmental justice issues in its representation of post-apocalyptic Manhattan: gentrification and the “back-to-the-city” movement, climate change, America's foreign wars. Most relevant to this discussion, however, is *Zone One*'s representation of the enduring nature of hierarchical—and “zombie-like”—systems of power, which defy efforts to transform them and outlast even apocalyptic catastrophe. In particular, *Zone One* focuses on the indoctrinating power of (office) space and the social and racial hierarchies that are embedded in those spaces.

Though it is set in a speculative post-apocalyptic city, *Zone One* can also be read alongside office novels like Park's *Personal Days*. It is set against the end of a workweek, and a significant portion of the text is devoted to narrating the mundane aspects of Mark Spitz's working life as a sweeper. Mark Spitz and his Omega Team are like post-apocalyptic urban professionals: they go to work in office buildings every day from morning to early evening, they go out for drinks together after work, and they look forward to relaxing on Sundays. As Whitehead writes: “Reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned, the slacker's code, the concept of weekend” (8). In response to the minor annoyances of their work, the sweepers of Zone One adopt many of

the same coping strategies that are deployed by the office workers of contemporary fiction. The sweepers commit minor acts of rebellion, such as swiping supplies; they parody the official language of reconstruction—the “rebranding” of survival (79)—which mirrors the absurd language of corporate office culture; and they share stories of common experiences to create solidarity. Even in the post-apocalypse, Whitehead suggests, office work is a deadening experience that calls forth familiar strategies for survival.

And like *Personal Days*, *Zone One* also deploys and strategically subverts genre conventions—in this case, those of the thriving “zombie” genre—to explore the limits of individual agency and the possibilities of collective organizing, and to draw attention to the horizons of possibility for such collectives. *Zone One* works within the conventions of the now-ubiquitous genre of horror zombie narratives to trouble readers’ notions of autonomous individuality. Mark McGurl, writing about the recent “Zombie Renaissance” in popular culture,⁴⁸ describes zombies as “anti-characters” whose “very flatness” allegorizes the breakdown of the ethos of individual autonomy central to the realist novel. However, in the tradition of socially-conscious zombie auteur George Romero, *Zone One* also draws attention to the endurance of structures of exclusion, alienation, and stratification that continue to shape the possibilities for collective organizing and coalition-building. While some social critics (like Ulrich Beck and Rebecca Solnit in *A Paradise Built in Hell*) have argued that catastrophe bears the promise of solidarity and cohesion, Whitehead’s novel offers reasons to be skeptical of such optimism. While the zombie genre often focuses on both the fears and feelings of liberation that come from the “collapse of societal infrastructures” (Bishop 20), Whitehead offers a different and

⁴⁸ Represented by the successful literary “adaptation” *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), the hit movie *Zombieland* (2009), and AMC’s critically-acclaimed television series *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present), among others.

equally frightening interpretation of the genre: that such societal infrastructures—and particularly the infrastructures that perpetuate spatialized racism and environmental injustice—are certain to rise from the dead. Instead, *Zone One*'s vision of a horrifying post-apocalyptic future points the reader back to the work that needs to be done to dismantle these systems in the present.

In *Zone One*, those infrastructures are represented, in part, by an enduring office hierarchy that separates a “middle class” of office workers like Mark Spitz from a subordinate class of “clean up” workers. As in both *Personal Days* and *Kings of Infinite Space*, the central characters of *Zone One* are shadowed by unseen clean-up crews, who could be said to bring an element of gothic haunting into the text. Mark Spitz and his Omega Unit are followed by a “Disposal” team, who work with “eerie efficiency” (73), who are clearly below Omega in the social hierarchy of reconstruction, who almost never speak in the novel, and who remain hidden and anonymous behind their hazmat suits. In Whitehead's vision of the post-apocalyptic social hierarchies, those who clean up the waste of reconstructed modernity remain, like Hynes's janitors and Park's “Unnameable,” largely invisible. They are also clearly placed at greater environmental risk than the members of Mark Spitz's Omega Unit (hence their hazmat suits). And though Mark Spitz and the sweepers share interests with the disposal unit—like access to fresh food and safe workplaces—they never collaborate.

More importantly, though, *Zone One* shows how these hierarchies are deeply embedded in the infrastructure of the office itself. In the opening scenes of the novel, Mark Spitz and Omega Unit begin to clean out a lawyers' office on the 15th floor of an office building in lower Manhattan, just east of Tribeca and north of the World Trade

Center. Before the plague, Mark Spitz had seemed destined for a life working in the office buildings he now sweeps; the law is the career path that seems most fitting to his “upper-middle-class” upbringing on suburban Long Island. As he surveys the remnants of the law office, he pauses to reflect. Mark Spitz is described as a keen observer of his environment, attuned to the presence of a “code in every interaction” (9), and the lawyers’ office presents itself to him as a rich narrative surface. The office speaks to Mark Spitz through its “hypermodern furniture” and open-office floorplan, and through the portraits of the firm’s “founding fathers” that hang on the walls: “For all that had transpired outside this building in the great unraveling, the pure industry of this place still persisted. Insisting on itself. He felt it in his skin even though the people were gone and all the soft stuff was dead” (12). The narrator’s observation that the office space is “insisting on itself” suggests that place is embedded with residual systems of values and structures of power—such as the impulse to “industry,” or the sense that the lawyers “will crush you” (11)—that reproduce themselves independently of human agency. Mark Spitz notes that he feels the presence of this power “in his skin,” which indicates the materiality of these systems, and their tangible impact on human bodies. The layout and design of office spaces contribute to their reproduction of dominant ideologies. Those ideologies have real impact on people’s lives, the identities they construct, and the choices that are available to them. And the power of these spaces to reproduce those ideologies, *Zone One* asserts, will long outlast their designers. Consequently, Whitehead’s novel offers an important critique of a prevailing assumption among the new urbanists: that the office worker’s “return to the city” is the first step toward the utopian transformation of social relations.

In this early encounter with the lawyers' office, Whitehead provides a microcosmic representation of *Zone One*'s broader argument about the endurance of infrastructures of exclusion in the apocalypse. As the novel progresses, the reader encounters numerous other enduring and reconstructed systems of power that echo Mark Spitz's experience in the office, such as the bureaucratic hierarchies he experiences in the dispatch offices that send his team out to work, the far-off decision makers in the new seat of provisional government in Buffalo, and the ubiquity of decontamination procedures. But the first office scene is also informed by a kind of "revelation," late in the novel, about the continued existence of casual workplace racism. This comes to the surface of the novel through Mark Spitz's explanation of the racist origins of his nickname, which is drawn from the stereotype that African-Americans can't swim. Mark Spitz's explanation of his nickname—a story that has been alluded to and interrupted numerous times—marks the first time in the text that he is explicitly identified by his race. Looking back with this awareness on Mark Spitz's experience in the lawyers' office, it seems that this experience is also shaped by the endurance of racialized systems of exclusion within the office space. In that scene, the narrator's observation that Mark Spitz "felt it in his skin" suggests that the office is also interpellating him through the markers of his racial difference. Although Mark Spitz seemed destined for a career in an office similar to this one, his reading of the space suggests that he is viewing it from the position of a perpetual outsider, someone excluded from full integration into the lifeworld of the office.

Later in the novel, Whitehead writes: "Now the world was muck. But systems die hard—they outlive their creators and unlike plagues do not require individual hosts—and

thus it was a well-organized muck with a hierarchy, accountability, and, increasingly, paperwork” (162). As the scene in the lawyers’ office illustrates, these systems don’t require individual hosts partly because they’re embedded in space. Mark Spitz is aware of the hierarchical and exclusionary systems at work in the office from the moment he walks through the doors and sees the “grim steel letters” of its founders’ names above the receptionist’s desk. It’s also no coincidence that reanimated prejudices and hierarchies of the post-apocalypse are linked to, and implicitly presaged by, the reanimation of “paperwork.” Unlike *Personal Days*, in which the reams of paper produced in the office are represented as “potential epics” that might have liberatory value for the office workers, paperwork in *Zone One* is represented as a repository of racist and classist narratives. The “old bigotries” of the pre-apocalyptic order are embedded in the paperwork of its office bureaucracy, just as they’re embedded in the geography of lawyers’ offices. And as Mark Spitz moves through post-apocalyptic world, the reader sees through his perspective the “insistent” geography of the office space (and its regime of paperwork) reproduced on a much larger scale throughout Manhattan, as the architects of Zone One’s reconstruction begin to execute its repossession by the elite.

In the scene where Mark Spitz finally tells Gary the story behind his nickname, a scene that immediately precedes the crumbling of the barriers between “civilization” and the “wasteland,” he narrates a condensed history of his experience in the apocalypse and reconstruction. He first observes: “There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them.” He immediately complicates this observation with the question: “Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone . . . ?” In the final sentence of the paragraph, Mark Spitz concludes: “If they could bring back paperwork . . . they could

certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns” (231). Mark Spitz begins this paragraph seemingly ensconced in the ‘us’ of the living that defines itself against the ‘them’ of the infected. However, the next sentence casts immediate doubt on that sense of inclusion, and by the final sentence of the paragraph, Mark Spitz has acknowledged the inevitability of racism’s return. For the reader, this may seem to be a foregone conclusion: Mark Spitz’s nickname seems to suggest that prejudice never needed to be reanimated in the post-apocalypse, since it had never died. But for Mark Spitz, this awareness of his place in the reanimated racial hierarchies of the past is a special kind of repressed post-apocalyptic trauma, which haunts him throughout the novel, and which is only fully realized in its final pages. The last scenes of the novel bear out the notion that Mark Spitz remains always at the periphery of the new collective identity of reconstruction, as he greets the crumbling of the walls with a sense of relief. As the wasteland outside overcomes the civilized world of the zone, the narrator affirms: “This was where he belonged” (250).

By contrast, at the close of *Personal Days*, Jonah still envisions the office as a place that can produce meaningful connection to others and still hopes that its aggregated paperwork will generate an epic to tell the story they all share, a monument to “the unknown worker” (239). *Personal Days* never explicitly suggests that Jonah experiences barriers to participation in the “we” of the office because he is marked by his race for marginalization or exclusion, but the lack of resolution to his narrative suggests that he, among all the others, is unable to cohere. This hope for connection, in spite of the endurance of racialized hierarchies and environmental injustices, is common to what Ramón Saldívar calls “post-race fictions.” Saldívar suggests that post-race fictions are

distinguished by their desire “for forms of social belonging that link the realm of public political life to . . . fantastic aspirations for substantive justice, social, racial, poetic, or otherwise” (22-23). Both *Personal Days* and *Zone One* are deeply invested in the possibility of new forms of social belonging that are socially, racially, and environmental just. But what *Zone One* offers—and what *Personal Days* never quite does—is an interrogation of deeply embedded structures that help to disable those forms of belonging and reproduce racial hierarchies, bigotry, and toxicity, even through times of catastrophe.

Conclusion: Imagining the Spatially Just Office

In Hynes’s *Kings of Infinite Space*, the potential for solidarity between Paul Trilby and the invisible service workers who haunt the office is derailed by his fear and dehumanization of them, his ardent desire to police the boundaries between him and them, and also by his deep investment in twin fantasies of heroic action and escape. Like many other novels of its kind, *Kings of Infinite Space* preserves a fantasy of individual agency in the face of the alienating and disempowering experience of contemporary office labor. Park’s *Personal Days* distinguishes itself from most other office novels by exploring the formation of collective, rather than individual, identities in the workplace. *Personal Days* represents this process of collective identity formation partly through a series of narrative experiments, such as the use of the first-person plural and genre parody. Park shows how the space of the office shapes the possibilities for collective identity formation among office workers. Park, however, doesn’t present a wholly organic vision office community: the gothic elements of the second and third parts of the novel indicate the porous boundaries of the office workers’ collective identity and the exclusions that enable it. Service workers in *Personal Days* remain ghostly and invisible,

as does, we later learn, racial difference. *Personal Days* ultimately suggests, however indirectly or implicitly, that these exclusions are untenable and that meaningful collective action in the office can't take place without accounting for invisible labor of service workers, the toxic byproducts of office labor, and the racialized exclusions that undergird office bureaucracy. Whitehead's *Zone One*, like *Personal Days*, is concerned with collective identity formation among a group of (post-apocalyptic) office workers. However, unlike *Personal Days*, *Zone One* draws out and makes visible the "zombie systems"—of social and bureaucratic hierarchies, of exchange value and private property, and of spatialized racisms both within the office and across the urban landscape—that stand in the way of just coalition-building across borders of difference. Socially and environmentally just communities, *Zone One* suggests, won't spring organically from the ashes of catastrophe, but will need to be built from the ground up.

The gradual movement of white-collar office labor back to the city will create new opportunities for urban social and environmental justice movements, such as the possibility of coalitions between white-collar office workers and unionized service workers. However, it also will also create new risks, such as urban gentrification and (as researchers have increasingly documented in recent years) the relocation of environmental hazards to marginalized rural and suburban sacrifice zones. The 21st-century office novel is a good indicator of the horizons of possibility for 21st century office workers: the limits placed on their ability to organize and act by their unstable position in the late capitalist economy, by the narratives of individual and collective identity available to them, and by the spaces they inhabit for 8 or more hours each working day. Office narratives are a means of understanding the office worker's

relationship to their environment and, more specifically, to the tenuous enclaves of spatial privilege, whether they be in the suburbs or the city, the cubicle or the condominium.

Together, these novels also reveal some of the cracks in the barriers that separate office workers and service workers, and which stand in the way of coalitional action for urban social and environmental justice. They point to new ways of conceiving organized labor, new narratives of self and collective identity, and new ways of thinking about office space and its connection to the city beyond.

CHAPTER IV

NEIGHBORHOOD AND NARRATIVE FORM IN HELENA

MARIA VIRAMONTES'S *THEIR DOGS CAME WITH THEM*

In his influential 1983 book, the political scientist Benedict Anderson described the modern nation state as an “imagined community.” He writes: “The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Anderson’s argument that social relations on the scale of the nation must be imagined (and, ultimately, *narrated*) also holds true on the smaller scale of the urban neighborhood, where a sense of collective identity and mutual obligation often grows between people who nevertheless remain strangers to one another. Neighborhoods, like nations, have tangible boundaries: neighborhoods and neighbors are most commonly defined by their physical proximity, and the borders of a neighborhood are most often particular streets (hence Manhattan’s SoHo, TriBeCa, etc.). Like nations, neighborhoods are often also defined by access to resources or structures of resource distribution: for example, physical infrastructure, like public transportation networks; social resources, like public schools; or resources necessary for the business of everyday life, such as grocery stores. Finally, neighborhoods are often defined by shared risks, such as the risk of natural disaster, and by the obligation to help one’s neighbors in the event of such a catastrophe.⁴⁹

Neighborhoods are also an arresting example of the power of narration to call communities into being. The power to narrate a neighborhood into existence, or to lay

⁴⁹ For discussions of the various ways of defining neighborhood of see Lewis Mumford’s “The Neighborhood and the Neighborhood Unit” (1954), Rachele and Donald Warren’s *The Neighborhood Organizer’s Handbook* (1977), and Logan and Molotch’s *Urban Fortunes* (1987).

claim to a neighborhood identity, however, is often stratified along lines of race and class. Among the poor and for people of color, claims to neighborhood are often disabled by both the legal and ideological apparatuses of the state. Since the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which established the legal foundation for urban renewal, the word “neighborhood” has had a special legal significance for millions of inhabitants of American cities. The Housing Act codified federal obligations toward urban neighborhoods; specifically, in its opening paragraphs, the act established the provision of federal assistance for state and local governments to “undertake positive programs of encouraging and assisting the development of well-planned, integrated residential neighborhoods.” The more well-known corollary to the Housing Act’s valorization of neighborhoods was its provision, in the very next paragraph, for government to “eliminate substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas.” It was this language—the expansive goals of eliminating “slums” and “blight”—that would be deployed by the federal government during the urban renewal era to raze entire city blocks and displace millions of residents of the urban core, many of them people of color. The implications of placing these provisions side-by-side are hard to miss: if a neighborhood didn’t qualify as a neighborhood in the eyes of the state, it could be classified as a slum. However, the conditions for articulating as a neighborhood within this legal apparatus—either individually as a neighbor or collectively as a neighborhood—were designed to exclude Chicanos and Chicanas and other people of color.

The language of the Federal Housing Act—particularly its provision for “well-planned, integrated residential neighborhoods”—creates a powerful narrative about how

neighborhoods are constituted, a narrative with its own distinct orientation toward space and time. The adjective “well-planned” implies a particularly future-oriented perspective in time; it assumes the power to plan. Similarly, the adjective “integrated” conveys a particular spatial orientation: the appearance of wholeness or integrity. There’s also a notion of temporal integrity: the existence in the neighborhood of unbroken links to the past. Finally, the word “residential” assumes a certain amount of stability: the establishment of duration. The ability of groups of city dwellers to articulate within the dominant culture as *well-planned, integrated residential neighborhoods* was (and remains) a condition for receiving resources from the state, such as investment in public transportation infrastructure, affordable housing, and schools. The language of the law also paves the way for the use of state power to police the boundaries of neighborhoods, and, ultimately, to prevent residents from meeting the conditions set by the law for recognition as a neighborhood. The residents of many urban neighborhoods were systematically and structurally denied opportunities for creating well-planned spaces (since people of color were seldom represented on planning boards), for being “well integrated” (since the federal government subsidized white flight), and for preserving the history of the place (since that history has been denied representation in the dominant culture). The subsequent transformation of urban neighborhoods into slums was accomplished both through federal “redevelopment” projects and other methods of racializing urban space, such as heightened surveillance, police brutality, legislative gerrymandering, mortgage discrimination, and the withdrawal of social services. Consequently, for millions of city dwellers who lived through the urban renewal era, and

for the generations that followed, being a “good neighbor” was both urgently necessary and structurally impossible.

The fragmentation, isolation, and racialization of urban neighborhoods was exacerbated by the arrival of the freeways. The Housing Act gave the federal government a much more substantial role in the planning and development of urban neighborhoods and, after the Interstate Highway and Defense Act of 1956, for the use of eminent domain to clear neighborhoods for freeways. Thomas Macdonald, Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads in the 1940s and early 50s, argued that highway development in urban areas would help bring new investment to the central business districts; however, ideas about the benefit of “removing members of lower-income . . . groups from rights of way” were also central to MacDonald’s thinking (Avila, “Race, Culture, Politics” 337). Ultimately, most contemporary scholars agree that the construction of freeways contributed to urban decay by dividing and isolating city neighborhoods and by facilitating the migration of middle class residents to the suburbs (Fulton 136). According to the environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard, freeways “physically isolate residents from their institutions and businesses, disrupt once-stable communities, displace thriving businesses, contribute to urban sprawl, subsidize infrastructure decline, create traffic gridlock, and subject residents to elevated risks,” such as air pollution and chemical spills (Qtd. in Hsu 153). And insofar as they fragmented, isolated, and blighted the neighborhoods that they surrounded, the freeway projects helped to foreclose any claims that remaining residents could have made to constituting a “neighborhood” under the terms of the Housing Act.

In this chapter, I look at the formal representation of these “un-neighborhooding” processes—as well as the *resistance* to those processes—in Helena Maria Viramontes’s 2007 novel *Their Dogs Came with Them*. Viramontes’s novel presents a series of overlapping narratives about teenagers coming of age in East Los Angeles between 1960 and 1970, a time when the neighborhood became home to more freeways than any other place in the United States (Hsu 153). I argue that *Their Dogs Came with Them* builds a coherent vision of neighborhood and neighborliness from the disjointed temporality and fragmented narratives associated with the postmodern novel. For Viramontes, a Latina writer whose first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, documented the working conditions of farmworkers in California’s Central Valley, the foundationless and fragmentation of postmodernism doesn’t seem to be a “liberating” force. Instead, as with other works by ethnic American writers that I discuss in the dissertation, *Their Dogs Came with Them* stakes a claim to a contingent foundation—in this case, the possibility of neighborhood cohesion and coherent neighborhood identity—as a way to resist injustice and oppression.

Their Dogs Came with Them analyzes the conditions of spatial and temporal oppression that prevent its characters from exercising agency over their environment or from realizing hopeful visions of the future. However, the novel also builds a sense of resistant possibility, founded in the development of neighborhood consciousness that would allow for the construction of collective neighborhood identity and the exercise of collective action. The tension between these conditions of oppression and possibility is registered in the form of the novel, in the collision between two starkly different modes of narrating space and time, metonymically represented throughout the novel by “the

quarantine” and “the neighborhood.” *Their Dogs Came with Them* ultimately builds an alternative vision of neighborhood outside the quarantine and outside the legal definitions set out in the Housing Act. Neighborhood, as it is constructed in the novel, is defined by potential for common feeling and shared values between neighbors but also by neighbors’ ability to map power relations in the neighborhood and to differentiate oppressors from oppressed. The stability of values, memory, and identity that Viramontes envisions in “the neighborhood” is set against the postmodern qualities of fragmented identity, spatial instability, and historical foundationlessness that characterize “the quarantine.” In this way, Viramontes’s novel helps to envision an alternative to postmodern form and style, which is grounded in principles of social and environmental justice.

In the chapter’s first section, I discuss the narrative form of the novel, arguing that *Their Dogs Came with Them* is best interpreted not as a collection of fragments, unified or otherwise, but as a dialectic between competing frameworks of space and time represented by “the quarantine” and “the neighborhood.” The quarantine, I argue, is a metonymic representation of the protagonists’ restricted movement through space and time, and their limited opportunities for narration. By linking these spatial and temporal restrictions to the construction of the freeways, Viramontes suggests that urban renewal is a manifestation of an ongoing colonialism that is reliant on the reordering of space/time. The second half of the chapter is devoted to the moments of oppositional thinking and acts of resistance that emerge in opposition to the quarantine, which coalesce around visions of neighborhood and neighborliness. In Viramontes’s formulation, the discourse of neighborhood is a means of contesting the space/time of the colonial order. I discuss the novel’s exploration of “neighborhood” possibility first in terms of opportunities for

alternative spatial mobility, then through memories of the old neighborhood which provide the protagonists a vantage point from which to make judgments about social conditions in the present, and finally in Viramontes's frequent use of the subjunctive mood. Through narration in the subjunctive, the grammatical form used to describe wishes and hopes that seem distant and improbable, the protagonists are able to imagine improbable or contingent futures and opportunities for resisting the regime of space and time imposed by the quarantine. In the conclusion, I draw connections between Viramontes's construction of neighborhood in *Their Dogs Came with Them* and the issues of contemporary social movement action that frame the dissertation as a whole: to the dangerous fetishization of neighborhood by mainstream urbanists but also to the enduring importance of neighborhoods to the struggle for social and environmental justice.

Narrative Form in *Their Dogs Came with Them*

Their Dogs Came with Them is divided into 17 chapters, each of which is largely focused on one of four central characters living in the same East Los Angeles neighborhood. The novel is narrated in the third-person, but it is written in the style of free indirect discourse. The reader often has access to the thoughts and ideas of the focal characters as if they were being narrated in the first person.⁵⁰ While the focalization of the novel wanders from character to character with frequent disjunctures in space and time, it remains a spatially and temporally “bounded” novel: the narrative action takes place almost entirely within the boundaries of East Los Angeles neighborhood where each of the central characters was born, and within the neat span of time—“1960-

⁵⁰ I draw my definition of this term from Genette (182) and Bal (141).

1970”—set out on the opening page. The perspective of each chapter usually adheres closely to one of these four characters:

- **Ermila Zumaya**, whose activist parents disappeared in Central America, and who is raised in a series of foster homes, and then by her grandparents. In the narrative present, she is a senior in high school, working part time at a car dealership and navigating a relationship with Alfonso, a member of the “McBride Boys” gang.
- **Turtle Gamboa** is also member of the McBride Boys. She struggles to find her footing after her brother Luis is sent to Vietnam and her mother “gives her up to the courts” (269) and leaves the city. She decides to go “AWOL” from the McBride Boys, only to be drawn back into their orbit near the end of the novel. Turtle is in her late teens in the novel’s narrative present.
- **Ana Brady**, whose mother disappears when she and her brother, Ben, are young.⁵¹ Ben is deeply troubled—in all likelihood mentally ill—and Ana spends the final portion of the book searching for him after he, too, disappears. She is in her early twenties in the narrative present, where she works an office job downtown.
- **Tranquilina**, in her early thirties in the novel’s narrative present, is the only daughter of the itinerant missionaries Mama and Papa Tomas. The family returns to their soup kitchen ministry in East Los Angeles after Tranquilina is raped and her mother and father are beaten outside a tent revival meeting in Texas. Tranquilina befriends Ben Brady when he visits the soup kitchen, and she joins Ana in the search for Ben after he disappears.

Amidst their personal struggles, each character also struggles against the spatial and temporal restrictions imposed by a fictional “Quarantine Authority,” a government agency that is ostensibly deployed to control a rabies outbreak in the neighborhood. In the novel, the Quarantine Authority enforces a neighborhood curfew, conducts helicopter surveillance, establishes checkpoints and roadblocks, and verifies identity cards. They are also given the license to shoot “undomesticated animals” that are wandering the streets after curfew. While the narratives of each of these principal characters remain mostly

⁵¹ In an interview with Daniel Olivas, Viramontes talks about these characters as the “four pillars” of the novel. However, others (such as Bridget Kevane) read Ben, rather than his sister Ana, as the fourth protagonist (24). But while there is one chapter devoted solely to Ben, he drops out of the narrative shortly thereafter, and his narrative is never resolved. In the same interview, Viramontes also describes the four characters’ correspondence to the four elements: Turtle, fire; Tranquilina, earth; Ermila, wind; Ana, water.

separate from one another, and their pathways seldom intersect, their shared experience of this oppressive “quarantine” creates meaningful connections between their stories.

The question of what—if anything—ultimately unites the novel’s fragmented narratives has divided critics of the novel. Many readers describe *Their Dogs Came with Them* as a “fragmented” novel. Bridget Kevane, for example, argues that “there is no central narrative or final connection between the world of each character, the world they inhabit, or the world they share. They remain as isolated and fragmented as the freeways” (27). For critics like Kevane, the novel is an elegy for the neighborhood or for the very possibility of social cohesion. Other scholars offer a more cohesive reading of the text’s narrative structure, focusing on how it continuously preserves the possibility of community in the face of violence and oppression. In the essay “Private Property as Story,” for example, Mitchum Huehls argues that Viramontes leaves it to the reader to assemble the different isolated threads of the novel into a coherent narrative: “Just as the individual characters struggle to form community, readers struggle to join their knowledge of the isolated plots into a larger narrative commons” (170). Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson makes a similar observation in her review of the novel: “The effect of the tale, which is told from multiple points of view, is simultaneously fragmentary when viewed up close and mosaic-like when seen from a distance; the pieces fit together into a vision of a community that, while broken by the violence of war at home and abroad, nonetheless, is made up of individuals determined to survive” (129).⁵² Both Huehls and Rodriguez y Gibson describe the novel as a collection of fragments that can be

⁵² In an interview with Daniel Olivas, Viramontes herself remarked that the structure of the novel most resembles a freeway, with its growing body of characters converging and diverging within a set of “delineated corridors” (314).

assembled—from the perspective of a distant point in space—into a coherent vision of community.

Like Huehls and Rodriguez y Gibson—as well as Hsuan Hsu (2011) and Sarah Wald (2013)—I argue that the novel is embedded with a contingent hope for social cohesion. However, I argue that the structure of the novel derives precisely from the unresolved tension between fragmentation and cohesion, a tension that is captured by the push and pull between “the quarantine” and “the neighborhood.” Both quarantines and neighborhoods are bounded spaces and collections of fragments; they are both, in some measure, means of “imagining” community. However, while the quarantine is defined by the restriction of agency and the *imposition* of a particular order of space and time, the neighborhood is distinguished by the presence of possibility. It is a space where people have opportunities to share in the creation of place: to create new meanings, new identities, and new narratives from the space around them. In *Their Dogs Came with Them*, neighborhood is not constructed as a community—as a body of people, defined by their shared space and shared culture, who form a cohesive unity—but it is a place where the social cohesion of community remains distantly possible. Both of these structures—the novel as a quarantine zone and as neighborhood, as isolated fragments and as a possible community—coexist and collide in *Their Dogs Came with Them*. The interplay between formal qualities of the quarantine and the neighborhood embodies what Ramon Saldivar calls the “dialectics of difference,” which he argues is manifest in novels (and particularly novels by Chicanos) in the tendency toward “open over closed forms,” “conflict over resolution and synthesis,” and the “paradoxical impulse toward [both] revolutionary deconstruction and toward the production of meaning” (7). *Their Dogs*

Came with Them maintains a commitment to making visible and subsequently deconstructing the spatial-temporal regime of the Quarantine Authority, but also to reproducing in narrative the possibility of a different world, which takes the shape of a neighborhood. It is a divided, dialectical structure that represents conflicting regimes of space and time. And it is in those fissures in space-time that the characters find opportunities to assert agency and begin transforming the world around them.

In part, I see the argument of this chapter as an attempt to add a layer of temporal analysis to productive readings of the novel's spatial dynamics by Wald, Hsu, and other critics, and, more broadly, to a critical conversation in which temporality seems to have become a secondary category for interpretation. Much of the analysis of postmodern and urban literature through the 80s and 90s—and most of this dissertation to this point—has privileged categories of spatial analysis over the temporal and historical.⁵³ Throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Viramontes is creating new expressive possibilities from the formal and stylistic conventions of literary postmodernism, and especially from its characteristic fragmentation of time and history; an account of the novel's formalization of time is critical to understanding its political intervention into the history of neighborhoods and the possibilities for their future. Reading *Their Dogs Came with Them* through the tension between different narrative fusions of space and time in “the neighborhood” and “the quarantine” is a way to draw attention to the significance of the novel's representation of time and history. To foreground the significance of time in the

⁵³ For example, in her study of postmodern narrative time, *Chronoschisms*, Ursula Heise notes: “Postmodernist culture has often been analyzed as relying primarily on spatial categories” (1). Heise, however, argues that “time and its problems have not simply disappeared from the contemporary cultural scene, while concerns with space have taken its place” (1). Similarly, Mitchum Huehls asserts in his study of the politics of postmodern temporality, *Qualified Hope*: “Postmodernism is so deeply suspicious of time and the idea of experience altogether that it approaches time or history only after first breaking it apart, reducing it, flattening it into easily manipulable parts” (5).

novel, I draw from Mikhail Bakhtin, whose concept of the chronotope describes unified representations of space and time in the novel. Bakhtin writes: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). *Their Dogs Came with Them* is remarkable for the ways that it makes time “artistically visible,” and the ways that it attends to the mutually constitutive relationships between time and space. The representation of time in the novel and its claims to neighborhood history are foundational to its vision of neighborhood possibility.

The Narrative Form of the Quarantine

The formal qualities that are embodied through the quarantine in the novel—particularly isolation and fragmentation in space and time and the restriction of opportunities for narrative creation—are linked to both the enduring history of American colonization and to the new regime of urban spatial and temporal fragmentation—described as postmodernity or late capitalism—inaugurated in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1973 book *Occupied America*, Rodolfo Acuña asserts: “Chicanos are a colonized people in the United States” (1). Viramontes echoes Acuña’s observation throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*, drawing sharp parallels between the Spanish colonization of the Americas and the restructuring of the majority-Chicano neighborhoods of East Los Angeles in the 1950s and 60s. The epigraph for the novel is taken from Miguel Leon Portilla’s account of the conquest of the Aztecs and many of the images in Portilla’s description—such as the vicious, biting dogs that lead the column of conquistadores—become reoccurring images, motifs, and metaphors in the novel. Critics have noted other

ways that the novel evokes the history of colonization, such as through Turtle's observation that the bulldozers set to begin constructing the freeway "resembled great ships" (227). In her figuration of the construction of the freeways, and urban renewal generally, as a second colonization, Viramontes draws on conceptions of colonization as a reordering of space and time and the imposition of a new regime of spatial and temporal power.

That regime of spatial and temporal power is most often represented in the novel through the Quarantine Authority, which gives narrative presence to the restrictions of space, time, and narration imposed on the protagonists. Although the Quarantine Authority—with its patrolling black helicopters and rabies checkpoints—may seem to enter the realm of historical fantasy, little of what Viramontes depicts is outside the realm of historical fact. Violent interactions between community activists and state apparatuses, such as the police, were part of the fabric of life in the 50s and 60s. Parts of East Los Angeles *were* under a curfew during the late 60s (Escobar 1495), and militarization of immigration control, including the policing of citizenship documentation, began in earnest during this period (Acuña 267). Even the notion of heightened community surveillance undertaken through the pretext of a rabies panic was drawn from an actual rabies panic that occurred in 1950s Los Angeles (Ahuja 558). The addition of Quarantine Authority to Viramontes's depiction of East Los Angeles during this time is less an act of imaginative fantasy than an act of imaginative translation, as the slow, indirect, everyday violence of urban renewal and the un-neighborhooding of East Los Angeles—its

pathologization as a diseased portion of the larger social body—is made visible through the spectacular violence of the Quarantine Authority.⁵⁴

Crucially for my argument, however, the quarantine is registered not just thematically, but in the form of the novel as well: in its representation of space and time, in its focalization and narrative perspective, and in the possibility for resolution of each of the central narratives. The experience of the quarantine is characterized by many of the same qualities that are associated with postmodernism: with spatial and temporal foundationlessness, by the disconnection from a continuous and legible history, and by narrative fragmentation. In the quarantine chronotope, characters are simultaneously restricted in their mobility and unstable in their current spatial position. There's a sense of spatial foundationlessness undergirded by the omnipresent threat of displacement. The quarantine has a spatially and temporally centering effect: it draws the characters out of interior space, out of memories of the past or visions of the future, and reorients them to the experience of spatial enclosure within the boundaries of the quarantine, and temporal enclosure, within the boundaries of the present moment. Time in the quarantine lacks depth or duration. In these ways, it shares characteristics with what Madina Tlostanova calls “the imperial-colonial chronotope,” which she characterizes as an experience of “parallel deterritorialization and dehistoricization (i.e. falling out of space and time)” (406). If characters are able to imagine a narrative trajectory within the quarantine, or the possibility of a future, the endpoints are most often predetermined and unpromising. Ermila's grandmother, for example, envisions an apocalyptic meteor speeding toward the neighborhood; Luis understands his daily existence as merely a “stay of execution” (324).

⁵⁴ Here, I'm drawing on the work of Rob Nixon, whose concept of “slow violence” has been applied to several critical readings of *Their Dogs Came with Them*, including Hsu's (2011) and Wald's (2013).

The passages in which time and space seem most restricted in the novel are directly linked to the presence of repressive state authorities associated with the quarantine: the helicopters surveying the neighborhood, the bulldozers that will build the freeways and displace the residents, and the checkpoints that characters must navigate to enter and exit their neighborhoods. The novel also contains several scenes in which characters who are attempting to think *outside* these strictures of space and time, to gain perspective on their lives or on the neighborhood by imagining its past or future, are “interrupted” by awareness of the oppressive forces surrounding them and returned suddenly to the restrictive space-time of the quarantine. In these moments, the quarantine seems to be determining the focalization of the narrative and the narrative representation of space and time; at times, it seems as if the police helicopters are controlling the narrative perspective of the novel. Through these interruptions, Viramontes formally replicates, on the level of sentence and paragraph transitions, the violence and disruption of the occupation and redevelopment of East Los Angeles in the 1960s.

In Viramontes’s novel, the processes by which Turtle’s East Los Angeles neighborhood is “un-neighborhooded” and excluded from recognition by the state are brought into the reader’s view through the Quarantine Authority, which serves as a material representation of those slow, and often invisible, processes of exclusion:

The girlfriends lived within the shaded boundaries of the map printed in English only and distributed by the city. From First Street to Boyle to Whittier and back to Pacific Boulevard, the roadblocks enforced a quarantine to contain a potential outbreak of rabies. Back in early February, a pamphlet delivered by the postman read: Rising cases of rabies reported in the neighborhood (see shaded area) have forced Health Officials to approve, for limited time only, the aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt (54).

By marking Turtle's neighborhood a "quarantine" zone, Viramontes evokes a space whose borders are clearly delineated and which is definitively marked as excluded from the space of the dominant culture. In this space, the exercise of repressive power is overt, represented not by legal codes or ideology but by police helicopters and roadblocks. The boundaries of the quarantine roughly correspond to the boundaries set by the major freeways that enclosed East L.A. in the 1950s and 60s (namely the Pomona Freeway, I-5, and I-10). The freeways and the quarantine constrict the characters' agency and limit their possibilities in similar and overlapping ways in the novel: both shape what kinds of employment are available and accessible, prevent characters from making connections to other people, and disrupt their daily routines. The list of traumas and disturbances that they can associate with the construction of the freeway is a long one: displaced neighbors and lost friends, car accidents, sickening air, omnipresent traffic noise, and much more. And though the freeways have a central place in each character's life, they rarely benefit from them. Ana Brady is the only one of the central characters with a car; Ermila, Turtle, and Tranquilina all walk their daily rounds or rely on public transportation. Ultimately, the domination of space by the freeway and the Quarantine Authority deeply limits the protagonists' opportunities, agency, and mobility.

Throughout the novel, the Quarantine Authority acts as an agent not only of the fragmentation and isolation of characters in space but also in time. In several instances, concern over time causes characters to miss connections with other people or prevents them from forming stronger social bonds with one another. Ermila and her girlfriends—who refer to themselves as the "F Troop"—often have to cut their meetings short out of fear of being caught out after the curfew enforced by the Quarantine Authority: "I gotta

split,” Lollie said. “If we don’t got the bus, the QA curfew’ll fuck us big time” (55).

Lollie, like the other girls, is reliant on the temporal infrastructure of public transportation and fearful of the potentially deadly consequence of breaking the curfew; as a result, her movements are ordered and restricted, and she is disconnected from her friends.

Similarly, as Ana Brady assesses her options for her return commute from work, she links the Quarantine Authority and the freeway in their circumscription of her time: “Pomona West versus the QA roadblocks—both options held equal disregard for Ana’s time” (272). Just as the bulldozers and roadblocks signify the protagonists’ dispossession from the space of their neighborhood, the infrastructures of time created by the freeway and the Quarantine Authority signal that they have also been dispossessed from their own time.

And while much of the power the Quarantine Authority comes from its ability to reorganize space with bulldozers and roadblocks, that power to displace is also linked to the particular structure of time that the quarantine imposes on the neighborhood. Turtle, who is homeless in the novel’s narrative present, observes: “Curfew had landed her in the alley” (17). Turtle experiences a removal to the margins that mirrors the displacements of her neighbor Chavela, but it is effected by the Quarantine Authority’s power to reshape time, rather than its power to reshape space. In another, similar passage, the narrator describes the curfew’s effect on a sudden break in the rain: “Curfew tarnished whatever sunshine escaped” (54). Like the description of Turtle’s displacement by the curfew, this description suggests the power of quarantine time to mark spaces. While the quarantine amplifies the neighbors’ exposure to local environmental risks, such as air and noise pollution, it also “tarnishes” the neighborhood’s access to ostensibly universal

environmental goods, such as sunshine. The connotations of the word “tarnish” here also draw a connection to the racialization of space in East Los Angeles. Finally, the power of the temporal infrastructure to “tarnish sunshine” resonates with a sense of apocalyptic time that seems common within the quarantine: even the daylight is tainted by its inevitable resolution in nightfall.⁵⁵

The sense of temporal constriction effected by the quarantine also separates the residents from history and their memories of the neighborhood as it once was. For example, a passage focalized through Ermila’s guardian, Grandmother Zumaya, describes the experience of losing access to memories that are linked to the space of the neighborhood, such as houses and lemon trees:

If she looked out the window, the freeway construction bit endless trenches into the earth that resembled a moat, fortifying their safety from all the furious violence outside. No sooner would her sense of consolation override any panic than she realized the construction of the freeway was ridding her neighborhood of everything that was familiar to her. The memory of who lived where, who buried their children’s umbilical cords or grew lemons the size of apples, done away. Grandmother thought about how carnivorous life was, how indifferent machinery teeth could be, and all these murky thoughts swirled the dust and tar and heat into a speeding meteor gathering strength (146).

Grandmother first interprets the spatial isolation created by the freeway as a fortification, a wall of protection from violence (she had been watching television news reports of the war in Vietnam and Civil Rights protests in Birmingham). But that sense of safety quickly metastasizes into a feeling of disconnection from history and memory. The “machinery teeth” image here evokes Leo Marx’s idea of the “complex pastoral” incursion: the arrival of the carnivore and the arrival of the machine in the same image. This passage ends with the apocalyptic image of a meteor speeding toward Earth,

⁵⁵ The language of this passage also reflects a larger pattern that Hsuan Hsu observes, in which the novel “persistently deploys stains to make visible the human effects of ambient (often imperceptible) environmental harm concentrated in low-income neighborhoods such as East L.A.” (157)

foreclosing possible futures, just as the freeway has displaced all of Grandmother's memories of the past.

As the novel progresses, the internalization of the spatial and temporal regime of the freeway and the Quarantine Authority begins to encroach on the novel's organizing perspective. The Quarantine Authority's power to co-opt the narrative perspective of the novel is reflected most clearly in Chapter Sixteen, which begins in the style of a police report describing the pursuit of Turtle and Santos, another member of the McBride Boys, who have taken a joyride to Laguna Cliffs (298). While the police report is a jarring and extreme example of the Quarantine Authority wresting control of the narrative perspective of the novel, the Quarantine is also linked to perspective shifts in many other subtler ways throughout the novel. Early in the novel, Ermila finds it difficult to distinguish between her waking experience of QA surveillance and her dreamworld: "In and out of dreams, floodlights jetted through the drawn blinds, drone of engines in and out of the hours" (75).⁵⁶ The floodlights' penetration of Ermila's blinds suggests that there is no space in the narrative that is outside the scope of the quarantine authority. Similarly, the "in and out of the hours" of Ermila's sleep also suggest the presence repressive surveillance during spans of time, such as sleep times, that are ordinarily elided in novels. Passages such as this one illustrate how time and space in the novel bend toward the experience of state surveillance. The spatial-temporal regime of the quarantine authority—and the colonizing feelings of powerlessness, immobility, and isolation that it brings—extends even to the time-space of dreams.

⁵⁶ Turtle has a similar experience of sleeplessness caused by the presence of the helicopters and bulldozers: "The groan, thump and burr noise of the constant motors would weave into the sound of her own breath whistling the blackened fumes of dust and crumble in her nasal cavities. And this sound would only disappear at night when she held her breath" (168-169).

Throughout the novel, there are passages that begin to explore and elaborate narrative pathways outside the space and time of the quarantine authority. Those visions of possibility or moments of contingent hope, however, are frequently “interrupted” by sudden disjunctures that wrench the characters back into the restricted space-time of the quarantine. For example, in the first scenes depicting Ermila’s relationship with her girlfriends, the “F Troop,” descriptions of iterative events begin to convey the dynamics of their group identity and the continuity of their relationships. Viramontes writes:

The only things they cherished, their only private property, were the stories they continued to create and re-create in a world which only gave them one to tell. And so they never tired of one another’s company . . . They met behind the gym, before homeroom, at the lunch benches, after school, at Concha’s not-really-a-beauty-salon, in the back of the bus, and if they had the privilege, they phoned one another at home because a few hours without conversation were insufferable. With conviction, they designed escape routes, rehearsed their breakout and hurled their futures over the roadblocks of their marooned existence. Lest they forget that silence is destructive, they pitted each other against the sorrowful and infinite solitude, each and every hour, because that’s what friends *por vida* are for. (61-62)

This brief passage describes the spatial and temporal dynamics that allow the girlfriends to solidify their friendships: the time that they find to talk and the spaces in which they congregate. The girlfriends imagine the possibility of escape not in purely spatial terms, but as a spatialization of time: their futures “hurled over” roadblocks that have left them spatially and temporally “marooned.” Both the time and space in which they congregate are unmistakably “borrowed,” from school, from family, and from the city’s zoning board (which would shut down Aunt Concha’s business if they knew of it). The iterative reassurance of storytelling that they provide for each other, “each and every hour,” enables them to build friendships that they hope will endure *por vida*. The girls use their time together to engage in “storytalk,” in which they tell stories that create coherence and unity out of the fragmentation and isolation of their daily lives. Mousie, for example,

narrates stories that give form and wholeness to her brother, YoYo, “who returned from Vietnam in . . . pieces” (59). Together in these story sessions, they are able to narrate collective futures that aren’t possible within the space-time of the quarantine.

But while the passage above stands temporarily as a vision of a better future for the girlfriends as a collective, the following paragraph presents Ermila standing solitary and silent at a Quarantine Authority roadblock, *waiting*. Viramontes creates a metafictional moment—the girlfriends’ liberatory storytelling—then interrupts it by the presence of the Quarantine Authority. Ermila’s inability to move forward spatially, beyond the roadblocks, becomes a signifier for her inability to move forward *temporally*, to a time in which she has greater agency and can navigate freely. It is also significant that this passage describing the processes of collective identity formation among the girls ends when they’re forced to part ways to avoid the curfew. At this point, the narrative perspective of the novel, which had been narrating a kind of collective experience, shifts to follow Ermila, who has been individuated by the authorities at the roadblock. The restrictions imposed by the quarantine interrupt the friends’ expansive visions of space and time and the storytelling that helps to build collective identity formation. As I have argued in previous chapters, the spaces that people inhabit play a significant (although not entirely determinist) role in the kinds of narratives they are able to imagine for themselves and their community, the kinds of individual and collective identities it is possible for them to construct, and the kinds of agency they are able to exert over their environment. By drawing the protagonists out of the limitless space and time of futurity and imagination and back into the confinement of the present, the quarantine prevents potentially liberatory narratives—narratives that could help the protagonists better

understand power relations in the neighborhood, or to cultivate a sense of neighborhood identity—from coming into being.⁵⁷ The space-time of the quarantine limits opportunities for resistance to the de-neighborhoodization of East L.A.: for imagining alternative arrangements of space and time, and for establishing the kinds of social relations that could lead to collective action.

Consequently, throughout the novel, there is only limited resistance to the Quarantine Authority (or to the construction of the freeway). In a chapter focalized through Ermila, the narrator observes: “Except for the troublemakers, the neighborhood people bit into the quarantine without question. Lollie translated the pamphlet to her parents, who spoke little official English, and they reacted like everyone else: they believed and obeyed. Ermila’s own grandparents were convinced that the curfew and the shooting and the QA all *contained the rabies epidemic*” (55). This passage sets up a telling contrast between “troublemakers,” who resist the quarantine, and “neighborhood people,” who accept it without question. Here, Viramontes captures the double-bind created by the legal codification of neighborliness, represented in laws such as the Housing Act. When one’s neighborhood is transformed into a slum through spatial isolation, criminalization, and disinvestment, it is no longer possible to be a “neighborhood” (and, thus, no longer possible to qualify for resources from the state or to prevent redevelopment through eminent domain). However, most strategies for resisting the transformation of one’s neighborhood into a slum, such as speaking out or disobeying, would make one a “troublemaker” or “bad neighbor.” This interpretation is

⁵⁷ Another way to think about this is as a formal representation of the internalization of social norms and spatial boundaries that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the habitus. According to Bourdieu, the habitus is “a sense of limits, which inclines some people to maintain their rank and distance and others to know their place and be happy with what they are” (qtd. In Lopez-Calvo 39).

underscored by the final phrase of the passage, which indicates that most of the neighbors believe that the repressive violence of the quarantine authority “contained the rabies epidemic.” The word “contained” conveys a double meaning here: both that the QA keeps the epidemic within a bordered space to prevent its spread, and that the QA itself bears the epidemic (and is the engine of its transmission). Consequently, by “biting into the quarantine,” the neighborhood people become agents of its transmission. In this reading, then, “the epidemic” is the spatial and temporal regime of the quarantine itself.

This account of neighborhood complicity in the quarantine is complicated by a passage that appears shortly afterward, describing the conflict between the paper-based bureaucracy of the QA and the neighborhood’s core values: “A neighbor’s idea of validity was totally incongruent with QA’s norms . . . No one in the Eastside believed in paper. Most of the Eastside stores didn’t even give paper receipts . . . No one questioned the calculations as long as all agreed that the poor didn’t cheat the poorer, and, of course, your word was your word” (63). The indeterminate subject “a neighbor’s,” the phrase “all agreed,” and the repetition of “no one” all indicate that the values enumerated in the passage—trust, mutual respect, shared responsibility for the poor and powerless—are unmistakable and absolute. There is a sense of iterative timelessness to this passage that indicates how social relations and values of the community are reproduced from generation to generation. However, the next paragraph undermines the resistant temporality, the stable community identity, and alternative value system that have been articulated in the previous passage: “But there they lined up, behind Ermila, these unquestioning neighbors leaning on their canes as the thinning colors of twilight made them nostalgic for their cluttered, coffee-smelling kitchens, or their delicious beds

readied to nurture sleep” (63). The transition word “but” underscores the ironic distance between the neighbors’ disbelief in paper and their unquestioning willingness to stand in line to have their papers verified. Interruptions like this one reveal the disjuncture between the restrictive and isolating conditions in which the protagonists live every day, and the possibilities for a stable, socially just, and self-determined neighborhood that they are sometimes able to envision.

The Narrative Form of the Neighborhood

In the previous section, I argued that the regime of space and time represented and enforced by the Quarantine Authority confines and isolates the characters, and restricts their opportunities to exercise agency and control over their shared environment.

However, *Their Dogs Came with Them* also asserts the possibility of an alternative orientation toward space and time, one which challenges the fragmentation and isolation of the quarantine; those possibilities are crystallized in narrative movements toward neighborhood and neighborliness. The neighborhood is constructed through three characteristics that distinguish it formally from the quarantine, and from the spatio-temporal qualities of postmodernism with which the quarantine is aligned: spatial movements inward and upward, temporal movements into the past and the future, and the use of the subjunctive to articulate the possibility of neighborhood and neighborliness. First, while the quarantine is organized around spatial confinement, spatial mobility in the neighborhood is oriented not toward *escape* from East Los Angeles, but toward ascension and convergence. As in Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, vertical movement, or ascension, carries with it the possibility of benevolent neighborhood observation and protection, but also the possibility of neighborhood narration and the apprehension of the neighborhood

as a narrative unity. And as in *Tropic of Orange*, both elevated perspectives and spatial contiguity in *Their Dogs Came with Them* allow the protagonists to envision alternatives to the established order of spatial and social relations. Second, the narration of neighborhood time bends toward stable and comforting community relationships, toward iterative narrative events that help to solidify neighborhood identity, and toward comings-together in shared space. The experience of “neighborhood time” in the novel is also shaped by the enduring presence of sentimental place memories, which help to form a foundation for value judgments and decision-making about the arrangement of neighborhood space. But the coherence and unity of the neighborhood ideal, like the unity of the novel itself, is always only a possibility, a contingency, never fully realized. Consequently, neighborhood is often constructed in the novel through the subjunctive mood, a sentence structure that is typically used to convey visions of the unlikely or counterfactual: for example, visions of life outside the quarantine. The subjunctive preserves the possibility for spatial transformation in the future and helps to articulate the conditions under which a neighborhood might be realized. Together, these three formal characteristics of *Their Dogs Came with Them* constitute a counter-narrative to the quarantine, a narrative that reveals possibilities for collective resistance and the transformation of urban space.

Vectors of Spatial Movement: Escape and Convergence, Falling and Flight

Their Dogs Came with Them is not a static representation of life under quarantine or colonization; as the novel progresses, the protagonists become increasingly aware of and increasingly resistant to the quarantine. In the essay “Refusing to Halt,” Sarah Wald argues that *Their Dogs Came with Them* is suffused with “moments of limited agency”

and that those opportunities for agency are most often “expressed in spatial terms” (Wald 80-81). In this section, I argue that these moments of spatial agency in the novel formalize a nascent neighborhood consciousness that is consistent with what I describe above as “the narrative form of the neighborhood.” Characters experience neighborhood awareness and begin to cultivate collective neighborhood identities when they follow narrative axes upward (and inward), rather than outward. Consequently, the neighborhood acts in the novel as a narrative counterforce to the confined space of the quarantine described in the previous section. This is reflected both on the diegetic level, in the way the protagonists formulate strategies of resistance to the quarantine, and in the structure and organization of the narratives.⁵⁸ The characters are able to realize opportunities to resist the regime of space and time primarily through vertical movement: the narrative movement of the novel is oriented not toward escape but toward ascension. This upward and inward movement of the novel is also consistent with what I refer to elsewhere as an anti-sprawl aesthetic. Instead of sprawling outward into space (as is the case in other late postmodern novels, such as Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and DeLillo’s *Underworld*), *Their Dogs Came with Them* densifies and infills.

That inward and upward narrative movement in *Their Dogs Came with Them* draws its protagonists toward a kind of collective neighborhood identity instead of toward the realization of individual identity. These spatial movements register what David Vázquez calls “impulses toward the social,” which reveal the tensions between narratives of individualization and community empowerment, particularly among members of oppressed groups (9). By troubling the narrative vectors of movement outward, *Their*

⁵⁸ With only a few exceptions—such as the story of Mama and Papa Tomas, and a short passage focalized through Turtle’s brother Luis in Vietnam—the novel’s narrative perspective never leaves the spatial boundaries of the city.

Dogs Came with Them seems to mirror the dynamics of many early Chicano/a novels, and particularly the Chicano/a bildungsroman—for example, José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* and Americo Paredes’s *George Washington Gomez*—in which the protagonists’ eventual departure from the community of their birth is rendered as deeply ambiguous and disturbing. In *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, Stella Bolaki argues that the ethnic bildungsroman is often interpreted through a false binary, in which the protagonist’s narrative of development must be resolved either through “the union of the protagonist with her ethnic community” or through “assimilation in the form of Americanization,” which most often requires the protagonist to leave the community (88). At times, *Their Dogs Came with Them* resembles a bildungsroman, not only because its central characters are in their adolescence entering adulthood, but because the space-time of the novel resembles the common spatio-temporal dynamics of the bildungsroman. For example, time in the novel sometimes bends toward barriers to the development of individual identity, toward epiphanic realizations about the nature of social relations, and toward the protagonists’ first experiences of complex “adult” emotions, all of which are said to be characteristic of the space-time of the archetypal bildungsroman (Schouten 69). However, with its multiple protagonists, wandering narrative perspective, and deeply-rooted and tightly constricted spatial perspective, *Their Dogs Came with Them* shouldn’t be mistaken for a narrative of individual development, failed or otherwise. The protagonists’ small challenges to the constricted space of the quarantine are not primarily movements toward individual development and acculturation, but rather a kind of collective exploration of the spatial and temporal conditions under which a neighborhood community would be possible.

The problems of movement *out* and the necessity of movement *up* are thematized in two interlocking scenes from early in the novel. In the first scene, Turtle remembers how her brother Luis—at a time before the completion of the freeways—convinced her to help him steal a bulldozer that sits in a lot outside their home, waiting to be deployed in the redevelopment of the neighborhood. Luis convinces Turtle that they can use the bulldozer to tunnel through the hill on Eastern Avenue and emerge in “a place called New Mexico” (25). Luis imagines New Mexico as a place “where you awoke banging your head against the sky or sucked on sweet cactus pulp for lunch or watched lizards transform into alligators in the afternoon” (25). The repeated “or” phrases in this passage suggest the Luis imagines a place of boundless possibilities beyond his neighborhood, a place of pathways where the rules of space and time that govern his experience don’t apply. The siblings are caught in the act, however, and their mother beats Luis as he clings to the bulldozer’s steering wheel. This scene introduces a radically different representation of space and time—a chronotope of mythic escape, a kind of Southwestern pre-colonial pastoral—and then destroys it. After their punishment, Turtle reflects: “They would never know what it was to be somewhere else, be someone else” (26). Luis knows that the bulldozers signify the authority to reorganize space; by attempting to steal one, he is seeking to become an empowered agent in the redevelopment process. Luis’s final recognition that he “would never be somewhere else, be someone else” shows their internalization of the link between space, time, and identity. Luis can’t become who he desires to be, or realize the future he envisions, within the space and time of the quarantine, but neither can he escape those strictures. When Luis does leave his neighborhood, it’s because he’s been drafted and sent to Vietnam. For Luis, the only

pathway outside of the quarantine is to become a participant in the American imperialist project abroad.

Their Dogs Came with Them is not a novel without hope of alternative possibilities, but it is also not a novel of simple narrative resolutions. Instead, the novel repeatedly returns to the possibilities that can be articulated *within* the delimited space of the quarantine, possibilities represented both by vertical movement or ascension and by inward movement or convergence. Interwoven into this scene of Turtle and Luis's attempted to escape to New Mexico is a scene that takes place later in their childhood in which Luis intervenes to protect his sister from a shopkeeper who has caught Turtle stealing food. Until Luis arrives, Turtle stands helpless outside the store, in the shadow of a major freeway interchange, as the shopkeeper gropes her in broad daylight. Turtle recalls: "Not one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge, not one driver driving the overpass of the 710 freeway construction stopped to protest, to scream" (24). Turtle's experience echoes Jane Jacobs's argument in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that the spatial organization of the neighborhood should help to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility for surveillance and community protection. As Jacobs writes: "A city street equipped to handle strangers, and to make a safety asset, in itself, out of the presence of strangers, as the streets of successful city neighborhoods always do . . . must [have] eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street" (35). In Turtle's experience, the freeway exemplifies the destruction of opportunities for community self-surveillance, as freeway commuters soar by, unaware or indifferent to her assault. But this early scene also simultaneously draws attention to the relationships between observation, safety, and care that will appear again

and again in the novel. As in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, the freeway overpass is a recurring visual image in *Their Dogs Came with Them*, where it suggests the potential intersection between city-dwellers from different social and ethnic groups and the power to apprehend as a unity the multiplicity of narratives that coexist in the neighborhood. Though the power to observe from above resides mostly with the Quarantine Authority in the novel, there are also instances in which the central characters seize a "heightened" awareness of social relations in the neighborhood. Those moments of narrative movement upward make possible both the feelings of empathy and the power to distinguish between perpetrators and victims that the novel claims as the essential qualities of a good neighbor.

The resistant neighborhood awareness that comes from vertical ascension is most often represented metaphorically or, perhaps, magically in the novel. Those who have vanished from the neighborhood—Ermila's mother and father, Ermila's displaced neighbor Chavela, the missing girl Renata Valenzuela—are often represented as having ascended or looking down from above. There are also several scenes in which characters ascend or take flight to avoid harm or escape oppressive conditions.⁵⁹ For example, Tranquilina's mother and father, Papa Tomas, take flight to escape indentured servitude (in one of the few sections of the novel that takes place outside East Los Angeles). In the novel's conclusion, Tranquilina herself ascends. These flights allow the characters to move temporarily outside the regime of space and time imposed by colonizing forces. These flights are narrated in a way that straddles the borders between realism and fantasy. Consequently, vertical movements in space also become sites for interrogating tensions

⁵⁹ There also dozens of similes and metaphors linking various major and minor characters to birds.

between faith and materialism, particularly as it pertains to the protagonists' germinal struggle against the quarantine.

Several critics have observed this tension between faith and materiality in the novel and have concluded that balancing these two is essential for characters to realize opportunities for resistance and agency. Sarah Wald, for example, writes that the novel represents possible oppositional consciousness as something "rooted simultaneously in faith and embodied experience" (81). Similarly, Mitchum Huehls, although he dismisses Tranquilina's mother's belief in miracles as "vacuously impotent" (165), argues that the text navigates between the "miraculous attempt to redress loss" and "the capitalist worker's materialist attempt to redress loss" (165). While "ascension" is often figured in spiritual terms, the text also consistently draws the reader back to the material impact of verticality, through the power of observation, and the correspondence between elevation and the control of space and time. Ultimately, the novel shows that those who look down, even as ghostly or imagined presences, can have a tangible impact on the world below, particularly in their ability to identify forces of oppression and discern power relations in the neighborhood. This power is foundational to neighborhood consciousness, and to the possibility of "being a good neighbor," throughout the novel.

This notion of grounded ascension—or ascension with material presence—is crystallized in the image of "god's little eyes," which appears throughout the sections devoted to Ben, Ana, and Tranquilina. Sitting together on the roof of their childhood home after their mother has disappeared, Ana tries to reassure her younger brother Ben that the stars above them were "God's little eyes guarding you" (106). But Ben is skeptical. He interprets "god's eyes" as a metaphor for protective neighborhood

surveillance, like Jacobs's "eyes in the street." In Ben's view, the neighborhood has failed them in that regard: "God's little eyes not guarding his mother when she had asked for extended credit at the Friendly Shop and the Japanese owner studied her face. Or when she went into the dry cleaner's to pick up Father's Sunday suit without the whole amount, the clerk had threatened to call the police" (106). Instead, from Ben's perspective, the eyes of the neighborhood are like the eyes of the police helicopters above, uncaring, suspicious, racist, and concealing an implicit threat of violence.⁶⁰ Later in the novel, Ben and Ana's rooftop conversation about God's eyes is re-narrated, this time focalized through Ana, who struggles with her failure to convince Ben: "She didn't know how to convert the mysteries into something solid or organize the scrabble-game alphabet into make-sense words. Faith couldn't be sculptured for Ben; couldn't cradle him like the San Gabriel Mountains guarding the inhabitants of the city" (274). Ana maintains a faith that seems as stable and timeless as mountains, a faith that has the power to organize meaningless fragments into the coherence of language. But for Ben, god's eyes merely reflect the nightmarish present of the quarantine. The tension between Ana's and Ben's interpretations of their mother's "God's eyes" image is reflected in the questions surrounding the orienting perspective of the novel. As I will argue in the conclusion, the metaphor of "God's eyes" speaks not just of the eyes of the neighborhood, but also, metadiegetically, to the eyes of the *narrator*, looking down on the inhabitants of the city. The conflict that divides Ben and Ana—about whether the eyes looking down on the neighborhood are benevolent or oppressive—mirrors the

⁶⁰ This perverted image of "God's eyes" as the eyes of the quarantine re-emerges later in the novel, when the armed guards at a roadblock are described as "guardian angels of the quarantine," shining flashlights on those in line (288).

dialectic conflict between quarantine and neighborhood that Viramontes embeds in the structure and perspective of the novel.

Vectors of Temporal Movement: Neighborhoods of Memory

In the previous section, I argued that inward and upward movement become vectors for constructing neighborhood consciousness in *Their Dogs Came with Them*. In this section, I argue that narrative movements through time—and particularly the recovery of memory—are also foundational to the possibility of neighborhood and neighborliness in the novel. One of the root causes of Ben’s skepticism regarding the eyes of the neighborhood, I would argue, is that he has no memory of a time in which the neighborhood *was* protective and no one to remind him that such a time *did* exist. Ben’s white father is an unloving and mostly unspeaking character, and his mother is entirely absent. Ben and Ana’s situation is not unique in the novel: there are few active parental figures. Ermila’s mother and father disappeared when she was young, and Turtle’s father is also missing. In spite of these parental absences, however, each of the other central characters in the novel seems to maintain a significant connection to an older resident of the neighborhood who transmits to them a memory of the place as it once was. Ana Brady, the older sibling, retains memories of her mother’s affection for the neighborhood as well as her faith in the watchful presence of god’s eyes. Tranquilina’s mother serves to validate her own early memories of the neighborhood as a vital and supportive place. And Turtle and Ermila both remember their neighbor Chavela, who signifies both the neighborly care and an early awareness of the power dynamics that will upturn the neighborhood. Because she has a memory of how the neighborhood was once, Chavela in particular seem to have a special understanding of oppression, an awareness that remains

a distant presence in Ermila and Turtle's consciousness throughout the novel. Taken together, these memories of the old neighborhood, articulated by those neighborhood elders and transmitted through the succeeding generation (Ermila, Turtle, Ana, and Tranquilina), constitute a kind of counter-history of East Los Angeles that challenges its condemnation as a slum by city, state, and federal authorities in the 1950s. Not coincidentally, these memories are also significant for thinking about new urbanism—and analyzing the impact of gentrification—because they caution planners to consider more carefully the voices of those who have lived longest in the neighborhood. Through these memories of the old neighborhood, Viramontes offers a vision for a grounded social justice historiography after postmodernism, one that would take seriously the place memories of urban residents as the foundation for value judgments about the present.

Throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*, memories become ways of navigating outside the boundaries of the quarantine. Just as the spatial limitations of the quarantine cause the novel's protagonists to explore alternative modes of movement through space, such as ascension and inward movement, the restrictive *temporality* of the quarantine provokes alternative movements through time. As I argued in the section describing the narrative form of the quarantine, the characters face barriers that limit their opportunities for narrating imaginative visions of the future (underscored, again, by the finality of the novel's time frame: 1960-1970, which isolates characters from both their past, in the years before 1960, and the possibility of a future, in the years beyond 1970). But the novel nevertheless preserves possibilities for moving outside that temporality by recovering memories of a time when the neighborhood was different and better. This temporal movement creates space for characters in the narrative present to envision

possibilities outside or oppositional to the space-time of the quarantine. These alternative visions of the neighborhood materialize in several passages in which Ermila or Turtle remember Chavela suddenly, often without any apparent connection to the narrative. These sudden memories provide a counterpoint to the Quarantine Authority interruption: they often give the protagonists sudden access to specialized knowledge about the neighborhood, about power relations, or about their own developing identities. In *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Viramontes shows how the protagonists gain access to memories of times and places that they did not experience, which are transmitted through the previous generation: women like Chavela, and Mama, and Grandmother Zumaya. These memories constitute an alternative value system that is rooted in an alternative cognitive mapping of urban space.⁶¹ Consequently, memories form the foundation of a place-based, neighborhood identity that stands in opposition to the hegemonic space-time of the quarantine.

The transmission of neighborhood memories is modeled early in the novel, in the scene that introduces Tranquilina and her mother (known only as “Mama”), who have recently returned to East Los Angeles to revive their ministry to the poor. As they try to navigate along once-busy streets that now dead-end in freeways, Mama recalls the contours of the neighborhood as it once was:

The streets Mama remembered had once connected to other arteries of the city, rolling up and down hills and in and out of neighborhoods where neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another. To the west, La Pelota Panaderia on Soto Street crossed Canter’s Kosher Deli on Brooklyn Avenue,

⁶¹ This interpretation draws from Alicia Muñoz’s reading of a scene in which Ray is casually dismissed by a police officer while making a statement about his encounter with Turtle the night before. Muñoz argues that the police officer’s map of the city “selectively depict(s) his neighborhood as nothing more than a network of streets and freeways. From this viewpoint, that space constitutes a void—a place without history. In contrast, Ray offers the social cartography possible through the memory of residents like him, which holds the power to fill in those blank spaces and give meaning to the place and the people within this space” (Muñoz 29).

which crossed Pol's Chinese Kitchen on Pacific Boulevard to the east. But now the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs in Mama's memory: la Senora Ybarra's tobacco smell and deep raspy voice; the Gomez father's garden of tomatoes; Eugenio's pennies taped on envelopes for their ministry; Old Refugi, who had two goats living in her cluttered backyard and who took the goats to graze at the edge of the Chinese cemetery before opening hours (32-33).

Memories like Mama's, which are rich in both spatial and sentimental details, constitute a kind of alternative map of the neighborhood that stands in stark contrast to the neighborhood of the narrative present. But while some readers might dismiss Mama's memories of the neighborhood as overly nostalgic or "unrealistic," they have real power in the novel. Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams and Ernesto Galarza's 1971 memoir *Barrio Boy*, Raul Homero-Villa argues that 'sentimental' attachments to the barrio and nostalgic recollections of "the old neighborhood" aren't false consciousness: "the real 'emotional substance' of working people's attachment to urban place can and must be analytically mined, following Williams—and echoing Galarza's prescription for materially situating the 'powerful feelings' of barrio residents—to identify 'the real change that is being written about as we discern its process'" (12-13). Homero-Villa goes on to argue that Galarza's memoir's "subdued but present nostalgia" for the "intimate and nurturing" social relations of his old neighborhood "define, in the end, what the real deformation may be" (13-14). In other words, memories of the old neighborhood—even, and maybe especially, those nostalgic and sentimental memories—can help the current generation (in this case, Tranquilina) begin identifying and resisting the slow and violent transformations that have taken place the neighborhood.⁶²

⁶² Karl Hess and David Morris make a similar argument about the value of "neighborhood nostalgia" in the 1975 book *Neighborhood Power*.

As Tranquilina's mother's memories of the old neighborhood are transmitted to her, they help her to construct her own vision of an ideal "livable" neighborhood. These memories also begin to serve as foundations for value judgments about conditions of the present. The passage above captures several specific elements of the old neighborhood which reappear again and again throughout the novel: The first is the sense of the social and ethnic diversity, the intersection of "neighbors of different nationalities" figured through its variety of ethnic restaurants, that Mama remembers once characterized the neighborhood.⁶³ Second, Mama's memory of East Los Angeles is also suffused with images of natural growth, such as Señor Gomez's tomato garden (figured, in this passage, against the "stumped" streets that she now sees); it also gently evokes the pastoral mode, through the image of Old Refugi the goatherd grazing his animals in the cemetery. The passage above also represents the memory of a neighborhood where there are informal systems of mutual benefit and social support, a neighborhood where neighbors like Eugenio send pennies to support Papa Tomas and Mama in their soup kitchen ministry. Finally, Mama remembers the streets of the old neighborhood as "connected to other arteries of the city," drawing on the metaphor of a whole and healthy urban body (one that she now interprets as broken and diseased). This passage elaborates a lucid vision of neighborhood outside the spatial and temporal regime of the Quarantine Authority: it is a place of promise, in which things can grow, routines and patterns are established, and

⁶³ In an interview with Jose Romero, Viramontes reflected on her own memories of a diverse Los Angeles in comparison with her experience of the spatially segregated city of the present: "Look at us, we are segregated. Very much so, and it wasn't always like that. As I said, I'm very interested in bringing back that history when it wasn't segregated to show that there was such a time." Ricardo Romo complicates this notion in his history of East Los Angeles before WW II, arguing that while the Plaza neighborhood west of the Los Angeles River was racially diverse, the neighborhood east of the river had a more "insulated character." He notes that sociologists most often interpret this spatial segregation as "an inevitable consequence of American racism," reflected in discriminatory housing policies that kept Mexican immigrants geographically isolated (148-149).

people move without restriction or worry. These four qualities of the old neighborhood—diversity, presence of nonhuman nature, social support systems, and connectedness to other parts of the city—also mirror those qualities of neighborhood valorized by the new urbanists. The synchronicity here underscores a point that is clear throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*: that the principles of neighborhood design that undergird the New Urbanist Movement are not as “new” as they may seem. Ultimately, Tranquilina and other characters in the novel use place memories transmitted by the previous generation to reconstruct a neighborhood ideal in opposition to the spatio-temporal conditions of the quarantine.

Mama’s memory is all the more striking because of its stark contrast with the descriptions of the freeway—“solid slabs of endless concrete” (33)—that frames it. Throughout the novel, these memories of the neighborhood’s qualities are juxtaposed with characters’ experience of their disappearance and absence. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes: “The places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: ‘You see, here there used to be . . .’” (132). Just as de Certeau claims possibilities for creating new place meaning through a spatial “rhetoric of walking,” the presence of place memory—a kind of walking through time—can help form arguments about what *should* be there but is no longer. For example, Tranquilina and Mama find that new layers of bureaucracy now stand between their ministry and the charity that sustained it in the past: When they ask the manager of the Val-U Mini Mart for his discarded produce, the grocer denies them, explaining: “The Health Department don’t let me” (36).⁶⁴ Similarly, Mama visits El

⁶⁴ Mama shows that she, too, has internalized this bureaucratic oversight when she puts on a hairnet to serve lunch because she’s afraid of being cited by the health inspector (39).

Zócalo Fine Meats for a donation for her soup kitchen, because the former butcher, Obdulio, had always been willing to donate stew bones and pork rinds for their ministry.⁶⁵ The new owner, however, agrees to give them a large chuck roast only on the condition that they never return. There are numerous images of “severed tree roots” in the novel’s narrative present (226), evidence of the literal uprootings caused by the development of the freeways. And when Alfonso observes the failure of his mother’s once thriving rosebushes, the narrator observes: “nothing grew on McBride Street anymore except the night” (309). Finally, the absence of social and ethnic diversity in the neighborhood is often noted in references to the freeway, which speeds commuters through and above East Los Angeles.⁶⁶ All that seems to remain of the original diversity in East Los Angeles are the multinational cemeteries scattered throughout the neighborhood. The descriptions of the old neighborhood that appear early in the novel become a foundation from which both the protagonists (to whom those memories have been transmitted) and the *reader* can make judgments about its transformation.

Among the four protagonists, the move from the reception of neighborhood memory to the development of oppositional identity is gradual, contingent, and incomplete. From the very beginning, Viramontes establishes Chavela as a locus of community memory and neighborhood values, as well as grounded analysis of power relations in the neighborhood. The first scene in *Their Dogs Came with Them* takes place in her home, a home that she is being forced to vacate to make room for the freeway. As

⁶⁵ The name of the butcher’s shop, a Spanish word that refers to a central public square, evokes the transnational public that existed in East Los Angeles, and that Mama seems to find absent when she returns to the city with her daughter (in the late 60s).

⁶⁶ As Eric Avila argues: “The freeways played an important role in that process [the disappearance of social and economic diversity in Los Angeles’s neighborhoods], wreaking havoc on the city’s heterosocial spaces and accelerating the trend to postwar agglomeration of racially segregated communities” (208).

she packs her things, a young Ermila, her across-the-street neighbor, stacks matchboxes on Chavela's table. The walls of Chavela's home are decorated with handwritten reminders: to water her flowers, call about an apartment, take the trash out on Wednesday. Her name, social security number, and address. "I need to remember," she tells Ermila when the child points to one of the torn pieces of paper taped to the wall (7). Chavela looks out the window, takes inventory of her small backyard—a lemon tree, a deep-rooted red hibiscus, an arbor that reminds her of the former lover who built it—and explains to Ermila: "I'm trying to tell you what it feels like to have no solid *tierra* under you" (7). This scene between Chavela and Ermila functions as a kind of overture for the novel, a condensed analysis of the ways that the freeways and the quarantine will separate the neighbors from their homes, from their connection with others in the neighborhood, and from their history and memories. Chavela also highlights the ways that memories become embedded in place and can be transmitted through the physical world: through handwritten reminders and blossoming lemon trees. After this first chapter, Chavela will only appear again in the novel as a memory or spectral presence. However, as I will argue in the following section, Ermila is able to draw from those memories a sense of possibility and agency that doesn't exist for them in the present.

Outside the Quarantine: The Subjunctive Neighborhood

The performance of spatial and temporal possibility in *Their Dogs Came with Them* is anchored in what I see as its most characteristic stylistic feature: its frequent use of the subjunctive mood. Linguist Wayne Harsh states that the subjunctive mood is when "the speaker or writer is thinking in terms of non-fact or modification of fact, as distinct from fact (indicative mood) or command (imperative mood)" (13). The subjunctive mood

is often linked to a conditional clause (an “if” statement), and is typically used to express “wishes, requests, or conditions contrary to fact” (Hacker 220). Unlike indicative conditionals, which are used to discuss things that will be possible or true if some other discreet and realistic condition is met, subjunctive conditionals refer to things that *would be true* if only some *improbable* or “hoped for” condition were met. However, the subjunctive mood is not a vehicle for pure expressions of faith, or idealism; it eschews the determinacy and teleology of metanarratives such as Marxism or Christianity. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the syntax of idealism, arguing: “Idealism overlooks the interrogative, the subjunctive, the aspiration, the expectation, the positive indeterminacy of these modes of consciousness, for it is acquainted only with the consciousness in the present or future indicative, which is why it fails to account for class” (398). But while the subjunctive mood casts doubt on teleological narratives, it is also, effectively, a repudiation of postmodern foundationlessness. The feeling of being trapped in a limitless present, without access to the distant past or future, is communicated through the present indicative or through the simple past of the narrative indicative. The subjunctive offers a temporary escape from the isolation of the present. Often, the subjunctive draws on memories of the distant past as a lament for people or conditions whose restoration is hoped for but which may never be again. At the same time, the subjunctive preserves the possibilities of realizing another world in the future, even if those possibilities are only distant and contingent. The preservation of possibility in the novel’s subjunctive narrations reflect Viramontes’s innovative approach to postmodern temporality.

In *Their Dogs Came with Them*, the subjunctive mood is used to imagine a particular orientation to both space and time that is oppositional to the regime of space and time imposed by the Quarantine Authority and the freeway. What Viramontes's subjunctive passages are most often envisioning, and the improbable conditions that they imagine must be met, is a kind of grounded and contingent neighborhood ideal. The subjunctive is a way to envision the qualities of neighborhood—among other things, the presence of friendly eyes on and above the street, spaces for face-to-face interactions, the opportunities to form stable collective identities—from within the restrictive space-time of the quarantine. As these subjunctive passages bring into narrative presence a vision of an ideal neighborhood, they also call attention to the particular oppressive conditions of the present that prevent that vision from being realized. While, in most cases, the conditions that are imagined in Viramontes's subjunctive passages will not be met in the diegetic world of the novel, in some instances the subjunctive offers the protagonists alternative narrative pathways that *are* taken and that lead to the kinds of oppositional consciousness and expressions of limited agency that Wald describes. Finally, in the context of Viramontes's extradiegetic historiographical project in the novel, the subjunctive is a way to speak to the reader through time, to direct our attention to conditions for creating neighborhood that were impossible to meet at the time, but which may be possible now, or to the quarantine-like conditions that are being reproduced in the present. In this way, the subjunctive captures what I see as part of the overarching ethic of the novel: its commitment to the slow and ongoing work of tearing down the roadblocks and freeways and building livable neighborhoods in their place.

There are many examples of the subjunctive in *Their Dogs Came with Them*, but one of the most striking subjunctive passages appears in Chapter 6, which is the only chapter focalized through Ben Brady (who disappears from the novel after this point). The chapter follows a mostly linear chronology as Ben loses his mother, is hit by a car at age 11, aces the SATs and wins a scholarship to USC, and finally, suffering migraines and insomnia partly due to his accident, becomes a shut-in.⁶⁷ In his apartment, next to stacks of dirty dishes and half-eaten Twinkies, Ben begins to write a passage in his journal that imagines the life of a homeless woman. The woman in Ben's description mirrors a homeless woman who arrives at Tranquilina and Mama's mission in the previous chapter, a woman who may be Ben's missing mother. Passages adjacent to Ben's journal entry describe his frustration with indeterminacy and open-ended stories: "Ben had lost his paperback and it killed him not to know the end of the story" (120) and "Stories, like life, had no logical conclusion and it made Ben angry at the uncertainty of it all" (123).⁶⁸ The writing task Ben has set out for himself is, perhaps, to tell a story that brings resolution to his mother's life. To do that, Ben has to create an omniscient narrator, a pair of "god's eyes" looking down on his mother from above, with protective concern.

But the vision Ben creates is resolutely subjunctive, never passing into the indicative mood required for narrative resolution. The passage reads:

⁶⁷ Based on some of the details of Ben's daily round, such as his walk to the Public Library and to Pershing Square, we can infer that his apartment is in Los Angeles's Bunker Hill neighborhood. Bunker Hill was also undergoing a major, controversial redevelopment project at this time, one that, like the East LA freeway projects, uprooted and displaced thousands of people of color (Cuff 301).

⁶⁸ This resonates with Frank Kermode's argument in *The Sense of an Ending*, about "the human need for a temporality shaped by the ordering force of the ending" (qtd. in Heise 48). Ben himself seems unglued in time, his narrative of high achievement interrupted by depression and illness, and his own story completely unresolved in the novel.

If one would pass the woman while driving home from the office after a crinkled day of work, one might acknowledge her disorientation with a merciful sigh, but rushing home nonetheless to retrieve the child, make a quick stop for groceries, pick up a bucket of chicken. If the woman stood on a pedestrian bridge overlooking the Hollywood 101 Freeway, let's say, one would think the woman who was not old entertained the idea of suicide and the driver would maintain a diligent vigil from the rearview mirror. Could the driver know what the woman thought? In order to envision her life, one would have to think of her with greater generosity. It would be too easy to simply imagine her existence as horrendous, and therefore think of suicide as the only option left for such a pitiful soul. Yet life is stratified layers of time, a complex gut of pulsating mystery. One would need much more than obvious assumptions in order for the driver to turn off the ignition key, set the parking brake right and ask after her. One would have to be close enough to look into her eyes, jump into the trunk of her heart, lift the stage curtains to see behind her props. It was one thing to assume, another to conjure, and yet another *to feel for her*. *One would need metaphor to love her* (124-125) [Emphasis in the original]

There are several things to note about the way that this passage constructs subjunctive possibility. First, the bulk of this passage is a list of improbable conditions—beginning with “If one would pass the woman . . .” —all of which must be met in order for the driver to “feel for” or “to love” the woman with the rainbow straw bag standing on the overpass. Together, these conditions form a unified image of the spatio-temporal conditions that would allow the driver to love and care for a stranger: the conditions that would create neighborliness. Under present conditions, the driver and the woman on the overpass experience space and time in ways that are contiguous but not overlapping. Space and time for the driver are compressed and episodic. The driver experiences the freeway only as a series of waystations in their daily round: to pick up a child, to pick up groceries, to pick up chicken. The spatial conditions necessary for the driver to feel for the woman would essentially require the driver to be pedestrian: “One would have to be *close enough* to look into her eyes.” Here, the passage suggests that the realization of neighborly empathy requires face-to-face interaction in public space. The passage also spatializes time, imagining it in “stratified layers” that separate the driver and the woman,

who is repeatedly described as “not old.” Finally, the passage suggests that the driver can’t look at the woman’s existence through a narrative of inevitability, which interprets “suicide as [her] only option.” To “think of her with greater generosity,” then, is to imagine *multiple* possibilities for her (including the possibility that she is worthy of love). The final line suggests that the spatial and temporal unity that would allow the driver to love the woman has to be narrative, has to be metaphorical, before it can be actualized. The subjunctive passages throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them* provide contingent foundations for such narratives.

Several critics have described this passage as a kind of imperative or call to action for the reader. John Alba Cutler writes: “The point for Ben is not for the driver of the car to understand what it means to feel what the woman feels, but rather for him to feel for her—to feel in her direction. Literature here seeks to impel action. Whatever its form, it should take us out of our cars and bring us face to face with people whose lives we have previously ignored” (166). Similarly, Alicia Muñoz writes: “Viramontes uses these narrative techniques to accomplish more than merely informing an audience; she seeks to incite a response by making her reader recognize, remember, and reach for those bodies underneath the overpass” (35-36). I find this passage striking for the same reasons that Cutler and Muñoz describe: it caused me to identify with the driver of the car and to wonder how I could be more aware of and responsive to people like the woman with the straw bag that Ben describes, whom I often pass without acknowledgment. But this response misconstrues the passage slightly, by conflating the subjunctive mood of the passage with the imperative mood. The subjunctive mood *can* imply a kind of call to action, but it does so indirectly. In this passage, the narrator seems to be taking pains to

avoid phrasing that would imply a direct address or direct command to a human narratee: using the indefinite pronoun “one,” for example, rather than the second person pronoun “you.” The cultivation of narrative distance here draws closer attention to the embedded spatial and temporal conditions that prevent the driver from seeing the woman with the straw bag. The result is both a call to action and a call to mindfulness of the spatial and temporal conditions that often prevent us from heeding that call.

Ermila’s narrative is the most fully realized example of Viramontes’s use of the subjunctive to create space for imagining alternatives to the space-time of the quarantine. Building on the observations of critics such as Sarah Wald, I read Ermila’s narrative in terms of her development of an “oppositional consciousness,” a journey toward the conditions that will allow her to resist the regime of space and time imposed by the Quarantine Authority. The social movement theorists Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris describe oppositional consciousness as “an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination” (4-5). Ermila begins the novel confronted with the systems of domination at work in her neighborhood, as Chavela warns her about the threat of earthmovers and about the feeling of having no solid ground beneath her feet. But while Ermila may be aware of her neighborhood’s oppression from a very early age, she seems uncertain about how to act to undermine or oppose it. As she confronts instances of oppression throughout the novel, she offers herself the spatially and temporally vague resolution: “I gotta do something soon” (13). Ermila’s response to the spatial and temporal restrictions of the quarantine aligns with other resistant spatial and temporal movements in the novel: to the link between ascension and agency, and the power located

in memories transmitted from the old neighborhood. For example, after she and her girlfriends take revenge on Rini's mother's abusive boyfriend, Ermila experiences "a larger-than-life ability to soar over just about anything" (199), and throughout the novel, she has sudden memories of Chavela, who commands her to "pay close attention" to her surroundings (58). However, the pathways for possible resistance in the novel seem to become most clear to Ermila when she begins to see her oppression as something shared with her neighbors and to imagine the transformative possibilities for a neighborhood acting as a collective. Ermila's recognition of the shared oppression that shapes her neighborhood is narrated through a series of subjunctive passages that lead her to a small but meaningful act of resistance.

As Ermila's narrative advances, it begins to establish a connection between the development of an oppositional consciousness and the development of a *neighborhood* consciousness: a sense of the others' intention and agency, the mutual obligations that extend between them, and the conditions of oppression that they share. At the start of one of the middle chapters, Ermila wakes up, looks out the window at the workers gathering at the bus stop, and asks herself: "Why even bother?" (175). That question sets up a series of descriptions of the morning labor of the neighborhood, of the lifeworld of those unindividuated others who share space with her:

Why did she make it a ritual, a habit, a routine to pincer the slats apart each morning and observe men wearing their butcher whites, others with paper-boat hats or baseball caps, passing her window alone or in pairs? Four freeways crossing and interchanging, looping and stacking in the Eastside, but if you didn't own a car, you were fucked. Many were, and this is something Ermila always said in her head: You're fucked. Though this morning, she said, We're fucked, as the men passed her window (176).

This passage echoes Ben's subjunctive vision of the potential encounter between the freeway driver and the woman with the rainbow straw bag. Ermila, like the driver in

Ben's passage, looks on pedestrians with some concern, but without recognition of obligation. And like the driver, she imagines their stories with the narrative finality of the indicative: they are fucked. But for Ermila, the passage ends differently. On this morning, she's drawn out of the "ritual" of distant observation with a sudden realization about what draws them together: the freeways, the quarantine, and the other linked networks of oppression that shape their lives. The narration in this passage shifts from a distant third to the more personal second, and finally to the first-person plural declaration: "We're fucked." In this passage, Ermila begins to seriously consider the stakes of looking at the neighbors and recognizing that they have autonomy, and also that she shares with them the conditions of oppression and domination imposed by the quarantine.

Late in the novel, this nascent neighborhood consciousness predicates one of the novel's few acts of direct protest toward the quarantine, as Ermila waits with her neighbors in a long line at a Quarantine Authority checkpoint. Ermila, whose "one desire was to get home as soon as possible" (289), begins to speak out, challenging the delay, and demanding to be allowed to go home. As she is confronted by one of the officers, she notices a mother, one of her First Street neighbors, struggling with her sick and crying child. When the guard (disarmed by nostalgia for his first car, which he bought from Ermila's employer) allows Ermila to pass through the checkpoint, she asks that the mother and child be allowed to pass ahead of her, and returns to the back of the line. This scene is an implicit response to Ben's freeway scenario and also to the question Ermila herself asks earlier in the novel, as she looks down on the workers waiting for the bus: "Why bother?" At the checkpoint, Ermila suddenly *feels for* the mother and her sick child. They become real to her, and she recognizes a sense of neighborly obligation that

extends to the mother and her child. As they walk on past the checkpoint, leaving Ermila behind, Ermila exchanges a smile with the now-quiet baby, a subtle suggestion of hope and possibility for the neighborhood's next generation.

Ermila's act of disobedience here also revises a scene that takes place *earlier* in the novel, in which she watches another harried mother at a quarantine checkpoint and yet does nothing. That scene that ends in a subjunctive interrogative: "What might happen if the line of people simply wrapped themselves around the QA officers like a python? **Demand, Protest, Organize.** Before the words infiltrated her thoughts, Ermila was cleared from the roadblock and suddenly found herself running to her house" (64). In this passage, we see a stark representation of the push and pull between the formal qualities of the quarantine and of the neighborhood. Ermila is at the threshold of a vision of another world, in which she and her neighbors organize and revolt against the quarantine. The possibility is described as "infiltrating her thoughts," interrupting the artificially imposed space-time of the quarantine checkpoint queue (similar to the way that the quarantine had interrupted the expansive space-time of Ermila's "storytalk"). But before she is able to act on these oppositional thoughts, there's another disjuncture in time and space, and Ermila finds herself beyond the checkpoint. By returning to this scene later in the novel, and allowing Ermila to protest and resist in a way that she was unable to earlier, Viramontes reveals the tangible consequences of the subjunctive visions that appear throughout the novel. Moreover, by acting on her feelings of empathy for her neighbor—by identifying her neighbor's oppressor and actively resisting her oppression—Ermila embodies the neighborhood ethic that Viramontes constructs throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*. Ermila's protest is one small individual act of

resistance—not quite a python wrapping around the police—but it is an indication of the enduring possibility of transforming time and space to reclaim a neighborhood from the quarantine.

The conclusion of the novel also includes significant passages of subjunctive narration, and it, too, reaches toward the possibility of neighborhood-based resistance to the oppressive conditions of the quarantine. The final section is the most diffuse in its perspective: unlike earlier chapters, which are devoted largely to one of the principal characters, the last chapter gives focalizing perspective to each of the four central characters. Also, unlike earlier chapters in which contact between the different protagonists is brief and unremarkable, or mediated through what Huehls call “suturing objects” that traverse the narratives, the final chapter is unmistakably headed for convergence. As the chapter begins, the McBride Boys are planning an attack on Ermila’s cousin, Nacho, who had imprisoned one of their members, Ermila’s boyfriend Alfonso, in an ill-advised bid for Ermila’s affections. Although Turtle had gone AWOL from her gang, she is picked up by her former associate Santos and drawn into the McBrides’ plan to ambush Nacho at the Greyhound Station (where he is waiting to board a bus back to Tijuana). Ermila is tipped off about the planned attack on Nacho by one of the McBrides and races on foot to prevent it. Meanwhile, Ana and Tranquilina’s ongoing search for Ana’s brother Ben leads them to the Greyhound Station downtown, where she questions Nacho about Ben. In the scene’s final moments, Turtle stabs Nacho to death, and Tranquilina rushes to their aid. Police helicopters swarm to the scene and begin firing indiscriminately. Tranquilina refuses their order to halt and, in a hail of bullets, rises

above the helicopters in what some critics have referred to as a moment of fantasy or magical realism.

Several aspects of this final scene correspond to the kinds of alternative movements through space and time that I have linked to acts of resistance throughout the novel. For example, Tranquilina's assumption of the power of flight draws on the memory of her mother and father's "miraculous escape" from slavery (325), which signals the possibility of inter-generational transfer of oppositional consciousness, as between Chavela and Ermila. Also, the fact that the scene takes place at a Greyhound Station—with Nacho waiting for a bus that he will never board—underscores the idea that lateral escape is foreclosed in the novel. Instead, the scene narrates a spatial convergence, a coming-together of all the central characters of the novel, who are linked perhaps only by their shared experience of oppression. As the helicopters fire on Tranquilina and Turtle, Tranquilina finds that she "couldn't delineate herself from the murdered souls." Just as Ermila uses of the first-person plural to refer to her neighbors when she recognizes their common deterritorialization by the freeway, so too does Tranquilina as she cries out to the police: "We'rrrrre not doggggs!" (324). As the characters converge, Tranquilina recognizes that the distinctions between she and Nacho and Turtle are immaterial in the eyes of the authorities: they have all been criminalized and marked for violence because of their race. The inward movement of the narratives in this final section helps to reveal the shared experience of oppression that unites the novel's narrative threads.

Tranquilina's climactic act of resistance in the novel is figured as an ascension, as she rises above the helicopters and "out to limitless space where everything was possible

if she believed” (325). This final line of the novel is a subjunctive construction that imagines unspecified but limitless possibilities under the condition of Tranquilina’s “belief.” But what is it that Tranquilina must ultimately believe in order to realize these possibilities? I interpret Tranquilina’s ascension in this final scene not as an act of individual escape or of a spiritual assumption into heaven but as Tranquilina’s ascension to the position of narrator. This, the assumption of omniscient narrative power, is the condition through which Tranquilina is able to realize the promise of the final line. Throughout *Their Dogs Came with Them*, the narrator exists in an ambiguous and indeterminate space and time, entering the interior consciousness of each character but also passing between them spatially, as if looking down from above. In this final chapter, in which all of the central characters converge on one place, it seems increasingly possible that the narrative could be replicating the point-of-view of the police helicopters that the reader knows are also beginning to converge on the station. The police helicopters had already begun to encroach of the novel’s focalization, and the authorities would have the spatial and temporal perspective to track each of the characters as their narrative pathways bend toward downtown. But this possibility is complicated by one of the novel’s final lines: “Except for Tranquilina, no one, not the sharpshooters, the cabdrivers, the travelers dashing out of the depot, the barefoot or slipper-clad spectators in robes, not one of them, in all their glorious hallucinatory gawking, knew who the victims were, who the perpetrators were” (325). This passage distills the essence of neighborliness that operates throughout the novel: To be a good neighbor requires not just the ability to “feel for” one’s neighbors, but also the ability to discern victims and perpetrators, to differentiate the oppressors from oppressed. This is the radical,

oppositional awareness that eludes most of the characters (and, ultimately, most postmodern novels): there *is* a foundation from which to separate victims from perpetrators. But the claim that Tranquilina is the *only one* who is able to make that distinction is undermined by the reader's awareness that the narrator, who has tracked each of the participants in this scene, also has the knowledge to separate the oppressor from the oppressed. The novel's final line, then, asserts the possibility that Tranquilina will ascend to fill the vacuum of discernment and critical judgment in the novel's narrative voice, and to re-narrate the story, not as a collection of fragments, but as a convocation of the oppressed, and as a call to action.

Conclusion: Narrating the “New Urbanist” Neighborhood

While *Their Dogs Came with Them* builds toward a radical vision of possibility, it is also a timely project of historical recuperation and an important counterpoint to recent narratives of neighborhood revitalization that elide the history of state-sponsored neighborhood isolation and destruction. The resurgence of “neighborhood” discourse is reflected in the language of contemporary urban policy—for example, the White House's “Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative,” which President Obama described in 2008 as “a bold new place-based approach to help neighborhoods in distress transform themselves into neighborhoods of opportunity”—and in the rhetoric of many urbanist, environmental, and community development organizations. As I have discussed in previous chapters, environmental organizations have been complicit in promoting narratives of neighborhood nostalgia that whitewash the history of urban renewal and its enduring consequences in the present. While the most recent iteration of the “back-to-the-city” movement has helped to inspire new investment in urban infrastructure and

innovative approaches to urban design, the benefits of new urbanist revitalization are often unequally distributed and have resulted in new forms of spatial segregation and displacement of the poor and people of color. In addition, the narratives of “innovative urban design” also efface the long history of ethnic urbanisms in places like East Los Angeles in the years before urban renewal. In many cases, urban neighborhoods before urban renewal contained the kind of diverse, green, and walkable urban spaces that mainstream environmentalists seek now to bring “back to the city,” often through neoliberal economic policies such as corporate tax abatements, and often with the result of displacing current residents.

However, *Their Dogs Came with Them* offers more than just a necessary revision to the historical memory of neighborhoods promulgated in mainstream accounts of neighborhood revitalization efforts: It also points to renewed possibilities for social movement organizing narratives in the present. Viramontes offers new ways to think about the social construction of neighborhood space, and, particularly in the form of the novel, new ways to imagine neighborhood identity and forms resistance to “un-neighborhooding” forces. The novel’s formal and stylistic innovations—its structure of “bounded fragments” moving toward convergence, its experiments with the subjunctive mood, and its final gestures toward the value of the omniscient narrator—help to push the boundaries of social movement narratives after postmodernism. Finally, its unequivocal assertion of a “neighborhood ethic,” in which good neighbors are called to differentiate between the oppressor and the oppressed, provides a foundation for understanding social and environmental justice in the neighborhood. Viramontes’s novel serves as an injunction to the urbanists and environmentalists who invest their hopes in the future of

urban neighborhoods: to “pay attention” to power (as Chavela commands Ermila), to be open to opportunities for resistance, and to be a good neighbor.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE LABOR OF JUSTICE AND THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

“Every decade or so,” Robert Bullard writes, “Americans rediscover the city” (7). Many American cities now seem to be experiencing just such a rediscovery, with increasing capital investment in urban redevelopment and growing numbers of educated young people migrating to city centers across the United States. After a long period of pervasive anti-urban sentiment in popular culture, the late 20th and early 21st century has seen a return of enticing representations of cities to the dominant cultural imaginary. In the early 1990s, the New Urbanist Movement emerged from this “back-to-the-city” migration of both capital and culture. Over the past 25 years, the new urbanists have had a meaningful influence on U.S. cities by advocating policies and design aimed to create urban spaces that are socially diverse, environmentally sustainable, and encouraging to a variety of public uses. New urbanism, its proponents hold, can help to remedy an array of social and environmental ills in the U.S., such as air pollution, fossil fuel dependence, and disappearing farmland and open space; the movement is also designed to encourage new urban environmental goods, such as community gardens and walkable-scale neighborhoods. Consequently, the New Urbanist Movement has won support from mainstream American environmentalists, who are slowly abandoning the tacitly anti-urban “back to nature-ism” associated with the movement’s roots in the 1960s and 70s, and from national environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and National Resources Defense Council. However, as the New Urbanist Movement has grown in size and influence, critics charge that it has been inattentive to the concerns of current residents of the city, particularly people of color. For many of those committed to environmental

justice—defined by the principles of equitable distribution of environmental benefits and hazards, and resistance to structures of oppression that *create* these environmental inequities—new urbanism has fallen short of its promise.

For both new urbanists and advocates of environmental justice, imaginative literature offers useful maps of the possibilities for social change in the city: by challenging the dominant narratives that shape urban spaces, helping readers to imagine individual and collective social movement identities, and providing a vehicle for visions of possibility outside of present social and spatial conditions. But social movements also influence cultural narratives; I argue that the tensions between the environmental justice and new urbanist approaches toward the city register in the form of late 20th and early 21st century U.S. fiction. The structurally and stylistically innovative novels I discuss in the dissertation—Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, Ed Park’s *Personal Days*, Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, and Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came With Them*—represent a transitional postmodern literary form that is shaped by a foundational commitment to urban social and environmental justice organizing. For several decades now, critics have been arguing that postmodernism is a political dead-end, antithetical to the projects of environmental and social movement organizers. However, Yamashita, Park, Whitehead, and Viramontes show how the critical tools of postmodern style, such as narrative indeterminacy and historiographic metafiction, can still be politically useful as means of destabilizing oppressive narratives about urban spaces and the people who live in those spaces.

But these novels also push beyond the formal and stylistic conventions of postmodernism in several important ways. Most significantly, they claim a foundation for

truth and value claims based on the experience of oppressions based on race, class, and gender, as well the experience of spatialized oppressions that inhere to particular urban spaces. For Yamashita, Park, Whitehead, and Viramontes, these experiences carry a kind of privileged perspective on the nature of capitalism, the distribution of environmental hazards, and the possibilities for organizing in response to those hazards. Consequently, their novels are of critical value to the social and environmental movements—like new urbanism—that aim to transform the city.

Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* represents the dialectical tension between new urbanist visions of the city as a place of organic community and the environmental justice commitment to grassroots organizing and structural transformation. *Tropic of Orange* valorizes principles of new urbanist design, with its neighborhood-scale development, mixed-income housing, walkable streets, local foodways, and opportunities for face-to-face interactions in public space. The new urbanist orientation toward urban community is represented in the novel through the freeway conductor Manzanar, whose pastoral symphony acts as a new urbanist convocation, a call for all those in the greater Los Angeles area to return from the suburbs to the city center. However, the fact that this fantastic convergence takes place on the 110-Freeway underscores an argument that Yamashita makes throughout the novel: that transformative social change requires an imaginative transformation of the physical and narrative infrastructures that have perpetuated social and environmental injustice in the city. Yamashita ultimately affirms many facets of the new urbanist project, but—through the character Buzzworm—she also draws attention to the labor of community organizing necessary to that project. While new urbanists often imagine the city's future through the experience of the autonomous

individual, Buzzworm's hopes for the city reside in the collective work of place-making and community-building. Yamashita's attention to Buzzworm's ongoing labor of community organizing offers a critical counterpoint to the social vision of the new urbanists.

The slow return of corporate office workers to the city—a migration heralded by many new urbanists—is central to the literary genre I refer to as “the 21st-century office novel.” As a genre, the 21st century office novel offers an anticipatory vision of the return of white-collar labor to the city, and the consequences of that return for social movements working for social and environmental justice. These novels represent the habitus of contemporary white-collar workplaces, whose corridors and cubicles mediate workers' experience of the city and their exposure to the social and environmental hazards of late modernity. Like the new urbanist neighborhood, these office spaces hold their own possibilities for face-to-face interaction and community formation; however, these novels suggest that social formation in the office is “haunted” by the ongoing production of environmental hazards and wastes, and by racial and social hierarchies that continue to structure the workplace. Park's *Personal Days* and Whitehead's *Zone One* suggest that in order to create a just urbanism, we must first confront and dismantle these oppressive systems.

Finally, Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* unsettles the historical foundations of narratives of urban transformation, which often elide the racist history of urban planning or falsely present facets of ethnic urbanism or vernacular design as recent innovations. Like *Tropic of Orange*, *Their Dogs Came with Them* excavates the infrastructural history of Los Angeles, particularly the freeway expansions of the urban

renewal era, as a way of making visible the enduring legacy of environmental racism that continues to shape the city. In particular, Viramontes's novel shows how racial projects such as the freeway disabled—and continue to disable—claims to “neighborhood” among people of color in East Los Angeles. *Their Dogs Came with Them* is invested in a kind of restorative historiography—an accounting of the enduring injustices of the past as a way to lay foundations for the social justice organizing of the future—that is embedded in the novel's nonlinear narrative structure and complex temporality. For the novel's protagonists, memories of the neighborhood, transmitted from generation to generation, provide guides for reestablishing livable neighborhoods in the future. *Their Dogs Came with Them* documents the troubling history of the social construction of urban neighborhoods, from which the poor and people of color were often excluded; however, the novel also helps to create a new vision of neighborhood and neighborliness rooted in the principles of social and environmental justice.

The work of Yamashita, Park, Whitehead, and Viramontes harbors distinctly anti-postmodern hopes for stable place-based identities, communion with others, and a shared future built on the principles of social and environmental justice. While these writers show how social and environmental justice are structurally impossible under present social and spatial conditions, they also acknowledge the necessity of such utopian visions to social movement organizing. In this way, their works offer an urgent counterpoint to both the new urbanists—for whom social and environmental justice have been a peripheral concern rather than a foundational principle—and some of the most heralded writers of “post-postmodern” literary fiction, such as David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Lethem. For Wallace and Lethem, the primary labor of community-building is the

affective work of empathizing and identifying with those “unlike others” who have been excluded from the social body, rather than the work of dismantling the structures that continue to reproduce oppressions. Among both new urbanists and white post-postmodernists, the city becomes a laboratory for imagining community; the right to reclaim the city for that imaginative project is uncritically assumed. Conversely, among the writers of color whose work I discuss in the dissertation, the possibility of community is contingent on uprooting infrastructures of oppression that carry social and environmental inequities into the future. In the coming years, cities will continue to register the negative consequences of vast and complex crises: climate change, food insecurity, gentrification and displacement. These monumental crises challenge us to think big about how we can organize collective action across social, cultural, and geographic borders. The work of Yamashita, Park, Whitehead, and Viramontes offers compelling visions of transformative collective action, but it also reminds us that these utopian visions are founded in the ongoing labor of social and environmental justice organizing.

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